

# The Charms of Freedom

A Yurvanian Transition Novel

Nicole Lieger

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[pronounced like: Nee'kol Leaguer]

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**The Starlight of Shadows**  
**Schatten aus Sternenlicht**

You can find a  
**background chitchat glossary**  
for the world of Yurvania  
on my website:  
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To those who save the children



# 1

Windmills lazily turned their white sails over a jumble of rooftop gardens. The Transition had grown gracefully into the charming playfulness and pompous self-importance of the old mansions. It covered them with greenery as tangled and vibrant as the patchwork of families and friends now inhabiting the stately homes. Ripening fruits gleamed on turrets and archways, and blossoming vines wound around a balcony where a few complacent hens clucked down at the people far beneath them. The morning sun came to bathe Varoonya in pale and glorious gold.

But behind thick velvet curtains, a gloomy twilight reigned. Muffled silence filled the hall, and the ancient walls seemed to run up endlessly toward the canopy of their vaulted ceiling. Enim squinted up into the shades. From a box hung with ornate tapestries, the expressionless faces of five examiners looked back down at him.

Enim cleared his throat.

There was nothing for it now.

He turned back toward the elaborate design laid out on the floor and checked again. Crystals of blue and purple blinked at him between threads of finest glass. Enim couldn't see a single flaw.

He raised his wand, his eyes narrowed. In that moment, the world disappeared to him. Enim knew nothing now but the runes in his mind and the flow of magic in his veins. Full and round, the first vowels rolled off his tongue, ancient words of power, intoned with a perfection reached through years of relentless practice.

With a deep, secret rustle, the lines of a pentacle began to glow, spreading their fiery gleam across Enim's face.

}} Kaya crouched behind low shrubbery, hidden in the shadow of the looming mountain. It was dark all around the mine. Black clouds scurried across a thin sickle moon high above, driven by a cold, gusty wind.

Lhut came up beside her, silent as a ghost, and gave her a short nod. So the path was clear. Kaya spied out from behind the branches. A guard had passed just a moment ago. It was now or never. She checked back with Lhut, then eased through the branches and swiftly made for the mine, without stopping and without looking back. Lhut followed close behind.

They did not halt once they were inside. They knew the path well enough. They had been toiling here for years, after all, day after day. Down they went, along the tunnel and down again, turn after turn into the maze of the mine. Finally, Kaya stopped. Almost there. She listened closely, then peered around the corner.

'Yes!' Kaya's heart jumped.

Everybody had come. They really had come.

Before her, where the tunnel broadened out, the figures gathered in the light of a single torch were little more than dark shapes and flickering shadows. But Kaya had no doubt. These were her people.

'We have come tonight, all of us,' she thought. 'Exhausted as we may be after shifts in the mine. Frightened as we may be after veiled threats, and more and more naked threats. We have come, in spite of it all.' Kaya smiled a proud and wretched half-smile, as did many miners.

"Well, then." Kaya's voice was low and intense as she took the hand of the man next to her. She gave Lhut the other and the circle closed all around, people clasping each other's hand in a solemn gesture of strength and determination.

In the silence of that rite, they heard it coming.

A low rumble at first, a sigh of stone somewhere deep in the mountain. An aching and moaning of slabs—and then, splintering wood and a crack in the ceiling.

Everybody jerked back. A scream tore through the air. Black figures began to run for the exit, stumbling and falling. Stones rained down on them, a hail of detritus hitting whoever was underneath.

Kaya bumped into two young men who were helping each other up, stumbling forward in clouds of dust, getting hit again. A massive block missed Kaya by inches as she instinctively pressed back against the wall. Another rock struck her head.



Blood streamed down her face.

Lhut appeared before her, taking her hand, urging her on. And then a pillar of wood and an avalanche of stone crashed down on Lhut, tearing his hand from hers. {{{

Kaya woke with a scream. Her breath was coming raggedly. Sweat covered her brow. She looked around in alarm, but all she saw was the shaft of moonlight falling in through her chamber window. All she heard was the racing beat of her own heart.

Kaya took a deep breath. She rubbed the scar on her brow. Her pulse began to slow down again. "It's all right. I am here. It is over," Kaya whispered.

Stiffly, she lay down on her mat again, staring out into the darkness.

It wasn't true. Things were not all right. Nowhere near right! Kaya thumped her fist into the mat, muffling her cry with her pillow.

Then she drew the pillow away. Her eyes were gleaming. "It is not right. And: It is not over yet!"

Her next scream tore through the night with full force, a lament as much as an oath, a promise, an unbreakable pledge.

\* \* \*

On the outskirts of town, the din of Varoonya's bustling river port subsided into a soft background rustle until it finally faded into the gentle murmur of the waves.

Where the banks of the Roon turned green again, a festive little crowd had gathered on one of the meadows. People were idling about, glass in hand, a cloud of laughter, talk and music swaying over them. Strings of fairy lights answered warmly to the gold and lavender in a darkening sky. The air was soft, carrying scents of the coming summer.

Enim drifted happily between arriving guests and slaps on his shoulder, between farewell songs and conversations about his future. Slim and gangly as he was, he danced with more joy than grace, but his sweet smile and boyish charms still brought more than one kiss to his lips.

Enim had dressed for the occasion by putting on the least worn of his usual blue baggy pants, the loose folds drawn tight at his ankles. The short crimson vest over his shirt, however, was exactly the same as always because of the hundred tiny pockets full of potions and crystals and magical implements. Enim wasn't going to go out

without his equipment. So, wand tucked into his broad linen belt, Enim looked just his usual self. Which was precisely what everybody had come to celebrate anyway, right? Laughing, Enim pulled off his cap to push black hair from his brow when he suddenly froze.

A thousand tiny stars were gathering around him.

Enim looked about in confusion. But he found the source of magic soon enough.

Yoor had his arms stretched toward the sky, his skin shimmering in soft shades of blue and violet like the wings of a butterfly, subtle hues of color dancing over his velvety body.

Yoor brought his hand down in a circular motion. The stars multiplied into a shimmer of gold, arranging themselves into high pillars and arches, a sheer temple of light rising over Enim, the sacred hall filled with a celestial choir of triumph and glory.

Enim stared, wide-eyed. Then he laughed. "Oh, Yoor, please! Enough is enough!"

The music faded and the temple rained down in drops of amber to form a shiny pool at Enim's feet, before even that dissolved into nothingness.

"Goodness me," Enim gasped as he gave Yoor a hug. "I have only graduated from the academy. Not ascended to the heavens."

"As good as," Yoor murmured into his hair.

Torly threw herself at Enim from behind, squeezing him into a double hug before she stepped away to lean against Yoor's shoulder.

Faces all around them had turned, eyebrows raised in surprise and delight, smiles beginning to spread. Butterfly people were rare, and Yoor's appearance was admired as readily as the illusions he created. Noticing the eyes upon him, Yoor waved and gave a bow that was both humble meekness and extravagant flourish.

Torly laughed. "Yoor! You truly were born for the stage."

"Thank you." He straightened up, throwing pearly white hair back behind his neck. "I'll be back on in two nights."

Yoor tucked his arm under Enim's. "But what about you? Where will you go now that you are leaving the academy behind?"

A crooked smile stole onto Enim's lips. "As far away as I can, you might say. I'm going to the Mountains."

"To the Mountains!" Yoor's eyes widened. "Really? But why? There is nothing there! What do you think you'd do?"

"There is not nothing there, surely," Enim frowned. "There is nowhere where there is nothing. There's just places you haven't

thought about yet.” He wrapped his arms around his chest. “But to be quite honest, I don’t know what is there either. That’s why I am going. I have lived in Varoonya all my life. I’d like to see something new. To venture out into the unknown. Even if it is... challenging.”

“Oh my,” Yoor said, impressed. “What an adventurer. You could simply have sought work here. But, no. You go and travel the world. I am all amazement. I admit I had always thought you were rather tame. A stickler for rules, who always does everything right. How wrong I was!”

“Going to the Mountains is not against any rules,” Enim pointed out. “Otherwise, of course I would not do it.”

“Because you really do believe that rules are always right?”

Enim looked surprised. “Of course. What else? Rules are about what is right, and what is right is made a rule. That is the whole purpose of rules. If even the definition of right was not right, then where would we be and how would we know anything?”

Yoor tilted his head, giving Enim a sidelong glance. “I fear you may be in for a rude surprise, my friend.”

Torly pinched his arm. “Don’t be too sure, Yoor,” she winked. “Enim has his own way of looking at things and is not thrown off course so easily. His conviction is so strong that I would not be surprised if reality ended up bending to his will, and then right will truly be right, just like he said it would.”

“Now that’s what I call true magic,” Yoor said with feeling. “I wish they had taught us that at the academy.”

## 2

On the way to the Mountains, Toan was the last town still serviced by the stagecoach from Varoonya. From here, Enim had to make his own way.

He carefully chose a brown mare at the horse market and even met a farmer who agreed to take his baggage. So he set out, riding alongside the cart at a leisurely pace, taking in the landscape and the smell of fields on the breeze. Homesteads and hamlets glided past, sparkling streams and blooming orchards, ducks and cows and sheep. White clouds drifted overhead, and to Enim it all seemed a little like having journeyed into a picture book. Nice, but somewhat unreal. And impermanent too. Soon the picture book would close and then he would find himself back in the real world. In the Mountains, this time.

Whatever that might mean.

Enim shifted in the saddle.

He had grown up in Varoonya. All his family and friends were there. How would it be to arrive in a completely new world? To know absolutely no one?

Enim bit his lip.

There were diamonds in the valley of Shebbetin, he knew that much. And mines, where tons of stone needed to be moved with the help of magical traptions. Since he was an artificer, capable of creating and repairing traptions, surely someone would want to hire him? Even if everything he had done at the academy had been models and exercises. A real traption, sitting in the depths of a mountain like an old giant of cogwheels and magic, might still be another matter. Would Enim even be able to handle that, when he was all alone in the darkness underground?

Enim squared his shoulders and encouraged his horse to pick up the pace.

After two days, Enim reached Hebenir, a small village huddled into the steep rise leading up to the pass. All traders spent the night here. It was possible to reach Shebbetin in one day from Hebenir, but it had to be a very long day, especially if one was going with a cart.

So it was well before dawn when the merchant who had agreed to take Enim along let her wagon rumble out of the inn's courtyard, lanterns swaying in the dark. Enim's horse followed close behind. The dirt track they rode on wound up a slope behind the village, softly meandering through fields and meadows. But just as the first gleam of morning began to brighten up the sky, the road disappeared into a thick forest and they were plunged into darkness again. Only rare fingers of light penetrated the gloom here and there, slight shimmers breaking through the crowns in odd places, all giving Enim a vague, somewhat dreamlike feeling of his surroundings. Black trunks stood solemnly all around, companions to a wordless whispering song sent down from the treetops by the wind. The track got steeper and steeper, and increasingly thick undergrowth pressed onto the path from all sides, hindering their climb. Everything felt dark and dense.

And then, very suddenly, they were out.

As they rode up over the crest, sunlight exploded into Enim's eyes, radiating brightly over the open highlands. The sky stretched endlessly overhead, a pale blue and gold striped with pink. A chilly wind blew hair into Enim's face, and from high above came the shrill, piercing cry of a hawk.

Enim shook his head slightly, as if trying to wake up.

This was it, no doubt. He had arrived.

This was the Mountains.

They rode on the whole day, following the thin thread of a trail that wove across the highlands, a delicate dark yarn in a richly textured tapestry. Enim felt the slopes rise and fall beneath him like the timeless breath of the earth. He had become taciturn, like his guide. They just traveled on and on, in this vast, silent landscape, allowing themselves to become two tiny spots in a quiet, ancient, boundless world.

The sun moved along its arc. Gradually, the shadows grew longer until their dark fingers reached as far as the sky, pointing out into the universe. Enim had never before seen so many stars. In the blackness of night he heard the constellations sing to him with thin, ethereal voices, a nameless song of the cosmos that came to him from the

depths of time and space. The trail could barely be seen any more in the meager gleam of their lantern. Enim was grateful when the moon rose, pale and impossibly big, over the ragged line of the mountains. They trotted on, bathed in the silvery silence that now covered rocks and meadows.

Suddenly, the cart came to a halt.

Enim startled. He reigned in, then rode up front to see what was the matter.

His gaze hardly found the outlines in the darkness of the valley.

It was only a few huts at first, huddling against the slope. But farther on, they condensed into a thick crowd of buildings, a black tangle, a confusing shadow full of nooks and edges in the ghostly moonlight. Over to one side of the valley, lights were visible, and shapes of stone houses with hearth fires shining through their windows. Enim let out a deep breath.

"Shebbetin," his guide said in a hushed voice, as if she too felt she was standing at a portal between two worlds.

Enim gazed down at the jumbled town. He could not really see or understand it, in the middle of night and darkness. He knew that. But still. Here it was. He took another long look at the mysterious life stretching out and hidden before his eyes.

Gently, he pressed the flanks of his horse and rode down into the unknown.

\* \* \*

Pale morning light fell into the inn's chamber.

As Enim climbed down the stairs in search of breakfast, he found the tap room occupied by a bustling group talking animatedly—in Vanian. Enim blinked. The innkeeper was right in the middle. Waving, and joking loudly. In Vanian.

Enim realized that last night, his guide had been the one to do all the talking, walking out toward the stables with the innkeeper. Enim had never thought to listen for the words. What would it have been other than Kokish, the language everyone had adopted as their own since the Transition?

A gust of wind blew in as the door opened and the boisterous group jostled out, trampling and shouting, leaving palpable silence behind. Slowly, dust began to settle between slanting rays of light. The echoes of ages past, of a language relegated to history, lingered on.

Enim sent a silent prayer of thanks to his old-fashioned parents for still having spoken the abandoned language at home.

He might stand a chance.

Enim cleared his throat. “Good morning,” he tried in his best Vanian.

The innkeeper gave him a bright smile as she turned around to face him. “Good morning!”

Right. What next? Enim searched his childhood memories for some follow-up words, for the obvious question. “You talk Vanian?”

“Of course. Everyone in Shebbetin does.”

Enim stared at her, stunned.

Enim shook his head at himself, or at Shebbetin, or the world. Such an obvious thing! Yet no one had told him. He had not thought to ask either.

Everybody spoke Kokish these days, didn’t they?

No. They did not.

Or only a little. The innkeeper’s Kokish turned out to be even more halting and bumpy than Enim’s Vanian. However, the woman assured Enim while wiping her hands on the apron, the distinguished people, the mine owners and such, all spoke fluent Kokish. No worries there. It was just the ordinary folks who did not.

Enim rubbed the back of his head. The notion of splitting humanity into groups of distinguished and ordinary people simply slipped past his mind for the moment. But the old Vanian... that caught. Kokish was the language of his heart, and of his head too. It was the language in which he had become an artificer. The language in which dreams came to him at night. Would he not be able to speak it, now? Would Enim still be able to be himself, in this new home of his?

Enim sighed.

He might have to resign himself to a period of stuttering and speechlessness. And a time of intense learning. This certainly wasn’t going to make his new start any easier.

Well. He would manage. His Vanian was rusty, but strong and healthy underneath. Or so Enim hoped.

The innkeeper was making breakfast.

Enim watched in silence.

Then another thought occurred to Enim. A happy one! Which was what he needed right now, anyway. There might be a welcome gift waiting for him, since a few friends unable to make it to his farewell party had promised to write to him instead. Maybe their letters had already arrived?

A smile came to Enim's lips. He had another go at Vanian. "Please, where... ah... have letters? Pouch! Pouch collection!" The words came back to Enim just in time.

"The nearest pouch collection point is in Behrlem."

"Behrlem..." Enim hesitated. "Where, please?"

The woman briefly raised her eyes to him while ladling beans onto a plate. "Behrlem is a town south of Hebenir, a ride of two or three hours."

Enim looked back at her, perplexed. "But..." Enim switched back to Kokish. "What I mean is the local pouch collection point for Shebbetin. You know, where the county courier drops off the pouch, and where local people can go and collect their letters?" And then he said it all again in Vanian, as best as he could.

"In Behrlem," the innkeeper repeated, arranging potatoes.

"But... I cannot three day travel for get my letters!" Enim's voice held all his bewilderment and confusion.

The woman took pity on him. "Well. For you, there might be a way. Do you know any of the mine owners? They have their own pouch collection. A private courier, who rides to Behrlem once a week. If you ask nicely, they might let you join. You, being an artificer and all, bearing the seal of the academy."

Enim still looked perplexed. "But... in Shebbetin thousands of people live. How they get letters?"

"They don't," the innkeeper said dryly. "Except if they are lucky and some trader takes the pouch along."

Enim stared at her, aghast. "But that... not possible. People in Shebbetin so far away. And then no letters? No." Enim shook his head. "This not right. Not possible. There is rules for this. The county bring pouch to everyone. Everyone. It must be."

The innkeeper turned away to pour steaming water into a teapot.

Enim appealed to her. "Of course, tell county. Bureaus, in Varoonya. Of course they make this right, very soon. They make pouch collection point in Shebbetin. And letters good everyone." Enim pinned the woman with an imploring gaze.

"Look here," she said somewhat defensively. "This is an inn, and I am the innkeeper. I have given you all I have on the subject."

"But—"

"Here's your breakfast," she said firmly, but not unkindly, pushing the tray over the counter. "I'll be around the back if you need me."



The only other guests still at the inn were huddled in the far corner.

"Did you hear that?" Kaya asked in a low voice.

"I most certainly did." Lhut leaned forward slightly. "He is unusual, this fellow." Lhut let his gaze wander over Enim, who had his back turned, eating breakfast with unseeing eyes. "He is from Varoonya, yet able to speak Vanian. And not too proud to do so, even though he has to scrape and scramble. He could have pushed all the awkwardness and headache on to the innkeeper by switching the conversation to Kokish. But he did not. He kept on making the effort himself. Not even afraid of sounding strange. That looks like someone with a strong and friendly mind." He nodded respectfully.

Kaya's eyes narrowed. "He saw a problem, and got upset. He did not opt out with his purely personal solution, even though he could have. He did not instantly forget about all the other people. Instead, he thought about what should be done."

Lhut nudged Kaya's elbow. "Go on. Right now, he does not have a clue. Let's make sure we get to him before anyone else does."

\*

"Excuse me."

Enim snapped out of his absorption.

A lean but strong-looking woman stood beside his table, with black skin and dark hair that was both very short and very curly. A long scar ran across her brow down to her ear.

"Yes?" Enim said tentatively. But in Vanian, like her.

"My name is Kaya." She nodded over at the table in the far corner, where a muscular man with friendly eyes and a head full of brown curls was smiling back at them. "Would you join me and my friend Lhut for breakfast?"

Enim was happy to agree. What could be better for him than making a few acquaintances and getting first-hand introductions to Shebbetin?

"I know you are new to the Vanian language," Kaya said. "I will speak slowly, in short sentences. And if I forget, please give me sign." She raised one shoulder apologetically. "I easily get carried away by my own speeches." She winked at him.

Enim tilted his head. "I can talk only hard. But understand is better. It is all right. You can speak like normal. So I learn." He smiled bravely. "And if not, I say and show." He waved merrily at her.

Indeed, it turned out Enim was able to follow Kaya's conversation, even if it took a considerable effort. And that was due to the language, but also the content, which caused Enim to ask for an explanation yet again. "What is a warmling?"

Kaya smiled. "It's what we call them around here. They are just round stones, really. Warm stones, which people put under their blankets in winter. I run an oven at the edge of town where I heat them up, then go through the lanes with a pedalcart to sell them. It's a small business, like the kitchens or the market stalls."

Enim gratefully remembered finding a heated bed in his unheated room at the inn last night. He nodded.

"And before that, we were both working in a mine," Lhut put in.

"Oh, really!" Enim felt familiar territory come within his reach. "But that wonderful! Can you show me, maybe? I will very much like to see a mine, with people who really know! Because I want to go work in mines also, with traptions."

Lhut and Kaya exchanged a glance. "Yes. We would love to show you a mine and tell you what we think of it. There's nothing we'd like better. Just give us a bit of time. We need to make arrangements first."

Enim nodded.

He took a sip of tea as another question came to his mind. "Why you not work in the mine any more? Because of the mine? Or because of work you do now?"

"Because of the mine." Lhut folded his hands on the table in a slow, deliberate motion. "Very much because of the mine. You see, there was an accident in that mine, three years ago, and I got injured."

"Oh?" Enim set down his mug. "I am sorry. And I am glad you have heal so well."

Lhut paused. "Now," he said. "My legs have not healed all that well, actually."

"Really?" Enim asked sympathetically, leaning sideways a little to squint under the table. "You still pain—" He stopped. He had seen the two stumps that were all that was left of Lhut's thighs.

