

DARK LANTERN

by

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Abstract

In many ways the fantasy genre of literature precedes the concept of literature itself. People looked at the world doing weird and wacky things and said, “Surely there’s a story that can explain why this happens.” From there you have gods, nymphs, warrior kings, sorcerers; oral traditions become written narratives become plays become films and comics and animations. Next thing you know, everyone has a Dungeons and Dragons podcast and John Constantine is having sexual relations with a shark man. That’s life.

My thesis takes the form of a novel, tentatively titled *Dark Lantern*, and concerns the misadventures of Claudia Childs and her mentor, Meryl Bone, as they encounter an ancient and dangerous relic from the lost histories of their crumbling empire. It’s fantasy, it’s action, it’s horror, comedy, camp, inspired by subgenre’s galore, and you bet your breeches it’s gay. *Dark Lantern* is both an homage to the fantasy literature I loved reading as a child and an attempt to rehabilitate a genre that has, let’s say, alienated a significant portion of the population. By engaging with the genre through a creative text, *Dark Lantern* is an opportunity to illustrate not only my academic sensibilities, for which an essay would be sufficient, but also the creative capacity to produce my own work that effectively executes familiar fantasy expectations while also maneuvering the pitfalls that mar it.

Foreword: Let Me Explain Myself

Indulge me.

There is a certain magic that comes with the phrase, “I’m working on my thesis.” With fellow students it’s a power move, a threat, a reminder of college mortality. Professors respond with excitement and admiration: a sign that a student is taking their academics seriously, to the point of undertaking a major project. The most valuable is the way it allows for one to avoid the well intentioned invasive questions of family. Yeah, I’m doing something with my life, I’m working on my thesis. Sure, that’ll help me find a job and pay off student loans I think.

My thesis presented something of an academic crossroads. I have for a long time felt a pull towards creative writing: my original major and college choice reflected that. But my first literature class made me think, “Hey, I could do this for the rest of my life and not want to blow my brains out.” I’m fairly certain those words flickered through my mind verbatim. So when I transferred schools I also changed my major to reflect this revelation, and now I am on the precipice of graduating with an English Literature major and I am satisfied with that. A natural thesis topic under this major would have been a just banger academic essay about a book or a series, a certifiable smorgasbord of analysis and citation and cross referential material. I still have that in me, and I want to do that sometime in the future, but my thesis as it is in front of you is not that; my thesis is a novel. It’s intention is to showcase both my academic awareness of literature, specifically genre fiction and even more specifically fantasy literature, while also illustrating a creative capacity. It says, “Not only do I know this genre, but I can execute a text that satisfies it.” It’s a challenging decision, it’s a masochistic decision, and it’s my favorite kind of decision of all: the decision not to decide.

This foreword is my opportunity to explain myself, part villainous monologue and part detective putting all the pieces together. Death of the author is all well and good but I'm hardly an author just yet: I am a self-important undergraduate and you are the poor, innocent fool who started to read the foreword rather than jumping into the text itself. You've fallen right into my trap, dear reader, so we might as well get into it.

I love the fantasy genre. I always have, really. Heroes with swords, ancient magic, curses and dragons and fairies. That was always my shit. But growing up and learning to read and watch and think critically, it was hard not to come away from the genre disillusioned. While I had found escapism and power in these stories, it was a doorway not open to everyone, and which plenty of people found to be outright unwelcoming. Gender, race, queerness, ability, class-- anything that exists in our world emerges in a fantasy setting, whether the author is aware of it or not, and oftentimes the things that make us human become damnable aberrations that make sure not everyone has a place in the genre.

I love fantasy, but I don't want to be a part of that, and the decisions I've made in the process of crafting *Dark Lantern* are meant to reflect that. I wanted the setting to feel accessible to anyone, which is pretty much impossible, but I will settle for western audiences, as my progressive tendencies are ultimately and understandably mired in my experiences.

So let's talk gender! Specifically the representation of women in fantasy, which tends to vary a whole lot. While we've come a long way from the limited dichotomies of witch/princess, there's still a lot of messy, albeit fascinating presentations of women in fantasy. There's only so much academic outrage one can muster before going, "Okay wait, that's actually quite interesting in its weirdness." Personally I find the skimpy

armored warrior lady trope to be funny but only if there's an equally exposed man. It's equality Arianna Grande.gif. I generally try to just approach women as like, people or whatever, and I wanted the setting to reflect that. What I hope to achieve is a setting where women feel less like objects or political tools and more just like the natural inhabitants of their environment. This frequently involves presenting women as just as careless, funny, kind, and utterly, hopelessly useless as any man or nonbinary person. Relationships between women in particular fascinate me. Maybe it's an overhang of my fixation on the Bechdel test, but I think there's something really interesting in the way women engage with each other in media. Like women characters in general, or as it is with any character that deviates from the expected protagonist, there is no way to present this without it being charged. Women in media cannot exist without it being some sort of political statement, and the same is of people of color, queer people, mentally ill people, disabled people, etc. etc.. There is an innate and unquestionable existence in texts that only a slim character archetype is afforded, and my writing seeks both to expel this and exploit it.

Consider, for example, the relationship between Claudia and Meryl. There's nothing especially unusual about it, and in fact the student and mentor archetypes are popular in fantasy literature! *The Last Apprentice*, *Magyk*, *H*rry P*tter*, *The Alchemist*, they feature this dynamic with the protagonist at the center. The only real difference is that both are women, but it does affect the general vibe of the text. Also there aren't nearly enough old women in fantasy, what's up with that? Regardless, the dynamic is familiar, but the charge built into their relationship allows for it to feel fresh. My hope is that humanity shines through in these characters, just as chaotic and lovely as it is in life.

And we really can't talk about gender without talking about race; the two are attached at the hip, and especially when it comes to representing people of color, it's important to remember that what is empowering for some is not for all. Fantasy tends to be an overwhelmingly white genre. Eurocentricity reigns supreme in the genre, which is understandable! In many ways fantasy authors are just slurping up the scraps left by Tolkein, who as a British author, surprise surprise, used his culture and folklore and history as the foundation for much of his world. The influences of history and geography have left remarkable impressions on the landscape of the fantasy genre, to the point that there is a term for that vaguely-European secondary world: Fantasy World 24. Writers write what they know, and when it comes to the fantasy genre, that means that there is a tendency to accidentally recreate Europe by means of geography, and through geography, race. Creators may not say, "Yeah, this was inspired by France or Germany or whatever," but there will be features recognizable to those regions, will be solely populated by white people, and will essentially recreate a vague blend of Europeness. And if there is an awareness of the world well then by God it will feature some mysterious Eastern empire or the brown-skinned people in robes across the desert. This has been a particular issue in more visual mediums, in which the presence of people of color is challenged as inauthentic, historical revisionist pandering, or, my personal favorite, sjw bullshit. Never you mind the presence of potatoes and dragons, it's the Black people that make this setting highly unrealistic. Those people of color who exist in these settings are reduced to a state of otherness. Tamora Pierce is somewhat infamous for her hackneyed representation of North West Asian cultures, for example, and the white savior nonsense going on with Daenerys in later seasons of *Game of Thrones* left a bad taste in the mouths of many. Naomi Novik's recent novel, *Uprooted*, springs to mind. The setting is heavily

influenced by Polish culture, which translates naturally into the environment in the form of just a ton of white people, to the point that the introduction of a Black character, Alosha, feels significant. Alosha is a cool character, she's powerful, she's influential, and she's been forging a magic sword with the power to slay an ancient evil for the past 100 years-- what's not to love? Her backstory: she and her mother were slaves.

Seriously, Naomi Novik? What the fuck?

This is a book published in *2015*! I'm not saying that the inclusion of slavery is utterly unacceptable in fantasy, but in the process of having a singular Black character be inherently tied to slavery, it makes the text phenomenally alienating. This is not to speak of the quality of the text, which is otherwise fairly solid (I could write another foreword about this but I will restrain myself), but the way this small detail creates an inescapable link of real-world trauma is unfortunately hostile for readers of color.

As a white kinda-sorta man, conversations about race are avoidable in my texts. I could comfortably avoid exploring race in my settings because my identity is treated as a baseline. But that's a privilege that is not afforded for authors of color, who will always be expected, in some way, to present a perspective on race. And the fact of the matter is, no statement on race *is* a statement on race.

The risk then becomes a fine balance of real-world raciality and what I like to call fantasy racism™. Fantasy racism™ is where an author has neglected to include people of color but it's okay! They still let you know racism is bad by having the elves experience discrimination because three centuries ago they caused a natural disaster and that is, of course, totally the same thing as the social construct of race in our world.

What these well-intentioned authors misunderstand is that race *is* constructed. That is not to imply that it is not real, but that it is something which is enforced through

social and structural interaction. It is a social concept that is invented for the sake of power. Elves are different.

They're different.

Fantasy racism™ emerges out of an inherent difference between fantasy races. If a species of people has the capacity to live for centuries or turn invisible or fly then like, hell yeah, those are a different kind people and the response to them will be complicated. But in the absence of people of color it just seems like a really sloppy metaphor that fails to take into account that the difference in real world races is something that is social rather than genetic.

These solutions are complicated. Recently there has been a surge in demand to let stories about people of color be told by creators of color, and that's understandable. There are nuances to these experiences that are often overlooked or underestimated by people of different backgrounds, and especially once we start getting into elements of cultural significance there is the risk of overstepping and genuinely causing harm. My own trepidation cannot be overstated. Good intentions do not mitigate harm, unfortunately. That being said, a fear of engagement, and a refusal to engage, is neither healthy nor productive. I would rather try my damndest and make mistakes and improve from there than never try at all. When everyone has a different idea as to what the morally correct thing to do is, it is important to take a moment to self reflect, do some reading, and simply do your best.

So I have a little bit of fantasy racism™, sure. The mash'him and the chol'alm, for example, aren't granted citizenship in Thalassa. Which is bad because racism bad, sure, sure. But the people of color in my setting, Claudia, Natasha, Kirabo, etc., aren't subjected to the discrimination that we would recognize, because I would like for the

setting to feel welcome for readers. The concept of the other is largely unavoidable: structures of power rely on scapegoats; someone must be on the outside in order to define the inside. But that doesn't mean I have to shaft real life marginalized people to do that. I want for people to be able to read my text and imagine themselves in my world without going, "Wow, would love to be hate-crimes there."

An extension of this tries to grapple with the troubling implications of the Light vs. Dark dichotomies that plague much of fantasy as a genre. The association of light with good and dark with evil has been a reductive element of fantasy for a long time. It's ingrained at this point! And this presentation of dark as being inherently bad is the same sort of thing that drives colorism in real-life marginalization. It's the same narrative crutch that associates villainy with mental illness or disability or queer identity.

Now I know what you're thinking: "Um, it's the *Dark Lantern*? What are you doing that's different?" And that's a fair thought, I'm glad you're having that thought. Critical thinking win. The text grapples with a duality of darkness through Maramothe, the goddess of darkness and healing, and her aspect, the twisted manifest version of herself which remains sealed within the lantern. In its current form *Dark Lantern* has not quite gotten to these revelations, so I am cheating here a little, but the goddess of darkness is a productive actor and a benevolent one. Darkness, rather than a function of fear and evil within my setting, is one of peace, origins, and creation. Maramothe is the god responsible for granting mortals soul, whereas her aspect, who has emerged from the reviled imagination of the continent, consumes them and twists them into something else. Again, it is something that tries both to operate within these expectations and to challenge them. Darkness, despite the negative association it has developed through centuries of

storytelling, is inherently neutral. My (eventual) positive assertions of it are intended to combat connotations of it.

My work is far from perfect. My work here is not even complete. My own inadequacies are frequently clear to me, and the tasks I set for myself are likely out of reach but still worth striving for. I hope that my work, in whatever way it can, can mean something.

Thank you for indulging me.

Ch.1

What had started as a hot, sunny day was now rainy and wet and still hot, even more so now that what little cool came from the breeze fell away to the oppressively humid air. The opening to the cavern loomed wide before Claudia, the shadows within almost reaching out beyond into the relative light of the forest around them. Even from where she stood, the smell of must and moisture and something else with an ‘m’ she couldn’t quite remember was overwhelming. In one hand she held an umbrella over her, quietly relishing the sound as it pattered against the fabric, and in the other she twisted one of her little black curls as she contemplated the task before her.

“This is going to suck, isn’t it?” she said without even turning to properly address her mentor.

Meryl Bone, said mentor, took a puff of her pipe and exhaled through her nose, sending swirling tendrils of smoke out of her nostrils. “Probably,” Meryl said, with a voice that sounded like a cello if the cello could speak and thought less of most people. She took another puff of her pipe, exhaled slowly. “But they’re only goblins. With any luck this will be a simple business and we can return to Terristown for our reward and then be on our way.”

Claudia frowned. “Can’t we stay the night in the village? I don’t want to camp again. It takes too long to get the bugs out of my hair after. We could probably get a free night in the inn if we asked.”

Another pipe puff, another slow exhale. “Perhaps. The innkeeper’s daughter was one of those taken, after all. But if she’s already dead then he might not be in a generous mood.”

“That’s fair.”

“Do you have everything? Do we need to review battle tactics before we enter? Do you remember your studies on goblins and their hierarchy? Oh and I’m sure you are well aware, but I expect you to keep that wild magic under wraps. This is to be by the book,” she tapped the cover of her spellbook at her side for emphasis. “Approved spells only.”

Claudia hated by the book, almost as much as she hated listening to her mentor go over things again and again like some parrot or a pull-string doll with three phrases. But she had learned by now she wasn’t going to convince the dreaded Meryl Bone to let her have fun, so she humored her with as much teen-angst that she felt would be appropriate for the situation. Enough to be mildly funny and subversive to their task, but not enough to prompt one of her hour-long lectures.

“I packed everything on the list. I remember tactics A through N, but honestly tactic H isn’t my cup of tea and I don’t remember tactic K. Goblins are simple minded and easily manipulated, so if they’re kidnapping villagers then there’s probably someone or something smarter behind it. Probably a hob-goblin. As for wild magic,” she said with a wink, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Meryl eyed her apprentice with a faint disapproval and took a final, lasting inhale of her pipe, before pouring out the still-lit contents of it onto the damp forest floor.

“I know this seems beneath you, but I need you to take this seriously. In this line of work there is no job so simple that you are free of danger, especially when you’re wielding magic, and even more so if you’re wielding wild magic. I don’t care how good you are at it. If you die here I am not going to be dragging your body across the Empire in hopes of finding some Magi-forsaken resurrector. Do you want to die in the goblin cave that smells of mildew?”

“Oh! that’s the word I couldn’t remember,” her eyes suddenly bright with revelation. “And, uh, no. That sounds gross,” she added with an irreverent laugh which suggested to Meryl that she had not, in fact, been paying attention.

Meryl reached into her endlessly large bag and pulled out a floating orb of pink light in a small golden cage, which darted around in glee as Meryl replaced its cage.

“Do you have your focus? Your dagger?”

Claudia nodded, touching the ring on her finger. “Right here. And I fixed my swingin’ dagger in my boot so I can get it if I’m in a tight spot.”

“Excellent. Now let’s get going.”

With the fairy light fluttering around them, the mentor and her student descended from the wet woods and into the darkness of the cavern. With every step, the air grew colder and even damper somehow than the woods outside, soaked in rain as they were. A general sense of unease permeated the air of the cavern, broken occasionally by the thin sound of water dripping from the stalactites above onto the looming puddles. No longer did it seem to come from one direction, but rather it surrounded the two as they walked. Further within.

Before long the silence of the cave was broken by the distinct sound of a goblin’s cry, something between a cat’s yowl and the noise one hears when they gargle mouthwash, and Meryl held up a hand, signalling Claudia to stop. The cry was answered by a chorus of others in response, each yowling in their strange, indiscernible language.

“They sound like they’re just around the corner,” Meryl whispered. “I want you to stay back and observe for right now. You can take care of the next bunch if you pay attention.”

Claudia frowned. “They’re goblins. I can handle them just fine.”

“This isn’t a negotiable lesson, Claudia. Just wait here.”

Meryl pulled from her endlessly large bag her focus: a crystal ball that channeled her magical energy into the spells she cast. Leaving the scowling Claudia, Meryl rounded the corner. A cluster of six goblins stood at the other end where the path split, little gray creatures no taller than three feet, with disproportionately large ears and solid yellow eyes that never seemed to focus on anything. Each had a sharp, triangular face, and wore a random assortment of clothes, which had once, perhaps, belonged to children.

As soon as Meryl turned the corner, one of the goblins, who wore tiny overalls and two mismatched socks, let out a screech and pointed to her. The other goblins followed suit, and the group scurried towards her with their daggers drawn and gleaming in the pink glow of the fairy light. Her crystal ball held at arm's length in front of her, Meryl called out a word of sorcery and three red-hot bolts of flame burst from the orb and shot with deadly precision towards the goblins. The bolts sailed through the air with a whistle of heat, briefly illuminating the walls of the cave before crashing into the first approaching goblins with a burst. These first three of the unfortunate creatures spilled over their feet, the momentum of their assault colliding with that of the bolts and their winning just enough to tumble to the floor, smoldering. While this would have given any reasonable person pause, it is important to remember that goblins are neither reasonable nor persons, so it stands to reason that their compatriots continued to sprint towards Meryl, climbing over the bodies of their allies to reach her in the narrow corridor. They did not make it, naturally, and like their fellow goblins fell to a splash of *firebolts* that took them off their feet before they could say “roasted” in that gargling language of theirs. Meryl replaced the orb in her bag without a second look at the creatures.

“You can come out now, Claudia.” Claudia marched out from behind the corner and into the soft light of the fairy light, eyeing the scorched little corpses. Her nose wrinkled at the acrid smell of burnt goblin flesh, which was a bit like pickled onion pie, which was thankfully made illegal in Thalassa by Emperor Olympie Ignatius in 2247 but was still sometimes served in rural taverns out of spite. “The important thing is to stay calm and think clearly. A sorceress can take on anything with a strong mind and the right spells.”

Claudia nodded, her eyebrows raised in admiration. “That was fast. *Firebolt?*”

Meryl nodded in affirmation. “Cantrips are your greatest weapon. Never miss an opportunity to conserve magical energy. Extending yourself beyond your limit can kill you. I’ve known many talented sorcerers who spent themselves past their limit and paid the price for it.”

“I love how ominous that is,” Claudia said, grinning widely in the pink light. “Don’t even tell me what happened, I want to find out for myself.”

An icy look from Meryl cut her humor down like a woodcutter a tree. “No, you do not. Stop being foolish and let’s be on our way.” She turned quickly on her heels from her apprentice, her face set like a statue in the gloom, as Claudia stood there both confused and ashamed in the dark.

No, that wouldn’t do. She shook her head a bit and gave her cheeks two wet, cool pats, forcing the grin back into place, more determined than before as she strolled behind Meryl. “Don’t forget, you said I get the next bunch.” Her soles slapped loudly against the damp as she trotted up to her. “I’m excited. I’m glad to be out in the field with you and out of the classroom. Even if we’re in this smelly cave.”

The lines on Meryl's face eased as much as her lines ever did and the sharpness returned to her eyes. "That's good," she said, turning to face Claudia. "But don't get too sentimental here: this is a mission, after all. There's lives at stake. And money. Spirits know I need a new pair of boots," she said, tapping her heel against the damp floor of the cavern.

The two continued on their way through the tunnels, the fairy light dashing around them like a cat on catnip, until they reached a fork in the cavern that split to the right and left.

"Where should we go now?" asked Claudia. "We went left last time, should we just keep making lefts until we find where we're going?"

"Claudia, that's wildly imprudent. It would be much more efficient to--"

She cut off then, her brow furrowing in a sudden concentration. "There's something coming," she said, taking Claudia by the arm, "from the right path. The aura is shifting, I can feel it." With her hand still clasped firmly around her apprentice's arm, she pulled her into the left path so that they were no longer in view of anyone coming from the right.

Claudia frowned. "I can't feel anything."

"It's subtle. You'll have to work with magic a bit more before you can detect small changes like this."

Resisting the bristling frustration, Claudia pushed forward a grin. "Let me handle this, Meryl. You got the last one, it's only fair."

"I don't think that's wise. The footsteps are too heavy to be goblin, and going up against an enemy we don't know is an unnecessary risk."

“Meryl,” Claudia said, speaking slowly and clearly, putting all the charm and reason she could muster into her voice, “I have to take things on by myself sometime. You won’t always be there, and I need to practice.”

Meryl’s face was stony, unreadable, but at last she sighed and said, “Alright you can handle this one, but I’ll be right here in case something goes wrong.”

“Don’t worry,” Claudia said, “it won’t.”

Claudia positioned herself right where the path split so that she could hear the approach of whatever it was that Meryl was so uptight about. She twisted the silver band, her focus, her heart pounding with excitement. Finally, a chance to show what she could do.

There they were! The footsteps. They sounded alone, which meant she had only one target. She could live with that. Their feet padded along the floor, wet and fleshy, getting closer and closer. Finally Claudia couldn’t stand it any longer, and she leapt from her hiding place and into the corridor, her hand outstretched, a sorcerous word on her lips, but there wasn’t a monster in the hallway. It was an old woman, a gaunt old thing with pale skin and a sagging face, and long lanky hair that seemed to barely take hold of her scalp. She was dressed in tattered rags that might have once been robes, and when she saw Claudia she smiled, showing off a row of crooked, jagged teeth.

Claudia felt the magic in her veins come to a full stop. Was this one of the captives? The guildsman had said one of the victims was an old woman after all.

“I’m sorry about that,” Claudia said, laughing awkwardly, “I thought you were--” she broke off. Maybe telling this woman she almost blasted she thought she was a monster would not make for a very good first impression. “Well, nevermind. Are you okay?”

Meryl poked her head around the corner and narrowed her eyes at the poor woman, then widened in sudden recognition. “Claudia, wait--”

“It’s fine,” she said, approaching the woman. “Look, she needs our help.”

But the old woman sprung forward and grabbed Claudia by her jaw, lifting her up into the air with one hand. Gods, she was strong!

The old woman gave a gleeful cackle. “I thought I sniffed out some magic here. Odd that it’s coming from a little mouse like you.” She looked Claudia straight in the face with her horrid eyes, the yellowing whites and the black irises, and Claudia realized her mistake. The old woman was a hag, a powerful monster with supernatural strength, speed, and magic. She thought she was just an ugly old woman.

“Drop the girl, and perhaps I won’t tear you limb from limb.” Meryl stood to full height, already emerged from her hiding spot and her crystal ball again drawn from her bag. She glared at the hag, rage burning in her eyes.

The hag grinned. “If you insist, darling.” She let Claudia drop, but before she hit the ground, a magical force enveloped her body and sent her barreling into Meryl, and the two smashed into the cavern wall, the latter giving a sudden gasp of pain as her head cracked against it. The two fell to the floor, and Meryl’s stunned body slumped over Claudia, who was, at the moment, experiencing a whirlwind of fear and shame. Her stomach felt like a ball of yarn being batted around by a cat that was also a goblin that also hated her personally. The fairy flittered about her in apparent distress. I cannot speak for the fairy light personally.

The hag padded over to them, slowly. “Now this is more interesting. I’m guessing this one,” she said, poking Meryl’s face with a ghastly toe, “is the one I felt. Yes, she seems much more seasoned.” She put her fingers to her thin, chapped lips and let out a

piercing whistle that echoes through the cavern. With a gnarled, wrinkled hand she reached out and plucked Claudia's ring from her finger, despite the best of her thrashing. She studied it a moment ran it beneath her nose like smelling a fine wine. "Your focus? Very nice. I rather prefer bracelets myself though."

Claudia breathed heavily, wanting so bad to say something witty back but incapable of coming up with anything funny.

A small horde of goblins arrived as the hag purloined Meryl's crystal ball from the floor. "Take the big one to Harrison," she commanded, "and take the other to my quarters. I could use a snack."

Chills coursed through Claudia's body at that notion. She, for one, did not feel very tasty at that moment. The hag's magic once again seized Claudia as the goblins bound her hands and feet and stuffed a cloth in her mouth which tasted, concerningly, a little like chicken. Carrying her above them, the goblins took off down one of the cavern paths, the fairy light darting after them, dancing with concern. Claudia rolled her head back and watched as the hag and the goblins dragged Meryl with them, and tried to shake the sinking feeling of guilt.



Meryl awoke in a cell in the cavern to an amazingly painful headache. She forced herself to sit up, and pushed until her back was against the wall, willing herself to ignore the feeling of her damp robes clinging to her tunic, her tunic to her skin. Thrones, what a pounding in her head. A voice broke through the pain, calm and rumbling, with a thick accent that clearly identified him as Baccian.

"Hey there, glad to see you're up, but you should take it slow, okay? Here, I'm going to rest you back down, okay?"

A strong hand grasped her shoulder, but she pushed it roughly back, her eyes flashing open in anger. “Don’t touch me,” she snapped, her eyes squinting against what felt like the light of the sun. It was still dark, she was still in the cave, but the sting of the blow made everything behind her eyes burn. She blinked rapidly, trying to push the pain back like the hand. Dimly she saw the figure before her, a human man, perhaps in his twenties, with tan skin and a nose that looked like it had seen better days. His hair was cut close to his head and he had serious brown eyes that seemed immediately trustworthy and that Meryl naturally suspected. “Give me a moment, get back.” Feebly, she reached her hands around her hoping to grab hold of her bag, or better yet her focus, but there was nothing in reach.

“You’ve been badly hurt,” the man said patiently, “you need to lie down, okay?”

While the cell itself was dark, light spilled in from the room next to it, giving her an opportunity to force through the ache of her head and take stock of her surroundings. The cell was small, but easily large enough for her and the four others that were kept there with her. It looked to be carved from the cavern wall, separated from the adjoining room only by several iron bars and a cell door, locked, she assumed, although she planned to at least try it. Piles of hay crowded the corners to serve as pitiful beds, and from the presence of several dirtied plates it seemed that the captives, although not in the most luxurious conditions, were at least being cared for. That was good. This was not the worst spot Meryl had found herself in. Bracing her hand against the slick wall she started to push herself to her feet, but the man once again placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back down with little effort. He repeated the same sentence, this time in the Baccian language. “I heard you the first time,” Meryl snapped.

His brows dove towards his eyes in a scowl. “Then listen to me,” he said, not unkindly but a bit too authoritative for Meryl’s taste. She noted with some distaste the muted brown robes and iconography that identified him as a cleric of Charodyne. “You’re of no good if you pass out again, so just cool your heels and wait a bit. Then you can go back to galavanting as you’d like.”

“You’re wasting your time, Rom,” one of the other captives, an older man in academic robes. Ink stained the side of his hand and he had a somewhat underwhelmed countenance, like a man who had ordered food from a fine restaurant and found that, while it was alright, it was certainly not all that it had been talked up to be. Across from him sat a young halfling girl whose wide eyes seemed both to take in all of her surroundings and reflect them like two dark mirrors, although if she registered any of it she gave no indication. “If the woman wants to throw herself against the bars you may as well let her. I’m sure our captor’s patience will run out soon enough and we’ll be dead either way.”

“Well at least you haven’t lost faith,” quipped Meryl. So, these were the captives the Terristown quester sent them to rescue. On the one hand, Meryl was glad to find them in one piece. Rescue missions had the tendency to go awry, and more often than not she had stormed into some dungeon or lair only to find her charges already dead or worse, and the fact that they were not only alive but apparently in relatively good health was a step above many of her adventures. On the other hand, she now found herself among them, which was far from ideal.

“Please,” called a voice from the adjoining room, “I have no interest in killing you.” A shadow passed over when little light peered through the bars and Meryl found standing over them a pale man in dark purple and blue robes. They were not the gaudy

robes of a nobleman, but they were decidedly more elaborate than her own purposely simple robes, with several dark braided cords hanging from his cloak and small silver images woven throughout, and the emphasized shoulders that came from much of Thalassa's more fashionable society. Although she was not intimately familiar with it, it was a costume that seemed to derive more from an organization than personal tastes, something like the Postmasters or even the robes that Rom wore. Indeed, the outfit didn't suit him. As she got a closer look at his face, broad and bland like a slice of bread with too much crust, she recognized a placidity that suggested that, although he may be leading the goblins, he was hardly the grand schemer here. She was quickly proven right. "I am under strict orders to keep you all in good condition," he continued, a bit of resentment coloring his words. "Dead is hardly 'good condition,' although it would make my job a bit easier on the whole." He leveled his gaze at Meryl, a smug sort of gleam in his eye. "I would say you made a good attempt but I would be lying."

As much as Meryl wanted to challenge that statement or even return with some scathing remark, she had to admit she was right. She and Claudia had not been in the cavern for more than a half hour before they had been overtaken. Her stomach churned with the sudden flood of realization. Claudia was not in the cell with her. The last thing she remembered was confronting that hag and then being thrown back and then everything going black. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious, or what could have happened in the meantime. "Where is my apprentice?" she asked, keeping her voice steady and cool.

His broad crust face widened with a smirk. "The little girl? I'm pretty sure Aconite took her away for a snack. She seemed to think that you were the more important of the two and, well, it is a rather small cell."

The stomach churning worsened. Meryl clenched a handful of hay in her fist, the sting of its stem biding the combination of rage and guilt. She felt cold. Claudia! Oh, she would hate to be eaten by a hag. Most people did, but Claudia especially. Rom placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off. She did not know this man and certainly would not be accepting his pity. It would get her nowhere. Meryl set her mouth and regarded the dark robes man with a cold, almost detached gaze. As one would expect of such a placid man, that stupid smirk of his faltered beneath her glare. The instant his power was challenged he hesitated. Quickly, almost without thinking it seems, his hand lifted from where it hung at his side to the dagger set in his belt, gripping it with a white knuckle firmness. His face slackened a bit with the comfort of its touch, and the same smirk slid into place. It was a tacky thing, the dagger, its pommel engraved with a skull, its jaw open wide for what looked to be a polished black opal, or perhaps a black pearl, the sort of dagger that screamed, "I belong to a necromancer with no sense of subtlety." Meryl loathed a mage whose entire personality revolved around their preferred school. To her it implied that one needed to get a hobby. Still, the tacky dagger was a sign of hope.

As a reasonable and well-seasoned sorceress, Meryl never left without an additional focus, in case her preferred crystal ball were to be separated from here. In fact, she kept thirty seven of them on her at all times. Unfortunately, all thirty seven were currently in her never-ending bag, which now sat in the chair at the table behind the dark robed man. At least he had the decency not to go through her belongings. But unless she had a focus, and made a point of connecting with it, she would have no foundation on which to build her spells, which would make her casting unstable at best, and disastrous at worst. So then the solution was simple: she needed a focus.

Which meant it was time to take advantage of the man's rather cowardly need to feel in control.

This time she did not brace herself, but rather rolled her torso forward so that she sat flat footed, and stood unattended. It was difficult, and the process made her feel light-headed, but it was important that she maintain a sense of complete control, as though she had already recovered from her injury. She strolled then towards the door, making a point to step emphatically with her heels across the uneven floor of the cave, letting the echo reverberate. He was shorter than her, now that she stood close to the bars of the door, and seemed to shrink further beneath her gaze. "If anything happens to my apprentice," she said, her voice low and clear, "I will make sure that you suffer in ways you never thought possible."

It was a fairly generic threat-- she really didn't have much to go off of and admittedly likely had a concussion, but it was enough for a man who already felt threatened by a caged sorcerer. His hand lashed out and grabbed the collar of her robe and pulled her closer, knocking her head against the rusted metal of the door. "I'm not afraid of a pathetic hedge-mage like you," he sneered, "You couldn't handle that hag, let alone someone like me." Up close she saw the wide pupils of his eyes, a black that covered the entirety of his irises. His breath smelled like the cold, like a wet winter's day where instead of snow it rains a terrible slush that spoils and rots away at everything, and he neared closer to Meryl, speaking directly into her ear with a cold, angry whisper. "I wouldn't worry about your apprentice. Once I get what I've asked for, you'll be quick to join her." He shoved her roughly back, and much to her chagrin, Meryl stumbled on that uneven floor, falling backwards into Rom, who steadied her without a word. The man in Dark Robes smiled, a genuine, callous smile that would have made a lesser person

shudder. Rom shuddered behind her, lesser than her. The man in Dark Robes spun from the door with a grand sense of purpose, and waltzed from the adjoining room through a wooden door on the other end, one which was too dark to see within. As he closed it behind him, he gave Meryl an arrogant little wave that made her itch with the desire to cut his throat.

“What in the seven hells did you do that for?” hissed Rom as the door shut. “Are you trying to make matters worse?”

Meryl regarded the man seriously. And this was the problem with priests. They always lacked imagination. From the sleeve of her robe she procured the skulled dagger and presented it to the priest, who eyed it suspiciously before his brows shot up in sudden understanding. “I plan on getting us out of here.” She turned to the little halving girl in the corner, who the whole time had been watching silently on. “An important lesson,” Meryl whispered once more stepping into the role of a mentor, “never underestimate a villain’s need to monologue.”

She chose to ignore the small cut on her ring finger she gained in the act of stealing the dagger. It was something she would deal with later.



The hags quarters were, in layman’s terms, really disgusting. Against one of the walls was a small sleeping mat, where Claudia had been tossed like a sack of garbage and left alone. Against the other wall were piles and piles of bones. Large bones, small bones, skulls and hips and femurs and fingerbones, all gleaming, all licked clean of any and all sign of life. Some of them were clearly animals, but by a considerable majority they were humanoid. Didn’t the quester say something about other people having mounted a rescue attempt before them? Maybe this was them. What was left of them. The hag stood at a

large cauldron of water, stroking the fire beneath it. It was taking her quite some time, the rain having soaked into the forest as it had, and she alternated between humming and cursing to herself. There was a small part of Claudia that took comfort in the fact that she would be cooked, although she personally thought she would taste better roasted than boiled. But she wasn't about to offer that suggestion. Claudia wondered what the best part of her would be. Certainly not her brain. It would taste stupid, she thought. Stupid and naive and weak. She felt like one of her parents' sheep that they would slaughter for festivals and holidays. They would pick the one that had gotten lost the most, or was chased by the most monsters, or the one that kept banging its head into the fence post. They would pick the sheep that wasn't likely to survive, because it wasn't smart enough to live. And that was her. Claudia was this festival's sheep. Baa baa.

