This city is filthy, Fonton, really.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes. It smells.” Millifred wrinkled her nose in a delicate little sniff to accentuate her point as she stared out of the floor-to-ceiling glass window overlooking the Fountains. The silver-bearded man in a white linen suit chuckled softly. His tan skin was crinkled at the corners of his eyes from nearly four centuries of smiling. He always did like the most disgusting sides of things. It was almost guaranteed that all the glitz and the glamor of Las Vegas was to ensure that there were plenty of shadows cast for the underbelly of the city to thrive within. It was those with the haunted hungry look in their eyes but no bills in their pockets that were the easiest for Fonton to wheel and deal with.

“Only on the street, Millifred. You aren’t supposed to be out there, on the street, you’re supposed to be inside. With all the Shops. The Miracle Mile, The Venetian, there are even shops in the connection between the Luxor, Excalibur, and Mandalay. All the best pedestrian thoroughfares are lined with shops. And there is a tram that runs halfway down the strip! Really for the most part you don’t even have to go outside if you don’t want to. And for that there are Ubers.”

The way in which he said the last word, voice dripping with condescension and a waggle of skeptical fingers indicated that he did not fully appreciate the relatively recent development of ridesharing. Probably because he did not understand it. Millifred had to suppress an eye roll. “Well, I want to feel the sun on my skin, Fonton. And I don’t want the stench of
sewage, and homeless people, and discarded trash or tires everywhere. Why don't you clean up the place?"

The man laughed again affably, running his hand through his thick white hair, which was not quite slicked back against his skull but pushed in that direction from the repetition of the motion he just performed, his little dice-shaped cuff links glinting in the florescent lighting of his private office. “Because people have to know. They have to know what to fear if fortune doesn’t favor them. It keeps them hungry.”

“Desperate more like.”

“They are one and the same.”

Millifred watched the fountains dance in an elaborate show, the signature of the Bellagio, the relatively steady stream of people walking up and down the long walkway that went to and from the Strip in the background. No matter what Fonton did, people would want to walk outside. And for all his posturing, everyone knew he chose a desert to build his empire in for a reason. Heat drives people mad, and when you offer them a cold drink of water, or a frigidly air-conditioned casino, they would grasp your hand as that of their savior. Millifred knew that tactic all too well.

“Why did you want to meet with me before the Conclave officially started, Millifred?”

Millifred turned her leaf-green eyes away from the window and leveled them steadily at Fonton. Her dark ginger hair was arranged atop her head, held in place by an ungodly number of hidden bobby pins. Her makeup was light, but crisp, a thin application of eyeliner, some mascara, and a soft shade of red lipstick was all she felt she needed. She took a breath and then seated herself across from him, in one of those large plush chairs he had adorned this office with, no doubt to dazzle whoever visited him here. Her wool pencil skirt suit smoothed out under her hands as she pressed her palms to them. It was a pastel shade of yellow, with large brown buttons holding the coat together. Her pale legs were concealed under some brown pantyhose, ending in some matching pastel heels.

“I was going to try to negotiate an alliance with Aliya—”

The laughter that cut her off came from Fonton and was a genuine belly laugh, brought on by surprise at the utter ridiculousness of her statement.

“Oh come now, its not that preposterous.”
He settled down, a smile still on his lips as he said, “It has been centuries since anyone has successfully entreated Aliya into an alliance. She’s ancient and crotchety and—”

“—and knowledgeable, meticulous, secretive—”

“—washed up, uninterested, she only comes out of her little hut every ten years for the Conclave, and only because she is the one who originally put it in place. She has made no bones about the fact that she despises, well, all of us at this point. Much preferring our predecessors. It’s a fool’s errand to try to talk with her. What could you possibly hope to gain from doing so?”

Millifred pressed her gentle red lips into a firm line. She knew all of this. Aliya made no secret of the fact she thought they were all mewling babes, barely beginning to lap at the fountain of magic, and that they were all undeserving to do so. Most of the Witches in the Coven believed her to have witnessed the fall of Constantinople. Millifred secretly believed she was there for the first stone to be laid in Notre Dame. Aliya would not confirm or deny any suspicions, preferring isolation over any sort of socialization. And since the second oldest of them had taken the Mantle shortly after the Portuguese had “discovered” Brazil, none of them had fully understood how the Mantles of Power worked for many years later.

