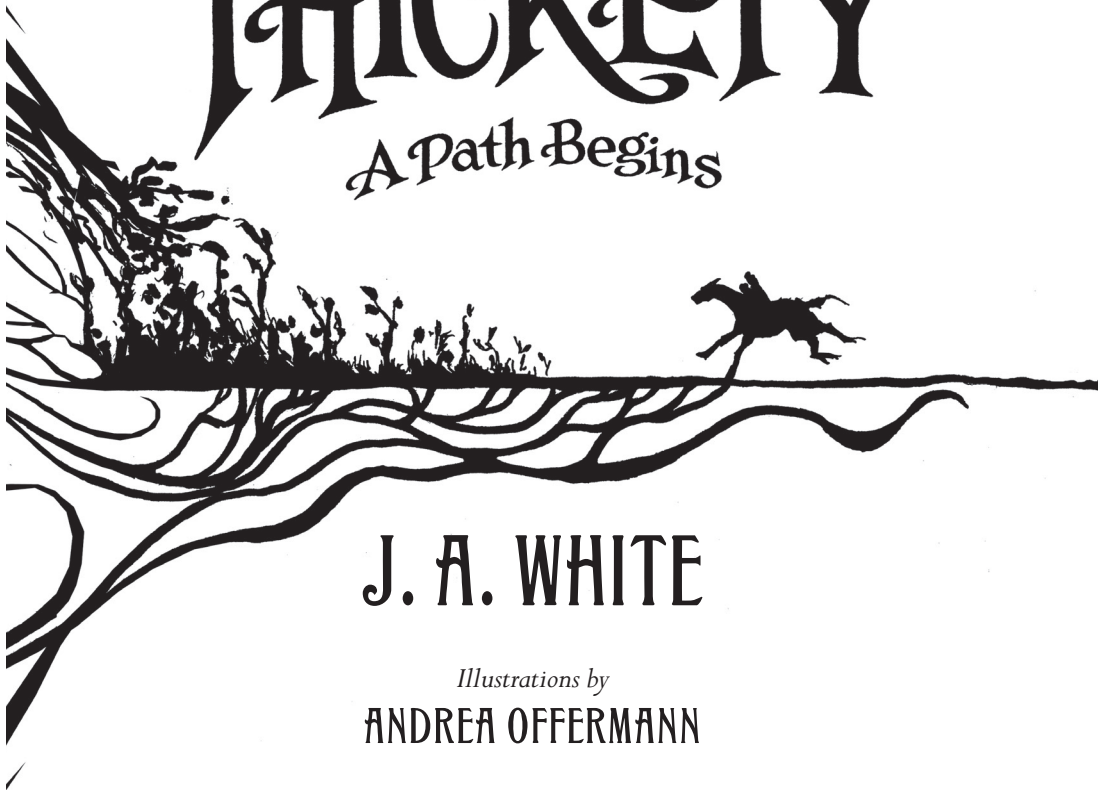


THE THICKETY

A Path Begins



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First Edition



Kara lay in bed thinking of names. Mother and Father had yet to settle on one, even though there were only six weeks left until she became a big sister. It was clear that they needed her help. *Jonathan?* No—too common. *Nathaniel?* Not that either—she knew a Nathaniel and he picked his nose. *Samuel?* She liked it, except everyone would end up calling him Sam, and that wouldn't do at all.

I really want it to be Victoria.

Kara giggled softly. It was a pleasant thought, but she was positive the baby would be a boy. Mother had said so,

and Mother was always right.

Philip? Edmund? Arthur?

Kara fell asleep.

When she opened her eyes, there were two men standing at her bedside. One was big and one was small. The darkness of the room obscured their features, giving them the appearance of living shadows.

The big one held a potato sack in his hands and shifted from foot to foot.

“Sorry, child,” he said.

Grabbing Kara with one massive hand, he yanked her out of bed.

She screamed.

“Don’t bother with that,” the second man said. “Ain’t nobody home but us.”

