

ARCHIVE ENTRY #022
Title: “Three Witches Walk Into a Bakery”
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What began as a local bake-off rapidly escalated into a magical power struggle laced with frosting and soul stealing sourdough.

If this entry smells faintly of burnt sugar and betrayal, that’s because it is.

Signed,
E. Wormwood

(Note: Remiss to share: no autographs or quotes were collected from legends in attendance. We are determined to try again under less dire-dessert circumstances)

The Larkspur Annual Baking Fair was—according to the wagon’s travel log—‘mildly competitive, deeply floury, and only fatal in two recorded instances.’...Estella arrived late.

By now the stone square was dusted in powdered sugar and trepidation. Frosted banners fluttered in the breeze—tables bowed under golden pies—and in the center of it all stood three familiar women, each more dramatically dressed than the last.

She patted Orlin’s letter, weighing her breast pocket—just once more, and started for them.

The matron on the left wore a sharp, red-lipped smile and an apron embroidered with thorns and curses—Morrigan Hawkesweed. Her taloned fingers held the brim of a large black hat, its curling tip nearly matching the height of the maiden beside her.

Lilliana Thistlewhip's lithe form floated in a dress that glistened like summer jam, a bonnet of swirling cream atop her head. Auburn hair spilled down her shoulders like syrup poured from a bottle.

And the crone—*Magis Briarwitch*—a friend of Orlin The Wise, and head of the Grand Coven. She wrapped her curved spine in something that reeked of remains and radiated enough disdain to curdle cream.

Only now did the parchment over her chest reveal its true meaning. This strange sweet tooth request was in fact a chance to stand before the Grand Witches...with no time to prepare. In true Orlin fashion.

Estella straightened her coat and spine then took one step onto the cobblestones. She immediately sneezed.

The sneeze sparked a nearby cake that exploded into marzipan butterflies. The crowd cheered.

“Oh, lovely,” she muttered, brushing powdered magic from her sleeves. “It’s *that* kind of baking fair.”

The three witches across the square turned as one. Estella moved swiftly, hoping the air would cool her burning cheeks. Morigane’s hat tipped just enough to hide her grin. Lilliana swirled her cream bonnet with a flick, as though savoring the spectacle. And Magis’ sigh rolled out like a cold draft from a tomb.

“Ah, golden eyes. I wondered when Orlin would send the fawn,” said Lilliana.

“Tell the old croak, the Oven keeps better time than the court. And his pupil was late.” Magis added, this time to Estella—who now opened her mouth to apologize,

“Truly sorry, the wagon wouldn’t enter the city with this crowd. Master sends his regards. The Crown keeps him quite busy these days.”

Morigane sneered at that.

“*The Crown* thinks it can regulate magic,” the shadows cast by her brim began to grow on the cobblestone. “The Oven laughs at kings you know. Let’s see if *you* can make it laugh.”

“Pardon?” asked Estella.

All three witches gestured toward a half crumbling, brick and mortar bakery to their left. Estella craned her neck to watch the large plumes of purple smoke spill from the chimney.

“Contestant!” someone barked from the crowd.

Before she could look down, a whisk smacked into her palm with the force of destiny—or at least of poorly supervised kitchenware. Then there was a smaller frantic looking witch beside them.

“Wait—no—this is a misunderstanding.” Estella sputtered, trying to shove it back at the official. The whisk clung, handle curling around her wrist like eager ivy.

A cheer rose from the crowd. Someone hurled a puff pastry bouquet in her direction. It burst into pigeons midair. Morigane snickered again while Lilliana hid her smile behind a gloved hand.

“This isn’t—!” she began again, but her words drowned beneath the ring of a bell and the scrape of chalk across slate. Her name was being scrawled into the contestant roster in glowing sugar script. She turned a confused and pleading expression to Magis—who only stared through her.

“Contestant!” the squat witch barked again, yanking Estella by the elbow.

“No, really, I’m—”

But her protest collapsed as she was shoved through a flour-dusted curtain, leaving the fair—and her chance with the Grand Coven—behind.

The air changed at once—cooler, heavier, infused with almond smoke and a hint of doom. The crowd's roar vanished in an instant, as if she had stepped through a pie crust and into another world.

“Name?” asked another witch with a clipboard and a quill that smoked ominously.

“Estella. But I’m not—” She tried to make out her surroundings through adjusting eyes.

“Great. You’ll be Station Ten. Watch out for Station Nine; she bakes with feelings.”

“Wait, I—” A bell rang and the ground rumbled.

The Oven behind her groaned like a dragon with indigestion. Its massive looming form occupied more than half the space. This was some kind of kitchen. And she was now, unwillingly, part of a ritualistic bake off.

