

Mercy loved it when her mom did ritual work. She always looked so powerful and beautiful—and more than a little mysterious when she invoked Athena and opened the sacred pentagram with the spirit candle. Nerves roiled Mercy’s stomach. She could hardly believe that the night had finally come when she and her sister were joining their mother in Ritual—just like so many Goodes had done for so, so many generations. The night felt special—different. There was a listening quality to the earth and plants around her that tingled through her body. She wanted to ask Hunter if she felt it, too, and when she looked across the pentagram at her sister she saw that she was gazing up at the full moon with a rapturous expression. *Hunter feels it too! I know she does.*

Abigail carefully placed the candle in front of the tree between thick fingers of roots. Then she traced the line of the pentagram to where Mercy was standing. She was holding the first of her two candles, which she lifted. Presenting it to her mother she said, “I set the green candle in its place on the pentagram. It symbolizes the path I have chosen to follow and the goddess whose service I am in.”

Her mother lit the candle and Mercy set it on top of the rock at her feet before she and Abigail together walked to her second candle, tracing more of the pentagram. Mercy liked the feel of the cool grass against her feet, but as they took their first steps her foot landed on something that was hard enough to make her ankle twist before it squished against her foot, like she’d just stepped on a raw egg that had broken and its goo leaked between her toes. Abigail instantly steadied Mercy by catching her arm while she righted herself.

“Did you hurt your ankle?” Abigail asked.

Mercy looked down. “No, I just slid on something—” She lifted her foot and under it was an immature green apple that had broken open—and was completely filled with worms. “Ugh!” She wiped her foot quickly on the clean grass, shuddering as the worms writhed in the rotten apple meat.

Her mother peered down, and then straightened abruptly. “It’s fine. Reset your intention. All is well.”

But Mercy noticed that her mother’s face had gone so pale that in the moonlight her skin looked like milk.

Abigail continued to the rock that marked the next point of the pentagram. Mercy shook herself mentally and followed her mother. She took several breaths to re-ground herself and then

she lifted the candle that waited there and proclaimed, “And I set the brown candle in its place on the pentagram. It symbolizes the path I have chosen to follow and the goddess whose service I am in.”

Before Abigail lit the candle she asked, “Speak, daughter, and name your goddess.”

“Freya, the great Goddess of Love, Fertility and Divination.”

“And which path will you walk with Freya?”

Mercy’s voice was strong and sure. “I am a Green Witch.”

Abigail lit the brown candle and bowed her head. “Welcome to The Path, Mercy Anne Goode, Green Witch and daughter of Freya.” Mercy bowed, too, and placed the brown candle on the rock that marked that tip of their pentagram. Then her mother walked through the center of the pentagram to where Hunter stood with the first of her candles across from where Mercy’s first candle, the green one, cheerily burned.

Hunter presented a yellow candle to her mother. When she spoke her voice was louder than normal, and Mercy felt a little prickle of anticipation follow the line up her spine.

“I set the yellow candle in its place on the pentagram. It symbolizes the path I have chosen to follow and the god whose service I am in.”

Abigail lit the yellow candle, which Hunter placed on the boulder before walking toward Mercy as they completed the final line of their five-pointed star. She picked up the blue candle that waited there and turned to face their mother.

“And I set the blue candle in its place on the pentagram. It symbolizes the path I have chosen to follow and the god whose service I am in.”

Just as with Mercy, Abigail spoke the formal words before she lit the candle. “Speak, daughter, and name your god.”

“Tyr, the God of the Sky.”

“And which path will you walk with Tyr?”

Hunter’s voice was strong and sure. “I am a Cosmic Witch.”

Abigail lit the brown candle and bowed her head. “Welcome to The Path, Hunter Jayne Goode, Cosmic Witch and daughter of Tyr.”

Hunter grinned when she placed the final candle on the rock by her bare feet. She and Mercy exchanged excited looks, and then they focused on their mother, who had returned to the center of the pentagram and the baskets waiting there. She shook out three quilts, made two generations

ago by their great grandmother. When the girls joined their mother, Xena padded into the pentagram, purring loudly. The three women, with Abigail's familiar, sat in the center of the pentagram, marked by brightly burning candles, and wrapped the quilts around their shoulders.

From her basket, Abigail took out a stone bowl, carved with the triple moon symbol, and lit a charcoal cube, which she placed in the bowl and then sprinkled a mixture of herbs over. Instantly the smoldering herbs began filling the grassy area with fragrant smoke. She lit a piece of palo santo wood and wafted it over the three of them saying, "Incense and wood are purifiers. They change the energy around us and keep negativity at bay."

The girls used their hands to move the smoke over and around them. Their mother placed the still-smoking stick in the burner with the herbal incense.

"And now we protect ourselves. I want you each to imagine a shield—a great, glowing shield. Close your eyes. Picture it."