“I understand all of that,” Millifred answered in clipped words, letting her eyes wander around the corporate-style décor Fonton had adorned the room with. “But, I think it extremely advantageous for me to attempt. Who knows when she might drop dead from old age, the reaper does so come for everyone, even us, long-lived though we are. And the notes in her grimoires could be infinitely valuable to the rest of us.”

She took a deep breath. This next question would be the hardest part. Her life before she discovered the Mantle of Summer had been extremely typical of women of the time. She had been expected to be silent and obedient, had been expected to ask for everything, groveling when her husband deigned to allow her some modicum of freedom over her own life. She hadn’t asked anyone for anything since she had learned to properly wield the Mantle, and certainly not Fonton. It wasn’t easy to remember the demure and polite way a man liked to be asked for a favor.

“I would like your strongest Fortune Charm. Please. If you could perhaps, be parted with it?”

Fonton leaned forward, steepling his hands together in front of him as he rested his elbows on the glass-topped Mahogany desk he sat behind.
Millifred did not allow herself to break eye contact with the man, so she saw the spark of avarice light behind his hazel irises.

“And what are you willing to pay for this strongest Fortune Charm, my Canary?”

Her lips pressed together. She had hated it when he had called her that sixty years ago, and she hated it when he called her that now. It didn’t help that she was preferential to wearing the color yellow. She was prepared to offer him several things, but she knew what he would really want. “I could give you a record-breaking summer, or an incredibly mild winter. It would take some time but...”

“That’s not what I want.”

“Perhaps I could craft a Charm for you? One of equal strength?”

He leaned back waving his hand in front of his face in dismissal. “I have no desire for a Heat Charm.”

“A future favor?”

He mulled that one over for a while. In previous times undisclosed future favors had been the largest form of currency between the Coven Witches, but as time wore on, and the violence of the world began to encroach upon them, the Witches realized that an immediate exchange was far better than the promise of a favor you may never have the chance of collecting on.

“No. You know what I want.”

“She hates you, Fonton. It won’t work.”

“You can make it work, though.”

Millifred sighed. “But I won’t. It’s not right.”

“I have seen you sear a man’s eyeballs right out of his skull, Millifred. What do you care about right and wrong for?”

He reached into one of the drawers in his desk, pulled out a single keychain, and displayed it between them. Allowing it to hang there, dangling in front of her. She squinted her eyes at it, as if she could, by willpower alone, teleport the Charm to a secret location of her choosing.

“Plant a flame in the Ennivia, and stoke that fire ‘til her passion for me burns, Millifred.”

Millifred carefully did not let her eyebrow raise or her mouth quirk at his word choice. This had just become a two-birds-one-stone opportunity.
“Plant a flame in her and stoke her passion until it burns for you?”

“Yes.”

“Done,” Millifred said, reaching into her handbag and withdrawing a small mechanical lancet. She armed it with the tiny disposable needle and wiped the pad of her pointer finger with a sterile wipe. She waited patiently as Fonton searched his desk drawers, managing to find a sharpened letter opener, reflecting on how the man must feel as if he never needs to be prepared for anything because of the power of his Mantle.

She pressed the lancet to her skin and triggered the mechanism that pricked her finger, squeezing it until a drop of blood pooled. Fonton had more difficulty in producing his own droplet of blood safely but then reached forward, and they pressed their bleeding fingertips to the other’s and at the same time intoned.

“Let this blood be my bond. May my words ring true as I promise to fulfil this request with the entirety of my Mantle upon my shoulders.”

Millifred fell silent as Fonton’s usually cavalier voice settled into formal tones. “For the price of my strongest Fortune Charm, I ask you to stoke passion in Ennivia, the Witch of Withering, so that she may come to me burning with it.”

“And for the price of stoked passion in Ennivia, the Witch of Withering, so that she may come to you burning with it, I ask for your strongest Fortune Charm.” She finished the oath and felt the snap of magic lace through her veins as the blood pact was completed. She stood and reached for the rabbit’s foot charm lying on the desk between them. As soon as she made contact with the soft pink synthetic fur she felt a giddiness wash over her and had the urge to walk downstairs and put a hundred-dollar bill in a slot machine, having absolute confidence that she would double her money. She suppressed the preprogrammed urge Fonton had instilled in the charm and smiled at him when she resisted that pull and began to attune the charm to her desires.

