

*Tuscany Yellow and the Thief King: A Queer Fantasy Novel-Part One*

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## Prologue

**I**t was high summer of the year when the ash and the elder bloomed green along the rivers and high upon the hills till they gave way to pine and white fir that laid mantle to the weary mountains of the north. The river, known to those of the valley as the Horn, ran greedy beneath the elder, leaping up on river stones to grip the hanging boughs or growing fat and shallow to better reach their roots. Ever still, the elder bent low over the Horn, whoring its leaves to mulch the river and shade the Yarrowroke boats that passed beneath the hanging branches each springtime when the banks would dot with crocus and hay blossoms, rook leaf, aster and ragwort. During these warm months of the year, lovers would curl in the dappling sun that fell between the branches to illuminate ankle or shoulder or parted lips.

It was high summer, and above the clinging moss on the north side of the ash trees, witches peeled strips of bark. The bark was for the children and prayers were uttered as knife went to wood and sap went to blade. The witches knew the tree sap precluded a curse as it bit the blades and dulled the edges. But witches care nothing for curses, and so they came to the ash to protect children sick with cold, and young girls would wind together under elder trees drunk with giving. Deep in the forest along the Horn, sounds of witch prayers mingled with the laughter and

sighs that came from cupping breasts and kissing wrists, and the river sung a rushing song of whispers and hushed deeps and summer.

It was high summer, and in the weary mountains the Thief King counted gold and wore brocades, letting cool pine-stained shadows run through his castle and in through his heart. It was high summer, and the witches of Harthshore ground tinctures and bathed naked in the Horn with tresses of hair falling past their waists to hang poised on top of the water. It was high summer, and the Golden Prince was in his tent of red linen and silk, and the priestesses of Aelet Tor gazed into their vision pools and rang their high bells to court the sky. It was high summer, and Uum, in his halls of schist, was rubbing the flesh of his thighs with rabbit veins and apple pulp as he chewed his tongue and cheeks. It was high summer and a Beast spoke into the empty mountains, its voice sounding like a thousand, tiny deaths. It was high summer and a piece of parchment lay on a pine desk in an airy, dry room that smelled of books and oils. The parchment, soft from years of use and creased with a spider's web of lines, was signed in a loose black scrawl, *Tuscany Yellow*.

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Part One

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# Drums in the Summer



*Oh Thief King, hear the summer drums pound,  
And bring me teeth and gold.  
I require bone to smear on my face  
And poultice to rub on my feet.*

## One

**E**lma woke in the heat of warm blankets and rough wool rubbing against her calves. Sitting up, she began to shake her shirt against her chest to dry the sweat that had nestled there in the night. The air, warm and dry, was already filled with the scents of cracking rye and flax, caramelizing crust and warm wheat. It was a comforting scent, and Elma stretched, also catching her own odor. She frowned. Kicking off the covers Elma straightened her shirt around her thighs and rearranged the blankets on the cot, noting to herself that she could put away the wools soon and replace them with linen or cotton. Opening the door, she slipped on her mother's rope sandals and folded her arms across her chest in case any of the village men were about. Following the scent of baking bread, Elma came to her mother at the oven to the side of the cottage. Gray hair twisted into a long fraying braid, her round arms bare as they worked another loaf of bread still doughy and unleavened, her mother labored sternly at the oven. Elma flung her arms around her from the side before her mother could give greeting and her mother kissed her cheek distractedly from an odd angle and pecked her eye instead.

“You smell foul girl, were you planning on taking a bath anytime soon?”

Elma nodded. “I was just going to.” Her arms were still around her mother’s shoulders, and she sniffed her damp hair. “You smell fine though. Where’d you get that from?”

“A new cake of soap from the Berthley’s. I think it’s got some lavender and sage and maybe some other silliness perfuming it up. No sense in saving it, so I went ahead and started washing with it today.”

Elma nodded thoughtfully into the crook of her mother’s shoulder.

“Would you get off me girl? I’m trying to get this done.”

Elma laughed and kissed her on the cheek.

“You can use it if you like. There’s plenty of it. Some four other cakes I got from them.”

She nodded again. “Thanks. I will. I’m going to take care of the goats first.”

Her mother agreed absently and went back to kneading, gently shooing Elma away by not responding.

Her mother was all round edges and sharp words that startled others coming from her gentle plump face. When her mother was young, Elma had been told, the Harthshore boys would run after her with jokes and flowers, toads and pies, wanting to get a sweet word or a rare smile from her. Clever boys and brave boys had courted her with a fierce earnesty that none of them had put to any other task before. The baker’s son was said to only flour his hands seriously after he had heard that Elma’s mother was fond of strawberries. From thereafter, there were pink stains around his nails and dustings of flour behind his ears.

The miller had once given flowers so sweet smelling and rare from down in the valley below the village that her mother had actually blushed, she said. He had picked calendulas and william pinks, lavender and lemon mint. All plants growing along the Horn, he had said. He

also brought back some leaves called lamb's ears that were velvet soft and smelled like honey and herbs when rubbed or wet with dew. Mother said she had kissed this one when he handed her these flowers and called her Suma Sunshine. For Suma was her mother's name, and when she was young her yellow hair and olive skin made her look not so much like anything but sunshine.

Yet, her mother had always reminded her, smiling something quiet and teasing, no suitor had made her smile so much as the goatherd boy from the edge of town. Yes, he was quiet and thin and often missed bristly patches of dark hair under his jaw when shaving, but as Elma's mother had told her, he was a dear man and being dear to him she decided to love him best. With his quiet thinness and her loud roundness they gave balance to each other. He was always kind and always stern and only Suma could make him laugh. Hearing this, Elma would nod and fondly pat her mother's elbow, for in this part of the telling Suma would grow sad.

Elma made her way back to the house and exchanged sandals for boots only remembering to put on pants after she had already laced the boots. Deciding she could certainly not herd goats with all her ass to be seen if a wind decided to stir her tunic, Elma dressed herself, put the boots on once again, and stomped off into the pastures—cross with wanting breakfast and to bathe.

From the pastures, wet with dew and smelling of manure and grass, Elma could see almost all of Harthshore. The hill behind the cottage where the goats were let to graze was a little hump of mud and bracken covered with a thin coat of tall grasses. The morning was beginning to warm, and, as the goats tumbled around the hill, mulling and grumbling in the way of goats, Elma felt she could practically see the dew evaporating. Over the roofs of Harthshore the sun ran over thatch and made the shadows bold between each house. There were three

buildings with tile roofs in town: one belonged to the governor, the next to the town hall, and the last covered the inn, The Hissing Mimic. Elma would go here for drinks on occasion or to bring home some potato pies that Berrith, the innkeep, was known for from his serving counter all the way to the other end of his taproom. Elma at least was fond of them.

While Harthshore stretched over the flat of land bellow her, dirt roads, farm yards, market and square all covering an area no more than three square miles, above the town loomed Castle Groan. Rough bricks of gray basalt and tall thin windows, the Thief King's castle slept just outside her little town. The tired castle was kept still with stony sentinels that had strange grim faces and wings and horns of beasts and birds. Perched on an outcropping of Harth Peak the Castle Groan dozed, casting a long shadow over the village bellow. All the while, the ugly little gargoyles and rough outcroppings of the mountain it rested upon guarded the keep and its master covetously. The only town in the Thieving Guild's District, Harthshore lay right below its king's castle.

Elma sighed as a goat butted her none too gently in the back of her leg. She jumped away from it, shoving him lightly in another direction. The goat whined then pissed, sulking and grim. Seeing that the goats were content with their grazing and that the last of them had found its way through the gate and onto the hill, Elma nodded and made her way back down the grassy slope to leave the goats to their peace. She rubbed the back of her thigh thoughtfully, prodding to see if it would bruise. Back at the cottage, smoke rose from the stone oven and from the fireplace inside. She slipped back into the house to snatch up fresh clothes and a bag of soaps and tonics, then made her way back outside again.

Still at the oven, her mother called out to her, "Don't be forgetting about tonight, lovely. I don't want you wandering off somewhere today."

Elma called back that she wouldn't be forgetting and continued down the road a little ways before she came to the sloping banks of the river. This wasn't the Horn that lay further down into the valley but a smaller cousin of it called the Bathwater; The Horn's source was far up into the mountains, Past Harth Peak and up into the heart of the Black Mountains, a range that ran across the region like an ancient, crooked spine. Summer had pricked even these chill waters, and the river, if not warm, was far from the stiff icy temperature it was for most of the year.

A wind stirred the scrub oak and pine that ran along the banks and Elma shivered in her tunic. Undressing, she left her clothes unfolded on the banks by her boots and crept into the river. She shuffled into the river, huffed, and dunked herself fully into the water. She stayed there for some moments, under the moving current with her long hair swirling around her. In the water she warmed and briefly enjoyed the sensation of her hair against her naked shoulders and the softness the water gave to the back of her knees and thighs.

She ran a hand over one of her breasts, absently letting a finger drag over her nipple. She likely wouldn't grow much bigger unless she became pregnant. Still, she tried to catch sight of her reflection in the water and tried to see their shape and if one was really bigger than the other like her mother said breasts grew. She sighed, and rising, she wiped the water from her eyes and from the edge of the river retrieved the cake of soap and hair tonic from the bag. The tonic smelled musty with herbs and oil that made her hair slippery. She washed, scratching first at her head to rub the tonic into her hair and scalp and then, with the cake of soap, washed everywhere else as well.

Then, breaking the quiet like a knock at the door during the night, Elma heard singing further down the river. It was Hascha's voice, she was nearly sure. Hascha was the cobbler's daughter and had a voice so fine that on Tathing nights folk would come from as far as the

Mining District to hear her sing. Full and low, her voice was swept up the river, interrupted occasionally with splashing or humming. Elma rinsed her hair and ran her fingers through the long straight chestnut strands, smiling mildly as Hascha began singing something far bawdier than she'd ever play at The Hissing Mimic on any night but Harvest.

*“Yellow seed and pumpkin greens,  
Flax fur, march wood, winter beans.  
Tinker spotted Molly Maygrass  
Tending her own flower patch.”*

Laughing not as softly as she meant to, Elma's eyes were fixed to Hascha as she made her way down the bank on the other side of the river. The other girl was dark skinned and naked as she carried her clothes against her side and sang. She made eye contact with Elma and began to wring out her hair, water splashing into muddy puddles on the far bank.

*“Yellow Yellow wheat and twine,  
Bent on over, moon and shine.  
Tinker ran to Molly Maygrass,  
‘I’ll help you in that garden, lass’.”*

Hascha began clapping her hands in place of a drum or fiddle and began to ready the next chorus.

“What are you singing?” Elma called across the river, giggling as she waded across its deep middle.

Hascha shrugged slipping on a cotton skirt, light and blowing in the sunshine. It was already damp where it touched against her. “Tuscany Yellow and The Tinker’s Luck. It’s about an old tinker that’s walking around town and he keeps meeting different women who need help getting off.” Hascha grinned and Elma blushed fiercely.

She laughed. “And what’s Tuscany Yellow got to do with any of that? It doesn’t sound anything like any quest of hers I’ve heard of.”

“I dunno. I think she had something to do with giving the tinker some number of wishes or something. Tuscany Yellow’s always ready to help out a lady in need after all.”

Elma wasn’t sure, but as Hascha spoke she liked to think that the other girl’s eyes hung on her for a moment longer than they needed to. She smiled. “The old lady said you were coming tonight too, to Watchfire Hill.” Her voice sounded more hopeful than she wanted it to.

“I am.” Hascha stuck her arms through a tunic and tucked it into the skirt. “You are too then?”

This time Elma felt Hascha’s eyes drape over her and she blushed warm and happy. “I am.”

Hascha nodded. “Then I’ll see you tonight.”

Elma looked for something more to say than, “Alright,” but couldn’t and watched the cobbler’s daughter make her way barefoot further down the riverbank. Elma swam back to the other side of the river to where her clothes and bottles were and, getting out of the water, went to find a sunny spot to sit and let her hair dry before combing it with the rose and nutmeg water her mother had sent with her.

She paused on a sunny outcropping of warmed granite and sat herself down thinking of the song. Before Elma had heard of heroes she had heard of Tuscany Yellow. Crouched in her small Harthshore cottage where she and her family had made their home, Elma had sat on the balls of her feet listening to her sister tell of how Tuscany Yellow had raised the Bright King of Aelesh Tor from his grave to send serpents back to their slumbers. She spoke of how she had buried the Child Pipe under a well of stones of lime and stones of schist. Tuscany Yellow slayed things that were evil, spoke things that were wise, loved people who were beautiful, and saved people who were good. And as Elma had peeled potatoes into wooden basins to take out to the goats in the evening autumn, or bruised herbs for poultice while heavy sweat clung to her neck and under her breasts in the summer, Elma listened to the tales of Tuscany Yellow her sister had spelled for her.

With years Elma's hair grew long and the cabin emptier as first her grandmother died and her father not long after. Her sister married a glass seller who made many fine cups and many fine bowls, all too fine for Harthshore, and so the glass seller went with his fine wares and his new fine wife to a city somewhere that was fine enough for them to have fine long lives. Elma peeled potatoes for stews to feed her and her mother, and she dried herbs for poultices and tinctures to sell to the people of Harthshore, no people nearly as fine as one could find in other cities, but people in need of remedies for gout and bruise and the bleeding moon all the same.

And through this all, though she could not tell them half as fine as her sister had, or in truth remember them half as well, Elma thought on the tales of Tuscany Yellow. In a quiet part of Elma's heart, perhaps louder on still winter evenings, or naked in the river as she washed, she built a secret resolve that she would become Tuscany Yellow and do and say things fine enough for hero to be too small a name to fit around her own.



*High in a tower carved of limestone and slate lived a boy. The tower overlooked the ocean, and each morning and each noontime the boy stared out over the waves watching the tide brush the shore with fingers of soft frothing foam. At nightfall when the moon rose high and dim over the ocean, the curling waves looked like silver mercury and the sand like diamonds.*

## Two

**A** wind blew in through the window, and with it came the scent of pine.

West inhaled slowly. The scent was the sharp spice of evergreen needles, but more persistent than this scent was the honeyed vanilla of the bark and sap. The smell was all sunshine and snowfall and sugar. It was morning by now, he was nearly sure. Light peeled in through his bed curtains and bird calls swept in through the window. The window. It was open then. Someone must have opened the window while he had still been sleeping. Though he had slept a full night, West was still only aware of the heaviness that hung in his limbs and in his temples. He didn't want to wake up. Or rather he did—the part of him that was angry, that was bored, that needed to stop letting himself grow thin and weak. But most of him was tired, and, even with the light, he knew he could fall asleep again.

With a halfhearted lethargy, West moved his hand under the waistline of his trousers. He moved his hand over himself, staring up at the canopy of the bed, green linen weighed down by dust. Some two minutes passed unaroused, and, realizing he had left his eyes

open, he closed them mechanically. He tried to conjure images of women, skin, lips, then a man, and then tried focusing on himself but quickly grew bored again, so he went back to imagining being fucked. He went through the motions, bored and tacit, before easing some minutes later. His breath had barely quickened and he laid his hand on his stomach giving up, still agitated and tired. He needed to piss but decided to go back to sleep instead.

Before he could drift to sleep again, brisk footsteps entered the room, clearly thinking that knocking was out of the question. The curtains around the bed snapped open and West squinted through the bright daylight that pried at his eyelids.

“Wake up,” the voice commanded.

“I’m sleeping.”

“You’re a burden. Wake up.”

“Didn’t you come by yesterday? Leave me alone awhile.”

The voiced tsked. “I came by a week ago. Get out of bed. You lump. You shitwad. You lemon skinned cretin. You boar. Get up.” This last demand was punctuated with a rough shove to West’s shoulder. He groaned. “I didn’t come here to watch you sleep. I came here to get some food into you and make you do something with yourself.”

“That’s a shame. If you’d have come here to suck me off I might have gone along with it.” West rolled over, tossing the blanket higher across his head.

This time instead of a response came the shrill rip of tearing fabric. West stiffened for a moment before reluctantly rolling over. His nose lay about an inch from the cold silver of a dueling knife edged into the mattress next to his pillow. The knife was hilt deep.

West looked up into Habrak’s winter grim face.

A booted foot swung up onto the edge of the bed, Habrak's elbow rested on his knee, and he leaned forward. "I don't want your cock in my mouth. I want your good for nothing ass out of bed." His voice was even and chill, and each word was punctuated with a calm still. Habrak stood there for a moment before deliberately lowering his foot and folding his arms across his chest. Neither spoke and their eyes were still locked. "Are you going to get out of bed?"

"No."

"Damn it, West!"

Before he could fully grasp what was happening Habrak was gripping his wrist and dragging him bodily out of the bed. His feet wriggled for purchase on the mattress but became tangled in the bedding and slipped beneath him. Bedding, pillows and West all landed on the floor with a hearty thud.

Habrak began pacing around the stony bedchamber. "I've had it. You're spoiled. You're cowardly. It's been, what, eight months, up here? You piece of shit, I'm not your keeper."

West rubbed his elbow; it was already bruising foully. "Then stop coming."

Habrak gave him a stiff look, almost sneering. "Do you want that? Would it be easier to pity yourself if I did? Do you want me to stop coming so you can just... what? Just stop eating? Stop getting out of bed at all? Just piss yourself in your sheets one day and rot?"

West almost laughed. "Habrak, that's disgusting."

Habrak quit his pacing and glared down at him. "That may have gone too far."

West grinned. "I think it might have."

A breeze stirred the bed curtains and the warm scent almost had West wanting to move, to put the blankets back on the bed, to take a bath. Habrak kneeled down in front of him like a school master bringing himself down to a child's eye level. It was patronizing, and, in an absurd fit of anger, West wanted to hurt the other man. For him to feel embarrassed. For him to become weak. He pictured the expression that would move over Habrak's face if he hit him, if he sent his head jerking to the side. He'd be surprised, his fingers would flinch and then curl into a fist, not knowing whether to touch his own face or try to hit West back. He'd be confused. A wave of guilt washed over West and the moment of anger passed as his shame replaced it. Habrak still knelt before him, white blonde hair falling over his shoulders as he leaned mildly towards him. His black eyes were laced with concern. West averted his gaze, his lip curling as something hot and bitter still nestled itself deep inside his chest.

Habrak sighed. "Come downstairs with me. Let me find you breakfast. You can take a bath." Something about his posture made it seem like he was about to reach towards him but the light shifted and he stood up.

West just nodded and tossed the blanket back onto the bed. He moved towards the open window and stared down the hillside across the pine boughs, down into the village of Harthshore. The morning was warming quickly and the sun on his forearms and face nearly nauseated him with a dizzying effort to ease and mend. The village was neither quiet nor noisy. Smoke from chimneys peppered blue skies, and thatch roofs held deep shadows that played against the yellow of their straw. The town hall bells called the hour and West gazed at the building's fine shingled roof. It had been five years since the town hall had caught fire and, during the repairs, a new roof had been placed atop it. For some while after, a tired joke circulated the village about how all the buildings should be torched so they too could earn new

roofing. West had smiled grimly when he had heard it. Fires jumped between thatched roofs, and with Harthshore's long, dry summers—well, he kept talismans for summer rain in his southern windows, that was for certain.

“West?” Habrak was waiting by the door.

West nodded again to no one in particular. “I’m coming.”

As they walked through the deep stone passages, it was clear that Habrak had busied himself through much of the morning. Any windows with latches were open, and sunlight and summer air poured in through them, creating patches of light for dust particles to swim and float through. It was a rare part of the year when the windows could stay open as they were. With long autumns and slow coming springs, only a few months each year saw any actual heat. Ul was one of those months, and with the heat came excitable little beetles that would hum past the windows and long brown lizards that would nap on some sunny slab of stone before quickly wiggling away into a different patch of sunlight. The daylight lit the hallways well and no torches were lit yet.

West hadn't lit the torches for nearly eight months now. He would sleep when sunset came and wake long after sunrise had passed, and, sometimes, he'd sleep somewhere in the middle as well. In the beginning, when West was wracked with grief and not just terse and lazy, Habrak had been around him constantly. The sheets were kept fresh and the rooms were kept warm. He had actually chopped some of the firewood himself once the servants had started leaving. When winter deepened and then turned to spring, Habrak left and began renting rooms in town. At first he came every day, then every other. By summer, he came once every week or so, counting that, even if West didn't feed himself, he couldn't freeze to death in the summer and so could last a week alone.

They turned into the kitchen and Habrak threw an apple to West. He caught it despite halfway wanting to see what the blonde man's face would have done if the apple had pelted him squarely in the forehead. Habrak plucked his own from a basket and took an obscenely large bite. Some of the core was bitten out. West took up a knife and began peeling his own, watching long tendrils of yellow fruit fall to the tiles. Habrak took another bite as he rummaged through cabinets and with it went the rest of the core's center. West always tried to forget that Habrak was one of the dreadful few who ate the entire apple. He ate entire pears, too, watermelon seeds and too much of their rind, carrot greens, and raw potatoes. When traveling far south, he had even caught him munching the furry skin of a kiwi fruit. In all likelihood the bastard would eat peach stones if his teeth would bear it. The thought of Habrak continuing to cook for him was nearly enough for West to want to start working again right then and there.

With the knife, he went on to pare the apple into wide slices that he chewed on while watching the other man select an array of vegetables from burlap bags that must have been filled in the village. The kitchen hadn't kept fresh vegetables for about three months now, and the gardens and greenhouses were full of dead plants, dried soil and withered herbs. Each vegetable seemed harmless enough just sitting on the counter, but who could know what would happen once they were being cooked.

“What will you be doing with those?” West asked, gesturing with his knife.

“Soup.”

“What kind of soup?”

“Mind Your Damn Business Soup.”

West rolled his eyes. “I'll be back later then.”

## Tuscany Yellow and the Thief King

Habrak didn't look up from the cabbage he was swishing in a basin of water. "It'll be done in about an hour; take a bath while you wait."

He nodded and grabbed up another apple before heading out of the kitchen.



*As Randik Lon wrote in what many consider to be his defining work, The Rise of the Guild King Districts: Our Fall into Falsity and The Loss of Liberty, “I wish to say that I cannot fathom how monarchy fell into the hands of petty merchants and bureaucratic criminals; however, the fear the populous held for the divinity of our kings and their mistrust of the gods could have only lead to their misplaced trust in themselves and their guilds.”*

### Three

“**T**hey say the Summer Prince touches aluminum and turns it gold. That even in the

dead of night, the moon will set if he opens his eyes. That all manner of birds will flock to him if he whistles, and even in the heart of winter they’ll come and sing to him such sweet songs of summer that only virgins and the Prince himself can stand to hear such a pure sound.”

“They say all this?”

“This and more.”

“Who says this?”

“The minstrels.”

“And what do common men say?”

“The common men?”

He didn’t turn around to face the speaker and held his gaze fast to the expanse of desert before him. “Yes, the common men.”

“They say that he must surely be a great Prince for all the minstrels sing about him.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes still locked on the rolling dunes of sand. “And what of the jesters? Fools and joking men? What say them?”

“Ah. They, my good man, say that The Summer Prince possesses great fiery balls that glow red when he is angered. That men who have wronged him have been branded with these smoldering balls to mark them as enemies to the Prince. They say that he pisses molten lava and shits gold. They also say he smiles so often and so brightly to give the fire jinn that lives in his mouth a view of the outside world, and that he’s a fool who likely spends far too much time summoning birds to listen to with all the virgins he keeps around him for no good reason. But mostly they praise his testicles of fire as being most fearsome.”

“Fools and jesters are always a ruler’s greatest council, and so what they say must be true. We must listen to these kinds of men above all others.” The Summer Prince turned around and let the setting sun behind him warm his back. He smiled easily, displaying straight white teeth. For the first time he took in the speaker that had stood behind him. He was somewhat short, very lean, and wore his tight curling hair trimmed close to his scalp. There was something about the way he carried himself that made Hayeid question whether he had mistook this person’s gender. The voice that spoke to him seemed deep for a woman but high for a man and yet...He wasn’t sure. The speaker grinned and the two stood smiling mildly at each other for some moments, each beaming widely. “What can I do for you...”

“I don’t have a title you need to honor, but my name is Gin, my Prince.”

“Well Gin, I can assure you the fire jinn is enjoying the view of you through my teeth as much as I am through my eyes. Is there some reason you’ve avoided my guards, escaped my sentries, crept past my wives and found me here, alone?”

The sun was weighing heavy over the sand dunes and the moon held equal balance with it upon the eastern horizon, a waxing crescent curving silver like a sickle. The musk of twilight, of jasmine and dry air, of myrrh and wild sage hung over the evening, scenting whatever rare breeze stirred the tents and flags.

Gin's smile broadened. "What compliments, and from a Prince too. I hope me being here isn't any cause of worry for you. Your guards are alive but unalarmed, your sentries watchful, but no, they didn't see me. And your wives, well, their game of Ji seemed to be rising in its stakes and I hated the thought of disturbing the fun."

"How thoughtful."

"Hm. But yes, I want something."

The Prince let his smile lay wistful on his face, guarding whatever tension he felt as he stood in the evening with the strange intruder. Gin, *if that was their name*, he thought, settling for now on a neutral pronoun used in Yoros, was certainly beautiful. He made a show of moving his eyes over the intruder, their dark skin, their black eyes, wide and deep like ink wells or night skies, the ocean when the moon was new, or, he blinked purposefully. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't think you'd notice."

"It turns out I did."

"I'll stop then."

"I'd appreciate it." The Prince blinked several times. Gin's eyes were still black, their body lithe with a dancer's leanness and in all, exceptionally beautiful. But the blackness of their eyes was only black and the Prince no longer seemed to be falling into them. A soft wave of fear wandered over him and he couldn't keep his eyes from seeking out soldiers or laymen, willing another soul to come into sight. None did. He stood there alone with Gin, watchful for the

strange moment of captivation they had laid over him. “You’re a sorcerer then? An occultist or—hm, a witch?”

“An alchemist my Prince. Sorcerers employ the arts of foresight, spells and vision crafting. I know none of this my Prince, though as it speaks of stars and water and velvet I find it beautiful. Occultists obsess over knowledge and dark magics, with the strange and the unseemly. As it’s a practice of passion I find it beautiful but I take no part in it myself. Witches, my Prince, employ the elements and energies of the world. They engage familiars and crystals, eyelashes, and bobbles to create magics and potions and operate works of healing. Though this is closest to my craft and speaks of moonshine and fire and all the pleasures granted through the body, its beauty is no substitute for familiarity and I cannot claim to know this art.”

The sun now dipped closer to the horizon and the lamplight from the tent spilled onto the sands. All the evening surrounding the pair was strangely quiet and the Prince found himself wondering where all the sounds of his camp had went. The alchemist was no longer affecting him directly with their craft, he was sure, but still the air around them held a strangeness that the prince found dreadful in his solitude. He wetted his lips wondering if he was simply stalling or if his participation in the conversation was some whim of Gin’s. “And what does alchemy speak of?”

“Ah.” Gin bent over at the waist with their legs standing straight and grasped a handful of sand, standing up again. “Alchemy speaks of gold and oil. Of starlight and empty depths. Of insanity and the ends of the human mind.” The sand spilled slowly through their fingertips. “It speaks of the mathematics that govern this planet, of gods and tides, of lightening and voids so deep the soul cries to madness.”

The Prince became acutely aware of the sensation of his skin and the loose linen that hung against it, of the rings on his fingers and the weight of his arms. “And what do you want?”

“What is your name, my Prince?”

“If that is all, your demands are simple enough. My name Hayeid.”

“Prince Hayeid, I am selfish in my asking and that is not all I want.”

Hayeid said nothing as Gin seemed to wait for a response from him. In the moment of silence between them he thought sadly on the weapons in the tent behind him, of hope for defending himself against an alchemist. He thought of calling out, screaming for aid from his wives inside the tent, but the quiet sitting between them appeared to him as a great obelisk of marble, immovable and precious and he felt he would not be heard even if he did cry out.

“Hayeid, my Prince, I wish to see you named True King, and I wish for you to let me aid you.”

Hayeid grinned. “As I said, the council of the strange and the foolish is the highest a man can seek. I will grant that wish.”

The sun lulled over the edge of the farthest stretch of desert Hayeid could see. The sickle moon climbed the sky and the strange silence lifted from the evening. Soldiers and the clanging of camp could be heard in the distance, a scarab scuttled over the sands and chatter and hoots from inside the tent sounded freely. One of his wives, Iza he thought, let out a whoop of triumph and grumbles of dissent from the others followed. All in the evening seemed entirely as it had been, and all seemed irreparably altered.



*Exploring the ruins has been unlike anything I could have imagined. When I discovered Yellow's journal some years ago I imagined many things, but not that it would bring me here. These ruins—they're unlike anything I've come across before. The statues are carved from schist and limestone and they have amethyst and malachite inlays. I feel there to be a strange and ancient life within these halls. Who could have created such a place if not Tuscany Yellow herself?*

## Four

**S**apphire dust clung to the palms of her hands, shards and particles nesting in her skin.

For a long while Odessa just looked at them. There wasn't much blood, and what was there was watered down into a loose smear of faded crimson playing purple as it flowed over the blue mineral embedded in her skin. A veil of shock still hung about her and water continued flowing over her hands, washing blood away as more blossomed between the torn flesh. The cuts were clean in many places; once the splinters were removed many of the cuts would heal just by bandaging them, and those in need of stitching would perhaps neglect to leave scars. Others still were rough and raw from how she slipped further forward after catching her fall. Her palms had touched the stone of the pool, and had continued slipping forward in the water, ripping and tugging her delicate skin so often belonging to clerks and scholars.

The vague sense of nausea that had accompanied Odessa's initial shock was beginning to dissipate and her breath slowed. She had landed in one of the upper vision pools. Gripping this thought, she looked around more closely. Yes, this would be the third or fourth pool, further and

it could have killed her if she had landed wrong. Everything was lit with the soft evanescence that made its home in the temple caves and the glow appeased some of her unease despite her better intentions to stay on guard. The evening outside of the caves would soon be fading into nightfall and, with the second drum at least, someone would come looking for her. It was a shame really. The kitchens were serving apples in mead and summer pies that night. She had even heard rumor of herb breads baked with cottage cheeses but ultimately hoped this would remain rumor. She hated to think of missing it.