Although Kara scratched at the big man’s arms and kicked her feet wildly, she might as well have been fighting a tree for all the good it did. Burlap scratched her cheek as he stuffed her into the sack.

The cord knotted tight above her head. A new, more suffocating darkness enveloped her.

“This one’s got a demon’s spirit!” the big one said. “See here! She bloodied up my arm.”

“It’s just a scratch, Josef.”

“I should get some ointment after, in case she’s the same as her mother. Could be it’s a spreading type of thing.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“Easy for you to say. She didn’t scratch you.”

Floorboards creaked as the small man bent next to the potato sack. Kara listened to his short, sharp breaths less than a foot from her ear.

“She ain’t dead, is she?” Josef asked.

“No,” the man replied. “She’s listening carefully. Aren’t you, little one?”

Kara, despite her best efforts, let a whimper escape her lips.

“Don’t be scared,” he said. Even through the thick

material of the sack, Kara could smell his breath, a mixture of boiled turnips and the clear liquor Father called moondrink. “We ain’t gonna do you no harm. The head man himself sent us, and he told us that. ‘Be careful,’ he said, ‘but don’t hurt her. Not until we’re sure.’”

There was a long pause, and then both men burst into laughter. Kara heard the pop of a bottle being uncorked and slurping sounds as each man drank from it.

“I want Mommy,” she said.

“Good,” the man replied. “Because that’s where we’re taking you.”

They tossed her into an open wagon and sped through the night.

The road was bumpy, and the wagon’s frame shook and rattled in protest, bucking Kara from one side of the flatbed to the other. Splinters and ill-hammered nails scratched bloody lines on her skin.

Finally the wagon came to a stop.

She was slung over someone's shoulder—Josef, no doubt. He had the same moondrink smell as the small man and tottered a bit as he walked. Kara did not think it was from her weight.

The two men exchanged not a word, and their sudden silence discomfited her.

“Where are we going?” Kara asked.

No response.

“Tell me where we’re going!” As she spoke Kara pounded her fists against Josef’s back. He tightened his grip slightly but otherwise showed no reaction.

They continued onward. Kara listened carefully to the too-quiet night. Nothing but silence, save the measured, rhythmic patter of boots against earth.

Until someone coughed.

The sound came from Kara’s right. She supposed it could have been the smaller man, but Kara didn’t think so. It sounded like the cough of a woman.

They were not alone.

“Help!” Kara screamed. “Please help me!”

Kara’s pleas were answered by the creaking of stairs, straining beneath the huge man’s weight. The night air slipped its cold fingers around Kara and squeezed tightly.

Where are we? she thought.

Kara was dumped from the potato sack and given her answer. She was on a small scaffold in the unused field north of the village, one of the only places in De’Noran where crops refused to grow. The scaffold rose about ten feet off the ground and teetered unsteadily. In the distance the black-leaved trees of the Thickety swayed toward Kara and then away, as though beckoning her.

Kara had been in this field yesterday, picking wildflowers as she waited for news of Mother. The scaffold had not been there.

They had built it in the night.

“Good evening, Kara,” said a familiar voice.

Fen’de Stone bent down before her. He was tall, with a thatch of thick brown hair tied in a neat ponytail, and

wore the crimson robe that befitted his position as leader of De’Noran. One eye was slightly larger than the other, though both were the same piercing blue. “Predator eyes,” Kara’s father called them—but only within the privacy of their home, and even then with a hushed voice.

Those unblinking eyes stared into Kara’s now, as though searching for something.

“I apologize if they frightened you, dear. It would have been best to simply explain the situation and bring you here peacefully. But all of this has happened so quickly—we couldn’t take any chances.”

Kara felt dizzy. She should have been asleep, not shivering in the night while speaking to the leader of her village about things she did not understand.

“Where’s Mother?” she asked. “Where’s Father?” Surely they would be able to explain.

