

THE
THIRD KIND
OF
MAGIC

ELIZABETH FOREST

The Third Kind of Magic

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THE BONFIRE



There were three kinds of magic in the village. Suli knew the first kind, of course; every girl did. There was no harm, folk said, in teaching girls to See for protection. And everyone agreed that the second kind of magic, Healing, was useful. But those weren't enough for Suli. She wanted to learn the third kind, the dangerous magic taught only to wise women.

It was New Year's Eve, and all over Teveral the villages celebrated the turning of the year with a bonfire. Suli walked to the village square with her grandmother and her brother Eb, to join their neighbors in the cobblestoned square around the bonfire. The villagers would sing songs, tell jokes, and jump over the bonfire to make a wish. Suli was excited to be wearing a new blue dress, and about the wish she would make. She'd asked to apprentice as a wise woman when she turned twelve. The village Elders, and Hedith, the wise woman, were considering her request.

The fire burned furiously, the smoke drifting into the crowd as the wind changed. A group of girls waited their turn, whispering and laughing. They cast sidelong glances at Suli, but she ignored them. The men had already jumped. Now her brother

joined the line of boys. Eb ran and jumped over the fire, yelling happily with his friends. He caught his sister's eye and grinned.

It was the elder women's turn. Suli waited to see if Grandmother would join them. Every year she said this would be the last time, and every year she still leapt over the fire like a woman half her age. Some said the flames erased the old year's bad luck as well as granting wishes, but Grandmother said that was just a story, and that everyone jumped because it was fun.

Hedith, the wise woman, strode forward to take her place at the head of the line, while behind her back, a man made the sign against witchcraft. Hedith ran at the fire, shouting words of good luck. Then came the elder women, her grandmother among them, hooting and laughing and making bawdy jokes. Then the mothers. Last came the girls.

It was time. Suli straightened her shoulders and joined the girls in line. One girl glanced at her and looked away.

"Have you heard about the Investigator?" another asked in a loud whisper. "My cousin said he's looking for witches in Riverford, and that's just a day's ride from here."

"If the Prime Minister had his way, they'd clean up all the villages, and a good thing, too," Janet said primly. She was the leader of the girls and they all nodded. Suli agreed, too, but said nothing.

One of them noticed her and stepped away. "Watch out, the witch-spawn is here."

Suli stared in front of her, stony-faced.

Janet said, "You don't belong here, witch-spawn. You aren't one of us. You're cursing our bonfire. Go away."

Suli took a deep breath. No matter what she or Eb did, the children always called them witch-spawn. It didn't matter to her—she was strong. But Eb was easier to hurt; he liked everyone and couldn't understand why they didn't like him. The children wouldn't let them forget their mother had left them on Grand-

mother's doorstep when she was five and Eb only four. The mother everyone said was a witch.

If the wise women granted her request, these girls would need her help some day. Once Suli was a wise woman, everyone would fear and respect her. No one would dare call Eb 'witch-spawn' ever again. Suli smiled nastily at Janet, who looked away.

Eb came to stand beside her, his face smeared with soot. He nodded at the girls and said, "Are you ready to jump?"

Janet called out, "Come to protect your sister from us? That won't help when the witch Investigator comes here, Eb Wing. Everyone here knows what your mother was. Everyone says Suli has the signs, too."

Eb stepped toward Janet, his fists clenched tightly by his side. "My sister is no witch. You're just jealous because she's better at Seeing than anyone else."

Janet narrowed her eyes. "Speaking to me? Orphans from a no-good family should mind their place. You need to be taught a lesson." She darted to the bonfire and dragged a burning branch from it. She held it gingerly in front of her, walking slowly toward Eb. The other girls scattered.

The branch was too heavy for Janet to control. It swung awkwardly, too close to Eb's face. The flames leapt toward him. Eb swore and stepped back.

"Not so bold now, are you witch-spawn?" Janet mocked.

The blood pounded in Suli's head. Everyone seemed to be moving slowly. She ran toward Janet shouting, "Put that down *now!* Idiot! You could burn him! Drop it!" She lunged for the branch, smoke stinging her eyes.