“Make sure you fulfil your end of the bargain before you try to approach Aliya. I don’t want her killing you before I get what’s mine.”

“Of course.” Was all she said as she turned to leave his office.

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As Millifred walked down the strip, tightly gripping the steel ring she had purchased from a street-side vendor with a cart full of toys and a photo album full of willing playmates, she savoried the feel of the sun baking every
inch it touched. It was a very dry 112 today, and with her face tilted up to catch the rays completely she absorbed the warmth and stored it for later. She had several irons in the fire, and this fortune charm was the key to stoking a lot of them. Being able to take care of Fonton while she was at it was just a very large bonus. Hopefully, the next Witch of Fortune would be more agreeable to be around than he had been. She might even try to find them early and become a lovable Auntie.

While she was approaching only her first century of life, she knew the other eleven Witches of the Coven had at least three under their belts and were very confident in their ability to survive, having learned how to stay out of the wrath of normal humanity. None of them were interested in training apprentices or priests or cults like previous Mantle holders had. The lofty position of the Coven at the top of the supernatural food chain meant that for the most part, the Witches were never the targets of any aggression from any other faction, largely due to the power they held over the natural world with the Mantle of Weather, The Wild Mantle, and Wind and Water Mantles, and the political and economic influence they held by the Witch of Fortune and Witch of the Mountain, whose gemstone and mineral trade businesses had been influential for centuries.

And, within the Coven, an intricate web of agreements and alliances had prevented the Witches from moving on each other, so things had settled down for the most part into an uneasy status quo before the previous Witch of Summer had ingested a frightening quantity of hemlock right before bed, causing the Summer Mantle to pass onto a newly born Millifred Junabee Willowsmith, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Algernon Willowsmith, of West Virginia, 1897.

Most of the Witches had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo since it was working out so well. Apparently, according to Svenya, the Witch of the Mountain, the Witch-on-Witch violence ended about five hundred years ago, when some petty squabble had resulted in the deaths of four of the Witches, the Mantles passing onto the next babes to be born upon the Earth, four babies in a row, spread across the globe.

This was a terrible inconvenience because that meant that the Mantles not only had to be found, but cultivated, as they were at minimum two decades from realizing their power, leaving the Coven exceedingly vulnerable during that time, resulting in many assaults upon individual Witches in an attempt to unseat them from power completely. Ever since, Aliya, the Witch of Winter and the oldest to hold a Mantle, had made no bones about the fact that she would outright kill the next person who started
anything to ensure the preservation of the Coven as a whole, willing to compensate for a single lost Mantle to ensure the retention of as many as possible. So Millifred, having discovered her Mantle almost twice as late as twenty, and had taken quite a liking to the power it gave, had certainly sat back without making waves until she was certain she could ensure she would not be summarily executed by a nine-hundred-year-old hag.

The river of people moving down the Strip was sweaty, there were red faces, hands fanning themselves, drinks dripping with condensation as they heated up rapidly in the palms of thirsting pedestrians. Millifred was confident the pavement was hot enough to burn the paw pads of dogs and sear the skin of barefoot children, and she relished it. She had been spending a considerable amount of time in the North lately, both trying to locate Aliya’s home and also to bring unprecedented heat waves to the cities she visited. She so rarely in the past decade was able to spend some time in a desert, soaking up the light with no concern for damaged skin or darkening complexion.

On the pedestrian bridge that connected New York, New York to the Excalibur there was a homeless man, skin dark and leathery from days upon days under the harsh Nevada sun. He was holding a cardboard sign that Millifred didn’t bother to read. She briefly thought about giving him a fatal heatstroke to end his misery but ultimately decided she did not want to slow her pace enough to do so and continued on.

But as she turned her neck to look behind her and saw the soaring multicolored glass towers of the hotel designed like a city and then returned her gaze forward to enter one that looked to be a Castle from a King Arthur story, she had to admit that Fonton had certainly outdone himself with Las Vegas, of course having been a behind-the-scenes influencer since the conception of the city. The spectacle was astonishing enough that many millions did not notice or mind when they were gently parted with innumerable funds in countless renditions of famous sites around the world, but the pyramid-shaped hotel had always secretly been her favorite, being largely unchanged for a while now and so campy it was cute. She relished walking into the Luxor and seeing all the gaudy ancient Egyptian style décor, she liked to believe that at least one of her predecessors had walked the sands in front of Giza themselves. It was also where Envidia was staying, the irony of the Witch of Withering staying in the same resort as the King Tut exhibit was not lost on Millifred.