She gazed absently at the fairy light that hovered above her even now. Tears welled in her eyes. Her mother would never have been in a situation like this. She was too strong, too smart. She wouldn't have mistaken a hag for an ugly but human woman, and even if she had, she had more than enough magic to deal with her. Claudia couldn't even come close. Now she was tied up, and Meryl was gone and maybe even dead, and she herself was going to get eaten by a hag which she would really hate. Tears ran freely from her eyes now, and snot dripped liquid from her nose and onto her lips, which was so gross and made her cry even harder because it made her feel pathetic. She couldn't even wipe it away with her hands bound like they were.

The fairy light floated down to her as she sniffled and sobbed. It ran along the tear streaks on her face, drying them and bathing her in its warm, pink glow. It nuzzled against her neck, and Claudia stopped her sniffing. It felt like when she was a child,

when her mother would comfort her and hold her face in her hands and kiss her forehead. She felt like a child.

Claudia realized that she was tired of that, tired of feeling like a child. She struggled against her binds with renewed energy, but to no avail. Those goblins could really tie a knot. Were they boy scouts or something?

“Stop struggling, girl,” the hag said, peering over her shoulder. The slowly growing flames illuminated her profile, the thin, serpentine nose and pointed chin. Only an idiot would have mistaken her for an old woman, Claudia lamented. On closer inspection it was obvious the fae-like influence on her features. “The muscles cook best when they aren’t so strained.”

“Well then I’m going to struggle more,” Claudia spat. She began to writhe uselessly on the bedroll to make a point that she would not be making herself a tasty meal. “Struggle struggle struggle,” she said. The hag rolled her eyes and returned to the flames.

Claudia racked her brain for some sort of solution-- what did she have that could break her out? She could try casting some sorcery, but without her focus and her spellbook she had no foundation, and wild magic was as likely to go wrong as right. If only she had kept some spare focus like Meryl always chided her to do. But Meryl also kept hers in the bag which struck her as stupid. If she were to lose the bag all those foci would be useless. If she were Meryl, she would make a point to keep an extra on her person at all times, like in one of those fancy boots of hers. Realization hit her then like a dryad throwing an apple at a girl in a blue gingham dress: the dagger in her boot! Claudia rolled into a fetal position and straining, pulled her hands under her feet and in front of her. As she brought them up, she plucked the dagger from where it hid in her boot, and

placed the hilt of it in her mouth. She held the rope that kept her hands together against the blade of the knife and began to saw away at it furiously, moving her head back and forth and her heads up and down for maximum sawing effect. Blissfully preoccupied with watching her water boil, the hag stood unaware of Claudia's escape attempt, the hiss of the flames and the bubble of the cauldron masking the sound of the fibers being torn away.

The rope finally snapped, and Claudia let out a cry of excitement that was thankfully muffled by the hilt. Pulling the knife from her mouth, she sawed through the bindings of her feet and leapt to a standing position. She snatched the fairy light from the air, tossed it down the front of her tunic, and immediately, stealth be damned, sprinted from the room, where seconds later a hiss of anger caught up to her.

“I told you not to struggle.”



Attuning to a focus was a somewhat tedious process, and it did not help that Rom and the academic continued to whisper to each other in hushed tones. Meryl's first challenge was to sever the dagger from its previous attunement, which wasn't especially difficult but did require some time and dedication. A focus was often a very individual, personal thing, and enough time with one often imprinted the artifact with some of its carrier's personality. Thankfully, the previous character's personality was nothing special, rather cowardly and insecure, desperate for a feeling of belonging. A few threats here, a persuasive promise there, was all it really took to make it abandon the dark-robed man. The entire experience was wordless, a silent engagement of wills that left her with a tacky magical dagger. In what was a similar experience, Meryl then set about attaching it to herself. This process was a bit more consistent, taking almost exactly an hour as she

slowly attached the dagger to herself piece by piece, her body, her mind, her soul, her intention. It must be a seamless connection with no room for spillage in order to ensure that when she allowed magic to flow she could link it to a sorcery foundation and execute it without mistake. As a sorcerer, the worst that would likely happen is the spell would fail, its architecture collapsing under its own weight, but were she a magician, or forbid, a pact mage, the spell could run wild and wreak terrible havoc.

But she was a bit too good for that.

When at last the final connection snapped into place, Meryl's eyes snapped open, finally silencing the two men. "It would have been a bit easier had you two not filled every moment with your ceaseless chatter." It wasn't necessarily true but she felt like shaming them just a little. The academic man flushed but Rom just scowled at her, perhaps on to her. She gave him a dry, thin smile and approached the door. Although her spell book was on the table, it was close enough, and she was strong enough, to use the spells within it to cast. With the tacky skull dagger in one hand, she raised a clenched fist and *knocked* against the bars, sending the door flying open with a shriek of metal on metal. The sound echoed throughout the cavern like a terrible thundercrack, and the sound was answered in turn by the cry of several goblins as they burst into the room, their weapons drawn. She did not waste time with cantrips now. Holding the dagger flat, she drew her fingers across the blade in a quick, striking motion, as if she were striking a flame alight, and conjured through it a *cone of flame*. A great whoosh of fire erupted from the tip of the dagger and fanned outwards towards the goblins, who stupidly ran into their fiery deaths without a moment's reflection. The scent of pickled onion pie again filled the room as their charred remains collapsed over one another, the flames receding once more into the dagger. Meryl grabbed her spellbook from the table, only for her hand to be

grasped in the tight, cold grasp of the dark robed man. His eyes were brimmed with anger, but Meryl did not miss the fear in them as well, and silently gloated at his pretension. He really had thought he could hold her in that measly cage.

“Stole my dagger, did you?”

Meryl grinned, mirroring to the best of her ability that same smirk he had given her as he left the room. “You catch on fast.” She swiped the dagger towards his throat with her free hand, but he let loose of her wrist and stepped back just in time. Behind her the other prisoners cautiously began to step out of their cell, Rom holding the little girl in his hands as she watched unblinkingly at the events that unfolded. He pressed his palm to her wide eyes, trying to spare her, but she wrested away from him, unwilling to look away. “We’ll be leaving now,” Meryl said to the DR man, a shorthand I have devised because I tire of writing “dark robed.” “You can come with us alive or I can drag your corpse into town. Frankly, the latter is more appealing to me.”

The DR man let out a sound that could only really be described as cackle-adjacent, a bit funny, a bit scared, definitely evilish. “You’re in no position to negotiate with me.” He threw his hands out in a flourish, his cords and sleeves flapping in the gesture, and with a terrible pressure, pulled his hands together in a tight ball, pulling within it all the light in the room. The torches on the walls were not extinguished, but rather siphoned, the flamelight and candles torn from their place and locked tight within his grasp. It was an all-encompassing darkness, one which drenched the very air in its void. Meryl’s mouth filled with the taste of it, her nostrils overwhelmed by its chilling scent, like rotting leaves in a winter rainfall. This was no mere sorcery, this was pact magic, this was a power called upon by some being far beyond mortal existence. And Meryl stood right in the middle of it, drowning in its depths.

Claudia shot off down the path, throwing the fairy light out of her tunic so she could see. The pink light felt silly and grotesque in the shape of her mounting fear. Oh damn it, where could she go? She took paths randomly, sprinting as fast as she could to get away from the hag, all the while her bare feet slapping against the cavern floor, getting closer and closer with each moment. It was no use, the hag was too fast, and in the split second of a path break decision, she snagged the back of Claudia's hair and pulled her to the ground.

Pain exploded across her skull as she hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of her, but she wasn't going to give up yet. Claudia swung her dagger wildly, fishing for the feeling of the dagger meeting flesh, but the hag grabbed her arms and pinned them to the ground beside her face. She sat on her chest, looming above her with her hungry eyes and her crooked grin, her hair wild, her chest rising and falling with the exertion of the chase. With a shocking strength she pulled Claudia's hands together and gripped them tight in one gnarled fist before grabbing the dagger and tossing it to the side to scitter emptily across the ground. Claudia was officially unarmed.

"You know what kid?" the hag said, her voice deep, gravelly. "It's been a really rough day. It's hard being a hag, especially a hag surrounded by incompetent, irritating little shits." She let out a low laugh, the kind you do when something's not really that funny. "So I deserve this treat. And if it makes you feel any better, know that I'm going to savor every last bite."

This did not, in fact, make Claudia feel better.

The hag's mouth grew wider, and her jaw unhinged, revealing row upon row of jagged, crooked teeth. Her breath reeked of death and blood. Claudia turned away from

her. She didn't want to watch it happen. Against the wall, just out of reach, her dagger lay. She had gotten close, and she took some pride in that. If she was going to die though, she may as well make a show of it.

Against the advice of her mentor, Claudia pulled at the spare strands of magic within her. They stood out against her consciousness like the threads of an old hand-me-down sweater, well worn, well loved, much in need of mending. In the few seconds she had left, Claudia reached out for those strands and tried to shape it into something simple, a cantrip, *mage hand*. It was a spectral hand made out of string and determination and raw magic, and it unsheathed the dagger from the floor and soared back to Claudia, embedding itself in the soft, sagging flesh of the hag's neck.

The hag was mere inches from Claudia, row upon row of rotting teeth descending towards her when the dagger struck. She let out a gurgling sound, like a goblin herself, and blood began to pool in her mouth, spilling through her teeth like a river rushing through a poorly constructed dam. It poured out and dripped onto Claudia's face as her grip loosened. This was her chance, and Claudia took it.

She wrenched her hands free of the hag's grasp and pulled the dagger from the hag's throat before stabbing it in again and again, both hands gripped tight around the handle, the *mage hand* reaching around the back of the hag's head and pulling it deeper and deeper into the blade with each thrust. At last the gurgling stopped and Claudia, considerably covered in the hag's blood, allowed herself a moment of rest. She was alive. She killed the hag and she was alive. The act of pulling together the *mage hand* had drained her considerably without her focus. With what strength she had left she rolled the hag from off of her and slowly stood to her feet. Meryl had to be around here somewhere.

As if in response to that thought, a sound like a thunder echoed through the cavern, followed by the whoosh of flames and the unmistakable scent of pickled onion pie. In spite of herself, Claudia's stomach growled. At least she had an idea of where to go.

She hurried down the corridors, the fairy light in tow, until she reached the opening to what she supposed was a room, although it was impossible to tell. The natural darkness of the cavern was nothing compared to the overwhelming blackness of the room before her. It was almost obnoxiously clear this was where Meryl was: whoever was behind this had to have done some weird evil magic thing. With a deep breath, Claudia dove into the darkness.

What struck her first was how cold it was. Any heat from the summer evaporated in the damp darkness that surrounded her. What struck her next was just *how* dark it was. The fairy light, which fluttered alongside her dutifully, shed only the dimmest of light around her. It barely even reached her feet, and the space around her was all but a mystery. Even sound seemed muted in the room, her footsteps soft, like stepping on a mattress. She approached cautiously, trying to make sure she didn't run into anything. Time felt... unfeeling. Although she had only moved a few steps she had no idea how long she had been in there. Had it been seconds? Hours? Days? Her thoughts were interrupted as she stumbled over the blackened corpses of several goblins. That was a good sign, she figured. Classic Meryl Bone. But when her mentor finally came into view it provided her with no comfort.

Meryl stood in the room, looking around fearfully, blindly. Even as the fairy light touched her face it was as though she did not register it at all. Claudia gave a cry of relief when she saw her, but Meryl did not respond, not even when Claudia reached out and

grabbed her hand. It was as though she were utterly isolated in the dark, incapable of feeling the presence of another. Her eyes, normally a smooth, dark brown, were pale and wild, darting frantically, and Claudia noticed with some surprise a sliver of dark blood that dripped from her mentor's fingertip. Where the cut originated a small flower of blackness was blossoming. Claudia wanted so badly to ask her what had happened, but no matter what she did, Meryl did not respond. She even licked her finger and put it in her ear, which always got a rise out of her in the past. It was the darkness, Claudia decided. She had to break the darkness.

It was then that she noticed the silence from before had ebbed away, subtly, but back none-the-less. From the darkness a quiet whispering emerged, steady and unfalteringly, just as nauseating as the scent of the goblin corpses. Claudia stumbled through the dark until she found the source, a man in dark robes and some pretty nice shoulderpads chanting, casting some sort of magic she did not recognize. He did not seem to see her, his eyes pale and wide, his wispy eyebrows raised in a terrible awe. On the one hand, Claudia did not know who he was. On the other, he seemed rather obviously the antagonist here and she was already on a killing streak so she may as well lean into that. She would deal with the repercussions later.

Claudia raised her dagger above her head and brought it down in a swift, arching blow, catching the man right above the collarbone. His chanting faltered but persisted, his hands wringing themselves raw with each syllable. She pulled out the dagger and brought it down again, each blow pulling from his thick, dark blood, like ink thickened with rue. It pooled out from his flesh and dribbled down his robes, staining Claudia's hands. Time ceased to exist, and there was a brief eternity where it was just Claudia, just the dagger,

just the dark robed man in the void, and the lingering approach of death. At last, Claudia pulled the dagger from his body and the whispering stopped and he fell to the floor.

In an instant, like a powerful exhale, the room was once again illuminated as the light flooded from the robed man's grasp. The prisoners blinked in the sudden light and Meryl, at last returned from the dark, recognized Claudia. Her face froze in a mixture of relief and shock, before she finally let her shoulders fall and the dagger drop from her hands. Claudia, her face and chest covered in the blood of the hag, her hands stained with that dark, thick blood of the pact mage, gave Meryl a strange, contented smile. And in the arms of the priest, the little halfling girl made her first sound since Meryl had arrived, letting out a high-pitched, horrified wail.

Ch 2.

Terristown was a modest town by Thalassan standards, some 2,000 people or so, generally dwarfed by its larger twin, Harristown, a mere day away. Local legend claimed that these towns were named after the twin brothers who founded them, but really that's no excuse. Regardless of how one felt about the name, the town had persevered since its founding during the First Ignition, featuring, in particular, the original walls that surrounded the entire town. Smooth, gray stone which towered above at three stories and arched between canopies of various historical figures, the foot of which sat unlit bronze braziers, which at one point shone with care and polish but now sat dull with soot and neglect. These walls were several feet deep in addition to their height, and, never to miss an opportunity for embellishment, embedded with stained glass windows each twice the height of a person. Although it would seem these were weaknesses in the defensibility of such walls, they were a source of pride and joy for those who lived in Terristown, a reminder that they lived in the comfort that their brilliant ancestors had carved out for them. They were also heavily reinforced. Beyond those walls the town was not of particular note, being again made of the same stone as the walls but featuring, like most residential architecture, facades of plaster painted with elaborate patterns and runes which had long since lost whatever magic embedded them.

It was a solemn walk back from the cavern. By the time they had collected all of their belongings and left the cave's opening it was just as dark outside as it was within, which did little to lift their spirits. The rain had abided somewhat by then, instead a dedicated mist more than a proper shower, but this was almost worse in some ways, falling into them not only from above but from all sides in an assault of the cold and wet. Claudia didn't even bother with her umbrella, noting with some chagrin that there was

little she could do to salvage her hair from the frizz in this state. Height of summer and chilly and wet, welcome to Thalassa.

Few words were shared among the party save for sparse introductions, which Claudia felt was understandable if not a bit disappointing. Here she had almost single handedly saved them and they had nothing to say. It wasn't as though she wanted a cake or anything (although admittedly it sounded lovely at the moment) it was just that she was feeling a bit unappreciated in the moment and that soured somewhat her already sour mood. Moreover, it certainly didn't help that when Meryl introduced herself the older man, a Douglas Pineswallow, paled considerably and stuttered out an apology for his rudeness earlier. At first Claudia had reveled vicariously in the pride-- after all, the great Meryl Bone was *her* instructor, and her successes were a promise to her own future as a sorceress. But as the man continued on and on, himself apparently a scholar or something, Claudia felt to herself a bit like a bowl of oatmeal left out on the table and gone cold before anyone noticed it. She distracted herself by twisting the focus on her finger round and round and looking alternatively at the woods around her and at the two moons that hung overhead, glowing as much as they could through the unrelenting mist. It was not a very compelling distraction. Beside her Rom carried the little halving girl, Trina, asleep in his arms, her full, mousy hair falling in front of her face, red from crying. Once he had retrieved his own focus which was, to Claudia's surprise, a cluster of wheat tied with a purple ribbon, he had placed a *sleep* miracle upon the girl and caught her as she slumped to the ground. Since then she had not made a sound, which was a vast improvement over her wailing. Claudia had hoped there would be a cute girl to rescue but Trina, while cute, was cute in the way a chicken dressed in overalls was cute. Only a little

girl. How disappointing. She instead turned her attention to the cleric who carried the overalled chicken child.

Rom had a kind sort of face from what Claudia could tell, but it was decidedly a bit simple and not particularly attractive from any conventional standards, and the somewhat plain green and brown robes fit too loosely to look as though they had been made for him, although the layer of chainmail that hung to cover his chest implied a subtle musculature that would benefit a cleric. A part of Claudia flashed with a touch of envy; clerics were lucky that armor did not disrupt their miracles the way it did sorceries. Were she to wear such armor herself perhaps she would not have so easily fallen to the hag.

But she had, in the end, killed the hag herself without the need for armor. Ha ha, hag.

“Thank you for helping us, Claudia,” Rom said, interrupting her thoughts. He was giving her a thoughtful smile that decorated his boring face fairly well and Claudia swelled with a sense of pride and recognition. *Finally*.

“Of course,” she said, beaming at the man. “I’m glad to help out.” He returned the grin but otherwise said nothing, readjusting the girl in his arms. It was enough though to improve her spirits, and the journey into Terristown was decidedly less dour for her from that point onward, although the wet air still clung to her in a relentless blanket of chill.

Eventually the party broke free of the treeline, and the road to the south gate of Terristown stood in clear view despite the weather. Two guards in military garb stood on either side of the tall gate leading into town. Or rather, one stood, a lance in hand, whereas the other leaned against the wall with her spear poking into the fire glowing in the brasier next to her. The first of these guards called out to them as they approached,

lifting a lantern high as they got closer. His face was youngish, probably early 20's, round, but closed with the astute air of someone who took himself too seriously.

“What is your business?” he barked.

“We would like to pass through, though I think that ought to be obvious,” Meryl said. “We’ve just returned with your villagers.”

The guard eyed them over sharply, his face softening at the sight of the little girl in Rom’s arms. “Ah! You have Trina. I’m glad to see that. And Rom, you’ve returned to us!” The guard clasped his arm in a gesture of warmth. “Were you able to find Gerome?” he asked, shining the lantern in the faces of the group. “I don’t see him with you.”

Rom shook his head. “I did not. I was but a few steps within the cavern before I was knocked unconscious. When I awoke I was trapped within along with Trina and Douglas here. If not for Meryl and Claudia here we would still be trapped there.” He paused for a moment. “Perhaps Gerome never made it there.”

A bit unconvincingly, the guard smiled. “Yeah, you’re right. He always was bad at finding his way. And he wasn’t alone. He’ll probably come wandering in tomorrow asking for a map for his party.” He laughed a bit and Rom returned it with a reassuring smile. Meryl pursed her lips but remained silent.

In the back of her mind Claudia remembered the corpses in the hag’s den. Were there military uniforms among them? She thought so, but wasn’t sure. It’s not the sort of thing one really takes stock of when waiting to die. Oh, what are all the other corpses wearing? Is there a dress code? So she said nothing, content that it would be for someone else to discover on their own time. Instead she basked in the glow of Rom’s words. “If not for Meryl and Claudia...” she rolled the words around in her head, relishing the

feeling of its weight in her head like a child rolling a hard earned coin in their hands, considering the weight of its potential.

“I’m sorry to have been so brusque,” the guard said, ushering the group through the smaller doors embedded in the mass of the gate. The leaning guard gave them a bored sort of wave as they passed before returning her gaze to her spear in the flame. “These are strange times.”

“They’re always strange,” Douglas said.

Claudia wondered, if times were always strange, if strange might just be normal.



“Strange times indeed,” Meryl said as she shed her robes back in their room in the inn. “There was a time when the military was a source of pride for the empire, a symbol of strength. His familiarity with that cleric is indicative of a larger issue of national identity.”

She shuffled the robe onto a hanger, which she thrust into the small closet. There was nothing inherently wrong with the inn, which was a sufficiently cozy sort of building, partially the old stone of the original building and partially new additions of local wood. It was a building with ample windows, tall, latched panes that could swing open on a less unpleasant evening, and an abundance of carpets and kitschy paintings of landscapes and side tables with cluttered knickknacks. It very much had the effect of an inn which tried so hard to be homey it became almost a satire of artificial heimlichness. Meryl had calmly purchased rooms for everyone from an extraordinarily emotional innkeeper, a rotund halfling man who would have easily been mistaken for a child himself if not for the beginnings of a bald patch and a grief-grown patch of beard. The halfling man had tried to refuse the payment but Meryl insisted. Eventually Rom, who was

apparently acquainted with the innkeep as well, was able to convince him, and they were given at last the opportunity to unpack while the innkeep prepared a special late-night meal for the returning heroes.

The idea made Meryl a bit apprehensive. Halflings weren't exactly known for their balanced meals, and she had been subject to more than one dinner featuring potatoes loaded with some pasta of some sort. A colleague of hers had once had her over for a meal that consisted of three types of deep fried grilled cheeses and ale and nothing else. She had anticipated a heart attack for dessert, which may have been more welcome than the reality of a fried cheesecake. Still, she was exhausted and hungry from what was a surprisingly harrowing adventure. When the quester had given them the details it had seemed like such a simple affair, but it was obvious the whole scheme of the goblin kidnapers was a part of something larger than she could see just then. The presence of the pact mage was a testament to that. But what was it that he wanted so badly he would team up with an unpredictable creature such as a hag? Then again, wasn't that the whole gimmick of a pact mage? Power through tenuous contracts. Which, of course, brought her unpleasantly back to the issue of Rom.

"One simply cannot trust clerics," Meryl said to Claudia, who, still dressed in her bloodied robes, scrubbed her hands in the basin of water by the window. "They present themselves as altruistic but they are beholden to beings beyond this realm." She kicked her boots off of her feet and removed a new pair from her endless bag, a sensible but bright pair of jade-colored boots, made from the leather of some monster or other. Somewhere in her bag was a ledger with all of her boots and their materials but she was too weary to bother. They suited her, being not coated in mud and blood.

“I don’t know,” Claudia said. “Rom seems nice.” She was hunched over the basin scrubbing away at her hands. “I can’t get these stains off of me,” she groaned, “I’m going to have to start wearing gloves like a vampire or a dentist.”

“Just because he seems nice doesn’t mean you can trust him. There are lots of nice people who are either too cowardly or too foolish to be relied on, and knowing being able to tell which is which is essential as an adventurer.”

“Just because he serves the gods doesn’t mean he’s a coward or anything.” Claudia rubbed her hands dry against her robe before stripping it off in turn. The chest stuck to her tunic underneath, pulling it off her in a sticky heap of clothing.

“It’s a mark against him,” Meryl said. She eyed her dirtied apprentice, “You would do well to bathe before dinner.”

Claudia looked down at her form, covered in scratches and blood and dirt. With a shrug she splashed some water on her body and rubbed it over the worst of it, drying it up afterwards with her equally disgusting clothes. In response to Meryl’s look of distaste she cried out, “What? I’ll take a bath for real after dinner, okay? I’m hungry.”

“I think not,” Meryl said. “Bath first. Hags are disgusting creatures of wyrd magic and blood and viscera.” She ran a brush through her sheets of gray hair in sharp, efficient strokes until it hung like a curtain of steel around her angular face. “You don’t know where they’ve been or what their magic will call for. A bit like your brown-robed friend downstairs.”

Claudia’s eye roll belied what Meryl was sure was yet another disrespectful retort, but Claudia merely pulled her smallclothes on and picked up her discarded robes from the floor before leaving the room. A moment later she reappeared in the doorway. “Is this a personal thing with Rom? Like the whole cleric thing.”

“No,” Meryl said truthfully. “Rom seems to be a nice enough young man. But I’m very particular about my craft and how others approach it. You’ll understand as you grow as a sorceress, Claudia. Not all magic is trustworthy. If there’s anything I can make you understand, let it be that.” This sentiment rested on Claudia, who remained in the doorway a moment longer before nodding slightly and disappearing again down the hallway. “One more thing,” Meryl said, drawing Claudia back into the doorway, her eyes bright with expectation. “Don’t just put on your dirty old robes after the bath. That defeats the whole purpose.” Her face fell.

“Um,” Claudia scoffed, “I was *not* going to do that. Gods.” Meryl waited for her to leave for her bath but she continued to stand in the doorway, staring at Meryl. Finally she looked away and said, “But on an unrelated note would you pass me my bag from my bed?”

Disgusting. Meryl was not so slovenly when she was fourteen, but such was the reality of raising a child in the countryside she supposed. Yet another thing she had to correct in her apprentice. But she handed Claudia her bag and watched her leave for the bathing rooms of the inn before she herself turned down the hall to the stair that led to the inn’s dining room.



Claudia was *not* that gross. As a person, at least. She had to admit as she bathed and the bath water browned with the remnants of blood and mud that she had been a good deal more crusty than she had originally thought. That hag did bleed a lot, after all. But that all was washing off at least, which was refreshing. Those dark stains on her hands were resilient to her scrubbing, even in the soak of the tub. It would likely take a few

more washes before they came out. Maybe she could also try some basic cantrips on them?

She replaced the soap that she had by now squashed into a warbled blob on the windowsill above the bath and put her ring beneath her teeth and mumbled some sorceries as she focused on her hands. Her skin pricked with the feeling of magic rushing over her as the cantrip tried to scrub away at the stains but without anymore luck than her non magical attempts. Dentistry here she came. The ring in her teeth dove into the water with a plop! as she groaned in dismay, and she let out a curse as she started to feel about the murky water for her focus. As if she needed another reason for Meryl to chide her. Maybe she should invest in a more traditional focus, one she was less likely to lose while bathing or whatever, but even as she thought it she knew she never would. She was far too sentimental for it.

Then again, she might have to because she couldn't find the damn ring anywhere. She even got up from her reclined position and began to search on her hands and knees, the water sloshing from the tub a bit and wetting the warm stone of the bathroom floor. At last she finally found it and replaced it on her finger with a sigh of relief and a little wiggly flourish that sent out little sparks, unintentional but harmless so long as Meryl didn't see. Any accidental magic was a spell gone wrong, according to her, even the small, cantrip equivalent bursts that sometimes escaped her, like a sneeze or a socially inappropriate fart. Whoever trained Meryl must have been a real terror to have made her how she was, Claudia figured, her fingers tracing the little patterns etched into the dark blue porcelain of the tub.

When they had first left the cave and stepped into the fresh air of the forest, it was like the whole wood breathed the fresh air with them, the breeze rustling the tops of trees

as they emerged. This was in that brief moment the mist had thoroughly soaked them and left them crotchety and sore, and before the march back had gotten in full swing. Meryl dropped her bag on the ground and began to work on a small sorcery, something to improve their travel, if Claudia was interpreting the hand movements properly. It was unusual that she wasn't taking this as another Meryl-Sponsored-Learning-Opportunity, but Claudia was relieved that Meryl didn't know that she saw when the spell failed and her hands dropped to her sides to clutch at her robes in a smothered act of irritation. Catching Meryl in a moment of embarrassment was almost always worse for the witness than the actor, and the look of frustration etched on her face was enough to make Claudia flee to the other side of the opening where the two men huddled against the chill, Rom clutching the little girl to him as he tried to wrap his feeble cloak around them both. He asked Claudia if she had a blanket and she very loudly replied that she did and she would be glad to lend it to him so that Meryl would hopefully think she had seen nothing.

Still, a part of her was concerned. Why had Meryl's spell failed her? She had seen her cast beyond her limit before, in a rather harrowing instruction that involved Meryl unleashing spell after spell until all her capacity was drained and then casting more besides until her fingers began to twitch in agony and blood pooled from her ears and nose and her arms twisted away in involuntary spasms that prevented any spell from forming. The lesson had given her nightmares for weeks, and she never spoke of what happened afterwards besides, perfectly content to repress that memory like an exhausted mother accidentally smothering her crying child. Yikes, wait, maybe a less gruesome metaphor. A hen hiding her last egg from a fox. An alcoholic hiding their relapse from their sobriety group. Whatever, it sucked and she didn't talk about it.

Yeah it was an interesting first day.

But this was different than that, Claudia thought, which was good in that she could only handle so much body thrashing but bad in that she didn't know why it had happened, and she dreaded the thought that it was somehow her fault. Not that she had a good reason to suspect that but there she was anyways. What a soothing bath this was turning into, all she needed now was a blow to the head and bard to recite her most embarrassing childhood diary entries. She dipped her mouth below the waterline to bubble the water like a petulant child but came up sputtering as the foul water flooded her mouth.



Dinner was stomachable, good, even. Meryl suspected that the business of innkeeping meant being able to serve a variety of clients, and although Meryl was ethically against mashed potatoes on a sandwich she had to admit that it suited both her exceptional appetite and the dreary night, which wet the dark windows of the inn with a relentless depression. So why not eat potatoes on bread? She almost died today anyways. Then again, if that was all it took to indulge in halfling cooking, she would be much more accustomed to it by now and perhaps a good deal fuller.

All her years of adventuring and she had been undermined by a hag and a hedge necromancer? It was true on the one hand that luck played a significant part in any adventurer's life, but it was also true that there was much to be said for preparation and Meryl for one hated to feel unprepared. No, she hated to *be* unprepared. So between bites of an overstuffed sandwich and sips of a warm herbal tea, Meryl made a list of the events of the quest, the people involved, and where things had gone wrong and where these things could have been improved in the future.

The most obvious of these was the blunt head trauma, which had a series of different actors involved. First and foremost was the hag herself, whose spell had hurt her in the first place. It wasn't a particularly complex spell, some sort of variation of a *force blast* most likely, easy to dismiss had she prepared a counterspell. Secondly was Claudia, whose lack of perception resulted in her being in such a vulnerable position to begin with. Meryl would have to double down on humanoid monsters then, until Claudia could recognize them on sight, in her sleep, by smell or, if she was feeling particularly thorough, taste. Thirdly, of course, was herself. Claudia putting herself in danger was one thing, but she was just a child, and Meryl had no such excuses to make for herself. Had she approached the situation with even a shred of self preservation she would have been able to fell the hag before any harm could befall her or her apprentice, she would have stayed hidden until she had a clear shot and dispatched the creature before she was noticed. But such was the bane of sentimentality, she supposed.

“You're chewing your food rather aggressively there, Madame Bone,” Rom said, his eyebrows raised in appraisal. He sat opposite her in the rounded booth, with Douglas sitting in between them, both lit dimly by the light of the candles the innkeep had laid out for them along with the meal. The innkeep in question had since retired to bed with his daughter, although a youngish human man, presumably the assistant to the innkeep, stood sweeping the rest of the empty commons, occasionally watching the trio warily as if they were the ones keeping him up and not the litter of plates and glasses left by the inn's other patrons. On such patron, a half-elven gentleman in a dark travelling cloak, laid sprawled out in one of the booths, apparently too drunk to have been able to make it to his room.

“I am thinking about the events of today,” she finally replied. She did not elaborate, and instead took another bite of her sandwich and returned to her notes. Rom, either through stubbornness or an inability to read social cues, prodded on.

“Of course, such distressing events will likely weigh on us for a long time. I completely understand.”

Meryl laughed at this, a short, derisive laugh that choked out like a hacked up chunk of bread. “I have seen far worse than what transpired today, and no doubt will see worse in the future.”

“It’s true,” Douglas added. “Meryl has served the upper circles of Thalassan mages for decades now, and has proven indispensable.” He swirled his own drink around in thought. “Which, of course, is likely to mean some rather nasty encounters in this damned country of ours.”

Meryl nodded absentmindedly. He was more right than he knew.

“You must be very brave then,” Rom said. “I know that these lands are often beset by dangers, but to continue your work as an adventurer at such an age is... well, both admirable and concerning.” He looked straight into Meryl’s eyes when he spoke.

Sitting there, his plate wiped clean and a splash of ale on his upper lip, it was so obvious how young he was, how little he had experienced, or struggled. Her irritation with him perplexed her in that he was so obviously beneath her, too young and naive. He was like Claudia, a child, unaware of the dangers of his craft, even after the day’s *distressing* events.

Before she could correct him though, Douglas did it for her, saying, “Oh, goodness, an adventurer? Meryl is beyond such escapades, she is a scholar, a teacher, and advisor.” He said it with such conviction, too, so much so that Meryl’s liking of him

diminished somewhat. “She has taught some of the greatest mages of this generation,” he continued, “in addition to her own works expanding the field of abjurations. In fact, and I don’t expect you to have known this, but her studies in group castings was what essentially won the battle for Fien-Risal’s Keep-- some of my colleagues may try and tell you that it was the arrival of General Isbeth Porlock, but if not for the enhanced shielding methods established in her work, the keep would have surely fallen before they arrived, and the tenuous hold we keep on the Riftlands relies on that keep. This is not even to speak of--”

“Thank you for your generous accolades,” Meryl said with something of a grimace. “You will be foremost in my mind should I need a ghostwriter for my autobiography.” Rom grinned behind his empty ale.

If Rom was oblivious to body language, Douglas was oblivious to sarcasm, and flushed with pride as he took another bite of potato sandwich.

Rom stopped Meryl as she climbed the stairs after dinner, Douglas remaining for another glass of ale, muttering something about his age and goblins and gout. “How is your head feeling?” Rom asked. “I never got the chance to look at it in proper light, and head wounds have a tendency to have longer repercussions if left untreated.”

“And the dimly lit stairwell is proper light then?” She couldn’t see much of him in the dark. Alcoves of gas lanterns dotted the stone walls with little etchings of sigils and swords and the occasional peony, which dated the inn significantly, but the lanterns were unlit and the only light came from the landing above and the common room below.

Rom smiled, his teeth a stone gray in the darkness. “No, not really. I was hoping to look at it in either of our rooms. Curative miracles tend to work best when the party is relaxed, anyways. Less opportunity for...” his hands floated about his head as he tried to

think of the word. “Misalignment? Like where something grows back but in the wrong spot.”

“That does make sense,” Meryl said, although she took no step towards the landing. “However there has been a misunderstanding which I would like to clarify. Although circumstance demanded our close proximity and acquaintanceship, and although your knowledge of the healing arts was helpful in our escape, I do not trust you nor your miracles, and in the future you would do well to keep them to yourself.”

Rom was quiet, and Meryl, satisfied she had made her point, climbed the rest of the stairs. “What about your finger?” he asked her.