It was then that Odessa noticed the body. It lay on the other side of the pool near the edge of a sharp drop that they had both missed. She leaned closer to the body and heard a dim breath rising from it in strange, ragged gulps. Rising to her knees, she waded across the shallow water to where the body lay and pushed it off over the edge. It made an awful sound as it hit some ledge bellow her and she found herself sobbing minutes after.

As Odessa calmed herself, she returned her attention to her bloodied hands. By the light of the phosphorescence that grew around her, she began to slowly and carefully pick splinters out of her palms. The larger shards she waited to pull out until she had strips of cloth waiting to tie around them to staunch the bleeding that would follow their removal. This had taken what seemed to be a great deal of time. Her skirts were well-woven and the fabric tore reluctantly and only after she had rubbed it against the stone of the pool's ledge like a tanner working hide. But afterwards, the tight weave of the material held secure around the cuts, and bled through only mildly and after some time. The smaller splinters she had worked for minutes upon minutes, building up sweat on her back and under her arms. Odessa had heard some dreadful tale in her childhood of a boy dying from leaving a splinter in his foot. Something about it traveling through his blood or some-such, but it didn't matter. She had never found the truth of this matter

entirely and so she worked even the smallest shards until the flesh around the splinter prick was pink and bruising—more from her prodding nails than the original hurt.

As she finished this, she noticed above all else that she didn't have anything more to do and the lack of occupation made her feel sick. Of course she could while away the next hour or so by screaming and calling for help, but it wouldn't accomplish much. Once in the cave someone would call out and she would respond; until then no one would hear her from outside the temple cave anyway. So she waited. Water dripped and the light tinkling sound slowly accumulated into a heavy unease that built inside her inner ear until she had to start humming or talking or tapping to keep from focusing on the solitary *plink* of the water droplets. She tried talking to herself first, but it was strange and made her uneasy. Odessa had never spent much time speaking to herself outside of her own mind before. Whether this was from never having a room of her own or some innate oddness in the habit, she didn't know. Either way, it didn't last long and she eventually broke into quiet humming interspersed with shuddering half sobs with her arms folded around her head. Her fingers coiled around her damp hair and she had an irrationally strong desire for it to be dry.

“Priestess?”

The call caught her off guard and she absurdly glanced behind her before answering the call above.

“Hello!”

A face peered down over the top ledge, familiar dark curls framing his cheeks. “Odessa?”

“I fell.” She said by way of answer.

This was obvious, he said, and then moved to get help. She said nothing of the silence feeling all the stronger after being broken by another voice, and waited patiently for help to return.

Helping her out of the pool had taken a copious amount of time. There were ladders and ropes to be lowered down, blankets to be put around her shoulders, and by the time it was all done Odessa was horribly hungry.

Aelenwe, High Priestess of Aelesh Tor had fallen into the vision pools and died. No one demanded answers from Odessa on that night, for really, how much could they press her, so wet and hurt as she was? All of Aelesh Tor, and even some beyond, would mourn Aelenwe and the bells would be rung once every minute for the length of the next day. Her body would be retrieved and covered in Bright Fire ash. Sapphires would be placed in her mouth and her toes would be cut for relics. And above all others, Odessa would be honored for being with her in her moment of death, and praised as one whom the gods loved most dearly. But she did not think on this too closely. The sky outside the caves was black and bright, and the summer air was cool and moist.



*I rest in halls of schist and coal,  
I suck on the gems that I spew,  
Waiting for you, my king of scum,  
Waiting for winds to turn cold.*

## Five

**A**t the cottage, noon was settling in when Elma sauntered back into the little

house and plopped herself down on the stool by the fire, still lit despite the growing heat of the summer day.

“You took your time, didn’t you, girl?” Elma’s mother swept into the room carrying a basket of a half dozen different things—yarn, sweet potatoes, three spoons, and a bottle of the foul cherry liquor her mother and some of the other village women liked to distill on empty afternoons.

Elma nodded, running her fingers through her hair. “I saw Hascha at the river.”

Suma clucked and placed a hand on her hip. “Silly girl,” she gave her eyes a short half roll. “I want your head on straight today, hear? You still have chores to do before tonight and I don’t want any of my pots breaking because your head is full of feathers.”

Elma played at pouting for a minute before standing up and prodding through the basket her mother was holding. “Where are you going with all of this anyway?” She lifted the sweet potatoes and liquor, giving her mother an overly horrified look. “You aren’t about to try out a new recipe are you?”

Her mother snatched the potatoes back from her. “Move along, will you? I’m meeting with some of the other mothers while you’re gone tonight. We’ll be having some of our own fun.”

“With potatoes and yarn?”

“Yes, you little toad, with potatoes and yarn. I’m just dropping this off at Laura’s early is all.” She pecked the top of Elma’s head and bustled towards the door.

“Wait, Mama,” Elma padded after her and Suma gave her daughter as severe a look as she could muster.

“What now, hm?”

“Feel how soft my hair is first.”

She tolerantly held some locks of hair, long enough to brush Elma’s hips even when dry. She ran her fingers through it softly and almost began to braid it absently. “Very pretty. Now may I go before all the day goes by with me listening to you prattle?”

Elma grinned and swayed from her toes to her heels and waved her mother out the door.

Before closing it, Suma turned around again and paused, her round arms holding her basket close to her chest. “You really are all grown, aren’t you? You always were around Witch Mother when you were young, but I suppose I never pictured you actually taking on after her. After tonight my own girl is going to enter the coven.” She sighed kindly.

Elma just smiled and waved again, for there wasn’t anything else she needed to say. Suma reminded her that she’d be back in the evening before Elma left. She closed the door behind her mother and went to find her breakfast, already lunch by now with the high sun. In the kitchen, she found one of the loaves her mother had made that morning and dug about for some hard cheddar and pears. She cut herself a thick slice of bread and lathered it with apple butter before storing it in her mouth for her trip outside.

Walking back down to the river, she set her lunch down on the bank. There was a cord they kept tied to one of the pines along the river that led to some bottles of goat milk. In the rushing mountain stream, the milk stayed cool and sweet for longer than it would in the cellar. Following the cord, she plucked one of the bottles of goat's milk tied to the other end of the rope out of the water. The milk was chill and heavy with cream. Elma sipped at it happily, alternating gulps of milk with bits of bread and cheese. As the minutes dragged on, she found herself munching at her second pear and a warm sleepiness crept over her as she lazed in the sun by the river.

It was finally happening; she was going to become a witch. Witch Mother had always told her she would. A warm rushing feeling began to rise in her stomach; she could just picture what would happen. She would dance with Hascha at the ceremony, this she decided first. Yes, she would dance with her. And kiss her. Or kiss her then dance with her. She shook her head and took another bite of pear, mulling over its sweet mealy texture. The order didn't matter. But once she was a witch she'd be able to do whatever she liked, she wouldn't have to tend goats or bake bread. She would travel, she and Hascha together. They would go south to the Mercenary's Guild to see the Red Keep, they could travel to the Half Wood to fight the sleeping monsters that lay inside. She would go to the Shipwrights District and visit Mag and her husband and show her all she could do with magic, all she was. And when she returned to Harthshore, she could even become the next coven leader, or the Thief King. She grinned to herself, wiggling her toes in the soft sand of the river bank and tossed her pear core into the bushes. Or both. It had happened before. The first Witch Mother had been both. She could be too.

She'd return after traveling with Hascha at her side, and they could storm the empty castle and take back the throne. They'd return Harthshore to being a town of riches and adventure. Her mother wouldn't have to work, she'd live comfortable and waited upon in the castle. She'd be like *her*. She'd be like Tuscany Yellow, that hero of old, and she could do it. There was no reason she couldn't. Without altogether meaning to, she was soon napping beneath the sun and the pine trees and Castle Groan, ever sleeping restless above Harthshore and its witches.

She woke with a start, panicked for loss of time. The sun was drifting just above the horizon, threatening to set if she didn't get herself together. Scrambling for the remains of her picnic, she clutched bottle and napkins in her hands and left the pear cores for the rabbits and deer. Her chest ached as she raced home; kicking up clouds of dust and dirt, she scampered to her doorstep and flung herself inside with a huff. Suma only clucked once; she was too familiar with this scene to be bemused by her daughter. She waved Elma inside taking the bottle and napkin from her hands.

Elma began to ready herself. She threw a long black dress over her shoulders. It hung around her ankles and swayed gently as she scuttled around the cottage. The village streets were already lined with lights, and the lamp lighter walked about with his wick and pole sending a warm pool of light across the pathways. Early rising moths began to flit easily around the lamplight, dusty brown wings fluttering in odd circles. Elma glanced out the window.

“I should be going I suppose. I'm sorry about the chores Mama, I don't know how I fell asleep like that.”

“Never mind for today girl, but mind you, today alone. I had to bring the goats down from the field myself, and there was no one to go to the chandler, but as I said, never mind for now.” She squeezed Elma’s shoulders and looked her sternly in the eyes. Elma was caught off guard for a moment as she faced her mother’s severe brown gaze and swiftly saw how much her mother loved her. Suma let her shoulders go and patted her cheek. “How I wish your father—”

Elma gripped her mother’s hand. “Mama.”

“Let me have my word now.” Her thumb brushed Elma’s cheeks, her callouses rough and somber. “What I want to say is this. Your father woke each morning before the sun and went to sleep with it too. He spoke very little, maybe too little to you girls. My, maybe he spoke more to the goats than with you girls.”

“Mama, that’s not true,” Elma laughed.

“My girl, your father loved Harthshore. He loved the Horn and the Mimic; he loved it when it snowed, and he loved it all the more, for you and your sister were born here. And more than the river, or the inn, or the snow, Harthshore’s witches have always been the living breath of this town, and your father would have loved that you were becoming part of that wind that keeps our town’s chest rising.” She kissed her daughter’s forehead and placed a necklace around Elma’s neck. The pendant was carved bone and inlaid with malachite.

She gripped it in her fist and scrunched her eyes shut before opening them again. .

“Thank you.”

Elma left her house into the evening and watched her shadow’s dress in the lamplight flutter and flick with the warm summer wind that teased the evening into night. Lanterns lined the streets of Harthshore, and though the roads were quiet, everything was warm and glowing. On the other end of Harthshore was Watchfire Hill. At each summer solstice on Watchfire Hill,

the witches of Harthshore would gather among the sweet grasses and crocus, lambs ear and moor grass, to welcome new women into their coven. With the hill in the distance, Elma made her way across the town and didn't pause to look at the village doors. She already knew each would have bunches of rye and snake skins pinned to the doors under chalk sigils for "fire." Her own door would have the same.

She didn't stop at the cobbler's door to see the old shoemaker sitting stagnant at his bench, and she didn't stop when a cat began to trail behind her, weaving between shadows and alleyways. It trotted at her ankles and rubbed up against her calves. The cat was as soft as anything, and Elma paused to scratch behind its ears and tried meowing at it before continuing on her way. She grinned. Cats were good omens, witch signs. The cat sat down purposefully in the road and its lamplight-yellow eyes followed Elma through the night, and she began to walk a little faster.

There was a fire atop Watchfire Hill, and using it as her point of focus Elma climbed up through the dewy grasses, and paced across drowsy slabs of granite boulders nestled into the hillside. Huffing, she reached the top of the hill and felt her breath catch at the sight of the burning straw-man at the peak of the hill. Fireflies roamed the hilltop, little ghost lights glowing a green hush over the grass. Her sister used to tell her some of them were really small fey out to play in human moonshine. Around the straw-man stood the coven members with Witch Mother at their head, each woman in black coverings, each with ghoulish masks of painted wood and coiled fur. The faces grimaced and grinned, some had horns of elk or goat, others drooping lips that hung past the witches' necks. Elma paused as if intruding on something intimate, something not for her, but the old Witch Mother nodded her head, and Elma stepped forward to join the other initiates.

As Hascha and two other girls arrived to Watchfire Hill, the Witch Mother raised a long withering hand and a humming drumbeat began to pulse through the evening summer.

“Welcome, my girls,” spoke Witch Mother. “And truly, this is the last occasion I may call you girls, for tonight you four become women in the truest sense.”

Elma felt excitement bustling in her chest. She caught Hascha’s eye and the two shared a quick grin.

“Tonight, my lovely birds, the Summer Cup will be passed between you and you will drink. As you know, if the water remains clear through the drinking it means The Horned Mother has accepted you into her circle.” Elma could spot one of the senior witches preparing the cup. Water was poured in, then lavender blooms and what Elma knew to be a piece of iron. She nodded to herself, counting the ingredients. Yes, then the clove oil. That would make it all taste like fiery piss.

Witch Mother continued, “You will drink, you will be cleaned, and you will dance. Let us begin.” The drumming slowed into an urgent moaning rhythm and Elma’s stomach tightened. The senior witch came forward with the Summer Cup and passed it between each woman. The drum’s pulsing, all thunder, all heartbeat, became the pounding in Elma’s own chest and she felt its echo between her breasts. Each initiate drank from the cup and when it came to Elma’s own lips she closed her eyes as she drank. She tasted just the water at first; it had a blood-like mustiness that was the iron and a sweet heaviness from the lavender. She couldn’t even taste the clove oil for a moment but once she did the dizzying heat filled her throat and nose, making her light headed.

Pipes whined, the drums went on, and Witch Mother gripped the Cup triumphantly, then faltered. Her lips opened, then pursed. “The Horned Mother has plans elsewhere for this

daughter of The Horn and Harthshore, may her path be gentle and full of light though it departs from that of the coven.”

Elma barely managed to blink as a sick fear ran through her body, before she realized Witch Mother was no longer speaking and all the women of the coven held their eyes upon her. “Oh.” Elma heard a shaky, childish voice say from somewhere, and then Witch Mother’s hand was on her shoulder. She thought of the cat that had trailed behind her on the way up the hill. They were witch signs, it had been a good omen. It had been a sign. It had been another sign that Elma would do this, that she would become a witch, that she could be a hero, that Hascha would love her. Hascha. She dared not turn to find her eyes now. She couldn’t cry. She couldn’t. She absolutely couldn’t give to that panicked, tearing feeling that was rising in her throat.

“I’m sorry, child. The gift magic doesn’t fall with all, but the Mother will walk beside you none the less.”

Everything felt as if it were underwater. Elma spoke and moved as if the rushing waters of the Horn lapped over her as she hung trapped beneath the current. She knew that she spoke, that she replied to Witch Mother, that she said something inane and ominous along the lines of “good luck” to the other girls, smiling, nodding, and waving all the while as she began to turn, trembling back down the hill. She knew Hascha didn’t look at her.

All the way down Watchfire Hill Elma felt her toes catch on loose tufts of grass, and made her way, half-tripping, down the slope until she came to a quiet lane that she followed down to the Horn. She had to calm down, gather herself, sort things out before going home. Her mother would be out, spending time with other mothers, mothers with daughters who would soon be

witches. Elma felt a hiccupping sob escape her lips as she bent over, sliding to a patch of grass along the edge of the river, where she cried, gripping her sides with crossed arms.

Part of her was as upset as all the tears and blubbing made her seem. She was humiliated and disappointed beyond all scope of the word, and yet, part of her, childish and young in her grief, summoned again and again her mother's voice saying how proud her father would have been of her when she joined the coven. Dwelling on this, she let herself fall into an easy sense of self-pity, deciding to cry because she felt she deserved to, that the evening had turned so dismal and cruel that she wanted the very trees to feel sorry for her. Here she could feel as awful for herself as she wanted to without worrying about anyone trying to cheer or reassure her. Eventually sobs turned to quiet sniffles, and Elma began to shiver on the banks of the river, arms wrapped around her knees.

As evening turned to night, and night to the naked hours of cold darkness past midnight, Elma felt a chill numbness creep into her toes and fingertips, though she didn't stir to warm them. Night in the Black Mountains was never truly warm. It could be free of wind, or rain, or even cold, but in the crooked shadows of the mountains, the sun warmed stones crawled with frost and slept with the rest of the world. The rhythmic chirruping of crickets and the occasional murmur of an owl were the only sounds to make conversation with the river, and Elma listened, her own heartbeat sounding loud and rude.

As a girl, when she had come here with Mag on late-night excursions with stolen cakes and nearly empty bottles of spirits, they had watched the sparkling lights cast from Castle Groan. Cradled by Harth Peak the lights of the castle seemed never to go out, never completely, as its lords played long past midnight, and its servants woke long before dawn. Even in a quiet hour, filled with deep silence and a deeper cold, torches would stand vigil with whatever guards stood

watch that night. Mag would lay back, and drink from the bottle in a way that Elma thought was lazy and womanly in a way she very much wanted to imitate. And she would tell stories.

Mag had said the Thief King was tall and dark and served by a wicked, clever man with white hair and white skin who stole riches for Harthshore from the Mining Guild and the Merchants Guild, and how one day, Harthshore would be rich. She had said that the Thief King wore a cloak made of stars that concealed him against the night, and could play a pipe to send rich men to sleep while he robbed them and their houses. Of course Elma had seen both the Thief King and Lord Habrak as a girl, and knew the King to be rather short and his man to be more pink than white. Yet how grandly Mag could spin such stories, and how it led Elma to love the stories more than the men of flesh and fault that would greet the town on festival days or at market.

Hardly noticing, Elma found herself crying again. She was so stupid, so embarrassing, she couldn't face her mother, she couldn't face anyone. All her fancies of becoming like the lady Yellow seemed so silly and so childish now. She was the daughter of a goatherd in a town that was going to die from lack of coin. She should be lucky just to live as her mother and be content. *But mother had father*, she thought piteously.

She sat, lost in memory and story, such that she missed the moment when a light glowed yellow in a tower window. One window shone, and then another, and then a whole wall seemed to alight. Elma gasped, stirred suddenly from her reverie and stood quickly on feet full of pins and needles. There sat the castle, for the first night in a full year with light shining in its windows.

Castle Groan had woken up.



*Each night the boy would watch out his window. He knew the movement of the day and the passing of the months only by the lapping of the waves and the shifting of the moon.*

*“How fickle that lovely lady moon must be, high in her kingdom of deep black sky,” said the boy. “How selfish she is to care so little about me, who spends each night watching the waves from these lofty windows of sea glass and iron.”*

## Six

**T**his time of year, the rivers were warm enough to bathe in, so West opted for this over heating water for the tub. Still, the water was chill and West shivered as he poured another bucketful of water over his head. He squinted, his eyes shut as soapy water slipped off his dark hair and onto his shoulders. He ran his fingers over his smooth jaw and upper lip. Even at thirty-one, he still didn't grow much facial hair, but, after shaving it off, his face felt cleaner than it had in months. The woods of Harth Peak were quiet and only gentle chattering from squirrels and whistling calls from insects and birds disturbed the warm air. Stepping out of the water, he found he had brought nothing to dry himself off with and stood on the banks of the water swinging his arms and squeezing the tips of his hair to dry as much as he could. Still dripping wet, he threw a light cotton tunic over his shoulders and slipped his trousers back on. His boots he left off and carried in one hand as he made his way back to the castle through the woods.

Sunlight dappled the mulch of the forest floor, and the canopy of leaves above him swayed softly in a mild breeze. His feet were tender from their time in the water and the months he spent walking little and sleeping often. As the breeze shifted, the scent of sage and hash

smoke blew towards him. West paused where he stood and felt his muscles tense with a sickly apprehension. Habrak was right. The past months had turned him coward as well. Shifting his weight carefully, West slipped his boots over his bare feet. They were well worn in, and he could walk quieter wearing them than if he were trying to avoid sharp twigs or rocks. Following the smoke, he moved slowly and quietly towards the scent, fingering the knife at his right hip.

As the scent grew stronger, the forest became subtly still with no sound of insect or bird stirring in the trees or bracken. The smoke wafted through the air and the earthy sweetness of the sage mixed foully with the hot, rotting smell that came with burning hash. He had to be reaching the source of the smoke, as a mild film began to play in the air as he walked further. He stepped with the side of his foot first, easing slowly onto the ball and then shifting his weight to the other leg. Like this he moved quickly and quietly, as silent as an adder.

Something white caught his eye and he flicked his gaze down to the ground. A mouse skull. Tiny and perfect, the little head stood out sharply against the dark forest carpeting. West knelt down and lifted the skull, staring at it intently. There was no damage to the skull whatsoever. All the teeth were intact, and the jaw had no cracks or splintering edges. It was as if the creature had found a peaceful end some months ago in the middle of the forest with no coverings or shelters and rotted away with no animals to disturb it or prying beaks to tap at its skull. He stared at it closer. No, it wasn't completely undamaged. Dotted the skull were small thin lines. Places where something very fine and very sharp had etched narrow, unintentional markings into the bone of the mouse head. They were markings from a knife. Someone had stripped the skull of its fur and flesh, leaving the markings in the bone.

West looked up sharply and dropped the mouse skull. Now that he looked ahead through the forest the ground was dotted with the tiny heads. Dozens of white spheres leading through

the trees with little empty eyes staring up into the tree tops. He walked quickly then, not bothering to not make noise breaking branches or cracking the heads that lined the ground. He was dizzy, and his dry mouth gulped in mouthfuls of air as he began running without noticing his feet propelling him forward down the path of little heads.

There, at the base of a tree, burned the wrappings of sage and a moss-like pile of hash sending a winding stream of smoke into the air. Next to the dish of burning plants, the mouse skulls came to a stop and formed a small pile. Other clay dishes were stacked around the base of the tree. Carefully he edged closer to the tree, breathing shallow and heavy. A cool sweat coated his cheeks and neck as he peered into each dish by turn. He blanched. One contained a piling of whole fingernails, blood and flecks of skin still clinging to the edges and bases of the nails where they would have been torn. Another was simply a dish of mashed fruit pulp, glistening pink and wet in the noon sunlight. The next held knots of curling gray hair with blood matting at the roots and the dish next to that had three lifeless spiders. Each lay on its back, legs curled in towards itself. The last dish contained a single tongue, flaccid and red.

West's hands were shaking and sweat ran down his back. With a horrible sense of apprehension, he stumbled back from the tree and circled to the other side as he fought bile back down his throat. Pinned on the other side of the tree was an old woman, gaunt and pale as she hung upside down. Her feet were tied together with a rope at the ankles that stretched up into the boughs of the tree and connected with a branch high up. Her skirt was knotted around her legs keeping it from flapping over her face, but her thin pale legs hung bare and bruised. West's eyes darted around from her legs to her face, her hair, tangled and silver, to her hands. Her hands. Her nails were gone. He screamed and began pawing at her face and shoulders frantically.

He patted her cheeks as gently as he could, cooing a sickly, “No, fuck, no...No no no no no.” He turned from the woman and vomited. “Please. Please please please. Fuck. Wake up. Just wake up. Just fucking do something.” He squeezed her shoulders softly and touched her hair. He recognized her. This woman. She sold candles. From the Shipwright’s District—she owned a chandlery. She kept her bench set up by a window and dyed her wax different colors. Sometime bright sometimes soft. Sometimes she put sweet smelling oils in the wax she dipped her wicks in. They were fine candles. She made the candles. She made him candles for the funeral. For her funeral. For Mag. She had made candles for Mag. West screamed—furious and sobbing. With a strange, mad speed West seized his paring knife and cut the rope above the woman’s ankles, carefully grabbing her in his raised arms, nearly reverent in his effort not to jostle her. A little groan came through the chandler’s lips as she crumpled into West’s chest. Her eyelids stayed scrunched together, still closed.

On the ground he cradled her for a moment, brushing her cheek, unsure whether to coax her awake or call for Habrak—no, he was too far away—or carry her back while she was still unconscious. Slowing his breath, West moved his hands gently over her, cutting the rope at her knees and lifting the hem of her sleeves and then her skirt looking for injuries. As he searched, his hand caught on a small plaque of thin wood tucked into the waist of her skirt. He held the wood between trembling fingers and pieced through the script carved into it.

*“Oh Thief King hear the summer drums pound,*

*And bring me teeth and gold.*

*I require bone to smear on my face,*

*And poultice to rub on my feet.”*

He pocketed the plaque, his fingers turning white as he gripped it, and continued looking over the old woman. Her fingers were crusted in blood, and her shoulders and legs were badly bruised, but, as he searched her body for cuts or blood, he found only what was coating her hands. He sighed a quaking breath and scooped the Chandler into his arms. She was so light. Almost like a bird. He hurried back through the forest with a frenzied haste, only cautious in his effort not to shake her.

Panting, he came to the side door by the kitchen and stumbled into the fragrant room where Habrak stood cutting a loaf of bread.

“What the fuck took you so lo—” Habrak froze with the knife in his hand mid-reprimand as he took in West standing in the doorway, crying and panting with the old Chandler in his arms.

“Habrak—”

The other man rushed forward and took the woman from him and carried her down the hallway without another word. West trailed behind to where Habrak laid her down in a spare bedroom. He stood watching as he felt for her pulse and turned around to face West.

“I’ll ask what happened later. For now I’m going to town and to fetch the doctor. If she wakes up, try to keep her calm and give her small amounts of water. I’ll be back in an hour.”

He left the room, patting West’s shoulder on the way out.

For the next hour or so, West hung about the woman’s bedside, dabbing at her forehead with a damp cloth and running his thumb over her forearm. At one point, her eyes fluttered open but soon shut again with her breaths sometimes crumpling into odd hiccupping gasps before they calmed again and seemed nearly even. West put the plaque out of his mind as he waited for

Habrak and a physician to come back. After some fifty minutes had passed, her eyes opened and she blinked around the room blearily. He inched forward and continued to pat her arm.

“You’re safe. A doctor is on the way.”

She began turning towards him and he stopped her head with a gentle hand.

“Don’t move. You’re hurt, but someone is coming.”

The old woman gave a small nod and her lip shook as she pursed her eyebrows. “That man—he took me from my shop. He took me.”

West froze as a wave of surprise rushed over him. The tongue in the dish wasn’t the chandler’s then. Somehow he had assumed it was, but then again, if her tongue had been cut out she’d have likely been dead when he found her. The woman was still speaking, and he hadn’t noticed her continuing.

“He kicked the dog when he came in the shop, oh my poor dog, I—I—”

He placed a hand on her forehead, hushing softly. “You’re safe, just wait for the doctor, and everything else will be fine. Just wait for the doctor. Here, drink some water, here.” In a panicked effort to calm and comfort her, the time until Habrak’s footsteps came in the room passed with West stroking the chandler’s forehead with uneasy hands. When the footsteps did come, West stumbled out of the way for Harthshore’s young doctor that Habrak had brought with him.

West was ushered out of the room and into the kitchen where a bowl of soup was placed on the counter. He ate what was put in front of him without noticing what it tasted like, and, sometime, as he ate, he told Habrak about the woods and the tree and the clay bowls filled with little horrors, about the mice skulls and the chandler who had made candles for Mag’s funeral.

Habrak shook his head. “I don’t understand. That chandler woman isn’t even from Harthshore. We met her at the bay, in Morino, right?”

West nodded his head and tried to keep the soup down. “I know that, I—fuck, of course I know that. Mag’s funeral was there.”

Habrak grimaced and grew silent, waiting for West to continue, but when he saw West wasn’t going to say anything more he brought him back up to his bed chamber. West lay in his bed, and, as he tried to fall asleep he watched the fine white hair surrounding Habrak’s face as it caught in the afternoon sun and bleached the color of moonlight. Habrak ran a damp cloth over West’s hands, cleaning them and rubbing them. For nearly an hour he sat on the edge of his bed running the cloth in easy circles. The cloth would be rewetted and wrung out, and then Habrak would return to moving it over his hands, and nails and wrists.

West watched him as he moved the cloth silently, “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

Habrak snorted. “And you’re what? The Saint of Devoted Mothers?”

He laughed and his eyes caught on Habrak’s. West moved his hand to Habrak’s arm and let it rest there. His sleeves were rolled up and cuffed at his elbows revealing pale blue veins that ran under his skin. An almost pained expression ran across Habrak’s face, and as West ran his other hand through a lock of Habrak’s hair the other man shuddered. He closed his eyes and sat there on the edge of the bed, barely moving, breath slow and controlled. West inhaled. Habrak smelled like winter and sunshine, all dewy light and sugar and pine. He gripped Habrak’s arm and his eyes opened, staring down at West. He held his gaze, and as he did, Habrak folded into him and his chest lay heavy against West’s. His legs curled up onto the mattress and he lay with his jaw against West’s collar bone.

Minutes dragged and as they lay there, West never moved to kiss or embrace the other man, but he let his hands slip under Habrak's tunic and move over his hips and spine and small of his back. His skin wasn't exceptionally soft, and in both temperament and temperature Habrak ran rather cold. But that coolness had a familiarity to it that West returned to with the ease experienced in walking old pathways or reading the script of a long known friend. At first, there was hesitation, but soon he fell into retracing all the old lines of his spine and scars that he could have drawn with his eyes closed. Neither said anything, but Habrak's breath took on a slow heaviness and when his hand moved under West's waistline he was already stiff. Habrak's fingertips were rough from holding crossbow bolts and as his hand moved from West's shaft to his balls and then back again, he worried for an inane moment that he wouldn't stay hard.

Sunlight caught against the small soft hairs on Habrak's back, illuminated white with the glare of the sunshine. The skin at the nape of his neck was so pale compared to West's own skin that it nearly seemed translucent. He studied Habrak's eyebrows, then neck, then earlobe with an absurd intensity, and, keeping one hand to his lower back, he let the other grip a fistful of Habrak's hair by the base of his neck and pulled the other man up and closer to him.

Habrak laughed against West's neck, "Give me a minute, my hand's cramping."

"Alright. I'll wait."

Habrak snorted, shaking out his hand and then slipped it back over West, jerking him off while West drew lines in Habrak's back with one hand and tangled the fingers of his other in his hair. Habrak's hand and fingers traversed over him, slow and rhythmic, and, still concentrating furiously on the white of Habrak's eyebrow and on the warmth that beat in his inner ears and shoulders, running down his arms and gathered heavy in his fingertips, he came into Habrak's hand. They lay very still, for how long he couldn't tell, in truth likely no more than four or five

## Tuscany Yellow and the Thief King

minutes. Even Habrak's hand didn't move from where it rested still laying on him. Sunlight, pouring through the open window, warmed West's hand on Habrak's uncovered back and made him squint and close his eyes. The room was warm, and still and heavy, and when West did fall asleep, sunshine and evergreen melded with images of small wicked forms lying red in clay earthen bowls, and all he could smell was blood.