### 3

Enim was lying on his bed at mid-morning, staring at the ceiling. Lhut and Kaya had gone back to their daily work, leaving with a promise to give him a tour of Shebbetin later on. Enim had meant to go out and make contact with at least one of the mines in the meantime, but he felt disturbed and unfit for pleasant introductions. He could not present himself now, neither as a likable person nor as a competent artificer.

Enim tossed on his bed.

‘What’s more,’ Enim thought, ‘why was Lhut still sitting around with the stumps of his legs like that? I know people often need to wait for a wound to heal before an aid can be placed. But surely not three years?’ Enim turned around. ‘I’ll ask him next time we meet.’

And as if this was the answer to all his doubts, he fell asleep.

\* \* \*

“Welcome to the Mansion! The heart of Shebbetin!”

Kaya spread her arms wide in a triumphant gesture. She half-turned, grinning back at Enim over her shoulder.

Enim recognized that dense, crowded area full of nooks and edges that he had noticed on his arrival, looking down from the hill into darkness and moonlit tangles. By day the quarter still seemed crammed, tousled and unwieldy, and only slightly less mysterious.

“It is just a mass of houses grown together, really,” Kaya explained. “People moving into town squeezed in another cabin where they could, or an extra room at least. In the end they simply covered up the space left in between with another roof. So alleys turned into corridors, and the open places of a village into the halls of a great house. Our Mansion.”

Kaya let her fingers trail along the rough stone wall beside her. “I’ve always loved it. For being a good neighborhood, with people ready to help each other out in all the hardships they face. A friendly, a trustworthy place.”

Kaya hesitated. "As far as the people are concerned," she added grimly. "The houses, charming as they may be, actually are a death trap. And everyone knows it. Bring a spark to the Mansion and you have killed everybody inside. The thatched roofs will go up in flames like tinder, in a labyrinth of stone walls that keep anyone from escaping. That is why no one is allowed to bring fire near the Mansion, or to use it inside."

Kaya tapped her hand against the low eaves of a hut, slapping the straw. "Very good for my business," she added with biting sarcasm. "No one here has a hearth at home. Lots of demand for warmings from outside."

Enim bent low to follow Kaya through a small archway, then almost bumped into her as she stopped inside a courtyard lined with potted plants. Brambles climbed up the walls, and flowering vegetables graced the edges. With various traces of play and craft sitting in every corner, the even sand plane looked like a cross between a farmer's garden and a charming village square.

"That's the Snuggery." Kaya was already kicking off her shoes before the door on the left. "Let's pop in so you can get an idea of what Lhut is doing."

The room was teeming with life. A floor full of rugs, blankets and woven grass mats held a jumble of kids big and small. Chalk drawings and writing squeezed into every corner of the boards along the walls. A few low tables were scattered across the room, most of them occupied by children deeply immersed in games Enim did not recognize, in sketching and building and watching with furrowed brows. Lhut was sitting over in one corner, surrounded by three kids with shiny eyes who were pulling at his sleeves while telling him something important.

Kaya's voice flowed on across the buzz of the room. "This is Cahuan. She has founded the Snuggery."

Enim turned. And froze. Cahuan was a butterfly, like Yoor. Enim stared. He had not seen this coming and was caught utterly unprepared. Cahuan seemed unearthly, fay. Her skin was velvety, shimmering in hues of green and gold. Under long dark lashes, her eyes looked out at him like deep green ponds, drawing him in, to drown perhaps, or to swim with the sunlight playing in the water in golden streaks. Like underwater plants, her long wavy hair was flowing down her back, swaying softly, and even in its rich green darkness there seemed to be little sparks shining through, like tiny

golden fish darting through the seaweed, or brilliant reflections of sunsparks. Cahuan was round and full, and all of her body had a soft, unhurried grace to it that again reminded Enim of an underwater dance. ‘Perhaps she is a mermaid,’ he thought stupidly. ‘A butterfly mermaid.’

Enim pulled himself together. He did not know how long he had been staring, or how obviously. He blushed and narrowly stopped himself from giving a little cough. But everyone else did not seem to be staring back at him. So perhaps it had not been so bad.

Enim regained some of his composure. He was able to take in more of the Snuggery again, and of the conversation going on around him.

“He speaks Kokish, mostly,” Kaya was saying.

“Oh great!” A twelve-year-old girl with braids full of pearls and feathers beamed at Enim. The immense confusion of colorful patches that was her tunic swished and swayed before Enim’s eyes with flaps and frills and ribbons. “Will you come and talk to us? And read out stories? We have this one book, you know? Pulan...” She waved a brightly patterned arm through the air. The girl next to her, with broad cheeks and extremely short hair, whistled through her teeth and darted off.

Enim, meanwhile, received further explanations. “We always copy the words written in it, but we never quite know how to pronounce them. But now you are here!”

Pulan came back with a triumphant whistle and stomped to a halt before Enim. She proudly propped open the book, holding it directly in front of his nose. Enim felt expectant eyes bore into him.

“Ah...” He stared at the pages, blinking. Letters blurred, too close to his face. “Ah. Yes. I can read Kokish.”

The colorful girl threw herself at Enim for a brief but breath-taking hug.

“Brilliant!!” Then she added, “I’m Som.”

\*

As Kaya and Enim left the Mansion behind, space between buildings reappeared and rapidly grew larger, until the last of the houses were only a scattering across the wide hillside.

“We cannot go into the mine just yet,” Kaya said as they climbed. “But you can walk past and cast a glance at the entrance, see some of the miners working there. It’s at least a bit of an impression.”

"Yes, very good." Enim did not mind. To him, everything was new and worthy of exploration.

He could already see the two small buildings that flanked the entrance. They looked nothing unusual, Enim thought. Just the same kind of low stone house and thatched roof that he had seen so often in Shebbetin. Some people were gathered outside, joined by a few more coming out of the mine.

Then a shock rocked through the whole group. Enim heard a high, shrill cry coming from the depth of the mountain. Kaya's hand clamped down on his arm.

"Nightling," she breathed. "Run!"

Kaya started off. "Don't look back!" she shouted over her shoulder.

Enim looked back instantly, unable to stop himself. But all he saw was people fleeing in all directions.

Enim turned and made after Kaya as fast as he could. He ran across the uneven meadow, stumbling, catching himself, hurrying on. Kaya was far ahead. The high grass brushed against his knees, threatening to entangle him.

Enim heard movement behind him. Something big was following, going very fast. Coming closer.

This time, Enim did not look back.

He kept on running. He felt more than saw a shadow behind him, to his left, and veered to the right, down the hill. And fell. Stumbling over a root, Enim dove headlong down the decline, crashing down hard. He rolled and tumbled on with the force of the impact, plunging downward without orientation, without control.

Finally, the avalanche came to a halt. Fingers clutching frantically at the grass, Enim managed to keep the world still.

He whipped his head around.

But the shadow was not upon him.

It had moved on alone up above.

Enim could see the nightling clearly now. Up on the hillside she was racing through the grass like the wind, fast, smooth, unbroken, in long, elegant bounces. Her black coat gleamed in the sunlight, showing the perfect play of muscles as her long slim body dashed on with the intense energy of a wildcat. The nightling was huge, much larger than a human, but seemed light, unbounded, almost weightless. She raised her head and gave one more sharp, eerie cry. Enim's hair rose on his neck. The piercing scream seemed to have penetrated the very marrow of his bones.

Then the nightling took wing.

Enim's eyes grew wide.

With one last bounce, the nightling had thrown herself into the steep fall of the hill, into the rise of the wind. She spread her wings, two sails made of darkness, of shiny black leather, perfect half-circles the color of a new moon. The air bore the huge creature effortlessly. The nightling rode on the breeze, turning into a sudden gust, rising up high with its thrust. She cut through the sky, swift and elegant as a swallow, circle upon circle, a black beauty unrestrained by the pull of the earth.

But she returned.

In a long, low dive, the sinuous creature swept over the grassland just above the tips of the blades, her open mouth a huge gaping hole, as wide as her whole body. With breathtaking speed she advanced toward Enim. And rushed past.

Enim lay on his back, pressed into the ground. His breathing had stopped. The black shadow rose up again, higher and higher, challenging the wind, soaring like a streak of dark lightening tearing up into the sky.

But this time, she did not come back. She let herself be carried away, a slim gracious outline, a flight of perfect wings circling away in fast, seamless swings, in a long, drawn-out flourish. Enim's gaze followed her dance until she disappeared into the light over the mountains.

Enim closed his eyes. He felt the solid earth underneath his body. He took a breath. And another. His heart was trying to come back to a normal rhythm. Enim laid a hand on his chest to help.

When he opened his eyes again, Kaya was beside him.

"Are you all right?"

Enim nodded.

Kaya stared at him hard, a skeptical look in her eyes. Then she shook her head. "You are in shock. You have no idea if you are hurt."

With an authoritative gesture she pushed Enim back onto the meadow when he made a move to get up. But her touch was incredibly gentle as she took hold of his hand and moved the fragile joints one by one, so careful as if she was handling a treasure made of blown glass.

A deep sigh rose up from Enim's chest. He felt lightheaded. He willingly succumbed to Kaya's ministrations, bent his elbow, raised his arm, lifted his shoulder. He took off his trousers, his shirt.

Kaya's focused attention drew him in, let him become aware of every single toe he had, every bone in his spine. He knew once again he had a liver, a kidney, a soft belly full of vital organs. And a heart that had returned back to its natural rhythm.

"Congratulations! You have survived." Kaya grinned. "Scratches and bruises," she added with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Enim took a deep breath. "Thank you." He felt a little more like himself again. He began to grope for his trousers in the heap of discarded clothes.

"That was a good move, to roll down the hill like that." Kaya sounded impressed.

Enim snorted. "Thank my body. Or the ground." His fingers imitated a very uneven surface. "I sure not this had planned." He ran a hand through his hair. "But, tell me. Why we run? Is it not that if you run away, hunters start to chase?"

"Yes. They do. If they are hunters. But the nightlings are not. Or, at least," Kaya amended, "they do not chase anything nearly as big as you and me. They eat insects, such like."

"Oh." Enim's head had not quite arrived back in its usual place yet. He shook it very cautiously. "Right. But, then also, why we run? If they are not dangerous. Not hunting us."

"They are dangerous. Very dangerous. If caught in a tight spot. Nightlings go into caves to sleep, and if they get surprised in there, they panic." Kaya looked back toward the entrance of the mine. "This here may have been bad." She hugged her knees.

Then she pushed herself up in one fierce move, holding out a hand to Enim. "Come."

\*

Moans and cries filled the air. The injured were staggering out of the mine, leaning heavily on the arms of their fellows, their eyes wild with pain. Groans and stifled oaths escaped from their lips. Sobbing uncontrollably, a large, hulky man was hunched down on the ground, holding the lifeless body of his son in his arms. Three people were kneeling beside him, sending a grievous lament up into the wind, a keening, a prayer.

With impatient urgency, a tightly knit group pushed past, piercing screams coming from their midst, a trail of dark red stains left behind in their wake. The woman they laid down on the meadow was young and sturdy. But her right leg was in shreds. Blood gushed out over



the hand of the miner who tried to squeeze her artery shut. As he leaned onto her with his full weight, her whimpers rose into another wail, then broke off suddenly. Her head lolled to one side.

"Fainted," the girl beside her said, in a thin voice. She ripped a piece of cloth off her shirt and deftly tied it around the leg, twisting the bandage tight with a stick. "She'll survive," the girl said defiantly. "We'll only have to get the leg taken off."

## 4

In one corner of the Snuggery, the elder was singing drawn-out elegies of the mountains, full of longing, full of mourning. Som was crying in his lap, a sad lake of colors over softly shaking shoulders.

All around Lhut, stripes of torn fabric lay scattered on the ground. Two of the children were still with him, practicing how to tie and tighten and loosen bandages. Most had had enough, and one was still busy rolling the cloth back up. Lasa and Lunin, the twins, had gone straight into impersonating nightlings and fleeing people in the courtyard, where a lot of disturbing emotions got translated into screaming and hiding, running and ducking. But in addition to a great deal of exercise and acting, there now also were discussions about the scenario. And the actual behavior of nightlings, a subject on which the two seven-year-olds sought confirmation from Cahuan from time to time.

At the moment, the nightling was clawing her way through an ineffective barrier that had been put up before a mine entrance to keep out dangerous visitors.

“Yes. It is very hard to make barriers that cannot be broken by beings who dig their way through stone,” Cahuan agreed. “Almost impossible, I should think. But it may not be necessary. In fact, some mines have very light wooden barriers over all entrances, including air shafts and all. And people doing rounds before each shift, to check. If they see any broken barriers, they will raise the alarm and tell the miners to keep out.”

Lasa stopped clawing and turned around, a question in her dark brown eyes. “But then what happens? They never go into that mine again?”

“Oh, they do. But first, they send in noisy traptions at one entrance, and watch the nightling flee out the other end. After that, people go in to work. And also repair the broken barrier.”

Lasa and Lunin nodded and instantly began setting up a mine with multiple entrances and wooden grids.

"But then why did people be surprised by nightling in the mine today? If they should have known warning?" Enim inquired.

"Because," Kaya said through clenched teeth, "this mine has no barriers, and no system. Because Naydeer cannot be bothered to maintain one."

Enim watched her, slightly intimidated by her expression. "Naydeer is owner of mine?" he ventured cautiously.

"Yes, she is. And it was in one of her mines that Lhut and I have been working. It was her mine that collapsed on us too." Kaya's eyes narrowed. "And not by chance either."

Enim's brow furrowed. "How you mean, not by chance?"

"I mean," Kaya said in a cutting voice, "that a ton of stone rained down on people who were ready to challenge Naydeer. In exactly that moment, on exactly their heads."

Lhut came over to join them. "There have been lots of accidents in Naydeer's mines. She has been saving on timber that supports the tunnels, and on adits that bring in fresh air. And the cost of that was the life and limb of miners."

Lhut sat down, his short legs stretched out before him. "We were going to force her to do at least the minimum: air, and tunnels that don't cave in. At least that. We were ready to stop the mine until she had done it."

Fists clenched, Kaya was looking out into the past, her eyes unfocused. "Naydeer must have found out what we were planning. She certainly knew we were pushing for our safety, because at first we had tried to talk to her about it. Naive fools that we were!" Kaya laughed scornfully. "Naydeer just gave us a kick in the guts. And threatened some more. But we did not give up. Too many lives had been lost in those mines. People were ready, were angry enough, to not take it anymore. So we rallied—and the moment we did, her mine collapsed on us. By pure coincidence."

Enim clutched his arms, so hard it hurt. "But, please, you not say that Naydeer has make fall down the mine, on purpose? On people? She cannot do that. That murder!"

Kaya looked at him, her eyes cold as steel.

Enim ate his lunch in a corner of the Snuggery courtyard, his gaze turned inward. His head felt empty, and Kaya's words echoed inside, a hollow, ghostly sound that could not find a home.

Enim sighed and decided to postpone to later what he could not deal with right now. Holding on to the soothing warmth of lentils and potatoes in his stomach, to the savory taste of fresh herbs on his tongue, Enim gratefully let the wisdom of his body take over for a while, calming and steadying. He leaned back against the wall, feeling the solidity of stone against his shoulders, the gentle touch of sun on his face.

Enim's gaze drifted over to the three kids in charge of serving lunch today, who were deftly handling things with an air of confidence and routine. Two younger girls who had been roaming out in the Mansion for too long came running in, hoping to still grab a portion. Kaya, Lhut and Cahuan were sitting on the little staircase by the side wall.

Enim pushed himself up and joined them.

"So have you spoken to any of the owners yet?" Cahuan shuffled to make room for Enim. "I hear you want to work for them, as an artificer?"

"Yes, I want." Enim said hesitantly. "I wanted." His fingers tapped a little pattern onto the rim of his plate. "I want. But, no. I have not spoken. I not sure how to start."

"Go to Manaam," Cahuan instantly suggested, a bright smile rising in her face. "He is the best one by far."

"He is your friend?"

Cahuan nodded, the happy glow still on her face. "Yes. He is. I do not see him often, but we are quite close."

Kaya put her spoon down a little too hard on her plate. "Manaam is paying for most of the Snuggery. So that is how we keep Lhut and Cahuan and everyone here fed. Also, in Manaam's mines, tunnels don't fall onto people's heads. He's as good as it gets, around here." Kaya set down her plate on the steps behind her, as if that might be needed to keep it out of harm's way.

"Manaam also runs a healing bag for his miners," Lhut joined in. "Along the same principles that Kaya has come up with when she started the first healing bag in Shebbetin, in our mine."

"What is healing bag?" Enim asked, inevitably.

"It's a way for people to help each other out in the case of injury or illness," Lhut explained. "A large group of people each drop a small

amount of coin into the bag. And then, when someone gets seriously ill or has an accident, as I did, coin can be taken from the bag to go to a healer.”

Enim blinked. “Everybody go to a healer. Everybody who sick, who needs. No bag necessary for this.”

Silence descended on their little group.

Enim looked at Lhut, and at the stumps of his thighs. A lump was beginning to form in Enim’s throat. “Not here?” he whispered.

“No. Not here,” Lhut replied in a low voice, brushing a hand over the rim of his thigh. “We did pay a healer to take off my mangled limbs. So I did not die. But that was it. We have nothing more. And for many, not even that.”

Enim turned away. “No.” It was a mere breath. An objection to the world, addressed to the wind. “No. That not possible.”

## 5

The afternoon sun shone down gently on the broad, tree-lined avenue as Enim marveled at beautiful mansions, quite different in style from the quarters around the inn. This was almost like a little town unto itself, somewhat removed from the main settlement, cultivating its own style and atmosphere.

Enim found Manaam's house easily.

A middle-aged woman opened the door and led him into a parlor full of polished wood and delicately painted paper screens. She would go and see if Manaam was available.

Enim nervously paced across the room, his fists clenching and unclenching.

Then the double doors opened. Manaam came strolling in with leisurely elegance, his flowing silk robe cut low to reveal the graceful line of his collarbones. He offered his welcome to Enim in a resonant, genial voice. And in Kokish. A wave of relief washed over Enim. He liked Manaam instantly.

And Manaam seemed just as pleased as their conversation carried on. "Having someone of your skill level in Shebbetin is a blessing," he praised. "You won't believe how I had to chase after artificers in the lowlands a few years ago, just to get a proper locomotion traption for my mine. None of the artificers wanted to come up here. Finally, I found one who constructed it down in Behrlem, leaving it up to me to get it back here in one piece and install it inside the mine. Which has stretched local competence to the limit, I can tell you."

Manaam opened an ornate wooden chest by the wall and thoughtfully peered in. "Ah! Here." He fished out a large, rolled-up parchment. "This is the glorious deed. Or at least the theory of it." He unfurled it on the table. "I confess I have no idea what any of these mean." Manaam vaguely waved a hand over myriad fine lines, interspersed with small pentagrams and tiny scribblings. "But I suppose you do?"

Enim licked his lips. He stepped up close and began perusing the scroll with furrowed brows. With a soft touch, his fingertip followed the slings and crosses among the lines, ventured deep into the labyrinth, trying to find its heart.

The silence stretched.

Then Enim looked up.

A secret smile crept into his eyes.

"I do."

Manaam took Enim to see the real thing right away.

The mine was well lit where they stood, with magical lanterns set up all around the traption.

"I have someone who can do routine things like this," Manaam related. "Changing the vim stone. But since you are here anyway for your introductory tour, I guess I might just as well employ your services." He chuckled slightly. "You will have other things coming your way, I warn you. Some of the owners here are less concerned with having the most advanced traptions, and only when their old ones grind to an actual halt do they call someone in to check." Manaam laid a hand on Enim's shoulder. "You will find a lot of interesting work here. Things you have never seen before. Traptions older than yourself," Manaam finished with a grin.

Enim's brows shot up. He was not sure whether to take that as a joke. Traptions had changed so rapidly in the last few years that one almost three decades old— "Here you go," Manaam interrupted his thoughts.

He had already taken the lid off the traption's case.

The lower half of the huge brass globe was filled with a cobweb of spun glass, holding glinting crystals in its midst. Enim crouched down, trying to find the pattern from the scroll in this delicate labyrinth. And he did. At least vaguely. Enim could not remember exactly which spell was embedded in which crystal. Except that if the pattern started there at the back...

Lost in his contemplation, Enim realized only belatedly that Manaam was holding out a hand for him, with a perfectly cut amethyst lying in his palm.

"Right." Enim took the crystal, rolling it gingerly between his fingers. He wanted to get a better grasp of things before he actually intervened. He straightened up, his eyes darting from the cloud of glassy threads to the huge cogwheels on the wall, and the chain

descending down into the depth of a tunnel. Wagons full of debris patiently sat on their rails, holding on to the chain, waiting to be moved.

“So this is where the power goes,” Enim murmured.

“Ah. Yes.” Manaam had nothing much to add to the obvious.

Miners were peeking around the corner, checking if things were going to get moving again soon.