But the branch wasn't there. White-faced and shaking, Janet had dropped it. She stared at Suli with a dazed expression, her mouth hanging open.

Two mothers rushed over and grabbed their daughters, their voices shrill with panic. Then Grandmother was there, leading

her away. She looked back once. The girls stared at her with pale stunned faces while their mothers fussed and scolded.



ON THE MORNING of her twelfth birthday, Suli entered the kitchen to find Eb and Grandmother waiting for her, her gifts beside her bowl. She could tell one was from Eb by the drawings of birds and animals on the wrapping paper. "Happy Birthday," Grandmother and Eb said together. She smiled and sat down to unwrap Eb's gift, careful not to tear the paper. Inside were two corncob dolls with painted faces, one wrapped in red cloth, the other in blue.

Suli walked over to kiss Eb. "They're beautiful. Thank you."

He smiled. "What will you call them?"

"This one," she pointed to the doll in blue, "is Princess Fig. The other is Princess Scarlet Runner Bean."

"Both princesses, eh? I wonder how that will work out. You'd better tell me their story," he said.

"No," said Grandmother. "Suli is twelve today, ready for her apprenticeship. She's too old to play with dolls. Sit down, Suli, I have something to say to you."

Stomach churning, Suli returned to her chair. Grandmother had said that what happened at the bonfire meant she must be apprenticed as soon as possible. She waited, holding her breath.

"You've been accepted for training to become a wise woman."

Yes! Her wish had been granted. She glanced at Eb. He scowled at his bowl.

Grandmother said, "Don't be too pleased. There are conditions. You must study with the right teacher. And Hedith has doubts; she worries your motives are dangerous, that you want folk afraid of you. You're going to have to prove that you understand a wise woman's magic is to help, not harm. But they had no choice. Everyone heard you use the Voice."

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That was confusing. Could Hedith change her mind? Suli *did* want to be feared, but only by witches, or mean people like Janet. When she had power, she'd use it to protect innocent people who were attacked for no reason. Like Eb.

"I've found a teacher for you," Grandmother continued, pouring porridge into her bowl. "You'll study with my niece, Tala Wing, at her home in Weatherstone."

"Weatherstone? Why can't I study with Hedith?"

"That's at least a day's journey," Eb said, "why so far? There are other wise women nearby."

"Because the decision is up to me, and that's what I've decided. Suli needs what Tala can teach her."

Eb shook his head. "Bad enough she'll learn things that look like witchcraft, but you're sending her away where she doesn't know anyone."

Grandmother returned the pot to the stove and sat down. "There's no better teacher for Suli than Tala. And this is women's business and none of your concern. If you want to worry about something, worry about your own apprenticeship."

Eb made a face. Suli caught his eye and shook her head. She wanted to go, but she felt sick to her stomach.

Grandmother said to her, "I know you wanted this, but understand you no longer have a choice. You either accept the training or you'll be exiled from the village. *Do* you understand?"

Suli's mouth was dry. "Not really, Grandmother."

Grandmother leaned back and sighed. "Everyone heard you use the Voice at the bonfire. There's no doubt you can use the third kind of magic. Without training, such magic is dangerous."

"So this is because of me!" Eb said. "Because of a little teasing you're sending her away and forcing her to study magic? I won't let you!"

Grandmother shook her head. "No, Eb, it's not because of you, and it's not about teasing. The Elders are right. If Suli doesn't learn to control her power, we'll be waiting for the next

thing to happen. Better she learns to control it now, while she's young and hasn't done anything irrevocable."

Eb looked confused, and Suli guessed he didn't know what "irrevocable" meant. "You can't send her away," he said miserably.

Grandmother rose and wrapped her arms around Eb from behind. She kissed the top of his head. "Silly boy. You won't be alone: I'm here. Suli would be apprenticed this year anyway—so why the fuss? You'll be off to your apprenticeship next year yourself. Calm down and try to help your sister. You don't want her hung as a witch, do you?"

Eb made a choking sound. "Why would she be?"

"Because if she doesn't learn to control the third kind of magic, that's exactly what she'll be."