“What about it?” she asked, her satisfaction deflating.

“It’s marked. I saw it, that little stain on the print. Does circumstance not merit my looking at it?”

It was Meryl’s turn to be quiet in the dark. A part of her was concerned regarding the mark on her finger, the very same spot that the knife had cut her. It was such a shallow cut that it had already healed over, but there remained a muddy, purplish tone to it that resembled a tally mark written in a shaky hand. And even now, small as it was, she could feel the way it seeped at her magic, interfered with her sorcery. Who could say how bad it could get?

But like that mark, this part of herself was miniscule compared to the rest.

“I won’t repeat myself.”

He grabbed her hand as she turned, moving up the stairs with incredible speed. She wrenched her arm from him but he held on tight, his eyes bright in the lantern light of the landing and filled with a sudden anger. “I know your type, Madame Bone, I heard all

about you as I grew up, the arrogant, self-righteous citizens of the Thalassan Empire, land of sorcery, emancipated from the grasp of gods.”

He spoke low and quickly, his face close to hers, and she took advantage of this, placing her free hand on his and sending a jolt of magical lighting through, not enough to truly hurt him, but enough to make a point. Rom jumped back from the shock, letting her go as he did. For a moment he sneered in disgust, but his face fell in realization.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was out of line.”

“It was,” Meryl said. “Don’t let it happen again.” She turned away from him and stalked off down the hallway and towards her room.



Unfortunately for Claudia, she ran into Meryl on her way back from the bath.

It was a brief encounter, all, “Hey there, Meryl”’s and “How was dinner, Meryl”’s and a few “Not now, Claudia”’s before Meryl finally directed her towards the common area and closed the door to their shared room firmly. This was not an unfamiliar interaction, per se, as Meryl was somewhat prone to migraines and Claudia was very talented in inducing them, but the rebuff still hurt nonetheless.

That being said, Claudia was more hungry than hurt, and eating, she found, often helped with the latter. Especially halfling cooking, oh it was her *favorite*. A friend of her father’s once invited them to dinner and they ate some sort of pasta that was stuffed with moist, spiced potatoes and smothered in a creamy sauce that made her want to weep with indulgence. She took the best nap after it.

By the time she had descended the stairs, however, the food had been cleared away, and all that remained was a sullen looking boy with a broom, a slurring scholar

with too many empty glasses around him, and a cloaked figure that had begun snoring in a booth. Claudia wanted to weep alright.

“Ah!” cried the scholar, Doug, she thought his name was. “You’ve come at last. Sit, sit, share an ale with me.”

Claudia really wanted to weep.

But instead she plastered on a smile and said, “Oh, I’m alright, thank you. A bit too late for me.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, drinking from an empty glass. His whole face was ruddy in what would have seemed a caricature of drunkenness were she not completely sure he was drunk. Generally speaking Claudia preferred to avoid drunk people, whom she found made repetitive company.

The sulking boy prodded at the cloaked man in the booth. “Sir, wouldn’t you sleep better in, ya know, a bed? You’ve got a room, don’t ya?” There was no verbal reply, per se, but he did manage a small groan and a thumbs up, which was something at least. “Do you need help getting to your room, sir?” Again a groan, again a thumbs up. Broom boy pressed his forefinger and thumb against the bridge of his nose in a universal gesture of irritation.

“Need some help getting him up?” Claudia asked.

“Not really,” he said. “I’ve done it plenty of times. Too many times.”

“Let me help anyways.” The boy shrugged and the two of them pulled the cloaked man into a seated position before hoisting him across their shoulders. It was somewhat cramped on the staircase, which was hardly wide enough for two people, let alone three, but they managed to haul him still groaning into one of the rooms, which broom boy

unlocked with a key from his large, jangling ring of them. They just about tossed him onto the bed by the time he began to snore again, his chest heaving with heavy breaths.

Broom boy looked down at the man in disgust. “He’s been here for weeks now and I’ve had to do this every night. You’d think we could charge extra for it?”

“It’d be a good incentive not to pass out in a public place. Then again,” Claudia said, “you’d think that would be its own incentive.” Snoring away like he was, the cloaked figure looked awfully peaceful, his smallish mouth halfway open as drool pooled out the corner. Peaceful, sure, but a little sad, too. She tucked his cloak about him like a blanket. He was sleeping on top of the bedding.

“Ya haven’t eaten yet, have you?” said Broom boy.

Broom boy, who finally introduced himself as Deannic, was not so good a cook as she suspected the innkeeper was, but she was thankful for the meal, a mass of scrambled eggs and some sort of gamey steak and soft, buttery onions. Claudia sat at the bar, wolfing the food down as if her life depended on it. It felt so good to finally have something in her stomach-- she hadn’t even realized quite how hungry she was, but she frequently found that after a quest she had something of a gluttonous appetite. So despite the lack of panache, she thoroughly enjoyed her meal, chatting between mouthfuls with the innkeeper’s assistant, who shared with her some local gossip about the current patrons of the inn. Not that she knew any of them, but she reveled in hearing about it nonetheless. Someone was meeting with a lover here on the regular, someone hosted a small meeting for those obsessed with fae and being whisked away to their wilds, someone was a writer for a popular anti-Empire pamphlet, someone was a famous bard, someone was a bard so bad they got booted off the small stage in the corner, someone was in a cult, someone was secretly a werewolf, someone was a retired adventurer who had two fake eyes that

gleamed like gems and saw all the usual stuff and things that were invisible too. In his booth Doug got drunker and drunker as Deannic dutifully refilled his glasses.

She was laughing at a joke he was telling-- I'm sure you know the one, the one with the bard and the dragon and the slippery golden scepter-- when Doug also started laughing. Without her noticing he had climbed out of his booth and sat next to her, and when his laugh, a chortling sort of thing that evoked the image of a drowning turkey, she nearly fell off of the bar stool. Doug didn't notice this, but instead kept laughing and laughing, far beyond the point at which the joke could still be funny. Claudia and Deannic exchanged uncomfortable glances. How many drinks had he had now?

"You know," he said, his laughter finally dying down, "you're so lucky."

"Uh, me?" asked Deannic.

"Oh, goodness no, not you," he said, waving his hand in a "pish posh you're so silly" gesture. "You're just some innkeeper. But Claudia, you're something, you're really something."

As much as Claudia disliked the drunkenness, she loved being complimented.

"Really? You think so?"

"I *know so*," he said, dipping forward with emphasis and tipping the stool almost far enough to fall over. "To have Meryl Bone as a teacher, oh, how lucky you are."

Ah, of course.

"Ah," Claudia said, "of course."

"You know," he continued, leaning forward and backwards and he motioned with his hands, "she used to teach at Yoringala-Linde with me, up in Wythe Knellis," he said, referring to the university in the capital. "Well, to be fair, she had left by the time I came

about and we never officially met and it had been some years since then. But we both taught there.”

“Uh, funny then, meeting down here, huh?” Claudia said, not really interested in continuing the conversation but not wanting to be outright rude either. She almost asked him if he had known her mother from the university before she realized, in fact, that she didn’t really care.

“Truly, truly, fate works in mysterious ways. Did you know that once--”

Oh Lord on the throne he was still talking. What’s worse is she still had food on her plate and refused to be chased away from her meal. She once again put her focus on shoveling the food into her mouth with incredible enthusiasm while Doug continued to reminisce about his scholarship or lament his failures as a teacher or whatever, prodded onwards by an occasional nod or mouthful grunt of affirmation from Claudia. Deannic, clearly unbound by the social decorum and hunger which kept Claudia in her seat, found a renewed interest in cleaning the common area.

“... and that, my dear child, is why you must never walk barefoot into a necromancer’s home,” Douglas finally concluded as Claudia scooped the final bite of the mystery steak into her mouth.

“Great advice,” she said, still chewing. “I appreciate it.”

“It’s my pleasure, truly, truly, it’s my pleasure. You’re an excellent listener. Meryl’s lucky to have you. If you listen to her half as well as you listen to me you’ll be an excellent sorceress soon enough.”

Well that wouldn’t be too hard at least.

The room was dark when she finally returned to it, full and clean. Well, besides her hands, but 80% clean wasn’t too bad. Did her hands take up 20% of her body? Eh,

she was a sorceress, not a mathematician. She waited in the dark for a moment, trying to determine if Meryl was awake or not when her teacher's voice cut through the darkness.

“Why are you standing in the doorway?”

“I didn't want to wake you,” Claudia said, whispering despite the fact that Meryl was clearly awake and she did not have to whisper. She waited while her eyes adjusted to the darkness before walking as quietly as she could, again, somewhat needlessly, to her bed by the window. “That Doug fellow sure is concerned with you. He talked about you almost non-stop. Well, that and feet or something. I kinda started to tune him out.”

“Hm,” Meryl said in what was the closest to a laugh Claudia could evoke. “I know what you mean.”



Meryl awoke early the next morning. Early for people who like themselves, perhaps, but for Meryl this was a normal time to wake up, the first rays of light just beginning to peak over the horizon, warping against the glass of the window. She dressed quietly, pulling on a set of travel robes and a cloak-- the early mornings could be rather chilly and she would rather be overdressed than have to shuffle through her bag for one. In theory it was supposed to work as an instantaneous planar container, but it was so old and had seen so much magic that the spells that kept it bound were starting to fray, and frequently she had to dig all the way to her arm for several minutes to find what she was looking for.

Eventually she did find it: a pair of knee-length riding boots, made from the hide of a basilisk she had killed on a rather hectic field trip during her university years. It's hide served as a surprisingly stretchy material, and although it lost much of color when removed from the actual beast itself, the bronzy brown of it gleamed with a hint of its

true blue when the sun hit it. Were she a nostalgic woman she might have taken this as an opportunity to reminisce, but as it was she was in something of a rush, so she yanked them over her socks and finished readying herself.

Claudia lay sprawled out on the bed, the covers kicked off, the pillow smothered over her face, and her feet dangling off the side. Loathe as she was to encourage Claudia's generally lax behavior, Meryl was willing to let her sleep in, just this once. She had been through a lot yesterday. It was easy for Meryl to forget that although she was used to such things, each quest, each brush with death, it was all new to Claudia, and when it was all said and done she had handled herself rather well. Granted she was still going to develop a three-part lecture on the identification of hags and other weird magic humanoids, but for the time being she could sleep.

Before she left, Meryl provided her with a list of small exercises to do in her absence, as well as spells to prepare for the next stretch of their journey. They had been on their way to the far east of Wydriff's Horn, a town called Pearloque, where an old student of hers lived. Sherin had also struggled to keep his magic in check, even more so than Claudia, who could at least, for the most part, shape it to her will. Meryl's own experience with wild magic was very little-- all of her own magic was in sorceries, and spell weaving, while powerful and officially recognized by the Council of Magi, was still too dangerous for her to truly encourage in a student of hers. It lacked foundation. So she endeavored instead to have him teach her methods of control, both for his history and for his recent departure from Yorigala-Linde. As long as he remained unaffiliated from the universities she could avoid some difficult questions and prying eyes, which she was keen to do in general but especially so with Claudia in tow.

She placed the list on Claudia's pillow and collected the dirtied robes Claudia had discarded on a plush but old chair in the corner. While she frequently stressed to Claudia that she was neither her maid nor her father, few things spelled doom for travel than starting with dirty clothes. Most of the monsters that would attack travelers were attracted to the scent of sweat and blood, which was not even to speak of the fact that it was outright disgusting.

Sounds of motion, talking, and laughter rose from the common room before she had even descended the stairs. Far from the quiet dinner she had suffered through the night before, the space now bustled with movement and chatter as fellow early risers discussed travel plans, complained about their sleep, or prepared themselves for the day with breakfast and tea. The brooding young man from the night before was not available, now replaced by several employees to the inn, who dashed around to deliver from the kitchen behind the bar or to refill cups of water, ale, or coffee. Who was drinking ale at this hour?

Meryl took a seat at the bar and ordered herself some breakfast and a coffee, surveying the others in the room around her. Could any among them be involved with the necromancer in the cave? He was clearly not the sort to work alone, and if he was willing to work with hags and goblins then it seemed as like he would work with less monstrous humanoids. It would be awfully brazen to stay at the inn of a hostage, she thought, but certainly not beyond the realm of possibility. It would give them the opportunity to survey who came inquiring about the issue, to interfere before they even made it to the cave. And some people, Meryl thought darkly, enjoyed the suffering their schemes wrought. She ought to know, she worked with plenty of them.

No one seemed outwardly suspicious, however. There were a couple of brutish looking women in a booth who looked to be having an eating contest based on the pile of dirtied plates around them, an old man who smoked a pipe at the end of the booth, stopping every now and then to drink his coffee, his eyes foggy and crusty, three soldiers on leave old friends telling exaggerated stories of their own glory, a young half elf in the soft, satiny garbs of a prostitute flirting with the girl running the bar, who would laugh and shake her head and blush as she returned to her work, clearing away dishes from a group of merchants who spoke in thick accents about their plans. They looked to be from the mercantile republic, Guasvino, far to the west beyond the Porrero Desert. Even if one ignored their accents, their clothes were a dead giveaway: short, colorful leather jackets, spurred boots, and brightly patterned scarves that decorated wherever they could, tied around arms and necks, braided into hair, or even through the loops of their belts. Of all the occupants of the room they stood out the most, but she doubted they would be involved. No, none of them were outwardly suspicious, at least not wearing hats that said, "I'm a part of a kidnapping plot," but she would keep her eyes open for the time being.

She quietly finished her breakfast and coffee and gave the server a few copper coins as a tip and then set out into the wet morning. The mist from the night before still hung heavy in the air like curtains before a show, although the rising sun promised a warmer afternoon where she could hopefully shed her cloak. Finding a shop to handle their laundry was a simple task, a small apartment above a perfume shop that made Meryl sneeze several times from the overpowering miasma of smells. She arranged to have their clothing delivered to the inn that afternoon and dropped a few coins into the rough and swollen hands of an old orcish woman with a wrinkle worn face and eyes wont to smiling. The edges of her robe sleeves were tied up to her elbows but stained and

bleached despite this. It was already beginning to brighten when she stepped off the narrow steps that ran up the side of the building and into the street. By then the rest of the city had started to stir, and the streets were filling with people going about their day. Meryl walked briskly through the crowd, stepping out of the way of the distracted grocer or occasional horse-pulled cart. A lantern-tender in a bright orange tunic and wide-brimmed hat hurried down the street, extinguishing the flames every few steps, unaware his socks were mis-matched and his galoshes on the wrong feet. Judging by the wry smiles of passerbys, this was not uncommon for the young man.

Although Meryl had travelled a great deal, venturing even beyond the empire when the circumstances necessitated it, she still found herself uncomfortable in smaller communities such as this. The lone inn, the familiar smiles, and the floating voices talking about local gossip and hardship-- it all communicated to her a closeness of a town. It couldn't be helped then, feeling somewhat like an interloper there. Not that the townspeople treated her badly, but there was a shift in their countenance, a thinness to their smiles. She was another traveller like any other to them, which felt both relieving in its anonymity and isolating in its indifference. The street curved with the length of the wall as Meryl passed through, the heels of her riding boots stamping satisfyingly against the old stone of the street. Eventually she reached the building which held the questers guild, a long building of older Thalassan design, the exterior embedded with arches etched with scenes from histories and myth. It had once belonged to the local lord-house, but the city itself had closed in too closely to it, and centuries ago a new estate had been built to better separate the lordship from the general public, and the building had been repurposed for the governments guilds that organized work within the empire. Although the pact mage in the heinous cloak had little evidence in his lair, none that she could find from an

exhausted search, at least, she was still determined to find a reason for his presence, if only to satiate her curiosity.

The mist had grown considerably during her walk and now pooled and dripped from the building's ogee roof onto the street, which was tight enough now that standing in the middle of it her fingers could touch the buildings on either side. Gratefully she stepped through the heavy doors of the building and into the reception hall. It was chilly but dry, at least. The hall was divided amongst the guilds under the scepter into several alcoves of clearly more recent design than the rest of the building, and furnished with curtains and cabinets and desks that served as polite barriers as much as surfaces. Steady, unflickering light glowed from magical flames that burned in braziers along the walls, but they provided no warmth or comfort.

Loud, slurping sips of coffee or tea broke through the drone of pen on paper as attendants wrote out forms or paperwork, looking now and then as Meryl walked past to see if this severe looking woman was their problem or not, ready to help if need be. The attendant at the questers guild was, frankly, unhelpful.

For starters, she was asleep when Meryl approached, not even at her desk but curled beneath the hazy window on a small bench between two polished filing cabinets, her cloak wrapped around her like a blanket. A soft snore escaped her lips and the attendant opposite her let out a small laugh that echoed down the hall. Meryl rang the bell at the desk a few times, which did little good but aggravate herself. So she settled for conjuring a spectral hand, a minor cantrip, and using it to reach across and yank the woman awake. It was a bit more forceful than she intended, and the woman flew off the bench and crashed to the floor with a startled yelp. Rather than actually stand like a

normal person, she instead rolled over and propped her head up with her hand so that she could look at Meryl with foggy, sleep-filled eyes.

“Hey, what’s up?” she said.

“Not you,” Meryl said.

Their conversation that followed was equally unproductive. As she had recalled, the form submitted for the quest proper had no mention of the hag, nor of the pact mage in the tacky black robe. The quest had been submitted two weeks before. It was stamped with the seal of the local house Jourinwane. She hadn’t thought to ask who had submitted the quest when she and Claudia arrived in town-- it was frequently inconsequential. Payment was submitted alongside the quest and doubled by the guild to ensure interest, and one frequently had very little interaction with the person who had actually requested the aid.

But when the Jourinwane head of house met her in the ostentatious audience hall, she was informed the lord had left to join court before the winter had set in and had not been seen in several months.

This was hardly an uncommon occurrence. Indeed, time at court was frequently required to retain one’s household standing, but more often than not nobles were known to abandon their territories for months, even years at a time to galavant with the court and avoid their responsibilities to the people they were intended to lead. Smaller towns like this were the more prone to it, given the lack of *engagement* available, Meryl thought with an eye roll. Certainly Terristown had managed to avoid burning itself down, and likely benefited from the absence of Javier Jourinwane, who she recalled to have a reputation for being a lout and an idiot, but she hated to see duties shirked and it meant she had less official backing in any following investigations. Not that she needed it. The

Guard had plenty of officiality and regularly failed to do anything meaningful in their investigations so. Perhaps hers would go better.

The rest of the morning and a good portion of the afternoon was spent asking about town for admittedly vague information. Based on the established timeline, someone who was probably not Lord Jourinwane had submitted a quest to the guild in order to rescue some of the townsfolk who had been kidnapped, but from her initial round of questions the first account of someone being kidnapped was only eleven days before, a guard who had disappeared during his nightwatch. Even then, a report had not been made until a full 24 hour search had resulted in no real results other than a smattering of small, muddy footprints where his rounds would have taken him. And furthermore, the connection to the quest had not been made until two more people had been kidnapped, the innkeeper's daughter and a visiting academic, who Meryl now recognized to be Douglas. The guards were willing enough to cooperate with her questions, seeming both to have nothing better to do and simultaneously not enough time or manpower to investigate the cavern properly. They hadn't been the ones to locate the lair, and after looping back to the guildhouse the now well awake attendant confirmed that the location of the cavern had been provided with the quest proposal itself. A whole two days before the first documented abduction.

It seemed that someone was aware of what was to transpire before it did, but was the quest posted to thwart the plan early? Or was it to draw someone out? The latter seemed more likely, if only because there were more straightforward ways to upset a plan than a quest that might go ignored for days or even weeks without passing adventurers. And indeed it seemed like it was only after damage had been done that anyone took action. But if it was the latter, it still left the question of who and why.

The day had warmed considerably. Fog had risen from the ground and now hung low to trail upon the tiles roofs of the town in heavy quilts of sky. What heat penetrated these clouds remained trapped beneath them, and soon between the throng of people and the cloying warmth of the air Meryl found herself sweating and tired. She retreated from the streets into the shadows of a nearby cafe, its elaborate door spoiled somewhat by a mounted menu that promised cool drinks and warm meats. Low bar.

True to its advertising, the food was alright. Under-spiced and overcooked goat, with a thin vegetable soup. One of the baby carrots had not been cut, and Meryl grimaced at its face as it peered at her through the broth. She hated being served previously sentient produce, but fruits and vegetables not brought to life by Veiled soil were increasingly rare to come by. She chewed it quickly and tried not to think about it. At the very least the cafe served a strong coffee, and she had drunk several glasses of it black over ice before she at last felt renewed. She filled the bowl of her pipe and lit it, the smoke filling her lungs with each inhale as she digested her meal. It felt almost nostalgic, almost like her life before Claudia had yanked her out of retirement.

Well, no, not quite. Tanis had hired her, and Meryl never really knew how to tell her no. So that was that, and she was back to lugging a teenager around the country as if nothing had happened.

Bad thoughts, unhelpful thoughts, useless thoughts.

She was quietly grateful when a lumbering figure pushed through the door, sending the bell above it flailing and ringing violently and her thoughts back to reality. “Could I get some help here?” a gruff voice called as a thickly muscled man pushed through the door and his cart wedged into the doorway. The man who was wiping down

tables in between running food helped his dislodge the cart before mumbling something about getting the owner.

Muscular guy looked around the room awkwardly, but no one eating seemed to give his arrival much notice, except for Meryl, who made eye contact with him as he surveyed the room. He flushed a bit, embarrassed to have been noticed, and focused instead on the thick beams of wood that ran across the ceiling and supported the floor above. Meryl smiled behind the pipe, and let out a satisfied puff.

The runner returned soon with a half-elven woman with greying hair and a stained apron. “Surely this isn’t all for us,” she said, frowning at the cart. “This is nearly triple what we ordered.” She absentmindedly swatted at her apron and sent a potato peel flying to the floor.

Muscular guy shrugged in response. “A seer in Harristown claims a bad storm is coming in from the Horn. Farmers guild isn’t too sure what to make of it yet, but they figured harvesting a bit extra could maybe reduce loss on their end,” he said. “Figured it’d be worth a shot.”

“Can’t do,” she said, “business has been a bit slow. Maybe if those students were still in town. Saw them practically everyday since they moved in and they left without a word of goodbye. Fuckin’ kids, you know? They can’t do a thing for themselves but won’t pay a mind to those that do it for them.” She said this like it was some universal truth, nodding sagely all the while.

“I didn’t realize there was a school in Terristown,” Meryl said, interjecting but otherwise still seated at her table. She tried to make the question sound mild and conversational.

“There isn’t,” the aproned woman said, “not besides the one for the kids and all that.” If she took offense at Meryl’s eavesdropping she did not show it. “But sometimes these university kids’ll come through now and then. ‘Independent studies’ they say or ‘focusing on my thesis.’ Bit vague, that one. Normally you can tell the seasons by them but they left a bit early this time around. Maybe there’s something to that Harristown seer, then,” she said, turning back to the muscular man.

“You’ll take it off my hands then?” he said, his eyebrows projecting his own surprise almost more than his tone.

“I’ll take the usual and a half,” she said. “Good luck with the rest though.”

Meryl paid her tab and collected her bag as she once more set back into the streets. Luckily for her, the cook had known where the students tended to stay, and she would have no trouble making it there before nightfall. It was true that luck played a significant part in adventuring, but where it ended she would take over.

Ch. 3

Claudia woke up considerably later than Meryl did, and honestly, good for her. It was the chill that finally did it-- she had effectively kicked off all her blankets and sheets and the cold morning seeped into her like a marinade or a good salt rub or when you make refried rice in the same pan you made bacon in earlier and it just soaks up all the bacon fat goodness.

Thrones she was hungry.

She tossed the pillow from her head onto the floor as she weighed the need to eat with the desire to simply sleep longer. Meryl was sure to wake her up soon enough, so she ought to sleep while she can, but her stomach growled like a cornered cat at an eight year old's birthday party and she conceded to her need to eat. It was brighter than it was supposed to be when she managed to finally pry her eyes open to realize she had been left alone, Meryl's bed beside her empty and neatly made. Where did that woman find the energy so early in the morning? The water in the basin was cold and fresh as she washed her face and peered through the window at the town below, everyone walking and moving. For such a small town it was awfully energetic.

Thankfully Meryl had put out a spare of clean, fresh robes for Claudia, and she dressed quickly, hoping she could catch the tail end of breakfast in the common area. The foods laid out on the counter were somewhat lukewarm by now and decidedly picked through, the rest of the residents having already helped themselves to the buffet before her. A small price to pay for the sleep though, and she gratefully piled her plate with food. This was why she loved inns run by halflings, they really and truly understood a good meal. When she and Meryl were on the road they typically had some sad oatmeal with an occasional slice of bacon or smattering of berries to brighten it. Meryl would

smoke her pipe and drink a mug of coffee so thin it would pass through the eye of a needle, all the while flipping through her spellbook and nodding quietly to herself. Always in her head, that one.

Speaking of Meryl though, she was nowhere to be found. All the booths, so empty and quiet before, were now filled with people talking and laughing with one another, servers darting from table to table to clear away dishes while others refilled cups of tea or coffee. Meryl would hate it here. Claudia returned up the stairs to the wide mezzanine that perched above the bar, squeezing past a couple of gossiping gentlemen and trying to resist scarfing down her food as she climbed. Shit, she forgot silverware. It was fine, she'd figure it out.

The landing's mezzanine was also a bust. Several more patrons sat about the lounging space smoking vermynt from a shared waterpipe, or at tall tables sipping their drinks or reading from the books that lined the shelves between alcoves of burning magical light. And obviously Meryl wouldn't be there-- she found the sharing of vermynt to be unsanitary. Claudia thought it just smelled bad. She turned downstairs to find Meryl, maybe get a fork first, when Rom called out to her from his curtained alcove.

"Do you need a place to sit?" he asked, pushing aside the heavy patterned curtain and gesturing across from him. As good a spot as any. The stone of the bench was still cold from the morning, and she adjusted a pillow beneath her before she looked at her breakfast date. He looked worse in the light of the inn than he had in the dark after a near-death experience-- tired and puffy, a thin scab forming across the right side of his face down to the start of a patchy and uneven beard.

"Thanks," she said. "You look bad. Didn't sleep well?" Her eyes darted across the table but alas! No silverware. Why was she cursed like this?

Rom laughed: a short, feeble thing. “Yeah, you could say that. Kind of hard after everything, you know?”

Claudia nodded sympathetically. “I mean,” she said, “I slept great, like really good. But I get it, that makes sense.”

“Ah,” Rom said. He looked down at the table.

Claudia kept nodding. She really wanted to go and get a fork but she felt suddenly really uncomfortable and couldn't do anything but nod, and now she had been doing it so long that she felt really self conscious about it so she just kept nodding, trying to do it a little less frequently and hoping she could subtly fade it out and he wouldn't notice she'd been nodding for like a full minute by then.

He did notice but didn't bring it up. Instead, he did something so much worse; he started to cry. It was slow at first, with thin streams of tears that flooded with a sudden downpour of emotion.

Oh fuck fuck fuck fuck, Claudia thought. This was not her expertise.

“Sorry,” he said, still crying, “this is really embarrassing, I just, it's not easy, it's not as easy as I thought it would be, you know?” His voice was wavering too, doing that pitchy wobble that people do when they're trying not to sob and kinda managing it but not really. The sound of course made it worse because it *was* really embarrassing, and this started another round of tears.

“I, uh, actually don't know,” Claudia said.

“Of course not, you're a natural,” he said with a sniff and a little smile. “You make it all look easy. It's just that, well, I've been taught my whole life that I'm supposed to help people, that these powers were a sign from the gods that I had a duty to save people and guide them.” He wrung his hands and Claudia noticed for the first time the

little splatter of a lightning scar across his hands. Of course. Meryl had a knack for inflicting emotional damage as well as magical.

She slid from the booth in the wall and said, “Wait here a sec,” before darting downstairs and out of sight. A few minutes later she returned with two mugs in hand, thankful that everyone upstairs seemed too absorbed in their own lives to take note of the soft crying coming from behind the curtain. “Here,” she said, sliding a mug to Rom, “drink this.”

“What is it?” he asked, eyeing the drink. At least his crying had slowed down.

“Hot chocolate.” Claudia took a sip of her own. It was a bit sweeter than she normally drank, but the fun thing about hot chocolate was everyone made it different but it always made you feel better. Unless you were allergic to chocolate or something, in which case, I don’t know, try tea or something you poor creature. She placed the mug next to her plate and-- oh thrones damn it she forgot the fork again she was right there! Fine then, Meryl wasn’t here anyways.

Claudia plucked at the magical energy around her, feeling it course through her body and begged it to take the shape of a fork. The raw essence flickered in her mind, pooling itself from an intangible force and into a cold, hard piece of metal in her hands. Like thread weaving a tapestry, the magic spun round her hand with a soft glow, settling at last with a little twinkle in her hand.

It was a fork alright: a snail fork, its two little prongs gleaming. Close enough.

She stabbed it into her sausage and began to eat.

“Do you, uh, often do that?” Rom asked. Finally he had stopped crying --the magic of hot chocolate-- and was now watching Claudia closely. “That was spellweaving, right?”

“Uh,” Claudia began, chewing her food still, “not really and more than I should. Reverse-respectively. Meryl calls it ‘wild magic,’ which is like a precursor to spellweaving. I’d have to actually train as a magician to do that.” A grin parted her face. “She hates when I do it. Too unpredictable, apparently.”

She took a sip of her hot chocolate, grimacing when something hard and metal slipped past her teeth and into her mouth. Pressing it forward with her tongue she swallowed the hot chocolate and spit the object out.

“Well there’s the other prong.” Point one for Meryl. “Don’t mind her, by the way,” she continued, tucking the prong into her pocket. “She has particular ideas about how and what kinds of magic should be used. A lot of Thalassans do, I suppose. But not all of them will shock you for it. Sorry, I’m being rude, did you want any of this food?”

“No, I’m alright, thank you. I suppose I just didn’t expect such a vehemence for the divine. All of that, The First Ignition, The Bright Wars, The Harrowing-- it was so long ago, and I’ve met so many kind people, in Thalassa no less, who do not spurn me or my miracles.” He took a thoughtful sip of his chocolate and his face turned in a sour expression as he plucked yet another prong out of his mouth. “Uh.”

“Oh, sorry,” Claudia said. “I can take that.” He relinquished it to her and she put the prong next to the other in her robes. “If I had a copper for everytime that happened, you know?”

“You’d have two coppers?”

“Actually three but that’s another story; please continue.”

With both hands he cradled his mug, sitting back against the cool stone. “I’ve been a cleric since I was born. Chosen by Charodyne, everyone said, and I was raised to be a symbol of her, to touch and heal where she cannot.” Each word seemed to drain him,

and he sat lower and lower on the bench until he was laying down on the bench and Claudia could no longer see him. “She has never spoken to me, I have received no words from her, but everyone tells me I must be a protector and a healer and a saint. But I don’t know if I have it in me. I don’t know if I can be the person they expect me to be.”

“Okay, so don’t.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, still laid out.

“I mean, maybe just do what you want to do. If the will o’ the gods is making you unhappy then don’t do it. You’re in Thalassa, Rom, the country founded by defying the gods. You’re in good company.”

He sat up slowly, looking at her with a curious expression. “I had never even thought about that. I genuinely don’t know what I would even do.”

“Hey,” Claudia said, a sudden thought coming to mind. “Why don’t you come with Meryl and me? We’re heading east along the horn, but there’s lots of places to see and people to meet. I’m sure we could use someone with a healing touch.”

“Do you really think that--”

“Look, Meryl can be a bit of a dick, but once she cools off she can be reasoned with. I’ll talk to her about it and it’ll be fine, okay? Oh, speaking of which,” she said, shoveling the last of breakfast into her mouth, “I need to find her first. We’ll figure out the details later, okay?”

Before he could answer she darted through the curtains. It had been the most uncomfortable breakfast she’d had in five months and seventeen days, but at least the food was satisfying. Back in the room she set her plate on the nightstand (why did she bring that with her?) and considered the space. Peeking out from the pillow was a little sheet of paper, a list of busywork. Of course she’d miss that the first time around.

Not that it was particularly important. While Claudia was aware it was important to practice spellcasting, that it was like exercising a muscle so she could do more of it eventually, Meryl had a habit of picking work for her that would be time consuming and only abstractly relevant to sorcery. Practice drawing chalk circles, raising and dropping mental shields, polishing and caring for her focus. It was all magic adjacent and rarely gave her the opportunity to flex her metaphorical magical muscles.

But she gave it a go, drawing lopsided circles on the floor, the walls, the door, and wiping them away with a *prestidigitation*. The mental shields thing she never really got--what, you just imagine a wall in your mind? Cool, she did it. She built it up, tore it down Mr. Gorbachev, and built it back up. She painted her nails over her weird dark stains. Her focus was already clean from being dropped in the bath, and so half an hour later she was sitting in the plush armchair and looking out the window for Meryl's return. Her errands rarely took overlong, but if Meryl had woken at her normal time, which she *always did*, it meant she had been out for several hours, which was concerning, but not enough to break her general sense of boredom and restlessness.

At the very least she shouldn't have to wait alone. Using her spellbook as a reference she drew a series of chalk sigils onto the floor, which would help to give her sorcery a foundation and require less magic transfusion. From her bag she produced a brass brazier and a few sticks of incense, the expensive kind with names like "Forest of Fevers" or "The Goat King's Dream," which she lit with a little fire cantrip. She stood in the middle of the circle (also lopsided) and began to pull magic into her being, allowing it to slowly suffuse the space within the circle, crawling up her boots, her legs, climbing towards the ceiling. Incense smoke flooded her vision and lungs, swirling in her hands as

she shaped the magic to her will. And like a glass overflowing, the tension of the magic broke and collapsed to a point at her feet with a burst of energy.

Claudia glowed. The casting had taken a full hour but when she really got into it it only felt like minutes to her. Now she had a friend!

Familiars were a tradition among sorcerers, a spirit manifest in animal flesh. Claudia picked up her magical fey chicken and scratched it beneath its comb in greeting. It settled gladly into her arms and closed its eyes in appreciation. They cuddled in the armchair for a while, Claudia reading poems to the chicken and periodically checking out the window for her mentor. By the time the afternoon had rolled around she had exhausted all her favorite poems and was beginning to worry.