*Though Randik attributes the rising power of the Guild Districts to a fear among the populace, I would suggest the issue is more nuanced than this. While the divine right of Kings may have created impetus for minority cults and pagans to gain influence within their respective guilds, the greatest trial of the Guild Wars likely stemmed from the Osh-Un Kings' over reliance on occultists, false prophets and alchemists—who claimed their words to be built from stars, and their wealth to have risen from sand.*

## Seven

**T**hree weeks had passed since Gin, alchemist of Al Har, had arrived in the Summer

Prince's war camp. During Gin's first days in the camp, Hayeid had been in a sense of low awe of the person. They woke so long before dawn it was truly just still night, and ate next to nothing throughout the day, only drinking huge swaths of water and nibbling on seeds and almond oil before napping for the afternoon. In the evening though they woke at dusk, and after spending hours in counsel with Hayeid, would give themselves over to wine and goat cheese and sugared figs, olives and pickles, sweet rice milk, honey-bread and yogurt, all the while playing long, raucous games of Ji with Hayeid's wives.

The first day Gin had been in the camp, he had confronted Gin trying to enter his wives' tent. He had walked up just as Gin was approaching the guards to enter.

"I'm not in there," Hayeid had said, thinking that the alchemist must want to speak with him.

Gin had turned around, thoughtful black eyes pensive and teasing. “My Golden Prince assumes it is he I wished to hold conference with.”

Hayeid was puzzled and angry all at once. “This is the tent my wives keep. It is not for men to enter.”

“Ah. But there we arrive once more at a misunderstanding. I am not a man, My Prince.”

Hayeid had blushed. Of course, how embarrassing. Simply because a person was of a small chest didn't mean she wasn't a woman. Damn him and his assumptions; Iza would be mortified on his behalf. Still he kept on. “Be that as it may, only certain women have permission to enter their tent. They must either be serving women, friends of at least the third *Ouk*, physicians, or invited in by me.”

“And what, Prince, of those who are neither men nor women? What laws do you have for these people to keep them from your wives' company?”

“There is no such person.”

“Then I must be a strange figment indeed, for you and all you camp to have imagined my presence so vividly. Perhaps I should remove myself to haunt other fields.”

“You're serious?”

“No, I've told you, my name is Gin.”

Hayeid frowned.

“Yes, I am quite serious. And not nearly as entertained by your stubborn dualities as you might wish me to be. So I'll ask again, Prince, have you any laws to bar people that are neither men nor women from the company of your wives?”

“Well. No, we don’t, but—” Hayeid hated this, he was spluttering, embarrassed, and still wasn’t sure what he had done wrong. He collected himself. “But you still cannot enter unless they want your company. Their comfort is of foremost concern.”

“I was invited by the delightful Nazami this very afternoon.”

Hayeid wasn’t altogether pleased with this. Of course, men weren’t allowed in the women’s tent at all, and neither were women who weren’t wives, but, as Gin had pointed out, they weren’t either. And so Gin laughed and drank and played long games of Ji and dice with Hayeid and the harem, until they would retire for the night to their tent before waking only hours later. All to say Hayeid’s awe of the alchemist quickly dwindled. The odd hours and long nights of drinking only led to Hayeid feeling tired, hungover, and sour.

The Solstice had passed, and though the days had begun to grow shorter once again, the sun still lingered long into the evening when Hayeid finished his rounds of the camp for the day and headed on to retire to sleep and his evening meal. The day was an incredibly dry one, but thankfully, it was also unusually still, and the wind’s breath was only a caress on the shifting peaks of the dunes. His feet were weary and his throat dry after speaking with each of his generals and walking the entire perimeter of the camp. The camp had been growing since he had come to the dune field in the Uuk Desert four months ago. As word of his mission had spread, the camp had gradually become home to four thousand soldiers, six thousand laymen, four hundred estranged nobles of the high courts of the Spice, Textile and Merchant Guild-Kingdoms, as well as roughly seven hundred merchants and family members to those who served in the camp. Yet all considered it was small. For now.

Before Hayeid made his way into his tent, nodding a tired hello to his guards, Pan and Elfem, he was greeted by the sound of Iza's laughter alongside Gin's. He sighed, and lifted the tent flap and entered.

“At games already I see? And yet the sun has yet to set.”

Gin rose, handing Hayeid a cup, which he took gratefully and emptied. “Simply creating a welcoming atmosphere for you, my prince; you seem tired.”

Iza, his principle wife, stood as well, her dark hair twisted into long braids that swayed above her waist, ornaments and gold interwoven in different strands. “Hayeid, Gin is cheating at Ji. They skipped over two tiles in their last turn and took my monkey out of the game.”

Gin grinned. “And now, I believe, the great lady has promised me her remaining candied ginger.”

“No. Hayeid, that's what I'm saying, your slinky alchemist cheats.”

“No they don't,” Elem spoke up from doodling in a poetry book. She sat up, stretching an arm above her head, holding her elbow with her other arm as she leaned to one side. She yawned. “You're just bad at playing with the red set, here.” She tossed a parcel of candied ginger pieces to Gin, who caught it gleefully and began to nibble. “You see,” continued Elem. “With the red set, if there are no more black tiles on the board, frogs can jump two spaces, and claim any tokens they pass over.” She popped an orange slice into her mouth, speaking while she chewed. “It was your fault you had your monkey in the open like that.”

Hayeid had sat down in a heavily cushioned chair, and had flung his shoes into a corner. He leaned back sighing and rested his forearm over his eyes.

“Anyway,” he heard Iza say. “Where is An? Is she heading back?”

Hayeid shook his head, eyes still covered with his forearm. The light in the tent, though dim, was dazzling, diffused from lamps of cut glass, the light reflected off gold platters and cups, shimmering Ji tokens, the jewels that adorned his wives, and even the gold threading on the blankets and pillows. “No, she is still running drills with the troops. She said she would eat with her soldiers and then come back.”

He didn’t see it, but he assumed Iza frowned, saying “And here you are acting tired while sweet An is working into the evening. She does the work of two of you.”

It wasn’t said unkindly and Hayeid smiled. “I never said otherwise, but, nonetheless—what are you doing?” He opened his eyes suddenly to see his foot in Gin’s hand.

“My prince seemed tired, I was simply going to let you relax while you awaited your dinner and chatted.” They lowered his foot into a basin of cool water, raising their sleeve above their elbow in a delicate, almost dance-like motion. They rested his foot in the basin and reached for a glazed bottle, pouring oil into an open palm. Gin rubbed their hands together, smearing the oil over long fingers, before lifting Hayeid’s foot from the water. They worked the oil into his sole in deep, circular motions, and then fanned their thumbs out from the center of the arch out to the edges, then up to his toes, and then back again.

Periodically, they reached for different bottles or vials of oil, and a loose, heady scent of rosemary and lemongrass and orange began to rise in the tent. The four women returned to what they had been doing, talking amiably and teasing Iza over how she praised An and her work with the troops. Hayeid leaned back into the pillows, but didn’t close his eyes. Instead, he watched Gin, whose dark eyes sparkled, a smile never quite landing on their lips.

“Are you making fun of me?”

Then Gin did smile. “I believe I’m washing your feet.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

Their smile widened. “No. This would be an odd method with which to make fun of a person.” They towed off one foot with a linen cloth and moved on to the other.

“You don’t have to do this though, you’re an alchemist not—”

“A wife?”

Hayeid’s face darkened and he tried to pull his foot away but Gin held him still.

“I’m sorry, Prince, that was out of line.”

“My wives are not my servants. An is a general in my army, Iza is among the greatest leaders of her time, Elem and Nazami are the west’s finest mathematical thinkers, and Sammeni’s poems are said to quell men at arms and bring tears to the gods.”

“Again, forgive me. My comment was not meant to be directed at their abilities or their character, but rather at yours my prince.”

“You’re saying you think me a tyrant?” Hayeid struggled to keep his voice soft and level. “A master overseeing laborers?”

“I do not know what to think of one who marries five women only to keep them secluded from company and guests barred from entering their place of living so they may not have friends, occupations, freedom in their speech and movement, apart from their God-Emperor’s rule.”

Hayeid’s face flushed with a cold rage. “That is, that is not, how dare—”

“That is, of course what your visiting diplomats from the Mining District will be thinking if not saying outright when they arrive, my prince, and they will arrive soon.” They rubbed their thumb into a tender spot in the sole of his foot and Hayeid groaned softly. “And your temperance, your wit, and your good humor may not be as readily summoned as you seem to

think, *Hayeid*, otherwise your fists and jaws would not be clenched right now, and you wouldn't have been ready to throw me into the desert and out of your camp."

"Are you saying I'm not to have any pride? That I must sit docile and smiling while corrupt foreign *merchants* insult me and those I hold dear?"

"I would never say you *must*, do anything." They poured a pitcher of water over his foot lifted from the basin, and began to towel it dry as water droplets landed on Gin's pant leg. "But I would say that those who come to meet you will be expecting temper, expecting suppression of your people, and yes, your kin, and will be expecting a young tyrant warlord with heresy on his lips and penchant for barbarism and domination."

Hayeid tried to let his tensed body soften, to smile and relax, "When we first met you said that I was beloved to the people? That I was admired and respected."

"Among *your* lands and people, Hayeid. Not abroad. And you must ready yourself for people who think you what you're not. Those from abroad will not see a marriage of six instead of two, they will see a prince and his," Gin paused. "They will not see things as they are and so you must be above reproof. You must be a sun amidst embers."



Hayeid slept that night after another long night of drinks and games. Yet he did not sleep easy, and his sheets clung around his legs either hot and cloying, or chill and thin. So when he opened his eyes to the sound of ululations from outside his tent, he wasn't truly woken up, but untangled himself with the same petulant annoyance as if he had been. He didn't bother with shoes as he shuffled out of the tent, running a hand through his cloud of dark hair, and muttered a passionate, "Ezrahel's seven tits," and flung his tent flaps open. Pan and Elfem were still on guard so it couldn't have been long after the party had broken up and all had gone to sleep. Or

so Hayeid thought. He gave Pan a withering look, and raised an eyebrow, forefinger and thumb cradling his forehead. “How long have they been awake?”

Pan shrugged, glancing to Elfem to confirm what he would say, “Not long, Balenox has moved maybe thirty degrees since the lanterns went out, your majesty.”

Hayeid glanced up to Balenox, the time-keeping star and rubbed his neck. “Any idea what they’re doing?”

Elfem shrugged her lips apologetically. “Can’t say we do, your majesty. I assumed it has something to do with their alchemy, some ritual for the season perhaps.”

“Ritual for the season my ass,” Hayeid had already begun walking towards the stretch of desert where Gin stood, whooping and wailing into the night, robes flapping around them as they leapt and jumped. “They want kingly temperance,” he cocked his chin. “Then temperance it shall be.”

And then Gin began to dance in earnest and Hayeid stopped short. Their movements were linear and controlled as a sword form; a foot would kick swiftly, lifting a cloud of sand with it, before landing in a sharp tap that would send up another cloud. Without music, in the silence of the desert night, their arms moved out and in from their chest, fingers shifting into different hand signs, with even their eyes keeping the rhythm of the dance as they shifted, dark and laughing with each movement before becoming still and unblinking. Hayeid didn’t know for how long he watched them dance, a wind of sand swirling around them as they moved, loose clothes swaying with their movement and chest heaving. When they stopped moving, and stood, arms lank at their sides, Hayeid didn’t know how long he waited, not daring to break that silence. Breath still heavy, Gin watched him, seeming to wait for Hayeid to speak first.

Hayeid smiled, faltered, then grinned. “It’s nearly morning, friend, and you’ve kept me up.”

Gin shrugged, seating himself on the ground. “Then you were not sleeping deeply enough, my prince.” They nodded knowingly. “Too much drink before bed, though it sends you to sleep at first, it makes for a poor night’s rest.”

“You drank a bottle of yellow tulk all on your own.”

Gin smiled. “And do I look like I’m getting a full night’s sleep?”

“I don’t think you can blame what you’re doing on tulk.” Hayeid seated himself beside them. “I’ve drunk it before too, you know. And I have never found myself capering about in the dunes past nightfall.”

“A loss, my friend. To never scream into the empty night,” that smile came again, white teeth and thin lips. “Is to never let your lungs feel themselves.”

“And the dancing?”

“A ritual for the season.”

“Really?”

“Probably.” They laughed.

Hayeid groaned and lay down, pillowing his head with his arms.

“You’ll get sand in your hair, my prince. It’ll be difficult to wash out.”

“I have sand everywhere. Unavoidable in these damned dunes I think.”

“You don’t like it here?”

“It’s beautiful,” he began tracing circles in the sand beneath him, no longer warm from the day’s heat. A chill was in the air and the sand made soft sifting sounds as he ran patterns through the grains. “But it is not home. Home is,” he paused. Have you ever been to Shad?”

Gin shook their head. “The capitol? No, I am from Yoros, this is as far into Hustanben as I’ve come before. I was beginning to think it was all desert,” they laughed.

Hayeid shook his head. “So of course this is home, in the way that I consider all of Hustanben my home and all the Uuk surrounding, but Shad is where I grew into a man, and it is a very different place than the Uuk. The city is the most colorful you could imagine. Buildings are painted deep blues and golden yellows, all the hues of many precious gems. Mosaics of cut glass and seashell cover temples and market squares. And though desert runs to the north and east on this side of the Black Mountains, east and south there is deep jungle bordering the city walls where tigers, and gaur, and monkeys roam the forest.”

“You sound like you miss it.”

“I have been here for four months and will likely be here for longer still, I cannot help but be sick for home when I cannot tell when I’ll see it next.”

“You should rest, my prince. It is late, you need not keep to my schedule.”

“Ah. Yes, about that,” Hayeid sat, shaking sand from his hair. “New rules. You will wake when I wake. You will sleep when I sleep. You will eat what and when I eat. And your rituals be damned, you will not wake up in the middle of the night to wail. Are we understood?”

Gin frowned. “Alchemy is a very particular art and to perform at my highest level there are certain austerities and—”

“And I am confident that any alchemist worth their salt can still maintain their duties without being a nuisance.” He raised an eyebrow. “Am I wrong?”

Their eyes narrowed. “No, my prince, you are not wrong.”

Hayeid nodded, standing up. “Good. Then to bed. Like a real human being.”

He reached out a hand to Gin, pulling the alchemist to their feet. They grimaced. “It is not customary to make an alchemist work under such restrictions. It is a high art of—”

“Yes yes, stars and madness and many things like that. But I must sleep, which means,” he began to steer Gin back towards the camp by their shoulders. “You must too.”

With that they made their way back to the camp, glowing on the endless desert canvas like an oil lamp on an empty wall. Hayeid yawned, knowing, any day soon, the representatives from the Mining District would arrive, and if he could win them over, he could win the west.



*Or so I have found myself wondering. I have come down to the fourth level, and the air is still and dank with years of abandonment. At this point the only air that passes through these halls is the breath of the earth itself, I think. Sometimes there are little winds that run through this place, coming from where I'm not sure. Helesenth said to find the room of statues, the one Yellow was supposed to be buried in. But it's all so empty, and when I sleep I just hear that breathing, that same empty breath that brings the wind. I hope I am alone here.*

## Eight

**W**hen the funeral bells stopped ringing, Odessa felt herself to be mad. For

nearly the whole day Odessa had been curled on her bed as priestesses tried to bring her water, droughts, and bits of yellow bread, but she couldn't eat and her hands ached and throbbed. Her face was wet with tears she was no longer aware were there. She had been sick twice. Still, when the bells did stop, she found herself holding very still, as if waiting for the next toll to strike. But it didn't and all was quiet. Shaking and uneasy, she pulled herself into a seated position when she was sure no more bells were to come, and she wiped her face with the palms of both hands. It was quiet. And yet, if the bells had finished tolling that meant a day had passed and next the funeral would come. She swallowed. And then, she'd have to be there. As Aelenwe's death witness, she must be there to be honored and to witness the final stretch of Aelenwe's journey into death, for she had already witnessed that journey's beginning.

A wash of nausea thrust itself upon her and she vomited a stinging liquid into the pot placed by her bed. She sat there, dizzy and heaving until her body lapsed into uneasy tremors,

allowing her to wipe her mouth with the back of her hand and lean back against the cool stone of the wall by her bed. She could smell the sick in her room and leaned in towards the open window, shuddering as she inhaled the summer air. Aelenwe was dead. Odessa had killed her. Aelenwe was dead. Odessa had killed her. Aelenwe was dead. Odessa had killed her. The thought ran through her mind in a tight circle, bumping into the walls of her skull until it was bruised and dizzy. *They must never know.* The rest of the order could never find out what Odessa had done, or else—A fresh fit of sobbing overtook her, but she could no longer truly cry so instead she choked and gasped covering her mouth with her hands, a headache pulsing through her and her breath coming short.

A knock sounded on the door then, and creaked open before Odessa could answer it. Quickly, as the door opened, she tried to straighten her shift and rub the red out of her eyes, but it was only Kavos at the door and she relaxed.

“I heard you hadn’t eaten priestess. Or had any water. I brought some?”

He sounded it as a question, proffering forward a tray with a wooden water cup and a plate of berries and folded pies.

She shook her head, black hair clinging to her damp face.

“Or maybe a bath?” He nodded in the direction of the wash chamber behind him and down the hall. “I could draw one for you?”

“Kavos, I want to be alone. I thought I told the girls that I didn’t want to see anyone.”

He nodded again, uneasy, and placed the tray down on the desk, one of only four pieces of furniture in the room. “I know. But you hadn’t eaten. I was worried.” He pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat, resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward, hands clasped.

She sniffed. “What kind are those?” Her eyes were on the plate on the desk. “The pies.”  
“Yucca and cheese.”

Her stomach tightened involuntarily.

“Odessa, what happened wasn’t your fault. No one will blame you. The pools are dangerous, and Aelenwe wouldn’t want you to blame yourself.”

Odessa swallowed and prepared the lie with her voice shaking. “But it is my fault. I’m the one who slipped and she caught me and fell too.”

“No one thinks it’s your fault,” he said, reaching forward to rest a hand on her knee. She didn’t pull back but held still until he pulled away. “The funeral will be soon. You should be there.”

“I know.” She straightened. “And I will be. Maybe I will bathe.” She pulled her hair back, running her fingers around tangles as she tugged it back and knotted it. “Thank you, Kavos. You’re always good to me.”

He smiled softly, shaking his head. “No need for thanks. Should I do anything for you?”

“No, that’s fine. Just leave the tray there, though. I’ll eat when I’m back,” she reassured him.

Seeming satisfied with this he ran a hand through his hair and stood. “When Balenox rises. That’s when the ceremony will start. Can you be there by then?”

“Of course.” Odessa stood as well, side-stepping her way around the young man.

When she finished her bath she returned to her room to eat the food Kavos had left. The room had been cleaned while she had been out and she stopped short, looking at the neatly made bed and the fresh rushes on the floor. Never before would someone have dressed her room with

strewing herbs, brought her food, or cleaned her mess. But now, things would be harder. As death witness to a High Priestess she was automatically elevated to the rank of second priestess, only one of twenty in all of Aelet Tor. She would have a vote within the college, she could submit a candidate for who to name High Priestess. At first the food felt dry and woody in her mouth, and the water made her choke and splutter. Eventually though the bread felt warm in her stomach and the water washed the food down. She began to feel hungry and started at the second pie, alternating gulps of water with bites. The cheese was soft and warm and the yucca was buttery and melted into the crust as she ate.

Yes, things would be different. She wouldn't be able to write things down, keep correspondence or meet anyone in her rooms. Instead, she would be wise to keep a journal, only to write down mundane things, appointments, day to day order business that could be found whenever anyone searched her room. That would only happen for the first few weeks of being a second priestess, she was sure.

A bell tolled and she started, almost dropping the last bite of pie. But it only chimed once to signal sunset, and the coming start of the funeral. Odessa licked the grease from her fingers and went to wipe the excess on her shift, before she paused and walked over to the basin of water that sat on her dresser. Carefully, she washed her hands then dried them with a cloth, drying each finger one by one.

It was time.

For the first time she dressed in the turquoise of the seconds, pulling her long hair out from the collar of the shift. She wrapped the cords around her waist and arms, remembering the pattern from all the times she had dressed seconds during her time as a disciple, and last, she placed Melphin's cap over her brow. It had an unexpected weight and Odessa spent a moment

shifting its balance and pulling her hair out from under it before she settled. She would mourn. She would cry to all the gods and beg the Saint of Devoted Mothers for forgiveness for killing her convey in the sacred caves.

Aeleth Tor, hall to the Seeing Priestesses, was seated high on the clifftops that bordered the districts of the Mining, Thief, and Merchant guilds. Over a dry canyon carved by the waters of the Horn, scrub oak, fragrant pine and cactus dotted the land surrounding the order's home. Aeleth Tor clung to the terrain like great crow perched on a branch, talons stretched for purchase and hooked around twigs and knobs in the wood. So stood Aeleth Tor. Against the odds of wind and balance, the building gripped the cliff side, and its highest spires reached into the empty heavens, no cloud or tree challenging its height. Yet summer had brought rains that doused the canyon each evening and night, sending the rare greenery crawling along the river to bring leaf and flower to the trees that shaded the banks of the Horn.

It was lovely, but as Odessa oversaw the valley, smeared with sunset, on the way to the vision pools, she fought a restless anxiety deep into her stomach. On the far side of the hall a rambling path led to the cave mouth that held the pools, and it was here Aelenwe would have her funeral. As Odessa marched herself down the trail to the cave entrance she met each stare that came her way. She would grieve, but she wouldn't hold her shame for too long, at least not publicly. Lower ranked priestess parted for her, clearing an opening around her that closed again after she passed through. When she neared the front of the procession heading into the caves, she drew back to linger with the most novice of the second priestesses who walked behind the six arch-priestesses.

In the caves, a sudden coolness engulfed her as the heat and sunlight of the day dissipated in favor of damp, musty air. Though small candles dotted the walls of the entry chamber, the

light diffused across such an expanse of shadow, that even with the candlelight everything was dim and cool. Upon the cave walls, the rippling patterns of the water played out shifting scenes that made the whole cave feel submerged underwater. The reflections from the pools cast a blue tone throughout each chamber, and as the procession continued further, Odessa's ear became drawn to that slow constant drip that had kept her company for the hours she had waited after Aelenwe's death.

Nothing though could have prepared her for the sight of Aelenwe's body. Odessa was prodded gently through the crowd to take a place beside the body and the arch-priestesses. The platform, at the far end of the entry chamber seemed to stand upon impossible stone stilts, suspending over half of the entry chamber over a precipice that lead down and down into swirling misty depths of layered pools. It wasn't from here Odessa had fallen with Aelenwe: a slick stairway led two levels down to the vision chamber where the primary vision pool was kept that looked over all the rest continuing downwards.

Try as she might to let her eyes wander towards the ledge and the pools below, her eyes were drawn to the pale body laying supine on the bier. Skin that had held a golden glow in life had now sunk into a pallid waxiness, ghastly in the shifting illuminations of the cave. Her head and face was mercifully covered with a linen veil, sparing Odessa from the vision of a broken skull or twisted neck, but she still blanched at the sight of her. The rest of her body was covered only in translucent funeral robes, and though it seemed the surgeons had tried to stitch and mend her body after the fall, and then to cover her wounds with flesh colored pastes, scrapes and lacerations still showed starkly against her skin. They had masked her death scent with perfumed oils and smoking incense sensors, but still Odessa felt she could smell water and blood and hear that final crack of Aelenwe hitting the ledge over and again. The chamber was silent

save for the humming of the mortician and the sound of dripping water. Odessa glanced around the room, sweat damping her back and an uneasy lightness prickling down her legs.

She started when another hand touched hers and she turned sharply. It was Malwen, one of the arch-priestesses, who smiled as she pressed a draw-stringed bag into her palm. Odessa looked at her, questioning as the other woman closed Odessa's fingers around the bag. Her chest clenched. Of course, a relic from Aelenwe. A gift for the death witness. She started, wanting to thrust it back at the other priestess, to be away from it, to be away from this, but the other woman interrupted, squeezing her fingers around the parcel tighter.

“For you, Witness. A relic. May it keep you.”

Panic still gripping her chest, Odessa felt the shape of the bag in her hand, feeling something knobby and soft. She opened the bag, fingers fumbling over the strings. It was a toe. It still had its skin, treated with preserving oils to keep away rot. Her eyes shot towards Aelenwe's bandaged feet and she ran from the cave, pushing through priestesses and disciples. When no one called her back she kept running.



*There are nine things I want you to steal,  
Nine nails for coffins I build.  
Toss knuckles with me boy, you bastard, you cheat,  
I've chewed the marrow of men finer than you.*

## Nine

**I**t was after midday when Elma finally stirred from her bed. She had been awake for a while already, her mother had come to the door three times, and each time had mercifully agreed to go back to her chores and let Elma wallow. But finally, when the heat of her covers and the stifling air of inside grew to be too much, Elma kicked her feet out of bed and crept through the three-roomed house. Before Mag had left to be married, and when her grandmother had still been alive, the three had shared a bedroom. Elma remembered nuzzling into her grandmother's paper-soft skin and smelling the lemon oil she wore on her neck. Mag would scooch herself as close to the wall as she could manage, complaining about how cramped it was sharing a bed with three, but Elma had been small, and tucked between the two she had felt safe.

On nights Elma couldn't sleep, when the wind would keen through the trees, whistling as it crossed the craggy hills that held Harthshore above the Horn, she would ask her grandmother about being a witch. Her grandmother, Soma, was the only woman in their family that had become a Harthshore witch since her own great-grandmother. On these nights Soma would hold one of Elma's hands in both of hers, running her touch down each of Elma's fingers one at a time,

counting a wish on each fingertip. *I wish you youth that lasts your life. I wish you wit that keeps you still. I wish you courage that holds you firm. I wish you love that lifts you tall. I wish you age that brings you all.*

Elma never knew if it was truly magic or not, but she had watched in wonder as Soma's old fingers, ringed with tattoos, had ran along hers. Soma had told her she would become a witch. She had said that Elma would be like her. That she would know the world like only witches could. And now when Elma looked at herself...She wouldn't let herself cry again. Somewhere, she knew this wasn't true. She would blubber until she damned well didn't feel like blubbing anymore, but the resolve made her feel good, so she tried to keep it as she ducked her head outside, looking for her mother.

"There you are, girl. Are you ready to tell me what happened?"

Elma jumped. Suma was behind her in the house, wiping down a cup with a yellow dishcloth. She scowled. "Mama, don't scare me like that. I nearly fell out of my skin."

Suma snorted. "Well excuse me for walking about my own home. I'll make sure to announce myself before coming into your presence again, *my lady*." She curtsied, wiggling her bottom.

"Are you trying to make me feel worse?" said Elma laughing.

"Not at all, squash, just trying to go about my day instead of sleeping through it all."

Elma was quiet a moment and Suma huffed, putting the cup down and flipping the dishcloth onto her shoulder. "Now, what happened? Are you really not going to tell me?"

And so Elma told all, about heading up Watchfire Hill and the ceremony, how Hascha wouldn't look at her and how Witch Mother had sent her home after failing her test. How she would never be like her grandmother and was "just a useless lump," she found herself repeating

her thought to her mother. She kept going. “I’ll never come to be anything now, Mama. It was the only thing I thought I would be good at. I mean, I can *do* magic, I really can. Only a little, but Grandma and Witch Mother always said I would be good, but now look! What does it even mean that the test failed? I really am just a goat.” Fulfilling her own prediction, Elma fell into another string of sobbing while Suma patted her hair, stroking her head as she made hushed clucking sounds, saying little things of comfort.

“Now now. Hush, girl. When did I raise you to feel so sorry for yourself like this?” She pinched Elma’s cheek.

“Ow!”

“Come now. You’re allowed to be upset, and it’s all well and good to be disappointed. Of course you would be. But I’m not going to stand for any of this talk of coming to nothing, or being nothing, or being a goat, though you are. You may be a lazy, silly, forgetful little creature,”

“Thanks Mama.”

“Hush, let me finish. But you’re my *daughter*. And I’ve raised you to have more mettle than this.” She brushed a finger over her cheek and Elma leaned into her mother’s palm. “Get yourself some breakfast. We still have plenty of milk and a few pears you didn’t gobble up yesterday, and another loaf is about to come out of the oven. Then I want you up and working with the goats, I want them taken out to the south pasture today, you hear? Nothing does a sore heart as good as some hard work in the wind and sunshine, alright?”

Four pints of Berrith’s hard cider from the Hissing Mimic also did a fine job mending a sore heart, or so Elma discovered as she burped heartily, leaning her head down onto the bar counter.

“Take it easy kid, you weigh what? Seven stone? You’re on your way to out-drinking yourself in cider.”

“I weigh more than that Berrith, and you know it. Now gimme all yer pies. Potato ones. Fourteen of em’. No. All of them. All of them, Berrith.”

The barkeep raised an eyebrow. “You can have three if you get out of here and take your scrawny drunk ass with you.”

Elma leaned over the counter, stretching an arm out wildly. “I have *never* left my ass behind anywhere, *sir*. Pies.”

“You have something to pay for this with?”

Elma dropped a collection of coins on the counter.

“Yeah. That’s way too much.” Berrith took the coins into his palm and began counting out the correct amount. “Let’s not tell your mother you just tried to hand me, a month’s earnings? You really just carry that around with you? In the *Thieving* District?”

“Thieves don’t steal from other thieves.”

“Yeah. Try telling that to absolutely anyone here. Anyway. Here’s your change, kid. Why don’t you bring it home before you drop it somewhere?”

Elma just frowned holding the sack of pies sourly.

“Hey, it’ll look up. I’m not a witch either, and no one complains.”

Elma searched for something to say, but feeling muddled, just nodded and walked out of the Mimic. If she went home now her mother would put her to her chores and she would be scolded for skipping out on them in the first place to get ciders. So instead of taking the road home, she turned instead towards the little path that led to her bathing spot near her house. Of course, it was the first place her mother would look for her if Elma was gone for too long, but

she didn't worry about that now, and instead meandered down to the river, letting her skirt snag on prickly plants that lined the way.

She had kept her nose tilted so far to the ground that Elma didn't notice the person sitting by the river. Elma squinted. The figure was plump and tan with curly hair plopped atop their head. Elma summoned all the drunken rage she could summon and tried to put a swagger in her step. "You there!" Elma called.