“Begin!”

Estella sighed and looked down at the whisk. It blinked back at her.

“Oh good,” she said, remembering last week's spat with The Kitchen. “Sentient utensils. What could possibly go wrong?”

She paused only to take a breath. The sweet aromas from each station combined and assaulted her nose. Something sugary, nutty, and a little...electric—magic. Estella gathered that this would not be any sort of normal competition.

Station Nine was indeed baking with feelings.

“I call this ‘Lover’s Regret,’” the witch crooned, pouring viscous heartbreak custard into a crust lined with crushed lavender. Her apron read Break Me, Bake Me, Bind Me in stitched thorn script.

Estella’s station wheezed like an asthmatic accordion as the smaller ovens flared to life. She peered around the room once more. Ten small prep stations were situated in a circle around the large hearth. Across the floor, Station Three coaxed a lump of dough that insisted on standing upright and flexing its gluten.

“Bread golem,” the witch announced proudly. The golem saluted, then attempted to escape across the counter.

On her other side, Station One’s meringue was reciting tragic poetry in a falsetto.

Someone shrieked as a cauldron of caramel began orbiting the chandelier like a molten moon. A choir of cupcakes somewhere were harmonizing. Every clang of pan or spoon carried a faint echo of laughter—as if the kitchen itself enjoyed the chaos. Estella tightened her grip on the sentient whisk.

“Comforting,” she muttered, starting to measure out anti-anxiety jam while dodging a runaway bread roll.

By the time she’d cobbled together something vaguely resembling a tart with a filling of the jam and one very rude cinnamon stick, Estella had gathered several facts:

This was not a baking fair, but a selection rite. *Naturally*. The winner would be named High Witch of the Threefold Crust. And the losers—would be banished from Larkspur, the only place a witch could practice magic.

“Three witches walk into a bakery,” Varric muttered from the edge of shadows behind the butter churn. “Sounds like a joke. Ends like a tragedy.”

Estella jumped, eyes darting around the room before they landed narrowly on him.

“How did you—I didn’t volunteer for this you know,” she hissed, failing to wipe the flour from her face. “*Someone* conscripted me!” Hairs danced between her antlers at the outburst.

He browsed the other contestants and sniffed the air. “Uh oh, that one’s cursing the nutmeg. You’re in trouble.”

“Oh please. I study under Orlin the Wise. I can taste a hex blindfolded with a stuffy nose.”

A second later, her tart exploded—and the rest of her hair fell from atop her head.

“Okay,” she brushed the charred crust from her sleeve, “maybe half a hex.”

Varric retreated to the shadows with a smile. Leaving Estella to her defeat.

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Soon Estella watched as the other witches began offering their creations to The Oven. A small crowd had formed around the hearth to watch the judgment. She could make out the three familiar silhouettes along the back wall.

Magis Briarwitch and her companions had come. Just in time to see Estella, and the finale.

Station Nine crafted an emotional soufflé that sighed with existential dread. Five had baked a casserole that sang hymns to the harvest moon and wept gravy. Three was still busy glazing her cupcakes while they blinked back at her.

The Oven loomed like a cathedral, brick throat glowing with hunger. She could only bear witness as dish after dish was turned away, or completely burned in rejection. Every step toward it became a prayer and a gamble.

Estella, thoroughly annoyed and utterly exhausted, had resorted to sourdough. But not just any sourdough. She needed something to win. “*The Bread of Binding*,” she’d read aloud from the ancient cookbook Varric had stolen from the Archive’s Restricted Pantry. A stunt she would most likely pay for later.

Infused with memory. Tempered with intent. Risen with soul.

It pulsed. She’d named it Gerald—and staked her livelihood on his complex charm.

“You are the last group,” the announcer called over the crowd, teeth gleaming like fondant knives. “Present your offerings to the Oven.”

It was not a metaphorical oven. It had a mouth...and opinions. Estella’s sourdough loaf—Gerald—trembled in her arms.

“I feel like this is wrong,” he murmured.

“You’re a sentient carb,” she said. “Your entire existence is morally ambiguous.”

Station Nine approached first, souffle oozing in its ramekin. It beat faintly, like a heart too tired to go on. The Oven...sniffed—drawing air in through unseen vents. A shiver ran through the crowd. Flames licked higher, then sank, as though the taste did not satisfy. Her eyes filled with the same dread her dish carried.

The witch’s face paled. She hurried to collect her plate from the slab before being escorted out with the others.

Station Five trembled as she bowed. Her casserole wept audibly, gravy dripping onto her shoes as though begging not to be sacrificed. The Oven gurgled deep in its belly. For one brief, hopeful moment the embers flickered green, like harvest fields—then its gentle melody was strangled. Flames burned it black, ash curling where gravy tears streamed.