“Right.” Not so hard. It was only to replace a vim stone. You usually did not even need a full-fledged artificer for that.

Enim cleared his throat.

He pulled his wand from his belt. At the heart of the invisible web, an amethyst identical to the one in his hand gave off a dull gleam. Enim’s eyes narrowed as he pointed straight at it. He spoke just one word.

Noiselessly, the crystal floated out and landed softly in Enim’s bag. At the same time, Enim sent the stone in his palm into the air, with one more flick of his wrist. And in one fluid motion, without ever disturbing the intricate pattern of gossamer threads, the amethyst settled into place, as softly and delicately as a snowflake. Enim held his breath, as if to preserve the silence and the fragile tenderness of the cobweb.

But suddenly all hell broke loose.

Rattling and clanking, the cogwheels above his head began to move, the chain sending echoing groans down the tunnel. Miners shouted and waved at their comrades.

Enim shot around. His eyes darted from the rumbling chains to the sparks flaring in the crystals. But a hand came down on his shoulder to pull him away.

“You’ll have time enough to study these later,” Manaam shouted over the din. It was he who had set the traption in motion. Since the vim stone had obviously been replaced, Manaam had deemed it best to let work continue immediately.

Enim exhaled deeply.

Glancing back at turning cogwheels and massive stone, he allowed himself to be led away.

They climbed up the innards of the mountain until they reached its gaping mouth and crawled out into the open. Enim raised his arms to the sky. Fresh, clear mountain air once again filled his lungs. Enim felt the wind in his hair and watched the sun sneak in pale rays between the passing clouds.



“Very well!” Manaam pocketed the old vim stone that needed refilling. “I think I should give a dinner party in your honor, Enim. That way you will meet some of the other owners and can offer your services to them too. I am sure you will be welcome.”

Enim nodded. A smile was beginning to spread across his face. Maybe starting his new life was not that difficult after all!

He whistled at a passing bird.

Perhaps some of these other matters that had disturbed and confused him could be sorted out now as well? Such as the pouch collection point. That, at the very least, must be easy to settle straight away, right?

Enim said as much as they were looking out over Shebbetin.

Manaam gave him a weird sidelong glance. He cleared his throat. “You can write to Varoonya, of course. But I don’t think very much will happen. And certainly not quickly.”

“Well.” Enim’s brow creased. “If it takes long, we should start soon.” He tapped a finger against his thigh. “Perhaps in the meantime, the existing weekly courier to Behrlem could bring everybody’s pouch, rather than just the owners? Surely that could be done, even if she might have to lead some extra horses?”

Manaam’s face took on a surprised look, then seemed to waver between anger and laughter. The laughter won out, but Enim still sensed a little sting behind it.

“Quite the revolutionary, aren’t you?” Manaam assessed Enim with narrowed eyes. “Look here,” he finally said, an edge to his voice. “You can suggest all manner of rash action to me. I don’t object. I even wish to hear. Feel free to speak your mind in my presence. But, please, don’t do it over dinner. I do not wish to get accused by the other owners of having introduced a troublemaker into our quiet little society. Do not rock the boat before even getting in. Don’t reallocate the owners’ resources before even becoming a member. You do not understand the forces at work here. Be cautious.”

## 6

It was quite a steep slope already, but still human hands had squeezed amaranth and rye onto narrow terraces and dug a hundred names for potato into the meager ground. A llama gave Enim a curious glance from behind a wall.

Enim had gone up the hillside by himself, to the edge of town where he had seen fields and gardens grow out into the meadows. Farther out, he could see a flock of sheep moving up into the highlands, and decided to go back down that way, so he would reach Shebbetin from a side he had not been to before.

He walked along the long, slow curve and soon enough the open meadow was dotted with sheds again, in between shaggy long-horned cows. In passing, Enim peered into one of the barns through an open door and saw people sitting on the ground. It seemed odd, somehow incongruous. But Enim gave it no further thought and just moved on, following the narrow dirt track that appeared beneath his feet as houses began to close in around him.

Their walls were made of rough field stones, but less well built, less carefully crafted than in the Mansion. Indeed, they looked crooked and ragged, unstable and uncared for. He came across some crumbling walls, of cabins that had never been finished or perhaps fallen to ruin already. Piles of rubble lay about, partly overgrown with weeds, the hiding place of a sickly dog that fled with a whine as Enim approached. Three toddlers slouched in the dirt outside a house, staring at Enim with empty eyes.

Enim felt his lungs contract. There was something oppressive about this place. The narrow lanes seemed to condense space itself, shutting out the sky, making the world gray and dull. It was almost like something pressing down on the air, making it hard to breathe. Enim tensed his shoulders imperceptibly and quickened his step.

Just then a dark bundle shot out at him, heading straight for his leg. Before Enim could gather his wits, a small child had dug herself in, clutching at his thigh. She was crying hard, her tears leaving light

streaks in the dirt on her cheeks. Enim bent down, touching her matted hair, wanting to soothe her or to at least get some idea of what was going on. Then she bit him, and hammered at him with her tiny fists, crying all the time. Before she could bite again, a boy of perhaps seven came out of nowhere and hauled her away, tearing brutally at her hair as he did. Without a word, they disappeared behind a door that slammed shut.

Enim stood speechless.

He had never seen anything like this before.

The people he knew in Varoonya had all kinds of problems. Quarrels, and disagreements. But nothing like this.

He took a step back.

Enim looked at the closed door again, then around him, at the dirty lane and the ramshackle cabins. There were no clues. Two children slumped against the wall on the other side, half asleep. A few women down the lane did not seem to have noticed, or to care.

Enim began to feel that he wanted to run. And, at the same time, that he did not dare to. Unable to name what invisible danger he feared, he walked on, steadily but unobtrusively, blindly. He did not know where he was going but he kept on moving, without turning back and without asking directions. He did not know where he was, but he wanted to be elsewhere very urgently. He ran on and on, without thinking.

And eventually, he did find his way out. Enim had followed one dirt track after another, hurrying on with hunched shoulders, until finally one path had turned into a small cobbled lane, and then into a slightly larger one. He had come out without being attacked by small children again, or by anyone else for that matter.

Nevertheless, Enim was practically shaking by the time he reached the inn.

\* \* \*

Morning had not turned the world to gold. The mountains seemed to loom ominously under the stormy sky, dark clouds pressing down hard on a frightened earth. A mouse scurried away in hasty flight before Enim's feet, seeking shelter underground.

Halfway up the hill, a long cabin crouched among the battered grasses. Kaya slid into its shadow. But Enim walked on until he could stand on the threshold, looking in.

It was all one large room, crammed with work benches, one squeezing in beside the other, children bent down deep over each.

None of them looked up. Their shoulders were hunched as they cowered, strained and haggard, their pinched faces close to the tools with which they polished tiny stones or twisted filigree patterns of silver wire.

Tension flowed around them like a suffocating coil, holding on to their necks. They cowered defensively, their bony frames stiff and drawn, their eyes focused but dead. They looked like ghosts.

Enim blinked.

A powerful voice bellowed out of nowhere. "Hey, you! What are you doing there?"

A twitch went through all the children at once, like an invisible whip lashing down on their backs. But none of them looked up now either. They all just ducked down a little more deeply, hunched their shoulders a little more tightly, and stared down unblinkingly at the twisted wires in their hands.

The frightful twinge had gone through Enim as well. Startled and confused, he looked around to identify the origin of the voice. Then he found it.

On one side of the cabin, a gallery ran along the length of the room, with a railing of solid panels interrupted by latticed woodwork. It was hard to see the man behind those grids, but he was definitely there. And he was getting up now, so that, at his full height, he could lean over the barrier and shout down at Enim more directly.

"You there! At the door! What are you doing here?" he bellowed.

"I..." Enim stuttered.

"If you have no business here, then be gone! And quickly!" the man hollered. His left arm ended in a stump below his shoulder. But the aggression reached far and wide.

Enim retreated. A few steps back at first, until, once fully outside, he turned and made off in rash, hasty strides. Kaya came from the cabin's shadow and caught up with him, walking at the same harsh, angry pace.

Stormy gusts lashed out at the grass, beating it against their shins.

"That's what they are like," Kaya hissed into the wind. "Work cabins."

"They are children." Enim's jaw was tight. The tension of the last days had been building up inside him. His voice was too loud, and too shaky. "Why they not in learning pavilion?"

Kaya gave him a sidelong look. "Why are there no pavilions for the children of Shebbetin? Why no healers? And not even a pouch collection point?"

Enim's face had turned pale, like that of someone pressing a lid down on a hot steam kettle with fierce determination, ignoring the pain. "Yes, why not? Why not!"

"Because," Kaya said through clenched teeth, "we have not made it happen yet."

"But we have made it happen!" Enim exploded. "We have! The Transition has happen forty years ago! And this is what it all was for! The Transition has make room for all children, everywhere. It has make a good life possible to everyone, not only a few. It has been made happen, we have done it! We know it is possible. So how can it be that it not happen here?"

Kaya looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Yes," she whispered.

"Yes, what?" Enim screamed. He was lost in an accusatory rage by now, viciously defending the foundation stones of his own beliefs. "This cannot be! This must not possible! It cannot be a whole area of Yurvania, with thousands of people, not included in Transition! It just cannot. I will not accept this!"

He was addressing Kaya directly now, his tone decisive, his finger pointing at her chest. "There are rules for this. For all this. And there are people and bureaus for acting with the rules. There is no reason for not make this right. It can be done. It must be done!"

His hand clenched into a fist.

"Now."

In a crooked lane in Old Varoonya, the vines of an overgrown balcony hung down so low that they were beginning to obscure the shingle of the Golden Kettle. But people had found their way into the inn regardless. The sounds of scraping chairs and murmured conversation filled the room, and in the far corner, two burly men holding on to their mugs were deeply engaged in the process of reinforcing each other's view of the world.

"You really don't know what a smith is any more, these days, I am telling you!" one of the two asserted. "Last time I looked, a smith was the one who did the labor and who knew the craft. But, ah, I turn around for a moment, and when I look again, what do I see? It's the likes of her that have taken over," he went on, with a derisive jerk of his head toward a woman in a green tunic who had just come to get her lunch at the counter.

"It's artificers and traptions, is all we are getting these days," his companion agreed. "You know what, my friend, soon there will be no smith left in any of the smithies. If you can still call them smithies at all," he finished with a contemptuous snort.

"They are not calling them that, anyway," the other put in. "At least they are admitting that much. They call it a 'trabarn,' like any of the other traption-barns producing all sorts of things nowadays."

"Well, it's obvious what it all leads to, no one knowing the art. Can see it in the pieces too. True, a trabarn may spit out a hundred knives in the same time it took to make just one, but I'm telling you, I'd rather have one single piece of true craft than a hundred of their magical fabrications."

"Aye, so would I," his companion agreed, and they both took a deep draft from their mugs.

Lenoren, the woman in the green tunic, took her mug and plate from the counter and joined her partner, a woman with a small, fragile figure and silky black hair that was braided around her head in an unbelievably complicated pattern.

“Ah, Qin Roh, I am telling you,” Lenoren began, very much in the line with the smith’s wording, “life in the Council is a trial.” She took a deep draft from her mug and set it down with a thump.

“Well, you signed up for it,” Qin Roh said with a twinkle in her eye. “You knew pretty well what you had coming. And you went for it with all of your fervor.”

“Thank you for the reminder,” Lenoren replied with a crooked smile. “There is nothing like the insight and compassion of your loved ones to help you through dark times.” She sighed. “Indeed, I will need all the fervor I’ve got to see this through without even tearing my hair out. It can be very trying.” She stretched out her legs. “But you are quite right. I signed up for it. And actually, I am signing up for it again right now. My nomination for the upcoming Choosing has just been confirmed.”

She picked at her food with a spoon. “The Transition isn’t over, and it is not going easy on people. So much change. There is a world being born here, but there is also a world dying. And people who lived in that world will have a part of their lives, a part of themselves die with it.”

“Such as the old craftspeople.” Qin Roh reached over to pinch a potato from Lenoren’s plate.

“Exactly.” Lenoren gazed at the far end of the room with unseeing eyes. “We can give them compensation for a loss of livelihood, and we do. But who could compensate for the loss of a world?” She pulled herself together. “Anyway. It can’t be helped. It is beyond me, I am afraid. I am the midwife of a world being born, and I have my hands full with that.”

Lenoren shook her head. “You would not believe the number of newly invented traptions that are springing up all the time, with potential uses and consequences no one could possibly foresee. Least of all the exactitudes at the academy, who are charged with evaluation. But who, in reality, do not wish to be disturbed in their pursuit of pure magical procedure. They have no heart for a circus of loud and lively, unpredictable traptions.”

Lenoren tapped her fingers on the table. “Of course, all the trabarns go on using the latest inventions anyway. You can’t stop everything just to wait for the academy, they figure. And I admit they have a point. If artificers had always waited to get authorization beforehand, I am sure we wouldn’t have a single traption in the world today. So unauthorized traptions are the only way forward,

and at the same time highly problematic. Someone really ought to check for safety, don't you think? There have been accidents. There may be worse."

Lenoren sighed. "So, anyway. The academy is aloof, the Council is worried, and the artificers are forging on regardless. And old craftspeople are upset about everything all the time anyway."

Lenoren remembered she ought to make progress with her meal. Mouth full, she pressed her concluding question out through tight lips. "How on earth am I supposed to sort that all out?"

Qin Roh politely raised one shoulder.

Lenoren shot her a sardonic look. Then she peered through the inn's dusty window, seeing the sundial outside. She gulped.

"Uh. I've got to go."



Enim was walking away from Manaam's mansion, disappearing slowly into the broad, tree-lined avenue.

Manaam watched from his window, his brow furrowed, his arms crossed over his chest. He hated this. Although he wanted it. He could not let go. But he could not stand it either. Listening to Enim was simply painful. And made Manaam feel old and jaded, hopeless, like some weathered, bitter cynic.

What on earth had possessed Enim to ask him that question? How to report to Varoonya in a way that will make everything right?

'I don't know,' Manaam thought. 'I'm sure I don't know. And I don't even believe.'

\* \* \*

There was another door leading out into the Snuggery courtyard, directly opposite. The two old folks who lived there had gradually grown to be elders for the Snuggery, much to everyone's delight. Now the two of them were seated in the back of the kids' pedalcart, content like a couple looking forward to a pleasant outing to the countryside. Which it was, in a way. At their age, the two of them could no longer walk the distance to the meadows. So this was their chance. And a much-needed contribution to the Snuggery, whose somewhat monotonous lunch had been enriched by herbs and salads ever since the elders had offered to teach them plant lore.

Little Quena wanted to sit in the elder's lap today, so Lhut climbed into the cartwheel alone.

"Everyone ready?" Cahuan called as she picked up the handles in Lhut's back.

Lasa and Lunin began to push the elders' cart with fervent twin energy, even though no one had yet taken up position at the steering wheel in front. One last girl limped out into the courtyard, trying to put on her second shoe while walking.

So, yes, everyone ready. In their usual sort of way.

\*

All the children had roamed out over the hillside, gathering herbs or trying to do a perfect roll down the slope. Only the two twelve-year-olds, Pulan and Som, stayed with the adults to listen to Enim.

"I wanted to do anyway, for the pouch collection. Thank you I now know it is more than that. Much more. All of this," Enim made a sweeping gesture toward the valley of Shebbetin. "Make it right. We must bring Transition here! Like in all Yurvania. We will tell county. And they will come and do what they do everywhere else."

Enim was very sure of the principle. The specifics, however, still escaped him. Who, exactly, were they going to tell? The Council, the bureaus in Varoonya? And how?

Enim raised his hands apologetically. "I have not done this ever," he admitted.

Neither had Kaya, Lhut, or Cahuan. They had a lot of experience, setting up the healing bag, confronting Naydeer, getting the miners organized. Starting and running the Snuggery. And, of course, working shifts in the mine, managing the days with the children, starting a business with a warmlings oven, getting legs to heal.

They have had their hands full, and they had achieved a great deal. But none of it had anything to do with the Council bureaus in Varoonya, or the administration of the county.

Enim had asked Manaam, but come back so confused and disheartened that he preferred to push the whole conversation out of his mind. If he could not get practical advice, he at least needed to hold on to his spirits. Which he felt more strongly than ever in the company of these courageous, beautiful people.

He smiled at Lhut and leaned into Cahuan's shimmering green hand on his shoulder. Kaya's eyes sparkled as she looked at Enim expectantly.

"So?"

"So I write report, tell them," Enim said heartily. "It cannot be too very hard. The county is for everyone. We just do it."

\*

At least Manaam had given Enim a list of all the bureaus in Varoonya. Which was incredibly helpful. Enim could not have listed them all from the top of his head, and certainly not with their full correct names. Those kept changing from time to time as well, it seemed. There were over a dozen.

Enim's brow furrowed. He was trying to guess the exact competencies of each bureau from the title.

'Bureau for Common Good.' That one was certainly relevant. Although learning pavilions came under 'Cultivation,' Enim knew that much. And the mines would probably go with 'Guilds,' even though they were perhaps not a guild, strictly speaking. But they were a workplace, and there were traptions in them, so that made them similar enough to the trabarns in Varoonya which, Enim was pretty sure, did fall under 'Guilds.'

Anyway.

He was just going to guess the main focus of each bureau and mention all other concerns of Shebbetin very briefly. So they would still know. And if Enim got the addressee wrong, surely the people in a bureau could tell who was in fact responsible and would pass the letter on.

The main message was always the same, anyway: There were thousands of people in Shebbetin and no county presence. Could the county please come in and set up all the services they usually run. Urgently, because there was great need and suffering, and things must be put right directly.

Thank you very much.

\* \* \*

Night descended over Shebbetin. The sky had turned a pale azure on one end, a dark midnight blue on the other, with stripes of deep purple running across. The mountains were lying low, black and massive beneath the rising moon. A thin sickle, it showed its face in between shredded clouds and a first few twinkling stars.

A light breeze shifted the plants on the open grasslands. Blades and stems swayed softly, gently, then bowed down low under a sudden gust, a brief exclamation of urgency and demand, before the air calmed down again and relented.

High up in the domain of the wind, where no restraints of houses and walls applied, where the air rushed down freely from the heights of the mountains, flowed from snow to wood, from cliff to meadow, high up there, a black outline moved beneath the sky. Swift like a swallow, a half-moon of wings spread out wide, the shadow rose and fell, circled and returned, shot up and glided idly on the air.

And then a song came on. Only remotely related to the shrill shriek the nightling had given in her panic, this voice was high, but

pure. Still. Almost inaudible, like a glass bell rung far away. A perfect sound, subsiding, returning, weaving into the dusk like another cloud, another trace of color. Another strand of beauty. There was no melody to this song; or maybe there was? It rang on, ethereal, eternal, like the voice of the stars. A prayer to the mountains and the night. A meditation on what cannot be named.

The nightling turned and danced in the sky like an imaginary being. The original bird, the shadow of a dragon. The connection between the stars, or between the firmament and the soil. She darted downward, catching her fall above the grasslands, shooting along in perfect companionship to their surface, their slopes and valleys, their hills and rises. One with the landscape of the mountains, one with the night filling the skies, the nightling danced on between heaven and earth, an image of fay, of wonder, of unfathomable life.

She rose up high again, and with one last circle let her voice grow strong, let the bell ring out loud and clear. Then she disappeared over the mountains.

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Fingers cramped into his tunic, Lhut steadied himself against the wall. Enim saw the unnatural pallor around his lips. With one move, Enim was by his side, kneeling down to offer his support.

“Are you all right?”

Lhut nodded, a short, constricted move. “This just happens every now and then. The pain comes in waves,” he panted.

Enim stared at him, speechless.

Lhut bit his lip. But then his body relented a little. The wave seemed to pass.

Lhut leaned his head against Enim’s shoulder, his breath slowly calming down, becoming deep and regular again.

Lhut straightened up. “Some of the pain always remains, in the phantoms of my legs.”

He raised a hand to show Enim the band of wooden pearls running around his wrist. Gently, he began to roll one of the beads between his fingers. “Our elder has shown me how to let the pain subside. It is a spell. A trance. A prayer. As you call on your pearls, one after the other, you let yourself be immersed in your inner ocean. You feel the waves come and go, and the pain slowly sinks down toward the bottom of the sea.”

Lhut’s gaze drifted off into the distance, his lips moving in silence as his fingers gently cradled the next bead. After the fourth, long

before he had finished the round of his wristband, Lhut brought his eyes back to Enim. Alive now, and even holding a spark, a subtle, wistful smile. "The pain never goes away. But I have made my peace with it. I have learned to let it rest. It has grown slow, dull, over the years. And while it drifts a hundred miles under the sea, I can surf the waves in the sunlight."

Lhut licked his lips. "These sharp twinges are rare now. But falling asleep is still very hard. When my spells unravel and the dreams of the night do not yet pull me into relief." Lhut sighed. "Cahuan often helps me with that. Then I can navigate even that most difficult turn, that moment when my mind lets go, and the pain rises up like ravenous sea dragon. When I need to make the leap to the stars."

