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FICTION

HIGH PRIESTESS, REVERSED

Abby Doss

I'VE NEVER quite been one for the occult. My father's influence, probably-- he used to take me on business trips with him, carrying me on his shoulders around towering cities, the looming skyscrapers curling out of the sky like looking through bubbles my little sister chased around the backyard. I've never felt so high above the world as in those moments, and never so grown up as when he would discuss things like stocks and taxes with me in the room, as if I was smart enough to understand at five or six years old.

I always was my father's son.

My sister, though-- she's always believed in that kind of stuff. When we were kids Sadie would beg my mother for bedtime stories, about witches, demons, anything a young set of kids in small town Louisiana might need to know to make their way in the world. I didn't listen to her except to appease my little sister, of course; it's been a long time since any of that held any merit in the real world.

Sadie though-- she was obsessed.

She was an awkward kid, never combing her hair, talking to the worms in my mother's garden. Mom was pleased, of course-- I don't know why Sadie attached more to her stories than I did, but as soon as Sadie showed any degree of "attunement to the higher world," she was Mom's golden child. They did everything together. Sadie could identify poisonous versus medicinal herbs in the garden before she could read, and she used to make me dot out their spellings so she could trace over them again and again, mesmerized.

I don't think Dad ever loved the stories, but he loved Sadie, and he said he loved Mom. Sometimes they would fight, Mom and Dad, loud slamming shattering arguments where Sadie and I would hide in our rooms and play word games until it quietened down. One time I asked my father why he was so angry with Mom if he loved her, and he sighed. "Sometimes, Alex," he said, "you have to do something to help the people you love, even when it's something they don't want you to do."

My father was worried about how raising us kids on Mom's stories would affect how the people around us treated us. And, well, it's not like it really mattered much before Sadie turned six, just a little kid flouncing around in her mother's too-big dress and holding her hand to her head, stumbling through the "visthins" she'd seen about why she would explode if she ate too many peas. And my father would smile some way I didn't see the strain in, and my mother would take Sadie into her arms, and she would say "Well, we can't have that now, can we?" and I would eat Sadie's vegetables. I didn't mind. I loved my little sister, and I didn't want her to explode either.

Sadie's first day of school, though, was the first day she went out in what my father called the "real world" without any of us beside her. She wasn't used to the plaid skirts and collared stories required of our school's dress code, to strict haircuts and learning to read from Bible stories. She lisped through her math facts and reading comprehension exams, and it didn't take long for the girls in her grade to learn to ignore her. Sadie (strong Sadie, smart Sadie, reclusive Sadie) didn't appear outwardly fazed by the sudden isolation, but sometimes her eyes went hazy with absence, and she drew further and further into my mother's stories.

She drew her first tarot deck as part of an unsupervised art project for school. While the other kids in her class played around with stupid origami fortune tellers with pithy statements on them about when you would eat ice cream next or what color shirt you should wear, Sadie'd drawn out a whole collection of Lovers and Towers and Death. The teacher found her at recess, for once surrounded by a small group of girls in pink coats, Sadie performing ritual after ritual and ominously talking about what changes each little kindergartener was going to bring to the world.

Most of them cried.

Our parents picked us up from school that day. We sat out in the hallway while our parents talked with Sadie's teacher after school. I held her hand and listened to the growing murmur of arguments through the door. "She's a little girl!" my mother shouted. "She's scaring her classmates," Mrs. Grante said, and from my father, "She's old enough to know better."

Sadie thumbed through her unevenly-cut squares of crayon-covered cards, flipping back and forth between an upside down picture of a couple under a tree and a stormy picture of a stone castle ravaged by dragons.

"Alex," she whispered to me when the noise quietened out again, "do you think I'm normal?"

I thought for a second, about my father's trips and my mother's stories. I thought about pulling Gertrude Jones's hair behind the slides last week when she said Sadie needed to be sent to a crazy hospital. Ms Longshore sent me to the principal's office, but later I heard her tell Gertrude about the Golden Rule and how we have to be nice to all of our friends, even if Alex's sister is a little different.

"I like your drawings," I said finally, "and if anyone is mean to you I'll protect you."

Later that night when I was supposed to be in bed, I snuck downstairs to get a glass of water. Mom and Dad were still awake. They were talking about Sadie.

"She can't keep believing this crap," my father argued. "She's going to grow up and have nothing come of her, as stuck in fairyland as she is."

My mother scoffed. "It's not a fairy tale, John. Just because the other kids at Sadie's school haven't been taught about the natural world--"

"Ella," my father interrupted, "this has to stop. I won't have my daughter running around turning into some kind of Satanist."

