



*Mother
Knows
Best*





MOTHER
KNOWS BEST
A TALE OF THE OLD WITCH
BY SERENA VALENTINO



Adapted in part from Disney's *Tangled*

Cover Illustration by Jeffrey Thomas

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*Dedicated to Eric Russell, Sarah Cook,
Chrys Lear, Linda Seaquist-Klein, Joshua Archer,
and Darick Robertson for your unwavering love
and support over the years*

CHAPTER I

QUEEN OF THE DEAD

Tucked snugly away deep within the dead forest lived a family of witches.

Their gray cobblestone mansion was perched on the tallest hill, which looked down on a vast landscape of lifeless trees with brittle and twisted branches that resembled long grasping hands.

Around this forest was an impenetrable thicket of rosebushes with tiny beautifully preserved rosebuds still clinging to them even though they had been dead longer than anyone still living could properly recollect. This was the boundary between the land of the living and the forest of the dead, and the witches who lived in the woods rarely crossed the boundary to do harm to those living on the other side. They asked for only one thing in return: their dead.

The witches' forest wasn't merely filled with lifeless trees. It was where the dead rested—or so the neighboring villagers liked to tell themselves. They chose to think of the woods as a cemetery they weren't permitted to visit, and the witches as its caretakers, though deep within their hearts they knew their deceased loved ones were given very little peace in what should have been their eternal resting place.

But we won't concern ourselves with that part of the tale at the moment. Right now, our story centers on three sister witches—Hazel, Gothel, and Primrose—and their mother, Manea, the dreaded queen of the dead, one of the greatest and most feared witches of any age.

Manea always let it be known that her daughters were a disappointment to her, pointing out that even though the three of them were born on the same day, they were not identical. It was widely accepted in the magical realms that having identical witch daughters was a great honor. They were highly favored among the gods, because they possessed greater power and magical ability than the average witch. Though Gothel and her sisters were, by definition, triplets, they couldn't possibly have been more different from each other.

Let's start with Gothel, the youngest sister by a mere handful of hours. She possessed raven hair and dark features, with large expressive gray eyes. Her hair was thick, wild, and unruly, often filled with little bits of twigs or dried leaves from her following her sisters around in the dead woods and romping through the landscape of cemeteries within its boundaries. When Gothel chose to look up from one of her precious books long enough to notice her surroundings, she had a very large personality, demanding the attention of everyone in the room. She was a thoughtful, pragmatic young woman, rarely ruled by her emotions and singularly focused on eventually taking her mother's place in the forest of the dead. There was only one thing more important to her.

Her sisters.

Hazel, the eldest sister, was lanky and shy, with large light blue eyes. Her hair was a brilliant shade of silver, and cascaded over her shoulders like a shroud. She moved silently like a wraithlike goddess, which was fitting, really, considering where she and her sisters lived. Hazel was a soft-spoken and exceedingly empathetic young lady, always willing to listen to her sisters' problems and lend her support.

That leaves us with Primrose. Now, she was a striking redhead, with sparkling green eyes, a peaches-and-cream complexion, and a light smattering of freckles across her nose. She was lighthearted and fun, always ready for adventure, and doomed to be entirely driven by her emotions, which sometimes vexed her sisters, causing the three to quarrel.

The sisters spent much of their time in the dead woods, exploring the mausoleums and reading the names off the headstones in what felt like to the sisters a small city of the dead. They spent hours walking the various pathways of beautiful and ornate tombstones, statues, and crypts, sometimes saying the dead's names aloud as they passed them, reciting the names off the tombstones, singing them almost like a song.

With little else to fill their time, the sisters found happy occupations to keep themselves busy while traversing the dead forest. Hazel loved to bring thin pieces of delicate parchment and coal with her on their long walks in the woods so she could make impressions of some of the more ornate and decorative headstones. She called them rubbings. Sometimes she found a name on one of the headstones particularly interesting or funny and she would make a rubbing simply for reference. Later she would look up the person in her mother's large leather-bound ledger that contained the names and origins of every person buried within their woods, which made her feel less alone. Not that her sisters' friendship wasn't enough, mind you, but she liked to imagine some of the dead as her friends. She and her sisters were quite alone in the dead woods aside from their mother, who was busy and sequestered away at every opportunity, occupied with her magic, leaving little time to spend with her daughters. So Hazel found comfort and company in reading about the dead in her mother's ledger, feeling like she was getting to know the people who spent their afterlife in her forest.