\*

Lhut was going to spend the night with Kaya and looking forward to an evening full of friendship and lovemaking. Gathering a few belongings off the shelves of the Snuggery, he turned a shining, open face toward Enim, ready to joke and banter again.

"You see," he said, "I fit into this place perfectly. I can reach up to the same height as the small children. I even walk at the same pace, with steps the same size. Clearly, I have come to the right place." Lhut grinned. "Sometimes I say this is a special qualification. You see, I am always eye-level with the children. And in a metaphorical sense, that is what I truly wish to be."

Enim took a deep breath. He shook his head. "How you joke about this? Losing your legs. I don't know if it is me. If I can ever have the strength." He gazed at Lhut with an expression somewhere between bewilderment and adoration.

Lhut's grin became a little crooked. "Well. Yes. If Kaya were here, she would start screaming at this point. She just can't stand any of this happy-talk. Seeing the sunny side and all that. And she is right, in a way. All in all, this is unacceptable. I never should have lost my legs. People never should have died in that mine." Lhut sighed. "But I cannot thrive on anger. Kaya can. She gets stronger with it every time. But for me—I believe it would kill me. If I allowed myself to get into that vein of fury and rejection, I fear I would never come out again. It would sap all my energy, instead of giving me furious vigor." He shrugged lightly. "So I try going this way. Taking this part of the truth, and making my life in it."

Lhut toyed with his cuff. Then he looked up at Enim. "And there is truth over here too. There is. Even if I would prefer to have my full legs back, no doubt. And to not be in pain. But still, I am glad I have survived. And my life has improved in many ways since the accident. Being in the Snuggery is much better than working in a mine. The mine is dark, dirty and dangerous. The Snuggery is exhausting in its own way, but it is also inspiring. It is full of love and sunlight. I can be with the children. I learn and grow, as a person. It is very rich. There is a whole, full life here. Much, much better than in the mine."

Lhut cast half a glance at Enim, a little shyly. "So this is how I live. How I can be."

Enim nodded. He did not trust himself to say anything. His heart had grown so full that he did not know what would come out if he opened his mouth. But it probably showed in his eyes, anyway.

Lhut reached out a hand and pulled Enim down into an embrace, fingers buried in Enim's hair, head resting against his chest.

\*

"Shall we go?" Lhut asked, his voice warm, his face open.

He walked out into the courtyard, with short steps on short legs. The evening sky was filling up with soft pastel colors and beckoning bird calls, and Enim had offered to take Lhut over to Kaya's oven.

Lhut threw a blanket into the cartwheel. "Shall I crawl in?"

"No." Enim came up to him. "I want to learn. To practice. Please, show me again. I maybe never be as good as Kaya or Cahuan. But I will be good enough, I believe."

"No doubt about it," Lhut agreed with a twinkle in his eyes. He explained once more to Enim how to stand, and how to lift him so that Enim won't break his back and Lhut will be both safe and, eventually, inside the cartwheel.

Enim tried. And it worked. Well enough.

Contentedly, they wheeled off into the evening. Hazy stripes of gold and orange reached out across a wide, open sky and Lhut began to sing out loud in a pleasant baritone, trying to teach Enim the second voice as they careened along the tangled lanes.

When they arrived at the oven, Kaya was out with her chicken, moving the pen a bit farther down the meadow and wrestling with the net that was meant to keep off the hawks. But the kids who had spent the afternoon with her came running up instantly to show off the eggs they had gathered.

Kaya, for her part, had picked up news. "The nightling will be killed." Kaya's eyes held a dangerous gleam. "Naydeer announced that she has secured the help of the magnificently imposing mage Pramus, who will hunt the monster down and kill it with enchanted fire."

"There is no need for that," Lhut opined.

"Of course there isn't. But it will be a great opportunity for the magnificent mage to show just how imposing he is. How indispensable. How powerful. And how dedicated to the well-being of Shebbetin. Almost as dedicated as wonderful Naydeer herself, never eschewing responsibility, all determined action."

Lhut shook his head in disapproval. "It is not the fault of the nightling if Naydeer has no system of protection in her mines. Why should the nightling pay the price? Just because we can't be bothered to keep our things in order, she will get killed?"

"Yes. Of course. What else? This is how Naydeer thinks." Kaya snorted. "There's a problem? Well, let's turn violent. Kill. That is the solution to problems."

Manaam was waiting for Cahuan in his garden. He was clad in long, flowing robes, slit up to his thigh on one side, so that his amber legs showed between the fabric as he walked. With smooth, elegant moves he strode up to a blooming tree where white petals drifted down every now and then, swirling around Manaam like fairy snow. They came to rest on his raven black hair too, which was loosely tied back with a ribbon. A few strands had broken free and were falling randomly over his brow. He looked every bit like an illustration in an old storybook, Cahuan thought. The romantic hero, for the main character to fall in love with. Manaam began to smile, and the effect was devastating.

“Welcome,” he said in his genial voice as Cahuan approached. “I am glad you could come.”

“My pleasure,” Cahuan replied, truthfully. Then she smiled and shook her head lightly. “I guess you have no idea how ravishing you look.”

She reached out and lightly ran a finger over his lip.

Manaam looked startled for a moment before his smile came back, deeper and warmer than before. “No, indeed, I do not.” He sounded very pleased. “My thoughts had strayed to another topic for just a moment. So you are taking me quite by surprise.” Manaam brought Cahuan’s hand up to his cheek, brushing against her velvety butterfly skin as he held her gaze. “And a very welcome surprise it is.”

As they began to stroll toward the house, Cahuan wrapped her arm around his waist. “I guess I have to make good use of the few times where I actually do get to see you,” she said. “Or perhaps we should have these reporting sessions about the Snuggery more often? As the main donor, I believe you should always be well informed.”

Manaam groaned. “Oh no, please. Do not inform me any better than usual. You have no idea how many extremely important issues I am constantly kept well informed of. Even the bits concerning my



mines pile up to mountains. Not to mention anything else this world might hold.”

Cahuan laughed and followed him in.

They settled in the parlor, and Cahuan reported on the progress of the Snuggery. They easily resolved the few open questions that had arisen since their last meeting. In fact, they were so quick and so pleased with everything, including with each other, that it seemed only right to stay on a little bit longer. And to move up to Manaam’s bedroom.

With one kiss, one touch, one thing leading to another, they allowed themselves to be carried away for a while, leaving all duty and busyness behind. To make a little journey to an oasis free of care and worries, a place of pleasure and pure enjoyment, of ease and tenderness, of abandon and release. A homecoming, a respite.

Cahuan smiled, a slow, lazy smile of gratification, laced with hedonism.

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As the golden afternoon sun slowly made its way down to the horizon, the light inside Manaam’s chamber was growing soft too. Warm and spent, Manaam stretched out on his bed, tangled sheets all around him. Cahuan was lying halfway across his chest, her hand in his hair.

“What a blessing,” Manaam murmured contentedly. “These are rare pleasures, without a doubt. I have not had any lovemaking in my life for quite some time.”

Cahuan traced a reverent line along his collarbone. “Truly? You have not? I almost cannot believe. You are so beautiful, so alluring. Surely other people must have noticed and tried to get your attention. Do you really never have lovers among the other owners? You always seem to be looking toward them. They are your people, aren’t they? Surely there are some among them you like, and feel attracted to?”

“No,” Manaam replied. “No.” His voice became heavy. “There are some I like better than others, naturally. But all in all, no. They are my people, and they aren’t. They are the people I have to get on with. Not the people I chose, nor the people I would choose. But I have to take what life brings me. And it has brought me this: a small, close-knit community that I have to fit into, like it or not. This tiny circle of polite society in the Mountains.”

Cahuan arched an eyebrow. "Do you have to? Surely it is your choice? You can talk to and live with and make love to whoever you like. You do not need their permission, do you?"

"I do." A butterfly took wing on the windowsill, but got suddenly swept away by a gusty wind. Manaam frowned at the empty space left behind. "I will be punished if I stray too far from the flock. These people hold power in Shebbetin. Much depends on their support and opinion."

Cahuan propped herself up on one elbow. "Even for you?"

The lines on Manaam's face deepened as he brought his hand up to rest on Cahuan's back. "Even for me. I am one of the most powerful people in Shebbetin, to be sure. The most powerful, perhaps, except for Naydeer. But nevertheless, the greatest power still lies in the collective, in the sum of all the owners taken together. No single person can easily go against that. Not even I."

Cahuan buried her hand in his hair, pulling uncertainly at a strand. "I can see the power of groups. Somehow. And then again, I can't. Why exactly are you so dependent on them? What do you think they would do?"

Manaam sighed. "Hard to say, or to pin down. It's a sum of many things, I suppose." He moved his hand across Cahuan's back, cautiously, searchingly, as if an answer might be forthcoming from there. "As long as I am in their good graces, I can hope for their support. Not only for charitable causes. Even for practical matters, like sharing a courier for our pouch. So many things in my daily life are tied up with them that I could hardly manage should they ever cast me out. And that is even before anyone begins to actively obstruct me."

Manaam tried to move his leg, but it was caught up in the sheets. He struggled in vain to pull it free. "This small circle has its own set of rules. About who you have to be, how you have to be. Polite society rules not only your behavior but also your thoughts and your identity. Any deviation is considered an affront. I am already pushing the boundaries of the permissible. It is well known how I run my mines and why I am doing it. It is accepted, or tolerated, as long as I am not seen as pushing any of it onto others. I can be a little eccentric with my ideas and practices, a little philanthropic, that is all right."

He licked his lips. "But if it gets too much, it will seem threatening and I will be punished. As it is, I am balancing on the borders of what I believe is right and what I believe is possible."

Talons scraped over the roof, revealing the presence of an invisible bird of prey. Manaam cleared his throat. "Should some of the other owners ever feel that I am posing a real threat, I believe they could be brutal."

He halted. "But it has never come to that. So far, I am still behaving like a proper owner, not leaving the limits of my class." There was a note of bitterness in his voice. His body seemed to have grown cold and stiff. Cahuan stirred, wrapping her leg more closely around his, sneaking it in among the tangled sheets. They were all made of silk.

Manaam's gaze was far away. "This may just be cowardice, perhaps. Or my addiction to the comforts I have. Maybe I am just looking for excuses to stay where I am."

He turned his head now, facing Cahuan. "But maybe it is better if I conform. Not only for me and my comforts, but even for the cause. I may be able to contribute much more to the Transition if I keep my position of relative power. Even if that costs me a hundred tiny compromises and betrayals every day."

Cahuan looked into his dark eyes, saying nothing. Then she moved over and came to lie fully on top of him, touching her skin to his from neck to toes, covering him with warmth and life and softness, the curves of her body easing into his.

Manaam wrapped his arms around her in a deep embrace, as if giving or seeking protection. He let out a deep breath. And his eyes fell shut.

\* \* \*

After a day of working in the mine, Enim was glad to leave his traption alone in the dark, allowing himself to reemerge back out into open air and a sundown sky of rose and amber. A soft breeze drifted down from the highlands, carrying a scent of herbs and wildflowers. Stretching luxuriously, Enim looked out over the tangled roofs and lanes of Shebbetin, of the Mansion slowly getting ready for the night. He began to hum lightly. He was going to dedicate the evening to pleasure and joy, he decided, and began trying out various images in his mind as to what exactly that might entail. Maybe he would—

An ear-splitting scream cut through the air. Thunder exploded in its wake, with hollow echoes reverberating through the mountains.

Enim crouched down on the ground, looking around frantically.

He saw the nightling first, a large black shadow swooping and diving over the valley.

But then came the magic.

On the opposite hillside, a white-haired figure in swirling robes was bathed in a surreal bluish light, floating upward into the sky.

The nightling turned and attacked, giving another unbearable scream as she charged straight at the mage. His staff shot fire, a red-golden stream of lava enveloping the nightling, mangling her cry, letting her voice die in a strangled sizzle. She dropped halfway down to the ground but then took up again, wings beating heavily, menacingly. The huge being gained height as the mage chanted incantations in a deep, ancient voice, loud as a bronze gong, strong enough to carry all the way across the valley. The alien gleam surrounding his body grew brighter, clear and cold as starlight.

The nightling charged again. With a terrible scream, she threw herself at the mage but was met with a flame so large and overpowering that she completely disappeared within it. A whining, painfully cringing sound filled the air as the flame died down. The ghost of a nightling was visible in the sky, a glowing outline, a trace of embers that slowly drifted down while parts fell off and the whole body disintegrated into sparks, into ash, into nothingness.

Silence reigned.

The wizard floated in the air, a softened white light surrounding him. The breeze touched his hair, let his gray beard and his billowing robes move in the evening sky. Slowly, the wizard descended. His light flowed out, glowing a gentle silver on the meadow, then disappeared.

Enim stared on into the darkness. He could not see into the empty blackness that had now swallowed the hillside. The deafening silence rang on in his ears.

Enim waited.

Nothing more came.

\*

Enim reached the Snuggery in a dazed state.

Of course, news of the magical combat, of the shining wizard and the vanquished nightling, had gotten there before him. The battle had been loud enough to be heard all over Shebbetin. It had been visible enough too. That particular part of the hill could be seen from most places in the valley, and the floating wizard from practically everywhere.

Lasa, Lunin and a few other kids were playing mage and nightling, but their acting had nothing of hilarious excitement. It carried the

same awe and wonder, confusion and pain, open question and veiled horror that Enim felt.

Enim gladly received water, bread, and a warm hug from Lhut when he sat down. He exhaled deeply.

"Now, what was that?" Enim asked. Although it should have been perfectly clear. It had been announced beforehand, hadn't it? So now it had come to pass: Pramus, a powerful mage hired by Naydeer, had killed a nightling with enchantments and fire.

However, Lhut too seemed to feel that things were unclear. And disturbing. He sat down beside Enim, sighing just as deeply. "I don't know."

"Who is magician?" Enim asked. "Pramus."

Lhut shrugged. "I don't know him that well. He is close to Naydeer, that much is certain. He seems to travel a lot. On her business? On his own? Who knows."

Lhut pulled the padding off one leg, feeling around inside before putting his bespoke house-shoe back on. "As a child, Pramus was at the feudal court, apprenticed to old mages. So I imagine he was on his way to becoming one of them, to rule the people with thunder and lightning. But then the Transition came and ousted the mages from power. The Transition has taken away his childhood dream, and his future. But Pramus is not going to let it go. He will live all of that anyway, best that he can, and do his upmost to restore the old order, to make things right again. Or so I assume."

A deep frown had come to Lhut's brow. "Folks say many things about him. That he can summon demons. Or banish them. That he can bind people into fealty. Or keep them safe from harm." Lhut shifted uneasily. He cleared his throat. "He weaves mighty spells, such as we have just seen. But also in the mines. He commands thunder and lightning. No one knows the true extent of his powers."

Enim looked thoughtfully down into his glass. The clear water swirled invisibly, making itself known only through its dance, its weight, its movements. And a spark of light that allowed itself to get caught.

Enim cocked his head. "I have friend in Varoonya who live with traditional mage for some time. For learn." Enim took a sip. "My friend make illusions," he added as clarification. "In theater."

"Ah." Lhut pulled up a blanket and wrapped it around his waist. Then he halted. "Illusions?" He looked at Kaya, who had been listening to their conversation. Kaya stared back at him intently.

"You could not fight a nightling with illusions," Lhut said in a monotonous voice, his eyes still locked with Kaya's. "That would never work." Lhut pushed the blanket in tightly behind his back.

Kaya folded her arms over her chest. "It was suspiciously convenient. Suspiciously public. An hour and a location where everybody would see him." She turned to Enim. "Would your friend be able to conjure up such a thing? The illusionist?"

Enim tried to think about that. To imagine it. "Yes," he said finally. "I believe. Yoor can make image like that, very good, very real." Enim hesitated. "But. I only see Yoor in theater. A small room. Here is very different. That thunder we heard all over Shebbetin. Also the light. All of it is much, much more than you need, or can have, inside a room." Enim's brow furrowed. "I don't know if it hard to make all of it more loud, more bright. I think not. But what I know about illusions? Not very much."

"Sounds like enough to me," Kaya said. She turned to Lhut. "A nightling would never fly attacks on a human like that. Not out in the open. So either Pramus has used magic to attract her, and to make her attack."

"Or...?" Lhut prompted.

"Or he hasn't." Kaya's eyes were narrow. "In which case, the nightling was as much of an illusion as the fight."

The late afternoon sun spread lazy rays over Old Varoonya, bringing an amber glow to turrets and balconies, to vaulted doors and mullioned windows. The sense of laughter and playfulness the extravagant buildings exuded was accentuated by a custom that had developed among the inhabitants to, at first, hang their washing on lines stretching across the street. At some point, the popularity of the visual effect seemed to have gone overboard, and people began hanging up all kinds of brightly colored cloth in all kinds of places above the city, never mind any need to wash or dry. So until today, the inner city of Varoonya was full of little flags and bright canopies, of sun-sails and ribbons, of sham signaling flags and (perhaps) secret love-messages disguised as ornamental cloth on a roof.

Even at the palace.

A flapping washing line waved in through the window of a large, sunlit office. Inside, a young scribe was scratching her head, dislodging a few bouncy curls.

"Shebbetin." She began to shuffle papers around on her shelf, pulling the lower drawers until she came up with a map which she spread out on the windowsill.

Her colleague walked up to her and began discussing the question of rural areas near the swamps, pointing out on the map how far apart settlements were and how difficult the roads, especially in the wet season. By the time the young woman was beginning to wrap her head around the various solutions suggested for that problem, and the drawbacks each of those also had, both scribes felt like going over to the parlor to continue the conversation over a nice cup of tea. They strolled off together, pushing the map back onto the shelf as they left.

“Pfff.” In one of the oldest bureau offices, a small, woody box with the atmosphere of an attic, a gaunt man shoved the papers impatiently to the far side of his desk.

Here, he thought irritably, was another random act by someone who didn’t know how things worked. Or who just wanted to be important.

Very likely it was, indeed, that there was a whole area in Yurvania that no one had ever noticed. Where the Transition had not taken place and people were suffering as in the feudal age.

If it were really so, surely in all the forty years since that historical turning point someone would have written a clever letter like this one, so the Council could take action?

No one except the author himself was going to believe that this was the first ever heroic attempt to bring a forgotten people into the light. Ridiculous. Surely, forgotten people did not exist. We would know about it if they did.

The scribe pulled up another report.

Something reasonable, he hoped.

\*

“That sounds serious.”

Seated beneath an assembly of colorful guild emblems, the man in his long caftan looked as if he had stepped out of an oil painting entitled: ‘The honorable palace scribes of Varoonya.’ With poised dignity, he stretched out an arm to hand the papers over to his colleague. But she did not take them. She only nodded.

“Yes. It seems grave. And unusual. That’s why I thought I’d give them to you.”

This solicited a low, rumbling grunt. “Why to me? I am no more adept at this than you. I wouldn’t know what to do in a complete absence of any structure, as he seems to be saying here. I can check on existing services, yes. Keep them running. Improve them, even. But beginning with nothing? In the middle of nowhere? I wouldn’t know where to start.”

His colleague nodded. “Let’s pass it on to Lenoren, then. She can handle it, or play it to the Council as a whole.”

\*



Lenoren ran through the papers that had accumulated on her desk in her absence.

The minutes of the last Council assemblage.

The draft agenda for the Canopy gathering, plus comments from two other bureaus.

Something about the Mountains.

A letter signed by one hundred artificers concerning the role of the academy.

Lenoren began to skim through the Canopy agenda while biting into her lunch roll. She smeared the paper with oily fingers, making it worse as she tried to wipe it clean.

A head poked in through her door. "Coming? We're about to start."

"Hmm," Lenoren nodded, mouth full, and hurried out, leaving the papers on the growing stacks at her side table.

\* \* \*

"And so the story ends!"

Pulan triumphantly clapped the book shut and whistled through her teeth. She had read out her whole text with perfectly correct pronunciation. Enim was impressed.

"You can say now all book with your head, yes?" Cahuan joked in improving Kokish. "You no must look book not one. Full storyteller you!"

"Yes, we know all story all book! Full! And write all slate board full book also!" Som was beaming just as proudly. She whirled around like a dancer, making all of her ribbons fly and the colors of her tunic blur.

In the Snuggery, communication in Kokish had always been fluent in the sense of enthusiastic. Increasingly, grammar was making its way into the conversation as well.

Enim absolutely had to get them a second book.

Even though he himself had not made as much use of the Vanian books there were. His writing skills were still deplorable, if they were at all. But his spoken Vanian had come back, better than ever and including grammar, so Enim was extremely pleased. He felt like himself again now when he spoke. Perhaps a little like his younger self, speaking to his parents. But even that flavor gradually disappeared as Enim eased more and more into his new reality, including this new old language.