Slinging her bag across her she tucked Cluckerson into it and hurried out of the inn, hoping to avoid any more emotional confrontations. Rom was no longer on the landing but he was not her only concern. The common room was still full of people and boisterous laughter, but the crowd allowed her to thankfully evade Doug as he talked animatedly with several Guasvinian merchants. And with both men avoided, she slipped out into the streets.

The inn, creatively named “The Inn,” was located at the center of Terristown, where the main road opened to a small square, a couriers office, and several small businesses and homes. Travelling merchants had set up several stalls, selling a variety of strange and foreign wares: fruits glistening with the moisture of the air or preserved in jars, woven carpets of intricate design, colorful clothes, unusual tools, bubbling potions, towering bookstacks-- all arranged around the tall fountain in the center. Water gurgled and poured from the statue of an elven figure wrestling with a great serpent into the pool below in what was simultaneously a compelling work of art and a really weird subject

matter for a fountain. The water jetted out from the serpents wounds, which made sense, but also from the eyes and mouth of the elven figure, which was just unsettling.

This was as good a place to start as any. She walked through the crowds of people, asking this person or that if they had seen “a kind of tall and sharp looking human woman with good shoes on,” which maybe wasn’t the most exact description but felt appropriate at the time. Most of the people she asked just sort of shrugged and said they hadn’t, and one old man went on and on about his niece for some reason until Claudia politely excused herself by declaring a sudden need to not be there. A boy in mismatched socks said he saw someone kind of like that earlier that morning but he couldn’t remember where or when, which wasn’t of much good. At least it meant she hadn’t simply disappeared into thin air.

Meanwhile a band had set themselves up at the base of the fountain and played a stirring song about the ancient Emperor Fiendal Fiersnyll and his escape from the Cradle. They weren’t half bad and it was a popular tale, the hero descending into the dark ruins beneath the earth to find an ingredient necessary to cure a plague that had struck the nation. The mandolin and guitar had reached a feverish rhythm as the singer told of Fiendal’s escape from the clutches of the dark elves that lived below, forever trapped in the control of the Dark Mother. Practically the entire square had turned to watch and listen, which made interrogating them rather difficult. Claudia turned to leave, maybe check with some of the shopkeepers (was there a cobbler in Terristown?) when her eyes caught on an exceptionally beautiful young woman.

She was minding one of the stalls, a bit further away from the fountain than some of the others were, leaning on the counter with her chin on her palm, listening to the music. Her skin was a brown so dark it was almost black, and so similar in color was her

hair that the only way to know where it started from a distance was to trace the brightly patterned scarves woven into several small braids down to the base of her skull, where her hair blossomed outwards into tiny, wiry curls. There was almost a boredom to her gaze as she surveyed the square, but when she caught Claudia staring she raised her eyebrows and smiled softly.

Claudia was hooked.

As she approached the stall that soft smile broke into an open grin.

“Welcome,” she said, the word clipped in halves by a thick Guasvinian accent. Her voice was light and unbothered, but with a purpose to it that kept it rooted to the earth like a kite on a string. “Are you looking for anything special?”

Claudia had barely even registered the stall beyond its tender. Forcing her eyes away from the girl was difficult, but she managed enough to quickly survey her wares. It was a jewelry stall, filled with glimmering baubles and trinkets, necklaces and rings and broaches, earrings shaped like animals or plants, ivory combs carved into scenes-- all lovely things, but they served only to embellish the woman who stood in the middle of it all. It would be far too much for any one person to wear, but somehow she wore it all just by being beside it, and glittered all the more.

For the sake of the game she picked a ring from its plush pillow. “How much is this one?”

The girl sat forward a little bit, looking Claudia up and down. “More than you can afford, I think,” she said.

Applause erupted from the crowd as the band finished their song, but Claudia had forgotten all about them.



Calling the building “The Dorms” was probably the first mistake, but the second was building it so far from the gates of the town itself. While the dorms were directly north of Terristown, the north gate was actually more to the northeast, which meant that Meryl had something of a trek to get there.

It was easy enough to find the path the students had used, the grass trampled into the ground, and it led straightaway to the building, a squat, two story stone structure overgrown with plants. A patch of ivy grew up one of the walls, blocking out the light of several of the few windows that dotted the building. From its simple design and lack of embellishment it seemed to be an old storage building that had been refurbished for residential purposes. When she had taught at Yoringal-Linde it was common for students to make use of their summer vacation as an independent study period, utilizing one of the many locations across the country that the university owned. She had never seen one for herself-- what did she care what her students did during their free time?-- but in her head she had imagined something more fitting to the Yoringal-Linde legacy.

Then again, she had suspected many of her students would live out of a carriage given the opportunity. A sticky bunch, academics.

Walking up the short flight of stairs beneath the awning she drew her fist up to knock, only to stop. Attached to the door was a letter, the envelope tied shut with a dark ribbon and stabbed into the door. Tasteful.

She took a long look over the dagger and sure enough there was a small mechanism built into the handle. Using a stick that had fallen from one of the overhanging trees she pressed it in, watching as one of the ornamental spikes on the hilt sprung to life and snapped towards the trigger, oozing with a thick liquid. A poison, no doubt. But with the trap sprung she was able to safely remove the dagger and the letter.

The letter, written in a heavy, looping hand, read as such:

Students,

You do not know me nor do you want to. I do not know you nor do I care to. But you have something which I desire, and will stop at nothing to get from you. Relinquish to me The Dark Lantern or I will kill your precious mentor. Don't believe me? See the picture attached.

Speak with the Quester's Guild, south of the Jourinwane Estate. I will not wait forever.

The letter was not signed, but it did not have to be for Meryl to figure out who had sent it. Maybe it was good he hadn't surrendered. One less drama king in the world.

As for the picture, well, his pact hadn't given him any artistic ability. It was the stick-figure equivalent of a portly sort of man in robes, but whether he was without ears or that was artistic inclination was up to the viewer she supposed. Needless to say, she wasn't putting it up on her fridge anytime soon.

The line about the Dark Lantern was concerning. Likely an artifact of some kind, but the fact that she had never heard of it meant it was best to proceed with caution if they did indeed have it.

When she placed her ear against the door she could hear the sound of movement, steps coming from the floor above, but not much else. It was difficult to ascertain how many people were within, or if they were an immediate threat to her. The door did not give when she tried to open it, frozen in place with some sort of warding sorcery. Her area of work.

It was pretty well made, too, likely the work of several of the students put together-- she highly doubted that even she would have been able to make a ward like this as a student, at least not alone. But that was then, of course, and if there was one thing she excelled at more than making shields, it was tearing down the magic of others.

Meryl took a deep breath to still her mind. A gust of wind rustled the leaves of the wood around her. The mist pooled and fell to the ground below. Pulling magic into herself, she opened the ward, pinching the key points of the ward as she muttered words of sorcery. Something was wrong though. It was harder to break than it should have been. Most of the magic was clawing into the ward as she directed but the rest ran along her hand down to the point of her finger, feeding into that damned mark, that stain. She grit her teeth, drawing more magic into her until the ward snapped and tore like wet paper.

“Not bad,” she said, breathing a bit harder. The *dispel* had taken more out of her than it usually did, but she had gotten through it, and the door now swung open easily.

Immediately she knew something was wrong. The stench of rotting food rolled into her like a rancid wave that nearly sent her to the floor in a fit of gagging. Her robe sleeves dulled it somewhat as she pressed it against her nose and mouth, but only just enough to make breathing bearable. Just through the door was a small entrance hall, barely large enough for two people to pass through at once. Muddy boots littered the stone floor and stained what might have once been a nice rug but now looked more like a bog hag’s bathrobe. Even the flowers on the table were dead and dry, their stems overwhelmed by a thick wad of mildew. It was darker inside than it should have been. It was true the day was dull and overcast, and that the light from the windows were smothered with leaves and curtains. But there was a dullness to the space that seemed far beyond the simple lack of light.

If the occupants had heard the door open there was no indication of it. The sounds of movement from above were even and steady, and Meryl cautiously stepped inside. From the hall opened a small dining space, a long table set with place settings and dusty silverware and piles of scattered notes. A somewhat clumsy looking meal sat at the

center, but by that point the decomposition of whatever it was made it impossible to tell what it might have been. At least she hoped it was decomposition. You know how students are with their dietary restrictions.

The adjoining kitchen was the worst of it though. Dirty dishes overflowed in the sink, and the unfortunate cooking experiments left the stove and countertops so overwhelmed with filth that she wondered if the occupants had simply succumbed to food poisoning. No magical artifacts here, just bad cooking practices. If so it had struck someone as they looked through their ice box, as the door had been left open and now seeped out the most noxious of smells. Meryl used her *mage hand* cantrip to shut the door from a safe distance, hoping that it would alleviate the stench somewhat.

It didn't, not quickly, at least. Beyond a general feeling of disgust, Meryl was concerned at the lack of evidence of residence. Granted there was plenty of refuse to indicate people lived here at some point, but not anymore, unless they had taken to eating rotten food. What was more likely was that they had died and been reanimated by the veil, which was irritating but not uncommon. Thankfully zombies would be easy enough to dispatch, but it spoke to the danger of this artifact. She had to get it out of this building lest it somehow affect the town. In the corner of the dining room a small spiral staircase rose to the floor above, and she could feel the pull of some magical force spill downward. With a quick word of sorcery she cast *intellect fortress*, reinforcing her mental shields as she drew them up and started up the stairs, ignoring the draw she felt from the mark.

Soon as her head had cleared the landing Meryl was struck with a powerful psychic energy that forced her to take several steps backwards as it railed against her mental shields. Her hands grasped wildly at the railing as she nearly pitched over the side

and onto the floor below, but she caught it and clung to the carved wood as she steadied herself.

“Shit,” she muttered. Thank the flame for that *intellect fortress*. A power like that might have otherwise pierced straight through her defenses. She steeled herself again and step by step climbed the stairs and stood at the top.

As it would happen, they were not, in fact, zombies. Zombies would have been preferable to what she found in the space upstairs.

There were four of them, two humans, a halfling woman, and an elf adolescent. One of the humans and the elf stood at the circular table, craned over the table in sharp, angular arcs. The halfling woman stood on the top step, blocking Meryl’s path. The other human danced in slow, languid motions. She spun, her arms outstretched, but as her body turned her head stayed in the same position, and Meryl realized with the cracking sound of her spine twisting all the way around that the thin dark line she had thought was a choker was instead a dark liquid that connected the space where her the skin had torn apart. All of their eyes were blank, milky white, as if their sclera had swallowed their pupils, and their lips moved in rapid, soundless words, which literally poured from their mouths as a thin flow of black liquid. In a way it was like ink, but there was no reflection of light, simply a blackness that tore clear through all light.

As Meryl approached the table they did not turn towards her, but remained fixed on the spot in the middle, on the ancient lantern that sat there, a small black flame flickering. Every few moments the figures at the table ran their fingers along the side of the glass, their overgrown fingernails singing against it. She stopped at the halfling woman, pressed her fingers to her neck. Her skin was still warm to the touch, feverish even, her oily hair plastered to the ashy brown skin of her forehead. Up close Meryl

realized that her words were not actually silent: she was singing. It was barely audible, but the melody rose and fell beneath the lyrics of a language she did not know.

Then her heart beat.

Meryl stood, horrified. They were still alive.

As if to mark this revelation the silence broke with the toll of a great bell tearing through the space. The room shook from the force, sending books toppling from the shelves. Meryl spun to face the lantern as the shadows of its captives thickened and pooled towards the flame. As their shadows touched the lantern they shuddered and peeled themselves off the ground, pushing up against the table with muscles that should not have been there as they stood to their full height, towering far above her. They had no faces, no eyes by which they could see, but when they turned to face Meryl and smiled, their teeth needle sharp, she knew it didn't matter.

Meryl flew down the stairs faster than was safe, faster than she realized that she could. One hand kept her balance against the railing and the other clutched at her focus at her waist. Her mind was moving too quickly for her to even think.

She was only a few steps away from the door when a shadow grabbed the hem of her robe and yanked hard. With all her momentum going forward she crashed to the ground with a breath-rending thud, thankful at least for the thin layer of softness provided by the muddy rug. It slid with her as the shadow dragged her back down the hallway and she tried desperately to catch her breath from the fall.

What did she have? What would work here?

She rolled over as the creature let go of her hems and instead gripped her neck with harrowing strength. It was cold, so cold it burned, but it squeezed so hard she was sure her head would pop off before the cold was a worry.

What? What?

With the last of the breath she had in her throat she raised the focus and muttered some sorcery, light, light, *sunbeam*. The mark on her finger tugged on her strength but she fed it to its fill, blasting all the rest of her magic into her spell.

Light surged from her crystal ball and shot directly into the shadow's chest. It's mouth snarled as if to cry in agony, and its fingers pulled away from her neck and clutched at the wound before it dissolved into a puddle of night and seeped into the stone. It never made more than a whisper. Meryl clambered to her feet, her eyes darting around the room for any sign of movement. The spell would allow her for a few more shots but she had to move fast, it wouldn't last much longer.

Another shadow came peeling from the kitchen and pinned her to the wall faster than she could react, snarling a strange hushed sigh. It pulled her forward and slammed her back against it, once, twice, each slam knocking the breath out of her lungs and sending a shooting pain down her spine. She pressed the orb into its wrist and shot through it, the hand spiraling through the air, dissolving into dark mist. It wheeled in pain but recovered quickly and spun to strike her across the face with its stump. She gasped in pain and it thrust its cold, thin wrist into her mouth, forcing it's arm down her throat. Bile crawled up to meet it. She could feel that cold bleed down her esophagus. With a blast to its shoulder the creature was sent flying backwards, its arm ripping out of her.

The other two gave her no time to recover, barrelling into her like wolves. Each one bit into her with a ferocity that could have snapped bone were it not for the flesh that slowed their movement, one in her shoulder and the other in her leg. Her nerves screamed in agony as the needle-like teeth carved through her skin and muscle and scraped against her bone. The latter's enjoyment was short-lived as Meryl decapitated it with a beam of

light. It's teeth dissolved but the wounds remained, blood filling and pouring down her leg. The other leapt to the ceiling with Meryl still in its maw, sending another shockwave of agony parading through her shoulder as it lifted her off the ground. It began to skitter towards the staircase, towards the lantern, its claws tearing into the dark wood of the ceiling beams with each step, each movement racking her body with fresh pain.

This was sure to hurt, but what was new?

Her spell was almost out, but she had held it together for this long and she wouldn't waste this last shot. She palmed the crystal to her other hand and raised it to her shoulder, sending her final beam right through the mouth of the shadow. It sheared through her shoulder and the throat of the beast in blinding pain, but the creature dropped her with its hush death cry and she fell to the ground, crashing into the balls of her feet and rolling into the wall.

And just like that it was over with.

A few minutes passed as she lay there, simply breathing, stewing in the pain that seemed to rack her whole body with every breath. But she wasn't finished yet. Gripping the smooth wood of one of the dining chairs, she forced herself to her feet.

"Fuck," she gasped out. "I need... a chiropractor."

By then she was accustomed enough to her pain to notice two things far more sinister: the first was the unwelcome chill that remained in the pit of her stomach, the second was the mark on her finger. It had grown significantly, now spreading to cover the entirety of her ring finger and some of the knuckle. Damn be to necromancy.

The first of these was thankfully much easier to deal with. Leaning over the mess of whatever those students had made for dinner, she forced herself to vomit the contents of her stomach, and once more for good measure. It sat there next to poorly digested

post-sentient carrots and mediocre goat: a thick glob of that black liquid. Without it pouring out it had a strange, almost organic quality to it, shifting and twitching in the puddle of puke. If you can't break their mind just shove it down their throat.

It was satisfying, stabbing it with the serving fork, but that's likely all the good it did. Still, better to be safe.

A few minutes of searching through the kitchen turned up a few dish towels that had been spared the rot that plagued the rest of the kitchen, and with some ribbons she *eventually* procured from her endless bag, she was able to bandage herself well enough to consider the opening to the second floor.

Her *intellect fortress* had dropped. She could not maintain that and the *sunbeam* at the same time; part of being an adventurer is to know when you need to shield vs. when you need to blast the shit out of things. While she knew her mental shields were strong, she knew well enough that whatever that lantern was it was stronger. Between the *sunbeam* and that horrid mark she was spent, and any magic that came now would cost some skin.

"Why not though?" she said. "It will grow back." She refused to leave that thing to hurt whoever wandered upon it, and she refused to become a puppet to it either.

The last sorcerous syllable was barely out before the choking cry of pain followed. Magic coursed through her, enforcing her mind with layer after layer of protection. But she was past her limit and the magic cost her as her fingernails blackened one after another and curled off their beds in fiery reprimand. She gripped the arms of the chair, wanting so badly to scream but resisting the urge, settling for a primal, angry sigh that shuddered through her. The last nail fluttered to the floor like a petal on the wind,

disappearing into the aether. Nindre's Price. Oh it hurt alright, and every day as the nails grew back it would hurt, but her mind would be her own.

On the second floor the students still stood, still moved about, but their motion was so slow as to be almost imperceptible. The black liquid no longer poured but rather dripped in thick, viscous drops from their lips as their silent chanting faded. Nothing remained where their shadows had once fallen.

Once again the lantern began its assault, but Meryl was more than prepared for it this time, and she braced herself as the lantern pressed against her mind, searching its surface for the smallest crack in her psyche. It would find none.

The silence seemed to intensify as she approached, choking the air like a snowy night. Each breath was thick and heavy, soaked in the scent of incense and wet leaves. After what seemed like a very long time but only took a few steps, she was at the table, the lantern within arms reach.

For such a dangerous thing there was an undeniable beauty to it. The globe shone clear and bright despite the dark flame burning within, and the base and chimney were made of a muted gray-green metal embellished with the images of a woman between two pillars, a pomegranate in one hand and a mushroom in the other. The side pieces, made of the same material, shot straight upwards like fluted columns, curling into capitals of veiled faces surrounded by stars, which bloomed upward towards the handle. Beautiful, yes, but the animosity beneath those veils was unmistakable.

Meryl stopped. As if moving on its own her hand had reached out towards the handle of the lantern, just inches away from wrapping her fingers around it. With some force she pulled her arm back, clutching it to her chest. How had it managed that?

This was no mere magic item. Things like her bag, those were considered powerful in and of itself, but the lantern? This was on another level entirely, and like a cat cornered at an eight year old's birthday party, she dared not risk touching it.

Her eyes darted around the room as she searched for something suitable to throw over the lantern, and settled on a veil hanging from a hook. Despite the pain she gave a thin smile. Slipping past the dancing figure, whose torso spun in a steady spin, Meryl grabbed the veil and draped it over the lantern.

It was a literal instance of "as though a spell had broken." As the veil fell the students broke to the floor, whatever magic keeping them alive finally severed. Like water on hot stone the black liquid sizzled and hissed, evaporating into the air as their still lips cracked. The dancer's head at last slid from her body and rolled across the floor before stopping against the leg of a potions cabinet. Meryl relaxed involuntarily as the pressure pounding against her head ceased all at once, and despite herself she breathed a sigh of relief. Light once more seemed to right itself in the room.

Meryl looked from student to student, their bodies a crumpled heap on the floor. They were, at last, dead. Regrettably that was the best she could offer them. After a few minutes of struggling with her bag she was able to produce a pair of thick leather gloves, which provided her additional protection from the lantern and now covered her bloodied fingers. She wrapped the lantern carefully within the veil and slid it within her bag, where it would be trapped in her private plane, unable to influence the world around it.

The potions cabinet was poorly stocked and clearly more often used to brew coffee and smoke vermynt than to actually practice alchemy, but she was able to find a few weak healing potions and a standard acid that was more like lemon juice than anything else. She set some coffee brewing as she explored the adjacent rooms.

Each one was a small, simple bedroom with two or three messy beds, all unmade, naturally. Rumpled robes spilled out of dresser drawers and unfinished throw pillows leaned precariously from ratty stained armchairs. Meryl found more than one moldy concoction on a bedside table, and from the looks of it these cultures had been at it for longer than the lantern's curse. An especially sticky bunch.

What interested her most, however, was pinned beneath these fungal flagons. A series of letters lay stuck together by the condensation of the mugs, and she pried them apart as she poured herself a coffee.

They were fairly boring, really. A few letters from professors or administrators, wishing them luck or laying out the rules for staying in the dorm, but the last of them did provide her with some insight as to the situation. It was a letter from Douglas Pineswallow, expressing his interest in the student's recent studies on the Cradle and their findings regarding their fetishes and religious symbols, particularly a recent expedition surrounding the Cult of the Dark Mother. At least now the lack of ears made sense; his *were* rather flat against his head.

She took a sip of her coffee, which was a bit weaker than she normally liked. It sat hard on her empty stomach, and she almost missed the mediocre goat. Things never could just be simple, could they?



Claudia was enjoying herself immensely. After their tale of Fiendal Fiersnyll the band had transitioned to more and more songs and legends from across the continent, many of which she had never heard. Natasha would fill her in on the details, where the story was from, its significance, which parts of it were complete and utter bullshit.

“Alright, so that line about the Queen’s heart softening at his plea and taking pity on him? Complete nonsense.”

“Really?” Claudia would say, sometimes in mock surprise and other times in genuine interest. This was of the latter. “But he had just swam to the Dragon Isles and back. Was that not enough for her?” She leaned against the post of the stall in an attempt to be casual, but this stuck her shoulder out a bit and now and then water would drip from the colorful canopy and chill her. Somehow she would endure.

Natasha smiled conspiratorially. “She told him that if he could swim to the Dragon Isles and back he was welcome to stay there and rely on the hospitality of the reptiles. And she banished him!” she said with a laugh that jolted through Claudia like soft lightning. “In the original version the song ended with her guards throwing him into the sea and him never returning.”

She slid languidly back to the counter, resting her chin on the back of her overlaid hands. On her pinky finger was one of the rings she was selling, but business seemed to be slow. Terristown was not the sort of place to take great interest in expensive jewelry, and more than one couple had stopped by looking for a gift before seeing the price tag, paling, and quickly being on their way. Despite this, Natasha seemed unbothered, watching the crowd with eyes that would appear to be sleepy and content, only to sharpen like an assassin’s sudden blade when they caught something interesting. She slid in and out of these with no conscious effort that Claudia could determine, though admittedly she was too smitten to tell a hag from an ugly old woman.

“So what? They changed it so it would be more popular?”

“Exactly. No one feels like shopping if they’re caught up in the details of truth,” she said. “They’re here to entertain, sure, but they’re on *our* dime, not that of the people.

They keep the crowds happy and the money flowing, and we give them protection and an audience. Symbiotic.” She sat up again, once more at full attention. “May I ask what happened to your hands?”

“Oh,” Claudia said. She had completely forgotten about the stains, and now wondered how she could inconspicuously hide them from view. Coming up with nothing, she conspicuously thrust them in her pockets and laughed nervously. “It’s not really that interesting, they’re just, like, stained.” Natasha looked into her eyes for a long moment, and for a second Claudia was worried she sensed the half-lie, but her gaze softened again and she curled back down to the countertop.

“If you say so,” she said, her tone of voice holding a few layers that Claudia couldn’t quite place. Amusement? Disappointment?

Claudia leaned her head to the side and turned to the band. They still played on but the crowd had dispersed somewhat, and the slow, easy melody that they played pulled an involuntary yawn from her. How long had she been there? And where was--

“Oh shit,” she said with a start. “Seven hells, I-- ugh, why am I so *stupid*?” How many steps had she made it past the inn before she got distracted? Six? Seven? Meryl could have been in trouble and here she was talking with a pretty girl who was now looking at her as if she was totally insane.

“Are you alright?” Natasha asked, her brows furrowed together. Damn she had nice brows. Wait, no.

“I’ve got to go, I’m sorry,” Claudia said, backing away. She bumped into several people as she continued to back through the crowd, talking all the while. “It was really nice to meet you and I’ll, uh, maybe see you around, but I have to check on something really, really really fast.” And at last she turned around and immediately barreled into

someone, who fell into another person, who fell into the guitarist, who stumbled backwards a few steps before toppling over into the fountain with a splash.

Someone in the crowd who was kinda paying attention to the band but not really clapped absentmindedly as the music suddenly ceased and he continued his conversation.

Claudia looked like a beet salad with a beet puree dressing on a plate entirely made of beets and served to her by a sentient beet person. Which is all to say she was a little flushed. One of the band members tried to help the guitarist out of the fountain but the edge was too slippery and the guitarist too heavy so she also fell in. From somewhere in the crowd someone started to laugh. It was answered in turn by several others, growing louder and louder until the sound felt like a roar in her head and Claudia thought for sure she was going to die on the spot. She darted from the crowd of people staring at her and into the doors of The Inn, which, yeah, was only seven steps away.

Once inside she pulled her cloak, which was not, in fact, hooded, over her head and made a beeline for the stairs. What were the words for *disguise self* again? Her hands moved in the rote motions again and again but she couldn't remember the sorcery itself. She'd studied that spell for hours to get it right but her heart beat too loudly in her head to even think, to even hear. In fact, she didn't hear Rom calling her name until she bumped straight into him on the top step.

"Claudia," he said, grabbing her by the shoulders, his mouth a flat, concerned frown. "Are you alright? Your face is beet red."

The words finally came to her then, and in an instant Claudia transformed into the only thing that popped into her head: Rom.

He dropped her shoulders and stepped back in alarm. His eyes looked her up and down, his frown shifting from concern to mild insult. "Is that really what I look like?" he

said, his hands touching the puffy bags beneath his eyes. His own eyes, that is, not Claudia's take on his eyes.

Claudia, however, had slipped down the hallway and stormed into her and Meryl's room, where she grabbed her blanket from the floor and flung herself onto the bed, giving way to humiliated sobs. Cluckerson popped their head out of the bag Claudia had thrown to the floor and flapped over to where she lay on the bed, nesting on her form like the chicken they kind of were. The warmth was comforting but it was no use, no comfort came to Claudia. Her stomach twisted round and round in her belly as the whole episode played over in her head again and again like a double feature of the worst play she'd ever been to. Worse than that-- she was the lead. Oh damn it, it was the sheep all over again.

She lay there, wrapped up in shame as much as she was sheets for several minutes, letting the tears pour and then slowly trickle. She really needed to drink more water. Her ruminations were spoiled by the sound of the door to their room opening and basilisk riding heels tap tap tapping across the floor to her bed. Cluckerson gave a startled 'bok' and flapped away. Claudia ran her robe sleeves across her face in a desperate attempt to wipe her tears just as Meryl pulled the blanket off of her and stared down at her curled up form.

Any relief Claudia felt vanished in an instant.

"*You,*" Meryl said, her face darkening as she spat out the word. She had taken a few steps back as she pulled off the sheets but she fell upon Claudia in moments, grabbing her jaw in a strong, gloved hand. In her other hand she had drawn up cool, angry jolts of electricity, which edged closer to Claudia's face. "Did you not learn your lesson? Where is she? What did you do with Claudia?"

Oh shit she still looked like Rom.

“Meryl,” she said, mumbling against the firm grip on her jaw, “it’s me, it’s Claudia.”

The lightning faded as Meryl looked at her, ran her hand over the scraggly beard that wasn’t actually there, and let go, stepping backwards and looking away. “Claudia. I’m sorry about that; I had thought that, well, nevermind. That’s a very convincing *disguise self*, good work.”

Yay, a compliment. It fell flat though, and the two regarded each other in uncomfortable silence. Meryl looked bad, really bad. Her robes were torn in several places and she was visibly bleeding from her shoulder. The beginnings of a dark, depressed bruise was forming on her cheek, and her normally tidy hair flew in many ratty dimensions like a group project spiderweb where one person did most of the work and the rest did just enough to make the whole thing a mess.

Claudia just looked like Rom.

“What happened to you?” Claudia asked.

“Why *do* you look like Rom?” Meryl asked at the same time.

“It’s kind of a long story,” Claudia began. Where to even start? “I went to go looking for you and there was this pretty girl, and a guitar player, and that weird looking fountain, and I got distracted and, and--”

Meryl sighed, halting Claudia’s rambling recount. “Nevermind, Claudia, whatever happened it’s fine.” She opened her bag and began to shove the contents of her closet into it.

“Don’t you care what happened?” Claudia said, trying to hide the hurt in her voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” Meryl said with a shake of her head. “Whatever happened, we have something more important going on. Grab your things and let's leave.” She took a second at the water basin and ran her fingers through her hair. It did little good, but still she turned out of the room, leaving Claudia alone.

She laid back onto the bed.

When she had finally gathered the energy and her belongings she followed Meryl downstairs, who was speaking to the halfling owner. The sky outside was darkening with the beginnings of nightfall, and the room sang with silverware on plates and easy conversations. Claudia felt very alone, and held the bag closer to her body, Cluckerson tucked comfortably away inside.

“I have these for you,” Meryl said, returning the keys to the man, “as well as this letter. We’re to leave immediately but I would appreciate it if you would send it for me.”

The man nodded. He looked significantly better than he had the night before, which for everything felt like years ago. “You’re welcome to stay another night,” he said. “Please, I insist, you’ve done so much.”

“Thank you but no,” Meryl said, shaking her head. “Your generosity is appreciated but we must be on our way.”

Half an hour later they were outside the walls of Terristown, a basket of food tucked into Claudia’s arms as they walked into the night. It felt warm in the cooling air, and she hoped the sky would clear soon. As if in response to this unspoken wish, a bolt of lightning cracked through the sky and the roll of thunder followed.

Trees soon overtook the low hills, hiding the skies entirely save for the bright bursts of light that illuminated the landscape and scattered deer from their resting places.

Meryl did not remove the fairy light from her bag, walking in front of Claudia with a determined, uneven gait.

They continued on the north road until the path split three ways, continuing north or turning west or east. To Claudia's surprise, Meryl did not turn, but rather continued heading northward along the road. Had she forgotten?

"Are we not going to Pearlroque?" she asked. They hadn't spoken while they walked, and her voice hung strangely in the night air, unfamiliar somehow.

"Not yet. We'll have to delay that lesson while I deal with something else." She did not elaborate, nor did she stop.

"Oh!" Claudia said, "Meryl, we have to go back, I'm sorry, I promised Rom he could come with us."

Meryl did stop at that, turning to face her with a baffled expression so close to condemnation that it made Claudia wince. "Why would you promise a thing like that? Did you think I would agree to that?"

"I thought that maybe it would be good to have a healer with us, patch us up if we need it." A part of her wanted to point out that Meryl very clearly needed it. The entire walk she had wanted to ask again what had happened, but Meryl was behaving so distant, and her mouth was set in such a hard, flat way that Claudia was sure she would offer nothing.

Meryl didn't even shake her head, just turned away and kept walking. "That man is more trouble than he's worth. And you'd do well not to make promises you can't keep."

Claudia tried to explain it better, that he was crying, it was breakfast, she didn't have silverware, but Meryl stopped her before she could even start.

“No more. It’s been a long day, and we have a long way to go. Let’s go a bit further and then we’ll camp for the night.”

Whether Claudia liked it or not the conversation was over with. All that remained was to follow sullenly behind her mentor deeper into the woods.

Ch. 4

Travel was much slower than Meryl would have liked, but there was little she could realistically do about it unless she planned on sprouting wings anytime soon, which she didn’t think she could manage with the mark on her hand. With each spell it grew just a little bit more, siphoning more energy all the while. Moreover her recovery following her encounter with the shadows was slow going, even after she had downed the potions from the dorms. It had stopped the bleeding but the muscle still ached as it slowly regrew over her bones.

Also not helping the pace was Claudia’s endless parade of moping. It was incredibly frustrating; she had told her that whatever happened was of little consequence-- whatever had happened Meryl wasn’t angry about it. On the contrary, she was glad her apprentice was finally practicing magic on her own accord and not just when ordered to. For the life of her she couldn’t fathom why it had upset Claudia so, but she was far too concerned with the much more practical issue of a murderous lantern in her bag to be overly preoccupied with the gloomy moods of a teenager. Eventually something would come along and lift her spirits and it would be like nothing had happened, so it was best to simply let things be.

There was nothing especially interesting about the woods they were travelling through. It had not even been properly named, not on any map, at least. Locals were

prone to calling it “The Thin Wood” or “The Barrier Wood”, as it curved around Terristown and Harristown and isolated it from much of the rest of the nation. A service to both sides, Meryl figured. One dreaded to think what the rest of the nation would look like if those naming conventions had been allowed to run amok. Thick, bushy elms blocked the dark sky with their foliage, and shadows of deer or foxes darted between the dense and hardy trunks of oak or maple.

On either side of the road a small wall stood alongside, crowned every few paces with a stone lantern, its fires long extinguished and now cool to the touch. Centuries ago when these roads had been built these lanterns glowed with the magical light of the emperor, the essence of their magic veining through the nation and lighting the path for any travellers. It was a complex ward, once which required the work of hundreds if not thousands of dedicated sorcerers to develop and build, but it had protected travellers for centuries. As long as they stayed within the light the animals and occasional monsters would be unable to harm them, and travel and trade flourished.

But that *was* centuries ago. There was not a venashim alive whose living memory had seen the fires lit. Besides that, nature fought and won many of the eons-long battles, and much of the roads had given way to the steady pikes of grass or the rams of thick, gnarling roots.

Meryl stepped over one of these battlefields, a thick oak that had sprouted centuries ago mere inches from the wall, and now stood tall and proud, the regular gray stone of the road cracked and shattered beneath its gradual growth. Claudia stumbled behind her, sending the ruined stone tumbling downward and scattering pebbles and dust.

This is not to say the wards were entirely gone. The magic that infused that rock was strong, crafted by the blood and will of thousands. Even where the grass had

overgrown the path and the lanterns lay icy cold and crumbling, that ward still sung. But magic did not last forever, and there would be one day where the wards would no longer hold, and the roads would be as dangerous a place as any other. Meryl took a bite of her cold potato sandwich.

With any luck she would be dead by then.

They finally made camp a few hours into their journey, which Meryl more or less announced by dropping her bag and beginning to unpack. The walls on either side of the road had curled outward and looped further into the woods than the road proper, allowing for travellers to comfortably make camp. There might have been a time where an inn or a hospitium would have offered shelter for travellers, but like the roads these were increasingly falling into disrepair. It seemed more and more that unless one was an adventurer or a noble with an armed entourage, you pretty much stayed where you were. Even the villages that once had dotted the countryside now fell to nature or monsters or lawless brigands whose only outlet for their frustration with things was to harm other people, often no better off than themselves. A worthless affair.

“No fire tonight,” Meryl said as Claudia sparked flame into her hands. “At least until we’re a decent way from Terristown. I would like for us to not draw any attention.”