Primrose often brought along her scarlet drawstring pouch, which contained a spool of ribbon, a small silver knife, and various wishes she had written on bright red parchment that she would hang from the dead branches on ribbons. It was just like Primrose to bring color into their stark world. Almost as if she had been created for the purpose of bringing beauty into their lives, because it did seem to follow her wherever she wandered. Primrose fancied the dead haunted their forest at night, reading her wishes while she and her sisters were asleep. She hoped the dead would love their afterlife. She wanted it to be a beautiful resting place rather than the dull gray landscape it really was.

Gothel was more rooted in the physical world than her sisters, with her eye always on the future. She often brought along one of her mother's books when she went into the woods with her sisters—a book she had slipped into the pocket of her skirts when her mother wasn't paying attention. She always took the opportunity to read when her sisters stopped to do a grave rubbing or tie wishes in the trees. Sometimes she read aloud to her sisters, but usually she just let herself drift into other worlds—worlds she desperately wanted to inhabit. The world of magic. And this day was no different.

"Gothel! Move! You're blocking the headstone I want to do next!" Gothel looked up at Hazel, who gazed down at her disapprovingly. The sun was directly behind her, creating a shimmering silhouette that emphasized her ghostlike face.

"But I'm comfortable here, Hazel. Can't you rub one of the other headstones?" Gothel asked, squinting to see her sister clearly.

Hazel sighed. "I guess."

Gothel watched Hazel walk into the brilliant sunlight, which was low in the sky and cast a lovely orange-and-pink glow on their otherwise dreary landscape. It was Gothel's favorite time, the magic hour. She had read there was a land where it was eternally twilight, and she wondered what it must be like to live in such a place. "Don't go too far, Hazel!" called Gothel. "It will be dark soon, and Mother will want us home."

Hazel didn't answer her sister, but Gothel knew Hazel had heard her. Gothel had read about sister witches who could read each other's minds, and she knew that wasn't the case with her and her sisters—not quite—but they did have an understanding. At least that was what their mother had called it: "an understanding." Ever since they were very small, each had known how the others were feeling. They couldn't communicate with each other without speaking, so they didn't hear the exact words, but they did get a sense of what the others *might* be thinking from each other's emotions. Gothel had searched her mother's books for the term "understanding" and decided it must be something her mother had made up, because she couldn't find a reference to it in any of them. And she wondered if maybe someday, when

they learned more of their mother's magic, she and her sisters would have the power to read each other's minds.

"What are you thinking about, Gothel?"

Gothel laughed, looking up at Primrose, who was surrounded by beautiful bright red hearts hanging in the black and twisted tree branches. Primrose had clearly been busy while Gothel had been reading her book. "You seem sad to me, Gothel. What's the matter?" asked Primrose, her brow furrowed.

"Nothing, Prim." Gothel directed her attention back to her book.

Primrose shoved her ribbon and little knife into her pouch, walked over to her sister, and sat down beside her. "Really, what's the matter?" she asked, putting her hand on her sister's.

Gothel sighed. "It's Mother. I don't understand why she won't teach us her magic. Every generation of witches in this family has shared their magic with the new generation. How are we to uphold our family's traditions if we have no idea how to do the magic?"

Primrose squeezed her sister's hand and smiled. "Because Mother never intends to die. She will always be here to honor our ancestors, so don't worry."

Gothel stood up in a huff, brushing the leaves off her rust-colored dress.

"Don't be upset, Gothel, please! Forget about Mother's magic and have fun with me and Hazel!"

Gothel was losing patience with Primrose. "But don't you see? It's our magic as well, and Mother is keeping it from us! Let's say Mother lives forever, and so do we. How will we spend our endless days?"

Primrose's green eyes sparkled in the remaining light. "We spend them exactly as we always have. Wandering these woods together. Sisters. Together. Forever." Gothel loved her sisters, but they were naive, especially Primrose. They were perfectly content to live their lives in the forest, letting their mother do her magic, having no idea how it worked. Primrose probably thought the villagers were content to give them their dead. Gothel was always keenly aware this was a topic she shouldn't bring up with her sisters,

for fear she would upset their blissful ignorance and disrupt their sisterly balance.

"I love spending my days with you, Prim, I do! But don't you want to see the world outside of this forest? Don't you want to live a life of your own?"

"We *are* living a life of our own, Gothel! Don't be weird!" said Primrose as Hazel walked up the path to join her sisters.

"I can't believe you would want to leave us!" said Hazel, overhearing her sisters' conversation.

"I don't want to leave you! I want us to always be together. I couldn't live without you, but if Mother refuses to show us her magic, then I want to be with you on the other side of that thicket! I want to see the world with you." She sighed again and continued talking. "If Mother won't teach me her magic, I want to find a witch willing to teach me theirs. We're witches and we have no idea how to use our powers. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Shhh!" Hazel put her finger against her lips, cautioning her sisters to be quiet, annoying Gothel.