My mother didn't respond for a second. When she did, her voice was colder

than I had ever heard it. "If I am remembering correctly," she said, "and I know I am, we came to an agreement. I would let the kids go to that stuck-up school of yours, get the education your parents so dearly desired for their grandchildren, and I could continue with the things I learned as a child."

"I didn't say you couldn't continue believing it yourself. But if this continues... either you stop lying to the kids, or I will cut you off and raise them myself."

"You think you can take kids from their mother?"

Quietly, his voice hard, my father answered, "No job on record, no home in your name, no documented support-- are you willing to risk it?"

My parents fell silent. The tension was thick. I went back to bed.

The next morning, my mother was in the garden. She didn't see Sadie and me before we left for school. My father drove us, the way he did when he had big news to share.

"Yesterday," he started, and I sat up straighter. That false cheeriness was never a good sign. "Yesterday, your mother and I were talking about how we want what's best for you kids. We both know you have the potential to grow into wonderful, down to earth people we can be proud of. And, which is why,"-- here my father coughed uncomfortably-- "your mother and I have agreed that we won't be focusing on any of that silly occult nonsense anymore." Sadie cried.

Sometimes you have to do something to help the people you love, even when it's something they don't want you to do.

My mother didn't stop, however. When my father took me on his business trips, teaching me about his wild adventures as an accountant at Big Family and Sons, my mother called Sadie out of school sick and they spent the day in the garden. Without my father's oversight, Mom told Sadie about redcaps, greenmen, the seasonal courts of the Fey and how to act around each different kind. Be polite, Sadie later recounted to me, don't accept anything. She told Sadie how to read tea leaves according to different herbs in the garden, took her to various fortune tellers around New Orleans and had Sadie grade their reputability. "None of them really know what they're doing," Sadie said, "except the ones that do."

When my father found out (because of course he did)-- he found out right when I was entering high school and Sadie had just finished the sixth grade. My mother had some savings, but her secret trips with Sadie slowly made her more and more financially reliant on my father, and one day in April she took Sadie on a trip that she couldn't afford without my father's credit card. My father, businessman that he was, had a habit of reading through each bank statement voraciously, gleefully checking the reports against every purchase he had made that month. The charges for a New Orleans motel and a high end palm reader were of course major discrepancies, and after failing to dispute the charges with the bank, he realized what happened.

Sadie and I sheltered up in my room, playing board games and listening to the radio. She jolted at each crash from downstairs, and I turned the radio up as loud as it would go.

My mother's bags were packed within the night. There wasn't much she'd had

left to save, after my father's tirade. Her little herb garden on the windowsill had smashed on the floor, and all I saw of her tarot decks were the torn-off scraps that had fallen before my father burned them. The box in which my mother lovingly stored her crystal collection had split down the middle and the crystals themselves had spilled over the floor. Sadie ladled some into her pockets before my father could notice, but the rest he sold off to an antique salesman friend of his he knew down south.

I didn't see my mother for the rest of my childhood. My father moved us out of the marshlands and into Abbeville, where he'd grown up and where my grandparents still lived. He found another Catholic school to enroll us in, this one even stricter than our one back home, and every Sunday my grandmother would take us to her church where we learned about the "real way God works, we can do that now that that woman's not influencing you poor kids."

Sadie pushed back, of course. My grandmother was the harsh kind of woman with a pursed face and slick grey hair pulled flat against her head, her clothes austere and shapeless, and Sadie's small frizzy curls and loose brightly colored clothes were the kind of sinful styles my grandmother loathed. Most evenings passed in a tense silence, Sadie out exploring the secret occult shops hidden away in the Conservative town, my grandmother stroking rosary beads by the window and muttering about useless little girls wasting their life on sexdrugsrockandroll. Most nights burst into shrill electricity, the sharp voices of my father and grandmother shouting against Sadie's static heat, and I would lean against the window of my bedroom tracing the same textbook words again and again or sharpening the collection of pocket knives my father gave me for Christmas.

Sadie never forgave my father for driving my mother out, and she was angry with me for not defending her.

I was biding my time. I would protect my little sister. Sometimes to help the people you love, you have to do things they don't want you to do.

So I moved back to New Orleans when I was eighteen, and later when Sadie graduated I invited her to live with me. She refused at first, but I knew she would agree. She needed out, and I hadn't, but I left anyway to make her a place. My place was with my little sister.