In less than two moons, Enim had settled quite comfortably into his new surroundings. In the wake of Manaam's introductions to the mine owners of Shebbetin, Enim had not only become a member of their private pouch group, but also kept getting hired to tend to traptions in the mines, just as planned. Enim's presence at the Snuggery had also become a matter of routine, especially since he had moved into a little room just across the street.

Enim pulled up his legs and leaned back comfortably against the wall, taking a sip from the water bottle beside him. This was all beginning to feel like home.

Except that... there still was suffering and hardship all around.

Enim had made his peace with all the pain on condition that it was purely temporary. Soon to be rectified. Any moment now, the first of the healers would arrive, or at least the first scribes. Or, as an absolute minimum, a letter telling Enim that all of these were on their way. How long could it take for at least one person in at least one bureau to confirm receipt of his report?

But so far—nothing. Except children still sitting in work cabins. And miners losing their health.

\*       \*       \*

A radiant sun reached down in the Snuggery courtyard. Most of the children were still out, roaming around the Mansion, but they would surely be back soon enough for lunch.

Kaya helped the three boys in charge unload boxes of boiled potatoes. Then she stalked over to Cahuan.

"I wonder if your gracious donor is ever going to allow the children to have food other than potatoes, day in, day out. But of course I can see that at the moment he does not have the means. If he paid any more than he already does, perhaps he could not afford to drink exquisite wines quite as often anymore. Too great a sacrifice, no doubt. Just as he needs a nice big house all to himself, while a whole group of children easily fits into one small room, day and night." She grimaced contemptuously.

Cahuan sighed. "Yes. We know that. Manaam is doing much, but he is not perfect. And he is not sacrificing himself. He gives what he easily can, but he still wants to have an agreeable life himself."

Kaya exploded. "Yes, and I want to have an agreeable life myself too! So would thousands of others, who are now slaving away in mines and cabins! You may think him very kind and generous for

condescending to give his valuable support—but really, he and the likes of him are still living on the backs of all of us! People are wasting their lives away in the tunnels, barely seeing the light of day; or have childhoods bent over benches, working their little fingers raw so that others can wear jewelry without having to pay too dearly for it. Well, I know who's paying too dearly for that! And no two ways about it!"

Pulan was standing in the middle of the courtyard, plates in hand. She stared at Kaya, letting out a low whistle. "Yes," she said slowly. "Of course. People who buy jewelry should pay properly for it. Enough for good wages, safe mines, and free children. Or else, they should not buy it." Pulan hesitated, rubbing a hand over her short hair. "But," she continued uncertainly, "is that Manaam's fault? He is trying to do things right, isn't he? His mines are better than any others. And he keeps the Snuggery running. He gives all the coin, doesn't he?"

Kaya snorted. "Ha! He gives all the coin. Whose coin is it, I am asking? Where did that coin come from? It's the workers in the mine who bring up the diamonds. And then Manaam sells them and pockets the coin, returning a small part of it in wages. And an even smaller part to the Snuggery. He gets rich from exploitation, and gives back a little in alms."

Cahuan shook out a dishcloth with an irritated gesture. "Yes. And all the other owners get rich from exploitation and give nothing back in alms. So?"

"So the others are even worse," Kaya snapped. "But that does not mean that Manaam is right. He revels in this shining light of being so very benevolent. But he is still a plunderer."

Kaya's eyes were flaring. "What's more: How come he is an owner in the first place? How come Lhut is not the owner of the mine? I am sure Lhut would be a very good owner. Lhut has got a good head. He can keep a mine productive, and ensure safety and proper wages and run a healing bag. How come ownership of that mine does not lie with Lhut, or with me, or you, or anyone else? What has Manaam done to deserve having a mine and a silver spoon placed in his cradle? What has anyone else done not to deserve that? Has he ever asked himself that?" Kaya kicked at a pebble and sent it flying across the courtyard.

"Maybe he has," Cahuan said, very quietly. But Kaya did not hear. Cahuan sighed. "Kaya. We have been in this argument a hundred

times. And we even agree, I believe. Manaam is better than most, but he and everything should be much better still. So." Cahuan buried her hands in her hair, pulling it back behind the neck. "I wonder how we manage to keep on arguing over it, again and again. Just because I keep saying Manaam is better than most, and you keep saying that everything should be much better still. Yes indeed. Yes to both. And yes from both of us, I suppose. So can we let it rest at some point?"

\*       \*       \*

The mine was dark, a pitch-black hole in the middle of the night. Enim was in there, alone amidst masses of ancient stone, a whole mountain towering over him. There was a deadly silence all around. Enim could feel the enormity of rock weighing down on him.

He cleared his throat, quietly, cautiously, as if trying not to wake the forces of the earth, not to draw attention to himself.

But there was no way around it.

Enim carefully positioned himself. He opened his mouth and let the first archaic syllable roll out, full, round, ending in rasping consonants that grated through the silent air.

It broke the spell.

It began to weave another.

Enim's voice grew strong, determined, his pronunciation precise, every move deliberate. The lines of a pentagram began to glow before him. His arms were raised, iron claws turning his fingertips into needle-thin thorns. Enim took hold of the pentacle, pulling flaming rivers from its tips into the darkness beyond, back toward the old traption in the wall. A myriad of crystals began to shine in the stone. White, clear, bright sparks, connected by an intricate web of glass and light, of glinting arabesques. Enim's incantation flowed on, relentlessly.

He was almost finished. On precisely the last tone of the last rune, Enim touched his thumbs to two of the crystals in the wall, connecting the burning lines of the pentacle to them. The crystals flared up golden. The pentacle was gone. The woven mass of glass and crystal amidst the gray stone came to life. Enim watched without blinking as the golden light moved on from the two initial points, following threads of glass to another crystal, and another, gliding through the whole transparent labyrinth of connections and intersections and flaring crystals. Bringing spells to life. Eventually,

it was all lit up. The wall of the mountain held a huge, deep mat of the most delicate structure, its golden glow shining out into the cavern, then slowly fading back into silver and pure white.

Enim exhaled deeply. He took a step back. A smile came to his lips, spreading there almost out of its own volition. Enim did nothing to stop it. He was happy.

This was the real thing. His magic had found its way into the world.

Enim lit a lantern. Pulling a long, thin wand from his belt, he stepped up to the shining latticework on the wall. With another deep breath, he touched the wand to a crystal in the center, speaking just one word.

The huge steel tubes along the wall gave a sigh. Then a cough. And then, after a swirl of dust and dried-up leaves, fresh, clear mountain air began to blow into the tunnel.

\*

Enim was sharing his triumph.

He had been working on this for over a moon. A huge old mine traption for air ventilation, functional in principle, but out of date, and out of repair. Enim had eased his way into its mind, trying to understand how the old magic worked and how it broke down. How to weave in newer spells, mingling today's traption craft with the weathered remains inside the rock.

He had prepared meticulously. Set it all up, brought in the new parts with as much care and precision as he could possibly muster. And now, finally, he had set it all alight. And it had worked.

With a happy smile, Enim lounged among the Snuggery greens while he was showing off one of his other feats. Although he feared he might never get this last one back. It was proving way too popular.

A small round wooden ball was crawling across the ground, then darted off across the courtyard beeping loudly, chased by a crowd of shrieking children. Others were queuing up for their turn to touch and start the traption.

"I made it," Enim explained, "so that I will be safe when I go to work in an abandoned mine. I always send this in ahead of me. It should wake up any nightlings sleeping in dark corners, giving them a chance to leave before coming face to face with me."

When exhaustion had persuaded the running crowd to rest at least temporarily, Enim took off the traption's lid. Lasa looked over his shoulder with eager eyes. A gossamer web of fine, transparent threads glinted in the evening light.

"Look here," Enim pointed to the crystal in the heart of the ethereal cloud, "that is the vim stone. That is where the magic gets all its power."

Lasa hung herself halfway over Enim's back, still looking down into the traption's inner life. "Why does the stone have vim?"

"Because we put it there. Some special artificers did. They live out in the swamps, where there are no fields or villages, and let collector traptions fly over the land. The collectors suck vim out of all the plants they pass over and store it in crystals."

"But how do the collectors fly?"

"They use vim too. That's their power. But they collect much, much more than they need. So they use some of the crystals for themselves, and all the rest the artificers send on to us."

Lasa mulled this over. "But how did it work the first time? When the first collector in the world wanted to fly, no one had collected vim into a crystal yet. So it could not fly. How did it ever get started?"

Enim had not expected this kind of logic. He cocked his head. "I do not know. I was not there. It was a long time ago, before I was born."

He shrugged Lasa off his back and straightened up, turning to face the girl's dark brown eyes. "It was magicians outside the academy who found vim. At the time, before the Transition, the academy was full of old mages summoning demons. But then, some people the mages had never heard of began to gather in secret, creating a new, completely different form of magic. Using plants and crystals, and pentacles so exact that not even a grain of chalk was out of line. Exactitudes, these new magicians came to be called, and today they rule the academy."

Enim raised the open wooden bowl in his hand, a spark of cold fire catching in the vim stone. "So the exactitudes invented the principle of vim extraction, more than a hundred years ago. But just how they did it on the very first day, I do not know."

The young woman no longer looked sturdy. She no longer was a miner either. Not since the day of the nightling. Not since her mangled leg.

Her sister, too, had not set foot in a tunnel ever since. The girl had stayed by the elder's side day and night, nursing her, keeping her alive by sheer willpower. Or so it seemed to the neighbors, who passed by every now and then with a stew or a bit of soup.

It worked, for a while. The young woman did not die right away. Week after week she lingered, delirious, weak from blood loss and open wounds. But now the fever had gotten worse. Her torn leg was red, festering, swollen beyond recognition. Little beads of sweat stood on her brow. She muttered, a wild, confused, anxious stuttering punctured by breathless screams that broke off suddenly. Her chest shook. Her eyes were wild.

"There, now." The girl dabbed her sister's brow with a towel. Her jaw was set, determined, the face of someone holding on to hope against hope. Unwilling to give in, to let go.

"Come, now, sister. Come here. I need you. I love you."

But there it was. One last rattling breath, one lone shiver running over her body. And her sister's eyes turned empty, dead.

\* \* \*

"It has been too long." Enim was fretting. "Why have we not heard back?"

He rubbed a hand up and down his arm. "I could write to Varoonya again. To each bureau, asking them to at least confirm receipt of my report and to say how long it will be before we hear anything else from them."

Enim shook his head. "But I am too impatient. Or too unsure, perhaps, that this was the right way to go about it. For if it wasn't, and people have to explain to me in writing what to do instead, and every round of question-answer between them and me takes over

two moons—that is just too long. So I think I had better go there in person. Clear this up.”

Enim raked a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his brow. “I have finished my largest contract as an artificer. The others can wait. After all, this is much more important, much more urgent.”

The morning air was fresh and bright over the highlands, with a thousand tiny wildflowers nodding their colorful heads contentedly in the breeze. Little Quena picked a few select blossoms and placed them in Lhut’s hair with great deliberation. Cahuan squinted slightly as the sun touched her face. Her skin shimmered a pearly gold, and an iridescent green in between.

Departure hung in the air like a haze, holding a mirage of hope, but also a chilling cool.

“Enim.” Cahuan’s voice was low, hesitant. “You are going to Varoonya. Where you come from, where all your old friends are. Where there is learning and amusement and a big bustling city, and enough trabarns to offer exciting work.”

Her eyes sought Enim’s. “Will you come back? No matter what happens?”

A hawk circled high in the sky. Then, leaning into the changing winds, he sailed away, a small black arrow darting off into the clouds.

Enim firmly held Cahuan’s gaze. “I don’t know how it will go in Varoonya.” He paused. “I don’t know how long I will stay. But I am going there because of here. And I will never forget that. I promise.”

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The carriage horses stepped swiftly, flaring their nostrils, tossing the manes over their gleaming coats. Enim looked out of the coach window, craning his neck impatiently. There! He could already see the palace hill rise above the Roon, the white stones of the capital shining over the river in the last rays of the sun.

The light had faded from the sky when the coach rattled over the cobbles of Farewell Square in the heart of the old city. Enim disembarked, inhaling deeply. The familiar sights, the sounds and scents of Varoonya made him feel happy and strange and homesick all at once.

He turned around somewhat aimlessly. It seemed ages ago. It all felt familiar, and also unreal. It was a homecoming, but to a home that had vanished. Enim had returned, but the world he had lived in



before was gone. It would never be the same again. He had seen too much that was not part of his reality before.

Enim shook his head slightly. His heart ached. With a sigh, he shouldered his baggage and made his way off into the night.

He was going to try Yoor first.

Enim walked uphill along tangled streets until the last of the lanes turned into a narrow dirt path that balanced between scrawny bushes and patches of naked rock. Yoor's mountain house was a stray, a little renegade hanging on to the edge of Old Varoonya by a thread. It squeezed into the hillside beneath the palace, just where the slope turned into an almost vertical fall above the river, a quirky abode nestling against stone and earth on one side, practically hanging out in the air on the other. It was slim, narrow, so as not to fall off the mountain. But it was endearing, and even in its odd, almost ludicrous location and with the proportions dictated by it, had forgone none of the elaborate, absurd playfulness of its siblings in the heart of the city.

Enim came to the door and knocked.

There was even a bath. Enim sank down gratefully into the warm waters while Yoor finished transforming the little storage room into a guest chamber. Enim let out a deep sigh of relief, angling for another fruit from the plate beside the tub. The world was good. He was home.

Recovered and happy, but also eager and impatient, Enim finally abandoned the bathtub, wrapped himself in Yoor's sarong and came over to the parlor.

The room was illuminated by the soft golden glow of magical lanterns. Carpets hiding strange animals and fantastical vines were scattered across the floor here and there.

Yoor sat in his favorite place, the convergence of a balcony and a bay window. Broad and inviting, it had a wooden base like an overgrown windowsill, panes that folded back, and an ornate wrought-iron balustrade curving far out into the sky before returning to its fastenings up above. Even more than the rest of the house, the bay balcony seemed to be hanging in the air, with a wide starry sky all above and a view of the river bend below. A few boats were rocking idly down on the waters, their colored lights reflecting brightly off black waves in the night.

Yoor tied his silvery hair into a loose knot at his nape and let one leg of velvety blue dangle out between the balusters. He smiled

invitingly at Enim. But just as Enim was about to sit down, Torly came in, her round brown cheeks dimpling in happy surprise. Enim hugged her so fervently that she gasped.

"Enim! Say, what happened to you in the Mountains? You have returned more passionate and less timid than before, I gather?"

Enim blushed, much more his former self again. "Well, yes, I have, in a way," he said. "Returned more passionate. Or passionate about different things, in any case."

As they settled into the sky above the Roon River, he began to tell them. About the beauty of the mountains and the people. About Shebbetin. About conditions in the mines. About the deaths caused by the nightling, or by the lack of precautions. About Lhut's missing legs. About the healers that were not there to meet the need. About the children in work cabins.

And his friends listened. They truly heard him. They did not turn around in the middle to tell him about their own affairs, of which there must have been many, Enim was sure. They stayed with him and his tale.

It hit home. Even though they had seen none of it with their own eyes, had not met any of the people, had not buried the dead. It was only Enim's tale that came to them; yet they heard him. They believed. They understood.

Torly and Yoor were quiet late at night, lying in bed together, lost in thought, lost in the memories of Enim's tales. And lost, quite generally. Holding each other tight, not knowing, not seeing how this could happen, how this could be a part of the world they lived in.

But by morning they were recovering. While Enim was still fast asleep, Yoor brought tea for two to the bedside, nice, hot and spicy, plus small crisp rolls with cream. First rays of sunlight sneaked in sideways through the window facing out over the river, and it seemed hard to feel gloomy. Yoor opened the panes wide and let the morning dance over his naked skin, which began to shimmer in hues of azure tinged with rose, just like the sky above. Yoor snuggled back into bed with Torly, leaning up against the wall as they sipped and munched, squinting out into the gold and white of drifting clouds outside.

Their thoughts were still on the tales of last evening though, even if their mood was irrepressibly swinging back to its usual level. They recounted Enim's stories to each other, trying to make sense of it all.

"It truly is as if the Transition had not reached the Mountains," Torly summed up, setting down her tea.

"Yes," Yoor replied pensively. "Enim put it that way as well."

The thought began to intrigue Yoor. The more he moved the words around in his mouth, the more they began to tug at the back of his mind. There was something there... something that caused an itch inside him.

"The Transition has not reached the Mountains," Yoor repeated, musing. "It has not. Yet. But it will!"

He began to get excited. He sat up straight in bed. "There is a tale in this. A tale that is calling to us, and may be calling to other people as well."

The storyteller in Yoor was going to give it a try. "The Transition has not reached the Mountains. But it will. It must. And we will bring it there! We can relive history. And the most glorious part of it too! Not just any old bit of history. No, the very best, the most important,

the most wonderful part of it all! We will relive the Transition. And not just relive, no, but recreate! We will not just watch it, we will make it happen! No deed more valiant, more worth doing!"

Yoor turned to Torly for support. "Beneath all the glitter and glory that I will inevitably bring to this, there is truth. There is real ground here, underneath. Isn't there?"

Torly wagged her head, black curls falling into her face.

"There is," she ruled.

"See?" Yoor was all aflame by now. "Bringing the Transition to the Mountains is imperative. And easy too, thankfully. After all, everyone we've ever known wholeheartedly supports the Transition. Isn't that right? Have you ever heard anyone say anything else? No. So. There cannot possibly be any obstacles around this time. Who would pose one? Everybody is in favor. The Transition will be just as grand, significant, important and glorious as the first time around, only much, much easier to do," he concluded with much gratification.

"And should any obstacle arise, against all expectations," Yoor began to act out the part, gesturing even while sitting in bed, "we will be there. Like valiant knights, to fight for everything that is good and righteous." He demonstrated with a flourish, then caught himself. "Ah, no. No. The knights were fighting against the Transition, rather than for it, weren't they? I do apologize. I have confused us with our enemies again. I'm sorry. No valiant knights, then, and indeed, no knights at all. Just us. The valiant midwives of the Transition." Yoor bowed his head in solemn greeting.

"Rest assured," he took up his thread, "we are the heroes at the service of history. We will ride across country on galloping horses. We will do all it takes. Whatever that is. What does it take, actually?" Yoor turned to Torly, his eyebrows raised in question.

Torly pulled the blanket up around her leg. "I don't know. And it seems Enim is not sure either. We need to find out what to do."

Yoor considered this. "Find out what to do. Is that a typical heroic activity?" he wondered.

"I couldn't say." Torly licked her finger to pick up crumbs from her plate. "But then, maybe it wasn't heroines who made the Transition happen the first time around. Maybe it was just ordinary people, who did not even know what to do."

"Hmm," Yoor replied thoughtfully. "Quite possibly." He pushed a snow-white strand of hair from his brow. "Even better, in a way. I shall quite like to be ordinary people. Who do not even know what

to do. And who then find out, hopefully, or in any case do it anyway. Somehow.”

Carefully negotiating his way between the dishes, he eased up to Torly. His hand ran up her naked arm as he snuggled into the curves of her full, round body. “So, my love, shall we lend our support to Enim? Like one valiant citizen to another? To find out what to do? And to do it, even?”

Torly brushed her cheek against the velvety butterfly skin of Yoor’s brow. The morning light flowed softly over his hair, bringing out shimmers of pearl and ice.

“Yes.” She kissed him lightly. “We shall. We will pledge ourselves to the cause.”

\* \* \*

The palace of Varoonya rested securely in the knowledge of its own importance and beauty, a crown on the crest of the hill overlooking the Roon. The wide stone steps leading to the main entrance shone in the morning sun as Enim walked up to where huge double doors stood wide open, inviting, yet impressive if not intimidating at the same time. Enim was used to the type of architecture, though. The Academy of Magical Arts practically intertwined with the palace, sharing its style of awe-inspiring grand interiors. So at least in that respect, Enim was unfazed and able to look around the entrance hall with clear, searching eyes.

All around him people in bright robes busily strode up and down, their arms full of scrolls and books and papers. Large windows beneath a high, vaulted ceiling let light fall onto the polished floor, or gleam off the arms of sparkling chandeliers.

Enim’s gaze caught.

On one side of the hall sat an ornate structure made of carved wood, polished with age and care. A succession of little cabins, inhabited by agile figures appearing and disappearing in the windows like statuettes of an old clock.

Aha!

Enim queued up before one of the cabins and was soon ushered up to approach. He placed his envelopes on the windowsill and began to explain. This was another copy of his report from the Mountains, together with—

“No need,” the officious person inside said, waving his hand. “I am only passing them on, you know. Have you marked clearly who it is for? Ah, yes. That is just fine. I’ll hand it in.”

“And, ah, then, how will I hear from them?” Enim put in quickly. “I have added a letter inside requesting an opportunity to explain in person and—”

“Yes, yes,” the window’s inhabitant cut in. “I can see you have given your address here. That is where they will contact you.” And he looked out past Enim to the next person waiting in line.