Claudia let the flame dissipate but still hunched over the tent of twigs she was going to incinerate. She wore her displeasure like a crown of thorns, quietly but with an indignation that was worse than had she simply complained like she so clearly wanted to. “Is this related to your wounds?” she asked.

“Tangentially, yes.”

“Still don’t want to talk about it then? Is that it?” Claudia stalked towards Meryl, the crown cast aside. “Do you think I can’t handle it? Do you not trust me?”

Meryl did not stand to meet her, but rather allowed her voice to do that for her. “I am the instructor and you are the student. I will tell you what you need to know and right now what happened is not important. You’re taking a professional decision and turning it into a personal affront. Stop being so emotional.” She returned her attention to setting up the tent. Normally she would have conjured an *invisible servant* to do the work, but with the mark on her hand... What would happen if it overtook her whole hand, or her arm? No, it wasn’t worth the risk.

Okay, maybe it would have been worth the risk.

“That tent looks terrible,” Claudia moped when Meryl had finished, and loath as she was to admit it, she had to agree. It had been a long, long while since she had set one up manually and the ground was too hard to properly thrust the posts into and the lines were too thin for her to tie properly with her damn gloves on but she didn’t dare take them off. The treated goatskin of the tent hung lopsided, part of it haphazardly tied to the post and the other side dragging against the ground uselessly. Okay, so the tent looked terrible, but by the Magi Meryl had had it and was not taking any more abuse.

“I’m not in the mood, Claudia,” she snapped. “You can sleep in the tent or out in the rain, the decision is yours.”

Her apprentice mumbled something under her breath but grudgingly slipped beneath the tent and began to unload her bag, which was another issue entirely.

“No,” Meryl said, “you are *not* bringing the chicken into the tent, it is to sleep outside.” Wait. “Why do you even have a chicken?” she sputtered. “Where did you even *get* the chicken?”

“They’re not just a *chicken*,” Claudia said, clutching the bird to her in a gesture that made it look absolutely like a chicken. “Their name is Cluckerson and they’re my

familiar. And technically they're fae and not an animal so the rules are different." She looked up at Meryl, the chicken whirling its head about and generally behaving very chicken-like. "You hadn't come back and I was lonely."

It was tempting to say that Meryl couldn't believe what she was hearing but in reality she absolutely could believe what she was hearing she just hated all of it. Where to even begin? "Claudia. Those incenses are expensive. You cannot just conjure a familiar because you feel like it, and by the Throne if you are going to you should at least conjure one that is less-- less *ridiculous*," she finally spat, finding the only word that seemed suitable. "Why is it so hard for you to just respect your craft? Why does everything have to be a joke with you?"

Faster than Meryl would have realized she could, Claudia collected her things and marched out of the tent and into the rain, her sleeping bag dragging behind her in the dirt like a jelly worm beaten unconscious.

"Where are you going?" Meryl demanded.

"I'm going to sleep outside in the rain," Claudia shot back. "You said the decision is mine and I'm making it."

Step by soggy step her apprentice trudged across the road and onto the other side of the clearing, where she sat on a stump and pulled her sleeping bag around her like the world's muddiest cape. She shot Meryl a sour look and turned away from her, burying her face in the fluff of the magic chicken. It clucked.

For a brief moment her heart faltered, like a rug had been pulled out from under it. But it was only a moment. If Claudia thought she was punishing Meryl somehow then she was mistaken; the only person she was actually hurting was herself. Let her sleep in the rain, Meryl would be perfectly comfortable alone in the shoddily made tent. Granted

when Claudia inevitably caught a cold Meryl would have to be the one to deal with her, but maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she would just learn something for once.



“If my memory serves me,” Meryl said, “there should be a village up ahead. I want you to take this money and buy us some supplies.”

“Aren't you going to come with me?”

Meryl shook her head, pulling the bag a bit closer to her almost imperceptibly. Almost.

It had been a few days now and they were nearing the edge of the woods, but the journey so far had been unpleasant to say the least. Some part of Claudia recognized that she was being childish about things. She knew that Meryl would share with her what happened when she was ready, and she knew that there was probably a good reason as to why she hadn't up until that point. And even if she didn't she was still entitled to her privacy. But even with all of this she still felt hurt by all of it, the quiet trek through the trees, the poorly made tents, the chill of nights with no fires and cold, stale foods. Was wanting a decent meal or a dry place to sleep so much to ask? And even with her right to privacy she didn't have to be such a dick about it.

Claudia glumly took the money and headed in the direction of the village. The path was clear, and obviously well trodden by visitors or the villagers themselves, weaving in and out of the trees. Soon she was out of sight of the road and her mentor. It was warm, balmy almost, the air layered with the rich smells of earth and plantlife. In many ways it reminded her of home, although the lack of livestock meant it was less weighed by the acrid smell of manure than she was perhaps accustomed to. Point for the

forest. From somewhere above her the endless cacophony of birdsong was interrupted by a crow calling out into the wood before it took off flapping away.

“Do you wish you could fly like that, Cluckerson?” she asked the chicken. It clucked in response and plucked a bug from her curls. The creature smacked away happily before curling into the hood of her cloak, content. Maybe she should have given the spirit a more practical form. A crow was a popular choice for a reason-- it could fly much further and longer, and there were always crows about, even in cities and towns. If you wanted to be sneaky about it you’d be hard pressed to pick another bird.

But that meant conceding to Meryl, and when she got into those condescending moods of hers nothing felt worse. She would rather peel off her own fingernails than admit she was right. It was more than that though, Claudia thought with a sigh. Meryl was such a talented sorceress, and she wanted so badly to impress her as her student, but it didn’t seem like she could get anything right. But for a talented sorceress she didn’t always have the best sense of self-preservation, and even Claudia could see that her pride got the better of her, and she was fourteen. And what was with that tent? Thankfully Claudia had been conjuring *servants* to fix the tent since then, but there was more going on than Meryl was letting on, and that made her anxious.

She sneezed, loudly. A cluster of pixies that had been hiding in a shrub scattered from the apparent assault, and all she could do was call out a sniffing “Sorry!” as they flittered off. Thrones she hoped she wasn’t catching a cold.

Trees slowly yielded to the sight of the sides of buildings, stone and wood and the gentle rise of smoke from chimneys. Seemed a bit toasty to be lighting a fire, but who was Claudia to judge? She had yet to notice it but the birdsong had quieted, almost

everything had, in fact. Besides the crunch of old leaves beneath her feet and the occasional cluck of Cluckerson, the woods had gone completely silent.

No, it wasn't until Claudia fully broke the treeline and stepped into the village itself that something seemed to be wrong. Regardless of how small a village was, there was almost always some din of life. Here there was just the sound of broken glass crunching beneath her feet as Claudia stepped on the shattered remains of a window. The smoke, too, was not rising from a chimney, but from the burned remains of a hut near the center of town. Its remains still smouldered in the warm summer day, giving the air a nostalgic sort of smell that reminded her of fall leaves. At least it hadn't started a forest fire. All of the buildings seemed to be in a similar condition, shattered windows, battered down doors, the entire village in a state of scorched silence.

Claudia's breathing had turned hard, she realized. Her heart had climbed in her throat and was making her chest tight. Where was everyone? Did they flee to a town after the attack? Was there anyone still here?

A horrible thought came to her. What if everyone had died? Or worse: what if *almost* everyone had died? What if there was someone trapped alone in this place?

"Hello?" she called out. "Is anyone still here in--" she looked around for a sign of some kind. Did this place not have a name? "Uh, is anyone still here?" Her voice didn't even echo, just carried on the air and vanished. If someone was there they gave no response.

She began to check each of the standing buildings, poking her head into doors or windows, keeping her ears and eyes open for any movement. Remnants of a fire still crackled in a small bakery, and a few of the homes had food scattered about the floor alongside smashed tables and chairs. Dark blood stained the stone of the floor, smoothed

by years of people walking over them. In some places the blood was not simply in a pool, but a trail, as if the bodies had been dragged, which is always encouraging. The only hint beyond that was that the entire village seemed devoid of metal. Every home and business she came across was stripped bare of silverware, weapons, or any jewelry, but whether that was the result of bandits or some weird metal eating monster was anyone's guess. What ate metal? Earth elementals, some subcategories of chimera, dragons (theoretically), trolls...

It was as she listed off metal eating creatures that she heard it: a slow, rhythmic creak. It sawed back and forth in a steady pace, the sound piercing through the air like an arrow. The sound came from one of the houses that lined the only paved road, and Claudia trotted towards it, thankful finally for a sign of life. The door was locked when she tried it, and no one answered her as she called and knocked against it. One of the windows at the front had been smashed outwards, but the edge was just slightly above Claudia's eye level, and she had to pull herself upwards to look inside.

Sun had emerged from the clouds a few days into their travel, but the room Claudia looked into didn't seem to get the memo. Long shadows veiled the room, and the light that did seem to pierce within had the cold, thin quality of moonlight. The creaking, Claudia realized, had not increased in volume as she approached, but rather remained at a steady level throughout, and even from where she was, within eyeshot of the rocking chair that produced it, it was no louder than it had been when it came from across the road. Sitting in the rocking chair, swaying back and forth in a regular, easy motion, was a figure. Whether they wore all black or that was the effect of the darkness of the room was up for debate. They were turned away from Claudia, facing the corner of the living room,

and did not turn to her when she called, just rocked, rocked, the creak whistling through the air and drowning out the silence.

Until they stopped.

Silence. Not like the silence before, where it was the absence of noise, but a full, grasping silence that filled the space like water in a glass.

“Please,” came a soft voice. It was like a shadow of a whisper, both distant and so close Claudia could feel the breath in her ear. “Leave, now.”

“What?” Claudia tried to say, but her fingers slipped and she fell from the window and only got out a “Wha.” She landed harmlessly on the dirt of the garden, but when she pulled herself back up the figure was nowhere to be seen. Sunlight now filled the room in normal proportion, gleaming off the polished white stone of the fireplace, its mantle cracked and fragmented. Clearly whatever had happened here-- *was happening* here-- was beyond her capacity. Dropping back down to the dirt of the garden she made a beeline for the trees.

She had almost made it there too when a movement caught her eye. It was just the briefest of motions, the whoosh of a cloak around the corner of a building, that was it, that’s all it was. Really it could have been a fox or something, or a deer. There were lots of deer, they were in the woods! But she knew it wasn’t.

Despite the tension in her chest and the mounting feeling that she was a rabbit nearing a trap, Claudia followed the motion, walking closely to the base of the wall, until at last she reached the corner and poked her head just beyond.

And there they all were. It was the villagers, all of them. Somehow she had managed to always be where they weren’t, small as the village was. Their steps were short, quiet things, their weight unsteadily propelled forward through limbs that no longer

held any life. Some of them still had enough of their skin on their faces to be recognizable as people, but that couldn't be said for all of them. One particularly poor soul had her legs broken before she died, and crawled along the ground with the rest of the crowd, her arms clawing at the dirt and what was left of her right leg pushing her forward.

Pushing *it* forward. No, Claudia knew better than to mistake the undead for venashim. Whatever husk remained of their personhood that was all it was. This was why the dead were burned in Thalassa. Too much magic in the mud.

Obvious horror notwithstanding, it was interesting that despite dying in separate, closed off areas, they all seemed to have grouped together relatively quickly following their reanimation. True, the undead were often seen roaming together, but it was speculated to be more under the direction of a rogue necromancer rather than the inherent instinct of the undead themselves. In fact, many wondered if the undead had any instinct beyond shambling, moaning, and seeking warm flesh to bite into. And that itself wasn't so special if you'd seen someone with a hangover before. Just a bit more viscera.

Meryl would certainly find this information interesting, maybe enough to get her out of her funk. She wasn't much of a necromancer herself but from what Claudia's mother had told her about Meryl she came from a long line of necromancers. Either way, she needed to get out of there before they noticed her. Zombies were slow but they were relentless pursuers; it would be best to leave while they were still just wandering about the place they used to live.

Naturally, then, she would sneeze. It wasn't a quiet sneeze either-- she inherited her sneezes from her father, and he used to scare the sheep awake.

She didn't wait for them to turn-- she didn't have to. As soon as she turned on her heels the nearest of them started to moan, a low, steady thing. Each one answered in kind and it rippled through like a wave of hunger and despair, until the woods seemed to reverberate with the sound. Cluckerson launched from her hood and flapped into her arms, and Claudia clutched him tight as she tried her best not to trip on the tangle of roots.

Before she knew it she was out of earshot of the moaning. Had they stopped? Was she far enough away to lose them yet? Without the immediate thrill of moaning behind her Claudia allowed herself to slow to a light jog and then a walk. It was incredible, how much of the forest seemed to be just fine. Birdsong once more filled the branches above her, butterflies floated from flower to flower, a particularly persistent mosquito flew at her face again and again until she smashed it between her palms. The wonders of nature and all that. Eventually too those corpses would rot while they walked and their flesh would return to the soil, and that too could be a part of nature. In the meantime they just had to make sure not to be eaten by them. Hells, maybe she should be a druid, she thought, but then another mosquito flew in her face and she decided she was fine with sorcery.

She blasted this one with a little fire and went on her way.

While it would have been easier to find her way back on the same path as before, Claudia was able to find Meryl before it got too late. Twilight was just beginning to settle through the forest when Claudia stepped through the trees and absolutely nailed her shin against the little wall.

“Oh, oh man,” she gasped out. “Fuck that hurts.”

“We’ve talked about your language before, Claudia,” Meryl said. She sat straight-backed on the wall opposite the one that had just made a complete disaster zone of her shin. On her lap was a heavy-looking bestiary, and floating next to her an enchanted desktop that piled high with papers scrawled with notes. With a sharp turn of her head she cracked her neck and began to pack things away, capping her pen and sliding the notes into various folders. “I suppose you had a good reason for returning so late and with no supplies?”

Oh damn, that’s right, supplies. The bloodstains and walking corpses and mysterious shadowy figure in the rocking chair made her forget all about the actual reason she was there in the first place. Which, to be fair, is a pretty significant series of events that would make most people forget their chores. Claudia was on the verge of filling her in on everything but, well. When Meryl rolled her shoulders there was a firmness to her jaw, a grit of her teeth, and although her steps had evened out somewhat, there were times when she faltered. Once when they were walking Claudia’s bag had swung into Meryl’s thigh and she gasped as if she had been struck, and she kept stopping on the way, leaning against the wall lanterns as if exhausted. Claudia tried to act disinterested, stare off into the woods. And not even to mention the gloves. She hadn’t switched them out to match her boots, like at all, which was incredibly suspicious behavior. Lately she’d even taken to sleeping in them, which was either an indicator that something was wrong with her or that she had turned into a sociopath.

Whatever it was that Meryl was going through, she could go through it without having to worry about fleeing from zombies. Zombies, mind you, that probably wouldn’t even reach them if they travelled reasonably fast and didn’t do things to draw attention to themselves.

“Claudia? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Sorry, I was thinking about the flowers for my shin’s funeral. Lilacs or peonies?”

“Peonies. The supplies?”

“Out of everything,” Claudia lied. “Another group came through earlier this week and they haven’t had the chance to restock.” She dug through her pockets and held out the coins.

With an aggravated sigh Meryl stood and collected the coins before continuing down the path. “We’ll stop for the night soon but I’d like to make up for some of the lost progress today.” Halting suddenly she plucked something out of the pile of coins, then another something. “What are these?” she asked Claudia, holding up the disembodied fork tines.

Claudia walked past her, eyeing them with disinterest. “No idea.”



Moonlight flooded the woods, casting the trees and grass in a stark, pale light. Pithe waxed into a half moon and Nindre, always full and gleaming, matched its light and then some. Some gods you simply couldn’t escape from.

While Meryl could hardly blame Claudia for the village’s lack of product, it did mean that their travels would become somewhat less comfortable in the coming days. That village had been the last until they were firmly out of the woods and had reached the border of the Harbor Planes, and that was still a few days of travel away. She was thankful that the innkeeper had packed some food for them, but they would be out of that soon, and her eagerness to leave Terristown meant that they weren’t half as prepared as she normally liked to be. A few nights of hunger wouldn’t kill her, but she might kill

Claudia before they restocked. That girl was somehow even less tolerable on an empty stomach.

On the positive side, they hadn't been followed, not that Meryl had discerned. Her casting limitations meant little to the array of magic items she'd picked up over the years, and many of them were proving quite useful. Periodically throughout their walking she had stopped to place little crystal eyes in the platform of the lanterns. With the matching eye pressed to her forehead she could review what each had seen within the last 24 hours, and so far there hadn't been much of note. Although the eyes were picked at occasionally by a pair of overly curious crows, the only others using this route besides them was a large caravan composed mostly of merchants, but also armed guards and hunters. There was, however, a rather conspicuous mash'him mage that trailed behind them but never fully out of their sight, his veils rippling in the breeze. Even through the distorted eyes she could see the tall, curling horns that cast such a stark shape beneath the cloth. He was one to watch out for, certainly. But ultimately she had the feeling they were simply moving north to more populated cities rather than following them.

Beside her Claudia clutched her chicken familiar to her chest, scratching it beneath the chin and generally smoothing it as she looked around the woods. Meryl's stance on the creature had not changed. It was one thing to summon a spirit; it was another to bind it to such an ignoble form. By the happy clucks of the chicken she had the impression that it was unperturbed by its body, but it was likely just happy to have a body. In the end it was more the principle of the matter. What did reassure her is that despite their close proximity the lantern seemed to have no effect on Claudia. Her anxieties about travelling into more populated species then could be abated so long as it was trapped within the planes of her bag.

Her efforts to read up on it had so far yielded no fruit. The cult of the dark mother was, well, a bit vague of a description. There were at least eight of them within the last 200 years, and that was not even counting the efforts of those pathetic creatures trapped within the cradle. To think about the thousands, hundreds of thousands of thrall-bound venashim that lived just a few miles beneath her feet; it chilled her. Of the books she had with her very little had to do with the divine, and the histories were typically regarding the practical events as they occurred, with very little consideration to the religious practices themselves. Such accounts avoided legitimizing the parties and their practices, but also deprived her of useful information.

Truly then, Umberport was the most sound destination. It was the second largest city in Thalassa and tended to smell like it. But its own academies and libraries were almost certain to have something of use to her. At least something better than what she had on her. They would be able to reach it faster than if they travelled home, and besides, she had an old acquaintance of sorts who might be able to help her with that blasted mark.

A cool breeze rustled the edges of her robes, sending a spray of goose skin up her arms.

They settled into camp an hour or so later. Precious travel time had been lost in Claudia's fruitless trip to the village and they ended up stopping before reaching a more suitable resting spot, but such was life. Meryl looked over their rations while behind her Claudia helped the *invisible servant* set up the tent. Tragic, really. Sometimes she hated being right. But only sometimes.

"Why don't you get a fire going tonight?" Meryl said. They had set up the tent in the middle of the road and Meryl was laying a few enchanted totems around the

perimeter. Should something break through the lanterns and the low wall it would keep it at bay, at least for a while. Meryl never made camp without them. “We could make some tea, or hot chocolate.”

“I thought you said we were laying low,” Claudia said. “Like, trying not to attract attention.” She had gotten into a game of cards with the *invisible servant* and was losing rather badly, judging by the pile of acorns beside the apparently empty stool. Based on the cards floating a few inches above it, it didn’t even have a good hand.

“I don’t think we’re being followed,” Meryl said. “And we’ll be running low on food. A good, hot drink can help make what we have last a bit longer.”

“Are you sure?” Claudia asked. “Not about the food, I mean the fire.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Meryl said, irritation prickling at her brow. “Is there a reason you’re being so insistent against it all of a sudden? Are you afraid you’ll catch fire?” It was an old saying, “liars catch on fire.” Like most old sayings it wasn’t very good and didn’t make a whole lot of sense-- Meryl suspected that it had to do with old military interrogation tactics-- but regardless of its quality it had stuck.

“I’m not being insistent,” Claudia protested insistently. “I just think it will be a hot night, that’s all.”

“Claudia you have a blanket draped across you.”

Claudia pulled the blanket closer around her. “It’s for comfort, not warmth.”

With some effort Meryl took a deep, slow breath. Hells this was even before she was hungry. “Fine,” she finally said, letting the word drop like one of those coconuts that kill people. “Whether you want it or not, I think I could do with a cup of tea. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be getting wood for the fire.”

Claudia opened her mouth like she was going to say something more but then stopped. Her eyes darted back to the deck in her hands. “Go fish.”

Much like tents, Meryl was not the most skilled at building a fire, but few fuels are more efficient than spite. Once she had finally gotten it alight it burned hot and it burned brightly, and it made a damn good cup of her favorite relaxation blend. Despite the cold, hard surface of the road beneath their tent, Meryl slept very, very well.

That is, she slept well for about 43 minutes. 44 minutes into her rest she was awoken by the not-so distant sounds of moaning. She shot up in her sleeping bag and scrambled towards the doors of the tent. Much of the fire had since burned itself out, and all that remained was the feeble spark of embers. But even without light to see them by, she knew what was approaching, just a little ways down the road. Zombies. Of course. This was punishment for wishing for them back in the dorms. Some god had heard her and said, “Oh, you want zombies? I heard you say something about zombies. Here, have some zombies.” And now there were zombies, shambling down the road as if the rules of old wards didn’t apply to them. Assholes.

Claudia was a bit harder to wake up, which drew from Meryl several concerns about her general survival chances on her own, but with enough shaking she was able to rouse her from her sleep.

“Whoah, whoah, the baby has stopped crying,” she said. “Are you trying to break my neck?” Her eyes widened as the noise finally pierced through that sleepy veil. “Oh.”

“I’m glad to see you’re practicing situational awareness. Get dressed and throw on your boots. They’ll be here in--” she poked her head out of the tent flaps. “Three minutes. Hurry up now.” Meryl pulled on the outer layer of her robes and laced up the

first pair of boots she could manage to get out of the bag. By the time Claudia had joined her outside the tent the first zombie had made it to the circle of totems.

It had reached out its hand in a very standard zombie motion. No one could accuse them of being spontaneous, that's for sure. Where it might have passed over the line and into the encampment a firm wall of force lit into existence, and the rotting palm pressed into it like a kid at the zoo who refused to acknowledge the "do not touch the glass" signs. Several more fetid hands pressed into wall, pushing against it or harmlessly wailing into it, each strike sending out a little warbling ripple.

Up close Meryl could see that they were decidedly outnumbered. There were at least twenty zombies for each one of them, and while she was sure a few battle cantrips would take care of most of them, she knew that the ward wouldn't last long enough to make a sizable dent in them. Zombies were one thing in groups of threes and fours, but a group this large was verging on a horde. Her bag weighed heavy on her shoulder. She had better things to do than be eaten by zombies. Generally most people did, but especially her.

"We should retreat," Meryl said. "It's important to pick your battles, and a good rule of thumb is not to pick one where everything in it wants to eat you."

"What about the tent?" Claudia asked. Without thinking Meryl shot her an incredulous look.

"A tent is not worth dying over, Claudia. Come now, do you think you can whip up a few *fire bolts*? I'll guide us, you shoot."

Thankfully it was a clear night, and there was plenty of light to see by. Meryl pulled out one of her old maps and located what seemed like the best place to withstand an undead seize. Charging forward into the night they stepped through the ward and into

the woods, the steady chorus of moaning close behind them. It was difficult going. No natural path had been carved through the thick grass and shrubs, and whatever paths had been laid for the old villages that would have dotted the area had long since been devoured by the woods. More than once Meryl had to stop and pry her robes from the thorny brambles of a berry bush. Claudia seemed to be having a harder time. Every few steps she would turn and blast a bolt of fire into the throng, and more often than not she hit something, whether that was for aim or the density of the horde... well, when your target *is* the broad side of the barn, you'd better be able to hit it.

The map wasn't the most detailed in the world, but Meryl was generally able to follow it, twisting this way or that through the woods and the hollow husk of old stone and plaster homes left to rot. She hadn't realized how far ahead of Claudia she had gotten until the latter gave a yelp of surprise and crashed into the ground. "Bok!" squawked her chicken.

"Damn it," Meryl exclaimed, tucking the map under her arm. The horde was gaining fast on Claudia, who had her foot tangled in the roots of some thrones damned tree.

"O-kay," Claudia said, breathing hard, "kiiiinda freaking out over here, ha ha." She peered over her shoulder just as one of the zombies began to reach out for her, grabbing at the trapped foot. "Nope!" she yelled, blasting it in the face with a *fire bolt*. It toppled backwards as the force of the blast pushed it away. "Big fucking nope! Meryl!"

"Again with the language," Meryl said, kneeling next to Claudia. Her panic had completely overwhelmed her-- her foot was barely hooked into the root. "Take a breath and look, Claudia."

“I really don’t want to,” she said, tears brimming in her eyes. “Does it need to be cut off?”

“What? No, just--” the same zombie curled forward, its spine clicking as it rolled back upwards. Fuck she hated fighting the undead. Why could they never just die? She pointed two fingers towards the creature’s face and shot it full of fire before attending to her panicked pupil. “Just take a deep breath and *unhook your foot!*”

With the fastest deep breath possible, Claudia shot her foot back and dislodged it from the root, kicking a zombie in the teeth with the motion. Several more corpses stumbled forward as Claudia scrambled to her feet, gripping Meryl all the while with frantic strength.

“Can you walk?” Meryl asked her. Not that there was any alternative, Claudia was almost as tall as Meryl had probably had twenty pounds on her; it’s not like she could carry her. Claudia winced with her first step but forced it into a gritted smile.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I should be fine. I’m sorry.”

“Good, you’ll need to run then. Don’t think about the zombies for now, let’s just get some distance. We’re getting close. Watch your step.”

Meryl replaced the map in her bag and took off at a brisk trot, looking back every now and then to make sure that Claudia was keeping pace and slowing where she needed to. By the time the building came into view the moans were a distant worry, but one that continued to scratch at the periphery of their senses.

It was a tall, round building, two stories of vaulted ceilings and old stone. Once it might have been a gleaming white in the moonlight, but now it had the grimy grey and green of a moss ridden skeleton. Even with the onslaught of moss and ivy one could see the carved reliefs of bathers and river nymphs, water elementals swimming up the sides

and sprouting outwards like gargoyles against the rotting tegula roof. As if the designer had been afraid someone might miss the entrance, the massive ornate doors were framed by a marble patio and fluted columns that flew towards a pedimental sculpture as tall as the entire second floor. Minimalism be damned, this was a bathhouse of the gods and everyone would know it.

“Gee,” Claudia said, “What do you think this building was used for? It’s really unclear, I feel like it could be anything.”

“Whatever it was used for doesn’t matter,” Meryl said, ignoring her apprentice’s quick turnaround. “For now it will be our bastion.”

It was difficult not to feel dwarfed by the building. Even the front doors were at least the height of two humans in a trench coat, which Meryl had oddly witnessed enough to use as a unit of measurement. College students. She stopped just beyond the threshold, and instead guided Claudia to the base of one of the columns, positioning her so she hid in the shadows.

“I’m going to be right back, alright?”

“Wait, you’re leaving me alone?” Claudia said, her voice squeaking a bit.

“Just for a minute or two. I need to make sure that if there are any other entrances they’re barred off. A building can provide protection, yes, but it can also trap you. You must know your surroundings. Speaking of,” she said, pulling her spellbook from its pouch on her belt, “there’s something I need you to do for me.” She flipped through the pages before setting the proper spell in front of Claudia.

“*Augury?*” Claudia said, more incredulous than an actual question. “But I haven’t practiced that at all, I don’t think I can even draw that much magic just yet.”

“I need you to try,” Meryl said, very seriously. “If this spot won’t work well for us then we will continue on our way and find one that will. Now give me your hands.”

Returning her chicken to her bag Claudia put her hands out for Meryl, her black-stained palms facing upwards and cold with sweat. Meryl pressed her thumbs into her hands and pulled the magic, feeling it swirl into her core. Focusing on the points where her hands met Claudia’s, she directed it into her apprentice, allowing the magic to flow out of her like water from a pitcher. As she had hoped she felt no tug from the mark. So it was only a barrier with spells then. Good.

“Oh,” Claudia said. “Oh that feels really weird.” She pulled her hands back and flexed her fingers. “It kinda smells like you? Like tobacco smoke and coffee grounds.”

Always the flatterer.

Meryl pressed a few inlaid tokens into her hands and stalked down the stairs. While she was loath to leave Claudia alone in this situation she knew she could survey the immediate surroundings faster without her limping apprentice. Moreover Claudia really needed to work on her divination, and sometimes one needed a life-threatening situation to incentivise. Even in the likely scenario that the spell failed, it would enforce the reality that a wide breadth of knowledge was essential to adventuring and especially where sorcery was involved.

A stone path had been laid around the perimeter of the building, likely from around the same time as the building of the bathhouse itself. It was thoroughly buried beneath years of soil and dead leaves, but every now and then it would peek out from underneath to remind Meryl that this had once been an important and useful building for the surrounding communities. From far above her a crow called and flapped noisily from its perch into the tall, open archways of the second floor. Must be a real mess up there.

As luck would have it there was only one other entrance to the building on the ground floor, a small nondescript door set into an adjacent hall, likely kept for the priests or servants. It hung ajar to a small residential space, although whatever furniture had been there had long been smashed to pieces and rotted. Even the lock on the door was of little use, rusted so far away as to practically dissolve at her touch.

Nothing in her bag would bar that doorway, nor would it be able to repair the door enough for it to function as a respectable barricade. What did she have, what did she have?

In the end she settled for a potion that had been sitting in the corners of her bag's plane for nearly a decade now, a gift from a druid after she eradicated a swarm of worm people from his domain. Much of the writing on the label had been smudged away, but she could still read the name itself: *Overgrowth*. Certainly worth trying.

She tore a little branch from one of the nearby trees and planted it in the dirt a few inches away from the doorway. The gloves made pulling the stopper from the mouth excessively difficult, and she had to use her teeth to pry it out. Exposed to the oxygen outside the bottle the thick liquid lit up from the dull, mossy green into a lurid neon that cast light out all around her. It coated the planted branch like a thick melty wax, dripping all the way down to the soil. Just as suddenly as it had lit to life the glow flickered out. Meryl took a few steps back. She'd had enough encounters with druidcraft to be wary of its effects.

Without any warning the earth beneath her began to rumble, rippling outwards from the little branch like a colossus breaking the surface of the still sea. The branch swung back and forth with the motion, each turn rising higher and higher from the soil until it towered towards the roof and its thick trunk swallowed the doorway. All the grass

around it had followed suit, bursting out of the ground in waves of bristling green that rose above Meryl's waist. It pushed her further back from the building and against the trunk of another oak, whose bark sang with the potion that coursed through it.

When the shaking finally quieted Meryl was practically swimming in plantlife, the roots and leaves all but suffocating the world around her. She picked up the bottle, which she had dropped in the initial quake. Perhaps she needed to visit that druid again. Parsing through the tall grass with her hands, Meryl began the march back to the front of the building, all too aware of the growing volume of the zombies as they closed in.



Divinations didn't come easily to Claudia. It was her least favorite school of magic and consequently the one she excelled at the least. Moreover the spell was beyond her current studies of that school, or of magic on the whole, and a lot of the concepts around it just didn't make a lot of sense to her.

Oh, and the endless moaning of the undead? Not the best background music for studying. It was like an unholy church choir where the hymns were all about eating you specifically. Damn she wished she'd been able to just blast them all to ashes. Why did things have to come back and bite her? Literally, they would literally bite her! She could practically feel their hands on her skin already, wet from decay and cold, like an evil frog with teeth.

Why didn't she just tell Meryl about the zombies? Why did she always have to make things worse? The pinprick of tears pushed against the back of her eyes but she swallowed hard and forced herself to look at the spell. Even if she didn't fully understand the mechanics of the spell there was still a good chance that she could cast it. All the magic Meryl had given her thrummed through her veins, and she shouldn't let it go to

waste. Was this a sort of group cast? There was still so much she didn't know about sorcery.

“Okay,” she said to no one in particular. “Okay. Okay.” She rolled the tokens in her hand, feeling the soft etchings on either side as she breathed, allowing her mind to still. With the image of her and Meryl hiding within the bathhouse held in her mind, that intention piercing through the stillness, she muttered the sorcery and cast the tokens, letting magic flow from her hands along with each coin.

For a moment she just sat there, her eyes closed. Cluckerson clucked next to her. Zombies moaned in the ever-nearing distance. Finally, when she could take it no more, she looked.

Her heart sank.

The point of *augury* was to determine the results of a particular action. One would toss the tokens or draw the cards or break the wishbone or something whatever, and it would tell you how it would turn out, weal or woe, good or bad. But the tokens in front of her were giving her something different-- some of the tokens indicated weal, which was great, but others indicated woe, which sucked. One of the tokens had landed on its edge somehow and rolled across the marble of the patio until it hit the door and stopped, teetering on the thin line between “great job” and “you're fucked.” Her fingers traced along the lines of the text while the other twisted nervously around a curl. Had the spell failed?

Without warning the ground began to shake beneath her, sending the tokens jingling against the ground. She snatched them before they fell off into the grass to be lost forever, thrusting them into her bag with disgust. Useless! A complete waste of time

and magic. Cluckerson pecked at her leg, the last token in his little beak. They dropped it into her outreached palm and she thanked them.

An idea dawned upon her then, and she grinned at the familiar with renewed excitement. The chicken looked back, its beady eyes totally unaware.

Unfortunately, as Claudia soon found, those beady eyes saw very poorly in the dark. It wasn't as though she mistook Cluckerson for an owl, but she hadn't realized just how badly the creatures saw in the dark until she tried to use its senses for her own. She once more sat at the base of one of the columns but her eyes and ears were with Cluckerson as they clumsily flapped from branch to branch and finally over the gap between the trees and the open arches of the second floor.

Thankfully she was not able to smell it. The second level was a mess: refuse from years of invading animals and plants left the space a marshy, soggy swamp. From the walls emerged statues of lightly robed figures who poured water from jugs into the large circular pool that ran around the hole in the center, though whatever water flowed here had since dried up. Only the dark and still water of the pools remained, littered with moss and the occasional dead animal. A swarm of gnats flew too close and Cluckerson caught one in their mouth, and Claudia was thankful not to taste either.

Guiding Cluckerson with her mind, Claudia searched the room as best as she could, flapping from one stone lounge to the next, peering in old alcoves and water closets. A crow cackled from somewhere in the dressing rooms and she started. It sat comfortably on the sill of one of the few windows on the second floor, the glass murky. Even in the dark Claudia could see it looked as self satisfied as a crow she had ever seen. But it was just a crow.

