The Accidental Theory of Us

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Sorrel Orrel comes to the Academy of Six Measures with five other witches and a crate of living roots. For a winter they have worked from plans that call the marks in an old boundary garden decoration. Sorrel wants the original records, including the names of the witches who did the work. The academy first requires an examination. Its needle barely moves for her, so she makes the examiner write down what it measures. It can weigh her reserve of magic. It cannot tell him what she can do with the roots growing under his floor.

One evening the witches pass around a mirror that can show them who's on their mind. Sorrel is holding the thread that works it when Alban, the prince's brother, comes to return a lamp. Sorrel catches him as he falls and the mirror in their circle breaks. By morning Alban can feel the roses and Sorrel is struggling to contain his storm. An account of a previous exchange gives them twenty-six days to learn how to reverse theirs. At the full moon each must release the gift willingly. Until then he teaches her where to send a dangerous charge, while she teaches him to feel which way a root wants to grow. When a fellow student asks about their private lessons, Sorrel says they're courting. Alban plays along. By the time she chooses to kiss him in private, neither of them needs the excuse.

Then a greenhouse freezes from the inside. In tracing the missing heat, the witches uncover an older working. Comparing her sketch with the evidence from the garden, Sorrel realises something was drawing power before Alban fell. As the stolen storm rushed back, their mirror gave it a way to reach her. In the archives she finds a copyist's agreement to a paid trial. Mara Venn withdrew in writing on the morning the

mirror broke. A private report records her death at the trial that night, although the public notice says she died at home. Sorrel puts the letter beyond the project office’s reach.

On the night of the full moon, a forged message brings Sorrel to a service door where the scholar Halric Dey is waiting. He had arranged for Alban to return the lamp so he could take his storm. The witches’ circle diverted it into Sorrel, and now he binds her to a stone seat to finish the theft. She cuts a copper return and strikes the damaged roof. Alban follows the roots to reach her, but even with the door open, the pull on her body keeps her from leaving. He helps expose the instrument beneath the stone and Sorrel sends a strike into it. Halric clings to the pieces when she tells him to let go. The returning force kills him.

Moonlight reaches a patch of floor through the broken roof. Rain keeps washing away their chalk, so Alban uses his mother’s knife to score the lines in stone. Each lets the other’s gift go. Alban can make a spark again, and Sorrel feels a root on the far side of a door.

Mara’s letter and Halric’s papers expose the false account of her death. Sorrel asks for her unpaid wages to be included in the claim. That fight continues, but all six witches secure paid work for a season and a catalogue with room for their predecessors’ names. Sorrel makes it to Alban’s rematch, where he loses the first point looking for her. After supper, they arrange to see each other again tomorrow.