Rejection was absolute.

The last witch, Station Three, raised her cakes like a relic. She placed them gently on the hot stone. The Oven sat—unchanging. Until, one by one, the cakes sparked like candles. Only to be snuffed out in a storm of black smoke. Her tray clattered to the floor as the Oven rumbled its disapproval.

Then came Estella. Gerald quivered in her hands, crust warm beneath her palms. She willed down the nausea threatening to surge.

“I don’t like this,” he whispered, his voice a low yeasty hum.

“You don’t have to like it,” she whispered back. “Just...don’t embarrass me. And don’t scream,” she paused for a moment. “Or, at least—if you do, harmonize.”

Eye-like coals fixed on them both. The crowd leaned forward. Even the three witches in the back row had stilled, their ranks momentarily forgotten as they waited for the final judgment to be passed. She set Gerald down gently and patted his crust.

The Oven inhaled again. The air warped with heat. Sparks scattered like fireflies. Gerald trembled, then puffed up his crust proudly. He had not been scorched...yet.

“I am perfectly fermented,” he declared.

A silence fell so thick Estella could hear her own pulse. Then, slowly—reverently—the Oven exhaled, a breath of molten butter and iron. Its doors closed with little ceremony, sealing Gerald inside.

Estella tore her attention from her loaf to scan the crowd again. The witches all wore different expressions—confusion, shock, disbelief, and along that far wall, three mildly impressed faces.

For an eternal second, nothing—only heat, only dread. She didn’t dare celebrate. Until a voice, resonant and rich as brioche, thundered from the building itself:

“She is the Crust Chosen.”

Some of the witches fainted.

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Estella was crowned with a wreath of candied sage not a moment later. The cheers began.

“I decline,” she said immediately. The cheering was cut short as a bottle popped somewhere. Someone cleared their throat in the silence.

“You can’t,” called Magis from the wall. The sea of witches parted for the crone as she approached Estella, Lilliana and Morrigane on her heels. Each step echoed.

“I don’t want to be in charge of a coven full of deranged pastry chefs.”

There was a unison gasp before the circle began to stretch away from Estella. They whispered to each other in disbelief.

“You *won*, dear.”

“I didn’t even know I was entered.”

The Grand witches all shared a look like they knew something she did not. Estella couldn’t help but think of a reason—*Orlin*.

“The Oven chose the one who performed best and fed it without fear,” Magis said.

“Choice is a luxury, dear. Leadership is a calling.” Lilliana added gently.

The sage crackled like a hearth, heat sinking into her scalp until it hummed in her bones. Leadership smelled of warm bread and scorched sanity. It was heavier than any spellbook.

“Well I had hardly anything to lose compared to the others.” Estella argued.

“They have spent their whole lives in these kitchens. *You* faced the unknown without fear.” Magis’ features were wrinkled at the edges. “Do you think the Oven is wrong?” Her eyes glinted. “Or is it that you do not take us seriously, young sorceress?”

“Apprentice.” Estella corrected carefully, trying not to offend a room of powerful witches any further. None of them moved.

She could not accept the weight of two mantles in one day. She should run, but somehow the thought of Gerald, of every dough and dream in this city, kept her feet still.

The crowd was still holding their breath as Estella surveyed them all.

Suddenly, a young witch in the front, no older than thirteen, stepped forward. She was clutching something tightly in her hands.

Estella smiled at the girl. Everyone watched as she knelt down and extended her hand. The girl floated forward. She stared into Estella’s golden eyes and opened her fist—in her palm was a small string of beads, and dangling on the end was a metal coin. The insignia of The Threefold Crust embossed on the surface.

“Will you... please teach us to bake like you?” The girl asked with her small shaking voice.

If the Oven, these witches—if Orlin—truly thought her fit, she could at least try. More children pressed forward with small offerings—how could she say no now?

“Okay.” Estella dropped the girl’s hands and bowed her head. “I can teach you what my master taught me.”

The children lit up brighter than the flames in the hearth, closing in around Estella to twirl her hair and poke her antlers. Magis and the others watched silently, spines straight with pride.

“You should ask about the benefits first.” Varric added, leaning against a larger bread golem—munching on its hand. It watched in silent shock.

Estella’s head whipped toward the arrival of his cinnamon scent. She sighed, laughed, and tore a finger off for herself.

The Threefold Crust held a celebration that night and Estella learned one last thing about the witches of Larkspur—they knew how to party.

—**Archive Note:**

'Temporarily inherited the title of High Witch, which comes with a spoon scepter and a mildly

cursed teapot that predicts brunch disasters. The sentient loaf known as Gerald will be fondly remembered.”