My father died the summer of Sadie's nineteenth birthday, his blood blackened and oily around the clotting slit in his neck, his terrifying exhilarating eyes swollen in shock. A burglary gone wrong, the police said, and I pressed my sister closer to my side and asked to hear the reports from their investigation. And Sadie moved in and I was still in school and I couldn't pay for both of our educations, so Sadie spent her days flipping between part time jobs ("There's no focus to you," she would hear, and "show up on time," and "this is your final warning") and exploring the back neighborhoods of the city. She met an older woman, a wizened palm reader with steel in her eyes, who offered her an apprenticeship if Sadie would just pay a small price, for transitional fees. My sister's dark eyes brightened with more hope than I'd seen in years, and of course I couldn't say no. I met with the woman first to... discuss the exact purpose of the cost of Sadie's apprenticeship (I've mentioned my collection?) and really

get her to see Sadie's promise, and when Sadie heard the woman was no longer requiring any payment to train Sadie, she was excited enough to ignore the new tremors in the woman's body.

I've always been my father's son, and he's made me an excellent businessman. And besides, you're aware, I have promised to protect my little sister.

I helped Sadie with the fees when she wanted to open her own place. I helped her set up the shop to exact specifications. The heavy drifting curtains, the rich incense, the small table in the center of the room. I had my degree, and I had my father's life insurance, and I bought my sister the best supplies available. I wasn't allowed to help beyond that. Sadie didn't want me to find her any customers.

But Sadie was so excited, and I couldn't be prouder of her-- I bought the place next to hers for my business consultation company and drilled holes into the walls where I knew she couldn't see. For a long time my little sister had been mine to look out for, mine to protect. It was my business to check in on her success, even if I wasn't supposed to. Sometimes you have to do things people don't want you to do in order to protect them. I will protect my little sister.

And I am right to. Sadie needs my protection. My company did perfectly well, but Sadie's fortune telling business was trying to do too much. She had romance consultations, career advice, warnings of big changes in the future-- do you know how hard it is to get all that stuff right? You can't spread yourself too thin, or you'll miss the real talents you have.

And Sadie-- gosh, it took her a while to find hers. A few months after Sadie had opened her business, she was stressed. She wouldn't talk at dinner, wouldn't even offer to read my tea leaves late in the evenings. It was the first time I've seen Sadie give up on her beliefs.

It hurt to watch.

One night a young woman came in, a tourist looking for direction in her life. She was a naive thing from a small town taking a year off before school, and her parents weren't expecting her back for another week. On a whim she'd come into my sister's store wondering what she should major in.

Sadie, in a fit of desperation, told the girl she wouldn't make it to college. She would be murdered here on her stay, mugged on her way home from a bar that very evening.

The girl's name was Annabelle Davis. I'm sure you've read of her in the papers. (They didn't publish the pictures though. Too gruesome for public eyes.)

The Davis girl had Sadie's card in her purse, and when word got out that Sadie had predicted Annabelle's death her reputation slowly grew. Teenagers visiting her on dares, old women with too much time on their hands, supposedly reputable gentlemen that had heard about the pretty young fortune teller-- Sadie had a talent for predicting the grim deaths of each one of her visitors. I kept a list, you know. Not all the dates have passed yet. But the ones that have, the ones with a quickslow ending, falling in the river this last winter or growing dizzy on staircases. It was hours, or days, or months. But so far Sadie's gotten them all right.

When they published that magazine article about her, she started going by her full name. Eusaide, my mother's choice. According to my sister it sounds more mystical. The journalist had just sent his final draft to the publishers when his hotel burned down from an electrical fire.

You officers have been here before too. I remember one of them in particular. He was a tall blond man with a square jaw. Didn't look great in blue. What was his name again?

(You were lucky. Waited by the door when he came in. I thought you were clever. I am not used to being wrong.)

Anyway that one officer ran off the highway that same evening. His car was too destroyed to check for any prior damages. (Why didn't you learn?)

Did you know most forms of death are possible to manipulate, so that even if they look like accidents there's some kind of purposeful intent involved? It's easy to push someone into a river if they get too close, and it's not too hard to introduce carbon monoxide into an old two-story house. Power crises are especially easy to create, if you have the right tools.

You know, Sadie cries each time she predicts a new death that was in the papers. She's a vulnerable girl. She keeps going because it's her talent, her skill, but she is not a killer.

Sometimes you have to do something to help the people you love, even if it's something they don't want you to do. It's easier if they don't know.

Manipulation requires less effort if someone pulls, say, death by gunfire. Self inflicted gunfire, too, once you know the dominant hand.

You were not so hard to figure out.

It's not personal. I won't apologize, though. I'd do anything to protect my little sister.