The person turned, feet still lingering in the river and glanced up at Elma with shocked, round eyes. This person looked like Berrith. Shorter, a little fatter maybe, and with a rounder, more lovely face but truly like Berrith in the eyes and nose and hair. "Are you a pervert?"

Mini-Berrith started. "Excuse me? What—no! Why—"

"This is where I take my baths," she clarified, striking an imperious pose.

"Well how would I know that?"

"You aren't here to spy on me?"

"Of course not!"

Elma pouted. "How mean." She was still drunk.

"What—who—"

"You look like Berrith, from the Mimic, are you his—"

"Sibling," this time they interrupted.

"Sibling?"

"Yeah." Berrith's sibling rose to their feet and proffered a dimpled hand. "Helben. Berrith calls me Beni, and if you don't call me a pervert again I suppose you could as well."

She couldn't summon enough shame in her inebriated state to feel abashed but she did smile and shake Beni's hand enthusiastically. She plopped herself on the ground and kicked off

rope sandals to soak her own feet in the river. She pulled out a pie, glanced up at Beni, looked doubtfully to her supply and pulled out a second. She patted the ground beside her. “Sit sit.”

“Okay,” said Beni with none too little caution in their voice.

“Pie?”

Beni was really quite sweet looking up close. They were all round cheeks, dark curls, and great brown eyes with long lashes. Their clothes settled comfortably on them and a beige linen tunic with wooden buttons, and sleeves rolled up above chubby elbows made them seem quite adventuresome in a way Elma immediately admired. “Why have I never seen you here before? If you’re related to Berrith?”

They shrugged, biting into the pie and wrinkling their nose a little. “Is this one of his?”

Elma nodded, munching on her own.

“Knew it. He overcooks the potatoes and puts in too much dill and lemon.”

“I like them that way.”

They shrugged again. Elma was fascinated. She never met new people. No one *came* to Harthshore, not really. It was the Thieving District after all. People didn’t exactly show up as tourists practically asking to get their wallets pinched, and it wasn’t the first place migrant families looking for new homes would think to raise their children and set up trade. Besides, Harthshore was the backwoods of the Old Empire’s backwoods. Compared to far off grand places like Hustanben and Al Har, with their gold and music, textiles and spices, the Black Mountain Region, even with the Mining Guild, was considered the east’s awkward neighbor with a badly painted house, a weedy garden, boards in the windows and a naked old man smoking and cursing on the porch. Compared to those shining cities of the east, Harthshore was,

well. Was Harthshore. Cutpurses, coin-pinchers, con-artists, rogues, crooks, knaves and swindlers, and of course, witches. All this made Beni a rather fantastic novelty to Elma.

“Six years ago,” Beni began. “Berrith moved here, and I didn’t. Our parents had a caravan wagon with a troupe, but they just sold it for a river boat, but,” they swallowed another piece of pie. They ate neatly. “Boating isn’t for me so I decided to come live with my brother.”

Elma made an affirmative sound as she licked the grease from her fingers, finishing off her pie. Beni finished their pie as well and glanced around while knocking their feet together in the water. “So…” they began, and didn’t pick back up for a moment. Elma burped softly. “If you were gonna take a bath or something, I can leave.”

Elma nodded, more acknowledging that she had heard what they said than agreeing that they should go. Beni cocked their head, twisting their mouth in a question. “Hey, are you okay? You seem, I don’t know, a little weird?”

Elma laughed, pushing away her gloom. “You’re so rude.”

Beni winced and rubbed the back of their neck, laughing. “Sorry, that’s not what I meant. But you know, shoulder to cry on and stuff like that.”

She didn’t make eye contact, she couldn’t. So she watched the tiny black fish in the river as they swam here and there in the brown-gray water. “I don’t think you’d understand,” she glanced over in time to see Beni raise both eyebrows. “And I don’t mean that in a mean way, really I don’t, it’s just. It’s witch stuff.”

They snorted. “Try me.”

“Are you a witch?”

“Fuck yeah, I am.”

“But, you said you’re not from here, and you don’t look like a witch, I mean you don’t dress like one, and if the Horned Mother hasn’t accepted you, then—”

“Hey now, I’m still a witch. Lay off with the assumptions a bit,” they splashed some water in Elma’s direction, “and tell me what’s wrong. Cousin Beni’s here for a listen.” They stuck a piece of sweet grass in their mouth and leaned back on both elbows, feet still in the water.

And so Elma told them. As best as she could so she neither sounded too silly nor stupid and so that she didn’t cry and so she didn’t talk about Hascha too much. It was a careful telling and by the time Elma finished with a solemn, if triumphant, “now I’m drunk,” she wasn’t sure how much sense she had made. Beni was quiet for a moment, chewing the grass thoughtfully before they propped themselves back into sitting.

“Huh,” they said.

“‘Huh,’ is that all you have?” She complained. “I just spilled my soul to you!”

“No, that’s not all, ‘huh’ was just a good place to start. Nice and neutral, shows you I was thinking.” Elma pouted and they grinned. “What I’m saying, is do you really think all that is true? I mean I knew Harthshore was kind of out of the way, but do you really think Harthshore witches are they only ones?”

“Well no, silly. I know that the Witch Woods have witches, *obviously*, and I know out east there are alchemists and stuff, but,”

Beni didn’t let her finish. “But nothing.” They scrambled into a different position so they were sitting on their calves and leaning towards Elma. “Sure the Horned Mother didn’t want you, can’t blame you fam,” they kissed the knuckle of their pointer finger and cocked it a little up and towards the woods. She didn’t have time to respond “But that doesn’t mean *no* goddess or patron god would want you, or that you even *need* a patron at all, I don’t have one.”

“But I thought all witches had to have a patron—”

“Not us snazzy ones. And by that I mean me, but just because you flunked out of one ritual doesn’t mean there aren’t countless other ways of becoming a witch, that is, if you can do magic. Can you?”

“Of course.” She tried to sound confident but it came out a little bit whiny. “I can, I did loads of little things when I was a kid. You know, the bread rising quickly, or fireflies kind of lining up to show me the way home at night, some other luminary spells...” she trailed off, needing desperately for Beni to confirm that all this was indeed magic, and that Elma, *clumsy, lazy, silly Elma*, she could hear her mother’s voice saying, really could be a witch.

Beni nodded kindly, enthusiastic. “Can you do something now?”

Elma fought down the sensation of a small vole burrowing around her stomach and tried to steel herself. “I mean, I haven’t been taught any spells, but.”

They nodded, seeming almost satisfied by the chance to teach her something. “Alright, give me a minute,” they said.

They stood and began to gather things, silt and soft mud from the river, smooth stones, ones that were flat on both sides, and last, four long sheaves of sweet grass that they peeled the stocks of, until each yellow blade was soft and fragrant and green.

Elma grinned. Yes, she knew what spell these ingredients were for, and she rushed to show she wasn’t so green as this stranger may have thought. Seeing her wiggling as she sat, Beni raised a challenging eyebrow and Elma went to work preparing the spell. She smoothed out the silt and mud as she created a low dome with a crater in the middle about the size of a goat’s hoof. Occasionally she ran her hand back into the water to keep the dome smooth and free of cracks as she built it. Then, when she was satisfied she carefully took the five river

stones, placed one around the dome for each cardinal, then laid the fifth gently in the middle. With the sweet grass she tied a wreath, it was nimbly done and she placed the wreath around the dome. She drew the sigil for “light” in the sand and watched as a soft and steady illumination began to glow from the center of the dome. It was a simple spell, the simplest of enchantments, especially during broad daylight.

But then, it didn’t matter. Elma was beaming, and so was her light.

She and Beni continued to meet by the river. After a scolding from her mother for all the usual things, Elma was permitted free reign of the town after taking the goats to pasture in the mornings. So by afternoon she’d make her way down to her spot at the river, where the rocks were of wide, smooth granite that was warmed well by the sun. Together they’d sit on the rocks and wile away afternoons casting small illuminaries, snacking and talking about any thought either of them could think of.

Elma was fond of Beni. She liked their frank face and how they would snort a little if they were laughing too hard, and how they had a dimple in one of their round, brown cheeks. More than anything though, Elma liked that Beni didn’t know her. That they didn’t know her as lazy or stubborn or silly, though surely they were beginning to, but that Elma could talk to them and know they wouldn’t take anyone else’s side. They were on Elma’s side. Her side was the only one they ever heard in a story and with that, Elma decided to be Beni’s staunchest defender. They would tell her stories of how they were blamed for a paint tin tipping over one stage once when their caravan was performing in the Mining District, even though it was dumb old Adock who had left the paint on stage, and Elma was outraged on their behalf.

In between stories and spells Elma would tell them all she thought they needed to know about Harthshore. Where the best crabapples grew in the fall, where you could take a boat along the Horn without running afoul of rocks, where to sit to watch the fireworks come the summer's Half Fire festivities, and about the Thief King's own castle.

"You see," Elma continued on, telling the story half with her hands for she was too excited in her telling to get all her words out proper. "End of Autumn is the Thief Day's Festival. The king calls all his retainers and all his kin back to Harthshore," again with her hands to make sure Beni really understood the meaning of *all*. "And it's a great game really. The King's court guards Castle Groan, while a fair is set up in the courtyard will caramel apples, and mead, and corn and everyone in the village goes about snatching tokens from their neighbor's homes and shops. If you're really brave," she went on, building suspense with fluttering fingers. "You try to break in to Castle Groan itself and steal yourself something. If you get away with it the King will grant near any request you ask for, and!" she could feel herself bouncing now. "The lights in the window have come back on, just on the solstice, so the festival might be back this year!"

Beni laughed, "I can't really believe it's a whole holiday for trying to steal from your king, this seems like something terrible to make up to trick new comers."

She frowned. "It isn't, and," she dragged it into at least three syllables. "If we went at it with that fancy concealment charm of yours, I bet we could get something good!"

Beni rolled their eyes.

"No, really," she went on, and grinned something wicked. "If you wanted I bet we could even get in now, if you wanted to take a look. There'd be no trouble in it." Elma couldn't tell if she really thought it a good idea, if she just wanted to impress a new friend who seemed far more worldly and bold than she herself could hope to be, or, and this thought she lingered on, or if she

hardly believed the king was really back at all. Part of her was nervous and terrified of the thought of walking through Castle Groan's long passageways and coming to the king's hall only to find a skeleton on the throne dressed in brocades and gold and turquoise, with a crooked crown atop its skull, and rings on its white fingers. The reason didn't matter. Helben grinned, which made Elma grin, and then they laughed.

They held their sandals in their hands as they began heading into the woods, laughing and whispering as a muzzy scent of hash hung lightly on the summer breeze.



*So thought the boy. And in his lonely tower, as he counted the waxings and wanings of the moon, he drew with chalk upon his walls. In his diagrams he drew great curving lines of symmetry and form, looking for a way to reach that lady moon, and make her care for him. But his geometries told him nothing, and from his tower he cried to her, and from his tower he screamed, but nothing save a restless beast heard his cry upon the night.*

## Ten

Once again, Habrak had come to sleep in his bed. West asked him if he would, he agreed. Old enough habits were easy enough to return to, and when he woke up, the other man's pale hair in his face, he felt something that came close to relief. They weren't lovers, they had never been, and that had never been the point. But people got used to constants. When he was a boy, a fat, reckless boy who ducked around the shops of Harthshore like a raccoon in a trash heap, a storefront where a baker now lived had closed. When it happened, West couldn't even remember what the shop had been, he couldn't even recall who had lived there let alone what they had sold. Harthshore was small, yes, but not near so small that everyone kept track of everyone, at least not fat little boater's boys. But when he realized it was gone, that the windows were dark and the door boarded over, he still felt like he had been smacked. He hadn't missed the place so much as he missed things not having changed. Habrak was like that, in a way. He didn't think they had to be *together* for it to bother West when they weren't.

Past the solstice it seemed that each day only grew subsequently hotter. Technically, he knew that he was waking up not long after sunrise each day, for not long after the sun was up heat stole into every corner of the castle, in part because it had never cooled off the night before. But West never woke up until after Habrak did. He figured if the man was set on dragging him back to the world of the living he might as well put in the work and physically drag West there every damn morning. It had been four days since he found the chandler in the tree. Four days since blood and nails and tongues and West sweating through the nights with Habrak laying still and straight, good enough to pretend to sleep through his restless dreams. Habrak was awake even now, pretending to sleep a little longer even though he had already been up, bathed, gone downstairs, and returned to play at sleeping a while more.

Stupid.

West *could* get up, he almost wanted to, or rather, was cognitively aware that he should want to. That at one point, a year ago, there were things he had truly wanted to do. He had listened to Habrak. He had gotten up, he had taken a bath, and now he had an old lady without fingernails living in his castle. *Brilliant Habrak, endlessly wise and clever Habrak. You got out of bed, what's the worst that could happen? Obviously some terrible bullshit, that's what.*

He inhaled deeply. He could smell the soap that Habrak washed with. After all these years that scent had never changed, and West should have been used to it, it should have blended in with everything else at this point, but still his hair, slightly damp now, smelled of clove and cedar, and something of apples.

He needed to piss and shook his legs restlessly. Then he kicked Habrak in the ass.

He turned over impossibly fast and smacked West soundly on the ear. "Hey," he said.

West laughed, rubbing his ear and sitting up. "You're supposed to wake me up."

“You can clearly manage that fine on your own, dick.”

“Is there breakfast?”

“Make your own damn breakfast.”

“What’d you make?”

Habrak was wiggling on his pants, removed as part of his elaborate Pretending to Sleep Scheme. “Gruel.”

“I actually have no idea what gruel is.”

“How do you live on the streets for four years and not know what gruel is?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I figure that’s the kind of thing portly angry ladies make for you, I never had one of those.”

“Are you fucking calling me—”

West laughed and cut him off, nothing was worth letting Habrak finish that sentence no matter how angry he’d be able to make him. “No, no I’m not. But this is good. I’m excited. What’s gruel? I may never have had it.”

Habrak laughed, or just exhaled really quickly, maybe something in between.

“Unfortunately for you then, it’s just normal oatmeal.”

“Raisins?”

“Go fuck yourself, no.”

He was silent a minute then let himself topple over laughing. “I was serious, do we have any?”

“I was serious too. I’ve never purchased or stolen those bloated little grape babies and I’m never going to.”

“I like them.”

“And that’s why I’m leaving you for another man.”

“Is he younger than me?”

“Older. He can actually grow a beard.”

West nodded. “Right, has Haybell gotten any yet?”

“No, I was hoping you’d bring her some. The grocer is making a delivery and I need to meet him.”

West agreed, and dressing, made his way down to the kitchen.

Haybell was the old Chandler’s name. He liked talking to her. When she was fully awake for the first time, they found out her name, which West thought he should already have remembered, he had known her after all. Against all his nightmares and that ugly sense of terror that curled around his stomach whenever he thought of Uum and the deathly tree in the woods that day, talking to Haybell was an easy kind of comfort. The doctor had called from the village every day, counting Haybell’s heartbeats, and feeding her tinctures and stone powders murmured with witch prayers. She was healing well, according to the doctor. Her nails, she said, would almost certainly grow back, but that they it could take up to six months and the nails could be deformed after they’ve grown. “But nails grow faster in the summer and in the sunshine, so set her up in a room with a nice window and that should help on several fronts. What I am worried about though aren’t her nails, it’s more...” She had trailed off for a moment. She was worried about the old chandler’s heart and mind. West had stood in the hallway outside Haybell’s room and listened to the doctor while Habrak tapped his foot nervously behind him. For Haybell, the doctor explained, while she was likely past a risk of dying from the shock, pain lasted longer for

the old, healing took place slower, and the trauma could be harder to come back from. She was also severely worried for her dog back at home, and that worry seemed to gnaw at her.

So when West came to talk with her he tried to be as soft as he could, softer than he was with anyone. He held her hand carefully, never touching her fingertips and talked, trying to make her laugh, and reassured her that her dog would be brought to her—because by the gods West was going to make sure that dog was found safely if it meant having to fetch it himself. Its name was Celery.

He knocked on Haybell's door with the toe of his boot, and opened the latch, still with his foot, when he heard her sandy, humming voice answer.

“Good morning. I brought you breakfast,” he said. He tried to remember to say things like “good morning,” “good afternoon,” and other greetings instead of barreling straight into conversations. It was, perhaps the first time in all his years he had made an effort to be polite to anyone. Except for Mag of course. He had tried very hard to be polite to her until he realized she was too infuriating of a person to make an exception for. He caught himself mid thought, he didn't want to think about Mag, not like this at least, not like he was some fondly grieving friend who had the privilege of smiling at the memory of her quirks, her speech, her faults and all the things he had loved her for. He didn't get to do that, he inhaled and cleared his mind of her.

“I hope you like oatmeal, Haybell. Habrak made it, but I wasn't sure what you like to top yours with, so,” he realized she expected him to say something more so he went on. “So, I brought cream, honey, walnuts and peaches.” He settled the bed-tray over her outstretched legs and went on to open her curtains, and then the windows, letting in yellow sunshine and morning air. Yes, this was better than Habrak fussing over him. Here was someone who needed real care, who wasn't just wallowing.

She smiled. “Thank you, West, this all looks fine. And I do love peaches.” He could tell she wanted to say something more and though he knew what was on her mind, he let her talk. “I hate to trouble you more after the way you’ve put me up, but I am so very worried about my Celery. He’s just a little dog, you see? He doesn’t hunt or chase, and if he’s hurt, I’m just so terribly worried about what’s to become of him.” Her words had grown so quiet, West could scarcely hear her by the time she finished. But as her lip nearly began to tremble he didn’t push her to repeat herself.

“That’s actually what I was coming to tell you,” he began to improvise. “Just today I’ve sent some of my people back down the Horn on a boat to the Shipwright’s District to fetch your dog. I trust who I sent fully and your dog is going to be brought here safely, just a few days, I’m sure, but no more than a week.” He knew he shouldn’t do this, shouldn’t tell her he had sent people he didn’t have. His castle was empty, Habrak was the only “people” he had, and he couldn’t promise that the dog wasn’t already dead. He was just so damned tired of fucking up that fire or fury he was going to bring Celery back to her.

They talked a little longer, and West made sure she ate at least some of the food he had brought her, but his thoughts only dwelled on how to bring her that little dog.



*Thus, my reader will understand when I emphasize than an understanding of the Osh-Un Dynasty is essential for a comprehensive examination of the climate that allowed the Guild Kings to achieve their unlikely success. The True King was never simply a person who had pure lineage within the line of imperial succession; according to The Tome of the Sun, 11:32, the True King was said to be immune to faulty council, free from the sway of witch crafts, and capable of being guided by only the truest of magics. Thus, alchemists became their most trusted advisors, for they cannot speak lies.*

## Eleven

“““ **A**nd finally, from our parents, we bring the deepest respects and hope that

this missive finds you, Prince Hayeid, in health and humor. My sister and I hope also that this comes in good time before our arrival. As we travel the dunes of the Uuk Desert our guide tells us we are mere hours from your camp and that we can expect to see your lights by sunset. We eagerly await our introduction.’ Etcetera, etcetera, signed, ‘Princess Yeilandali of The Mining District.’” Iza glanced up as she finished reading the letter. “Well, she must have gone through an inkwell or two on this, hmm?”

Hayeid tried to stifle a yawn, but couldn’t help it and turned his face into his shoulder and covered his mouth. His eyes watered a little and he blinked the tears away instead of rubbing them. “Well, today’s the day then, isn’t it?” The camp had of course been prepared for days, as much as they could be at least. While they had hoped that a missive such as this would have been sent ahead of time, it wasn’t something they could have counted on, so instead of risking being caught off guard, the camp had remained in an elevated state of efficiency and repair over

the past three days. While there was much Hayeid knew he couldn't prepare for before the representatives' arrival, from the state their messenger arrived in this afternoon, he had a good idea how the change in climate might be affecting the foreign princesses. Puffing, sunburnt, dehydrated, and delirious, one of An's battalions had found him hanging from a bored camel's stirrup by one foot, being dragged at a leisurely pace. Once identified, the messenger had been sent to recover in one of the medical tents. Hayeid wasn't sure if this would produce good faith between the two parties because Hayeid was ensuring the messenger received such excellent care, or further frustration and distrust because their messenger was half dead in his camp and the two princesses could be in a similar state for all he knew. He frowned. No use worrying about that now.

Iza hadn't answered his observation and had returned to giving an attendant instructions for the coming evening. "Thank you Bolos, let me know immediately when you hear from An's scouts that the representative party has been seen, and let me know how their messenger is recovering. Did he really seem so very ill?" She asked the last as an afterthought.

Bolos, her attendant, let a careful smile touch her lips. "Unfortunately yes, lady. He's all blisters and red skin. I'm afraid he'll be recovering from the sun for quite some days."

Iza snorted, annoyed, and waved Bolos away with one hand, resting the other on her hip. Hayeid barked a sudden laugh and she turned sharply, her braided hair swinging around her shoulders as she raised an arched eyebrow. She had beautiful eyebrows. "What?"

"You can't resent the poor fool for being pale my love, the Mining District is a cloudy place from all I've heard."

She huffed. “Oh yes I can. A ridiculous place to be born if it means you can’t walk about it proper daylight. And,” she added. “from all you’ve heard indeed, you’ve never even been there, so don’t talk to me about their clouds.”

“Yes my love,” he came behind her and wrapped his arms around her soft waist. He pulled her collar down a little to kiss her shoulder. “Thank you,” he said, brushing her braids from her back and over her shoulder.

“Aren’t you going to say for what?”

He laughed, holding her and resting his chin on her shoulder. “There is nothing else to add.” His eyes closed and he let out a heavy breath as her fingers absently brushed along his forearms, still wrapped around her. “All I want is for you to know I am grateful. That is all.”

Iza didn’t turn or reply, but began to sway a little from one side to the other.

“Do you believe this will go well?” he asked.

“How would I know that?”

“I’m asking if you think it will.”

He could feel her shrug a little. “I don’t know, Hayeid.”

“They may not be convinced. They don’t have the same things to gain from aligning with me that the Spice and Merchant Guilds did.”

“I don’t think that’s what matters.” Her nails were long and clean, running over his wrist and hand. “These two cannot make decisions on behalf of their families, they can only meet you, and see some of who you are. They do not have to agree with you, they don’t need to be persuaded by your politics, because they will love you as all who meet you do. And when they love you, they will believe in you despite themselves.”

“You make it sound like it is inevitable that they will disagree with me.”

“Ha.” She said it instead of laughing it which made Hayeid laugh in turn. “Of course they will disagree with you. No one likes to hear their rule is built upon extorted labor and coin, that how they rule is wrong and harmful. But to meet you is to adore you, and,” she turned in his arms, facing him. He felt her wide black eyes against his own, and he felt all of nineteen again, seeing her, so wise and angry, for the first time. She grinned wickedly. “And so all you need to do is pretend not to be so insufferably self-righteous and obnoxious for a few weeks, and maybe, *maybe* you can trick them into believing—”

The rest was lost in a fit of laughter as Hayeid pinched her waist above her hips and she shrieked, squirming out of his arms.

A little cough came from the tent flap, where Gin stood in their billowing black pants cinched around their ankles, and loose alchemist robes. The clothes were unusual as always, and Hayeid didn’t think it was the cultural dress of Yoros, their homeland. The robe was black too and ended mid-thigh, while their waist was belted with a wide cloth band of deep blues and burgundy that formed a cumbersome knot at their back where the cloth continued down in an elegant drape. The collar of yet another layer beneath the robe was form fitting and high, buttoned and clasped with a fine brooch. Yet even in the odd garb their height left them with a daunting presence, and when they bowed they raised an elegant hand to their heart. “Pardon me, my Prince, Lady.” Their eyes moved to include Iza. “But the party has just now been spotted. The messenger must have been greatly delayed by his state of camel impairment.”

“Fuck,” Iza whispered to herself. “He certainly must have been, and they must be early. They said they’d arrive at sunset.”

“They are still likely an hour away, Lady.” Gin supplied in a helpful tone. “But I thought my prince might appreciate time to ready himself.”

He nodded. “Very good, Gin. Thank you. And I trust we can expect sparkling entertainment tonight from our own alchemist of Al Har?”

Gin grinned white teeth and bowed again deeply. “It shall be dazzling, my prince. A radiant display of the arts magic that will lower the stars to shine at your table.”

Hayeid waited outside, in the central sector of the camp. Iza had debated with him over the wisdom of staying inside and meeting the Mining District representatives when formally presented to him, versus awaiting them outside in the heat of the setting sun. But he knew he must make himself be seen—make himself visible from their very first encounter as a man who was warm and open, about his people while remaining as a beacon above them, so different from the Guild Kings who kept to their keeps collecting stealthy alms from their peoples. No. Hayeid was of a different kind of man entirely.

The setting sun, obscured by neither the crawling spines of mountains nor the rise of towering buildings, cast a golden orange glow across the dunes, blinding in its heat and hue. And yet, how grand and lovely it made the camp, and its king, Hayeid was sure. Gin had cast water works across the central sector. Hayeid wasn’t entirely sure how it worked, though Gin had certainly tried to explain the mechanics. Something about anchoring various water supplies with alchemical diagrams so they would interact with air flows, and, Hayeid would really have to have them explain it again. But it hardly mattered. The display was dazzling. Springs of water fountained up intermittently from different corners of the square, while other trinkets Gin had had set about the square sprayed misting dustings of water that courtiers cooled themselves in, laughing. Still more water flowed freely down channels constructed of sand while more splashed out from the sides of the channels at random intervals, dampening passersby. In the

setting sun the water glowed all yellow pink and blinding white, faceted like the very jewels that graced Hayeid. When explaining the water show, Gin had expressed that water in the desert was the richest of gems, and to let it flow freely displayed Hayeid's own power over those rare life-giving springs of the Uuk.

Music rose from sitars, drums and santors, while his court rambled and danced amidst the spraying water, eating, drinking, letting their silks and linens wet in the alchemist's enchanted rains. Hayeid crossed and uncrossed his legs as he sat, attempting to attain an air of relaxed humor. He exhaled, letting himself be fanned. But the air barely seemed to touch him. He could only feel the weight of gold against his chest, the sweat that gathered around the bands around his bare arms and fingers. He wore draping layers of gold and yellow, black and midday blue, a loose coat of red linen hung over his shoulders, keeping his arms exposed in the still heat. His shirt was loose but the silk cloyed against his skin, and the light reflecting from the jewels on his feet shone into his eyes. He closed them and tried to concentrate on the fanning.

A spray of water spurted into his face and Hayeid blinked in wet shock. Even in the split moment it took to open his eyes, Hayeid knew who he would see. Gin—smiling, white teeth, long limbs, gold water pump held in their hands, ready to spray more. Hayeid licked the water from his lips. “Should I even attempt to ask, friend, why you sprayed water in your prince's face?” He knew he shouldn't be smiling, what precedent this set, he couldn't imagine, but he was—he was smiling like a gods forsaken fool, and laughing too, laughing so much the pearls on his chest shook against his belly.

“I thought my prince might need refreshing, he seemed wilted.”

“So you thought...?”

“In the moment I saw you, I thought, ‘Ah! What a shame that instead of blooming towards the evening sun, the oleander blossom dwindles in its heat. Why,’ I thought to myself, ‘though resistant to the droughts of summer, all it must need is a bit of rain, to raise its white petals to the sun again.’”

Hayeid snorted. “Oleander is a toxic bloom, best keep your distance friend, lest you dwindle in its company.”

“But did you not know? The sunbird drinks from the oleander unhindered, it minds not the poison.”

“A mild bird to feed on naught but flowers.”

“Fear not, my prince, it hunts spiders also.”

Hayeid snatched the water pump and sprayed Gin with the rest, watching droplets fall from their long nose.

“An apt revenge, my prince. Deftly executed. Songs shall be sung and ballads written—”

“Are you ever serious?” He could feel himself grinning, still looking the fool he was sure.

“Ah. A fine question, one worth long answers over tulk by moonlight I’m sure, but not now, prince. See?” They pointed a long finger into the distance where the head of a caravan was rising over the horizon. “Your guests arrive, and they must not see you being silly.”

He resisted a reply, but couldn’t suppress another laugh and a short shake of his head as he straightened in his seat. He fixed his eyes on the horizon, and as the drum’s pace quickened, he watched the camels and horses of the Mining District’s party crest the dune hills to the west. Their figures were silhouetted against the setting sun, but as the banners of the Mining District lifted over the hill, black pickaxe against a green and gold peak fluttering in the wind, Hayeid clenched the arms of his chair, and smiled into his cup as he drank a long draught.



*It has been four days since I've last written, I would date the entries but I believe I lost some days before I found the clock. It's a curious thing, seven hands. I believe it counts days, hours, minutes, and seconds, but beyond that, I can't say what the other three hands are for. Months? Years? I think not, I believe they move too quickly for that, but time will tell. I've descended down two more levels since last I wrote, either hoping to escape or find that rushing breath that wakes me in my sleep and haunts me as I walk. But no such luck, the wind continues and all I have found is this clock and ----- °°redacted°°*

## Twelve

**S**he wore Aelenwe's relic in a reliquary about her neck. It was expected of

Odessa as the death witness, but aside from her obligation to the order as a second priestess, she knew she faced a different kind of duty as well. Holstaba, a seeing priestess of Aeleth Tor from the ninth century wrote that to kill someone was to know them more profoundly than any who had known them in life. Even more than she who birthed them. For in death, Odessa remembered this acutely, you see in them all their moments of living and take them upon yourself, for yourself, and bear that life with you as a second soul, a second destiny to fulfill for the one you killed.

She never thought that weight would hang about her own neck. But in all the dark caverns of her heart, she didn't, couldn't, regret killing Aelenwe, so in place of regret she would wear her relic. It was the sum and total of Aelenwe's weight she could carry, and the only destiny of the fallen High Priestess Odessa could see herself coming to was her own violent, lonely death. *Sooner or later*, she thought grimly, and finished combing her hair. It was fine and

black and hung below her waist. Her hair was cut to come to a fringe above her eyebrows, but she had missed several hair-cutting days and so it fell about her eyes, so that when she blinked she could touch her hair with her eyelashes.