Fen’de Stone looked surprised. The expression rested uneasily on his face, like an ill-fitting mask.

“Why—they’re here, Kara,” he said. “We’re all here. Didn’t you notice?”

He stepped to the side.

A sea of faces stretched out across the field. The entire population of De’Noran— men, women, and children— standing as still as scarecrows. All eyes on her.

Kara saw the old wagon that had brought her here in the distance. The crowd must have parted to allow them passage to the scaffold. Her friends and neighbors had been mere inches from her captors, knowing what was happening. Allowing it.

Standing behind her now, Fen’de Stone placed one hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently.

“Even your brother is here, Kara.”

“My brother?”

“That’s right. He was born last night.”

A brother. Just like Mother said.

But if her parents were truly here, why did they not call out for her?

Kara scanned the crowd, searching for their faces. This was not easy, for De’Noran was a large village, and though

the night was dark, few people held lanterns. Nonetheless Kara was able to make out one familiar face after another. Baker Corbett, who slipped her a fresh sweet roll each time she passed his shop. Gregor Thompson, the owner of the farmland adjoining theirs, who took his coffee in Kara's kitchen most nights. And just beneath the scaffold: Grace, a girl about her own age, brilliant blue eyes glowing with excitement.

Finally she saw Father standing between two gray-cloaks. The crowd to either side of them had parted slightly, giving them space.

"Father!" Kara exclaimed. "Father! What's happening?"

Her father did not respond, but his eyes met hers. They were wet with tears.

"Father!"

In his arms he cradled a small object in a plain, brown blanket.

I have a brother, Kara thought.

"Father! Help me!"

His mouth tightened and he looked ready to step forward, but the graycloak to his left clenched his ball-staff tighter and shook his head. With slumping shoulders, Father backed down.

“I need you to see something, Kara,” said Fen’de Stone.

“Can I go to Father?”

“Maybe later. Afterward. If all goes well, you can hold your brother. Would you like that, Kara?”

Kara nodded.

“He’s beautiful. Pure. His name is Taff.”

“Taff.”

The name had not been one of the possibilities they’d discussed, the three of them squeezed into bed together, laughing. But she knew it was the perfect choice the moment she heard it.

“Taff.”

Despite everything, Kara smiled. She had a brother.

“I need you to look up, child. At that tree there.”

But it was such a cold night. A newborn babe

shouldn't be out here right now. He should be home, by the fire. . . .

Fen'de Stone snapped his fingers in her face.

"Look up. Now."

Kara did as she was told.

Mother's hands had been bound together and hooked over a thick branch; her feet dangled fifteen feet from the ground. She was blindfolded and gagged.

Kara screamed.

At the sound of her daughter's voice, Helena Westfall jerked against her restraints. A nervous murmur went through the crowd, the first sound they had made since Kara's arrival.

"Have no fear," Fen'de Stone told them. "She no longer poses a threat."

A gnawing emptiness, not unlike hunger, spread through Kara's stomach.

Until this moment Kara had been confused and frightened, but these emotions were now replaced by

something more powerful.

Rage.

She turned on the fen'de, no longer caring that he was the most important man in the village.

“You hurt her!”

Kara flailed her fists against the man's chest. He made no move to stop her, simply watched with cold amusement.

“Your mother is a witch, Kara. A danger to De’Noran.”

“Liar!”

“She has gone into the Thickety and communed with the Forest Demon.”

“That’s not true! Mother is good!”

“She killed two people.”

“Stop it! Stop lying!”

“There were witnesses, Kara. Respected citizens of De’Noran. They saw her work black magic with their own eyes. Widow Gable. Master Blackwood.”

“No! No! No!”

Fen'de Stone grabbed Kara's fists and stared into her eyes.

"Your father, girl! Your own father admits it!"

Kara slumped to the wooden floor of the scaffold. She looked up at her mother, who had once again stopped moving. Then to Father.

"Make him stop it," Kara said. "Make him stop lying."