Mercy closed her eyes and imagined a huge round shield with a strong apple tree, much like the one in front of her, carved in the middle of it.

"Imagine it strapped to your back, so that nothing may harm you from behind."

Mercy imagined that it wasn't a quilt covering her back, but her shining shield.

"In your mind draw a circle around you, in which you are the center," Abigail continued.

"Repeat after me: *This is my space.*"

"This is my space," the girls repeated together.

"*I own this space,*" Abigail intoned.

"I own this space," they said.

"Good. Now we ready ourselves to be vessels through which the energy of the earth will flow and into the gatekeeper, strengthening our tree and keeping the gate to the Norse Underworld closed.

"Breathe with me, deeply, in and out, on a four count." Their mother led them in several deep, cleansing breaths.

"Clear your mind of thoughts. Then *acknowledge* your feelings, and as you do don't question *why* you're feeling something. Simply breathe in with acceptance of the feeling and on your next breath out, release that feeling."

Mercy cleared her mind and then drew in a deep breath and immediately was filled with nervousness. She didn't try to decipher her nerves. Instead she thought, *hello nerves—I feel*

*you—I acknowledge you—and now I release you!* She let out a long breath and felt the tension between her shoulder blades relax.

With her next breath in Mercy was filled with fear—fear of not being good enough, smart enough, brave enough—or worse, being too self-centered to truly walk Freya’s path. Again, she acknowledged—*I get it. Fear is here. That’s fine and normal and natural. Fear can be healthy. It reminds me to be smart and brave and selfless instead of selfish. And now I release you, fear.* As she breathed fear out Mercy felt the sick knot in her stomach unravel and calm.

“And we begin. We are vessels, cleansed and protected, ready to be conduits for energy. Remember, we do not keep that energy. We only guide it. Visualize the gate before you, deep within the trunk of this ancient tree who has stood guardian for hundreds of years.”

Mercy kept her eyes tightly closed. She knew that Hunter’s eyes were open because every Feast Day of their lives until that night they’d practiced the ritual together from *outside* the pentagram while they watched their magical mother harness the energy of the earth and direct it to close the gate. Hunter always kept her eyes open to stare at the tree, but Mercy preferred to imagine the gate in her mind’s eye.

“When your image of the gate is set, reach through your bodies down into the earth—find the ley lines there—see them. What color is your ley line, Mercy?”

“Green!” Mercy said, eyes still shut.

“What color is your ley line, Hunter?”

“Deep blue!” Hunter said.

“And mine is silver gray, like the eyes of Athena. Draw your ley line up through your body and push it from the center of your forehead, like a beacon, to shine against the gate hidden within your tree. If the gate seems open at all, it will be closed. If the gate seems weary, it will be strengthened. If the gate seems small, it will grow and grow and grow until it is so powerful that nothing could possibly escape through it.”

Mercy imagined that when she breathed in she drew the beam of radiant green light up and into her body—along her spine—to blaze out of her third eye in the center of her forehead.

But nothing happened.

Mercy felt the pulsing power of the ley line, just like she always could. She could even feel it lifting to her, but instead of it filling her body with luminous energy, it was like a garden hose

with a kink in it, and only trickles of power sluggishly moved up to her spine and hovered there with a little warmth, like someone pressed their hand to the small of her back.

She squeezed her eyelids more firmly together and focused, concentrating on the energy that was tantalizingly close. Drew a deep breath in as she called to her goddess. *Freya, my goddess, help me. Strengthen me. Allow me to guide the energy of your earth.*

Mercy felt the warmth along her spine expand a little, but there was no infilling of energy—there was no inrush of power. The pulse of the ley line had been replaced with something cold and strange and wrong.

Suddenly Xena hissed and began growling, a guttural, dangerous sound that wasn't even recognizable as coming from the sweet, nosy feline Mercy had known her entire life.

Hunter gasped and cried, "Oh! Tyr! No!"

Mercy opened her eyes. Hunter sat beside her. They faced the tree, while their mother sat cross-legged in front of them with her back to the tree. Beside Abigail, Xena had turned to face the tree as well. The huge cat's back was fully arched and her tufted ears flattened against her skull as she continued to growl menacingly.

The thick trunk of the mighty tree dripped with something disgusting—black and foul and thick. The center of the trunk quivered, like a horse trying to shake off a swarm of biting flies, but this was no horse. A snout pushed through the darkness and took form, melted wax becoming solid as it entered this world. Red eyes broke through the shuddering bark. The thing was huge—all sinew, matted fur, and claws. Its breath came in rapid pants as it pulled its body through the corrupted center of the tree. The fetid stench of it reached Mercy—thick with sulfur and rot. Mercy tasted bile as she gaged in revulsion and fear.

The creature looked directly at them and snarled, gnashing long, pointed teeth.