Before the funeral she had been able to excuse her weeping and moping, she had been shocked. Of course she was. Who wouldn't have been? But as the time for submitting candidates for Aelenwe's replacement approached closer, there were things Odessa must do, people she must speak to, petitions to make, but every few hours Kavos seemed to find something new and distracting to bother her with. She liked Kavos fine, for being one of the order's *hajans*. Hajans weren't castrated, not anymore at least. A measure had been passed in Aeleth Tor some forty years ago outlawing the practice as archaic except in special cases put before the order in petition. But as a hajan, Kavos was considered sexless, even if only honorarily. Often she welcomed the company of the friendly, funny boy she had grown up around, but ever since Aelenwe's death it seemed as if he were always—

Odessa's thought broke as she heard footsteps and the clinking of dishes in the hall outside her chamber. She groaned.

From the hallway she could hear voices speaking, Kavos, of course, and someone she didn't recognize. Slipping to her feet, she edged towards her door and put her ear to the paneled wood. She recognized Kavos's voice immediately, a warm tenor, hesitant but controlled, but there was another man also and Odessa raised a surprised hand to her lips and pressed her ear closer to the door.

"I helped carry the dishes this far, Kav, but I don't need to go in. It's weird. She doesn't know me. I should head back anyway—"

"You're already holding half the food, so it'd be weird if you *didn't* come in, so just—"

“No I think I should really just—woops.” There was a light plopping sound that Odessa imagined was part of her lunch. She grimaced.

“Now listen here—Odessa!”

Odessa opened the door and both Kavos and the other man turned their heads towards her with a timing that seemed theatrical. Still looking at Odessa, the other man kneeled to the floor, and for a horrified moment she thought he was kneeling down to *her*. But then he lifted a slab of bean cake from the floor, gently placing it on one of the plates Kavos was carrying. Oh. Not kneeling to her after all.

Kavos, recovering quickly said, “Lady Odessa, I brought you lunch, and a friend of mine I thought you might like to meet. This is Tolk.” Tolk, broad man with a slight paunch bobbed his head, muttering a polite sounding, if nervous, and “lady.”

Odessa looked between the two. She ran over several scenarios that would allow her to dine alone, or better yet, dine without Kavos playing her maidservant at all, but couldn’t find one that wouldn’t result in any hurt feelings, and tired and sore at heart as she was, she didn’t think she could bear hurting anyone else. So she said, “come in,” and stepped to the side, beckoning the two men into her rooms.

There was some awkward stumbling about as the table was moved closer to the bed, and a chair and chest were drawn beside the table to create three seats. Odessa sat on her bed, and Kavos proffered the single chair to Tolk, who didn’t argue as Kavos situated himself atop the chest, his shoulders coming up to the lips of the table.

She knew why Kavos was here, she even knew why his odd, large friend was here. Somehow, Kavos was determined to *help* her, to support her, to comfort her with company and food and endless, endless talking. And she didn’t have time for any of it, except she knew that

seeming alright would be important in the upcoming weeks. If she seemed unstable, too ill at heart or volatile, the college had the ability to revoke her vote temporarily. And that couldn't happen. Not after everything. Not after Odessa had destroyed herself by killing Aelenwe. It would only all be worth it if she had her vote, if she could play her hand.

Odessa laughed. "Kavos! How can you sit there? You won't be able to reach your plate."

He grinned and she could see his tense shoulders relax and his smile ease. "I'll manage," he said, pulling his plate into his lap. He dipped his bread in the mashed beets and took a contented bite.

"Whatever works I suppose."

Tolk relaxed as well, though not completely, and began eating, his huge hands dwarfing the wooden spoon he held. He looked like a child playing with his doll's utensils, lifting them carefully from some castle in miniature where all the dolls lived. He caught her staring and smiled a little under a hand covering his mouth while he chewed.

"Tolk's family farms down in the valley," Kavos said, answering the question Odessa hadn't asked. "The order buys an amount of their vegetables from them."

"Don't we use our own gardens?"

Tolk swallowed. "You do. I work there, several days during the week, and other times I'm running deliveries."

"So that's how you know each other," she said. As a hajan of the order, Kavos oversaw a fair amount of the work that was menial for most priestesses. Apprentices and those very young or low ranking in the order, may do chores and tasks of various kinds, as Odessa herself had once done, but beyond a certain point, a priestess of the order was too valuable to waste on tasks any man could do. As much as Aelet Tor might like to present itself to the world as a self-sufficient

force of the west, independent from the Guild Districts, it wasn't. While legally independent, its lands not belonging to any district, practically the order depended heavily on surrounding farms and merchants both for good and labor.

Standing above a canyon valley surrounded by the Mining, Thief, and Lumber districts to the west, south, and north, respectively, the order had the potential to be self-sufficient, but as most of the priestesses were reserved for religious affairs, ceremony, and schooling, they still depended on the outside world—a sore ache to many High Priestesses of the college. But Odessa had never felt so. The world was swiftly changing. That much could be seen by the dissolving of the Merchant District that had once laid to Aeeth Tor's east. Now, that endless expanse of the Uuk desert, visible from the spires of the order's keep, was just one more stretch of land belonging to the New Empire of the east.

And she had a vote in the college.

She laughed along with something Kavos said, and she saw him relax further. "What do you mean there's nothing you can't pickle?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "But really, think about it. Cucumbers, plums, carrots, radish, cabbage—"

"Lettuce?" Odessa said, smirking.

Kavos paused. "Well. Hm. *Can* you pickle lettuce?"

She shook her head, covering her mouth as she chewed, "No? I don't think so. How would I know?"

"Fine. Not everything. But most things. Mangos."

Tolk's eyes widened. "When have you eaten a mango?"

He shrugged. "I was born in the textile guild. I had them when I was little."

Odessa perked up. Had she ever asked about Kavos's life before becoming a hajan? She knew they had talked about her childhood, but there wasn't much to say. Her mother had been a priestess, she was born into the order.

*Heretic's Daughter.*

She blinked, clearing her head. She didn't have to know him. "Well, what about corn? I've never heard of pickled corn."

He shook his head. "Alright, that doesn't count. Corn is a grain. We aren't talking about pickling barley either."

"Alright. What about potato then?"

He huffed. "I've had it."

"Watermelon?"

"A delicacy in the Lumber District."

"That's just a lie," she said. "I won't believe—"

A choked snort came from across the table where Tolk had his head down on the table, his shoulders shaking.

He sat up, laughing. "All of it. You can pickle every last one of those things."

"Not the lettuce?" Kavos asked, sounding more disgusted than curious.

Tolk rubbed actual tears from his eyes. "But you can. Trust me, you shouldn't but you can. The barley and corn too. Coming from a genuine peasant, you can pickle it all."

"Huh." Odessea leaned back, crossing her arms. "Well. Food is ruined." She glanced at the light out the window. The afternoon was escaping her and she didn't have much time before candidates for the High Priesthood were due.

Kavos noticed. "Do you need to go?"

She nodded, apologetic. “Yes. I still need to talk to Yniss today.”

He looked curious but didn’t ask. “We’ll let you go then.” He looked to Tolk. “Did you need help with the herbs?”

Tolk nodded. “Fungus gnats,” he said, as if apologizing on their behalf.

“Well,” Odessa said. “Good luck to you and the gnats, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

They all left the room, Kavos carrying Odessa’s dishes as well. They parted when the passage forked; Tolk and Kavos heading to the kitchens and the gardens, friends in a way Odessa had likely never been friends with anyone, Odessa to the keep’s north wing, where the High Priestesses had their quarters.

When she had been a child, Odessa had never understood how large Aeeth Tor truly was. Aelenwe had yet to become High Priestess, and though a girl, Odessa had been clever for her age, quiet and listening where the other girls would chat and boast. So the adults around her had said, and Odessa felt it to be true. Han had been High Priestess, and she could only remember that the woman had been tall, fat, very old and extremely kind. She had loved her, in a distant, removed sort of way, as much as she could love a woman who had sat on the vote to execute her mother. Han had voted for clemency, but her vote lost to a large majority, and so in spring, on a day Odessa was too young to be aware of or remember, her mother had sailed on a barge down the falls of Kirith An to be judged by the waters and the gods. They had found their fault.

But still, she didn’t blame Han for this. The High Priestess was not the mouth of the gods, she did not speak their will, she was simply their favorite. Most cherished, most beloved, most dear.

Odessa fought down a sudden urge to wretch and found herself leaning against the cool carved stone of the passageway, grounding herself in the tactile sense of rough, cool stone

against her fingertips. Han had been good to her. Fully and truly, and Odessa had never been held accountable for her mother's trespasses, and in truth, no one spoke ill of her mother. Dying had been enough and the order was satisfied. But as a girl, bereft of mother or kin, Aelet Tor, with all its heavenly spires, empty skies and echoing caves, had been all her world. There was nothing beyond it and nothing before it.

The High Priestess was her king and she was of that court, and she needn't go further than the vision pools to hear the god's own voices and know the world's turning fate. It would end—in ice and fury and breaking. This, all priestesses of the order had seen. It was called the First Vision, and any who could see in the vision pools had seen this ending first.

She turned a corner that opened into a covered walkway through the prayer gardens. The air was dry and warm and felt good against clammy hands. When Odessa would cease breaking out in cold sweats, she didn't know. She paused for a moment, to step into the sunlight and feel warmth return to her fingers and forearms. She only noticed that in goose pimples covering her arms when the sun eased them and she could rub her skin smooth. The prayer gardens were a central square that signaled she had left the south wing where all the other priestesses, apprentices, hajans and help lived. The north wing was truly home to the second chapel, dining halls, and indoor prayer rooms. No one lived there save the High Priestess and voting members of the college. Odessa's rooms would be moved here, but not until a four month period of grieving passed.

She continued on from the gardens and into the north wing, where three flights of stairs would bring her to the college's quarters, where she could find Yniss. College members weren't given separate offices for conducting order business. There was the voting chamber, three

libraries, and their own chamber, thus most chose to set aside a portion of their quarters as a private office where they wouldn't be overheard or disturbed.

Odessa paused at Yniss's door and inhaled a shaking breath. Her heart beat at an alarming pace, and she knew if she tried to speak without calming her stomach and heart first, her voice would come out quavering and breathy. She closed her eyes, inhaled slowly through her nose for a count of ten, and exhaled through her mouth, picturing the breath curling down her spine. It was a common visualization and breathing technique taught to all apprentices, and the image to focus on varied from priestess to priestess. She did this three more times before knocking at a polite volume on Yniss's door.

A moment passed, then came the sound of a chair sliding, footsteps, and the door opened. Yniss smiled immediately when she saw Odessa, but it was all polite surprise rather than any real familiarity. They knew each other certainly, Yniss had mentored her for years, and Odessa had a long time respect for Yniss's ideals and her presence in the college, but they weren't friends so to speak, and Odessa would do well not to blur that boundary when they spoke. Yniss was clever, cautious, and earnest in her devotion, all things that led her to be someone difficult to sway. But she only needed to sway, her. Only needed to push her the slightest bit. Anything Odessa said today only needed to be things Yniss would already have been thinking.

"Odessa," she said, stepping out of the doorframe to let her into her quarters. "I'm glad to see you, come in."

Odessa nodded her thanks and followed the other woman into her rooms. They were far plusher than any rooms she had lived in before. But even from these remote towers, Odessa knew that was only by order standards. In all likelihood the rooms were still sparsely furnished. Yet, stepping into the cool, sunny rooms, with greenery spilling from terracotta pots on the floor

and hanging from the ceilings, white and brown linens covering couches and chairs, and Yniss's small grey tabby cat curled in a window seat, it seemed luxurious in the most delicious way she could imagine.

"Please, sit," Yniss said. Odessa sat and tried not to watch her too closely as she poured two cups of water from a copper pitcher by the window. She had admired Yniss for as long as she had been aware of her. She was beautiful, Odessa could tell this, and she thought, outside the order she would have had suitors lined up outside her doors. Her hair was dark, like Odessa's, and she wore it parted down the center in a long sheet down her back. She had a long face and a straight sloping nose, and though she wasn't carrying it with her now, Odessa had seen her smoking from a long stemmed pipe from her balcony sometimes. Against the evening hush in autumn Odessa sometimes spotted the steam of her breath curl with the smoke against the cold air and followed the lines of the smoke against the sky. Odessa took the cup gratefully and took a few sips, watching the cat's slow, humming breath.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you? I didn't mean to barge in..." She trailed off. She knew Yniss would be free at this time, and in her quarters, but she hadn't sent a note so she took another sip of water and waited for Yniss to demure.

"Of course you aren't this is a fine time." She seated herself in a cream and white wood chaise longue, and if she didn't quite lounge, she certainly looked relaxed in a way that Odessa's steel-pole-spine would never let her appear. "Actually I was planning to come and see you soon, but I also wanted you to have the space you needed to..." she searched for a word, but didn't seem to find one she liked. "Grieve."

Odessa nodded. "I understand, thank you. I'll be well, I just. Lady Yniss, I don't have anyone to speak to, and whenever I talk to you, I feel as if my troubles have eased."

She smiled gently. “Well, you’re kind to say so. But I hardly think myself to be your only confidant.” She sighed, and smiled sympathetically. “I may not be able to help, but if you like, I’d hear what’s on your mind.”

Odessa wet her lips. “Please don’t answer me if I’m speaking out of line, but, I wanted to ask you, that is, I wondered,” she marked how Yniss’s lips parted and how her brow began to straighten. She was being too coy. Damn it all if Odessa could afford to play this poorly. *Be frank you fool, else she becomes tired of you.* “How do you mourn someone whom you often thought *wrong*? How do *I* enter the college on the footsteps of her death, that feels for all the world to be my fault, and yet be unable in my own conscience to follow her either in matters of religion or in politics?” Yniss softened and seemed ready to speak. *Good. But she must not only believe me, she must feel how this weighs on me.* “I mourn her. I mourn her truly and with my whole heart, but what will the college expect of me as her witness? I must either lie to myself or make myself hated before them and I can’t bear either.” Her voice cracked. That was enough. *Enough, and now let her answer.* Odessa looked down at her cup and took another drink. Her hands trembled slightly.

“I see. You worry that the college will resent you if you vote differently than Aelenwe would have?”

Odessa shook her head. “Not only that, but I wanted to ask you because—”

Yniss laughed. “Because I so often disagreed with her?”

She took a sheepish drink of water.

“Don’t be embarrassed, it’s fine.” She sighed. “Yes, Aelenwe and I disagreed.” She tilted her chin sardonically. “Fundamentally. As you know, Aelenwe never thought I should be in the order, never be a priestess—”

Odessa's eyes shot up. "She was wrong."

"Yes," she raised an eyebrow. "She was. But to mourn isn't necessarily to miss. It is a life passed. She was High Priestess, and as her witness, you were there for her last moments of life as well as that first instance of death. To be a witness doesn't mean you're obligated to emulate how she was in life. Aelesh Tor is a shifting place. We hang on the precipice of all possible futures, and given that weight the only thing to fear, to avoid, is inaction. For what reason do the vision pools have value if not to grant us, heavy responsibility though it is, the duty to exact change where we see opportunities to do so."

So you're saying," said Odessa. "That we aren't obligated to follow in the footsteps of past priestesses, but rather, to continue effecting change because we have the ability to do so?"

There was something in Yniss's expression that Odessa couldn't place, but she hoped that it was a good sign. "Yes. You've read Olinox?" Odessa shook her head. She was a terrible study. "Well if you had, you'd know that she wrote extensively on this subject, and that her model of deliberate action has been used by many High Priestesses. It is not wrong to wish the world and the order to be better than it is. We must."

Yes. This. Odessa spoke up again. "The vote takes place in just a few days, do you know who has submitted their names?"

That look again, Odessa couldn't read it. "Aelessi and Talowell, I don't know yet if any others have, but submissions close tonight."

She was losing a grip on the conversation. She was too tired and anxious to carry on without making some mistake or another. "I will have to read Olinox, I would very much like to see a world better than our own." She smiled, bowing her head. "I've troubled you for too long, but you have put my heart at ease. Thank you, Lady Yniss."

Yniss nodded. “You’re always welcome. I’ll see you in a few days, I’m sure.”

Odessa was seen out of Yniss’s chambers, a curious gaze following her as she left. She followed the stares back down to the chapel and the prayer gardens where the golden afternoon sun was fading to red as it reached the lip of the canyon. It was all she could do. She had done everything she could.

That night, when the moon hung, half a face above the Horn, submissions for the High Priesthood closed.

Aelessi, Talowell, Hachobell, Losmelon, and Yniss cast their names as candidates for High Priestess.

The college would vote in three days.



*I keep her hair in a locket, my boy.  
The hair of the woman you killed.  
So remember me, boy,  
You owe me this nine.*

## Thirteen

**I**t wasn't quiet. As Elma and Beni walked through the forest the air hummed like a plucked chord with the chatter of insects. Though it was too late in the afternoon for songbirds, a magpie could be heard squawking in the treetops, arguing with the red-tailed squirrels. Elma and Helben laughed, and then laughed at their own laughter, which only made Elma descend into a fit of hiccupping snorts.

Beni shushed her, still wheezing into their hand while holding up an emphatic finger on the other, signaling their friend to shut up. "You're being way too loud. I thought this was a stealth mission."

Elma kept hiccupping. "I—*hic*, can't help it. Whenever I laugh this much—*hic*, I always get the hiccups."

"Doesn't that come from bad posture?"

"What? *hic* I have honestly never—*hic* heard that in my life."

"Okay, okay." They sat down. "Just stop talking so they go away."

"Kay." Elma sat as well, *hic*-ing quietly while Beni grinned at her out of the corner of their eye.

“Have you tried drinking milk from a cup upside down? That usually works.”

“Shut up,” she whispered. “They won’t go away if I keep talk—*hic* dammit!”

Beni chuckled, leaning back on their hands, watching the forest. “Hey, how close are we getting to the castle anyway?”

Elma gestured silently with a hand, indicating that they were getting close.

She hated hiccups. Elma tried to count her breaths; she usually found the more she thought about hiccupping, the more stubborn they were to get rid of. She always either had to drink water very slowly or just get distracted. Mag always tried to scare her when she got them; she said that, if you were spooked, the hiccups would run away. While that led to many occasions of Mag sneaking up behind her little sister to clap her hands or pinch her waist, it had never gotten rid of them. She was glad Beni didn’t seem like the kind of person to try to scare people because she had never once liked it. She grinned. “They’re gone! I think. Just need to be careful for a bit so *don’t* make me laugh.”

Beni raised their eyebrows. “I can’t help it if I’m incredibly hilarious. It comes from a long line of charming waggoneers and barkeeps; we have to be funny otherwise no one will tip us.”

“Well stop anyway.”

“Sure thing,” they said.

As Elma stood, patting her copper colored skirts free of damp mulchy earth she noticed Beni rummaging around the forest floor. “Did you drop something?”

“Nah. Just getting this.” They lifted a handful of pine needles to show Elma and began working them into knots.

“What’s that for?”

“Concealment spell. Thought it’d be handy as we get closer to the castle.”

“Well, it won’t be too long. We need to get up this next ridge and then we’ll be getting close.”

They continued on quietly, wandering barefoot towards the castle. Elma had never come at it from this direction. But she knew if she followed the small tributary she liked to bathe in, it eventually would lead up to Castle Groan’s western grounds, and from there she was sure they could find some kind of untended servant’s door. The castle wasn’t walled. But really, it didn’t need to be. By occupying the high ground above Harthshore, Harth Peak and the Black Mountains provided enough defense without fortifications, not to mention most people weren’t keen on sneaking into a castle full of thieves anyway. She grinned, thankfully Elma wasn’t one of them. Despite being the heart of the Thieving District, Harthshore was a strangely trusting place. Doors were seldom locked at night, and glass in the windows was for keeping raccoons and cold out rather than other folk. Children in the Thieving Guild often played as trying to get as close to Castle Groan as possible, and a small, gleeful part of her felt a rising tense of triumph at the possibility of making all the way inside.

Elma sighed. It seemed her hiccups were gone for good and she could trust herself to speak again. “One time, I had them for an hour,” she said.

“That’s nothing. One time Berrith had them for a day.”

“No!”

Beni nodded. “We thought it was gonna kill him.”

The tributary, fondly known as the Bathwater, continued up around the wooded outskirts of Harthshore, and up a high sloping ridge that stood above the Horn and the lower woodlands. The Horn never actually cut through Harthshore town proper, the valley it cut out was too steep

and sloping for a village to sit on, but the Bathwater flowed through the town, offering its water to Harthshore for washing, cooking and bathing. Their hike through the woods took them on a steeply pitching uphill trek. Following the stream the whole way, they passed budding groves of wild foxglove and patches of sweet mint.

Finally they could see Castle Groan. They had climbed the last really steep hill that Elma remembered and they were back in an area she recognized. The slope of the hill had flattened into a kind of clearing where the trees didn't grow so close together, and sunlight created a dappling patchwork of light and shadow on the ground. They still weren't exactly close to the castle. But she could see its south-western wall of gray stone climbing up tall past the treetops. There didn't seem to be much of a courtyard up ahead, and she wondered if they were by the stables or some unused area of the grounds. Either way the land around them was unkempt and wild. They would be able to reach the castle's wall soon enough though and so they continued on. All the while, a veil of hash smoke clung to the air, drifting in slow, meandering eddies.

Masked by their talk and their footsteps, Elma wasn't sure how long the drums had been pounding before she heard them, but when she did she stopped still. "What's that?"

Beni stopped too, coming up very still.

It wasn't the hissing snap of a snare drum, or quick and tumbling like the drums on festival days, or hollow and warm like those the witches played on Watchfire Hill. It was a near and constant drone that swelled with each pounding clap. Faster than a heartbeat, it tapped in a ceaseless, constant rhythm that continued before another, faster tempo overlaid it. It spoke of running deer and scattered ash, the popping flame from the burial barge and the keen of a northern wind.

Elma reached for Beni's hand. "We need to go." She began to tug on them, needing to leave, needing to get away, needing to run from the smoke and the drumming, and that high, lilting spell-chant that had begun in the trees, but when she pulled she found Beni wouldn't budge. "We need to go," she insisted, pulling again.

But then her eyes followed Beni's, and she knew what had kept them still.

Through enchantment or concealment, Elma and Beni had walked near into a spell circle. While still on the outskirts, they were hidden, blessedly, miraculously. The figure drumming out the spell-chant hadn't seen them. It seemed impossible, and then, in a numbing flood of relief, Elma remembering Beni casting the concealment charm on them. Whatever magic this was, it hadn't pierced Beni's charm. *At least not yet*, Elma reminded herself and tugged on Beni's hand again. They shook their head, gesturing something that seemed to signal caution. She nodded. She had no doubt that whoever was casting would be capable of piercing the enchantment if he became at all aware of them. However they were going to escape, it had to be done carefully. But Elma was frozen in the horror of the magic before her. This wasn't witchcraft of any god near or far.

Rabbit's feet and antlers bound with twine and branches created a sort of gate before the spell circle, while the circle itself was drawn from feathers, and a white powder that she somehow knew to be bone dust. Witchcraft claimed the bones and antlers of fallen beasts, blood and sometimes hair, but death itself was never what fueled the magic. When Elma's eyes darted between the staring, empty eyes of a boar's head and the braided, twisting entrails of what creatures she didn't know, all hanging from the boughs of the surrounding trees, it took all that was in her to resist screaming.

This was occultism.

Different from sorcery, or alchemy, or witchcraft, it drew upon death and marrow. *The strange, and the unseemly. It's magic unlike anything you've dreamed of Elma, it's the raw and naked knowledge of the world. Old and empty like nothing else save ourselves.*

She started. Whose words had those been? She couldn't think now. Dozens of creatures lay slaughtered before her. Remnants of different bodies lay about the forest while heads and feet dangled from the trees.

Then she clutched her nose. How hadn't she noticed the smell before? Blood and urine and death stench hung in the air, and all she could think about was the boar's face, frightened, not stupid, just scared, and now there was only so much blood and hair. She was going to throw up she was going to she was going she was she—Beni gripped her hand tightly and her eyes shot up, wide with tears, to meet theirs. They squeezed her hand again and cocked their head back the way they had come. Elma started to follow, but, once more, she glanced at the spell circle and froze. It was a spell circle. He was casting. He was casting a spell, and for what?

Who or what was on the other end of this magic?

“No,” she whispered frantically. She pulled away from Beni's hand, not daring to think; she dropped her shoes and ran, full force, towards the spell circle.

The man was still dancing, still drumming, still singing. Not only occultism, but many forms of magic often involved a three-fold casting for large spells, using voice, dance, and material elements and objects such as instruments or bones. The man casting was a hulking figure with pale, pale skin and greasy dark hair that hung long and lank down his bare back. He was naked and incredibly fat, smeared with oil or grease. But he was graceful. If Elma hadn't been so seized with fear, his dancing may have been beautiful, the lines he formed as he moved lovely, were he not surrounded with such profound carnage.

She was running. Nearly at the spell circle, nearly close enough to touch it, nearly—she kicked. Her foot smeared the circle's line, breaking the link between the land and the magic.

The instant it broke, the drumming ceased completely. He spun to face her, and, suddenly as her own eyes met his, pale blue and bloodshot, she knew he could see her, and she knew she was going to die. She screamed, and the sound was such a relief that when she saw Beni beside her, breaking another edge of the circle, her confidence bolstered.

*Breaking the circle isn't going to be enough.* She began grabbing items at random. Clay pots, small cauldrons, dishes of herbs and other things she tore her eyes from, vials of liquids, anything in her reach she took up and threw to the ground and against stones, watching glass and clay shatter. It all happened in an instant.

She reached out to grab something else, but her hand only found air. There was nothing else in reach. Then, in a moment of terrible stillness, his eyes locked with hers again. His blue eyes widened, and with an expression she did not understand, he nodded. To himself or to her, she couldn't tell. But then, slow, deliberate, he began to dance, until, with a step, he was fast, and moving towards her. A guttural, low rumble began to rise from his throat and Elma knew it was the beginnings of a hex.

“RUN!” From somewhere Beni screamed, and then Elma was running.

Bare feet tearing against rocks and brambles, skirts catching against twigs, her heart thrummed in her throat. She ran. Her breath was coming as shallow gulps for air. They still weren't at the castle walls but they had to get there. She was choking—she couldn't breathe, but she had to run. She turned up the last, sloping hill towards the castle. All she could do was run. The castle walls were ahead of them. Was that a door she could see? But they weren't going to

make it. He was too fast—too powerful, and the forming hex hung in the air liked a hanged man kicking.

She wasn't cut out for this. She hadn't even been able to join the coven. Forget the coven. She couldn't even tend goats without getting scolded. This wasn't for her. This was magic, and he was strong and terrible and was going to kill them both. The hum of the hex rang throughout the forest; its sound filled the entire wood, reverberating off the stones and the pines and the sky itself, but then, he stopped.

Elma almost froze in her tracks, so startled by the sudden silence, but Beni was still running, and pulled her along behind them. She turned her head, watching the occultist, naked and still, simply standing in the forest behind them. He rubbed his hands down his chest then let them flap to his sides. Then he turned. He walked away, and looking forward again, Elma kept running.

They were so close now to the walls. They were nearly there. If Elma could just reach that door. She reached out her hand wildly waiting, grasping for the moment when her fingers would touch wood. The chanting continued behind her. Her fingers were so close now, she could nearly—there!

Without pausing, she barreled into the door lifting the latch in the same instant she reach the door, and it stuck. She jiggled the latch.

“Come on!” She cried.

Beni was beside her. “Hurry!” they called.

She rattled the latch again, pushing and pounding on the door—willing it to open. It was stuck. She couldn't get it to unlock. She turned her head over her shoulder, frantic. The

occultist was just paces away. She could see the sweat traveling down his stomach. She slammed her shoulder into the door again. Nothing. She pushed gain.

“Pull, Elma! Fucking pull it!” Beni screamed.

Elma eyes widened and she pulled. The door swung open and they both stumbled through and slammed it shut behind them. They fumbled frantically for something to bar the door with. Not finding anything, Beni seized a broom and snapped its pole against their leg, muttering a charm of breaking as they did so. The wood splintered and they barred the door, leaning against it, heaving heavy, gasping breaths. For a moment, Elma couldn't think why her face was wet, then she realized it was streaked with tears. She was shaking, and she began rubbing her arms while pacing tight circles around the room. It was a kitchen. A pot sat simmering on the stovetop, and loaves of bread were cooling on trays. It was a bright, airy room, with herbs and spices hanging from the rafters and cheeses sitting about, wrapped in yellow wax. Then she laughed and Beni looked at her like she was a thousand shades of madness.

“Are you okay?” They asked, concern sounding true in their voice.

Elma wiped her face dry and nodded. “How can I not be? Don't you see?”

“Clearly I don't.”

“We did it!”

“Did what? Almost died?”

Elma shook her head, jumping up and down a little. She couldn't even feel the cuts in her feet, she felt amazing. Definitely needed to do things like this more often. “The size of that spell, what did you think of it?”

They shrugged. “Huge. I don't think many spells would call for deaths in those kinds of numbers. But then again, they were all animals, no humans I think, so not the biggest either.”

She felt a pit form in her stomach but spoke past it. “Exactly,” she said. “It was *big*. And even I know what big spells need, no matter what kind of magic it is. Exact times of day, exact season, right constellations, right phase of the moon, right weather, right everything. That means...” she trailed off looking at Beni, excited.

Beni perked up. “You’re saying that we didn’t just stop this spell for this instant, that it’s probably something he won’t be able to repeat for a little while at least. But,” they deflated a little “he can probably just put together a different spell anytime.”

“Not necessarily,” she said. “That kind of preparation, it’ll nearly certainly be a little bit, a few days at the very least. All I’m saying is we delayed him, at least for now. We need to get back to Witch Mother and tell her what we saw, give her time to do something.”

“But we can’t just turn right around and go back out there. If he’s still out there, he’ll for sure kill us if he sees us.”

Elma grinned, but still felt something frantic and sick in her stomach. Her hands were shaking and she willed them to be still. She reached out for a loaf of bread and taking a large bite out, chewing. Who had put the food here anyways? Everyone said the castle was abandoned, no one was even sure the king was still here, but folk in the village said that the lord Habrak would come to town on occasion to bread or apples or soap, but never said who for. Elma tried to settle her breathing once again. She put the bread down, feeling she was going to be sick. “So we kill a little time here while we wait. We *did* want to explore after all.”