“But will they?” Enim tried to take up as much space in front of the window as he possibly could. “They didn’t, last time. Is there another way to get in touch, maybe?”

“Sure,” the scribe nodded, pointing over Enim’s shoulder. “Meetings that are open to everyone are on pale blue paper. Just go and see if there’s anything that sounds right for your concern.”

Enim turned around.

A broad grin came to his face as he realized just what it was he was looking at. He knew it! Of course the palace had open doors for everyone. Of course things were organized in a way that allowed everybody to have a say, to make suggestions or point out problems.

With a few swift strides, Enim traversed the hall and came to stand in front of a large grid teeming with colorful notes.

Each row was a day, Enim soon figured out. Bottom line was today. Pale blue meant open to everyone. Enim gave up on all the other colors and little symbols that must have meant heaps to the people busily shuffling around him, hurrying off to one side or another.

Enim rubbed his head as he perused the papers with narrowed eyes.

There!

‘Innovation—New Ideas,’ the small sheet read.

Enim was not sure if including all areas of Yurvania in county services was a new idea, exactly. But close enough.

He would take that!

✱

When evening came, the designated hall was brimming with people. Hundreds were bustling on the ornate floor or lounging on the broad sills of palace windows, eager to hear the presentations.

Only very brief announcements were allowed here in the plenary, with each person to say just a sentence or two in front of the entire crowd. Then the presenters would all go to their allocated rooms and corners, so that anyone interested could find them there and hear more details.

Enim had taken his place in the queue that slowly and jerkily advanced toward the speaker's dais. He twisted his report into a tight roll and tapped it against his fingers. His eyes were shining. He could see the rapt attention on people's faces, sense their avid curiosity, their vivid spirits. He had an inkling of the wide diversity of backgrounds they had brought to this gathering, these craftsfolks and gardeners, parents and artificers, and most importantly: these scribes from all corners of the palace. Thank goodness Enim had made this trip to Varoonya! Now he would be able to say it, in person, in front of all these people. And then exactly the right ones would come and speak to him: those who were able to help.

Enim advanced one more step, one last time. Then it was his turn. He climbed the dais.

All eyes were on him.

Enim cleared his throat.

When he spoke, it was with the compelling clarity of a spell, a voice so deep and resonant it reached even the hindmost corner of the room.

\*

Deeply immersed in thoughts and conversations, participants moved from one presentation room to the next, from one speaker's corner to another. Enim shifted his weight to the other foot. His gaze followed the lively faces milling past.

There were so many people! So much curiosity, care and vivid intelligence. But there also were a great many topics on offer.

In the first round, no one had chosen to come to Enim to hear more about the Mountains. Nor in the second. But maybe now, in the third, the last?

\*

Slowly, the palace grew quiet. Only a few lone figures lingered here and there in the corridors. In the emptiness of the great entrance hall, an old scribe pulled the lowest row off the grid. Another day was over. Another line of meetings relegated to history.

The next day rocked to the bottom.

Enim stepped from the shadows. Determination in his narrowed eyes, he searched the rows for pale blue, noting the meetings of the next day, and the one after that, and after that. Enim was going to go to all of them. Until he had found the one that was right, the one that brought him to the people he needed.

\*       \*       \*

Night had descended over Varoonya. It lay upon the city like black velvet, elaborately decorated with stitches of magical lights in myriad colors. Too weak to even let one read by, these lights were subtle fireflies, shining in their own beauty while leaving the dark of the night intact. Their gleaming threads followed the lines and curves of ancient lanes, crawled up buildings to lace a turret here, a winding staircase there. They guided nocturnal wanderers through the city, but they also drew up images for them, weaving a fairytale tapestry of secret gardens and forgotten passages, of tamed animals and bewildering humans. A richly embroidered cloth, hiding innumerable and unimaginable tales in its depths.

But yarns were also being spun inside the mansions.

In the theater room of the Singing Phoenix, the curtain dropped. Gradually, people came back, still half dreaming, somewhat reluctantly emerging from a world of fairy realms and dormant miracles. The last charms faded away in a wispy haze.

Then the curtain rose again, and as the music grew into another sweet, glorious crescendo, Yoor appeared on stage. Still half-caught in the otherworld, the audience practically sang to him. Amidst the applause, they called and cheered, they laughed, and some cried. Only a little, though. They brushed their tears away and joined in the hailing and clapping, only to find yet another clear little drop hanging on to their lashes a moment later.

Yoor bowed. He waved. He offered a flourish to the left, a flourish to the right. His pearly hair fell forward as he bowed one last time, disappearing behind the falling curtain.

In his dressing room, Yoor still beamed as brightly and happily as ever. He loved this. He loved the stage, the illusions, the magic. He loved the legends he told, the dream worlds he created. He loved people loving him. He just felt utterly, fully, entirely in the right place.

When he stepped out into the street, a bright half-moon had risen above the roofs. As usual, a few people were waiting for him at the back door, those who wanted to see him, to touch him, to speak to him before he left. Yoor turned to them genially. He smiled and chatted, kissed and hugged, laughed and held hands. Satisfied, people strolled away. In the end only one was left, a dark-eyed woman who felt vaguely familiar to Yoor, as if he had spoken to her moons before. He remembered her delicate body, her warm voice, the typical



braided pattern in her hair. And wasn't she living with one of the Council members?

"I have a request," Qin Roh said. "Not something you'd likely want to do. But then again, who knows? I just thought I'd try."

\* \* \*

"What's that?"

Enim peeked over his friend's shoulder into the wooden case she was holding, into a labyrinth of glassy threads and enchanted crystals. Balancing between workbenches, Enim bathed in the industrious atmosphere of the Artificer's Den, the cornerstone of golden memories from his student days.

"It's a receptacle, like they use in the Choosing." She sat it down carefully. "But these things are unbelievably slow. And people say it's impossible to make them handle an unlimited number of entries."

"Impossible, impossible," another one of Enim's acquaintances muttered, also a regular at the Artificer's Den. "We're almost there. We just need to find something to balance the Grunidews. Those are irritable spells, and something isn't quite right about their crystalline environment just yet."

Enim smoothed out a large scroll on the table with both hands, his eyes roaming over the patterns of intricate lines, the pentagrams and tiny scribbles, trying to catch up with what everybody here was actually trying to do.

"Could you prepare some more Waruneems?" Enim's friend did not even glance over her shoulder as she spoke to him, her eyes fixed on the glassy thread she was spinning with her wand.

Enim nodded invisibly behind her back, pulling up a box of crystals. He did not know whether his fellow artificers were aware that he had been gone for moons. That he had been to another world, almost. The artificers lived in a world of their own, after all, and Enim's tale apparently had not made it in. But even if they had not noted his absence, they did realize his presence, here, now, and were as good as ever at instant inclusion. And that was great.

Since Enim did not know how long he would be in Varoonya—and was hoping it wouldn't be very long at all—he was unwilling to commit to a regular position in a trabarn.

But the Artificer's Den was perfect. Always buzzing with people and knowledge and new inventions. With trial and error and enthusiasm, and with opportunities to make yourself useful.

Whenever there were no palace meetings he could go to, or whenever he needed to recover and just be an artificer again, Enim would come here.

\*       \*       \*

The presentations in the scribes' chamber had gone on for longer than usual. Longer than scheduled too. A number of people were rushing off hurriedly, filling the palace halls with the sound of receding footsteps.

Enim looked around, trying to spot anyone who might be willing to talk to him, hear some more, take his report on the Mountains.

However, when a thin, black-clad figure swooped down on him in a cloud of billowing robes, he almost fled. The wall behind him kept him in check. Enim forced himself to relax. He took a deep breath.

The old woman before him arched an eyebrow, so high it almost disappeared beneath her white hair. Her eyes were hard as steel.

Imperiously, she stretched out a hand toward Enim's report.

"Give it here!"

Enim hesitated. He had come just for that. Nothing he wanted more. And yet... It felt as if in this case, his report was not going to make a step ahead, toward the fulfillment of its destiny. Rather, as if Enim would be sending it to its doom. Straight into the hands of the henchman.

The energy that woman radiated was unsettling.

Enim swallowed.

She snatched the paper from him without another word. Head held high, an aura of cold power around her, she strode out of the room like a black-sailed frigate on the sea of the hurrying crowd.

Yoor had finished mopping the floor and turned around to give Enim a bright smile. "Are you sure you don't want to come along to the party? Lenoren will surely be there. It's her daughter's birthday, after all. You might be able to speak to her. Or some others, like Qin Roh, Lenoren's partner. I have given her your report already, after all."

"No," Enim replied uncomfortably, "you know how I feel about that. It isn't quite right. This is a private party, and you have been invited, not I."

Enim disappeared into the kitchen and reemerged with a pot of steaming dahl. "It's great if Lenoren's daughter is smitten with you and you agreed to be her birthday present. But there needs to be an official way of bringing matters before the county, a way that is reliable and open to everyone. Not dependent on chance party invitations by families of Council members. That is just not proper at all."

Light broke through the clouds, catching on bright white sails negotiating their way along the river below. Enim watched them, thinking of the many meetings he had gone to by now, and the way they always seemed to be slightly off course, never really right for his concern. Always elegantly maneuvering around him, like a purposeful sailor around an unexpected rock in the stream.

Enim sighed. He shook off the memory of the black hawk that had clutched his report.

"I'll soon have it figured out. One of these many scribes is going to pick it up, or going to point me to the right path, and then things will get moving very fast. No doubt." Enim nodded affirmatively at reality as he had always understood it. He set a steaming plate for Yoor down in the bay balcony. "But you go to the party and enjoy it."

‘I’ll talk to you.’

Even that little note annoyed Lenoren. Though she could not have said why. Except for who it was from. Would anyone else manage to squeeze a tone of condescending command into just a few words on a tiny piece of paper?

Lenoren sighed. Maybe it was only her imagination. She was tired, overwrought. She ought to go home. And deal with this kind of thing in the morning.

Lenoren cast a brief glance at the report the note had been attached to. It looked vaguely familiar. Had she seen that before? Something about the Mountains. Lenoren lifted a page. A very brief paper. Now here was some good news, Lenoren thought with a sneer.

Nevertheless. She’d leave it for the next day. She just needed to get home now. She could not be late for her daughter’s party either. Nin would never forgive her. You only turned fourteen once, after all.

\*

The courtyard of Lenoren’s home was riddled with washing lines. Huge, brightly colored sheets of cloth hung down all the way to the ground, in an intricate arrangement that turned the whole space into a labyrinth, full of secret nooks and alleys, hidden dead ends, and unexpected openings. Nin and her friends had put this up for the party. For privacy, they had explained. And for beauty. And for making it more of a party.

Right now, while the adults stood mostly around small tables by the wall enjoying juicy fruit and harmless gossip, the youngsters roamed the maze, bent on getting lost and finding each other all over again. Nin turned around to her friend—and froze in mid-motion.

A sparkle of stars had appeared overhead. Music chimed in, nearly inaudible at first, then richer, fuller, more demanding. The swirling sparks began to move, forming purposeful patterns.

All the youngsters had seen them. Eagerly, they followed the call, impatiently pushing aside the fabrics whenever they could not find their way around them fast enough.

They emerged into the courtyard before the expectant eyes of the adults, who had ceased their conversations by now. The music swelled, the stars gathered into one dense swirl of light and color, and Yoor stepped through that sparkling cloud.

His long, flowing robes showed the contours of his graceful body, leaving his shoulders bare to shimmer an iridescent blue beneath his pearly hair. He advanced slowly. The crowd of youths stood spellbound, in one huddled group with Nin a little in front, having half moved there, half been shoved by the others. Nin's eyes were shining, but her shoulders cramped and her fingers clenched into an awkward knot.

Yoor walked toward her. He halted a respectful distance away, like a pilgrim before his shrine and bowed in a flourish so humble and ravishing at the same time that Nin's breath caught. When he straightened up, he held a flower in his hand, a glass blossom shining with magical light. "May I bestow this upon you, Crown of the Day," his voice flowed out in a mysterious singsong, "with a blessing that will grace your life for all time to come."

A pale globe had risen, filling the black sky with silver. Yoor was still surrounded by avid youngsters, Nin first and foremost among them. For moons she had hungered for all things coming from Yoor, and when Qin Roh had passed on Enim's report about Shebbetin, Nin had practically learned it by heart. And was now eager for more. So Yoor told the tale of the Mountains.

Of how there was a mission of epic proportions waiting for them. How they needed to make the wheel of history turn, to end the plight of the downtrodden, to let justice and kindness triumph. It was the Transition, but it still had to happen, all of it, and they were the ones to do it. This was the future that was meant to be, and it was calling out to them, longingly, urgently. They were the ones. Destiny would be unfolding through them, if only they were brave enough, wise enough, to do right.

Nin's eyes had grown wide.

She held no doubt.

This was her quest.

\*

Lenoren frowned as she passed behind the little crowd around Yoor, half-listening to their conversation. What? Mountains again?

Her eyes fell on a paper that someone had left lying on the buffet, in between the yogurts and the fruit salad. And at that point, Lenoren gave in. This report was following her home, was it?

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\*

'I'll talk to you.'

The note slipped out between the papers and landed on Lenoren's desk among sweets, tea glasses and inksticks. She picked it up, a mental image of its author rising unbidden in her mind.

Zurres was a gray eminence in the palace now, a discreet presence of inscrutable power, insinuating herself into whatever business seemed appropriate to her.

Zurres also was a retired recursor, one of those people who, on very rare occasions, used physical force in the name of the state.

And a retired secret guard, Lenoren thought maliciously, inwardly reproaching Zurres for the deeds of her youth once again, when she had served the Feudals, cruel overlords who would even have such a thing as a secret guard!

Lenoren leaned back. It was official policy not to hold people's past against them. To allow them to move on.

And Zurres had apparently not only switched sides in those stormy days before the Exit of the Feudals. She had also been in the service of the new recursors ever since, guided by and protective of the values and practices of the Transition.

She had. So everyone said. Even if you would not believe it looking at her, Lenoren sneered.

At that moment, an apparition in black swept into the office, dark robes billowing, eyes of steel gleaming.

\* \* \*

A perfectly round brass bowl sat on the table. As the Chairperson touched a wooden stick to it, the pure sound of the bell rang out though the hall, slowly reverberating into blissful silence. All the Council members took a deep breath and gratefully closed their eyes for a brief respite.

But Lenoren's thoughts were still churning. Now the assemblage was almost over, but they had been on the topic of the Canopy for hours. And lapsing. In theory, Council members should always see their own personal truth as just one piece of a larger puzzle, as one small shard longing to be complemented by many other colors in a mosaic, until the overall image would emerge. They were supposed to share humbly, and to listen deeply.

But instead, they had made fervent pleas. For the cause of regional integration, for the spirit of exploration, and for friendship across borders. For a broadening of horizons both in geography and culture,

in mind and spirit. Not to mention all the advantages of commerce that a stronger bond with the countries upriver would bring to Yurvania.

Just as fervent, however, had been the pleas for preserving independence and autonomy, and gloomy warnings about being swallowed up by some humongous entity of unknown destiny.

The rapid growth in power and importance that the Canopy had seen during the last few years seemed to have made both the advocates and the opponents of integration only more passionate about their respective causes.

Lenoren had made her own appeals. Slipping, like so many of her colleagues, away from the professed ideal of listening for the shape the future wanted to take, from that quest for wholeness. Blundering instead into pushing her own positions and trying to haul everyone else along.

Nevertheless, it had still worked out somehow, hadn't it?

An overall picture did emerge, after all. They had come to an agreement as to how Yurvania would go into the upcoming Canopy gathering. It was not perfect, Lenoren felt. But it was not bad, and it left some room for maneuver, some readiness to respond to things that might unfold only at the actual gathering. So, good enough.

But now, Lenoren, as most other Council members, was hanging in her seat somewhat limply, thinking of fresh air and food.

But they had not quite finished. A few small items were still on the agenda. Miscellaneous.

"On the Mountains," the chair announced in a dragging voice. "Details to be found in the addendum to the background papers. Anyone to share on that motion?"

Lenoren pushed herself upright with some effort. "Yes."

\* \* \*

"Woah!"

Enim stared at the note in his hand. Then at the large, formal parchment. "Woah."

He sat down.

Torly took the envelope from his hand and pulled out some more papers. She began to read while Yoor fully unfurled the parchment on the bay balcony. Enim stepped up to him and ran a finger over the beautifully embellished inscription.

'Scroll of the Special Representative for the Mountains.'

He had been appointed. He, Enim.

Enim shook his head, dazed. "Now what is that?"

All around him, dark clouds gathered. A tiny bird perched on the banister, holding on to the wrought iron with thin feet, hesitating to throw himself out into the stormy wind.

Enim rubbed his chin. "I really did not mean to get myself a position. I wanted the county to come in. But now the county sends me?" He licked his lip. "To do what, exactly?"

Torly looked down at the papers she had pulled from the envelope. "Well, it sort of says here."

Enim was by her side in an instant.



Hues of color returned to Old Varoonya. Slowly what had been gray on gray, black on black, became distinguished again. The green of vines on the white of stones, the crimson of flags on a pale blue sky, cerulean blossoms on terracotta pots. The cry of a rooster and the crowing of a human baby joined in the symphony of waking songbirds.

Torly and Yoor hauled their baggage across Farewell Square as they zigzagged between neighing horses and rattling carriages. While they were still looking around in confusion between piles of cargo and hurrying passengers, Enim came to collect them. Relieved, they sank into their seats, just in time before the wheels started rolling.

"Did you truly manage to reschedule all your performances?" Enim asked uneasily. "I have a bit of a bad conscience, hauling you away like that on short notice."

"Never fear," Yoor replied, "Varoonya will manage without me for a while. Not without pain, of course. Not without a sense of loss. Not without wistful longing, that will build up to culminate in an exuberant reunion once I return, I am sure," Yoor concluded confidently. "Also, you are not hauling us away. We decided to come of our own free will, to see where you are going. And to heed the call of destiny, of course."

"But," Yoor turned to Torly, his eyebrows raised, "did you manage to reschedule all your classes, my dear?"

"Alas, I did not," Torly grinned. "But never fear. The Academy of Magical Arts will manage without me for a while. Also, I am sure my cultivation will not suffer. I met a most magnificent magician once who told me that he had learned as much outside the academy as inside. So no worries. I am still on my path to greatness."

"That you are, for sure," Yoor agreed. "We all are. What could be greater than bringing the Transition to the Mountains. And once we are beyond Toan, we shall ride across country on galloping horses. I knew we would be doing that at some point. I told Nin all about it too. She liked that part very much. And she puts great trust in you,"

Yoor nodded confidently at Enim. "As a Special Representative." Even within the confines of the carriage, Yoor managed to turn enough to put a hand on Enim's back, in a gesture somewhere between a slap on the shoulder and a knighting.

"Nin gives you her blessing."

\* \* \*

It was dark. It was late. He might as well have waited until morning.

But Enim could not resist. Tired as he was after a long ride over the mountains, he turned away from his beckoning bed to walk across the street and to briefly, ever so briefly, peek in at the Snuggery.

They were all asleep.

But Cahuan lay close to the door and woke. "Enim!" she whispered a shout of joy as she embraced him in the dark.

"I'm back. I'll tell you tomorrow," Enim murmured, trying not to wake the kids. "I've brought two friends."

\* \* \*

The Snuggery was crawling out of bed, stretching and yawning, and beginning to bubble with the energy of morning and breakfast and getting ready for the day. Enim was rocking a grumpy little Quena on his hip, singing good morning songs to her, rubbing shoulders with Cahuan and enjoying the general friendly bustle. It was amazing how much he had become used to this. How much he had missed it.

Lhut was still sitting in a corner, quiet and withdrawn, his fingers caressing a bead on his wristband, his lips whispering a silent incantation, a prayer. Enim met Lhut's eyes when they came back from infinite distance, from watching the pain sink down to the bottom of the sea and to the back of the mind.

With a happy smile Enim settled beside Lhut, leaning against his broad shoulder as he winked over to where Torly and Yoor were lounging, soaking up the atmosphere.

"So you are now a special representative? Of the county?" Eyes narrowed, Lhut tried to grasp the meaning of this.

"Yes," Enim nodded. "I am in the employ of the Council of Varoonya, charged with writing reports on the situation in Shebbetin, so that the Council is well informed and can take action."

"Good." Lhut paused. "But isn't that what we did last time? You just wrote a report, to the Council bureaus, so that they would be informed and able to take action."

Enim cleared his throat. "True. But I guess my letters were too short and sketchy after all. I have brought back some other reports, examples of what kind of thing gets submitted to the Council, so I can get a better idea of how this should be done."

"Good," Lhut said again, but it sounded more like someone lost in thought than someone full of enthusiasm.