THE JOURNEY



Suli stood on the doorstep with Eb, her possessions in the sack over her shoulder. Her grandmother kissed her on both cheeks, and tears rose in Suli's eyes. She'd never been away from Grandmother before. What if something happened and she never saw her again?

"Go with the Sisters' blessing and mine," Grandmother said, stepping back. "Suli, practice your Seeing exercises. Eb, stay with your sister. Thanks to the Outsiders, even a girl traveling alone isn't welcome these days. Be careful on the road coming back."

They set out in the cold grey light. Thick scarves of white mist floated over the fields. Suli and Eb walked quickly to get warm. By midday they were halfway across the still and dusty plains. At noon, they sat down to rest and eat beneath one of the elms that lined the road. Suli drank cool water from the jug she carried, then handed it to her brother; he handed her half of the bread and onion. After they'd eaten, they set off down the blazing white road again, the dust swirling and settling on their bare feet and legs.

They'd walked an hour in the heat of the afternoon, and Eb's fair hair was dark with sweat, when he broke the silence. "I'll

miss having you around," he said gruffly, not looking at Suli. "If this cousin doesn't treat you right, come home."

Suli glanced at his profile and smiled. Strangers couldn't tell the fair boy and dark girl were brother and sister, but they read each other's thoughts easily. "Don't you trust Grandmother? She wouldn't send me to live with Tala if she wasn't..." She broke off, unable to finish the thought. What would someone who knew advanced magic be like? Like her grandmother, stern but basically kind? Arrogant and haughty? She felt a prickle of fear. She'd never seen this village, nor met the stranger who would order her life for years to come. Would she ever see Eb and Grandmother again? Her stomach knotted.

"I'll miss you, too, but don't worry. Once I know advanced magic, I'll be able to protect you, and Grandmother, and everyone." *And I'll finally learn real magic.*

Eb looked at her doubtfully. But he always worried about her. He was afraid she'd disappear one day, like their mother. She thought he was the one who needed protection the most. He trusted too easily, and was too openhearted. He was traveling with her to protect her from the villagers' fear of strange women, even girls, traveling alone, but it was up to her to protect them both from anyone who meant them harm. That's what her Seeing was for.

The flat horizon, seen across hedged fields, gradually became a range of mountains in the distance. Suli thought they should've seen Weatherstone by now, but by late afternoon there was still no sign of a tall blue mountain with a village nestled at its foot. A cool breeze came. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, lifting her arms at the sheer pleasure of it. If only I had wings, she thought, I could fly to Tala's house, instead of plodding along like this. As if in answer to her thoughts, two geese lifted into the air, flying beside the road ahead. They flew a short distance and sank down behind the hedges that bordered the fields.

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They walked on, thirsty and hot. There was only a little water left in the jug, and they didn't know how far there was to go.

Rolling green hills, dotted with trees, surrounded them. In the valleys between the hills, farms lay snug and orderly, alternating squares of green and yellow. They decided to stop and ask for water and directions. A lane ran from the road to three houses surrounded by neat fields. Suli whistled to the songbirds in the trees as they passed. They took a path leading to a trellised gate and knocked on the door of the closest house.

A woman answered, drying her hands on a cloth. Her face was deeply tanned and she wore a red kerchief over her dark hair. She smiled at first, then frowned at something behind them. She shouted, as though speaking to someone far away, "What do you want here?"

Eb stared in surprise. "Please, Mistress, we just want to know how far it is to Weatherstone. And we're thirsty; may we have some water from your well?"

"We don't welcome strangers here!" the woman called loudly, then under her breath she hissed, "You'd best not stay here. There's a witch Investigator, one of the Outsiders, in the next valley. Everyone's afraid to be seen talking to strangers."

"But why?" Eb asked. "Most folk aren't witches. How will you sell your goods at market if you don't speak to strangers?"

"Be on your way!" she yelled angrily, then whispered, "You should arrive in Weatherstone by sunset if you don't dawdle. Drink your fill at the well there, but do it quickly. I have nosy neighbors."

Suli looked over her shoulder. A woman in the garden of the house across the lane was watching them, a scowl on her face.

"If you don't go," the first woman called loudly for her neighbor to hear, "I'll set the dogs on you!"