She plunged her hand into her purse and withdrew a cell phone that was positively ancient and only held eleven other numbers in it. She called
the one simply labeled ‘Witherer,’ listening to the dial tone until the click of someone else picking up relieved her of that burden.

“Hello, Ennivia darling, I would like to come up and discuss something of importance with you dear.”

Ennivia answered with a dry raspy reluctance, indicating the correct elevator bank to use and indicating she would have to wait until another guest boarded, as the floors were locked by room keys and Ennivia was certainly not coming down to get her. It took several rides up and down the sweltering and humid inclinator before Millifred was finally able to step out onto the 29th floor and make her way around to one of the corner suites. Her polite knock on the door was quickly answered by it opening and a small, severe-looking woman glared up at her. The roots of Ennivia’s long straight hair were bone white and tapered into a silky raven black at the ends. She had dark stern eyes, and her forearms were chorded in a way that suggested that she would not lose her grip on anything she held.

“What is this about, Summer Witch?”

Millifred moved forward to brush past Ennivia into the room. “Oh, hello Ennivia, it is so good to see you after this long decade since the last Conclave. How have you been? Oh me? I have been doing well, plans in motion and all that, and yourself?”

A small growl escaped Ennivia’s lips as she moved into the little sitting room area adjacent to the bedroom, crouching on an armchair with rough and stylish upholstery, still glaring, her hands hooked on the armrests like claws. “I do not make social calls. What do you want?”

Millifred sighed and settled down into the chair opposite her and clasped her hands in front of her, keeping her spine straight and her face open and engaged. “I had a little visit with Fonton this morning.” She began, watching the other woman’s lips curl back in disgust.

“Of course you did, is he throwing his weight around as host?”

Millifred made a resigned face, and then let her eyebrows knit together in a look of confusion. “It was actually about you, dear...” She allowed herself to trail off as her eyes wandered, acutely aware of the now rigid silence Ennivia held, waiting for her to continue. Millifred didn’t and instead focused on the wall-mounted art the hotel had adorned the suite with. Two large three-by-three pictures hung of a woman with beautiful eyes, gold leaf brushed into her lashes and brow, dark smokey makeup suggesting mystery and excitement.
“What about me, what does he want now? Is it not enough that I have to keep moving because he is just so damn lucky that he keeps finding me?” Ennivia stood and began pacing, worrying her skeletal hands together as she did so. For the briefest of moments, Millifred felt a pang of sympathy. She knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of a determined man’s affections, but then once again steeled herself. Allowing the pacing and silence to drag for just a moment longer, she then reached out to grab the hand of the other woman, gently taking in and then using her thumb to rub a red-hot spark into the other woman’s dry skin, feeling the heat born of Ennivia’s own body begin to circulate and spread throughout her blood. Watching the other woman’s eyes intently as she spun to regard Millifred. After just a moment Ennivia’s eyes had dilated, and she had begun to pant slightly. Time to drive it home.

“Ennivia, he...he...” trying to look disgusted and worried, feigning a crack in an aloof mask, “he is out of patience, he said. He offered me something very significant in return if I came to you and made you want to go to him.”

Ennivia withdrew her hand from Millifred’s and looked like she might be sick, suspicion rising on her face. Millifred pressed on quickly, “I don’t think his efforts are going to stop. I think in fact, they might redouble. He doesn’t seem to have any understanding of the wickedness of his request at all.”

A small growl escaped the lips of the Witch of Withering as the spark Millifred had planted took root. Time to fan it.

“I fear we might have to take drastic measures.” Millifred watched Ennivia, watched the other woman stiffen. “Drastic, final measures, Ennivia. He is a dreadful man. You know, much like my late husband, a boor, and I have come to help you.” Millifred reached once again into the handbag, fingers brushing the soft fur of the rabbit’s foot before finding a warm metal ring, about 55 mm in diameter, made of a thick band of stainless steel. One she had been enchanting on her walk over here.