Enim spread his hands in an open-ended gesture. "I guess we just have to say it more than once. More than twice, even. But surely we will not be discouraged so quickly?"

\* \* \*

"Is it so hard to realize we exist?!"

Kaya was fuming. "Can't they see? Or do they simply not care?"

She began to pace up and down the Snuggery courtyard. "What we need is not better reports. It is a better Council! One that understands. And acts!"

Enim rubbed the back of his head. "Well. There will be a new Council. But I don't know if that's going to help."

Kaya spun around. "There will be a new Council?"

Enim nodded. "Yes, of course. You know the Choosing is at solstice. After that, the new Council gets formed."

Kaya was looking off into the distance. Her finger aimlessly traced the scar at her temple. "There is a Choosing," Kaya said to the wind. "And we do not know. Since we have never chosen a Council, and never heard or seen anything of the Council that would help us here in Shebbetin, we do not know. We have never cared."

"How do you mean, you have never chosen a Council?" Enim asked. And then he almost bit his tongue. He turned his face away, pale. "People in Shebbetin have not been included in the Choosing?" Enim's voice was low, tense.

Kaya said nothing, staring blindly ahead.

"The owners have been," Lhut murmured after a pause. "I think. They go to Behrlem, where the Choosing for Shebbetin happens."

There was a strained silence.

"We have never known," Kaya finally said, still in that distant voice. "We have never cared. However," she said, her gaze coming back to this world, "maybe this time, we will."

Her voice grew loud and strong. "We will be there! In the Choosing!" She tilted her head back, shouting into the sky.

"And we will bring the right people into the Council! Ourselves!"

\*

Two of the children bustled importantly up the steps into the Snuggery. Enim leaned sideways to make room for them. He had finished, anyway. Translated, or explained the whole thing to Yoor and Torly as best as he could.

Torly's mouth formed a round "Oh."

But Yoor caught fire immediately. He got up, letting his body move with the tale. "Yes! Excellent! We will launch our own grouping! The grouping of The Mountain. When we are in, the Council will definitely realize that Shebbetin exists. The people will raise us up! And once we are the chosen ones, we can make anything happen!"

Yoor mimed waving a flag in the wind, or possibly galloping across country on horseback. Several kids raised their heads with interest.

Torly snorted. She turned to Enim. "Do we even know how to register for the Choosing?"

Enim spread his hands. "No. Of course not."

Yoor looked down at them. "Never mind! We'll find out! Won't we?" His eyes sought Torly's.

"Well. Um." Torly cocked her head.

The two important children bustled back out of the Snuggery, a rag doll cradled carefully by one, a book and a tambourine by the other.

Torly ran a hand through her hair, tugging at a wayward curl. "I suppose someone in Varoonya is bound to know this. And we're going back soon anyway."

She raised her head determinedly.

"Yes. We can do it!"

\* \* \*

"I don't believe in the golden morrow."

Manaam let his hand slip off Cahuan's shoulder and took a few steps to the window, staring out to where the pedalcart was waiting for her to continue her round of errands.

Manaam's face darkened. "I can't imagine they'll be in the Council. And I don't believe the county will come and make everything right either." He stood with his back turned, his gaze lost among the trees of the avenue.

"You do know, however," Cahuan murmured, "that of all the things Kaya has done so far, none sounded remotely possible when she first mentioned them."

Manaam snorted. He let his brow fall against the pane.

"Maybe." He turned around to Cahuan, shaking his head. "I am not one to reach for the stars. I won't keep others from trying, though. And should they ever succeed, against all my expectations, I will be thrilled."

His lips curved into a crooked, woeful line. "The most I can aim for with this is to be open. To allow for a mere possibility, a sliver of hope. To stay awake. So that if perhaps one day a falling star does indeed come within my reach, I will not fail to catch it."

Manaam turned around to face Cahuan. "But I would like to do something here and now. Something that will actually work. Where I can see how."

With one gentle hand, Manaam cupped the round flowerpot that sat on the windowsill. "Of course it would be much better to have the county come in and set up well-funded learning pavilions for all children in one go."

Manaam carefully ran a finger along the young green leaves sprouting from the earth. "But what if the county never shows? Then there will be nothing at all. Unless we grow it ourselves, with what we have. Let us at least give a few kids a home. Right here, right now."

Manaam found Cahuan's gaze.

"Come. We'll start another snuggery."

\* \* \*

The day at the Snuggery was in full swing. Torly and Yoor had settled in, immersing themselves as best as they could even without speaking any Vanian.

But the children helped. With hands and feet and some Kokish. Pulan briefly interrupted her doings to explain to Torly, all while the second girl kept holding on to the other end of the wooden plank Pulan had tucked under her arm.

"We build cart. Like this," Pulan pointed to the Snuggery's handcart. "But half as big. This is bottom," Pulan raised her shoulder and the board underneath. "But we must think. The cart half as big. So what boards we need? Half as big? Or same big, but half as many? What is half as big, really?" Pulan gave a high, inquisitive whistle and completely forgot about Torly as she crouched down again with the other girl, both putting their heads together over a measuring stick and a piece of slate, trying to figure this out.

Quena, the youngest, was rubbing her fingers over the letters carved into wooden boards along the walls and filling the drawing next to each letter with chalk. Later she walked over and watched Lunin write down a text on a slate. His twin sister Lasa read it to him with considerable difficulty, and both kids kept checking back and forth between the story book and the slate to make sure all the words were as they should be.

In the back corner, the old woman Torly had already seen explaining herbs in the meadow sat on the floor in dignified elder pose, weaving grass mats with three children from the Mansion.

Lhut had been walking on his hands in the courtyard, inspiring a number of children to try and imitate him, or to at least stand on their hands while leaning against the wall for support. Lhut had left them, however, when one girl had gotten into a fight and come to him to cry her heart out. Lhut had sat down on a blanket, holding her close, murmuring into her ear every now and then. Slowly, she had recovered, and was now, still in Lhut's arms, trying to make sense of what had happened to her, and to figure out whether she should apologize or what else could be done to make things right again.

Som was dancing around Yoor in a blur of frills and ribbons and checkered tunic. She did her best to explain the Snuggery in Kokish.

"This here," Som gestured toward the stairs leading up the side wall of the courtyard, "is tailor family. Three tailors, one baby. The baby here with us some more day. We carry and feed and play." Som demonstrated carrying a baby, almost getting close to Lasa and Lunin in their role-playing mode.

"They tailor shop very great. Many ribbons. Many colors." She raised the patches of her tunic with a meaningful look at Yoor. "When they say yes, I go watch tailors." Som squeezed one eye shut, focusing on a long swath of imaginary cloth with the other, cutting a perfectly precise line with her scissory fingers. "I learn," Som added proudly.

"And also! Tailor family always here. We can shout them, always. When Cahuan and Lhut not here and terrible things happen."

Yoor smiled, his eyes on the door to the wonderful world of helpful and competent tailors.

Cahuan was mending clothes with a six-year-old boy who kept losing his thread and looking over at Cahuan to remember how to place a stitch.

Torly moved over to Enim and asked him about the origins of the Snuggery and its children.

Enim did his best to explain.

“Of course children, even in Shebbetin, usually have at least three or four parents, just like anywhere else. Parents who cease to be lovers go on being parents. Parents who fall in love bring in their new partners. So usually there is a healthy little network, growing over time, where the children always have some parent they can turn to in difficult times. But when children start out with only two or even one parent, and something happens to that very last one—where do they go? Who can they turn to? With no county services at all.”

Enim’s face was grim. “In Shebbetin, parents get lost more easily than elsewhere. People die, due to accidents, hard labor, poor food, poor housing. Some leave. Some despair. So if there wasn’t a strong and large network of parents to start out with, children can end up being left alone.”

Enim took a deep breath. “Cahuan took in the kids of a friend who died. And then others she knew, and then kids people brought to her because they had heard of the Snuggery.”

Cahuan met Torly’s gaze. She had been listening to Enim’s tale with one ear during her sewing. “Yes. This how it was. This how we are.” She nodded encouragingly at the boy by her side who had just managed to find his thread again. Cahuan smiled, as if the sad story had come to a happy ending after all.

Torly looked around, observing the children scattered across the room, and could understand why. There was something very right about the Snuggery, she felt. Something very, very right.

Little Quena had fallen asleep curled up in Lhut's arm. Cahuan cuddled up to Lhut's other side, burying her face in the crook of his neck. She sighed happily. Lhut was large and strong, and so familiar. This was the man who had been by her side all those days full of children, all those nights full of pain and hope.

Cahuan kissed him gently on the cheek. Lhut grunted approvingly and a warm wave swept through Cahuan, causing her to kiss him once again, on the lips this time, fully and tenderly. She nestled up to him, the curves of her body melting into his. With her arm lying loosely across Lhut's chest, she rested a hand on Quena's back, feeling the child's little chest rise and fall. Cahuan gave a blissful little moan. Her home. Her family. She felt the glow of happiness run through her like a slow caress.

Lhut shifted slightly and a hiss of pain escaped him. His muscles tensed. He tried to calm his uneven breath, but it still came raggedly.

"Help me?" Lhut mumbled into Cahuan's thick mermaid hair.

"Hmm," Cahuan nodded against his skin. She laid a gentle hand on the edge of his thigh.

Lhut exhaled deeply, with deliberate effort. As his sleepy mind relaxed its spell, the ache came back, the pain that would live on forever in his phantom leg, in his body's memory of what had been torn away. Gnawing at Lhut, keeping him from sleep, locking him into a wheel of suffering.

But there was a way out.

Lhut began to whisper. Cahuan joined in, letting their mingled voices grow into an incantation, a solemn, powerful raga that wove patterns into the night. The song of an ocean, where the pain has lain forgotten all day, down in the deep. But whence it woke come darkness, transforming into a dragon that rose up, hungry and restless, until it broke surface with a roar of fury, its mighty tail lashing the foaming waves.



But in the blackness over the waters hovered a prayer, a song of yearning and need, of trust and hope. Held safely within its magic, Lhut drifted away into the quiet dreams of the universe, into the embrace of the stars.

\*            \*            \*

They had known what to expect. Enim had told them, after all. And yet. As Torly and Yoor walked away from the work cabin's door, they were quiet. Very quiet.

Dark clouds shrouded the sky, casting the highlands into dreary shadow. A gusty wind shook the grass, whipping Enim's hair across his face.

"Some say," Enim broke the silence in a hesitant voice, "that there is a spell cast over these cabins. That they use magic. Dark magic." Gloomy mountains looked down on him. "There is an old mage here, Pramus. People have seen him fill the cabins with reeking smoke, dipping the children's tool in a potion, or marking their brows. They say he uses magic to give the jewels a special gleam, like the one in the eye of a happy child. The sparkle of life, of enthusiasm, of youth. He transfers it, they say. From the eyes of the child into the heart of the diamond."

Scrawny bushes held on to the hillside, their thin, bony branches whipped by the wind.

"You have been with old mages, Yoor. Learned from them, and about them, more than any of us. Could they hold such powers?" Enim's eyes were searching, uncertain.

Yoor looked down on his feet as he walked. His face darkened. He drew his arms around him, as if to keep from shivering.

"No." His voice barely more than a whisper. "And yes. They do."

Yoor swallowed. "I have been apprenticed in that mage's tower for only a few moons. But I almost did not make it out again. Even though this was just one lone castle, a tiny coven. Remnants of their ancient reign, of the realm the mages commanded at the age of the Feudals. And still. The atmosphere even in that ruin was so intense, so overpowering it almost devoured me. We were just a handful of acolytes. But everyone in there had dissolved into the spell. We only existed to serve the master. There was no other purpose, no other reason left in the world. He determined what was good, what was bad. Who you were, and who you could be. I came to fear him, to love him, to revolve around him with all of my being, trying to sense

him, to please him, to divine what he wanted. And I'd fail, inevitably, and hate and despise myself for it, trying to redeem myself by being ever more obedient, more devoted."

Yoor's brow furrowed. "I spent my days shivering, fearful I might have sinned, angered the master, offended the demons. Who would then come down on me. The mage's whim and the demon's rage became one and the same thing, and the whole world dissolved into them. There was nothing else anymore."

Yoor raised his head to squint out into the distance, toward the ragged line where the mountains met the sky.

He clutched his arms around the chest a little more tightly. "Even though I knew the mage was casting illusions. Even though I had come to learn just that. And I did. But still. The mage's true power was not in the visible vision he created. It was in everything. In the frightful walls of that tower, in the hour he woke you at night. In the way he let you wait, kneeling, cowering, until you were yearning to fall down at his feet."

Yoor licked his lips. "Only then did the mirage appear. The demon."

Thunder rolled in the distance.

"That mage created a whole world of meaning. A reality so compelling you could not help but live in it. And behave in the only way it allowed you to."

Yoor drew a deep breath. "So, yes. Yes. I have seen old mages use magic powerful enough to shackle children to a cabin, where they keep on polishing jewels until their own lives wither away."

\*

The storm broke. Enim, Torly and Yoor ran toward the edge of town in a downpour, seeking shelter in the first tavern they could find.

Wet and disheveled, they huddled together on the unheated kang in a corner, blankets around their shoulders and mugs of hot soup in their hands. Thick tears of rain ran down the windowpanes.

Yoor was looking out over the windswept hill, back up to the cabin. The laughter that always seemed to be lurking in his eyes had gone, to be replaced with a reflection of stormy clouds and dark memories.

He swallowed. "That apprenticeship was the most frightening time of my life, in many ways. Most of all because I was losing myself. Even when I had fled the tower."

Yoor stared down into his steaming mug. “I did not know who I was. What had happened to me. I knew I had found my power, the magic that was alive in me. I had learned the language of dreams, the summoning of visions, even though the mage never taught me. But that gift was so strong within me it burst forth at the slightest provocation. I knew this was my calling. But I was horrified, even while I was drawn irresistibly. That craft was evil. All the mages come before had used it as a stranglehold on people’s minds and hearts. Centuries of oppression had soaked that practice. Every little gesture, every slanted rune seemed to hold vile powers, appalling memories. A legacy of dominion. I was so scared. Who would I become? Would I fall into the patterns of a vicious past if I so much as touched that magic?”

Yoor pulled the blanket tight around his hip. “I did not know how to move.”

He raised an arm. From his shimmering blue palm, a trail of golden stars rose up to swirl around the windowpane. “So this is where I have turned. To pleasures and amusements. I have taken the dark heritage out of the dungeon, into the sunlight. To a bright and open meadow, a light-hearted, easy-going, naive and powerless place. I wanted that space to be the opposite of that tower in every way, to let the magic be reborn there, innocent and free.”

\* \* \*

The Snuggery was cleaning up after breakfast when Enim realized he had to go back to his room. He had forgotten to bring over the papers, his examples of what reports to the Council should look like. Torly and Yoor were going to look at them too, all while spending their day in the Snuggery.

Enim got as far as his door before he stopped short, freezing in place. A scraping and bumping came from inside, and the harsh clank of an object hitting the ground.

Enim stood motionless, hand on the handle. Cautiously, he bent down to look through the keyhole. A moment later he tore the door open.

“You!” he hissed. “Wrollic!”

A furry little being, no bigger than a hand, straightened up beside a fallen milk bottle. Around him lay, in wild disarray, what must have been the contents of all of Enim’s shelves and drawers.

Like a flash of lightening, the little being darted across the room,

dodging Enim, and shot across the lane into the Snuggery courtyard. There he stopped, hanging on to the railings of the staircase in the side wall with tiny hands. Enim, who had followed in hot pursuit, came to a halt several paces away. The wrollic looked at him with wide round eyes and an expression of extreme innocence.

Enim growled.

"Yes," he muttered, "you have done nothing wrong. Not that you are aware of, anyway."

The wrollic tilted his head slightly and twitched a little round ear toward Enim. His bushy tail swayed softly back and forth, caressing the baluster. Or getting ready for action. Enim planted his feet firmly on the ground and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Now," he said somewhat menacingly, "are you going to do anything for me? Anything to make up for the mess you have made? Beyond hanging in there, looking cute?"

The wrollic cocked his head the other way and wiggled his ears some more. He held on to the railing with the hands and legs facing his belly. His other pairs of hands and legs, the ones facing his back, were idly playing with the iron bar next to him, and the air in between.

Then the wrollic somersaulted downward, head over tail a number of times, a whirling tumble of hair and air and color, then shot up again on the outside, darted across the length of the stairs and flew up and down the balusters. In movements so swift the eye could hardly follow, he wove a pattern of dance across the air, barely touching the railings, pirouetting lightly, reeling and flitting, shooting up and down, back and forth in a dizzying merry-go-around. In a breathtaking display of nimble lightness, he whirled around the railings like a storm.

Then the wrollic came to a halt. Head down, dangling from just one foot, he hung from the topmost bit of railing. He pressed all his arms tightly against his body, making himself look all stiff, then tilted his head slightly to one side.

"Wow," Enim said admiringly. "That was quite something. I am impressed." He cocked his head in an imitation of the wrollic. "Actually, I have to say that even you hanging in there, looking cute, is quite something. It might indeed make it all worth the while."

The wrollic swayed his tail, contemplating Enim. Then his eyes narrowed as he opened his mouth in a wide grin and let out a sequence of high, cackling laughter.

Enim snorted, but a grin had stolen into his face as well. "Yes," he conceded. "I guess it is all good fun in the end. Nevertheless. Don't do it again, all right? Just come to visit, without all the mess."

The wrollic chuckled some more, then danced up and down the baluster again, more slowly this time, more melodiously.

Then he dropped out of sight. Enim was perplexed. He looked at the bottom of the stairs, at the ground between his feet, the path behind his back. No wrollic. Enim looked up, and the smile came back into his face. Right above him, halfway between the stairs and the roof, a small furry being was hanging in the wall.

"There you are," Enim said, and the wrollic acknowledged that by laughing lightly and by being somewhere else instantly. Enim saw him reappear on the roof a moment later, where he began to tear at the straw with great fervor.

"No!" Enim shouted. "Stop that! No tearing out thatch from our roof! We need it there. It keeps the rain out, you see?" The wrollic looked at Enim, his tiny hands still gripping the straw.

"You are welcome to take a bite, though," Enim added, ready to compromise. "A small one. Off the end, preferably." The wrollic bent down to the straw, his eyes fixed on Enim. Then a tiny pink tongue came out and licked a stalk.

"Yes! Very good! That is the perfect thing!" Enim called out in tones of strong approval. "Just what you should be doing to all the enticements you meet. Give them a small, gentle kiss. Then leave them lie. We will all be very happy this way."

The wrollic cackled, gave the thatch a good slap and disappeared over the ridge. Enim kept craning his head, looking for the wrollic on various parts of the roof. Beside him, Som, who had come out the door in a cloud of colors a moment earlier, was doing the same. They bent down, scouring the ground. The corners. The nooks by the windows. No wrollic.

But all the children were in the loop by now, and all excited. "A wrollic! How cute! How wonderful!" Everyone was searching the courtyard once again. "Perhaps he is still here somewhere! Will he come back? Why didn't you call us! What did he do? Will he come again?"

Cahuan had also stepped outside, her moss-green skin shimmering in the gentle light.

"Wrollic! Wrollic!" Several children were calling out in low, coaxing voices, or strong, audible voices, or something in between

and beyond. They were waving and signaling, running and jumping, crawling and scouring. If the wrollic was indeed still anywhere near, he could not possibly have missed the excitement.

"What if we left potatoes out here for the wrollic?" Som suggested. "Maybe he would come back, and even without causing a mess inside."

"That's a nice thought." Cahuan put an arm around Som's shoulder. "I'm not sure it would work, though. As far as I know, wrollics don't actually need to eat anything. But they need to taste everything. They thrive on experience. They need to dip their nose in, touch everything, smell everything. Lick and swallow. See and hear. Climb up and down and in and out again. That is how they live. That is what they live on. Even in a meadow, they will take just one bite out of every plant. Drink nectar from each flower, taste each petal, just once. Then they move on. I guess that is why they empty all the drawers in a room too. They do not need any of the things in there. But they need to know what they are. To sniff them, squeeze them, try them all out, just once, then dance away."

"'Just once' are the key words in that sentence, I would say," Enim muttered, thinking of his ravaged room. "Let's hope you are right."

But Som was not interested in keeping it at 'just once.' Quite the opposite. "But then," she suggested eagerly, "we could put something interesting onto that staircase, something new every day. So the wrollic will always find something worth coming back for." She demonstratively tugged at the myriad colored flaps and ribbons on her tunic.

Cahuan smiled and pulled the girl close. "Maybe," she nodded. "You can certainly try. Maybe the wrollic will be interested in what you put there. Or in you, if you keep wooing him so persistently. They can be befriended, I believe. In a loose, open, freedom-loving sort of way."