But her father's eyes were unable to meet her own, and she knew then that Fen'de Stone spoke the truth.

The world began to spin.

"How many years have you?" asked Fen'de Stone.

Kara felt so sleepy. It was hard to understand what the words meant.

"Your age, Kara. How old are you?"

"Five."

"Five," the fen'de repeated. He sighed dramatically. "It is too late, no doubt. But the Children of the Fold are just in all things, and we shall learn if you have inherited your mother's powers. If you, Kara Westfall, are a witch as well."

It was then that Kara noticed the second tree. Smaller than her mother's but with an identical peg pounded into its bark.

"You understand, then," Fen'de Stone said, following her eyes. "That's good. Easier."

"I'm not a witch."

The fen'de smiled, and Kara realized, with a sickening feeling, that the man was having fun.

"A promising beginning," he said, clasping his hands together. "But let's find out for sure, shall we?"

Josef and the smaller man—who Kara now recognized as Bailey Riddle, the gravedigger—led the creature through the crowd. It most closely resembled a dog, with jet-black fur streaked with gray and an elongated snout. Fur hung loosely from its frame, as though the animal had been cursed with an overabundance of skin.

"Their kind has become rare, a shadow of their former selves," Fen'de Stone said. "In the Old Stories, these

beasts walked proudly with the great hunters and helped them track witches to the darkest corners of the World.” The leader’s eyes grew distant, reimagining the former glory of his people. “We used to call them by their true names. Gant-ruaal! Thrandix! Danik Juzel! In these ignorant times, however, they are known as nightseekers.”

The strange creature was having trouble navigating the stairs. Josef gave its chain a vicious tug, and the nightseeker, emitting a low-pitched squeal, dragged itself forward on folded-back paws. Despite her terror Kara felt a rush of sympathy for the thing. When it finally reached the top of the scaffold, it looked at her askance, with violet eyes that would have been pretty on a less monstrous frame.

Fen’de Stone nodded to Josef, who slowly untwisted the chain from his arm and set the creature free.

“Go,” Fen’de Stone said, clicking his tongue and gesturing toward Kara. “Tell.”

The nightseeker eased itself to its feet and made its

way forward. Kara tried to move, but Riddle held her in place.

“Watch this,” he whispered in her ear. “It’s *something*.”

The nightseeker shifted forward until its long snout made contact with the scaffold, and then it extended its rear legs, revealing two large, hairless paws. Its front legs unfolded next, the cracks of shifting bones reverberating loudly through the silent night as the creature grew before her eyes. Soon it was twice its original size, three times. The makeshift scaffold groaned in protest under this surprising new weight.

The nightseeker sat back on its haunches. Its whimpers grew to a piteous whine as a translucent needle, as long as Kara’s forearm, emerged from its front paw. The beast looked up and bared its teeth, revealing large, jagged incisors that had not been there a moment ago.

“I would take a step back, Bailey,” Fen’dé Stone said softly, “if I were you.”

Kara’s arms were released half a moment before the

nightseeker leaped across the scaffold and knocked her to the floor. It placed one massive paw on Kara's chest and gazed into her eyes. Warm slobber dangled from its mouth.

Kara did not realize the needle had pierced her arm until the nightseeker sat back and regarded the blood at its tip. At first Kara thought it might lick it, but instead the nightseeker plunged the needle deeply into its nostril. With a shudder of its massive body, it sucked up her blood and snorted deeply.

After a considerate pause, the nightseeker straightened, as though a decision had been made. It raised its needle paw high into the air and angled it toward Kara's right eye.

"No!" she screamed. "Please!"

The nightseeker's other paw was an impossible weight on her chest. No matter how hard she jerked and twisted, she could not move a single inch. Each breath was a struggle.

“Judgment has been delivered!” Fen’de Stone proclaimed. “It looks like we’ll be ridding the world of two witches tonight! A return to glory for the Children of the Fold!”

The crowd erupted into cheers.