A hand rested on Claudia's shoulder and she jumped, suddenly wrested from her projection. It was Meryl, thankfully, although the look on her face almost made her wish it was a zombie. "What did I *just* say about being aware of your surroundings?" she scolded. She held up her hand before Claudia could explain. "We don't have time for excuses."

It was true. The horde had reached the bottom of the stairs and were now beginning to climb up the patio. Well, they were certainly trying to. Something about being a shambling corpse made steps exceedingly difficult. For every zombie that managed the slow, rising leg lift of a stair, another lost its balance and toppled over, rolling down the stairs in a cacophony of what one could describe as "a bag of catfish, granola, and chopsticks being hit with a club." It was wet, it was fleshy, it was crunchy, and were they not so intent on eating her, Claudia would have found it intensely funny.

"I don't know," she said, "it looks like we have some time."

For a moment Claudia thought the effort of not rolling her eyes would burst a blood vessel in Meryl, but instead she just pursed her lips and sighed. "What did you glean from the *augury*?"

Oomph, she'd forgotten about that. She was tempted to just say, "Oh yeah, the *augury* went great thanks for asking! We're good to go and I did everything right and I'm great at magic." But the results of her last lie were crawling up the steps to kill her and she was no longer feeling confident in that particular course of action. Better to come clean.

"I couldn't get it to work right," she admitted. "The spell failed. I'm sorry."

"I figured it would," Meryl said with a shrug that stung worse than a slap. "No matter. I've sealed off the other entrance, we will just have to be wary." Before Claudia

could even respond she strode off through the doors. “Well don’t just stand there,” Meryl said. “Hurry up unless you want to be eaten.”

Actually being eaten was starting to sound pretty good. Her heart in her stomach Claudia plodded after her mentor. Each step sent shooting pain through her ankle but it just seemed fitting at this point. As she slipped through the doors she poked her head out and sent one last *firebolt* into the crowd. For good measure.

Once Claudia helped to heap what remnants of furniture remained within the building, which wasn’t much, but there was a tall sort of candlestick that had been broken in half, and once both had been slid through the handles served as an adequate drawbar. From the other side of the door the zombies began to knock on the doors in slow, insistent blows, but the door did not budge. One problem solved, at least.

The ground floor was just as gross as the second had been, with the added detriment of being able to smell the foul, brackish water that filled the bathing pools that were fed by the overflow of water from above. You know, because the best bathwater is the dirty water from those above you. From the floor above Claudia could hear the ruffle of feathers as Cluckerson flapped about. She hoped he was staying out of the water; she needed a smelly familiar like she needed another twisted ankle.

“I’m going to take a look around,” Claudia said. Her voice echoed through the temple uncomfortably, bouncing off the stone and tile mosaics with an emptiness that felt all too accurate.

“A good idea,” Meryl said. Claudia stood there for a moment more before leaving Meryl to set up an impromptu campsite.

It was a shame the building had been abandoned as it had. Even in its current state of decay there was a sense of artistry and intention that flowed through the ruins. The

building was part bathhouse and part place of worship from what Claudia could gather from the writings under the reliefs. If not for Thalassa's disdain for the divine would this place have remained in use?

The walls along the stairs felt slick with damp as she climbed them. So far her assessment with Cluckerson had held firm-- besides the occasional bird or moth or snake the temple seemed to be utterly empty, which was reassuring. *Augury* or no, she had been able to assure that they were safe inside here, and that was what was important.

"Here, Cluckerson," she called gently. "Come here little chicken." Cluckerson did not respond, which was about right. That was fine. Closing her eyes she focused her mind towards her familiar, allowing her sight to be with them.

For a moment she didn't recognize what she was looking at, but then she realized: it was her, standing upside down on the roof in the darkness. No, not on the roof, Cluckerson was the one who was upside down. Soft steps rang out from behind them as Cluckerson got closer and a pale hand reached out and grabbed Claudia from behind. From her own body she felt the cold palm clasp over her mouth and she shot back into where she stood as the figure wrapped her other arm around her, Cluckerson clasped firmly in her hands.

Claudia drew in a deep breath to try and scream through the hand, but a shadow slid from behind a column and slid a knife towards her throat before she could make a sound. Her eyes widened as she recognized the drunk man from the inn in Terristown. A fine way to thank her for her help, thank you very much.

"Shhhh," the drunk said, pressing the knife in harder so Claudia could feel the sharpness of the blade against her skin. "We wouldn't want to alert Madam Bone, right?"



At the very least Meryl didn't have to bother with a damned tent. While she doubted she would sleep particularly well, there was a comfort in knowing that any immediate danger would wake her up. For added insurance she would have Claudia set up an *alarm* around their camp. A shame there was no way to block that wretched smell.

In the morning they would have to deal with the horde, but such things were more manageable in the light. Darkness had a way of playing into one's fears, of taking advantage of one's ignorance and allowing it to spiral outwards into paranoia and panic. All that to do now was to settle and get what rest they could. The spare sleeping bags that she rolled out weren't nearly as comfortable as the ones they normally used-- they were spare for a reason, but they would suffice for the time being.

“Why do these never come with the pillows?”

She was arm-deep in her bag when she heard a yelp from the floor above, then another, followed by the dark shape of her apprentice jumping through the hole in the ceiling. For a brief and terrible moment Claudia plummeted from that great height before sputtering out the words to *feather fall* and slowing to a leisurely float.

“Merylthere'sabunchofdarkrobedcreepstheyhaveCluckersonIstabbedoneand-- ah!” Whatever she was trying to say was smothered by the wings of a crow that dove from the landing above and scratched at her face. “They're crows they turn into crows!” Claudia sputtered out. She threw one hand up to shield her face and started throwing fire left and right, one bolt splashing just to the right of Meryl and singeing her boots. Meryl would get her back for that later.

Pulling her hand from the bag Meryl rushed to the shadowy corner of the entryway and began to draw magic into her, enough for the spell itself and then some for the mark. It was enough, thankfully, and as she drew the spell closed she gripped the veil

of sight around her and drew it tight over the bag, encasing it in *invisibility*. At best the sorcery would hold for an hour, but that was an hour to come up with something, it was an hour she would take.

Above her Claudia still swung bolts of flame at the crow, who had wisely chosen to distance himself from the feral apprentice. Even armed with just a few cantrips, Claudia was a vicious scrapper. Now where was this other dark robed creep?

“Behind you,” a voice said from the darkness.

Meryl spun to face her but not quickly enough as a foot lashed out from the darkness and knocked her from her feet. Touching her hand to her crystal ball Meryl conjured forth a *light* to illuminate the space, but no figure stood above her, all that was there was the looming gaze of a grimy mosaic. Meryl threw up her mental shields. Even without magic she could keep most venashim from her mind by sheer force of will, and she wouldn't give them the advantage of her mind.

“Not bad,” the voice came again. This time when she turned to face it the figure stood in full view, a human woman with a thin face and golden hair braided and wrapped into a knot at the base of her neck. Her form below her chin was almost entirely enveloped in the folds of a black cloak that flared outwards at the hem like the feathers of a bird. “I'm glad that curse didn't take all the fight out of you. You really should give up though.” She was short but she stood with an unnatural stillness to her that reminded Meryl of a snake or the open jaws of a bear trap, just waiting to be sprung and to snap shut.

Meryl held her orb out like a lantern in front of her but the woman did not flinch, nor did she squint away from the light. Even with the bright light no doubt flooding her vision she stared Meryl straight in the eyes, her face passive. This was no measly lackey.

“Oh, wait,” Claudia cried from the center of the room. Her descent had taken her to the surface of the dark water and she was slowly sinking into it. “No, nonono no! That’s so cold!” The crow, taking advantage of the momentary lapse in fire-throwing, swooped downward and let loose the transformation at the moment of contact, exploding out of the form in a burst of shadow and feather as he and Claudia crashed into the pool. A wave of the foul stench rolled from the water and filled the room as the two came up for air, gasping.

“Ah!” the man sputtered, “Gross! Where are you, you little brat?” He thrust his hands into the water, searching in the darkness. It was only a matter of time before he found her.

“What do you want?” Meryl asked.

“You know what we want,” the woman said.

“Yes but why?”

“It’s important to us.”

Fuck she hated these circling conversations.

“Just tell her, Jeanie!” the man in the water called, his voice booming in the empty space. “The Night-Speaker will just erase her memory afterwards.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jeanie said. Her voice never rose above conversation level, and she never broke eye contact with Meryl as she spoke. Was she even blinking?

“And do *not* call me Jeanie, *Antione*.”

As if in agreement, Cluckerson came diving from the platform above down at Antoine, pecking violently at his face. He raised his hands to block the chicken but as he did so Claudia lept from the water and tackled him, thrusting them both once again into the pool.

Jeanie pursed her lips in an all-too-familiar gesture of irritation. All Meryl wanted was a moment of distraction that she could use to force some distance between the two of them but there was none, and she didn't have it in her to win in an all-out fight. Hells, she was still recovering from her last fight. And it wasn't just her life on the line this time around.

"Alright," she sighed, letting her focus drop to her side. "Let no harm come to my apprentice and I won't put up a fight."

"Deal."

As if on cue the half elf came bursting out of the water, one hand clasped on Claudia's hands and the other on Cluckerson's neck. The chicken wriggled around, trying hopelessly to scratch at the man's face, to no avail. Water clung to all three figures, two of which were panting hard. One was a chicken and therefore could not pant. Magic only did so much in the face of evolution.

Claudia looked like a wet, shaggy sheepdog. Even from under the mound of curls plastered on her face Meryl could see her characteristic pout. She thrashed against the man who held her, her hair flailing about and splattering foul water everywhere.

"Stop that!" the half-elf snapped. His own long hair hung limply against him. If Claudia was a sheepdog he was a water-logged praying mantis, a weak-chinned man with watery eyes, although that could have just been the accidental bath he just took. "You keep slapping me with your hair!"

"Oh?" Claudia said, flipping her stench ridden hair into his face. "It that" smack "what" smack "I'm" smack "doing?" smack. He threw her forward and she barreled into Meryl, who caught her somewhat regretfully. Up close the smell was far worse. Thrones

it would take weeks to get that out of her robes. Cluckerson thrashed about even worse than before in retaliation.

“Claudia,” Meryl said calmly, “dismiss your familiar.” Claudia tried to interject but Meryl silenced her with a firm look. “Summon it later but send it away for now. We’re going to be agreeable here.”

“Listen to sense,” Jeanie said, earning a hateful glare from Claudia. It glanced off her like rain from an umbrella.

With a sigh Claudia released the spirit and the chicken disappeared.

“Good. Now tie them up,” Jeanie said to Antoine. “Better than the chicken, this time.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” Antoine sneered, but he set about tying them up nonetheless.

“Not so tight,” Claudia grumbled as he wrapped the rope around her wrists. “I’d rather keep my hands *on* my arm thank you.”

“You *stabbed* me!” he said, sounding more indignant than hurt.

“You pulled a knife on me!” she snapped back.

“Well you hit me with fire,” he said back.

“I will stab *both* of you,” Jeanie said, not looking up from her work. And everyone knew she meant it and shut up, the space suddenly silent except for the persistent groans of the zombies as they scratched and pried at the door. Meryl was begrudgingly impressed. Antoine finished tying them up and left them resting against the wall of the entranceway. Against the opposite wall sat her bag, still wrapped in the *invisibility*.

A few minutes later the two had finished their work, and a short shrine sat on either side of the engaged columns opposite Meryl. Squat, simple things, really. There was a tarnished candelabra with three black candles, a string of black pearls that hung through the arms, and a handful of mushrooms set in a circle. Antoine set about writing something beneath them with chalk as Jeanie turned to face them, the short woman now practically towering above them. “It’s time,” she said. “The lantern.”

Claudia shot Meryl a confused look. “The what?” she asked Jeanie. “I mean, I have a lantern if you need it but why go to all that effort? Haven’t you people ever been to a general store?”

“Gods above,” Antoine groaned. He rubbed two gloved fingers against his temples. “Can we not do this? Have I not gone through enough already?”

“You said you would hand it over,” Jeanie said.

“I said I wouldn’t put up a fight,” Meryl corrected. “But I won’t just give it to you. Not without knowing what you plan to do with it.”

Jeanie scoffed, smiled humorlessly. “Fucking semantics.”

She wheeled forward and struck Meryl across the face. Claudia cried out but Meryl had expected the strike and braced herself. It still hurt, don’t misunderstand, but she was able to keep the sorcery in place.

“Whoa, hold on,” Antoine said. “He’s not going to like that.”

“He’ll live,” she said. The next strike was worse, sending her reeling and her head spinning. “I can do worse,” she said. Her words slipped past Meryl’s ears, manifesting in the back of her mind. “So much worse.”

“You should check her bag,” Claudia said. Her voice had this high, pleading tone in it that rolled in Meryl’s head like a pearl in an oyster, cushioned with the droning from

dead throats. Meryl tried to tell her to stop but her mouth had filled with blood. All she could do was spit it onto the floor. When did that happen? “She keeps everything in there.”

“Where is the bag?” When Meryl didn’t answer the woman pulled her upright and struck her once more, this time throwing her head back against the wall.

“She can’t answer you if she’s dead!” Claudia yelled. In the periphery of her vision Meryl could see Claudia try to stand to her feet but the half elf pulled her to the corner towards the bag. “Stop hitting her just stop!”

“Hey, Jeanie? I think I found the bag,” Antoine said. His voice shook a little as he said it.

Damn, Meryl thought. So much for an hour. Too much blunt head trauma.

With one long, final look at Meryl she stood, turning to Antoine where he kneeled by Claudia in the corner.

“And?”

“Well uh,” he said weakly, “so far I’m only finding shooooooooessss.” He let the word trail off as he pulled out another pair of boots. Hellhound leather. Smoky, warm to the touch.

“Keep looking.”

Meryl’s vision was blurred. It was all she could do at this point to stay conscious. Blood seeped from a tear in her brow and pooled beneath her eye. Softer than she would have expected, Jeanie ran a cloth over it, wiping the blood away and pressing against the wound.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It means nothing. I know that. But it’s in my nature.”

They found the lantern soon enough, despite the impertinent bag. Even wrapped in the veil Antoine seemed to know immediately. A shudder passed through him. “That’s a good idea,” he said. “It suits it, don’t you think?”

Jeanie didn’t answer. She knelt by the first shrine, then the second, lighting each candle one by one. Antoine set the lantern in the middle of the room, still wrapped in the veil. Despite her tears Claudia craned her head to look at it.

The two cloaked individuals stepped back then, equal distance, and began to chant in a language Meryl did not know: Celestial. While their lips moved as normal for any language, the sound was not that of a normal tongue. It sounded like trumpets, blowing softly at first, and then singing out with a might that wanted to shake the foundations of the temple. It rang, filling the air with music and the imperceptible twinkle of the stars, so far away that they died long before we ever saw them. Even with just two speakers it was as though an entire chorus had joined them, and it rose and fell with such devastation that Meryl’s head felt like it would burst at the same time that she could feel tears pry themselves from her eyes in reverence. All sense of the restless zombies beyond the door evaporated, their cries drowned out by the bells and the trumpets and the strum of guitars which meant nothing and *something* all at once. Smoke rose from the candles in thick, billowing tendrils, suffocating the air with cloying fields of lavender and the gentle, unavoidable lull of sleep. From the ceiling where the smoke pooled, a black curtain fell, so thick and so dark that the folds couldn’t be seen by the eye, but which caressed the recesses of one’s understanding like a mother holding her firstborn.

And from that curtain emerged a hand, scarlet red, so hot against the black curtain that Meryl thought for sure it would ignite. The curtain parted with a silent swoosh, and there he stood. He was tall, but not as tall as you would expect, the rest of his height

made up for by the tall, pointed horns that crawled up from his forehead like a crown. His dress was entirely black, soft, almost delicate robes that seemed to float around him rather than hang from him, and a long dark veil that hid his face completely, laced with prayers. The only bit of skin visible was his hands, his long, spindly red fingers tipped with sharp black nails.

He slid from the curtain in a soft, smooth step. On either side of him the figures slowed their chant, and the drone of the zombies once more took over, although the curtain behind the man remained. Although she could not see it, she felt the man survey the room, lingering briefly on the lantern, and settling at last on Meryl.

“Oh dear,” he said. “This won’t do at all.”

Ch. 5

Claudia had no clue what was happening. Meryl’s refusal to fight baffled her. She’d seen her chew through creeps like Jeanie for breakfast *and* wash it down with black coffee. She didn’t know who these robed people were, or why their chanting sounded like bells and trumpets. She didn’t know what this lantern was, or why they’d beaten Meryl three-quarters to death over it. And she *certainly* did not know who this scarlet-handed guy was, or when he had showed up, or where from. If you were keeping score, she had a big 0 in each of the 5 ws of what the everloving fuck was happening.

What she *did* know was this: when tying up someone you should always check for blades on their person. Or else they might wrangle them from their boot and slowly saw away at their ropes. Twice in a row now.

On either side of the scarlet-handed man the figures bowed low, their hands open in the way one would bow to a noble or ruler. He ignored them though, floating down to

kneel next to Meryl. Soundlessly he placed his own candelabra to the floor, the candles flickering darkly. He gingerly reached his hands out to touch Meryl, moving her head this way and that, examining the wounds.

“What a nasty cut,” he said in a voice that was both soft and clear. “Just a moment, if you will.”

Meryl raised her hand against his, tried to push him away, but she was much too weak to do so and he simply gripped it as one might hold the hand of a petulant child. Once again she opened her mouth and only blood came out.

Claudia’s gut twisted in disgust. “Haven’t you done enough?” she said. “Just leave her alone.”

Although his eyes were well hidden beneath the veils she could feel them land on her as he turned. “It will be alright, do not be afraid.” There was a smile in his voice. Turning back to Meryl he cupped his hands as if lifting water from a pool and lifted it to her brow. As he ran his fingers across the tear a trail of gloam followed, covering the wound in a blur of darkness that soon dissolved and left her skin smooth and healed. He did this several more times, washing the wounds from Meryl while Claudia watched. The two robed figures held their bow, although the drunk’s legs had begun to shake with the uncomfortable pose. Serves him right, Claudia thought.

At last the Night-Speaker stood. Meryl was no longer actively bleeding out, although from the pallor of her skin she was clearly far from recovered. “You need to rest,” the veiled man said. “Your head will likely still ache but you will not die here, I promise you that.” He turned back to the robed figures and started. “Please rise,” he said. “It was not my intention to keep you held there.”

Drunk half-elf guy stood shakily, but the short woman, Jeanie, simply rose as if it was only natural to bend your knees a little bit for a few minutes at a time. She'd not even looked at Claudia once the whole time, as if she wasn't even worth registering. It was irritating and degrading and just the worst icing on top of an already bad kicking the shit out of your teacher cake.

The Night-Speaker reached out to the short woman, clasping her on the shoulder. "Jay," he said, "we've talked about this."

Antoine shot her a smug look, which Jay did not register. She cast her eyes down in a shadow of shame. "I wanted to find the lantern," she said. "I did not care what it took."

He shook his head, the veils swishing gently with the motion. "That is not the way. Harrison sought a similar route and met his own grim fate, as you recall. We must always approach our goal with good intention. I will speak with Anslem on the subject, but I want there to be no misunderstanding between us. I take no pleasure in this, lantern or no."

Schk! The last fibers of rope finally severed and Claudia's hands slipped from the bindings. Blood flowed freely into her veins and she almost sighed with relief, flexing her fingers and enjoying the sensation. Meryl was still laying against the wall, but some of the color had returned to her face, and she was watching the three strangers with a familiar attention.

"What *is* your goal?" Meryl asked.

"Ah!" the Night-Speaker said, "I am glad to see you have recovered so well. I must thank you for keeping the lantern safe for us." He bowed, his hand crossed against

his chest. “I would gladly tell you what it is we seek, but perhaps elsewhere? I find this place... somewhat disquieting,” he said with a chuckle.

That was fair. Every few seconds was punctuated by the rattle of the candlestick in the door, the zombies still moaning and scratching at the door. So much was happening Claudia had almost outright forgotten about them.

“Untie them, please.”

Oh crap.

“Most Gentle,” Antoine said, his voice a bit uncertain, “I would not recommend it. The little one bites.”

Also fair. Claudia had bitten him during their fight in the pool and had been rewarded with a mouthful of damp leather and dirty water.

The Night-Speaker chuckled at that. “Good for her, I imagine.” He kneeled before Claudia, looking intently at her. It was a strange feeling, knowing that his eyes were there, feeling the intensity of the gaze but not being able to return it. All but the most general shape of the face, the slant of his pointy ears, were invisible to her. “Are you alright?”

Against her instincts she nodded. “I’m fine,” she said. “You need better lackeys.”

“I have no lackeys,” he said patiently, “only friends and siblings in my purpose. I thank you as well for protecting the lantern. You’re very brave to handle this situation so calmly. It is clear your mentor finds much loyalty in you.”

Claudia almost laughed out loud at the compliment. He was the one who caused the situation, from what she could gather. Who was he to compliment her? And yet he said it so sincerely it would have felt wrong somehow. Jay/Jeanie untied Meryl, who

likewise flexed her fingers a bit in relief. She moved to stand but Jay pushed her back down, shaking her head.

“May I untie your bonds?” the veiled man asked.

“I uh, beat you to it,” Claudia admitted, showing him her hands. They were going to be untied anyways, so why hide it?

Jay shot Antoine a scathing look, which gave Meryl time to slip the third candelabra behind her. The veiled man grabbed Claudia’s hands suddenly and she flinched. She didn’t know what she was expecting exactly, that they would be too hot or too cold, but they felt so normal that it took her by surprise.

“Oh,” he said. There was a sadness to his tone that made Claudia’s heart ache a little in recognition. His red thumbs stood out starkly against the dark stains. “I’m so sorry. You should not have had to endure that.”

Before Claudia could ask when he meant he swooshed away from her, retreating to the lantern in the center. “There is no taking back what has happened,” he continued. “The past will always be the foundation for the present. But we can change the home we build upon it. And we must.” He knelt down to the lantern and plucked at the tie that held the veil. Jay and Antoine stepped forward in anticipation, looming over his shoulders to get a closer look. Even Claudia edged closer.

A knock rang out from the door, ringing out in the silence and startling everyone out of the moment. “Hello?” called a man’s voice. “Is everyone all right in there?”

And for the briefest moment everyone simply looked at each other.

Meryl swooped a *mage hand* through the air, snatching the lantern from the Night-Speaker, the veil around it flying wildly as she pulled it into her arms. Jay spun

towards Meryl, her fist swinging already with terrible force. Before she could make contact though, Meryl conjured a *gust of wind*, and Jay was forced to brace herself.

The Night-Speaker and Antoine were not so lucky. Having not anticipated the spell the Night-Speaker was thrown off of his feet and he rolled into Antoine, the two of them tumbling through the portal in the wall. Jay clutched at the worn stone floors and began to crawl against the tempest towards Meryl. Beads of sweat dripped from the sorceress's brow as she maintained the gale. But it wasn't enough.

Jay curled upwards, her feet braced against the *gust*, and made a wild grab for the lantern in Meryl's grasp. She'd just grabbed the corner of the veil when Claudia threw herself from her perch in the wall, thrusting her dagger into the armpit of the outstretched arm. Jay gasped in surprise and lost her footing, falling backwards and yanking the lantern from Meryl's grasp. Her back smashed hard against the floor as the gale threw her, and she too disappeared through the portal.

Either side of the portal the small shrines had been scattered, the pearls rolling across the floor and the candles extinguished, but it was not until Meryl blew out the candelabra behind her that the curtain fell, its top folding in on itself and the portal dismissed.

Not that Claudia saw the last bit. After stabbing Jay she'd snatched the lantern from the air and the veil and blown into her. She pulled the veil off of her and sighed, letting it drop to the floor. A bit disappointing, losing her dagger, but it would be alright. The knocking at the door was more insistent now, heightened further by the muffled calls from the other side.

"Well that was fun. Should we let them in then?" she asked Meryl, but her instructor had backed away from her, her face pale. Claudia held the lantern up, trying to

see what was causing such a reaction, but if anything it just made the space darker. There would be time to ponder on that one later, she figured.

“Claudia,” Meryl finally said, her voice firm yet barely audible above the knocking. “Put the lantern down.”

She was about to ask what had her so worked up when she heard it. Both distant and close, directly into her mind the words came. “Help me,” the voice called. “Please, you have to help me.” It sounded so desperate, so afraid.

Before she could even process this there was a crash and one of the doors burst open as an axe cleaved through it, and Claudia almost dropped the lantern in shock. A dark face appeared in the gap, split by a wide, relieved smile.

“Oh good,” the man said. “Was afraid something might have happened to you.” He reached an arm through the hole and pried the candlestick bars from the door and pushed it open. There was a whole group of people with him, a few humans and a dwarf dressed in similar light armor, all holding weapons and torches, and a round-faced half-elf with greying red hair and Guasvinian scarves.

“Alright everyone,” the axe-wielding man said, “keep in pairs, search this place top to bottom. I want no more surprises. Unless of course they’re good,” he said with a wink to Claudia.

The armed groups split off, shuffling past Claudia and Meryl with a practiced efficiency. This was a group of adventurers, and fairly experienced ones at that. The man with the axe introduced himself as Kirabo, the head of the adventuring group. “We were escorting Quirino and his caravan on the road when we came across what was left of your camp,” he explained as he helped Claudia pack their meager second camp. Meryl just stood in the corner, watching everything silently. “With all the eerie moaning and the

poorly hidden escape path it wasn't too hard to figure out what had happened. We're just glad to have found you before they broke through the door."

"Yeah," Claudia said with a smile, "then you'd've missed out on breaking down the door yourself." Kirabo laughed louder than the rib merited, but Claudia was thankful for the way his voice boomed through the ruins. Her finger traced the handle of the lantern uncertainly. She hadn't heard anything from it in the meantime, and she wasn't sure she hadn't imagined the whole thing. Then again everything was weird lately. What was one more thing?

Once they had everything sorted properly, Quirino, the greying half-elf, guided them from the ruins and back through the forest. Two of the adventuring group came with them, just in case. "We have a healer who can look over you both once we've all returned to the caravan. It's a bit overcrowded, but I suspect we'll be able to find room for you both. It is safer to travel in a group, I find."

Claudia searched Meryl's face for some sign of what was going through her head, but her expression was impassive. She'd spoken only a little since the others had arrived, mostly looking things over with her dark, sharp eyes.

"Hey," she whispered to Meryl as Quirino rambled on about the variety of skills in the caravan or something. "Are you okay? Like okay okay?"

Meryl eyed her wearily. Claudia had hung the lantern on her belt and it now bobbed against her leg with each step. For all intents and purposes it may as well have been an anti-Meryl charm, the way she shrunk from it. Useful for the future, but right now it was freaking Claudia out. "What are you not telling me?"

Meryl pressed her lips together in a tight frown. “I will tell you,” she finally whispered back. “I should have told you earlier. But not now. Just...” her voice trailed off. She flipped her bag open. “Put it back for me right now.”

A reasonable enough request, but Claudia still faltered. What if she hadn’t imagined that voice? What would putting it back mean, exactly? What, or *who* was she putting away?

“Claudia.”

“Okay,” she hissed back. “Okay, you don’t have to beat me over the head about it.” She unhooked the lantern from her and slid it into the bag. A part of her expected a scream or another cry for help but there was nothing, it just slipped into the bag like everything else. So why did she feel disappointed?

As soon as it was in, Meryl slammed the bag shut once more. But she looked a bit easier, and there was satisfaction in that, Claudia decided.

“Oh look!” Quirino said. “There’s the man himself!”

Claudia smelled it before she saw it. They had reached a town center in one of the ruined villages, a spot where the stone from the streets still fought against the onslaught of grass and roots. In the center a great bonfire had been built, surrounded by several individuals and fed by many others besides. As bad as the ruined bathhouse had been, the scent of rotting, burning flesh was not a vast improvement. Then again, Claudia *still* reeked of the waters so who was she to judge.

“Your turning may affect more of them but to what purpose?” said a figure before the fire to the man next to him. Like the scarlet-handed man, his face and horns were hidden beneath a set of veils, but his voice had a cold precision to it, like a scalpel cutting around an injury. As he spoke he held out a gleaming purple gemstone and gestured

continuously, and Claudia realized that he was directing the zombies into the flame.

Great, another necromancer. Too bad she left her knife in someone else.

“The turning requires no magic and no direction,” a familiar voice explained. “It offers one the opportunity to assess and recover.”

“What it does,” the veiled figure said, all the while pushing the undead back into the fire, “is thrust the problem onto other people for them to deal with. We’re lucky to have the manpower to round them up.”

“I suppose you are right,” the other man said, turning from the flames to the approaching group. Even silhouetted against the flame Claudia could see his face light up with recognition. “Claudia!” Rom said. “How good it is to see you!” He hugged her, his robes feeling warm from the fire and a little scratchy in the way an old family blanket might be. It was a good hug. He pulled back with a frown, his nose crinkled a little. “Did you bathe in the Temple of Nora?”

“More or less,” she laughed. “It’s good to see you, too. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know we were leaving.”

“There was a change of plans,” Meryl said. “We had to leave immediately.”

Rom nodded with a friendly but faint smile. “The innkeep mentioned as much. Which reminds me,” he said, reaching into his bag, “I was hoping to run into you both. These are for you.”

Claudia had never been so thankful to get her clothes back from the laundry. Her robes smelled like roses and melons, and even crumpled in Rom’s bag like they were, they still had the crispness of a good wash. It took all her will not to strip out of the wet, slimy robes she had on so she could wear these instead.

“Go with them back to camp, Rom,” said the veiled necromancer. “I can handle it from here.” He waved his hand and two leathered rangers pulled more of the undead from their throng, letting them walk into the fires. Perhaps he was a bit less stable.

“Thank you, Drust. We’ll see you at camp shortly. Be safe.”

Drust waved absentmindedly in farewell-I-guess. Friendly sort.

Camp was, in this instance, a bit of an understatement. There are certain expectations that one has when they think of camping: tents, little campfires, smores and undercooked meats, never enough toilet paper, the endless assault of nature as bugs invade your personal space. To call this a camp would be to call a tiger a kitten; sure they’re kinda the same, but the proportions are all wrong and one of them could hide your body easier. For starters it was massive, taking up the entirety of the road’s resting space and then some, with several carriages and carts pressing into the road ahead and spilling behind. Rather than there being a series of tents for a few people each there were instead three large tents that served the whole of the company. Horses lined the edge of the camp tied to posts, and the remnants of a dinner wafted over the space long after the last bite had been eaten. Although it was late it seemed as though much of the caravan was still awake, milling about the screened spaces or sitting around the low fire that glowed in the middle of the tents.

Thankfully segments of either of the residential tents were dedicated to bathing, and although she couldn’t entirely scrub the smell from her skin, Claudia at least felt a bit less grimy. She pulled on her blouse and robes, yawning a bit. What a long day! What a weird day. It was hard to believe that just this afternoon she had gone to the village for supplies and come back with a bunch of zombies instead. Life was just like that, she

supposed. You go to the store for something you need and come back with a lot you don't.

"I was thinking about what you said," Rom said in between miracles. He sat by the big fire, almost entirely alone now that the adventuring group had returned and the caravan returned to ease. With a gentle strength he shaped the magic to restore her ankle. All the adrenaline had pushed the pain aside at first, but like a cat sitting on the book you're reading it had returned with a vengeance. Claudia had been healed with magic before, normally by the bright bardic tones that made up most healers in Thalassa. But Rom's healing was different than that. Whereas tones tended to resonate within and throughout, the miracle Rom cast felt warm, resounding. She could feel the tendons weave themselves together like roots climbing deeper into the soil. "I cannot follow this path if I don't choose it for myself. My anger, my frustration, my fury-- it was terrible fruit from a tree in bad soil."

Claudia had encountered one of those trees before, actually. Terrible thing, called her all sorts of names and threw fruit at her. She couldn't eat apples for a year.

"I'm glad it helped," Claudia said, not remembering what she had said but nonetheless thankful Rom seemed to be doing better.

Rom smiled up at her. "I'm going to travel the empire. Maybe if I can understand why you abandoned the gods I can understand why I follow mine." He gave her ankle a light pat. "You're all better now. Although you seemed to be better off than your mentor to begin. It's a good thing she was healed when she was though. I don't know if I could have done much otherwise."

Claudia bit her lip. It was hard not to think about Meryl slumped against the wall, bleeding out. Her chest tightened with the image, her eyes pricked with tears. “Yeah,” she sighed.

“Don’t worry about her,” Rom said, his brows slanted kindly. “She’s a strong woman, and she wouldn’t want you to worry about her.”

Like that was something she could help. “Yeah,” Claudia said a bit brighter anyways. “She is strong, for an old lady.”

“You will be old too, someday,” he said with a laugh. He reached into a pouch and pulled out a few vials. “In the meantime, I was able to buy this from one of the merchants, for your cold. This ointment here is for Meryl. It will help her fingernails to regrow and reduce the pain as well.”

Claudia tilted her head in confusion. “Did something happen to her nails?”

Rom’s face fell. Then it rose again and he laughed a bit forcefully. “Not Meryl, no, it’s for someone else. I apologize. I misspoke. It’s getting late and we should both go to bed. Goodnight” He awkwardly clasped his hands on his knees and rose, retreating towards the tents.

Okay. So something had *definitely* happened to her nails. Just another thing she would have to ask her about. Another thing she didn’t trust her with.

She pushed the thought from her mind. Meryl was sure to have her reasons.

A yawn escaped her. A sneeze followed. Whatever was going on, it would have to wait until morning. Claudia pulled her cloak closer to her and shuffled towards the tents. Leaves scratched against the tops of the tents as they blew in the wind and Claudia wove through the painted partitions. A light shone faintly in the segment she was staying in; a young woman laying on a sleeping mat, reading a book. She turned when Claudia

entered, the light of her little lantern bouncing off her dark skin and hair. Natasha smiled. “Look what emerged from the fountain.”



Claudia was not the only one reuniting with familiar faces, although for Meryl they were not quite as pleasant. While riding in a carriage was a pleasant change of pace for travel, Douglas’s incessant chatter made her wish she was still walking. Bleeding against the temple wall was less tortuous than this.