"Thank you, Mistress," Suli whispered back. "We'll drink and be on our way." They drank their fill quickly, then Eb filled the jug while Suli kept her eye on the scowling neighbor.

"Why are folk so suspicious?" Eb asked once they'd returned to the road.

"I don't know. The Investigator, I suppose."

They were used to walking now, and kept a good pace. Two more geese, or the same ones, flew just ahead of them, but before they could catch up, the birds floated down into the trees by the road and were lost to view.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun was a finger's width above the horizon, they saw a tall, forested mountain with a village at its foot. From a distance, the stone houses looked gloomy and strange. Grandmother's house was painted yellow and roofed with golden thatch, but the houses of Weatherstone were built of dark blue stone quarried from the peak above. In the fading light, the dark houses had a gloomy look.

They passed through the gate in the town wall. Once inside they stopped, uncertain where to go. Villagers passed, ignoring them, intent on their evening meal. Some stared at them with suspicion. They had never seen so many strangers before. Suli concentrated on using her Seeing.

A middle-aged woman passed them in the lane, avid eyes sunk in a puffy face. She stared at the children with a hungry expression. Suli examined her and recoiled. She nodded brusquely to the woman and grabbed her brother's hand, pulling him along. "C'mon, Eb." He followed, looking back at the woman.

A woman with a calm, comfortable face stood behind her gate, looking down the lane. She wore a plain homespun dress with a clean, white apron over it and she smiled when she saw the children. Suli studied her face, and then focused her gaze on a spot behind the woman. Suli nodded and went over to her. "Excuse me, Mistress. My brother and I are strangers here. We're looking for Tala Wing's house. Do you know where she lives?"

The woman smiled and gave directions, pointing to the lane that would end at the foot of Blue Mountain. Suli thanked her, and she and Eb walked up the lane.

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"Are you certain she wasn't misleading you?" Eb asked.

"Yes. She has a kind heart," Suli said.

Eb shifted his sack. "Good. I don't want to meet a witch at nightfall in a strange village. There must be a lot of witches here, or folk wouldn't be so scared."

Suli privately thought people seemed more afraid of being accused of witchcraft than of being a victim of it. She'd seen no sign of it on the journey. The first woman they'd passed in Weatherstone had a cold and greedy heart, and would have stolen from them if she could, but that didn't make her a witch.

The village street climbed upward, passing fallow fields, to end near the foot of the mountain. Night had fallen and the stars were out when the street ended at a wooden gate. Beyond it, a path climbed upwards until it was out of sight.

Eb groaned when he saw the steep path. "My poor feet! This better be the right place. Why is it so far from the other houses?" They closed the gate behind them. Suli didn't reply. She was out of breath, forcing her legs up the steep path, her sack heavy. The path entered a thick copse of trees and the moon disappeared. Suli stopped to catch her breath as Eb walked on ahead. The trees rustled, although there was no wind. She thought she heard a voice whisper, "Suli, Suli, over here. This way. Come this way, dearie."

"Is someone there?" Suli called softly. "Eb, wait." She stared into the darkness but could see nothing.

"What's wrong?" Eb asked, returning to her side.

"I thought I heard something. Let's keep going." They emerged from the trees, and water glimmered to their left. Suli could smell the spicy scent of bulrushes and mud.

At the top of the path they saw the dark outline of a house. No light greeted them, and the only sound was the singing of crickets, loud and shrill in the grass. The dark windows seemed to stare.

Suli knocked on the door. "Cousin Tala!" There was no answer.

"What if she's not home?" Eb said from the bottom step.

"Maybe she's feeding her animals."

"It's awfully late. I don't like this," Eb said.

Without warning, a loud flapping sound passed over their heads, a gust of wind ruffling their hair. Looking up, Suli saw the silhouettes of two large birds against the stars. One of the birds turned its head to look at her as it flew over the house.

Suli pounded on the door. "Mistress Wing! Your cousins Suli and Eb are here! Are you home?" There were sounds of movement inside.

The door opened without warning and a woman stood on the threshold, an oil lamp in her hand. She was a thin, dark-haired woman, with cheekbones like the outstretched wings of a bird, the bones of her wrists sharp with nothing extra anywhere about her. Only the streaks of white hair at her temples betrayed her age.