Beni looked briefly horrified but puffed out an exhale and said, “I don’t think that’s such a good idea. *Clearly* someone is living here,” they said emphatically, waving to the simmering pot of soup to prove their point.

Somehow, Elma didn't mind this. They couldn't go back out into the woods just yet in case the man was still nearby, but she thought she'd even take a ghosts company right now. Rationally, she knew she didn't want anyone to find them, to scold them and send them home with chores as was always done to wandering children who got caught sneaking around. But another part of her, the part of her that felt she needed to scream and cry and laugh all at once, wanted to see someone, anyone, that could tell her she'd be safe. That everything wasn't wrong, that somehow, the world could return to what it was before this.

Castle Groan was a tired place. The castle stirred as if coming out of a long slumber, and walking through its wide and empty corridors was like passing through the mouth of a yawning beast. Even with Beni's concealment charm, the pair found themselves being strangely quiet as they explored. Elma didn't think she had ever been somewhere so gloomy before. It was very empty. The charm protected them from passing eyes, only eye contact, touch, or loud sound could break the spell, as it had with the occultist in the wood. They had been prepared to scurry past bustling servants, averting their gazes from kinsmen and courtiers, but there was no one. It was empty, and when they heard a sound, it would be nothing but a mouse or pecking bird.

Even still, they didn't talk much as they explored. The kitchens, far grander than the small cookery they had entered through, opened to a great hall decked with tables carved of yew wood spreading over a room stripped of the cheer use brought a place. There was little disarray. The tables sat straight, the benches pushed in, and no mess of food cluttered the room. But tapestries, that Elma imaged would once have looked warm and splendid lit by firelight against a backdrop of drink and conversation were dusty and moth-eaten. A thick layer of dust and pollen

carpeted the floor and the room, protected with glass windows to keep it warm in the winter, was musty, smelling of mildew and damp wood and water.

The kitchen had also opened to servant passages that lead to different rooms around the castle so food might be carried directly and quickly while servants stayed unseen. A smaller dining room led off of the kitchen where serving folk, guards, and table workers could dine without fuss at odd hours. Though dim and damp and ill-used, Elma couldn't escape the sense that this place must once have been warm.

Before Mag had married that glassmaker of hers and moved off to the Shipwrights District where there was plenty of sand and business for her new husband's craft, she had spoken of coming to find work here. Mag had never said what she'd do here; she wasn't the sort for specific plans. She made dreams and ideas that curled and coiled in her mind until they formed into impulses. But, whatever she might have done, Elma had a sense she would have liked it. Mag liked things that were bright and clever, and here among thieves and cook fires, she might have found something that would have let her be brave. Elma had not objected to her sister marrying. How could she have? Elma was seven years younger, and Mag seemed happy with her handsome, kind new suitor. But girls, women like Mag, wasted away when they weren't allowed to be hard—when they were given no chance to turn their wills to steel and sharpen themselves against the world to see what fires would temper them. She would come back someday, of course. Elma knew this. *But what if I don't know her when she is back? What if she's serious and un-laughing and grown in all the way that would mean I'd lost her?*

But those thoughts soon left her as they followed a servant's hall up to varied living quarters on the second floor. By the time they had found the quarters that the attendants of the keep must once have lived in, she was no longer surprised that the rooms were unoccupied, with

no signs of use. What did surprise her was that most rooms were still furnished, not simply with furniture on the floors or books on the walls, but personal things too. Earrings and rings lay atop dresser tops, letters and ink sat out on desks, shoes sat tumbled over at the foot of beds.

Everyone had left. That much was clear, but that, Elma and everyone else already knew. No one had come in or out of Castle Groan save for the grim Lord Habrak, and even he only rarely.

While there wasn't enough in the rooms to appear truly lived in, there was too much still to seem like those who left had planned to be gone forever, or even long. It felt more like all the court had simply meant to be gone for a day, a week, a month, then forgot to return, chased away by whatever specter held the lonely castle. They had all meant to come back, except, no one had.

Elma was sorting through a stack of notes she and Beni had found in one of the bedrooms. She looked at each date, the shape of the signets on the seals, and the round, crooked bent of the scrawl, delineating a mundane correspondence between a woman and her niece.

"I'm tired of this," Beni said, their voice breaking the fragile silence, making Elma start.

"Me too, we can go to the next room." She set the letter down, too bored to even really wonder what that woman was up to now or where she had gone. They were all just people. There was no scandal here, no mystery or intrigue as to why the castle was empty. Their king had given up on doing his duty to his guild, and eventually his vassals trailed off, tired of serving a vain, despondent king.

"Not tired of this room, tired of walking around this place. It's so empty, and I feel like someone's just gonna pop out of nowhere any instant. And I'm hungry," they said as an afterthought, but, as Elma's stomach grumbled in sympathy, it felt like the heart of the issue.

"Yeah, I understand. We should be able to head home now."

Beni smiled at her, roguish as a badger. “Think we can grab some of what was down in the kitchen?”

They meandered back down through the servant’s hall into the side kitchen they had entered through. The main kitchen split off from this room, opening into a wide space with stone floors and endless hearths and ovens. The room they had entered through was cozy, and clearly the only part of the kitchens being used. Elma had suggested to Beni that they cast a protective charm over the castle in case the occultist was about, but Beni had scoffed at this, saying they couldn’t cast a “protective charm” over both of them, let alone an entire building, so they went back to trusting that the man was done with his spell-work for the day.

In the kitchen, they found the pot of soup still warm and covered, but no longer simmering. Elma frowned. So someone had been here. She looked around covertly, half expecting to the occultist standing there with a ladle and a bowl ready cook them in with the carrots. But there was no one, and though sick and shaky she relaxed some. No harm in a little snack to calm the nerves. A loaf of bread had also been sliced, and a cheese sat, unwrapped with a knife laying on a board beside it. Beni also scavenged for some summer fruits and triumphantly produced three peaches that they cut and divided between themselves. Beni hoisted himself onto a counter where they ladled some soup into a dish to dip their bread. They chewed happily, and Elma grabbed another bowl to do the same, and ate leaning against a counter.

They talked, but only quietly, and nibbled at anything they found. On the one hand, this could have gone better, the version where they weren’t chased through the woods by an incredibly fast naked man was definitely better, but Beni’s charm had done them wonders, and Elma was feeling satisfied and at ease as she finished her lunch. Thus, it came as a great surprise

when, as she was leaning over to dip her bread in a pot of butter, a hand clamped down on her shoulder.

Elma screamed and Beni dropped their loaf of bread into their lap. Elma swiveled around, eyes closed, to punch her assailant, but when her fist contacted skin, it was holding her fist, blocking her punch in a firm grip. She carefully opened her eyes then, still preparing to throw another punch then try for the door. Peeling her eyes open, she was ready to see the fat occultist, chest heaving and oil in his hair, dripping down into his pale eyes, but it was nothing of the sort.

A pale man did hold her flung out fist, but it wasn't the pale man she had been expecting. His skin was fish-belly white, and his hair was the color of bone dust. She would have thought he was a dead man standing if not for his pink lips, and an angered heat crawling across his cheeks. He dropped Elma's fist and she staggered back four paces.

It was Lord Habrak. She had never seen him this close before; it had always only been from a distance at parties and public events. He had a narrow rodent's face, and his eyes, if not beautiful, were intense. Despite the king having been unseen for a full year, he still wore the king's colors of black and deep pine. He wore his doublet without sleeves, its green brocade twining with black under a full-sleeved black sayon draping above his forearms and falling mid-thigh. He still held a riding crop and Elma became absurdly worried he would smack her with it. He didn't. Instead, he ran his eyes across the room, glancing between Beni, bread in their lap and soup stains on their tunic, and Elma, who had just knocked over the jug of butter she had been reaching for. Nervously, and maintaining eye contact, she took another bite of bread, chewing slowly.

His eye twitched. He raised a long eyebrow in a delicate arch, then let his lips crack into something between a smile and a grimace. "This is surprising."

Elma nodded, as if agreeing. She wasn't sure what else to do. The cards were in his hands, really. He could cut off their thumbs or brand them as thieves, he could lock them up in some foul dungeon, or, being so impressed with their daring and wit, recruit them as full-fledged guild-thieves, embracing them into the court to carry out heists against neighboring kingdoms grown fat and docile in their wealth, just waiting for—

“Did you hear me, girl?”

“Wha?”

“I said, how did you two get in here?”

Beni spoke up. “Kitchen door, Sir, it was unlocked.”

Lord Habrak clicked his tongue, turning away from Beni, and then looked back to them again. “I recognize you,” he said to Elma, cocking his chin in her direction, but kept his eyes on Beni. “You're the goat girl from Baker's Hill. But you, where are you from?”

Beni gulped, and sat up a little straighter, still perched on the countertop. “Family are caravaners, Sir, my brother, Berrith, is the barkeep down at the Mimic, I'm his sibling, Helben.”

“We were just leaving, Lord Habrak,” Elma said. “We can be on our way now, if you like.”

He snorted, looking utterly taken aback. “Why, thank you. I suppose if you're offering, you can head out.” Only Beni had the sense to stay put, but Elma began scurrying for the door before a pinched ear held her back. She squeaked and glared up at Lord Habrak. “Let go!”

He did, and Elma stayed put. “What are you doing here?”

“We thought we could get in,” Elma said, rubbing her ear. “Just a little joke, My Lord.”

“Not to mention the big occultist chasing us through the woods,” Beni reminded, and Elma nodded furiously.

“Oh, yes. And that, that’s the main reason we’re in here. For our safety. Seeking shelter. Your shelter!” Elma couldn’t be sure, but there was something in Lord Habrak’s eyes making it seem like he was ready for death. Elma smiled meekly. And then he looked alert.

“An occultist?” he said.

“Doing a ritual, Sir,” said Beni. “We came across him in the forest in the middle of a spell circle. We disrupted his casting, but then got chased up here. We’re lucky the door wasn’t locked, else we might be dead now.”

“Is he out there still?” he said.

Beni shook their head. “We don’t know. We’ve only been here about an hour.”

“Awful lot of food to go through in one hour.”

Elma laughed, they had only been at the food for a quarter hour or so. Despite herself, she was a little afraid. Lord Habrak was the king’s left hand. A northerner who carried out the worst of his king’s bidding, who had been at his ear before King West had even ascended the throne twelve years ago.

“This was supposed to be the king’s lunch.”

“Shabby fare for a king.” It was out of Elma’s mouth before she could stop herself. She covered her mouth immediately, but Lord Habrak didn’t react, save for pinching the bridge of his nose.

“And in return for eating his meal, you’re going to clean this place up,” he said, gesturing around the kitchen. “Get more soup and bread cooking and then be out of here to inform the Witch Mother of what you saw before I can change my mind.” Elma opened her mouth to reply but he lifted a silencing finger. “And if I find anything from any of the rooms missing,” he held

Elma's eyes, "remember I know where you live, girl. From what I know of your mother, this wouldn't please her."

At this, Elma was truly frightened. "Please don't tell her, Lord Habrak, free bread and goat milk for a year if you don't tell her!"

"Enough. Kitchen. Clean. Get out. That's all."

"What about the occultist?" she asked.

"What? Afraid to walk home through the woods?"

"With him out there, yes."

He sighed. "I'll take you home when you're done."

But Beni shook their head. "No offense, sir. But Elma and I are both witches." They smiled encouragingly at Elma. "Honestly I think we'd be protecting you."

Lord Habrak laughed. "Whatever you will," and, taking off his sayon, he stationed himself at one of the counters and began silently peeling potatoes into a large brass bowl. She watched for a moment, astonished, as his long fingers worked the peeling knife deftly, turning the potato in his hands until the peel came off in one, long twirling tendril. Elma might avoid scolding for a week if she could peel and chop half as well as this strange lord could. As the three worked on in quiet, Elma almost found herself asking, but she didn't. Not because he was a lord and she was, as he had put it, a goat girl, but rather because something strange and hushed still seemed to hang over the day.

The kitchen smelled of rosemary and compost, of baking bread and dust, and yet to Elma something felt very different. Growing up, magic had always been something of moonshine and firelight, of the warmth of the hearth and the bitter of the healing draught. It had been dance. Rushing, reeling, racing—light against the moor grasses of Watchfire Hill. The bone and

malachite necklace her mother gave her. Songs for the watching gods—their eyes the burning starlight that hung in the nighttime sky. It had never been what she saw today. It had never stank of so much fear and death. As she wiped butter from the counter from the cup she had spilled, a nervous, fluttering part of Elma still knew that she wanted to be a witch.

Of course she had always wanted that, never really stopped wanting that. But her heart had played with other ideas, of thieving or farming, of marrying a fine merchant of her own, but in those pounding woods, something had changed. She had met magic, had met someone who didn't use magic but was *of* it. And though it wasn't the magic she wanted, wasn't a kind of casting she would ever dare touch, she knew now how easy it would be to become a witch that wiled away her time selling potions and charms, scraping spells from the edges of her craft in return for coin. Selling her magic would be simple. She could open shop in some foreign district and tell fortunes and enchant flowers to never wilt for beaux to give their girls.

Or she could learn magic. Really learn it. Really become a witch, and not for Hascha, not so she would look at her, but so Elma could understand something of the look in that occultist's eyes, so she could learn something of what it meant not simply to use magic but to know it. And though she didn't know how to get that, as she pulled brown bread from the oven, heat curling sweat down her brow, she knew she wanted it.

When they left Castle Groan, the day was beginning to edge towards evening. The woods were quiet, free from the drumming and the chanting of the spell circle, but other sounds had returned of the birds and beasts of the forest, readying themselves for night. The resolve she had come across in the Thief King's kitchen was already wavering somewhat as the pair picked themselves through brambles and bushes, trying to rush back into town before nightfall. *I want*

*to become a witch, I really do, she thought. But I don't want to leave Mama like Mag did, and I have friends here, I have Hascha and Witch Mother, and now Beni. Maybe Witch Mother would teach her anyway? Even if she wasn't part of the coven. And she could always learn some enchanting from books on her own while peddling some other trade, helping with the farm and the bakery...she tripped suddenly but caught her balance before touching the ground.*

She cursed, patting her skirts out, and kicking the offending tuft of dirt.

“Are you okay?” asked Beni. They had paused a little up ahead. “You’ve been really quiet since we left.”

“Yeah,” she whined. “Just been thinking.”

“Bout what?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. How far back anyways? I’m sick of walking and I’m hungry again and I keep thinking all those shadows are ready to start crawling.”

Beni laughed but only shrugged.

Suddenly she felt very guilty; what had she been doing? *Why did I drag Beni along into this? Why can't I have one sensible thought and follow it instead of always saying something stupid or doing something even stupider?* Had she really thought sneaking into Castle Groan would be a good idea? Beni must be sick of her by now. The thought sent a stinging prickle into the back of her eyes. “Listen, Beni, I really am sorry about this I—”

“Hush.”

“What? No I just really—”

“No, shh!”

Elma stopped, suddenly gripped by the thought of another spell circle or the occultist returning, but then she heard it. A low, murmuring whine, piteous and crying. At the same time,

they began peering around the forest. She didn't like this one bit, they weren't far past where the spell circle had been, and that sick, dying scent still hung in the air. Sound illusions were simple; this could easily be a trap. A foolishly simple one to lure—"There!" She saw it and rushed forward with Beni on her tail.

Hidden in the bracken, a splintering cage held a small and shaking dog. It was a small hound, its coat a patchwork of browns and greys, it sat there nervously, all clumsy limbs and muzzy nose, trembling in the bushes.

Beni called out a worried, cooing noise as they came over and began gently maneuvering the cage out of the bushes. They paused. "Dammit."

"What is it?" Elma said, snapping branches around the cage to free it while the dog inside whimpered more.

Beni pointed to a pair of delicate carvings on the bars of the cage. "Hex runes. If the cage is opened the runes unlock and cast themselves."

"What do we do?"

"Hang on," they said. Beni reached to their belt, pulling out a delicate blade with a carved rosewood hilt. Elma had never noticed it before. Beni drew a pinprick of blood from the tip of a finger and whispered something as they added two additional lines to each hex rune.

"There," they said. "That changes the rune to unlock it."

Elma nodded and together they pried open the roof of the cage and, carefully reaching in, she scooped the ratty dog up into her chest. Up close she could see it was an old dog, thin with rough fur and wobbly legs. It was shaking still, and immediately went to nip her wrist. Its teeth were pin sharp, and she yelped, more from surprise than pain, and the pup, startled, let go to squirm in her arms. Even with sharp teeth, it couldn't bite very hard, and Elma cooed at it while

Beni gently ran their hands along its coat, checking for scrapes and injuries. “Do you think she’s okay?” she asked, deciding the pup was a girl.

“I think so?” They scrunched their lips, thinking. “A little hard to tell. Can we bring her to Witch Mother?”

“Good idea,” she said, lifting one of the hound’s big paws to squish her toes. Her front right paw had a white sock running up to its elbow matched only by a patch of white on its belly where the rest of it was a rusty brown and grey.

They took turns carrying the dog, never daring to let her walk on her own through the darkening woods for fear of her running off.

“Do you think he was going to do something to her?” Elma asked, even if she knew the answer. The bodies of different beasts had scattered the circle. The dog was likely just one the occultist hadn’t gotten to yet.

“Probably,” Beni said, understanding that Elma had more been trying to fill the silence than to really ask. “That could be why he turned back and left. He might have wanted to hide Bucket in case he could come back for her to use later.”

They had named the old dog Bucket. Elma was sure a world-collapsing dispute was on the horizon as to who would keep the dog, but for now they were holding off on that, as Witch Mother would need to tend to her first, regardless of who would keep her. They had decided to come up with a name together to hold off on figuring out who would take her home. Elma pouted. *Not that Mama would let me keep her after all the chores I’ve dodged lately.* She could hear her voice already. *“You have thirty goats you’ve been neglecting this last week, what makes you think you could be handle a hound?”* She would hold off on thinking about that too.

Beni was holding Bucket when they finally made it back to Elma's bathing spot. They passed it, going back up the hill, and stole past Elma's home and into town.

Harthshore was a glow of lanterns and storefronts in the evening, with moths and fireflies flitting across a patchwork of shadow and firelight. Witch Mother's home was located just west of the town's center, overlooking the lower river valley created by the passing of the Horn. It was a humble home of river stone and pine wood, but supposedly every coven leader had lived in that little stone house on the edge of town since Harthshore's founding, long before the guilds had become their own independent kingdoms during the Guild Kingdom Wars. Elma honestly didn't know much about it, but it was said that Harthshore and its first Thief King had played a pivotal role in overthrowing the Old Empire. That's why, despite being a small kingdom with no standing militia, other guilds never interfered with Harthshore's activities; that, and the witches. From what Elma understood, the Harthshore coven, that she had failed miserably to enter, had quite the reputation abroad.

Only two things protected Harthshore from the guild giants of the continent: its witches and its reputation. If it lost either, it couldn't stand under the pressure of districts like the Mercenary's and Merchant's guilds. Even the Mining Guild had proven a danger to Harthshore in the past and had only backed down from a show of force from the witches. Witches that Elma would never call her sisters, serving the Horned Mother who would never call her daughter.

The door to Witch Mother's house opened before Elma had been able to knock.

"Hurry, come in." She folded them into the house, hound and all, and Elma relaxed into the familiar scents of the old woman's home. It was cool and bright despite the summer heat outside, and a fire crackled in the hearth. Fresh herbs were scattered across the floor, filling the house with their sweet, earthy aromas. The room had sparse furnishings. As a child, Elma had

heard her fondly explain that witches would always want for little with the whole world outside always there to care for them, so most of the items she spotted were a part of Witch Mother's craft. Crystals, herbs, old bones and stones covered the surfaces of the house, and Elma was struck again by how different this magic was from what she had seen that very afternoon.

Seeing the dog, Witch Mother cleared a space on a counter, covering it with a soft wool cloth and let Beni sit her down there. Bucket was nervous still and shaking, and as soon as she was sat down she soiled the cloth, panting. Not missing a heartbeat, Witch Mother comforted the nervous dog, exchanged the cloth for a dry one, and whispering little prayers of comfort in her rattling voice, she began moving her hands over the her, checking here and there for injury. She laid her hands on Bucket's ribs, noting the rhythm of her breath and the pace of her heartbeat before checking her tongue and teeth, eliciting a rumbling little growl from the little dog. While she worked, no one spoke. It was always like this with Witch Mother. If she was working, she was working, and no part of her was spared for conversation or attending to anything but her current task. Eventually though, she fetched a dish of water and some watery scraps of food for the dog, and turned to Elma and Beni while Bucket lapped from her dishes.

"I knew I sensed something foul from the northern woods today, but why that same foulness hangs about the pair of you and this dog I can't imagine. Tell me."

And so they did. They told her of the woods on Harth Peak, of the spell circle and what creatures had died for its casting. They told her what materials they recognized, what sigils they could read, the height of the sun and the scent of the air, anything they could think of that could inform Witch Mother of what kind of spell the occultist had tried to cast. Last, they described the hex's caster, the naked occultist with oils in his hair. When they finished speaking, Witch Mother sat quietly with Bucket in her lap. She stroked the dog, who now slept, content and

breathing easy. Then, settling on what she would say, she looked up to Elma and Beni. The evening had turned to night, and Elma couldn't help but think of her mother, waiting at home worrying about her unreliable daughter. She exhaled unhappily.

“Well,” Witch Mother began. “This news only affirms what I was feeling from the forest. There are deep magics that hold this world in place, and to tug on one thread makes room for others to unravel.”

Elma frowned, but Beni said what Elma for once held back from saying. “No disrespect, Mother, but that doesn't mean much. Do you know what spell that was? Or who that occultist is? Did he finish his casting or did we stop him?”

She chuckled and ran her fingers over Bucket's silky ears. “No, I suppose it doesn't. Don't worry, I'm not trying to be coy. But sometimes a knowing is more of a feeling, and feelings don't always get on well with the words you try to explain them with. No, I don't know what the spell was. Too much of occultism requires such sacrifices, and having no familiarity with the art I can't know for certain what he was attempting. A blight of sickness? A curse upon the castle? A beast summoning to wake the old powers and bring them to roaming our woods openly once again? I cannot say. Aspects of the spell you described could speak to all these things or none at all. That's the way with castings, especially old and great ones. But no, I don't think that casting was completed. I believe the living breath of our little friend here is proof enough of that.”

She snorted. “As to who he is, that much is clear. His name is Uum. He is an occultist as you have guessed, and he dwells deep within the caves of the Black Mountains, past Harth Peak and all things good and green kept by the witches of Harthshore and the woods beyond.” The firelight caught the copper of her jewelry as she leaned forward, gently setting the dog down

on pillows beside her chair. “But he is not what needs fearing, children. He may keep the old magics, but before the ancient, sleeping wills of this world, even he is young and small.

“We have charms to protect the town and he will wander as he always has, carrying his grudges and his wrath. But should he wake the wimble-rush, or that older voice that keeps it...” she leaned back in her chair and exhaled, resting her hands folded across her stomach. “I’d begin keeping iron in my pocket.”



*Seven days he sat idle. Seven nights he slept. Salt from the ocean's briny breeze had swept into his tower room and he could taste it on his lips whenever he licked them wet again. On the evening of that seventh night, he longed for the full and naked moon to fill the sky, for her to have come to him to keep him as her own. Instead, the sky was empty and the stars shone very cold. It was then that a voice spoke to him, quaking with the droning hum of cold and hungry death.*

## Fourteen

**T**hough they spoke in quiet voices, West could still hear the conversation taking place outside. Habrak likely didn't know that West was in the kitchen, that he could hear how they talked in the woods outside. But West had never been above eavesdropping. He was the motherfucking thief king. He could listen in on whoever he wanted, even if it was his closest friend and a vassal. Not that she was really a vassal anymore. Not that he really had any of those at all anymore. It was a woman he was speaking to, one by the name of Quick-Fingered Ran. A year ago, *a world ago*, he thought, Ran had been his third, only after Habrak. She was simultaneously brutal and incredibly kind and had never given West a notch of slack over anything.

She had led coup once. Not against him of course, but when she had been a hungry, penniless, wretch of the Banking District she had led an uprising against the nobility of the guild. It had failed and most of her compatriots met with the gallows for their efforts, but that wasn't so much of the point in West's eyes. They assassinated sixteen members of the gentry, they

dispersed the collective wealth of seven of those houses amongst the people, and the market had failed for twenty-three days. He couldn't even say they had completely recovered, the district was still poor, most of the people still hungry, but in those twenty-three days loans had been defaulted on, interest rates plummeted, and their vaults had been filled with coppermites, a vicious little monster that devoured metals, a move he thought was rather clever. There was something nearly poetic in the thought of vermin devouring the wealthys' coin. So naturally, when Ran had fled the Banking District for Harthshore to seek the king's asylum, West had granted it. But when he floundered a year ago, she was the first to have left.

It stung, more than he cared to admit, but it was nothing more than what Ran would have done had it have been another to disappoint her so profoundly. He stepped closer to the counter, where an open window above the sink let him hear what they were talking about and he took another quiet bite from his pear. He sounded angry, and at first that made West smile, he liked to think of Habrak defending him to Ran, until he listened closer and realized that wasn't what was going on.

“And you think I'm not angry also? Honestly you think so?” West's stomach clenched at the sound of Habrak's voice. “You think *I* don't have the greatest right to be angry? No, you let me finish.” She must have wanted to cut in. “But don't think for one fucking moment it's only him I'm angry with. What you did, how you *left*, is treason in most guilds and it is treason by hanging. I—I am the *only* one of this entire godsdamn court of cowards to have kept my oaths. I am the only one who stood by my word, I was the *only*—” he was nearly shouting but Ran cut him off.

“Listen here, cunt. If we’re going to talk oaths you better have something real smooth to say before I remind you that above all our oaths that sad bastard up in his tower had a vow, a fucking vow, to his throne and his people that he didn’t think about once before letting—”

“So you chose to make oath-breakers of us all rather than keep yours before—”

“I only broke mine when it was clear he wasn’t strong enough to keep his.”

What had West thought about her being kind? Ran was a shit.

“And yet you were the weaker one. He’s back, Ran. He’s ready to be king again, and I’m calling upon your vows, I’m calling upon your sworn fealty by the name of our king to return to court to steal from some rich sons of bitches, get revenge on the motherfucker that killed Mag, and get the fucking kingdom back!”

West shrunk in on himself. He was talking about Uum. Habrak had told him about the villagers who snuck in, who had seen him and it made him run cold. This was twice now Uum had wandered down this far from his cave, once for the chandler, and now again for whatever ritual the witches had caught him at. Habrak had wanted to do something, had wanted to go after him but West had stopped him. What were they going to do? Hunt down an occultist? They had crossed Uum once before and he knew where that had gotten him. It wasn’t worth it. Revenge wasn’t worth it. But somehow he knew Habrak wouldn’t let it drop. It was too easy of an out. If Uum was dead then they were free of what he had done to them. It was that simple for Habrak. Mag avenged, West fixed, the kingdom back.

When Ran replied he could almost physically feel the sneer in her voice. “Ratshit, Habrak. You’re a prick, he’s a prick, you don’t get to just decide when you want to be king and when you’re too sad to wear the fucking crown. He doesn’t get to do that, and if you think...” Her voice trailed off as West left the kitchen. He felt sick with how right Ran was. He felt sick

because he could imagine what he would have said had he been in her position. He would have said worse. He would have killed him. He *did* want to kill him but the sheer fucking effort of pulling that off was more than he had energy to do. He was tired. He was still godsdamned tired and would have pulled out his own teeth if it would make Habrak, and Haybell, and Ran and the ringing echo of Mag's voice all just leave him the fuck alone. If he could sleep, if he could just sleep and come back a decade later it could be fine, but now, now he just wanted to be alone.

“Good news.”

He jumped at the sound behind him, startled to see Habrak huffing a little and pink in the cheeks. Who had given him the right to be so damn good-looking? He'd give both his balls to be the only person who ever got to see Habrak angry. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and hoped he hadn't been crying. “What is it?”

“I happened to run into Ran,” liar. “She's still been living in Harthshore,” probably not. “And I just convinced her to come back to court.”

“What?” He wasn't sure if that had really been a question or just the only sound he could make.

“Yeah. We talked things over, and she agreed to come back. She knows where Ath and Tetheb and Giln are as well and she'll bring them with.” Habrak couldn't be lying about this. Not about this, he wouldn't be, surely.

“Also we have a badger in the cellar. So. I thought we should get it out before they get here.”

“We have a badger infestation?”

“What? No. I said we had *a* badger.”

West blinked. He felt like giggling and punching something all at the same time. Ran was coming back? After what he'd heard? She was bringing others? He would have to be king after all? Badgers?

“So there's only one.”

“One what?”

“One badger.”

“Well, no,” said Habrak. “I think she had a had a cub.”

West frowned. “Are you sure there's only two?”

He shrugged. “Well, there might be more like three, I definitely saw one cub but there could have been two others.”

“So there are *four* badgers?”

“Four or five, something like that.”

“Five!” He said, and did giggle. “So we do have a badger infestation.”

Habrak waved his hand imperiously, “They're all in one room, that's hardly an infestation.”

“We have a clan of badgers living in one of the cellars. Great. When was I going to find out?”

“I was thinking about now would be a good time.”

“How did they get in, anyway?” asked West.

“The wall crumbled and made an opening. You can see it from the window in Haybell's room.”

“So Haybell has been watching badgers stealing into my castle and never did anything to stop it?” West was kidding but he knew Habrak couldn't always tell. That made it better.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine,” he ran a hand through his hair. “Let’s take a look then.”

Haybell really did have a good view of the crumbling cellar wall from her window, and when he saw a fat, furry little creature waddle out of sight into the crumbling hole, he gave his theory about Haybell letting the badgers squat in the castle a little more credence.

“Oh my,” came her rough, musing voice. “Look at them go.”

West exhaled through his nose. “Are you even sure they’re only in the one cellar?”

“Of course I am. The door is closed. How would they get to other parts of the castle?”

“They could chew down the door.”

“They could not chew down the door, West. They’re badgers. They’re kept like dogs in the Lumber District. We’ll just smoke them out and close up the wall.”

He began running different scenarios through his head. Badgers overrunning the castle when he opened the cellar door to smoke them out, being overrun like a sugar lump swarmed by ants, a badger sitting on the thief throne, gnawing on their bones. He couldn’t have found a more ridiculous way to torment Habrak if he had planned it. He could bring this as far as he wanted. He could break him. “What if we used a washtub?”