“Well after I was captured on my way south I certainly wasn’t going to travel nearly so lightly,” he said for perhaps the third or fourth time. Maybe it was the thousandth, or the hundred thousandth. Maybe Meryl had died and been dragged into one of the seven hells and this was her specially designed eternal punishment and she just hadn’t noticed yet. “And then I was drinking in the inn and I was complimenting this man on his very fashionable coat and wouldn’t you know it, they were travelling up to sell their wares and I was travelling north to rejoin the University circuit and it just seemed--”

Meryl pinched the bridge of her nose, willing the oncoming migraine to relent. Rom was of no help-- he sat in the same booth of the carriage as her and Douglas but he only nodded empathetically each time the old scholar started one of his stories over again. Judging by the wry smile he occasionally shot Meryl she supposed it was some sort of joke at Douglas’s expense, but the humor evaded her, personally. At the very least they had some fresh air. The Guasvinian carriages were wide, open vehicles, really more cart than carriage. They rocked back and forth as the uneven bricks of the road pitched them up and down. More than once they had been forced to step out and lift the cart over a segment of torn road or a collapsed wall or overgrown root. Even so, their pace was decidedly faster than walking, and she would accept that.

By virtue of knowing one of the merchants in training Claudia had secured for herself a spot in one of the foremost carriages. On occasion the sound of her laugh would hang in the air long enough for Meryl's own cart at the end to pass through it.

She'd really held the lantern without any effect, so it seemed. Antoine's reaction to the veil had secured her suspicion that it was unwise to touch it with bare flesh, and she had seen what it had done to the students back in Terristown with her own eyes. Yet Claudia seemed fine. There was something Meryl wasn't seeing and it infuriated her.

Meryl pulled stray hairs back from her face and ran her fingers along the back of her skull. It still hurt, even with the bone closed back up and the bruising on the brain eased. Her body knew it had been damaged and continued to fire off warning signals, healing or no, and would likely continue to for some time.

"-- and how were any of us supposed to guess there would be a *troll of all things* just right around the corner!" Douglas exclaimed. He chortled, a word used here derisively. "It's a good thing Quirino hired those adventurers, and even then the troll took a few down with it!"

"Yes," Rom said, his face darkening, "a terrible thing."

"And here I thought your goddess watched over the planes of death," Meryl said dryly. Even with her limited knowledge of the divine it was impossible not to know about Charodyne, the earth serpent who swallowed the dead and returned their life to the soil. Her name was a cursed one, not erased like the Dark Mother but hated for the cursed dirt that refused to offer Thalassans rest. A reassurance, if anything, that the best interests of mortals were not at heart.

"Just because death is natural and holy does not mean I take joy in it," Rom said.

“You know I was thinking of writing a book on this whole terrible adventure,” Douglas said. “We too often forget how dangerous and wild the countryside is.”

“A priest that does not take joy in his god’s strengthening domain?” Meryl said. “How sacrilege.”

“Life and death coexist, Madame Bone. This means celebrating what is here and mourning what is not.”

“Oh but how beautiful, too. I never hear the birds sing like this in Wythe-Knellis.”

“So we should celebrate then our dying agriculture? The scores of people who go hungry because your goddess’s precious ego was wounded?”

“We mourn the suffering of those who go without, of course. But you bite the hand that feeds you and complain of an empty stomach.”

“You know the first time I saw a chicken uncooked I was in my twenties?”

“Well thank Charodyne we have you here to show us the way.”

Rom released the clenched fists in his lap and stood from his seat. “I think I would prefer to walk with more civil company,” he said, and he slid from the carriage and onto the road, stumbling a bit from the momentum. Meryl watched him impassively as he righted himself and waved to Drust as he followed behind.

“I didn’t even realize it was a bird at first. It looked like a grotesque, half-transfigured teapot. When it bit me I screamed so loud the band stopped playing,” Douglas chuckled. He looked at Meryl as if waiting for some sort of response, then looked to Rom only to realize that he had left his seat and he was now alone. “Where did...? Oh, there he is, chatting with my student.”

So he was. Drust had caught up to him and the two were now walking together, Rom shortening his steps to match the languid stride of Drust’s promenade.

“It’s odd that he should walk behind us,” Meryl said. She rested her chin on her fist, watching the veils float in the wind around the curved horns. In the light it was clear that the veil was not so opaque as the Night Speaker’s had been, and she could see the soft yellow glow of his irises through the black. His face was broad and severe, with a long, flat brow and a wide mouth prone to frowning.

“Oh he probably just wanted some fresh air,” Douglas said, unhelpfully.

Meryl sighed and braced herself against the side of the carriage. If only they’d let her bleed out. “I speak of your student, Drust. There are other mash’him in the caravan, unveiled at that.” The legal situation of who counted among the venashim was a complicated one, but the general agreement was that neither the Devil Bound, the mash’him, nor the Divine Bound, the chol’alm, were counted among them. Too much influence from non-mortal actors. It was a foolish notion, but one which satisfied far too many of her country people.

“It’s the oddest thing; the merchants had no issue with him as one of the scorched ones, but as soon as I mentioned he studied the necromantic arts there was something of an issue. They think it’s bad luck.” He leaned in close to Meryl and began to speak in a hushed tone that was at best a conspiratorial stage whisper. “Between you and me,” he whisper-yelled, “it’s something of a relief. I think it’s our duty to teach the mash’him, if only to allow them to better themselves.” He shook his head sagely, the weight of the world surely bearing down on him. “But he still gives me a bit of a chill to be around. Those eyes, oooh,” he shuddered dramatically.

He continued his descent in Meryl’s esteem.

“A bit terrible to say it, but I *was* disappointed he was the only student to survive their summer vacation. He was only assigned to the group to make up the credits in my magical artifacts course, and even then he didn’t take it seriously.”

“Yes,” Meryl said, her tone so sharp it’s a wonder she didn’t cut her gums. “It’s such a shame he didn’t die for lack of care with a strange object. If only he had callously thrown himself headfirst into his studies, why, he too could be a shriveled husk on the floor of a storage shed in fucking Terristown.”

“Well at least he would have shown some initiative! One doesn’t become a sorcerer through osmosis, otherwise I’d be throwing spells out left and right myself,” he said, his arms flailing with the gesture. Other people in the carriage were now turning in their booths in curiosity, much to Meryl’s disgust. An audience to this farce was not needed. “If my students died studying the lantern then they died because they loved their craft and that is something I am proud of!”

“Excuse me,” Meryl said coolly. She slid from the carriage as Rom had, although she accounted for the momentum and landed much easier than he did. Douglas, for his part, watched her with an absurd, bewildered expression before standing to terrorize some other booth with his tales of woe.

“Well well,” Drust said as she approached, “come to start up a new fight then?” Fire surged through Meryl’s blood but she smothered it. Despite Rom’s embarrassed flush, Drust wasn’t entirely wrong.

“I’m just looking for more civil company,” she said. “That’s all.”

“You’re out of luck, then,” Drust said, grinning widely beneath his veil. His teeth were large and sharp-looking. “No one civil back here.”

“You’re welcome to walk with us,” Rom said apologetically. “I’m sorry for my stubbornness earlier, it is something I am working on.”

How irritating. “You don’t have to grovel,” she said, shedding her attempts at diplomacy. “I was picking a fight and you rose to it, that’s all there is to it.”

She settled into step with them, watching the caravan ahead as it rolled peacefully along. It was a nice day, bright, warm but not too warm.

“It’s a nice day,” Meryl said, trying to break the awkward silence that haunted her. Drust just snorted a coarse laugh but offered nothing to the conversation. Rom continued to look awkward and apologetic.

Thankfully no one had started some damned travelling song-- that was half the reason Meryl travelled sparsely. Claudia had once tried to initiate one early in her mentorship and Meryl had cursed her with a *fear* sorcery so powerful she’d actually had to coax her down a tree afterwards. It was hard to think that was such a short time ago-- what, five months perhaps? And now all this was happening.

Try as she might she couldn’t see Claudia from where she was, although her voice still carried. The people around her were probably dying for a pair of earplugs. For the most part Meryl was anxious to make it to Umberport and make some headway on her research on the lantern, but she was worried as well. Umberport wasn’t the edge of civilization like Terristown felt, but cities posed a threat all their own, and one Claudia wasn’t especially accustomed to. And despite her efforts, Claudia was not one to be left to a babysitter. Unless, perhaps, it was a pretty young friend. Something to keep in mind.

“Douglas tells me you’re not invested in his course,” Meryl tried again.

“Come here to lecture me on the importance of study, professor?” Drust said, his grin curling mockingly.

“I haven’t taught in a university for over a decade,” Meryl said, “the title is hardly appropriate. And for that matter no, I’m not. It’s not my business how you conduct yourself so long as no one else is harmed because of it. Do you have a reason as to why?”

Drust shrugged. For a moment it seemed as though that was all his answer would be. With a thoughtful tilt of his head he answered, “Magic items, all of that. It’s all well and good to be able to identify them, know how they work, whatever. But it means you have to come across them, which means money or discovery, of which I am both dispossessed.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rom asked. Occasionally his steps grew a bit excited and Meryl watched him purposefully slow himself for their sake.

“Somewhat limited post-graduate opportunities,” Drust said wearily. “I doubt the good Lady Rhouthé would lengthen my leash past her front door when it’s time to return to my service. Not that it would matter anyways.” As if by reflex he reached beneath his veil to scratch at the nape of his neck.

Meryl didn’t have to see it to know what would be there: the tattoo of a moth beneath a crescent moon. The business symbol for the Black Moon Moths, the largest and most corrupt of the merchant guilds in the continent, and they had a finger in every pie. Justine had filled her in on some of the more egregious examples in recent legal history, but meeting an actual victim of them was always something else entirely. She wanted to say something but Rom beat her to it.

“I am so very sorry,” he said.

Drust, to his credit, just rolled his eyes. “Nothing much to be done about it. Could be worse. At least sorcery keeps me engaged. At least I’m not as pretty as some of the others.”

Meryl's stomach burned, disgusted. She drew up her pipe and puffed away at it, letting the sensation calm her. There was little she could do realistically. Even if she tried to help him escape they would only track him down. They always did, and it was always worse than just staying put. With each exhale she let the smoke scratch comfortably at her throat, letting the useless thoughts drift out with it.

“Do you know anything about what happened to your other classmates? The ones in the dorm?”

Again Drust shrugged. “Not really. They were planning their little field trip but I wasn’t invited. I went off on my own, took up a few local quests with some adventurers, had a nice weekend in Harristown. Do you mind?” he asked, gesturing for Meryl’s pipe.

“Yes, I do. Continue.”

He frowned but did as she asked. “By the time I’d come back they’d warded the door off. Far as I was concerned that was as clear a ‘fuck you’ as I needed so I just holed up in the inn. Next thing you know I’m cornered by the guard and dear old professor over there on the suspicion of their deaths but nothing held up to inspection.”

“So you don’t know anything about how they died? You don’t care?”

“Not really,” he said plainly. “But I bet you they were poking around someplace they didn’t belong. Nothing good comes out of the Cradle.”

“They went into the Cradle itself?!” Rom exclaimed. “Why would they do a thing like that?”

“An assignment, probably,” Drust said. “Don’t know how they got there though.”

Rom’s nostrils flared in an oddly expressive scowl. “They risked their lives for *an assignment*?! They died for what? A grade?”

“*Lost* their lives,” Drust corrected.

“Clearly you don’t know many sorcerers,” Meryl remarked. His reaction was understandable, albeit obtuse in a sense. Going into the Cradle was reckless of them; from a young age children were told about how dangerous it was, their dreams filled with the grasping hands of dark elves in the shadows of their rooms, or of the countries of people moved about like puppets for the pleasure of the Dark Mother. Stay away from caverns, avoid the dark ruins, don’t listen to voices that beckon from the shadows. Things you should generally do anyways.

But any good sorcerer knows there’s a difference between story and truth, and the space between is where magic culminates. Indeed, there had been several successful expeditions to the Cradle, some of which were executed by Yoringala-Linde and her sister universities, in fact. The difference being that those expeditions had been funded and outfitted by the Magi and possessed experts in their fields. These students were just that: students. Even the oldest among them was barely beyond adulthood, and had none of the experience or knowledge necessary for what awaited them, and all of the blithe confidence that guaranteed their death. There was a good reason Tanis asked her to mentor Claudia personally.

“So the lantern they had, you know nothing about it?” Meryl asked again.

“Don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

It figured, but it didn’t help her. She turned her attention to Rom instead.

“Anything you could tell me about the Dark Mother?”

Rom opened his mouth to speak but Drust stopped him. “You have it, don’t you?” Drust asked. Rom shut his mouth quickly and looked at Meryl as if reiterating the question. “Whatever killed them, the lantern, you have it. And you don’t know what it is and that’s why you’re bothering us about it.”

“Yes,” Meryl said. No use in hiding it. “Although I’d prefer if you kept it to yourself. I’ve been beat about the head enough over it as it is. I’m too old for this sort of abuse.”

“I want to see it.”

“That’s out of the question. I still don’t know its radius of influence. It could be twenty feet or it could be two-hundred. I suspect that it fed on your classmates and has grown less desperate, more powerful.” That at least would explain why Claudia could touch it, and why it hadn’t assaulted Meryl upon being unveiled. “Until I know more it is to be kept with me.”

“You think this is an intelligent object?” Drust’s voice remained steady but the quickening of his pace betrayed his excitement. Despite his self-proclaimed disinterest, Meryl noted. Rom simply looked stricken.

“Of a sort,” Meryl offered. “Back to my question, Rom.”

“I do not feel there is much I can tell you,” he said. “Worship of the Dark Mother is unheard of, even in Bacchia. From what I can recall from certain scripts she was the lover of Ouramous, the god of light, and grouped with him and Charodyne as the makers of the venashim. That is all I can recall, however. Even her name is erased in scripture.”

“Yes,” Meryl said, “a direct result of the First Ignition, I’m sure.” As the empire had first spread across the continent they struck down temples and churches, erecting schools of magic in their place. It was to “give mortals the power of gods to use as they seem fit.” This was the foundation of the Thalassan Empire, the very crux of its identity, but it meant that Meryl’s job was more difficult than explicitly necessary. “Let me know if you remember anything else.”

“Of course, I will, absolutely,” Rom said. “I hope I can help you.” He smiled.

What a suck up he was turning out to be. Typical cleric.



A few days later they had settled into Wakeslon, the first town once the forest had ended and the rivers passed. Claudia loved riding the ferries across the long stretches of water, watching fish burst from the surface as they swam upstream, or catching the eye of a curious naiad as they drifted alongside the boat. She and Meryl hadn't spoken much since the ruins, but that wasn't intentional. At least, she didn't think it was. From what she figured, Meryl was content to spend time with more seasoned sorcerers, like the Mash'him necromancer and that Doug guy. They were probably having dry, intellectual conversations about the ethical implications of transmutation or the practical applications of short-distance teleportation in lab settings. Things she wouldn't be able to keep up with.

For the most part she just tried not to think about it. She still hadn't given Meryl the ointment for her nails and she felt bad about it but she also worried that it might make her angry with Rom for telling her. Rom, as he told her during their late night meals by the fire, was trying to get to know Meryl as a person and not just a religious roadblock.

"I think if I can understand her I could maybe put aside my frustrations, quell my temper. Not just with her but with anyone like her," he would say. It made enough sense to Claudia. When she was first getting to know Meryl the old sorceress drove her crazy. So many rules, so much attention to detail, so many lectures. Meryl was still the same of course, but Claudia had gotten used to so much of her behavior, and now all she really wanted was to impress her, to show that all the lectures and effort hadn't gone to waste. So much for that, she would think with a sigh.

“There is just so much to my faith that I do not think she understands, and I’ve begun to realize that both for myself and for others,” he said, his voice ringing with a new determination. “She cannot help but misunderstand because of how she was raised, and I was too close to really see it properly, but now it makes sense. We all are like stalks of wheat in Charodyne’s great field. If you look too closely at the individual grain you miss the grandeur of the golden hills.”

The metaphor wasn’t quite landing for Claudia. “So we’re like, produce for the gods? I hope I’m something good like an apple or a pomegranate or something. I don’t want to be like, the wheat of mortals.”

“Hey,” Natasha said, tossing a bite of dinner roll into her mouth. “People love bread.”

“Yeah but there’s entire fields of wheat!”

“My point exactly!” Rom exclaimed, barreling into another series of excited but incomprehensible sermons.

Natasha just smiled and sipped at her beer.

Just as well, Claudia supposed. Whether or not she understood Rom’s faith was something of a moot point. What mattered is that he seemed to be out of whatever funk caused that incredibly awkward public breakdown he’d had with her. Not that she had anything against crying-- she loved a good cry. And she felt it was important to have people you could cry with. But he had just met her and he was like, three years older than her. Whatever. He looked better than he had, his face fuller, his eyes brighter. And as long as he wasn’t being a suck-up he would be able to get on fine with Meryl.

Wakeslon was a nice town, bigger than Terristown by a fair amount but with a lot of the same features: plaster friezes, statues and gargoyles galore, stained glass, and tall,

looming walls that ran around the city, opening at the bay of the great lake to the south. The harbor was what really set it apart and made the town feel so much more alive. The growing din from the town as the ferry toted them across the Flat Shield Lake, the fine mist of the waters flying into her face, it all made Claudia feel so alive and excited.

It didn't take long for that to fade. As soon as the caravan had gotten things settled with an inn and the local commerce committees they had set up their stalls and Claudia very quickly found herself alone in her room at the inn once more. Well, almost alone.

"A rather strange turn of events, wouldn't you agree?" Meryl said, unpacking once more. Why did she bother? Quirino had told them they would only be in town a few days before continuing to Umberport.

"Yeah, no kidding," Claudia said. From her window she could just barely see the square above the roofs of the town. If she opened the window she could hear the sound of the band playing, singing about the Emperors.

"Before I forget," Meryl said. She reached into the pouch on her belt and handed Claudia a small leather journal. Flipping through it she found it to be filled with Meryl's precise, thin handwriting and several rather graphic diagrams, all surrounding the identification of hags. "In lieu of a lecture," she said. "I know we haven't had much time for more formal lessons and I apologize for that."

No, no, Claudia wanted to say. That's okay.

"But I've compiled the most useful information from the bestiaries I carry with me and this should be a good foundation."

"Thanks, Meryl," Claudia said, running her finger along the edge of the pages. "I never really apologized for that. The whole thing with the hag. I'm sorry. I didn't mean

for anyone to get hurt.” She kept flipping through the pages, not wanting to meet Meryl’s eyes. Thankfully her voice hadn’t quavered or anything.

Predictably, Meryl sighed, and it settled over Claudia like a shroud. “I forget that you’re not experienced in these things, Claudia. That’s why we have lessons, so you can learn and be prepared for what comes. Be prepared for what you can and be ready to improvise where you can’t. You are very good at the latter, which is why I focus so much on the first.”

Claudia allowed herself a small smile.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Meryl said, sweeping towards the door, “I have some errands I must run.”

“Wait,” Claudia said, “I have something for you too.” She reached into her own pouch and pulled out the small glass tub of ointment. “Rom asked me to give this to you.”

Meryl eyed it for a moment, her mouth a thin, ambiguous line. Still, she took it, sliding it into her pocket. “I will have to remember to thank him,” she said flatly. Once more she turned to leave.

“What happened to your nails?” Claudia asked.

“Is it necessary for us to do this right now?”

“You say that I need to be prepared but how can I do that if you won’t tell me everything that’s going on?” Claudia said, completely ignoring once more the zombie incident. “Do you not trust me? Am I not good enough?” She bit down on her tongue, afraid she would just keep going. It hurt. “I just want to help, Meryl, that’s it.”

“I know that, do you think I don’t know that?” Meryl said, her mouth tight in frustration. “But I owe it to you and I owe it to your mother to keep you safe, and whether you like it or not that means that I decide what you get to know.”

“‘Get’ to know? What I ‘*get* to know?’” Claudia seethed. It’s really quite incredible how quickly one can transition into anger, and for Claudia it bloomed through her like a thorn-ridden shrub, scraping against the inside of her skin in sharp swipes. “You’re casting past your limit, *you’re* invoking Nindre’s price, something you told me never to do unless I had no other choice, and that means--”

Fuck what *did* that mean? Damn it she was on a roll she would keep going. She thrust an accusatory finger at Meryl.

“That means you’re tackling something big and weird and bad. That means *you need my help!* And I don’t care that I’m not a full fledged sorcerer, I don’t care that I’m clumsy and reckless and stupid; I already know I’m all of those things!” Her palms stung with her nails digging into them in tight fists. “But I can still do something if you’ll stop being so stubborn and just *let me!*” She hadn’t realized how loud she was getting, but as her plea finished her throat felt raw and the words echoed emptily against the stone walls.

Meryl stood in the same spot, her brows knit tightly together, her chest rising with slow, deliberate breaths. “Have you got it all out of your system?”

“Yeah,” Claudia said, her voice finally breaking. “Yeah I did.”

“Good. I expect a short paper defining the different covens that define hags.” Her boots echoed angrily across the floor, but she stopped in the doorway and turned back to Claudia. “I’m not doing this because I’m a villain, Claudia. It’s not because I don’t trust you, either. But I won’t shed my responsibilities for your feelings, and that’s something I

won't apologize for." The steel gray of her hair swung in the doorway for a brief moment, and then she was gone out into the hall, leaving Claudia alone for real this time.

It wasn't until her breath came out in a sharp, angry sob that she realized she had been holding it. Maybe she should have kept avoiding Meryl after all. All she wanted to do now was crawl into her bed and cry, but she didn't. That was a part of herself that she would leave in Terristown, she decided.

Through the window she watched Meryl step out into the narrow street and turn north, her bag clutched tightly to her. Whatever was happening with Meryl, that lantern was sure to be a part of it, and by Rom's weird metaphor ridden god, Claudia was going to find out just what it was.

She grabbed her bag from its hook on the wall and reached into the Veil, calling Cluckerson back into her arms. With a burst of light they clucked back into existence and nuzzled against her neck. "Alright," she said to her favorite magic chicken, "time to face my old nemesis."

Time to find a library.



Meryl shifted uncomfortably on the stone bench, trying to ignore the aching in her back, trying to concentrate on the magazine in her hands. The small patio outside the healer's home offered her enough shade to keep off much of the heat, but not enough. A slow, cold trickle slid down her spine beneath her dark robes.

Across from her a mother sat with her sniffling child, reading a magazine that had to have been more interesting than Meryl's. Instinctually Meryl had figured that any light reading of magical theory wouldn't be worth her time, and *The Mage's Monthly* was not surprising her in that assessment. Every article seemed to be a paraphrased study she had

read months if not years ago in the salons of Walláchaven, written in the lay terms that would be accessible to any hedge mage. It was necessary, in a sense. Meryl was of the opinion that the gatekeeping that naturally accompanied the academic circuit was ultimately to the detriment of the nation. How could they lay claim to the Magic Empire of Thalassa if the majority of its citizens could not even grasp the basic theories of sorcery?

But the integrity of it was beside the point; it did little to keep her impatience at bay, and with each snuffle and sneeze from the child across from her Meryl desperately wished to wash her hands somewhere.

“She’s not contagious,” the mother said, “if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” Meryl said.

The child looked up at her, snot running down her mouth and to the tip of her chin. Meryl watched in horror as the child opened her mouth and slurped it up, her lips smacking. She wanted to throw up.

“Patricia, that is repulsive,” her mother said sharply. “What have I told you?”

“Snot is for sticking, not licking,” the child mumbled, not meeting her mothers gaze.

“That’s right.” The mother caught Meryl’s horrified gaze and lifted her brows theatrically, smiling as if to say, “isn’t that clever?” She reached into her belt and handed her daughter a tissue, which she promptly wiped her nose into, blowing noisily.

Involuntarily Meryl scooted further away from them.

“Kids,” the woman said, returning the crumpled tissue to her belt. “They’re just so funny, you know?”

Meryl did not and was frankly grateful for her ignorance. Several pomanders hung from long, thin lines tied to the roof. They swung gently in the wind, coating the patio in the smells of lavender and sage. Before Meryl had even seen the sign that hung from the door, the scent had told her what this place was. But now she had been sitting there for nearly half an hour and she was growing anxious to be seen, or at least to not be sitting so close to something so inexplicably sticky looking.

A bell clanged wearily as the door beneath it opened, and out stepped another child and a halfling woman with thick brown hair that greyed at the temples. Several more pomanders were tied to a cord at her belt, as opposed to the more fashionable gems that often adorned cords of a similar style. Their own scent of lilac and rosemary tickled the back of Meryl's throat in an unpleasant miasma of overwhelming herbal perfumes.

"It's nothing to worry about, Rallene," Doctor Chard said to the mother, pushing her spectacles back up her nose. They immediately slid back down. "It looks like Gerwig just crawled through a poison bush or four." Child number two conspicuously scratched at his leg between his tunic and the doctor smacked his hand away without looking at him. "Just keep him from scratching and maybe pick up an oat and cranberry gel to abate the pain and he should be fine."

The woman thanked her and took her two very gross children by the hand and joined the tight, crowded streets, intent to spread their germs elsewhere, apparently. Doctor Chard turned a sympathetic glance to Meryl. "She's got another two at home, just as prone to accident and illness."

"Steady business," Meryl said.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Doctor Chard sighed. "Now come in, dear, you've waited long enough."

Inside the home was yet more cloying than the outside, overfilled with potpourri and scented candles which even unlit stuffed the small entrance with a dizzying cloud of smells. It was with great effort that Meryl followed the doctor inside without first pinching her nostrils shut, but she managed.

“You came very well recommended by your guild,” Meryl said as they came to a small office in the back of the house. It was a simple space, a short, cushioned bench, a desk and a few stools. Light flooded the room from the window above the desk, the panes and shutters opened to the summer heat. There were several decidedly neutral pictures hanging on the bright, clean walls, as well as a condescending sort of pain chart that started with a placid faced goblin and ended in a tearful, roaring dragon. She sat down on the cushioned bench, so low her knees folded into her like and unfortunate piece of outdoor furniture.

“Well I pay my dues and I haven’t outright killed anyone,” Dr. Chard said, scribbling at a form on her desk, “so I like to think I’m doing alright. Now what is it that ails you, dear?”

Meryl removed her glove, carefully pinching the tips so as not to press the still raw nail beds. “I have something of--”

“Oh great hells,” Dr. Chard said, her voice pitched with disgust. She bolted up from the stool and stalked towards Meryl like her hand might reach out and afflict her too. “Hold it up to the light now.”

Meryl did so and Dr. Chard continued to look at them with a perverse interest plain on her face. “Oh how ghastly,” she said. “Just dreadful dreadful dreadful. Oh and this?” she said, looking at the nailbeds. “Horrible. Just a terrible thing.” Her upper lip

curled as if she was looking at some abomination of nature, a rabbit fused crudely into the chest of a bear or a satyr fucking a pumpkin.

“Yes,” Meryl tried to say, “I’m well aware just--” she pulled her hand back but the doctor tittered “uhuhuh!” and Meryl ruefully pressed it back out. Her eyebrow twitched in irritation.

Chard’s reaction wasn’t entirely unearned. From an objective perspective they were indeed ghastly, dreadful, terrible, *and* horrible. From the cut the mark had spread to cover not only the entirety of that finger but also her middle and pinky fingers, and moreover had consumed a fair portion of her palm. The affected fingers were thin and gaunt, the joints jutting the skin outwards like a strange hand pressed against the taunt fabric of a tent, trying to tear it open. Her skin too was coated with a thin sheen that glistened in the summer sun and smelled of a rot so sharp it cut through the doctor’s perfumes like sheers through gossamer. Oh and the nails, don’t get me started on the nails: the unaffected fingers were bad enough, the nails crowning from beneath the skin in what any midwife would declare a preference for caesarean section. But those effected were piercing out too far up into her fingers, three-pronged tridents of dark, hard keratin that caught against the leather of Meryl’s gloves each time she put them on. So yes, ghastly, dreadful, terrible and horrible.

Dr. Chard continued to investigate it, prodding the skin with little metal instruments, carefully scooping the glistening moisture from her skin into a vial, sniffing the air around it. All the while her eyes remained fixed with rapt, morbid attention, and Meryl with some discomfort noted that the doctor had begun to breathe rather audibly from her mouth.

At last the doctor sat down at her desk and looked at Meryl with a bewildered, admirable expression. “This is the worst case of Veilrot that I have ever seen. Granted,” she added hastily, “I’ve only seen it in books, but still, it is so much worse than I could have expected it to ever be. Truly, nothing in my training or my experience has prepared me for this.” She nodded absently, a smile wide on her face. “Thank you for this opportunity to inspect it in person.”

Meryl sat there, waiting for the doctor to say more, but she just sat there, nodding like a moron, her eyes darting from Meryl’s face to the outstretched hand and back again.

“So,” Dr. Chard said, “what do you plan to do about it?”

The sheer audacity of the question hit Meryl like a book falling from the third story balcony. “What do you mean,” she growled, “what do I *plan to do* about it? Why on earth do you think I’m here? For a laugh?”

“Well I had posted a quest looking for strange and unusual maladies, I had figured that was the issue. My position is to identify and to recommend a course of treatment.” She stood from her desk and pulled a book from a low bookcase adjacent to the door. “What you’re dealing with is a curse, not an illness, and for that you need the arcane. Although you really should do something about those nails.”

She licked a finger and began to flip through the pages with a terrifying rapidity. “Give me just a moment to find it... aha!” With a flourish she pushed the book towards Meryl. “Don’t touch! This book is rather expensive and that mucus you’re secreting will do terrible things to that ink.”

With a glare Meryl replaced the glove on her hand and looked over the page. She closed her eyes, allowing the information to settle with her. Dire as it was, at least she

knew what it was. Knowing was half the battle. “Well then? What course of treatment do you recommend?”

Dr. Chard shut the book with a satisfied thump! and returned it to its place on the shelf. “For starters, stop casting spells. Sorceries, druidcraft, spell weaving, pact magic-- I won’t judge,” she added with a wink. “But if it connects you to the veil then it feeds that curse too. So stop that.”

Meryl bit back her annoyed insistence that she had, in fact, already figured that out. “Anything else?”

She shouldn’t have asked.



In addition to being a dreadfully boring affair, the Wakeslon Village Library was proving to be far less useful than Claudia had hoped. She had spent a good quarter hour collecting various texts that might be helpful: almanacs of magical relics, glossaries of famous artificers and their works, and curated journals on the intertextual development of the sorcerous artifacts. Each stacked on top of the other in a precarious stack that she lugged to a well-lit reading space beneath a wide set of curtained windows, the lead holding them in place flaking with rust. This was all well and good-- Claudia loved a good game of fetch. But the actual work of reading it was a chore she hated.

For those not familiar with the realm of academia, it is important to understand that scarcity of text is only a part of what sets a good scholar apart from the unlearned masses. Much more than being rare, there is an unspoken need for the text to be as close to incomprehensible as it could be without being literally illegible. Granted, all the confusing and conflated diction is far from arbitrary; indeed, it has a specific purpose to describe a specific phenomenon. But it is more often than not grounded in a text so

esoteric that only a handful in living memory had actually read it. The word has sprouted wings and flew off on its own and become an invasive species in the writing of every other scholar on the topic, used not to actually evoke the meaning, but instead to signify that they, in fact, are educated on the subject. Which in turn is emulated by their contemporaries and their students and then before you know it people will read a sentence that is absolved of all meaning beyond empty implications of knowledge.

There is no perpetual motion machine quite like the insecurity of authorship, and Claudia was more or less a bird that had flown into the cogs and was trying desperately to understand the machine without being crushed.

She sighed as she set aside the last of her books. Her eyes ached from the strain of reading the handwritten texts, the ink faded into the pages by the years of study. Nothing of what she read had actually granted her the information she sought, at least, not immediately. The lantern had a very specific design, and even from her brief encounter with it she was hard pressed to ignore the significance of it. None of the lanterns she found in the glossaries matched its description, and there had been quite a few lanterns to read through. One hundred and six, to be exact. In the 1580's they had been something of a fad but most of them from that period had been donated to museums or were in the hands of private collectors by now, their magic long since faded.

Excitement stirred beneath the frustration. If it hadn't appeared in any of these texts, that meant there was a good chance that it was either a new magic item, recently forged, or that it was a relic so old that any documentation on it had fallen by the wayside. It could very well be a new discovery in the sorcerous circles of Thalassa. If Meryl played her cards right it could guarantee her a position far better than that of a mere mentor.

Sunlight glared through the window, unrelenting and unkind. Claudia could not blame her for being protective of her discovery. While she rarely spoke of it, there might very well have been some part of her that missed her career as a professor or regretted her missed opportunity on the Council of Magi. It was the highest position that any mage, sorcerer or otherwise, could hope to achieve, second in importance only to the emperor. A few years dealing with clumsy, irreverent students? Who wouldn't want a change of pace?

She pulled the books back into her arms, determined not to feel hurt by it. It wasn't as though she were so spectacular an apprentice as to warrant her teacher staving off a promotion. The best she could do was to help her in any way that she could, even if it meant slogging through a few more of those dry texts. While this *specific* lantern was not outlined in any dusty tome, most magic items still fit within a general guideline. If she could figure that out, maybe she could prove to be of some help.

The Wakeslon Village Library was quiet, even with the hard wood floors and the tall stone arches that made each footstep echo to the ceiling and back. It was nice though. All the time she'd spent reading and there had been no disruption. Only one person had passed her the entire time, a serious, scholarly faced man with dark little glasses and long, pale fingers that plucked the books from the shelves with ease. He was wearing very fashionable robes and she had meant to tell him as such, but he had gone as quickly as he had come, striding quickly out of sight. So much for a pleasant distraction. Claudia wished she'd thought to ask Natasha to join her, if only for the company.

Cluckerson clucked as if sensing her thoughts.

"Not that I don't appreciate you, Cluckerson," she said. "It's just that I could use someone who has a person face. Nothing personal." She ruffled their feathers and her

familiar gently shut its eyes and went back to napping on the windowsill. “I’ll be right back.”

Claudia peered down several of the aisles, the shelves looming a head or two above her. She had been to her village’s library enough to know it was better to trust a librarian to reshelve the books than to do it herself. Let that be a lesson to us all, should you wish to avoid a librarian’s wrath.

Unfortunately there seemed to be none nearby. Not a problem, Claudia figured. She would simply return them to the front desk and ask for more general texts on relics and artifacts and their classifications. They hadn’t quite gotten to them in her studies. Meryl was quite insistent that it was more important to wield one’s own magic before trying to throw anyone else’s into the mix, and given Claudia’s history with wild magic that was understandable. She hoped though that Meryl would take her initiative as a promising sign in her apprentice.