“Here, dear, this is a “Red-Hot Passion Charm,” it is one of my most popular products, it will ensure he won’t notice as you drain the life out of him slowly.” Ennivia’s greatest weakness was the time it took her Mantle to work.

Ennivia’s eyes bore into the little charm that Millifred held out to her, and her jaw clenched as she mulled it over. “Yes.” She muttered almost to herself. “Yes, I did think it might come to something like this.”
Millifred felt a flutter of triumph in her chest as she saw the fire she had stoked bloom. It hadn’t been hard, Ennivia had already disliked, perhaps even hated Fonton, and hatred after all is a passion just the same as love, just the same as lust. Millifred stayed silent, knowing all too well that whatever thoughts were racing through the other Witch’s head were far more helpful in fanning the hatred than any words Millifred could offer. After a moment Ennivia’s eyes that had been staring off into the distance focused on Millifred’s face.

“Well, what are you going to do, dear?” She asked the Witherer.

“Give him what he wants.” She said flatly as she began to move about the room, digging through the clothes she had brought with her to find something suitably skimpy, “and it’s the last thing he will ever get.”

Millifred walked back out onto the street, finally allowing a smile to spread across her face. She certainly could have made a charm strong enough to enrapure the Witch of Fortune for long enough that Ennivia could wither him to death before his Mantle could react. She just couldn’t have done it on the walk from the Bellagio to the Luxor, a charm of that strength would have taken her days, but the one she had given Ennivia would last long enough. Maybe.

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The conclave that took place the next evening was two members short. Ten Witches had arrived at the Mirage and taken their seats in the conference room that had decorative carpet patterns resembling a jungle, the air conditioning diligently trying to disperse the ambient heat that 117-degree weather gave to old buildings designed and built in an age prior to the effects of global warming.

“Where is the Fortune Witch and the Wither Witch?” Catherine, the Wild Witch asked to the silent gathering after an hour of waiting for a man and woman Millifred knew would never arrive. She had checked the local news this morning and discovered an article about how a police officer had shot a prostitute who had been with a prominent city investor. The investor, the article had said, was currently in the hospital undergoing emergency procedures. But none of the old Witches cared much or knew much about technology and thought the only way to gather information was through magical means.

Millifred toyed with the rabbit’s foot charm under the table, fingertips lightly brushing the soft synthetic fur, waiting, planning to approach Aliya after the Conclave had concluded, planning to be
sympathetic and concerned, wanting to learn how to help the Conclave get stronger in the absence of two of the Mantles, angling for Aliya to view her as a protégé, someone she could pass her knowledge down to. . .

It did not take much longer before Aliya stood with a resigned grunt of irritation. “Come, gather, we will search for the Mantles, if we find them we will need to call them to course, if we don’t we will know their Mantles will need to be found.”

The spell to locate a Witch Mantle was finicky at best, most of them rusty with the procedures of the spell, it requiring them to both link together and mingle their magic and Witches were solitary creatures. The last time the spell had been used, it had been used to find Millifred, and it hadn’t worked. The biggest problem was the power of the Mantle was directly tied to the Witch’s consciousness of its presence and assumption of it around their shoulders, and newborn babes weren’t conscious of anything. Despite a proclivity for burning things in the kitchen, it hadn’t been until Millifred’s forty-fifth birthday, when her husband, naked, had declared himself her only needed birthday gift, as if he was a gift at all, that her power manifested to her clearly. Millifred had put her hands on him like she knew she had to as his lawfully wedded wife, but she was filled with such ferocious anger as his irreverence, at his lack of understanding or appreciation for everything she did and took care of for him that she felt as if her hands had been on fire, willing them to burn him.

He had been rushed to the hospital with a charred stump remaining of his “gift” and a few days later is when Fonton had showed up, as if by happenstance, to whisk her away for a history lesson, telling her that in four years’ time she was to meet in Athens, for the Conclave of the Witches, and being the newly discovered Witch of Summer, was required to attend a Conclave every ten years thereafter. Taking her under his wing, it had taken until that first Conclave to figure out that Fonton was just another man trying to take advantage of her and she had gone her separate way after seeing that the Witches were not as close-knit and helpful with each other as Fonton had lead her to believe.