Habrak only looking at him.

“We could catch them all under a washtub.”

“No. We’ll smoke them out. I know what I’m doing.”

He swallowed a grin. “If we smoke them out we won’t be sure if they’re really all gone. Someone should stand outside and make sure they all come out.”

“That’s a terrible idea. Do you want to be overrun by angry, fleeing badgers?”

“I could stand on top of a washtub.”

“Why?”

“So they won’t get me.”

“They aren’t going to *get* you, West. They’re badgers,” he was pinching his nose now. “We’re doing this my way. We’re smoking them out and then searching the room afterwards to see if any are left.”

“I’m king,” West pointed out reasonably.

“You’re an idiot.”

“With the mantle of rulership upon my shoulders.”

“You can stand on a washtub and watch the badgers run away if you want to.”

West did. Not so much because he wanted to, but because Habrak wanted him not to, and he wanted to do things when Habrak didn’t want him to do them. Habrak left for the cellar while West found a washtub and planted himself in the grass outside the crumbling cellar wall. He knew that the crumbling wall didn’t actually have anything to do with his year away, that mortar chips and walls fall down, but somehow the disrepair haunted him, a reminder that he hadn’t tended his home for a year, that the very walls of Castle Groan had strained under his apathy. It was a warm day, and the sun prickled against his while crickets hopped through the tall grasses.

Soon enough a billowing trail of smoke began to waft out of the hole in the wall. He wrinkled his nose. The smoke was likely from Habrak burning sugar and saltpeter, but it left a fowl scent in the air. It wasn’t harmful for a short period of time, but it would likely startle them out of their makeshift den. He waited and watched the smoke wash out across the sky. He

almost got off the tub to poke his head in the hole and see what was happening when a rustling came from inside the hole and then came a badger, and then came another. A sow and four little cubs loping out of the hole, gray and white fur gliding over their haunches and noses in the air they trailed out in a line making huffing little snorting sounds as they careened into the woods one after another.

They spent the next several days occupied in similar if less entertaining tasks. They hadn't found any more badgers about the castle, five was, indeed, the final count. But they did find rotting timbers, moth-eaten tapestries, overgrown creepers as well as a modest rat colony on the fourth floor. The refurbishment of the castle was more than they could do during the three or so days they had before Ran's return with several members of West's crew, but they attempted the worst of it. Habrak had crews called in, with what funds he couldn't imagine, to strip away rotting boards, trim away the wild grasses and encroaching flora while Habrak concocted more smoke pellets to chase away other pests that plagued the castle from its year of inactivity.

Rooms were dusted and beds redressed while West found where Habrak had stowed away his finer clothes and tapestries, papers and other goods he hadn't wanted touched by water or mice. Though a year was not, in many ways a long time, it had drifted past him as slowly as a leaf on still waters. While the days ran into each other, they still hung over him as a single, restless memory with no start or stop and it felt like he had been still a century. Even touching the garments he used to wear, soft lines and rich brocades, cloaks lined with fur and tunics from deeply dyed wools, he felt an ache in his throat he could not banish. There was something cruel and lingering about lost time, about the sheer amount of breaths he had given to empty hours and passing days. But thinking of it didn't help, mulling over that year did nothing but pull him

further into guilt and pity so with an effort that could have lifted hillsides, he brought his thoughts away and took them back to the chests of clothes and papers he redressed his chambers with.

West's papers were another spirit all together. Fortunately, Habrak had maintained ledgers, taxation and income reports, as well as land deeds during the past year, as he always did, but that didn't let West escape the piles of correspondence, legal papers, and other documents that Habrak couldn't do anything with without the king's seal and approval. He was in the middle of filing a collection of arrest reports of guild thieves that he squirmed at the thought of neglecting when he heard shouts coming from outside. He peered out through his window, but it overlooked the woods at the back of the castle and no sound came from there. He turned across the room and out into the hallway before taking the stairs down to the ground level two at a time. He wound his way out into the courtyard where he found Habrak with blood staining his tunic and trousers.

West's heart lurched and he was rushing towards him before he realized that Habrak was supporting an unconscious man under one arm while Ran held him under the other. With a start, he realized it was Giln, just as shaggy and drink eaten as he remembered but perhaps a little fatter and bleeding more than last he saw him. He sighed with a guilty sense of relief. Habrak was fine, and on closer inspection, Giln wasn't even actually unconscious, and was stumbling crookedly between Habrak and Ran.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Ran looked up and replied without preamble. "We aren't sure yet. Says he and Tetheb got attacked in the mountains by some sort of monster, but Tetheb just says it was a mountain lion. Ain't that right, Teth?"

Tetheb, a quiet, long-haired man with olive skin and black eyes nodded.

At this, Giln stirred, still being carried between Habrak and Ran into the castle. “It wasn’t a fucking mountain lion, Teth. It was a rush. Came up through the grasses, running on all fours then jumped me and started chewing on my shoulder. Didn’t think it was a mountain lion when Teth killed the thing.”

Ran looked up. “You killed it?”

“No,” he shook his head, smiling wanly. “It left.”

“The mountain lion?” she asked.

He shrugged. Teth was quiet, superstitious, and stubborn.

West led the way back into the keep, Giln groaning and cursing all the while.

Coming through the door last came a slight, chestnut haired woman with soft blue eyes and freckles scattered over her nose. Ath. West knew she was younger than she looked. She had a round, ageless face that still seemed childish despite being over thirty. Her hair was short and bobbed with a pinned braid curving along her right temple. She smiled. “Hello, West.”

“Ath,” he said.

She tilted her head as she passed him and hummed quietly to herself, or him, or no one, “*Here comes the whimble-rush down the mountain trail. Hush rush scary rush run away home.*”



*With guidance such as this, alchemists, and occultists posing as alchemists came to hold significant positions of power within the high court. Alchemy was, and is still today for many, a practice of the gods. It is an art of metals, astrology, and the planets that govern the fates of men, or so many have believed. Where the Osh-Un Dynasty trusted their alchemist-priests to keep both their gods and their sciences, unknowingly, they came to trust them with the wellbeing of their empire as well. I believe it is from this trend that the Old Empire allowed itself to be steeped in quasi-religious superstition, politically castrating themselves as their own weak understanding of the gods allowed their own people to place more faith in their guilds than their magic addled leaders. I'd like to conclude by...*

## Fifteen

**I**t turned out that the princesses Lobell and Yeilandali of the Mining District, the Caverns of the West, the Coal City, the Fire Forges of Mount Lead, home to King of the Mines, were not what Hayeid had been expecting. To be fair, they probably weren't looking how they had been expecting to look either. Both princesses had dusky skin and dark hair, though the older princess, Lobell, had hair that he thought was nearly black under its coating of travel dust and sand. And covered in sand they were. Most of their features were indistinguishable, covered in traveling clothes, dust covers, head wraps, and sand as they were. He frowned. A lot of sand. As they approached further, he didn't think either of them appeared burnt as their messenger had been, but that was perhaps because only inches of skin was showing on either of them, and that was only a slit around their eyes that their scarves didn't cover.

*A dust storm, perhaps?* He thought to himself. It was the most likely answer. While there had been a few unpleasantly windy days in the dune field as well as during their journey all

the way from Hustanben's capitol and Hayeid's home in the old Jeweler's Guild, Shad, to Ojaro, the larger region bordering Hustanben's western border, they had mostly found fair weather. The Uuk desert covered large swaths of Hustanben, Ojaro, and Yoros, as well as some lands beyond, but the dune field they camped in was part of what used to be the Merchant's Guild before they gave fealty to Hayeid, and was as far West as he had ever been before.

He signaled for Sammeni, his fifth wife, with An to accompany her, to approach the princesses. Several from their party hobbled off horses to help their princesses from their mounts, but Hayeid could tell the retainers too were wobbly and off balance. He wondered if the western desert beyond his camp grew harsher as it approached the mountains for the ambassadorial party to arrive in such an ill state. He took another drink to stop himself from laughing. *Poor things*. He would never have shown his face before a foreign prince while covered in sand and travel grime. He admonished himself. He should let his thoughts be gentle. Having no knowledge of the road they had traveled he shouldn't make light of their troubles even in his own mind, but he couldn't help but feel somewhat embarrassed for them and decided to be kind.

As Sammeni and An presented themselves to the princesses, Lobell and Yeilandali lowered their scarves and greeted his wives appropriately if not gracefully. *Be kind*, he thought, and stood. He resisted turning around to see what his strange alchemist friend was making of the arrival. He wanted to try and read his expression to see what the alchemist was thinking, but knew Gin would be as unreadable as ever. He frowned. Her expression? Their expression? He sighed. On the one hand, he wasn't sure how much Gin's gender honestly mattered to him anymore. Gin was Gin, and though *they* insisted on the use of this third, neutral pronoun

apparently used in Yoros as well as the west, it itched of uncertainty to him, and like all uncertainties, it made him uneasy despite his wish to take it all in stride. Gin didn't seem genderless to Hayeid, but Gin said that wasn't the point, and when he pressed further Gin simply made fun of him. He sighed subtly, resisting to turn to seek Gin's eyes, and instead strode forward, Iza at his side, radiant as sunlight on water.

As he approached, the princesses bowed, bending at the waist with their left hands behind their backs, but noted that their right hands did not rise to rest over their hearts. So respect but not loyalty, deference, but not obedience. He expected this, but instead of returning the gesture, he merely tilted his head, and Iza, as was a wife's right, did not lower her head at all. Semantically, he and the princesses were of the same rank, in Guild Common prince and princess were merely gendered variations of the same ranking, but practically it made no sense for Hayeid to consider himself to be at their standing. He thought again of Gin's odd genderlessness and wondered absently how they could hold official rank. "King" and "consort" were both gender neutral words, but what of the lower ranks? There weren't even any words that would allow one to consider such a thing.

But no, he was not the same as these two travel-worn princesses. Prince though he was, he chose that title out of humility only. He would not be crowned until the empire had been fully reclaimed and united once again under the gods and a True King. There would be no more king among kings. Hayeid would be the True King and he would be the only king. The princesses stood bellow their parents with Lobell to become the Mining King after her mother, but she was not like Hayeid. Hayeid had won the fealty of nineteen Guild Districts in sixteen years across Hustanben, Yoros, and Ojaroath. He had all the guilds of the three Uuk regions united under

sovereign rule, free of the mercantile tyranny they had existed under for two centuries. They were not the same.

The princesses lifted from their bows, and standing closer he could read something more in their eyes. Lobell, the eldest daughter, though tired and travel worn she had a sternness that hung about a thin mouth, and serious, black eyes. Yeilandali was softer where her sister was edged, and her brown eyes were baleful, and yes, perhaps even weak as she looked up at him. Pretty, though.

He opened his hands expansively. The music came to a hush and the eyes of the camp turned to Hayeid. “We welcome you, Lobell and Yeilandali of the Mining District. We see that you have traveled far and journeyed far to greet us. We see also that you are tired, and yet in seeing you we are enlivened, knowing that you have come so far east to meet us, and in hope, to become our friend.” He nodded. It wasn’t a bow, but it was a hospitable gesture that he had weighed carefully. It was all done carefully. He knew the Old Imperial “We” was stiff to hear for those raised in Guild Districts, he wasn’t even entirely comfortable and used it only in formal audiences. But the plural represented the empire. It represented the unity of mind and heart his reign promised. Rather than raising his own standing, its usage was designed to remind all present that as True King he would not be one man, but rather the voice of a people, a vessel for the collective wills of gods and men.

“My sister and I are honored to greet you, Prince Hayeid,” said Lobell. “We bring with us greetings also from our mother, the king.”

Iza rested a hand on his shoulder before Lobell could continue. “My prince, see how travel worn they are. The festivities will continue throughout the night. Let them be refreshed in their tents, and then let them join us in the evening.” She turned and spoke to them. “You will

find it very beautiful when the moonlight hits the sands, I think, princesses. There are drinks and food and music to come, but for now, will you wish to recover in your tent?"

Yeilandali nodded gratefully before Lobell could accept the invitation. She looked briefly annoyed, but then, glancing to her younger sister, Lobell nodded as well. Hayeid extended a welcoming hand past him, signaling for retainers to escort the princesses and the rest of the party to their tents. The music resumed, and the camp returned to its lively state. Onlookers vied for a clear look at the princesses, but as they did so a few disappointed murmurs made their way across the crowd. How did these dirty children compare to their own Summer Prince? How did the west not make way for him already. He smiled, and, taking Iza's hand, returned to their pavilion to watch the festivities unfold as the sun edged closer to the horizon.



*Hello, old page. Again, it feels like such a long time since last I've written. I haven't gone down any further since finding the clock, this level is far too curious to not spend more time in. To think that above me stands Yoros, with all its technologies and jungles, its ruins and its temples stuns me. I have never been anywhere as lonesome as this. I feel as if I am bearing witness to something dying, like I, unworthy as I am, am watching it's final moments. I do not think about that steady breathing anymore. I fear for when it becomes silent. I fear that will mean it is dead. I fear it will mean I have no way out.*

## Sixteen

**W**hen Odessa was but a girl, newly orphaned after her mother's execution, Han had brought her to the vision pools.

"I'm curious, girl," she had said. Odessa had clung to her fat legs, not daring to part herself from the strong and steadfast priestess. "I wonder if you have the gift. What intelligence there may be behind those black eyes? What sight?"

Odessa didn't remember how she had replied. What she did remember was walking to the pools. She remembered the patterns the water made on the cavern walls, how the stone steps leading further down were slick with condensation, and that steady constant *plink*, the incessant sound of dripping water. How she hated that sound now. But this wasn't now. This was when she was a girl. When she was first brought to the pools and instructed to stare into their depths.

At first nothing had happened. She had complained. She was tired. It was too late at night. She was scared. But Han made her wait. Made her sit on the edge of the pool until her

legs ached with stinging needles and her fingers were numb with cold. She made her wait till Odessa tumbled into the water and all around her was darkness.

At first, that was all there was. She couldn't feel the water, she couldn't feel if her throat longed for breath or if she was breathing at all. And then there was a woman. Her skin was dusky like Odessa's, and her hair was the color of gold spun wheat growing in noon sunshine. She rode atop a deer—a monster, a beast. It stood as tall as five grown men, and its antlers spanned the sky.

Then something broke, something seemed to fracture, but Odessa couldn't tell what.

Ice and cold, an endless winter spanning across the world. The world was round, a marble of silver white dew. She could feel herself bleeding and she watched her blood melting the snow. She had no limbs. She was gone. She had no ears.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“We are the ashes of the fires you should not burn,” came the answer.

“Eat me,” she said.

She was eaten.

When she awoke she was laying in Han's lap, shivering from something more than cold.

“You saw it child. You saw how all things will end. And we at Aelet Tor are the only ones who know. We are the only ones.”



*Cottage Dill Loaf*

one and a third cups brown flour  
one and two thirds cups white flour  
three table spoons dill weed  
one table spoon sugar  
one tea spoon asafetida  
one tea spoon salt

two tea spoons root starch  
one and a half cups cottage cheese\*  
half a cup warm water  
one table spoon more sugar  
one table spoon yeast

Mix dry ingredients, let warm water, sugar, and yeast rest. Mix cottage cheese and yeast mixture with dry ingredients. Knead. \* \* Rest in sunny or warm spot, let rise. Bake till done.

\* See Safell's recipe, hers has the salt right.

\*\* Coat hands and pan with oil or fat—helps with crust

Caesura

**I**t was said the Witchwoods were waiting. Unlike the great growing Halfwood that lay to the south, the Witchwoods' borders didn't inch further out each year, reaching out hoary, decrepit fingers to all sides, parched for life and sunlight. It was said the wood hadn't grown in years, that the Horned Mother, long ago, had spat at the forest's edge, cursing the wood to never grow till the forest's coward children lay penance before her. But none knew what it was for. None knew what had gone wrong. The Witchwood was waiting, though no one knew what for.

Bregoleth had heard this since he was a boy, a child wandering the curving deer trails from Lake Los to those nameless springs that trickled down the wooded slopes. By the time he was a youth he could trace the tumbling ridges of the Black Mountains in tracks down his forearm, familiar as old scars. And when he looked upon those spots where the trees could climb

no further for want of air, and the mountains stood bald through the summer and crowned with snow in the winter, he thought he heard the sounds of sleeping, a humming breath from deep in the forest dells. Yet as years turned over upon themselves, the mountains seemed only to be stone and the Witchwood a small place that smelled of wood smoke, and spell dust, and must.

He sighed, crouching down beside an old and sickly pine wracked with beetle, brown from their chewing. Balancing with one hand to stabilize him, he reached to the soil at the base of the pine with his other, and brushed his thumb across the dirt.

“Darn.” He said it aloud. Alendi was always mentioning that, how he talked to himself. She said it was a sign of a poorly trained mind, that if you couldn’t sort your thoughts silently it was a sign you were unfocused. Considering she had still selected him to be her second, he thought it must not be as bad as all that. Feeling the soil, damp across his finger, he frowned.

*Not only beetles then.*

What the soil was damp with, he couldn’t be sure. But there, at the base of the pine lay a creature, dying, and breathing in strange, wracked breaths. Its voice was a low murmur, almost as if it knew what words were, and understood that they were formed with tongue and teeth and air, but couldn’t shape its mouth around them. He brought his thumb close to his face and inhaled, searching for an odor. Nothing he could recognize, nothing but—he inhaled again, camphor? No, he couldn’t quite tell. The darn wind he had caught was blocking everything up. He stared at the dying creature, not daring to take his eyes away, took a step back, and wiped his hand on his trousers. He sniffled, then sneezed, sneezed three more times and rubbed at his running nose. He couldn’t work like this. Fishing into his satchel, he pulled out a nubby knot of ginger root. With a long fingernail, he carved a small rune into its skin, *sal*—breath, and took a

bite. Once he worked it to fibers he spit it out to his side and tied his hair back in a tail.

Ginger—good for everything, honestly. It also got rid of hiccups.

Leaning down towards the creature, he inhaled again, this time with a clear breath. He had been right, there was camphor, but also fennel, ammonia, and hash. Uum then. His cousin was up to foul work as always, but this...This was unexpected. The creature continued to let out shallow, quivering breaths, its oddly pink lips moving as a long trail of drool escaped its mouth. Surely it wasn't what it seemed like, surely no such creatures continued to walk the land. But here it was. Was Bregoleth anyone to deny what his eyes claimed to see? Likely not, and yet.

And yet.

It was no bigger than a black bear, but its spine was curved like a hunchback's, and its legs seemed like a frog's, bent and long with hips that seemed too high. A putrid death scent hung about the air, something of rot and something of sickness that had no comparison to anything but itself. Its eyes though were deep and round and its lips had a human quality he couldn't shake. He exhaled slowly. Whatever he chose to believe, he wouldn't like it. Either Uum had the capability to cobble such a tortured creature together, granting it some ghostly soul, or it was the Rush, and he was face to face with a dying Beast.

"I should not kill you," he said. "I should bring you back to the village so Alendri may look upon you and learn what she may from your body before it dies."

The creature's ragged breaths continued, but its eyes no longer twisted so in their sockets, they had focused on Bregoleth and it watched him closely.

"You and your brothers bring death to my folk. It is said you are plagues' body, sent walking where it cannot be carried."

A pink dribble of blood began to mix with the drool dripping from its lips but it never broke eye contact. It had no irises, only the black liquid of its pupils that seemed dry and filmed over like a skin over hot milk.

He heaved a sigh. "If you are not a Beast of the seven than I am a fool." In a swift motion he unsheathed a bone-handled hunting knife from his thigh, knelt down, and stabbed up and into the soft hollow under the Beast's jaw. It jerked once, but it was less a spasm of pain and more the last seizing and release of long tensed muscles. The creature was dead before Bregoleth pulled the knife free.

*You are still a fool.*

He jerked his head behind him and back to the Beast looking for some sign of a speaker, but there was none and the woods were quiet. A cold wind rose in the summer air and passed through the trees and shivered down his spine. Seized then by a strange urge he reached towards the Beast and closed its staring eyes with gloved fingers. What carrion would want to approach such a thing he couldn't imagine, but it was not his burden to bury it. He wiped his knife clean on damp leaves from the forest floor and sheathed it once again. One way or another, Uum's magic had touched this place, and the scents of ammonia and camphor spoke to spells no one in the Witchwoods would touch. A panicked guilt crossed over him as he eyed the dead creature again. He shouldn't have killed it, he shouldn't have been gripped by some self-absorbed sense of mercy for a monster no matter what it was. He coughed and spit to his side. It was done though. Even if he should have brought it to Alendi, even if that could, in truth, have aided his people by having understanding of the creatures that haunted this wood, it was too late to bring it back alive, the least he should do was bring back the corpse. But for some reason he couldn't. For all the breath inside of him he couldn't give himself one decent, sound reason not to, but still.

His stomach felt tight and constricted as he paced under the trees, indecision clinging to his shoulders.

He made up his mind, he'd bring it back. Having decided, he paused to blow his nose once more in a handkerchief, took another bite of ginger, and set to work bringing out cloth and rope from his pack so he could drag it back without having to carry it. As he laid the cloth out, marking it with sigils drawn in charcoal for keeping and sigils to repel pestilence he paused, that uneasy uncertainty claiming him once again. "Darn it."

As quickly as he had pulled them out, he stuffed the cloth and rope back into his pack, hurriedly folding and wrapping so it would all fit in once again. His heartbeat rushed in his ears and he could hardly hear anything over the sound of it. He looked around him once again. Nothing was there. No there was movement—he grew still and waited. A deer ambled past, walking further into a thicket of trees, its antlers wide and gray like branches. When it passed he waited again and then began pushing piles of mulching leaves onto the corpse, covering it with a shroud gold and brown. Another sound came from somewhere, but this time he didn't turn around, continuing to push piles of leaves onto the body.

"Bregoleth?"

He started, his throat seizing but he didn't turn around. He let his face relax and his lips fall into a neutral line.

"Bregoleth? Is that you?" came the voice again.

He turned, coming to face Nalheden, a mild featured man with almond eyes and brown skin of the same tone as Bregoleth's. Nalheden was his junior several turns over, and he took his time standing to greet the other man. "You startled me, Nal."

Nal smiled a half apology, and ran a hand through his curling hair. “Sorry.” He tilted his head, leaning over curiously to see past Bregoleth. “What were you doing?”

The half-truth slid out of his mouth oiled and easy. “There’s a smell of the occult about this place, I was preparing wards.” He raised an eyebrow, knowing the effect his temperament had on the younger witches. Alendi said he frightened them, which was good and utterly what he intended. “I assume you are here to help me?”

“Oh, well, yes I could, but really I was on my way to—”

“Good.” He thrust an extra notebook of spell paper and a charcoal pencil into Nal’s chest. “Follow me then, we have the village’s perimeter to cover before sundown.”

Nal squinted up at a clouded sky and immediately caught a stray raindrop in his eye, or so Bregoleth thought from the way he began blinking furiously. “I think we’ll have rain.”

He snorted. “Is that your weather sense telling you that?” He pulled a hood over his hair, still tied securely in a tail, and blew his nose before adjusting the ties on his oiled boots.

“Yessir,” Nal grinned.

Without replying Bregoleth gestured with a nod to walk and began trekking through the woods, out to the village’s outer edges that were marked with periodic flags of red woven linen. Under each flag glowed a spell torch that was never extinguished, but perpetually sputtered a low ember’s gray that flickered white, then red, then gray again, like a bonfire’s breathing coals. When they reached the first of these posts, Bregoleth tore free a sheet of spell paper, scrawled out a *takk*, the sigil for the eyed tongue, and pressed it against the wood with the flat palm of his hand. The paper hissed, then grew hot as it scorched the sigil into the wooden post. The sigil glowed there for a minute, pulsing golden-red before it turned black and then faded into the wood.

Nal had been watching closely, coming up beside his shoulder. “How did you cast that?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, popping the last of the ginger into his mouth. The rain had begun in earnest, and though it didn’t fall heavily, it brought a low mist up from the ground that cooled the air. It was the first rain they’d had since the solstice and it seemed a balm for the water-hungry land.

“You didn’t say any words but it doesn’t seem you had ingredients besides the paper and pencil, where’d the heat come from?”

“Torch is already on the post, dullwit. It does not cast till it touches the wood.”

Nal just nodded, his friendly face never responding to scolding or jibes. He was a good man and a clever witch, but he wasn’t half as smart as he would have to be to rise in leadership within the coven. He always seemed to understand a spell once it was explained to him, but had nothing of Alendi’s raw intuition that somehow innately understood how objects in the world fit together. She knew eyelashes belonged in spells of dreaming, that fire lived in iron while pewter smelled like cold. Black tea was dry and hot and red beads carved of a rowan branch would set the corn to growing. But it wasn’t the kind of thing to point out to someone. To build that kind of knowing was fiercely personal, and to make someone aware of it could chase a waking knowing back to sleep.

They continued on along the village’s perimeter, stopping at each border post to spell the wards to the poles. The posts didn’t go around the entire Witchwood, but rather extended some miles out from the village’s edge that lay at the center of the wood. This perimeter encircled another circle of wards that ran closer to the village that was enchanted with protective charms reinforced three times daily. The village was nothing like Harthshore, the only other town in the Thieving District. In fact, the village wasn’t even really considered a town. Gods knew the

Thief King never paid them any mind, he had even forgotten to collect their taxes this past year. Instead the village was a combination of wagons and tents, small out buildings, and a few rare stone structures that held community halls and healing houses. Aside from these, caves catacombed the woods containing a few dwellings among ceremonial casting chambers and food stores, it was here Alendi kept her home. While Bregoleth had grown up in his father's painted caravan wagon he had eventually moved into a small building shared by himself and two other witches, both retired from their ruling positions in the coven. His father insisted there was still room for the both of them, but there wasn't and they saw each other plenty no matter how he complained.

The afternoon was quickly turning to evening, but they continued on, unhurried, for they were reaching the final stretch of border posts. It was as they were making their turn to walk along the border's northern edge that they heard the bells.

At first it was a quiet sound, like wind chimes catching in the breeze, then it sounded more like deer bells, the kind attached to harnesses during Cold Nights in the winter, and then they noticed their rhythm, steady as footsteps but punctuated like a dance.

Nal snorted quietly turning to look at Bregoleth. "For the gods' sake," he muttered. "Can no one walk in the woods without stumbling into some kind of trouble?"

Bregoleth cocked his lips in an uneasy smile and loosened his knife in its scabbard. He waited a moment, trying to smell the air and catch a sense of what magic, if any, came from the sound of chiming bells, but he could tell nothing. The illness, mild in truth though it was, sent a fog crawling through his mind, making his thoughts and senses blunt as a cushion. By the gods he hated falling sick. He reached around his bag for more ginger before remembering how he had finished it already.

“What do you think it is?” asked Nal.

Bregoleth shook his head and whispered back. “Does it matter? It will make itself seen or it will not. If it intends to trouble us I am sure we will know before too long.”

Nal nodded and Bregoleth could tell he didn't like the answer, but that too didn't matter much. Alendi had received reports over the past months of strange sightings in the woods outside the village border, and scents of foul magics had come drifting on the wind from Harthshore. For now, all Bregoleth could do was complete the wards and return to tell Alendi about the dead Beast. As they walked, the rain continued in a steady, pattering tap that made it hard for him to hear. He was feeling very cold, like winter, chased away by the summer sun, had come to sleep inside his chest and fingertips. He rubbed his hands together and thought of wandering over to his father's later to beg hot milk and raspberry cakes off him once they got back. Then he would take a bath and then sleep in all the soft down and bedding he could cover himself with and not wake till his head was clear again. If he could still hear the rain while he slept that would be fine, better than being out in it.

He realized, then, that the bells had gone quiet and he let a sigh of relief run through him. Whatever it had been must have decided the weather too miserable to go chasing after witches today. It was for the best. Bregoleth considered himself able to hold his own just fine, but didn't think he'd have another spell in him today after they finished with the wards. When the next post came into sight he could see there was a person standing beside it, not so tall, but not so short as to be a child.

“It is time to be heading home!” he called, raising his voice so it carried over the rain and rustling trees. The person didn't move but continued standing, seeming to watch the flickering torch in the rain. He strode forward several steps, cupping his hands around his mouth. “It's

time to head back, friend. It's nearly nightfall!" Still the person didn't turn. *He can't hear me over the rain.* He began heading towards the post at a light jog, waiting for the person to turn around. As he came closer he saw that, to his immense surprise the person was naked. He stopped then, uselessly wiping the rain from his face with a damp hand. Long hair clung in wet strands over his bare, dripping skin in long snarled tendrils. His body was thin but not hungry, and strong sinewy muscles ran down the naked man's forearms and calves. Bregoleth could feel his face turning hot and kept walking, determined not to look away like some shy maid.

"Bregoleth, wait!"

The call came from Nal behind him, Bregoleth turned around, frustrated to see he hadn't been following after him. But he kept talking and he could barely hear Nal over the rain.

"—you can't feel him!"

He took a step back in the direction he had come from and furrowed his eyebrows. If Nal would just get over here then—

"You can't feel him, Bregoleth! There's nothing there!"

What was he talking about? He—

"My lord, he's—Bregoleth, look!"

He whipped back around. The man was still standing there but had finally turned. He met his gaze. The fading sunlight didn't catch his eyes, and though very black, they seemed dry and filmed over—like—no, he didn't feel like the beast, the beast had been alive but—in a moment he understood what Nal had been trying to tell him. There was nothing there.

There was nothing there.

The sound of bells rang out over the air and he only then caught sight of rows of small, bronze bells strung around the body's ankles and wrists. Bregoleth drew very still. "Nal!" He called back behind him. "Nal, leave here and bring Alendi!"

But he couldn't turn to see if Nal obeyed, because in an instant the body was moving. It lifted a long leg out in front of it, its calf hanging down at a cornered angle from its knee. The bells chimed. At the same time, the backs of its wrists met above its head, its fingers hung down like spider's legs. The bells chimed. And it began to dance.

Bregoleth ran.