“No,” Kara said, but her voice was quiet now. “I’m not a witch.”

The needle inched closer to her eye until it was all Kara could see, a clear pinpoint in the night.

“I’m not a witch. I’m not bad.”

She stared ahead, wanting to close her eyes but needing to see.

“I’m a good girl.”

The crowd began to clap. A steady rhythm.

“Don’t hurt me.”

Looking past the needle, Kara met the violet eyes of the nightseeker.

“Don’t hurt me!”

The creature shuddered and made a noise deep within

its throat. The crowd had grown far too loud for anyone to hear it, but it wasn't a growl, not exactly. There was no fury in it.

With one swift motion, the nightseeker backed off Kara's chest, the needle already retracting into its paw. By the time it had gone three steps, its body had shrunk to its original, innocuous form. Looking tired and drained, the creature tottered toward the stairs.

The crowd grew silent.

Fen'de Stone regarded Kara, his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

"What did you do?"

Kara shook her head. She hadn't done anything.

"A spell. You cast a spell, didn't you?"

Kara shook her head again.

"You bewitched this creature and—"

"That girl didn't do nothing!" From her position on the scaffold, Kara couldn't see the speaker, but it was a woman's voice.

“That’s right!”

“That creature of yours made its choice, all right.”

“She ain’t no witch!”

“Let her go!”

This last voice Kara recognized. Her father.

Others joined in, murmuring their agreement. The bloodlust of the crowd had been extinguished by shame. Whereas before they had seen a demon in a child’s skin, all they saw now was a little girl, shivering with fear.

Fen’dé Stone raised one hand into the air, commanding their silence.

“Of course,” he said. He wore a smile of relief on his face, but Kara knew that it was just for show. “It appears as though she’s not a witch after all. How fortunate.”

He held out a hand to Kara.

“Allow me to help you to your feet, dear. I am so sorry if we scared you—but I’m sure you understand. One can never be too careful about these things.”

“My mother,” she said.

“Oh yes,” the fen’de replied, and his smile transformed into something far more genuine, far more terrible. “Your mother.”

Afterward the crowd began to shuffle toward the village, conversations already turning back to practical matters such as livestock and fertilizer. The sun had risen in the sky, the day’s work begun.

Kara’s father stood at the base of the stairs. The baby in his arms wailed fiercely.

“He’s hungry,” Father said. There was a large, red welt on his cheek where one of the graycloaks had struck him. He refused to meet her eyes.

Kara looked at the small bundle in his arms.

“Can I hold him?” she asked.

Father nodded, passing the baby to Kara with a relieved expression on his face. He collapsed to the earth as though holding his son had been the only thing keeping him on his feet.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m—”

Kara left him and started toward the village.

Gently folding back the blanket, Kara regarded the newest member of her family. She hadn’t seen many babies before, but she could tell that Taff was small, even for a newborn. His eyes, barely open, were light like their father’s.

“Hello, baby brother,” she said. “My name is Kara.”

The morning was cold, and Kara held him close, trying to pass her warmth into him.

“I have sad news, Baby Taff. You’ll never get to meet Mama. But you don’t have to worry. I’ll always be here. I’ll always protect you.”

Kara took one last look across the field. Her mother’s body had been removed. Workers were already dismantling the scaffold. The only sounds came from a group of giggling children tossing pinecones at Bailey Riddle, who spun round and round and screamed girlishly in mock pain.

“No one is ever going to hurt you,” Kara whispered to the baby.

She stared at Bailey Riddle until he finally looked up and met her gaze. Unlike Taff, Kara had her mother’s eyes, black as a forest night.

The man gasped.

“No one,” she said.

Kara held her brother close the entire walk back to the village. By the time they reached their house, he had fallen asleep in her arms.

Bailey Riddle died later that night, viciously attacked by some sort of wild animal. There were no witnesses, and as Bailey was not especially well liked, he was simply buried and forgotten.

These things did happen.