The ten remaining Witches came together in a circle in the middle of the conference room. Aliya reached into her ever-present satchel and pulled out a few materials, sprinkling a powder in a circle on the carpet, bisecting a large leaf design, and then lit some incense in a censure and began wafting it around the room. Once the materials had been laid out, the Witches joined hands and extended their senses together.
Each Mantle was distinct, with different areas of power. Millifred, for instance, the Witch of Summer, could stoke passions and summon heat, heat to burn or to warm, and could condense the heat and store it. That’s how she was able to raise the average temperature in a city, despite the fact she was not the Witch of Weather. She would simply walk around, ensuring the pavement, cars, lamp posts, and buildings all retained any heat they stored up while baking in the sun. Though, she had to be careful because Leo felt it was their place, not hers, to be mucking with the weather.

When they all came together like this though they focused on the very first aspect of their Mantles. Before one was the Witch of Summer, or Witch of Winter, or Witch of Weather, one was first simply a Witch. That modicum of baseline magic is what they homed in on, using it like a beacon, or magnet, questing out in search of some sort of return signal. It was unlikely they would be able to sense the Mantle of Fortune or Withering within the babies that now possessed it, and it could be some time before the Mantle manifested itself in the children. Millifred could feel the patience waning around the circle as more and more of the Witches pulled back, convinced it was a fruitless effort. Even if they could feel the Mantle, it’s not like it would give them directions to where the person was now.

Aliya and Millifred were the only ones still actively searching out, Millifred eager to show her investment to Aliya, so it was only Aliya and Millifred who felt it. It was a Mantle, alright, and not the familiar delectable flavor of the Mantle of Fortune or the dry dusty crumble of the Mantle of Withering. This was something completely new and alien to Millifred, like a rainbow reflected in a fractal image, endless, infinite. And, for a moment, Millifred forgot all her scheming as her eyes snapped up to Aliya’s and they shared a long look before Millifred asked, “What is that?”

“I do not know yet. We proceed.” Was Aliya’s only reply as she dropped the spell and returned to her seat, choosing to ignore what they had just felt, and instead resorting to her standard level of secrecy. . . Anyone who hadn’t felt it before the spell dropped wouldn’t understand how fathomless this new Mantle had seemed and Millifred was worried that if she mentioned it in front of the others, they may press it as well, and Millifred did not want all the Mantles to know something so blinding and beautiful was out there so she let Aliya continue without comment. “I call the Conclave in session now. It is time to go over business.”

Millifred only half paid attention to the meeting. It was mostly things she already knew, her information network being one of the more modern ones, the older Witches having trouble adjusting to the rapid progression in
technology. It was about banking and territory and feeble attempts at alliances or favor currying. They concluded with a brief discussion about whether or not to seize Fonton and Ennivia’s holdings, and it was agreed upon that their estates would need to be maintained for as long as possible, to give the new Mantle’s time to grow, and to maintain the illusion of a complete Coven of Twelve Witches. And Millifred idly wondered if Fonton was alive in his emergency procedures because they certainly had not felt the presence of his Mantle anywhere.

Millifred continued to gently rotate her thumb on the end of the rabbit’s foot, its original purpose now shelved as Millifred meditated on what she needed to do next, massaging her desire into the last Charm Fonton had ever given out. Aliya could be a great ally, sure, but what she felt today in this new Mantle was unlike anything else. It was seared into Millifred’s senses like the afterimage of a flash.

If she could locate this new Mantle, hopefully belonging to someone who was young and impressionable, then she could certainly begin tipping things, not just a little bit, but perhaps all the way, spilling the contents of the status quo that had guided the Coven for centuries. As soon as all the relevant debates and discussions were had about official business everyone began to slip out, sparing only brief attention to social pleasantries among each other.

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Millifred, not wanting to seem hurried or suspicious, chose to leave fourth, maintaining a dignified walk as she made her way back to the street, clutching the rabbit’s foot in a white-knuckled fist. Exiting the hotel and feeling the wonderful desert breeze hit her cheeks, she walked up to the taxi stand and waved her hand, choosing for once not to walk, but to arrive as quickly as possible, relying on the little pink charm in her hand to lead her in the most fortuitous direction possible to locate the bearer of this new, thirteenth Mantle.