There were no spells to cast, there was nothing he could do. He could fight it, he should fight it. But when he turned to see the body moving after him in twitching, jerking lines of dance he couldn't make himself stop. Somewhere he knew that if he stopped running, he would die fighting the body, and that would honestly be such a waste. Nal had started running as well and was several paces ahead of Bregoleth, plowing through the trees back towards the village. If they made it to the village, if they made it back to Alendi, she could stop it. He hardly looked where he was running, only paying attention to what direction he needed to go in to get back to the village. Up ahead, Nal toppled forward, sliding back down the sloping hill on wet leaves back the way they'd come. Bregoleth caught up to him, and, without waiting, gripped Nal under his shoulders and heaved him back to his feet. He nodded his thanks and Bregoleth dragged him behind him as he ran.

But the body was closer now. He turned around to see it only paces behind him. It was cold in the rain and yet its body wasn't pink or flushed from chill or exertion. They were still ahead of it though, they were faster, they could keep ahead. Or hide somewhere. It would— something pounded into his back and Bregoleth felt himself smack the ground before he felt

himself fall. His face was jammed down in the wet leaves and blood was in his mouth. He tried to spit but couldn't. His face was pushed too much into the ground. He had bit his tongue. He squirmed under the weight on his back that was holding him down. Somewhere, above the rushing of blood in his ears Nal was shouting. Then his head was lifted from the ground and fingers were in his hair. He could spit the blood out of his mouth, but his face hit the ground again slamming against the forest floor. He tried to breath in but couldn't—there was too much weight on his back. Panic rose sick inside of him and he tried to throw the weight off—tried to roll over—to get a breath in—to—

A deep aching pain surged down his spine and he was screaming but he couldn't get his mouth to open. White flashed into his eyes. He smelled camphor and ammonia. His back was broken it must have been broken. He couldn't move he wasn't going to get out of here. Then, as suddenly as the weight had come onto his back it was gone and he could breath. He blinked seeing the damp brown of the ground before him, an ant scurrying back under the foliage and out of the rain. Nal was still shouting. He was breathing but the ache in his spine was still there and all his mind could grab ahold of was the soft wrinkles around his father's eyes. And then in a flash he breathed in a full, gasping breath, and something of the pain faded slightly and he was aware that his legs were moving, that *he* could move.

He rolled onto his stomach to see Nal struggling with the body, its hands forming purple bruises around his neck. Nal—his eyes bulging and his mouth forming one straight line of panic, clawed weakly at the body's hands. Without thinking, Bregoleth reached for his hunting knife and barreled forward screaming. The body wasn't even looking at him as he came in running, but Bregoleth didn't stop. He surged forward, the knife hilt slippery in the rain and his sweat. He rammed the knife into the body's side and twisted up and into its ribcage, feeling a

triumphant rush. But it didn't let go. Its hands stayed around Nal's throat—choking him, sending that strange gray violet down his neck. Bregoleth screamed. Wrenching the knife out of its side he push it back into its shoulder and neck and arm—anything until finally it simply let go of Nal, sending him tumbling to the ground. There was no blood. It was covered in a half dozen wounds but no blood left the body, only a stinking scent of rot and sick.

The body was still. It seemed to be pausing to look over its wounds with a detached, perfunctory attention. Bregoleth didn't wait. He grabbed Nal by his collar and then hauled him half onto his own back and managed as close to running as he could. He rushed through the forest, branches snapping against his face. The rain hadn't stopped but it was slowing. His breath heaved in gulping, coughing, inhalations. He couldn't run, he couldn't keeping running. He toppled over. Nal dropped with him but he managed to keep Nal's head from hitting the ground. He dragged him behind a thick trunked tree, leaning him as gently as he could manage against it, and reached for his pulse. It was there, weak and fluttering, but it was there. Nal blinked, his eyes dazed and unfocused.

Carefully, Bregoleth edged around the tree, peering out the way they had come. He couldn't see the body anymore, but he was sure it was there. He reach clumsily behind him to his back, trying to feel what had happened but the movement caused such a rush of pain he bit his pointer finger as he covered his mouth to keep from crying out. He blinked tears out of his eyes and tried to quiet his breathing. He looked over to Nal who was still blinking, confused, and sweating profusely. The marks around his neck didn't only seemed like bruises. When he looked closer there was a black char around where the body had touched him and a scent of rot. If they simply tried to run again, surely the body would catch up with them. Bregoleth needed a plan, he needed something he could do and he wouldn't be able to count on Nal to help him.

He couldn't think clearly though. Illness and pain and something else he couldn't grasp were fogging his mind. *Cutting the body did not kill it. It is still standing, I am sure. Think damn you, think! Use the faculties the gods granted you, or die here, a fool.* It came to him then, simple and obvious and he thanked the gods, kissing his knuckles.

*Fire.*

The thought came as if from a voice outside of himself. Yes, fire would stop it.

Shaking from fear and pain, he went back out from behind the tree, into the deer path they had been running up. If the body continued after them, it would come this way. Hurriedly he cleared away a section of leafy carpeting until he reached dry soil underneath. Then he began digging, pebbles and cold stinging his fingers and dirt gathering under his clean, trimmed nails.

In moments he had a small hole in which he placed a lock of hair he cut from his temple with his hunting knife, and a necklace of bone and black spinel from around his neck. In the quiet, the sound of bells rose on the air. Footsteps followed after. With trembling hands, he cut his palm with his knife, running it along his hand before he threw the knife in the hole as well. The bells were growing louder, their chime sounding in rhythm with those shuffling footsteps. With one uttered sigil—*dak*—the ground covered itself, filling in the hole with soil once again. He looked up from his work. The body was coming. It came into sight over the rise of the hill, its eyes made contact with Bregoleth's and it charged. Bregoleth looked down at his spell. The ground pulsed a glowing ember hue before the light faded.

The body was nearing the spell but Bregoleth didn't run. He edged closer to the tree Nal was behind, carefully lifting him and making ready to flee. The other man didn't even make a sound as he was lifted. Unconscious then. *That might be better for now.* He couldn't move quickly. He was in too much pain. Nal was too heavy. A dangerous fatigue hung under the

adrenaline that ran through him. The body was still heading towards them. It was only paces away. Bregoleth began walking carefully backwards, not daring to take his eyes off the naked body. Twenty paces. He readjusted Nal on his back. Fifteen paces. What if the spell didn't work? Ten paces. He was in so much pain. He wouldn't be able to move. Five paces. He formed the spell in his mouth, waiting to release it.

Three paces.

Not yet, he couldn't say it yet, not till—Now!

The body went up in a surge of flames as Bregoleth sounded the spell. It formed a bizarre black silhouette inside the flames as fire and sparks rushed towards the gray sky. The heat was so intense Bregoleth was forced to step back. Relief washed through him as he watched it burn. It had worked, it was burning and—he froze. It was still moving. It wasn't twisting like a person in pain, or rolling to the ground to put itself out, it was beginning to walk. Bregoleth inhaled sharply. Sparks and smoke filled the air, and from inside the pyre, he heard a bell.

And then the body stepped from the fire.

It was still burning, it's form lost in the fire consuming it. But then it dropped. He could barely keep ahold of Nal. It had to be dead. It being dead was the only chance they had.

The body began squirming on the ground, rolling and scrambling over the damp leaves. It was trying to put itself out. Whatever power was animating it had enough sense of preservation to try to save itself. He held his breath. *Burn. Just finish burning. If there's nothing left it can't move.* But fire was slow to eat a body, especially a bright, warm fire without enough heat to swallow bones. The last spark was quenched as the body smacked it out. Terribly bald and charred, it stood. The string wrapping the bells around its ankles and wrists

had burned, but with something that felt nearly like anger, it gripped a handful of bells that had fallen at its feet. Two slipped from its fingers, chiming as they hit the ground.

Bregoleth bolted.

Nal was slipping from his grip. White pain shot out from his back. He couldn't make it. They weren't going to reach the interior border of the village. It was too far, and Bregoleth wasn't running. His feet shuffled and Nal fell from his back again. He sobbed out a curse and gripped Nal's wrists. If he could just drag him the rest of the way back they could make it. But Nal's hands kept slipping out of his grip. Bregoleth's hands were bloody from cutting his palm and they were covered in sweat. He couldn't get a grip. The body was going to reach them. It was burned and blistering with great, red lumps swelling over its smoke blackened skin but it was still moving.

He couldn't move. Every muscle in his body screamed. His back felt like it was burning. He couldn't carry Nal. If he left him behind maybe he—the thought ended midtrack. He couldn't. Nothing in him would let him do that. But if it caught up to them Nal would be dead anyway. Frustrated tears fell down his cheeks without realizing them. Screaming, he lifted Nal once again onto his back and ran up the hill. Every muscle throbbed with exertion but he was moving. He could still hear the sound of bare feet smacking on the leafy ground behind him.

Abruptly he was on the ground again, the breath thrown out of him. He gasped uselessly. He hadn't even noticed tripping. He tried to inhale again. Nothing. He tried a third time. Nothing. He tried a fourth time and blessedly, air returned and he was breathing. But he couldn't move. He gripped Nal to him furiously. The world was growing dark around the edges of his sight. Was it so dark already? He hadn't noticed it becoming that dark. He rolled over, urging himself to stand. But it was no use. He couldn't.

But he could see the body. It wasn't walking towards him anymore. It simply paced in a line thirty paces behind and adjacent him. Its burned face was sagging like a melted candle. Curious. Why wasn't it moving anymore? He wasn't sure if he could see any more or if what he saw was some dream conjured in his own mind.

He held Nal tighter, and somewhere he realized the junior witch wasn't breathing. Somewhere he knew this meant Nalheden was dead. But he didn't let go. The body still didn't move closer. It paused. Without turning its back, it began walking back into the trees. Back into the trees? Yes they were in a clearing. He could see that now. He could smell a campfire and baking bread. His father baked black bread in the winter.

*Foolish child of man. I should eat you to warm me in the winter.*

*But it is summer,* he thought to himself. But it didn't matter. He slipped away into unconsciousness, and the world slipped away with him.



In his dreams there were spider lilies, and they were very red. Bregoleth watched them, and marveled at something that red standing against the green of the forest around them.

*They bloom in the summer before the world turns red with autumn.*

“What makes them bloom?” he asked, reaching out to touch one of their spindly legs.

*The rainstorm. But they will die as soon as there is frost.*

“Why do they grow here?”

The deer Beast snorted. It did not know. *They do not grow here. There is no here. This is but the space within your mind, and you, fool, invited me in.*

Bregoleth looked up then to meet the deer Beast's eyes. Its eyes were soft and black and wet with tears or mirth. Moss hung down from its bone white antlers and its fur was the color of the forest at night. Its body was great and spanned the sky yet it stood in the trees before him, its hooves crushing red petals beneath their cloven weight. "I don't remember doing that," he said.

*Does that matter?*

Bregoleth thought it did but he didn't say so. He was surprised to find that his clothes seemed clean and his hair, falling long and black past his shoulders, didn't smell of blood and smoke. *Why would it?* He thought. There was no smoke here but the incense sticks that burned in patches of three all along the path, and the path was lined by trees with branches of bone that grew green leaves only just turning gold.

"My father calls them corpse flowers. They were growing along the side of the rode when my mother was driving south for Sorisea. He said when he saw them growing there he knew he'd never see her again. He said they grow only in death. Is that true?"

*Are you asking me if I've been there?*

Bregoleth nodded and the forest shook with the Beast's laughter. Little twigs of bone clattered to the ground like ceramic landing on tile.

*No I have never been. I am alive. I have been alive for a very long time.*

A wind rushed through his hair and then fell still. It smelled of winter and iron.  
*We have slept deep in the mountains and dreamed of eating men. We wait for summer to pass and for winter to crawl in on its knees. We feed in the old caves and bathe in the old rivers.*

*He is cursed.*

"What? Who is cursed?"

*He is cursed.* The words suddenly sounded far away as if he heard them from underwater. The voice was different too. It wasn't the low hollow drone of the Beast. Not that keening tone of a breaking tree or a falling stone. It was something else.

*Call for me if you choose human. I will come. And if I choose, I will swallow you.*

"I don't think it's a curse I can break," said Alendi. "But with time I may be able to—" Bregoleth bolted upright, brown covers falling from his shoulders.

Alendi gasped. "Bregoleth, lay down."

He did, though in truth he just fell back into his pillows. He recognized the room he was in as a healing chamber in the medicry. He could tell that he, however, was in one of the few private rooms. While the coven of the Witchwoods prided itself on its egalitarian ways, there were still some few benefits to being Alendi's second. This, apparently was one of them. Brown woolen blankets covered his bed and his window, he knew, overlooked the herb gardens outside, but in the evening and the candlelight, only the faces of those in the room were reflected back in the glass. He spotted his father and smiled wanly. He closed his eyes again, shutting out the firelight.

"Bregoleth," it was Alendi's voice again. "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes," he answered.

He opened his eyes and met his coven leader's gaze. She had a straight, serious face with olive skin and long curling hair of a deep mahogany brown. She wore long, linen skirts dyed a deep red and embroidered with birds and river rushes. She tucked a loose black tunic without sleeves into her belt, but in the chill she wrapped her shoulders with a heavy cotton shawl. His father didn't say anything. Bregoleth found himself wondering how long he had been perched

on that little stool in the corner of the room. *Since you got here*, he scolded himself. *Would you think he has been anywhere but at your side since you arrived?* His father's eyes were pinched and downcast; he had been crying. In a sudden urge Bregoleth wanted nothing but to be alone with him and out from under Alendi's demanding eyes.

"Nalheden is dead," said Bregoleth. His voice was dry and croaking, sounding strange in his own ears. He coughed.

"Yes, he is. Tell me how."

He knew Nal had died. He had just spoken of it in his own voice, but somehow her confirmation still fell on him with a sick heaviness. His father's stool squeaked from the other end of the room. "The boy has hardly woken. Let him have water and some peace before you question him."

"He is no more a boy than you are, Habenon. And one of our own is dead. I must know why more than I must ensure your son's comfort."

Habenon let himself be quieted but he still walked over to a table under the window and began pouring water from a copper pitcher. When Bregoleth tried to take the cup he found he couldn't and so let his father hold his head with one hand and the cup with his other till Bregoleth was done drinking. He coughed more, finding it hard to swallow past all the mucus and ache in his throat. But he did drink and when he finished he told Alendi all chose, leaving out nothing, save the dying Rush under the magnolia tree. That he kept and would speak no word of. When he finished his mind drifted back to the words he had woken to and dread crawled into the tips of his fingers.

"Did you say I was cursed, Alendi?"

She nodded. "I did."

“How did that happen?” He didn’t look at his father. This was easy, because Habenon wasn’t looking at him either.

“The curse has its root in your spine. I imagine this body you described was able to cast the curse when it knocked you down.”

“I need to see that.”

“A mirror can be brought in later.” That was as much agreement as he was going to get.

“Did you say you couldn’t heal it?” The words fell out of his mouth, loose and dry. He could speak them but he could not think on them. Somehow, he didn’t think that if he made it back to the village he would still die.

“I cannot. However, I will arrange to send some women to Harthshore to make consult with Witch Mother. She carries more knowledge of doctoring than I do, but if she sends back instructions or comes herself I believe it can be countered.” She gestured for Bregoleth to roll over onto his stomach and he did. She pulled down the covers and moved her fingers down his spine. The contact sent smarting spasms down his back but he sucked in a sharp breath and bore it.

“The curse originates from here,” she said. He knew she was barely brushing her finger over the spot but still he bit down on the inside of his mouth. “And it continues out in hex tracks from that point.” She traced the lines. “The origin point is festering. It carries a traveling rot that will spread and consume you with fever.” She lifted her hand and he exhaled. “I assure you, I will consider your recover as an utmost priority. I will send Tathia and Eln at first light.”

He shivered and coughed. “I should come with.”

“Why do you think that?”

“If the curse is so serious than the time it takes to travel to Harthshore and back may be time too long.”

“It may be,” she allowed. “But if you travel, you will almost certainly die on the journey there, and the wound’s magical signature will put the other two in danger. You reek of it. Any dangers of the forest would descend from miles away. It is only the wards in place around the village that keep it from being so now.”

“So let me go on my own.”

“No.”

He was silent for a moment and glanced to the window. Bottles and jars lined the sill, the various tinctures labeled with paper glued to the bottles.

“You will listen to me in this. Tell me you have heard me.”

“I have.”

“Good. Then rest and be well. Someone will be in to check you throughout the night.”

Alendi and several physics left the room.

Habenon lingered in the doorway. “Should I stay?” he said.

Bregoleth nodded, swallowing back tears. “Just for a little.”

He pulled the stool up to his bedside and sat there till Bregoleth seemed asleep.

Eventually though he heard the door open, and the light that had flooded into the dark room receded again when his father closed the door behind him.

For a moment, he lay very still. But an anxious restlessness crept through his stomach and he couldn’t keep from trembling with it. With effort he laid off the covers and sat up, resting his feet on the ground. It took several moments for his breathing to slow and to fight back the nausea that came with the pain. He sneezed and quickly reached for something to blow his

runny nose on. He did so quietly on a handkerchief from the bed table and then sat quietly, waiting to see if anyone was coming in. No one did.

He stood, moving carefully and quietly to the windowsill and then the medicine cabinet, searching out the healing draught he was looking for. He found it, but it was in small vials of individual doses and so he rummaged around the cabinet till he found a dozen or so more. He took the corks out of all of them first, then he spelled them all at the same time with the charm that would activate the potency of each tincture. He drank them all down. They wouldn't cure the curse, but he didn't need them to. They would, however, give him the strength he needed to make it to Harthshore. He had to talk to Witch Mother on his own, and despite what Alendi said, he could, and had to make it there by himself.

From outside the window a deep baying cry sounded. It was a sob. More wretched and piteous than any had heard before. It ran down the mountains and tumbled over the blue pines, sending the woods awash with the sound of something breaking. The voice was familiar, for Bregoleth had heard it in his dream. Hands still shaking, he made his way to the window and unlatched it to let in the cool summer air.

"Come," he said. And he did not need to speak loudly, for when he spoke his call was returned with the Beast's cry. Next time he blinked the deer Beast stood outside the window in the distance of the woods beyond the village. It was great and it was massive and it was older than the witch fires that burned at midsummer and it was older than the sound of their prayers.

*Come human. You will ride on my back.*

Bregoleth climbed out the window, his bare feet making no sound as he walked to meet the Beast.

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End of Part One

## Apendicies

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## Pronunciation Guide

**Aelenwe**—*eye-len-wee*—A high priestess of Aeeth Tor.

**Alessi**—*eye-less-ee*—A priestess of Aeeth Tor.

**Aeeth Tor**—*ay-leth tohr*—Home to the Seeing Priestesses.

**Al Har**—*ahl-hahr*—School of Alchemy in the Astonomer's Guild, Yoros.

**Alendi**—*a-len-dee*—Leader of the Witchwood coven.

**An**—*ahn*—General of Hayeid's army, his second wife.

**Ath**—*ahth*—A vassal to the Thief King.

**Balnox**—*ba-len-ahks*—The time-keeping star.

**Bathwater**— Tributary to The Horn, flows through Harthshore in the Thieving District.

**Beni**—*be-nee*—Helben

**Berrith**—*ber-rith*—Innkeeper at The Hissing Mimic, Helben's brother.

**Black Mountains**— Range of mountains running through Saltpar and Harth.

**Bregoleth**—*bre-goh-leth*—A witch of the Witchwoods, Alendi's second.

**Bucket**—A dog discovered by Elma and Helben in the woods.

**Castle Groan**— The Thief King's Castle, sits on Harth Peak.

**Celery**— Haybell's dog.

**Deer Beast, The**—A Beast.

**Elem**—*ell-em*—Hayeid's third wife, a mathematician.

**Elfem**—*ell-fem*—Guard to Hayeid.

**Elma**—*ell-ma*—A young witch-in-training of Harthshore.

**Eln**—*eln*—A witch of the witchwoods.

**Ezrahel**—*ez-ra-hell*—A god.

**Giln**—*giln*—A vassal to the Thief King.

**Gin**—*geen*—Alchemist of Al Har in service to Hayeid.

**Golden Prince**— Hayeid.

**Habenon**—*ha-ben-ahn*—Bregoleth's father, a mummer.

**Habrak**—*hah-brahk*—Second to the Thief King, a lord of the Thieving Guild.

**Hachobell**—*hah-cha-bell*—A priestess of Aelet Tor.

**Hajan**—*hah-jhahn*—Term, a eunuch of Aelet Tor.

**Half Wood**— A forest south of the Thieving Guild, claimed by no Guild Kingdom.

**Han**—*hahn*—A high priestess of Aelet Tor, Aelenwe's predecessor.

**Harth Peak**—*hahrth Peak*—A peak in Harthshore.

**Harthshore**—*hahrth-shore*—The sole town of the Thieving District.

**Hascha**—*hahz-cha*—A witch-in-training in Harthshore, the cobbler's daughter.

**Haybell**— A chandler from the Shipwright's District.

**Hayeid**—*hah-yeed*—A prince of Shad aiming to unite Yokevak under one king.

**Helben**—*hell-ben*—A young witch and friend to Elma, Berrith's sibling.

**Hissing Mimic, The**— An inn in Harthshore.

**Holstaba**—*hohl-sta-ba*—A priestess of Aelet Tor, a scholar.

**Horn**— Yoevak's longest river.

**Horned Mother**— Goddess to the Hathshore Coven.

**Hustanben**—*hoo-stahn-ben*—A region in the Uuk Desert.

**Iza**—*ee-za*—Hayeid's principle wife, a politician of Shad.

**Kavos**—*kah-vohs*—A serving man at Aelet Tor, friend to Odessa.

**Kirith An**—*kee-rith ahn*—A river near Aelet Tor.

**Lobell**—*loh-bell*—A princess of the Mining District.

**Losmelon**—*lohs-me-lahn*—A priestess of Aelet Tor.

**Mag**—*mag*—Elma's older sister, Suma's daughter.

**Nalheden**—*nahl-hed-en*—Nal, a witch of the Witchwoods.

**Nazami**—*na-zah-mee*—Hayeid’s fourth wife, a mathematician.

**Odessa**—*oh-dess-a*—A priestess of Aelet Tor, Aelenwe’s death witness.

**Ojaro**th—*oh-ja-rahth*—A region in the Uuk Desert.

**Olinox**—*oh-lin-ahks*—A priestess of Aelet Tor, a scholar.

**Osh-Un**—*ohsh-oon*—A dynasty of the Old Empire.

**Pan**—*pahn*—Guard to Hayeid.

**Ran**—*ran*—Quick Fingered Ran, a vassal to the Thief King, led a coupe against the Banking District.

**Randik Lon**—**Randik Lon**—A political writer.

**Red Keep, The**— Castle of Sorisea of the Mercenary’s District.

**Rush, The**—A Beast.

**Saint of Devoted Mothers**— A saint in the doctrine of Aelet Tor.

**Sammeni**—*sahm-me-nee*—Hayeid’s fifth wife, a poet.

**Shad**—*sahd*—A city in the Jeweler’s District, Hustanben.

**Sorisea**—*soh-ri-see*—A city in the Mercenary’s District, home of The Red Keep.

**Suma**—*soo-ma*—A goat-herder in Harthshore, Elma’s mother.

**Summer Prince, The**— Hayeid.

**Talowell**—*tah-loh-well*—A priestess of Aelet Tor.

**Tathia**—*tah-thee-a*—A witch of the Witchwoods.

**Tetheb**—*te-theb*—A vassal to the Thief King.

**Tolk**—*tohlk*—A farmer near Aelet Tor.

**Tulk**—*tulk*—A sweet alcohol distilled from stone fruits.

**Uuk**—*ook*—A desert.

**Uum**—*oom*—An occultist.

**Watchfire Hill**— A hill in Harthshore, used for many of the Harthshore Coven’s rituals.

**West**— King of the Thieving District.

**Wimble-rush**—The Rush.

**Witch Mother**— Leader of the Harthshore Coven.

**Yarrowroke**— A town in the Bridge Builder’s District and group of mercantile boaters.

**Yeilandali**—*yay-lahn-da-lee*—A princess of the Mining District.

**Yoevak**—*yoh-e-vahk*—The continent.

**Yoros**—*yoh-rohs*—A region in the Uuk Desert.



# *The Independent Cooperative Guild Kingdoms of Yoevak*

## *The Craft Guilds*

Mining	Hunters
Lumber	Plumbing
Shipwrights	Street Cleaners
Spice	Scriveners
Textiles	Vinters
Farming	Shepherds
Potters	Botanists
Sailing	Locksmiths
Builders	Florists
Cooking	Tea
Bookbinding	Cartographers
Metal Working	Rope Makers
Herding	Stable
Carpenters	Carters
Masons	Glassmakers
Weavers	Morticians
Dyers	Perfumers
Tanners	Bridge Builders
Bakers	Washing
Cobblers	Navigation
Tailors	Paper Makers
Apothecaries	Hounds
Chandlers	Tinkers
Arms	
Surgeons	
Brewers	
Couriers	

## *The Coin Guilds*

Merchants  
Banking  
Solicitors  
Minters

## *The Artisan Guilds*

Jewelers  
Painters  
Playwrights  
Dancers  
Musicians  
Poets  
Sculptors  
Writers  
Gaming

## *The Scholar Guilds*

Astronomy  
Mathematicians  
Record Keeping  
Chemists  
Linguists

## *The Low Guilds*

Mercenaries  
Thieving  
Pirates  
Whoring  
Street Cleaners  
Gambling  
Assassins  
Beggars  
Servants  
Orphans

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## Tuscany Yellow and the Thief King: A Queer Fantasy Novel-Part One

*Tuscany Yellow* came in fragments. In the beginning I didn't have a world or a story, or even characters. What I had were pieces. I had poems I had scribbled between my notes in a freshman geology class, images of priestesses dwelling deep in damp caves, a castle I built in Minecraft, and a name; I had the name Tuscany Yellow, and I wanted to know who she was. As it happens, *Tuscany Yellow* turned out to be a story of fragments and Tuscany Yellow turned out to be a name belonging to more person than one. When I talk about *Tuscany Yellow*, and what I'm trying to accomplish with this kind of narrative, I've often said that fantasy, as a genre, lacks substantial queer representation, and I wanted to write a fantasy with queer character to see what it would look like. This is wholly true, but it doesn't have the heart of my goal.

I grew up loving fantasy. My sister is ten years older than me, and I, possessing a temperament as a child to pester and to bother her however I could, was quieted if she would read to me aloud whatever book she was carrying. So, between the ages of three and eight or so she would read me Weis and Hickman, Tolkien, Lewis, Lloyd Alexander and Anne McCaffrey. I was three and we'd play that we were the dragon-riders on Pern fighting the thread that threatened the planet. I was four and she'd read to me in the hospital. I was six and drifting in a floaty in my friend's pool listening to stories I'm not convinced I understood, but know that I loved to hear. I grew older but I never stopped loving these worlds that I eventually realized had little space in them for girls like me.

There were no queer women, and when it stopped being something I could take for granted, it was confounding. An integral part of reading fantasy is entering a world that some part of you wants to stay in, to be a part of, to linger in, and readers need to be able to see themselves in those worlds to know that they can go there. I wanted to make a world where it was explicitly clear that queer narratives were important here, that queer people and their stories could exist at the forefront of a narrative without losing anything about fantasy that I think we love. There's magic and witches, things deep and dangerous living in the woods, beasts old and great beyond the scope of man, there are heroes, and there's beauty too, I think. In this way, my goal has been simple, but I don't think that makes it unimportant.

Though the novel isn't nearly done, as this portion is likely just about a fifth or a sixth of the story in total, coming into it as a complete work, I hope to do several things. Aside from continuing with it as a queer story, I want *Tuscany Yellow* to have a focus on written texts, healing, and hero-building. The found-texts that begin each chapter are ultimately texts attributed to Tuscany Yellows across time. Whether poems or treatises, stories or recipes, each text has a narrative quality no matter what it is. The dill bread recipe beginning Bregoleth's interlude chapter is, in its own way, a story, much as the poetry verses beginning Elma's chapters tell something of a larger narrative. There are stories in all kinds of texts, and writing, nearly of any kind, tells its reader a narrative to a greater or lesser extent.

As demonstrated by Elma and Beni's encounter with Uum, and Bregoleth's inability to fight the body directly without setting a trap, witchcraft in this world isn't designed for combat. Most witchcraft is used primarily for medicine and other methods of healing. This becomes significant with Hayeid's war-camp looming beyond the mountains. The story is violent. As it's occupied in many places with the physical body, and harm done to that body. I hope it becomes significant later on that Elma doesn't learn to fight, she doesn't learn to kill, rather, she learns to heal, and in a similar way Hayeid will choose not to go to war, and that will be his bravest choice.

Fantasy is a genre that makes heroes. Frodo and Sam aren't extraordinary because they help win a war, they're extraordinary because they remain kind and loving in the face of war. The farm-boy turns king trope is only appealing if it speaks to something that says that common people can do great things by being kind and brave and good. However, the trope runs into an issue today when the stories stay focused on the reluctant young boy that has had so many stories already told about him being worthy of becoming a hero, and so few told about girls, or people of color, or queer people becoming those same kinds of heroes.

I think being able to see oneself in a fantasy novel, at any age, can be a powerful thing, because ultimately, so many fantasy stories are about choosing to be kind and loving in the face of great fear, and becoming strong because they choose to do so. This choice is something nearly everyone encounters, but through the genre's poor representation, only a small group of people are encouraged that they can do so. *Tuscany Yellow*, as a semi-historic hero of folklore, becomes a kind of mantle that people have chosen to assume over the years, claiming the name for themselves as they come to do great, heroic things. *Tuscany Yellow* is not just one person, but

anyone who chooses to take on her name, as we hope Elma will someday do. Though she's clumsy, and lazy, and hopelessly gay, Tuscany Yellow is a name she too can come to wear.

Tuscany Yellow is by no means the first fantasy work to include queer characters, and I owe my inspiration to many works in several mediums. To cite a few chief influences, *The Death Gate Cycle* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman was the first fantasy I really ever read and was the first world I loved. Brandon Sanderson and Patrick Rothfuss have had a profound impact on my writing, Sanderson demonstrating playful worldbuilding and Rothfuss lovely, lyrical writing less concerned with getting someplace, and more with having time to stay there. Ursula K. LeGuin has been a recent influence on writing queer, feminist fantasy. Lastly for now, CLAMP, a group of four Japanese women celebrated for their beautifully rendered and narratively immense manga, has been the single greatest influence on my writing queer characters in fantasy. They were the first to show me it could be done.

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