"Mother isn't here! You're so paranoid, Hazel!" But the sisters heard the snap of a twig, which rang out louder than thunder in the quiet woods. "Shhh! What is it?"

The sisters stood frozen in fear. Nothing lived in the forest except the witches. It was either their mother or the dead, and they couldn't decide which was more frightening. "If Mother heard you, she is going to be furious, Gothel!" whispered Hazel.

"Shhh! I don't think it's her! Maybe someone from the other side made their way through the boundary!" whispered Primrose.

"That's impossible. No one has wandered into our woods in our lifetime. Not once!" said Gothel.

"Not that Mother has told us about," Primrose said, making Gothel scoff.

"Even if a villager were brave enough to enter our woods, they couldn't get in if they tried. The thicket is enchanted. No one living can enter these woods if they're not a witch of our blood. You know how it works, Prim! I've

told you this story countless times!” Gothel thought about those words and continued, “But I suppose we really don’t know how it works, do we?”

“Why are you so weird all the time, Gothel? What are you talking about?” asked Primrose.

“I’m talking about Mother! She tells us nothing! The only reason I know any of this is because I’ve been reading her books!”

“That’s because Mother knows best.”

Their mother’s voice was like a knife in Gothel’s stomach. She felt queasy and slightly faint at the sound of it, her knees buckling under her. Primrose caught Gothel by the arm, steadying her.

“Mother! Leave Gothel alone!” shouted Primrose, putting herself between her mother and her sister.

Manea laughed at her daughters. “This isn’t my doing, Primrose. Gothel has worked herself up into a tizzy as usual. Hurting her would be like hurting myself, and I would never dream of hurting myself.”

Manea stood perfectly still, staring at her daughters. Her long straight black hair hung around her, creating shadows in the hollows of her disturbingly thin face, making her visage look like a skull brought to life. Her eyes were extremely large and bulged from their deeply set sockets with rage, sending fear into her daughters’ hearts.

“Please do calm down, Daughters. I’m not here to punish Gothel. You don’t think I hear your every thought and know your every movement? I’ve known for years Gothel has been reading my books. And what do I care? That’s what they’re there for, to read!” She laughed again. “Clever Gothel. Secretive, blackhearted Gothel. All this time slipping books into your pockets and spiriting them away to the forest to read in secret!” Her voice held a mixture of scorn and amusement.

Manea pushed her hair out of her wrathful face with her long spindly fingers, making her look even more severe. The sister witches knew she was about to do her magic, because on the rare occasions she did her magic in front of them, she made this gesture when she was about to perform a spell.

“You want to see my magic, Gothel? You want to see what my mother taught me? You want to learn my magic? Behold!”

Manea raised her hands skyward, illuminating the dark forest with silver lightning blasts that sparked from her fingertips and crashed into the tree branches, catching them ablaze. Primrose screamed, pulling her sisters closer to her. “Mother, no!”

“I call upon the old gods and the new, bring life into these woods and give us our due!” Manea bellowed as she sent more lightning into the sky, causing a thunderous storm to erupt overhead.

“Mother, stop! What are you doing? We know you’re powerful. I’m sorry I said those things about you. I’m sorry!” Gothel pleaded with her mother, but Manea just laughed as she created a tempest of swirling golden light that mingled with the storm and showered down around them.

“I call upon the old gods and the new, bring life into these woods and give us our due!”

As the golden light fell with the rain and penetrated the soil, it woke the souls that inhabited the city of the dead, inviting them to come out of their crypts and rise from under the earth. Most of them were skeletal creatures, exhausted and angry about being awoken from their slumber, while others were still in possession of their rotting muscles and putrid skin. Gothel observed the looks of disgust on her sisters’ faces when they saw the creatures with dangling or missing limbs silently making their way to Manea. She felt powerful seeing these creatures, realizing that one day they would belong to her and be subject to her whims.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, my dears,” said Manea to her creatures. “But I need you. One of our nearby villages are hoarding their dead. Go forth and bring them all to me.”

Hazel and Primrose gasped in fear, but Gothel stood in awe of her mother’s majesty. She had never seen her mother command her creatures, and it sent chills throughout her body. She couldn’t fathom any of the nearby villages having the audacity to hoard their dead. For centuries, the dead had been sent to the witches. Sure, there had been times when a local villager

had caused an insurrection and tried to defy the witches, but it had always been met with such violence that Gothel was sure it would never be attempted in her lifetime. Gothel could see one tall grotesque creature considering her mother's words with intense concentration.

"Leave no one alive but their children and one adult woman. Bind her to the old promise. She must tell the story of this night to future generations and warn them never to hoard their dead again!"

"Yes, my queen," said the exceedingly tall creature with leathery skin stretched over his skeletal face.