"Welcome, Cousins! Let me look at you," Tala said, holding the lamp high. She examined them for a moment. "Suli, you look like your father. Come inside. I've been expecting you all day."

They stepped across the threshold, and Tala led them through a dark parlor into the kitchen. A stone hearth covered the far end of the room. At the other end, an iron stove radiated warmth, the banked embers glowing red through the latticework pattern on the doors. The pattern resembled a face, and Suli felt it watching her. She looked over her shoulder as she passed, certain she'd seen it move.

"Do you want supper?" Tala asked.

"Yes, please, Cousin," said Eb.

"Put your things down. I'll show you where to wash.

Tala lit a lantern and led them outside to the pump in the yard.

“Wash while I’ll warm up your food,” she said, and leaving lantern on a bench, she went back inside the house.

When she was gone, Eb said, “Did you see those birds?”

Suli shrugged as though she didn’t care, but she thought they were the same geese she’d seen on the journey. She couldn’t tell Eb that, and anyway, maybe it didn’t mean anything. She was more worried about Tala. When she’d used her Seeing, Tala appeared to be two people.

She couldn’t tell Eb *that*. He’d be wary and suspicious, and might say something that would put them in danger. It was up to her to understand what it meant.

They walked slowly back to the house, Eb carrying the lantern. A huddle of goats stared at them with golden eyes, their chins resting on the half-door of their shed.

Tala stood in front of the kitchen steps, bent over two geese. They’re just ordinary geese after all, Suli thought with relief.

“They’ve arrived safely, thank you,” Tala said. She straightened and came toward the children, smiling. “They wanted to see the new apprentice.”

Is she joking? “Your geese wanted to see me?” Suli asked.

“They’re curious,” Tala said. The geese peered around Tala’s skirt.

“This is Suli,” Tala said to the geese, “and her brother, Eb. They’re Dafyd’s children.”

Not knowing what else to do, Suli said, “Hello.”

Eb looked from his sister to the geese, his brow furrowed.

“That’s enough for tonight,” Tala said to the geese, “let the travelers eat and sleep. You should roost, too.” The geese dipped their heads and disappeared into the darkness.

“Come inside, your food will be warm now,” Tala said.

They followed her up the steps. They both ate quickly, tired and ready for sleep. Tala led them to the bedroom that would become Suli’s and handed her the candlestick. “I’m just down the

hall if you need anything. Goodnight, Cousins. We rise soon after cockcrow here.”

Alone in the bedroom, Suli and Eb sat on the bed’s bright quilt.

“Tala talks to geese as though they were people,” Eb whispered. “Do you think she’s a witch?”

“Hush. That’s ridiculous,” Suli said. “Lots of people talk to their animals. It doesn’t mean anything. She probably doesn’t see people very often, and it’s become a habit.” But she wasn’t thinking about the geese. She realized she’d forgotten to mention the voice in the trees to Tala. Would her new teacher believe her? She was sure she’d heard it.

Eb shook his head. “This doesn’t feel right.”

“You can’t say anything. If Tala thinks we suspect her of witchcraft, she’ll be angry. That’s not how I want to begin my apprenticeship.” And if she *was* a witch, all the more reason not to say so. Besides, Suli wanted to know more about those geese.

Eb folded his arms. “I’ll wait until morning to decide,” he said, with the stubborn expression she knew so well. “I’m not sure you should stay here.”

“No,” she said, careful to keep her voice level, “You’re making too much of this because you’re tired. They’re just geese, Eb. I used my Seeing; Tala doesn’t mean us any harm. In the morning, you’ll see everything’s fine, and that’s what you’ll tell Grandmother.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She smiled with a confidence she didn’t feel. She crawled beneath the quilt and lay down. She hadn’t told him the geese seemed to have two identities, too. Long after Eb fell asleep, she lay awake wondering how Tala could be two people. And who had whispered to her from the trees?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Forest is a former librarian who lives in Northern California, where she writes speculative and historical fiction for all ages. She occasionally talks to crows.

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