The problem, it seemed, was finding the stairs. Claudia hadn’t gone especially far from them to find her little reading spot, but now for the life of her she could not seem to locate them. She couldn’t even find the balcony that overlooked the ground floor of the library; the end of each line of shelves simply turned off into more shelves, and those into more shelves besides.

“O-kay,” Claudia said. “That’s an entirely normal thing and *definitely* not magical.” Her voice bounced off the floors and down the aisles, carrying further than they had before. She turned back the way she had come-- maybe she could sit in her nice little reading area until the library figured itself out. We all get a little tangled in ourselves now and then, right? But her step collided into a bookcase, hard and unyielding. That one certainly hadn’t been there before, but there it was now: tall, dark wood. She pressed it,

tried to push it aside but it wouldn't budge, just creaked against the support of the ceiling. All of the shelves had grown, and the light that had peered from above them was now blocked by the dark, thick wood. The books just glowered at her, their dull, gilded titles illegible.

"Okay okay," Claudia said to herself. "That's fine then." She picked a path and started down it. There were sorceries like this, she remembered, *Mazes* that kept people trapped in endless corridors. They could be escaped though, and the spell only held for so long. So she wasn't trapped, she was just in a magical time out, or something. No immediate danger. Her quickened breathing slowed and she forced her grip on the books to loosen. Her ribs ached from where she had pressed their corners to her chest. It was important that she keep her cool and take stock of her surroundings.

It was shelves. Everywhere she looked, just lots of shelves. Helpful stock, glad she took it. She was just about to start down another path when she heard it. Low, barely perceptible, but definitely still there: the soft snuffling of an animal. Her breath caught in her throat as she tried her hardest to listen over the growing pulse of her heart in her ears. Whatever was making that noise was either very close or very large, but neither of these options particularly put her at ease.

The part of her that was trying to stay calm was quickly losing ground to the part of her that very much wanted to freak out, but she was determined to make sure that she wasn't panicking over something silly. For all she knew there was a big pig in the *Maze*, and like, sure it would eat her if she laid down in front of it. She would do the same to it if the roles were reversed. But it wasn't worth losing it over. Until evidence proved otherwise, she would operate under the assumption that it was a big ole pig and she would find her way out of the maze and she would be fine.

Evidence quickly proved otherwise.

It was easy enough for Claudia to put some distance between her and the creature. A hard turn, a quick but quiet stride and she was on her way to snuffle-free city! She might have made it there too had she looked more carefully around the corners. In her eagerness to get away from big pig she spun around a corner so fast that she had crashed to the floor before she even realized she had tripped, sharp pain tearing through her calf. The books flew from her arms and tumbled against the ground in front of her as she threw her hands out to catch herself.

“Sweet honey fuck,” Claudia muttered. She’d managed to brace herself for most of the impact but her palms stung from the force and the fall had knocked the wind out of her. She rolled over to see what damned thing had tripped her and froze.

It was barely recognizable as a corpse. The shape was still obviously humanoid but any distinguishing features had been stripped away. What remained of the face was barely a strip of flesh on the cheekbone and a wide, lidless eye that stared at Claudia from its alcove in the hanging skull. Their robe sleeves had been torn away, revealing a loose, unraveled layer of muscle and flesh. Pockmarked every few inches in what flesh remained were long, sharp quills. One dripped with fresh, bright red blood from where she had caught her leg.

So much for her big pig theory. Maybe she could still hope for a giant porcupine?

The roar that rang out through the aisles dashed that hope.

Claudia stumbled to her feet, snatching the books from the ground. Wait who cared she was supposed to be running for her life. Stealth be damned, she ran, her footsteps bouncing and echoing in hard, frantic beats. She slid as she took a corner hard and rammed her shoulder into a shelf, sending several heavy tomes plummeting towards

her. They fell hard against her forearms as she threw them up to guard her head and peeled off down another aisle.

It was getting closer, thrones damn it. She could hear the sound of its thick, heavy paws slap against the floor, its nails clicking and clacking with each leap and bound towards its prey. The bookshelves rumbled as something hard and leathery scraped the sides, toppling more books in a tidal wave of hardcover dominos. Against her better judgement Claudia risked a glance over her shoulder. She immediately wished she hadn't.

How familiar are you with the manticore? Claudia had a decent understanding of its anatomy, which was really frightening to behold. It's body was similar to that of a tiger, with the strong, rippling grace of a leonine predator pulsing with each terrible leap, and from its back emerged great leathery wings like that of a wyrm, which even tucked close into the body still scraped viciously against the shelves. With each leap the hard, crooked spines that crowned the wings tore through the binding of the books just as sharply as any claw, and the cluster of deadly spikes that bristled from its mane to the tip of its tail left little to the imagination as for its danger.

Worst of all was its face. The rest of it was terrible, sure, but where you might expect a lion or a tiger or a bear, oh my there was a face that could almost be that of a scowling person's. But the mouth was far, far too large. The manticore gave another roar as Claudia met its jaundice yellow eyes, revealing row upon row of sharp, gristly teeth.

"Ha ha," Claudia said, not really laughing but trying. "I changed my mind about the person face thing." Apparently insulted by her lack of decorum, the manticore thrust its tail forward, sending a volley of spikes sailing towards her. Claudia yelped as she threw herself against a shelf, narrowly avoiding the spikes as they embedded themselves

into the books in front of her. She rounded another corner, then another, but it was no use. There was no losing the beast, and worse it was gaining distance.

In a desperate attempt at a distraction she spun around and launched one of the books at its weird, sharp face. It soared through the air and the creature caught it in its mouth like a shark-mouthed labrador playing fetch. Before it could do anything Claudia followed with a blast of *firebolt*, igniting the book in sudden flame and sending the manticore reeling from the scorching heat. A small advantage, but enough for her to turn another few corners as it sputtered and snarled in anger.

If she could only get enough distance to stop and think, maybe she could... could what? Her spellbook was back with Cluckerson, and there was no way she could take such a creature down with the few cantrips she had prepared. And to make matters worse it was getting increasingly difficult to see. The ceiling was all but gone, the tops of the bookcases disappearing into a thick veil of darkness. Shadows pooled from the shelves darker and thicker, and with each turn Claudia could see less of the space around her. It was too dark to see the path split, but Claudia fumbled along all the same, clutching at the shelves to guide her.

Her stomach lurched as she reached the end of the corridor and found the shelved pressed in on all sides. There were no more turning corridors. A dead end.

A sudden peace fell over her. There was nothing left for her to do but face it. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

With a roar the manticore slammed into the hall, its sickly yellow eyes gleaming.

Oh it would be *so bad*.

She kneeled down to get her dagger but it was gone, just her and whatever magic she could scrounge up. But then something passed through the darkness. Not like

something moving in the space veiled by darkness, but something that was in the darkness itself. A voice, soft, distant. A whisper that carried like fog on a lake.

“You’re so close,” it said. “Reach out your hand.”

Whatever it was, it was a lot more promising than being manticore chow. A warm, soft hand met hers in the darkness, and for a brief moment Claudia thought, strangely enough, of her mother. It was but a brief moment, punctuated by the whiz of spines soaring through the air, and the sound of something sharp punctuating flesh.



Theatre had a long and important role in the history of the Thalassan Empire. During the First Ignition troupes were frequently deployed following the *troops* to help restore the spirits of the recently conquered. These players would put on dances and concerts and plays to inform the civilians as to their new leaders and their new roles in society. As one might imagine, this inspired varied reactions. Those surviving articles of critique were not especially flattering to the performers or their auteurs. One performance of *My Emperor is Your Emperor* was famously so violently lambasted that none of the performers survived the curtain call, and for a time these stagings were done with every actor fully armored and armed.

Following centuries were less extreme. Universal standards of literacy resulted in a steady stream of publications from around the continent. These productions predominantly concerned histories and moralities: emperors, mages, great battles, discoveries, and sometimes even their personal affairs. It wasn’t until the 2084 reign of Emperor Regilanet Kirte Whythe-Knell Thalassa, who expected you to call her the *entire* name on threat of death, that a broader subject matter made its way to the stage. No longer limited to larger than life narratives, productions more frequently featured the real,

everyday lives of the Thalassan people. Comedies, tragedies, overwrought action performances; theatre thrived in Thalassa, cementing itself as one of the most popular past times for the nobility and the common folk alike.

So how, Meryl wondered, did we end up here?

“Why are you red?” said one of the actors stiffly. He squinted painfully against the stage lights, gesturing like someone who had only ever seen a puppet having a seizure and was told that was how people moved. When the other actor had not replied he looked back down at the script and said, “Why? Why?” each word accompanied with another jerking chop into the air.

Silhouetted by the bright lights of the stage was a scrawny human with close cropped hair, an unusual style in the empire. The director of the production, he stalked back and forth before the stage with a hungry gaze that seemed to absorb the whole stage.

“I am red because you hate me,” the other actor replied. A red sheet concealed the entirety of their body, but their head was embellished with a warhelm, with the face of an open lion. “I am red because you love me! I am red,” they sang, “because you made me.”

One of the players in the orchestra snorted and the director shot them a withering look. Meryl had intended to wait until the rehearsal was done before she asked for a Shivan Shinweld, but each passing moment was agony. Even the most amateur productions at least had a semblance of love for the craft. These people looked to be held at swordpoint. She wished she was *on* a swordpoint.

“Lo and behold,” crooned another actor as they appeared on stage, this one dressed in a green robe and wreath. “For I am--”

“Enough!” The director snapped. “Cut! Cut!” He waved a wand and the lanterns lining the walls and ceiling ignited, illuminating the empty audience and the bewildered

actors. “Igrain, Igrain, darling what do I keep saying to you? Hm? What is it that I keep saying?”

With downcast eyes the actor in green said, “If you can’t hear me from the front row--”

“No one can hear you from the back, that’s right. Why, pray tell, do you keep whispering like a mouse? Is your character a mouse, Igrain?”

“No, Shivan.”

Oh great. So this was to be her savior. Meryl dipped a cup into the fountain that bubbled in the back. It was one of those heinous 27th century ones, the water pouring from the wide eyes and pouting mouth of Emperor Hyacin the Vain. He hated when people called him that. At least the water was crisp and cool.

“No, she is *not*. She is a goddess, and you had better start acting like one. And *you*,” Shivan snarled, spinning towards the squinting actor. “If you are not off book by tomorrow I will sneak into your home and break the fingers of each of your children.”

Mr. Squinty returned a blank look. “I don’t have children, Shivan.”

“Your parents then.”

The actor in green exchanged a nervous glance with the red-fitted actor. “I uh,” Mr. Squinty said. “My parents are dead sir. They were killed in last summer’s peryton attack.”

“Then I will dig them up and break their fingers.”

“They were bur--”

“Enough with the excuses! We will take a brief-- and I mean *brief!*-- break, and then I expect perfection.” Shivan spun away with an emphatic clap, leaving the actors to

stalk off in various states of distress. The musicians in the pit stood, stretching this way and that, trying to shake the ache from their bodies and hands.

It was as good an opportunity as any. Especially if she didn't want to sit through more of the show. "Excuse me," Meryl said, standing to meet Shivan as he huffed his way to the back of the theatre.

Shivan held up a hand in silence, his other hand fishing a small goblet from his hand. He drank the water from the fountain in thick gulps, and for a moment Meryl indulged the fantasy of him choking. He did not.

"If you're from the magazines or the papers I would prefer you to come back a different day for your reviews. We're nowhere near ready." He spoke in the tired tones of a man who hadn't just threatened to desecrate the dead.

At least he had the right of it. "I am not," Meryl said. "Shavon Shinweld, I presume. You were recommended to me by Dr. Chard for your skill in tones. I have an ailment I would appreciate you looking at."

At this his face soured even further, the thin lips peeling back to reveal tea-stained teeth. "I've told her to stop calling me that. 'Shinweld.' Pfft. You break a shin what? Four times? and all of a sudden it's what you're known for, it's what people are calling you," he sneered.

"I don't have a stake in this," Meryl said flatly, but Shivan was really getting into the melodrama of it all.

"All I want is a little peace and quiet. I just wanted to retire from a life of adventuring and put on the shows that for years I had denied myself. It was always, 'No Shivan, we don't have time for your treatise on mortal-made divinity, all the orphans were kidnapped by a rakshasa,' or, 'We need support if we're ever to defeat the spider

queen,' or, or--" His voice faded. He had sunk fully to the floor now, and was swooning against the etched basin, his cup-bearing hand twisted above him in regret. "Or, 'Help Shivan,'" he muttered, "the wolves are getting big as houses and have started naming themselves." His bony finger traced the carved figure of a warlord in reminiscence. "Do you know how many spider queens there are?"

"There have been at least two hundred and seventy six in the last twenty years," Meryl said. She had killed a great deal of them herself. "They're not much for pomp and circumstance when it comes to heirs. Which is respectable but does mean disrupting their chain of command is tiresome."

Shivan peered up at her through his graying lashes. "I don't expect you to understand," he pouted. The actors and musicians had returned to the stage from their break and were whispering to each other as they watched their director lie prone on the fountain.

Of course, Meryl did understand, but if anything it made her want to kill the fool and be done with it even more than had she not. Maim, perhaps, not kill. Curse. Yes, that was it.

Regardless of what she wanted to do, however, she needed his help. She sat herself next to him and patted his arm sympathetically. "It is difficult I suppose when everyone needs you to do something other than what you would like to pursue." Shivan sniffled, his wrinkly eyelids shut in quiet self-reverence. "But it is important to remember that what we need must also take priority. We are of no use if we cannot take care of ourselves."

His eyes fluttered open. “You are so, so right.” He clasped her hands as if she were a dear friend, and then leapt to his feet and bowed to his performers. “And *that* is how you do it people-- that is acting. Can you hear me Igrain?”

“I can, Shivan! Thank you!” Thrones, was she crying? What was wrong with these people?

Shivan called the rehearsal to an early close so that they could “marinate in his performance” and led Meryl to an area behind the stage. The small office was well lit with the help of a few *light* cantrips that embedded the decorated walls, but without any windows these were the only source of light, casting the peeling wallpaper and crumbling friezes in a stark, artificial light.

“Well let’s get to it.” Shivan poured himself a small glass of whiskey, which was not very reassuring. “I’m a very busy man.”

“I’m sure,” Meryl said dryly, pulling the glove from her hand. “I will warn you that--”

“Oh!” Shivan said. “Oh how horrible!”

“Yes, I kn--”

“Just ghastly! Terrible!” He leaned in closer for a better look, with the same perverse expression Dr. Chard had worn etched into his face. “Dreadful, absolutely dreadful!”

“That is enough!” Meryl seethed. “I’m well aware it looks bad and I do not need your expertise to determine that. What I need to know is if you can do anything about it.”

Shivan took another sip of his whiskey. From somewhere else in the theatre a player knocked over a mannequin and let out a string of curses. “I should. Probably. But it will take time and money, as well as some uncommon ingredients.”

“How long?”

“At least three weeks, but more likely leaning towards five.” Another sip.

“Longer than that if you continue to cast. Veilrot can quickly reclaim the progress made to dispel it.”

Shit. As much as Meryl wanted to take care of the curse, it was something that affected only her, and something she could deal with on her own. Something she would *have* to deal with on her own. She didn't dare make any experiments with the lantern, not without her sorceries at her disposal, and certainly not without a more stable environment. The last thing she needed was to pull it out on the road and feed the whole caravan to it. No, the Veilrot would have to wait.

She sighed. “I cannot afford the time. I'm afraid I have business in Umberport I must attend to.”

“A shame.” Shivan lifted his brows in a theatrical show of pity, his lower lip pressed out ever so slightly. “Best take care of it while it's just your hand. I've heard some nasty stories about what Veilrot can do when it spreads.”

“Only stories.”

His mouth widened in a toothy smile. “I am only a bard, after all. Stories are what makes the truth.” With a final sip of his drink he turned to his desk and began to scribble on a sheet of paper. “You'll want to collect these to dispel it. I would recommend another bard, personally, but a necromancer might be able to help. Oh and,” he said, slipping the paper into her hand, “I do mean what I said about the show. It's not yet ready, so don't judge it too harshly, yes?” His lips parted into another one of those smiles. “We all take our time to get there.”

Meryl thought to the poor actor with the dead parents. Her eyes flicked to her hand. “Not too much time, one hopes.”

Once Meryl had stepped back out into the sunny afternoon she looked over the list. “Uncommon” had been something of an understatement. Some of the materials would be easy enough with the necessary funds, of which Meryl was running lower than she liked. Although she could likely ask her sister for the money she would rather just pick up a few quests to make up the difference. Justine was a bit... unpredictable. Meryl could never tell where the two of them stood. It would be best to take what blessings they could and figure out the rest themselves. As for the rest of the materials: wraith fog, angel feathers, silver ash sap; these would take some hunting to procure, either in a black market or on an expedition of her own.

The sidewalks were growing crowded in the midday rush. Boots crunched along the streets and the skirts of robes fluttered with the warm wind. Already summer was on its last legs and soon the harsh chill would be setting in. As she passed the Wakeslon Village Library a woman stepped from the gleaming doors and stumbled down the steps, falling into Meryl. The latter caught them before they both fell to the ground, and the woman laughed, awkward with relief.

“Thank you. I swear I forget how to walk somethime.” She was veiled, but the flat headdress assured Meryl that she was not mash’him. Mourning garb, perhaps, although the veils were becoming popular among some courtiers who shied from the traditions of heavy makeup and masks. Indeed, her dark robes were fine enough for that.

“Think nothing of it,” Meryl said, righting them both. She crossed the street. While her robes had no insignia or brooch there was always the chance she belonged to one of the Magi. The closer she and Claudia got to Umberport the more likely it was they

would run into the court eventually, but still she hoped they would somehow avoid that complication. Claudia was not much for deception in a very general sense, and the pressure and allure of the court would surely crack that thin veneer.

A dark hand lightly grabbed Meryl's elbow. "Excuse me," the woman said lightly. "You are Meryl Bone." It wasn't a question.

Meryl's mouth set into a tight line. So much for that hope. "I am she, yes. Do you have need of me, my lady?"

Her head bobbed to the side. "Would you be willing to come with me? I would rather us speak in private." That voice was so smooth and soft, the words rustled like fine fabric in a dance. Instinctively Meryl enforced her mental shields-- enchanters were commonly attractive in their face and tongue-- but she detected no attempt to influence her mind. The woman retracted her hand self consciously. "I know it is a strange request."

"Actually it is a very common one." Many of the courtiers preferred to keep their business private. Rumors spread fast and could quickly unseat one from their cushy placement. "What is your name?"

She seemed surprised by the question. For a moment Meryl thought she would not answer but finally she said, "You may call me Em."

"Just Em?"

She nodded. A breeze wafted up the street, lifting her veils just enough for Meryl to spy the dark black chin and a hint of a dark lower lip. As if in response to Meryl's gaze the woman adjusted her headdress and pulled the veil down.

“Well, Em,” she said, “I am afraid I am currently predisposed. I apologize, but you must find someone else.” When she tried to turn away Em’s hand shot out, but did not touch her.

“Please listen to me,” she said. “You cannot trust her. She will fashion herself an innocent but she is a danger to everyone she comes in contact with. Her words are like honey infused with poison. She is a blade in the ice. Whatever she has offered you, her power is not worth what she will take from you.”

Meryl slowly turned back to the woman. “Who will?”

For a long moment the woman was silent, shuddering. No, she wasn’t shuddering. She lifted her hand to her throat slowly, as if moving through sap. She was choking. In a moment Meryl was behind her, prepared to knock whatever it was from her throat, to do something, at least. But just as quickly as it had started it stopped, and the woman was still.

“It was not my intention to frighten you.” Her breath was easy, as if she hadn’t been almost strangled where she stood. Meryl slid her hand from the woman’s back. The sidewalk was still full, but not one of those passerbys stopped to help. Their eyes simply slid off of the scene in front of them as they stepped widely around the two. “I cannot speak the name. It has been forgotten in this land and I cannot be the one to restore it.”

Meryl wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that, but she was sure that there was some sort of powerful magic involved in it. “Is this a *geas* that afflicts you?” she asked. Although no one seemed to be paying attention, Meryl would have liked to find some place to sit and speak at length. If Em was indeed enchanted or cursed it would be best not to be so public about it. “Come with me, let us sort this out.”

As she grabbed for her hand, however, Em stepped away, her head shaking. “I should go,” she said. “I may have done too much as it is.” With that she slipped into the throng, lost before Meryl could even consider following her.



For a moment after awakening Claudia thought it had all been a dream. She was back in her little reading nook, curled up in the chair. Golden afternoon spilled in through the window and she felt that pleasant warmth one’s bed has on a cold morning when you want anything but to get up. Her hand traced where she had cut her calf in the fall. The skin had stitched itself back together but the tear in her pantleg remained, a jagged mouth just above the boot. Whoever healed her hadn’t tailored her clothing, which was fair. But it meant she hadn’t dreamt the entire thing, at least.

From the height of the sun she had only been gone for a few minutes, but she felt like she had just taken the best nap of her life. Cluckerson sat contented on the sill next to her, still asleep. Thank the Magi she had thought to summon them, she thought dryly. What a great help they had been so far. But they were warm and soft when she picked them up, so she figured that alone made the spell worth it.

The library books she had collected were lost still in the maze, but on the coffee table sat another in their place. Rich, burgundy leather bound the pages together, painted beyond the point of overdecoration. It felt cool to her touch, and although the cover and spine was untitled, the first few pages named it: *Wizardry, Warfare, and Wealth: A Companion for the Conscientious Citizen of the Empire of Thalassa in Regards to Ancient and Forgotten Magics and Their Arts and Utilities Bothe in the Style of holy shit* the title just kept going. She flipped the page but it was just more of the title. No wonder it wasn’t on the cover. An acronym wouldn’t even fit.

Someone had to have put this here for her. The same person who healed her, maybe? Claudia looked around her but there was no one in a hat that said, “I leave books for people after they’ve been spirited away in magical mazes.” But like the book title, it was a bit verbose and probably wouldn’t fit on a hat. It might though. Claudia had seen some big hats in Walláchaven. She was getting distracted though.

Once she had found the end of the title there was a treasure trove of a table of contents. It was a thick book, small print, overflowing with chapters on magic. Getting through this would take some time, certainly, but if this could help make sense of things she would do just that. As she shut the book she noticed one other detail. A gilded bookplate identified the tome as a part of the library’s restricted section, which, of course, complicated things.

Or it would have if Claudia felt morally obligated to such things. As it was she shoved the book in her bag and hustled out of the library before she could be spirited away into any more labyrinths. She slipped into the bustle of the sidewalk like a fish and started towards the town square, where the merchants had set up their stalls.

On her way she saw Meryl speaking to a woman in dark robes and nearly turned around to follow a different street. She wasn’t quite ready to see Meryl after their little spat. Still, she found herself inching closer, making sure to keep just out of sight. Who was this woman? A friend of Meryl’s? That seemed unlikely. Not that Meryl didn’t have friends per se, but I mean, yeah, she kind of didn’t, at least not from what Claudia could tell. She seemed mostly to have acquaintances or like ex-coworkers. Even with her mother, who claimed Meryl to be a “dear friend” of hers, Meryl had seemed oddly distant.

Claudia was so caught up in this line of thinking that she hadn't noticed the woman excuse herself until she slid through the crowd and bumped into her.

"Oh, Claudia! Excuse me," she said, reeling a bit. "You know, it's all a bit-- no, you don't, I--"

"I'm sorry," Claudia interrupted. The woman had a voice like a soft blanket warmed by the sun. If she listened to it too long she would fall asleep. "Do I know you?"

A rush of awkwardness suffused the air as if billowing from beneath the veils. Claudia took a step back, suddenly very aware of herself and very uncomfortable. Air solidified in her lungs.

The woman dropped her shoulders, held her head up tall. "No, you do not," she said. And then she left, and just as suddenly the feeling evaporated from Claudia.

"Are you alright, small one?" a tall orcish man asked. No, on second glance, half orcish. His tusks were too small. He wore an apron and carted with him a small mobile stand of pastries. "You nearly stepped back into the street."

"I'm alright, thank you." The woman was thoroughly gone, as was Meryl, thankfully. "I'm just having a really weird day, that's all."

"Ah," the man sighed, a small, nostalgic smile on his lips. "We've all had those days. But do keep clear of the streets. Would hate to see you barreled down by a horse or an ostrich or... whatever the nobility are riding and driving these days." He waved it away like a silly little bee that confused him for a large, grayish flower. "Would you like a pastry?"

Claudia dug out her coin pouch. "Two, please!"

One of these, a small strawberry tart, she placed in front of Natasha. Natasha smiled, but continued her dealing with the customer she was speaking with. After she had boxed and wrapped their chosen piece, she turned her full attention to Claudia.

“I’m afraid I can’t offer you a discount in exchange,” she said.

“Damn,” Claudia sighed. “I guess I’ll have to take my tart elsewhere.” Before she could grab it Natasha snatched it from the countertop and bit into it.

“Sorry,” she said through a mouthful of custard. “Strict no refund policy on tarts. You understand, I’m sure.”

Claudia did that condescending “tch” that Meryl liked to do and theatrically rolled her eyes. “My father always warned me about you merchant types. Swindlers, the lot of you.” She shook her fist and Natasha chuckled.

“And *my* parents always warned me about strange imperial mages, and yet here we are.” Natasha took another bite of the tart. “Would you like some?”

“I had mine already,” Claudia said. Hers had been a little apple crisp with the flakiest crust she’d ever had. She was sure she’d dream about that pastry. A pastry filled with manticore quills. She frowned.

“Well you’re welcome to some of this as well. You look like you’ve had the times today,” she said, looking Claudia up and down with those appraising eyes. “Have you been sleeping in that silk scarf I lent you? Your hair is a thunderstorm.”

For the second time in an hour Claudia found herself saying, “I’m just having a weird day.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow, but the rest of her face was very serious. “How weird?”

“Uhhhhhhhh,” Claudia said. She dusted the skirt of her robes, trying to buy time. Her hands were still dyed, harkening back to an earlier question and an awkward trip to *disguise self* city. “You remember the whole thing in the woods? When Meryl and I joined you? How much do you know about that?”

Claudia went on to explain as much as she could, as much as she knew. Which was, admittedly limited, but still covered the basics. The lantern, the dark robe people, the horned man with scarlet hands, the maze, the manticore, the book. Natasha listened diligently, breaking only to help customers when they approached. When she was acting as a merchant she smiled and leaned in conspiratorially. But once they had left she would ask Claudia to continue her eyebrows knit together often enough to make a scarf. When Claudia finally finished, Natasha let out a long sigh.

“This is,” she ventured, “not really a product I house in my storehouse.”

“I know, I’m sorry to unload on you,” Claudia started, but Natasha held up her hand.

“You haven’t done anythi-- okay well, unload is perhaps the appropriate word, sure. But, I am your friend! I’m glad to lend an ear.” She smiled and Claudia’s heart glowed in response as she returned the smile.

She cast anxious eyes towards Claudia’s bag. “Did you really steal that book?”

“I prefer to think of it as checking it out illegally,” Claudia said. “But for all intents and purposes--”

“But for all intents and purposes,” Natasha chimed in. “Yes.”

“Yeah, absolutely. Super stole.” Thrones why did she add that in? She was making it so much worse, the heart glowy thing was going away. “But!” she added, “I think it

might give me an idea as to what this lantern is. And if I know what it is then I can do something about it!”

“Right.” Natasha licked her lips. “Do something like...?”

Claudia raised a finger with an idea that wasn't there. She dropped it. “I'm not sure yet... but I'm sure once I know what it is I'm bound to come up with something.”

“I just worry that, maybe, this is dangerous and that maze and the manticore was trying to get you out of the way? As if someone doesn't want you to know about the lantern.”

“Right,” Claudia nodded, “that's exactly what I was thinking! If someone knowing about the lantern is enough to warrant them being killed by a monster then there must be some pretty dangerous people involved, willing to do anything, even to kill a cute up-and-coming mage.”

Natasha smiled a bit at that but it was tight, anxious. “Right. I think we came to the same conclusion more or less.” She reached out and placed her hand on top of Claudia's. For a moment her heart fluttered in her ribcage, glowing hotly. “You should leave this to Meryl.”

And then it fell.

“I'm not trying to discount you,” Natasha said.

“Merchants; no discounts,” Claudia quipped.

“I just--” Natasha broke off and laughed. “Okay, yes, that was quite funny. But I'm being serious here. Meryl is a seasoned sorceress. A famous sorceress. Even I've heard of her and I live on the other side of the continent! And you're an apprentice.”

Claudia dropped her hands. “That doesn't mean I can't help.”

“And that’s not what I’m saying.” Natasha curled her hands beneath her chin, her head perched like a watchful bird. “I only mean that you should be careful. Find ways to help that don’t throw you in immediate danger.”

“Like going to the library,” Claudia said flatly. “Because that went *so* well.”

“Most of the time the library won’t have manticores in it.” She dipped her head with a sly smile. “Most of the time. I’m just asking you to stay safe, be smart. You can only be a great sorceress if you live long enough.”

Claudia sighed. Natasha was being so sensible, but she just didn’t understand. As far as Claudia was concerned, “smart” only occasionally crossed paths with her life.

“In the meantime,” Natasha continued, “you should speak with Meryl about everything. I’m sure she’d want to know.”

Now Claudia groaned. “I know, but, like, we had a fight this morning and I feel really weird about it still. She’ll probably just scold me on not using proper manticore evasive maneuvers.” Plan m-2, it was a classic.

“All the more reason to talk to her. Clear the air. She’s your mentor, not your opponent.”

“Is that how you feel about Quirino?” Claudia had only interacted with the man a few times but she had enjoyed his company. His thick red hair looked different in the sun and the clouds, and there always seemed to her to be many things said at once, even in the simplest of phrases.

Natasha rolled her head back and forth. “Most of the time. But there is little in the form of lecture or teaching. My apprenticeship is mostly in the experience and opportunities this grants me. These aren’t even my wares,” she said, gesturing to the jewelry. “I only know Quirino because I spent a season reorganizing his warehouse in

San Suchil. Really I was only in charge of keeping inventory but the place was *such* a mess something had to be done and the initiative impressed him.”

So Natasha’s apprenticeship was all merit. Would Claudia even be training if her mom didn’t already know Meryl? Probably not. She’d likely still be on the farm, watching sheep. Maybe she should be.

“That’s great!” Claudia said, trying to push the feeling of envy aside. Natasha was a good friend to her and she didn’t deserve Claudia’s own bullshit getting in the way of that. “You must have really just reorganized the shit out of that place.”

Natasha laughed. “You have no idea. Now listen, I really have to get back to work, but we’ll talk on the road. It’ll be a long ride to Umberport.”

“Of course of course,” Claudia said, returning the smile as best she could. “I should probably grab some lunch anyways. I lost track of time in the library.” Ugh. Not a sentence she ever expected to say.

With a little wave she left Natasha to do the whole merchant thing, heading south towards the piers. Hopefully there was a cafe or a restaurant or something that had a decent view of the water but didn’t smell entirely of fish. The fine balance of water-side living.

Cluckerson popped their head from the messenger bag and gave a cluck, just to remind Claudia they were still there. It was comforting, and she welcomed the brief distraction from her thoughts. She did need to speak with Meryl, and more courteously than she had before. When she had first started her apprenticeship she had been so excited to learn. But as the hours of lectures turned into days, weeks, months... somewhere in there the sheer enthusiasm had gone. It was somewhere, but most of the time she just felt like it was all work. Even with learning sorceries, the part of magic that

actually interested her, it was always so thick with context and history and theory that any joy had been sucked out of it.

And it didn't matter, either, how quickly she grasped it. Meryl always laid out a clear schedule and even if you were ahead it was being stuck to. Like when Meryl was teaching Claudia how to cast *sleep*. After a full day of lecture and history and theory, Meryl had taken her out into the garden attached to their tall, narrow house. It was early spring and still cold, but the dogwood trees fluttered and sang with the cacophony of birds.

“Remember the hand motions,” Meryl told her. “Not too quickly, not too hard. It's an enchantment, so it runs soft. Watch me.” She held out her crystal ball in one hand in front of her and drew the other down on top, almost as if shutting the eyes of the recently deceased.

“Right, right,” Claudia said. Cold air filled her lungs and numbed her fingertips. She desperately wanted a mug of something warm to wrap them around. But she stilled her mind, drew the magic into her, and let it settle onto the tree like a yawn. Instantly the chirping and the fluttering ceased. The whole garden had gone utterly quiet. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked.

“Did I do it right?” Claudia asked. She'd learned how to dampen sound in a space the week before and she was worried she'd cast that on accident. But then a bird fell from the tree with a thump into the hard packed snow.

Meryl picked it up and showed it to Claudia. Under its soft feathers its chest slowly rose and fell with easy, restful breaths. “Yes.” With a snap of her fingers Meryl sent a shock of magic into the enchantment, unravelling the sorcery and awakening the

birds. “But there are things more resilient to sleep than birds that you will face. I want you to practice the gesture three hundred more times. I will be in my study.”

“Out here?” Claudia shivered.

“You must be able to cast in any condition, not just by the hearth. We will have breakfast afterwards.” Meryl closed the door firmly behind her, and the birds flew off in favor of a garden less prone to enchantments.

And Claudia did practice it three hundred times, out in the cold. And she practiced it six hundred times the next day, interspersed with notes and lectures and battle maneuvers. For a full week it was the same spell, over and over again, and with a new spell the next. Nevermind she had gotten it on her first try, or that she was ready to try more. They would do the same thing again and again until every ounce of enjoyment, every ounce of *magic* that came with sorcery, had been thoroughly and utterly wrung from it.

But she was learning magic. Shouldn't that be enough?

She sighed. Lunch prospects weren't particularly promising. Most of the buildings closest to the piers were dedicated to sorting and processing catches, or otherwise belonged to fishers guilds. Windows filled with ropes and knives and nets and hooks lined the streets, but nowhere, nowhere, a bite to eat. Maybe she should have been a bard instead.

She turned back north, figuring that maybe the more residential districts had some promise, when a hand gripped her sleeve right and yanked her into an alleyway. Another hand clasped tight over her mouth as an arm tucked her arms against her body. Even if she had her knife she wouldn't be able to reach it.

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” a familiar voice whispered in her ear. “I just need you to listen.”