"Knock on every crypt as you go and wake all of my children. Even the young. Take them with you and show them the way. Show them how to make the living suffer for hoarding their dead."

"As you wish, my queen," said the creature. The other creatures just stood at attention, waiting for their orders, waiting for the queen of the dead to do her magic, waiting to bring the living into their ranks. The only creature who spoke was the grotesquerie who had once been a very tall man, who wore a black top hat, a long black coat, and trousers that were now tattered and crumbling like dust. The creature looked down at his own hands, examining them, his face strained as if he was surprised there was so little left of him since the last time he had been awakened from his slumber.

"You look beautiful, my love," said Manea. "Handsome as ever. I still see the man you once were. Do you see him in my mind? Hold that image as you lead this army in my name. Know that I love you and will be waiting for you to return." As she was about to dismiss her most favored minion, she remembered one last detail. "Oh, and, my love, bring the newly dead to me so we can record their names."

"Yes, my queen. And should the woman refuse the terms?"

"Then kill her and the children, my love. And bring them all to me."

"Yes, my queen."

Primrose's and Hazel's screams rang in Gothel's ears. She couldn't tell one voice from the other as they pleaded with their mother to stop.

Manea didn't seem to hear her daughters, and if she did, she didn't care. Her gaze was fixed on the thicket as she reached forward, grasping at the air with her clawlike hand and then tightening her grip as if choking an invisible victim. Then, quickly, with a flick of her wrist, she released a scarlet ball, which shot through the air and turned into a spiraling vortex, creating a pathway for her loathsome minions to cross the boundary into the land of the living. The sisters had never seen her use her magic in this way, and it made them tremble in fear.

"Go now, my love! Teach the living what it means to hoard their dead! Make them fear me like their ancestors did before them. Make it brutal and make it bloody! Fill their minds with terrors that will live on in their imaginations. Create a fear so great within their hearts they will never forget what it means to cross the witches of the dead woods!"

"Mother, no!"

Gothel was awestruck and her sisters stood frozen with fear, watching the dead march through the crimson vortex. But even more disturbing was the twisted smile on their mother's face. They had never seen her so happy, so pleased with herself, and they shuddered to think what those monsters would do to the villagers.

"Mother! Please don't do this! Can't you just give them a warning? Give them a chance to make it right before you do this?" begged Primrose.

Manea laughed at her. "You're pathetic! If you girls want to learn *my magic*, if you want to honor the ancestors, then *this* will be one of your responsibilities. Do you think I do this lightly, Prim? Do you think I take pleasure in having women and children slaughtered? I do it for our protection. For our family!"

Primrose had a look of utter disgust on her face. "I think you do take pleasure in it, Mother! *I can feel it!* So don't pretend otherwise!"

Manea narrowed her eyes at her daughter. "One day it will be up to you girls to take up this responsibility after me. It's a grave undertaking, it takes courage and resolve, and I fear you are too weak to take my place when the time comes!"

Primrose stood stark still, clinging to Hazel. It was Gothel who spoke. She took a deep breath, raised her chin to meet her mother's gaze, and said, "I choose to honor you and those who came before you, Mother. I want to learn your magic. I will take on the responsibility."

Manea grabbed Gothel by the throat, lifting her off the ground. Gothel's feet were dangling like a rag doll's as her sisters' screams rang in her ears. "What makes you worthy, Gothel, to stand in my place and rule as queen in this land?"

"I don't know," said Gothel, trembling and gasping for air. She knew she was worthy. She felt there was something of her mother inside her, waiting to get out. She knew this was her rightful place, but she couldn't put it into words.

"What would you do in my place? What would you do if a nearby village was hoarding their dead?" asked her mother, meeting Gothel's gaze.

"I would do the same as you, Mother," said Gothel.

"Good. I always hoped you would take my place here once I chose to fall into the mists, Gothel," said Manea as she gently let go of Gothel's neck. "But that time is not now, my darling." She stroked her daughter's hair. "My magic doesn't live in those books you've been reading, not entirely. It lives in my blood, and I can spare only so much at a time." Gothel's eyes were wide as she listened to her mother, and she knew her mother could hear her thoughts and questions. "Yes, my dear one, my Gothel, you understand me now. I'm not being selfish with my powers. Once I have given you everything there is to know, there will be nothing left of me. You will have it all, including my life and my place as queen, and the responsibility to honor our ancestors will be yours. That is paramount, Gothel, that you uphold our traditions and keep our secrets safe from the world of the living." Manea looked into her daughter's eyes. "Are you ready to receive more of my blood, Daughter? To take the next step?"

"More of your blood?"

Manea laughed. "Yes, my blackhearted child, more. How do you think you and your sisters can feel each other's emotions? How do you think