

**Narrator**

Welcome back to Witchever Path's latest interactive story, Message in A Bottle. What a stellar way to start up again in the summer, no? In our first episode, you walked to the beach with our new protagonist. You swam in the darkness of pre-dawn, past boats and markers of civilization with her until you found her favorite rocks. And she sang a lament to her lost love before turning her attention to the mysterious bottle she found floating in the sea. The peculiar find was not empty. A strip of cloth was inside, that slowly unraveled, revealing a pendant of a winged insect. The pendant knocked against the bottle's inner wall, but only in one direction. West. Back to the mainland.

The strangeness of her find brought her to a choice. Bring the bottle back home, open it here, on her rocky perch, or cast it away. You voted and decided she should open it. And so Witchever Path brings you Message In A Bottle, Part Two – “I Hope This Finds You Well”

[cork pull]

[in the background, you still hear the waves and birds]

[Slight rattle of the pedant leaving the bottle]

Opening the bottle, I'm hit with the smell of old wine and cloves. A small eyehook is screwed into the bottom of the cork. The pendant's chain hangs from it. How is the - ? Ah, the cloth is braided along the necklace to a point, and then its excess was stuffed around it. Why?

The cloth is a pale blue. It's mostly dry. There are words written in black ink along the length of this cloth—a message.

“GL, She should know who I am. She'll need me, too.”

[slight gasp of shock as the cloth of the message wraps around her wrist and up her arm]

The ribbon snaps to life. Like eels, the ends of it coil around my wrist and across my forearm. The Pendant's chain, still tied to the message, scratches against my skin.

The nails on my left hand do nothing. I can't cut the ribbon. In desperation, I open my mouth widely and distend my jaw, allowing my sharp teeth to extend from my gums. I bite into the fabric only to feel a sharp, cold pain in the roots of my teeth. My arm is jerked away from my mouth, no longer in my control. The cloth tightens and twists as my arm raises and my hand points... West.

The small pendant slips out of its bonds underneath the ribbon and out of the bottle. I see it for what it is—a pewter moth. It is swinging wildly in the direction of Salem, defying gravity, as if it were cut free, it would fly to shore on its own. I pull my arm back down to my side and while I hold it close to my side, the cloth tightens. Squeezing my arm.



I have to get to Bella. I need help.

[dives in]

In the water, I can hear it. The fluttering... like wings or a flag caught in a storm. But I shouldn't hear these things. Not down here.

[scary whispers, repeating the message of the bottle]

Instinctually, I attempt to swim from the voices further out to sea. Maybe I can break the spell if I get far enough away. But my arm feels like a lead weight, anchoring me in place, and the chain and ribbon bite into my flesh.

The whispers grow in my ears. And to drown them out, I do what comes naturally. I sing.

[bubble sounds]

With each note, the cloth loosens. My arm feels like it's my own again. I look down at my arm while I swim back to Salem. The ribbon and necklace are still tied to my wrist, trailing behind my fingers. I keep singing as the sun rises behind me, lighting the shallows. Dawn already?

Oh no.

I slow down, two hundred feet away from the shore, and I slowly peek my head above water. There is no one currently on the beach. I stop my song all the same. I don't know who could hear me. But as soon as I stop, the ribbon tightens again. My arm's pulled to the shore. I dive back down. I begin my song again, and the pendant falls slack. And then, through my gills, I smell it.

There is a light trail of my own blood in the water. And I'm not the only one to notice. I feel the vibrations from a mile North. A shark has turned course. I need to get out of the water now. And so... I breathe deeply through my sides and out my mouth with every subtle note. I lower my voice... to ward off my potential adversary while continuing my swim.

The shark doesn't care. It's still coming. I'm twenty feet from shore, and with a final push I thrust myself forward until I nearly beach myself. I stand up, ignoring the pain in my arm as I stop singing and run to my clothes.

I turn back, briefly to see the disappointed fin of my hunter break through the waves, before it turns away, in search of another meal. I hear cars on the street. Doors closing and the stirring of people. I grab my dress with my free hand. I try to use both hands, but the fingers on my right hand are tense, the muscles contracting from the pain... my claws painfully unsheathed... I clumsily pull on my dress, forgetting I am still wearing my knit bag across my shoulder until my dress is caught up in it on my lower back. I twist and pull until I am fully clothed, pushing my right arm through the strap. My mask is in the sand, and I retrieve it. Trying to hook it onto my



ear with one hand is frustrating. And so, I sing quietly, just loud enough for me to hear. I pour my will into it, compelling the necklace to cease its attack and to rest. To sleep. And though the cloth and metal remain tight, it gives me the use of both hands. I will have to sing if I want to get home without more pain. But the world around me is awake. If I'm heard, I will get attention. I will have to deal with that.

I have to get home. The risk is too great.

And so I walk across the beach, singing quietly and constantly. With each breath, I feel the chain stir on my wrist. My sandy feet scratch across the cobblestones of the alleyway, past my neighbors' garbage cans and little fences. Five steps from the door, I see a neighbor's open window. The blinds twist and then open. A man, maybe thirty, is behind them. He's groggy, squinting in confusion. He hears me and turns his head toward my voice, eyes still half-closed. I stop my song and turn my back to him. I rush toward my door, open it, and get inside—the pain in my wrist returns.

"Bella!"

"Help."

[sound of walking through the apartment]

I lock the door behind me and enter the dark kitchen.

"Bella. Help me."

Through the window between the kitchen and the rest of the apartment, I see that Bella is not sleeping on the futon. She's not here. There's a note on the refrigerator.

"Emergency staffing issue back north, have to go back early and help. I may get back tomorrow. I'm sorry, love."

The phone she has left me is fully charged. I can call. I hope to keep it together so we can talk on the phone and tell her what is happening. But I'll have to speak. If I sing, one wrong note could cause her to veer off the road or into someone else. I can't do that. Then I hear a commotion from the beach.

[sound people yelling]

Holding my throbbing hand, I go to my window that overlooks the shore. My neighbors are on the beach. They're shouting at each other and racing toward the water. There are dolphins in the shallows. Beached. The pod beached themselves where I just resurfaced. They heard me. In the water, they heard me... no. No.



I feel the blood from my wrist on the palm of my other hand. My right arm throbs. The agony lessens or increases depending on where I turn in my kitchen. I pace the floor. It worsens when I stand closer to the sea... but toward town...

If I sing, it'll stop. But as I hear my neighbors trying to figure out what to do on the beach, I don't know what I can do here.

[calls – voicemail]

I have to do something. The knives on the counter are sharp and strong. I could try to pry this off my wrist, cut through the ribbon and chain... but I'm not left-handed. But I can sing, stop the pain, turn music on, and mask my voice to the outside world. Or I can get dressed and walk toward ... wherever this wants me to go.

Narrator

This is a desperate choice. There are three options.

To remove the ribbon and chain with a knife.
To sing low and quietly and buy some time
To get dressed and follow the pull of the pendant

Will you choose what you think is best for her? Or will you choose what makes the best story?
Or are they the same?

Vote now at Witcheverpath.com/vote. You have until August 28.

Your Siren is played by Valentine Buchanan
The story is written by Etienne
The podcast is produced by Witchever Path.
The theme song is by Rydyr.
All other music comes from EpidemicSound.com

We want to thank our three new Patreon members. Katie Donovan and Skye for each becoming Wanderers and Carrie for joining our Squirrel Feed. Not only do all of you get our extra episode this month, which is the PATH NOT TAKEN in the last vote, but access to even more episodes. The Wanderer tier also gets behind the scene entries from Journee and me.

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That's it for today. Sleep with a clear consequence. Choose the Path