\* \* \*

In the outer quarter, dust devils were wheezing through the lanes on gusty winds, stifling people's breath. Fetid smells rose off patches of refuse, miasmas of sickness and misery. A mangy dog limped away, tail between his legs. His thin whine lingered on, hovering like an omen over an overgrown pile of rubble and the two children hiding behind it. Taking up the whine, the small girl hid her face in her brother's arm.

Cautiously, the boy peered out over the weed and debris. From the house across the lane came clamor and angry wails. A thud, and a piercing scream. A shutter banged hard against the frame before the door flew open and a man stomped out with an air of furious determination, dragging a wiry girl of about ten behind him.

He shouted straight into her face. "Shut up, Yunda! Be grateful to go to a work cabin! In the mine you'd end up like this," he raised the stump of his left arm. "Or dead."

His right hand gripped Yunda's arm like an iron claw. Red-eyed, her mouth a thin, straight line, the girl let herself be pulled along.

\*

Terrified silence filled the cabin. All children had their hands on the workbench, fingers laced, head bowed. They could not see the mage. Not clearly. But they knew enough. Reliving the nightmare of their own initiation, they were petrified into rigid stillness.

Smoke billowed up, filling the lungs of the newcomers with choking bitterness. A grim incantation rolled out over the mage's tongue, arcane words of power, harsh and guttural, commanding and relentless.

Yunda shivered as she felt the ring of fire descend from the crown of her head over her whole body down to her feet, where magical chains locked her to the ground. In the depth of the earth, Yunda could see a deep dark pit, and the face of the demon that would be set loose should she ever try to leave.

But Yunda was a witch. She knew how to protect herself against dark magic! Keeping her tongue in her cheek, her fingers crossed inside her pocket, she bent her head down low, looking to all the world like a cowed, terrified child.

But beneath her dark lashes, her eyes were ablaze.

Ethereal music filled the Snuggery courtyard, the sounds of an endless sky. The children walked off gallantly, each one with their head held high, their eyes shining, the invisible star on their brows marking them out as gracious fairy druids.

As they disappeared into the house, their path of sparkling stardust melted back into the ground. Yoor let his own ears grow round again, covered up by his silvery hair.

Torly came to kiss his cheek. Her voice was soft. "That was beautiful, my swan. These children will remember for a long time to come that they are precious and magical."

Yoor's eyes held a deep smile. He bowed to Torly with a flourish. "Here I am, at your service: the magician of your dreams, ready to bewitch your heart and to enchant your senses. To capture you with my charms, and gift you with a golden sun living on in your soul forever more."

Torly laughed. She kissed him again. "Yoor. You truly are in love with yourself, aren't you?"

"I am indeed." Yoor raised a graceful hand of shimmering blue. "And shouldn't I be?" He swirled around her like a dancer. "I am ravishing, surely? And even if I were not: There are other good reasons to hold myself dear. For I tend to love others as much as I love myself. So the higher that level, the better for everyone, isn't it? I really ought to cherish myself with all my might."

Torly cocked her head.

Yoor traced his finger along the line of her cheek. "I could worry about vanity, of course," he conceded. "But I much prefer not to." There was a glint in his eye. "I'd rather choose to laugh and dance, to shout out loud, without restraint, of my own beauty and of the beauty of the world. We can all be wonderful in it together, can't we? So why would I hold back. Why wouldn't I love myself as much as I possibly can?"



Yoor pulled Torly close again, swaying her to a melody that now drifted around his body like perfume. "And you too," he murmured. "And the wind, and the sky, and the moon."

Torly gave a gentle laugh and danced him on across the courtyard.

On the far end, Cahuan had remained standing on the threshold of the Snuggery. Her magical lantern let a trace of gold ripple out over her skin, which had otherwise turned a deep moss green with the coming of night.

"Just look at her, for example," Yoor marveled. "All beauty, outside and in."

Moving with the fluid artlessness and natural poise of her full, round body, Cahuan stepped down into the courtyard.

"Yes. I was drawn to her from the very first day." Torly glided on, leaning into the music. "But we will be leaving in a few days," Torly reminded both herself and Yoor. "Do not nourish any dreams in your heart."

"I like nourishing dreams in my heart," Yoor replied plaintively. "And who would not do so at the sight of her? She simply radiates grace, blessing everyone in her surroundings. The children. Lhut. Truly, I find that more and more, I am including Lhut in my worship as well."

"Yoor!" Torly chortled. "Are you actually falling in love with everybody you meet?"

"I have a big heart," Yoor replied weightily.

"You do." Torly kissed his nose. "And you are a big flirt."

Yoor pouted. "If I were, I surely would be smothered in kisses from a host of people at all times. But I am not, as you can see. In fact, half the people I adore never even get to know about my passion."

"Yes. And the other half end up in bed with you, don't they?"

Yoor's lip twitched. He gently ran a finger down Torly's neck. "Wild rumors, feverish imagination," he murmured. "In truth, I come to lie with no more people than you."

Torly winked at him. Her dark brown eyes were full of light, of a smile born from deep within her soul. "Go spread your love, my swan. It is what you are born for."

Yoor raised her fingertips to his lips.

"Yes. It is what we are all born for."

"Of course you should still write your report!"

Looking back up over her shoulder, Kaya gave Enim a vehement nod. "We will need it! When we are in the Council, we must still have some paper to hand to people. It can't be talk only. With my Kokish, on top of it. So yes, by all means. Write your reports! We will rely on them."

Kaya carefully stirred the embers in her oven, making sure they would keep up the gentle, constant heat the drying racks needed. The people renting the oven for the day would be back any moment now, bringing even more baskets full of berries and mushrooms. Subtle fragrances of summer and mountain were mingling with the scents of the fire.

Kaya straightened up. She crossed her arms over her chest. "However. If what we are doing here truly has power, it will put us in danger." Her face darkened. "If Naydeer has collapsed a ton of stone onto our heads for challenging her one mine, what is she going to do when she sees we are taking on the whole of Shebbetin?"

Enim froze in mid-motion, rack in hand. "You don't think...?"

"I do." Kaya's voice was grim. "At least, we have to be prepared. If we are truly bringing the Transition to Shebbetin, reversing all the power structures, the injustices and inequalities, then Naydeer is not going to sit by idly. I don't know what she will do. But she will not do nothing."

Kaya turned an intense gaze on Enim. "We shall work in secret. For as long as we possibly can. We won't tell people about the Choosing until we know we are ready to go. And you, don't tell anyone you're a Special Representative. Go on working as an artificer. With just a few contracts, so you still have enough time for the reports. But if you keep your cover, Naydeer will not suspect, and not threaten you in any way. Or us, for telling you all we know."

\* \* \*

The clouds had gathered into high, dark mountains during the day, full of rain and charged with tension. They shoved and hustled each other across the sky, impatient and angry, pressing heavily into the wind but unable to find release.

Yet another storm broke.

Kaya's eyes were blazing. "You a tourist!" she snarled at Yoor. "You not know! Not understand. You not live here! You come here little days, look at things, then go home have nice life. You think all a big

joke. You laugh. But this not a joke! This real life! For real people! You only dance. But it important! Important do right thing here. For real! If you know what mean 'real,'" she finished viciously.

Yoor blushed. He said nothing, staring down at the ground between his feet. Then he looked up again, past Kaya's face. "What if I do the right thing, and laugh and dance while I am doing it? Is that not good enough?"

It was a warm day, redolent of wildflowers and summer skies. All the children were roaming outside, running across the Mansion to the first meadows, or frolicking in the Snuggery courtyard.

Som sat on an upturned flowerpot, little Quena in her lap. She continued singing and nodded encouragingly at Yoor, who promptly let his voice grow stronger. Pulan whistled a high, sweet rhapsody above, while Lasa began to cluck and patter a low beat underneath.

His eyes locked with Som's, Yoor tried to keep up with the music that came so naturally to the children. And gradually, he began to sense the rhythm in his blood, to know the strange harmony that all these mountain tunes seemed to share. He almost started to feel at home in the song.

But when Kaya stepped into the courtyard, he missed a beat. His voice grew strained and thin. His eyes darted to Kaya and then away again, flitting from contact to cover. Their song came to an end.

Kaya gave Yoor a curt nod and passed on to talk to Lhut in the corner.

Yoor gave her a curt nod in return, even if to her back. He followed her with his gaze.

Then he shrugged.

Turning to Som, he offered a few tentative notes. Som picked the right one and burst into a lively summer song, instantly winning Lasa and Yoor over. Pulan couldn't stand that tune, but after some angry bird calls, she joined in with a flute-like whistle nevertheless.

Lunin came by to dance and before long, Yoor's voice was as full and rich, as unrestrained and happy as it had ever been.

\* \* \*

A whip crashed down on the banister, and its ghost on the backs of all children in the cabin. They cringed. They shivered, the memory of that rod on their own skin vividly emblazoned on each of their young bodies, each of their tender souls.

Yunda bit her lip. It hurt. The flesh was still raw from where a strike had landed a few days before, bruising her face rather than her back when she had jerked around under her first lashing.

None of the children looked up now. Not even Yunda.

They all kept their eyes focused on their workbench, on the shiny jewels, the intricate arabesques of silver that held their lives.

\* \* \*

"We need extra coin to start new Snuggeries." Manaam turned to face Cahuan. "I am able, myself, to provide additional coin for a while. However, in the long run, we must have more support."

He strode across the parlor, his shapely legs set off to advantage by the short dark silks he wore. "That's why I intend to give a ball and invite you too, as a special guest. I am sure the owners will be interested. Even if they only come to see the butterfly, they surely will come. And when they set eyes on you they will be spellbound, and hopefully willing to give funds for the children."

Cahuan froze. "What?" she said, aghast. "Am I to pose as a butterfly? To lure and charm people?" Her voice was strained. "I am not some exotic attraction to stare at. I am not a fantastical beast to be put on display to amuse an audience. Why should I have to put myself out to entice people?"

Her face had grown pale beneath her mermaid shimmer. "There are children in need. Is that not reason enough to be there for them? Why would it need an extra butterfly to charm these people into doing what's right? If my skin was brown, would they just let the children starve?" Cahuan was practically shaking by now.

Manaam stood very still. His gaze was riveted on her face. Cahuan stared back angrily. Her whole body was tense, her fists tight, her knuckles showing.

Then her shoulders sagged and her back softened. With a deep sigh, she walked up to Manaam, closing the short distance between them.

Manaam met her stiffly. His hand came up in a jerky, angular move to rest on her arm. "Is this how you feel about it?" His voice was husky.

Cahuan nodded shakily. "Yes. At least at first instinct. But," she grumbled, "I expect I will come to see reason. If this is how it is, how things go. I may hate it, but it will not kill me. And it will save the children. Some sacrifices have to be made." Cahuan tried to give a brave smile, but it came out rather weakly. She looked wretched.

Manaam swallowed. "I am sorry," he muttered. "I had no idea you would think it such a horror." He fidgeted. He turned away from Cahuan hesitantly, uncertainly, twisting his fingers in a restless grip. His shoulders were rigid. "Your reaction is very strong." He cleared his throat. "It almost seems as if there is a lot of pent-up suffering behind it. A lot of bad experiences. A lot of accumulated pain right beneath the surface, ready to shoot up in an instant."

Manaam crossed his arms over the chest. "I wonder," he said in a constricted voice, "if I may have anything to do with that?" His face was drawn. "I provide funds for the Snuggery. When I ask you to visit me for business, you practically have to come. However, when you do, I also touch you and kiss you. Every now and then, we conclude the evening by making love. I wonder. Has any of that ever gone against your grain? Do you feel obliged to humor me, to charm me, to go beyond what you would willingly offer, in order to keep the funds flowing?" His eyes searched her face almost desperately.

Cahuan stared back at him. Then she came over in one swift move and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. "Manaam," she said softly. "No. No. Never. I have never kissed you without meaning every bit of it. If you lost all your wealth tomorrow, I would still be your friend. And I would still want to make love to you, just like now." She kissed him lightly on the cheek, then pulled back to look into his eyes.

Manaam held her gaze. Finally he lowered his head. "Yes." He exhaled. "I hope so." With a deep sigh, he let his temple come to rest against Cahuan's seaweed hair, dipping his nose into the lush fragrance of her skin.

A crooked smile rose to his lips. "However, if you truly felt obliged to flatter, charm, and deceive me, you would still be saying just that. Because it clearly is what I wanted to hear. So how will I ever know?" But his mouth was still curved, and his body soft.

Cahuan gave him a playful shove and pulled a slipping sleeve back up over his bared shoulder. "You never will. For that last lingering bit of doubt, there is only one remedy. Independence."

She took a small step back, still holding on to his hand. "If all that coin were no longer yours to decide on. If it were put aside, to be spent only on the children, even if you changed you mind tomorrow. If that small fortune were to be theirs, rather than yours, I would no longer depend on you. And then you would know, beyond doubt."

The light from the window sent a shimmer of pale gold running

over her cheek, to get lost somewhere in the shadows beneath her chin. Manaam stood quiet for a long while, without making a move. Then he tilted his head back, groaning softly. "Ah," he moaned, "you are a thorn in my flesh." His eyes held a spark as he looked at Cahuan. "But a good one," he added. "The needle of a healer, maybe?"

He licked his lips. "So are you suggesting that I give up power? That I give up wealth? Much more than I have done already?" His gaze traveled out into the distance as he seemed to be listening to the echo of his own words. He ran a finger down the latticework that graced the window, eventually touching ground, tapping against an ink stone resting on the sill.

"I am not going to," he rasped, almost inaudibly. "I don't think I will. I like my wealth too much."

His eyes were feverish as he met Cahuan's gaze. "I can see that I have no right to that fortune. I have done nothing to deserve it, nothing more than anyone else. I have inherited, that's all. There is no justice in this."

He rubbed a silken slipper over the polished floor. "But now I have that wealth. And while it may not be right or just, it certainly is very comfortable. And I do not even mean the big house or the fine foods. That too. But being able to take my own decisions is comfortable as well. I am independent, yes. And I like it. I am not going to give up that independence, to hand it over to somebody else. I don't think I have the strength to share in that way. I won't."

He looked straight at Cahuan again, the light still burning in his eyes. "There you have it. Truth." Manaam bowed his head.

Cahuan said nothing.

Her eyes rested on Manaam's face, taking in his drawn eyebrows, his pale amber skin, the stray lock of hair falling over his ear. She stood there with him, motionless, in perfect silence.

Pulan and Som shoveled ripened soil from the old privy box while Torly helped Cahuan move the seat onto the new now-empty box. Between half-filled flowerpots on the ground, little Quena and two other girls were building an earthling, whose body form seemed to suggest close kinship with the common snowman.

Yoor, all smeared and dusty after some vigorous digging, was trying to show Lasa and Lunin how to create a mirage. The energy of their role playing came so close already, Yoor felt, so close! Together with all their enthusiasm for magical illusions they were bound to stumble across the threshold one of these days.

"We don't have a vim stone!" Lasa exclaimed suddenly, slapping a hand against her forehead. "It can't possibly work! We need power for magic." Lasa came to Yoor with her arm outstretched, fully expecting an enchanted crystal to be dropped into her palm.

But Yoor did not understand. It had all been in Vanian. Enim came to his aid.

"Ah," Yoor nodded. "But vim stones are only for traptions."

Enim stayed to translate while Yoor let visions weave in with his words. "The magic I work gets its power from passion. From people's feelings, convictions, and memories. From wishes, fears, desires."

Waves of emotion rose up in Yoor's music, crushing ashore with ardent fervor in the eyes of a lost pilgrim, a dying swan. Fleeting images of a lover's kiss changed into galloping horsemen, into a veil blowing in the wind. A lone temple in the desert turned into a book that crumbled to dust, a rich, fertile soil from which a sapling scroll rose up, sprouting leaves and rich, purple flowers, sweet nectar dropping down like ink.

"Each tale I tell grows out of tales that have come before. Dreams live on dreams. They need to be free, flowing from one person to the next, changing and blossoming, ripe fruits falling on fertile ground in another's soul."



Lasa and Lunin had added themselves right to the center of the mirage, growing into tale-filled scrolls and dripping down inkily to become dragon eggs in their next life. As the dragons returned from their flight around the courtyard and lay down on the page of a book, Yoor's music softened into the ethereal sounds of the stars, a quiet symphony of the universe.

"All dreams live on, in a realm inside each of us, and beyond all of us. We shape them with every wish we hold, every twinge we feel. We are in their lives always, as they are in ours."

Lasa and Lunin gazed up at the night sky, listening to Yoor's voice drift down to them from the constellations. "What I do is to make myself their friend, their apprentice, their midwife. That is the magic I weave. Tapestries of the dreamscape, filled with the power of yearning and memory."

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The Snuggery's ivory tower was getting some attention too. Lhut and two of the girls were shaking the wriggling ivories over a sieve, determining who was to go back into the growing boxes, and who was going to be eaten. A few younger kids crowded around them giving opinions, including whether perhaps no one should be eaten at all, but everyone allowed to grow up and fly away.

On a bench between the vines Torly cuddled up to Yoor. "I wish I had grown up in a learning pavilion like this."

Yoor tilted his head to one side. "Hmm. It is marvelous. Full of love. But... there are no lectures, are there?"

Torly shrugged. "So? The point of it is the learning, not the lecturing, isn't it? The kids here learn everything. They learn how to calculate—and to hammer—because they want to build a cart. They learn how to write because they watch others enthusiastically copy texts from a book. They know how to make music or lunch, flower beds or bandages. How get on with each other and even negotiate with the neighbors. And most importantly: how to have their own ideas and projects and an interest in life. I think they learn everything they need."

Yoor tilted his head the other way and thought about his own childhood. About hours and hours of sitting still in a group of painfully restrained children who were listening to the official teachings instead of following their own curiosity.

He nodded pensively.

Then Cahuan came up to them and Torly leaned forward to give her a fervent hug. "Thank you. For everything. You are wonderful. And so is the Snuggery."

Cahuan rewarded Torly with a kiss and a warm smile. "We happy you here." Her brow creased a little. "And we have more snuggeries, soon future. Many children need very much. We soon can make for them."

Cahuan pushed back her unruly hair with an uncertain hand. "Only now coin. Manaam will do party with owners for it. And I will go and be beautiful there. So everyone will look and like." She grimaced ferociously.

Yoor raised his brows. "But that's good, isn't it?"

Cahuan gave an impolite grunt. "I not like make show butterfly."

Yoor's jaw dropped. "You do not?" Shock and disbelief washed over his face. He stared at Cahuan wide-eyed, trying to find an anchor in her gaze.

"You do not," Yoor repeated with an empty voice, like a monotonous echo. "You do not like to show off. You do not like to flaunt and to pose." He shook his head. "My word. Who would have thought it possible. Here I was, thinking it is natural, unavoidable really. The fate of those gifted with unearthly beauty. The destiny of butterflies."

Yoor was still visibly hit. But some of the usual gleam began to creep back into his eyes. "You should try it." He got up to demonstrate being on stage, bowing to a ravished audience. The applause swelled. Imaginary flowers landed at his feet. Yoor turned to Cahuan. "It is fabulous. I live my life this way. And I never regret."

Cahuan snorted but smiled. She shook her head, wondering. "I never thought. Not this way. I thought that of course I hate. People stare at me. But, true. Maybe I can like, people stare at me." She sounded very unconvinced.

Yoor cocked his head. "They don't stare. They admire. And they have every reason to admire. You truly are wonderful, and beautiful. They see it, and they are happy." Yoor shrugged. "It is very easy, for you and me, to make people happy. They just look at us and already they are happy. That is good, isn't it?"

Cahuan toyed with a stone in her hand, pondering.

"Up to you, of course," Yoor concluded.

Cahuan wagged her head doubtfully. "I don't know if it 'up to me.' I cannot make me feel different only by say 'feel different!' Only because I hear good idea."

Cahuan shifted slightly on the stairs. "But you give me more than good idea." She looked at Yoor, his easy grace, his radiant self-love. Remembered him flirting, laughing, improvising. Dancing through a colorful mirage, showing off and making gifts. Giving and receiving admiration in abundance, and enjoying all of it recklessly, shamelessly.

"You give me example. True life."

\* \* \*

The lights were slowly changing and fading in the sky over the Snuggery. Pulan was still working on the handcart, whistling softly to herself, and would probably be doing so until the very last shred of light had vanished. Som and Lunin were right beside her, creating a wrollic-tree for the wall beside the Snuggery door. They had dreamed that up: a structure with lots of opportunities to climb and fall and spin around, to sit and hide and come out of narrow tubes. And to find new exciting things in an array of little nests. Which one could also sleep in, if one was small and furry and curled up into a ball.

Enim looked from Lhut to Kaya, a deep frown on his face. With a sigh, he switched back to Kokish. "I really don't know what we should be saying about safety in the mines." He ran a worried hand through his hair, turning to Torly and Yoor. "What should the report call for? How much is enough? It is dangerous work, and it will continue to be so. How many accidents would we tolerate? How many people can get killed and we would still think it all right, because some steps had been taken beforehand to make it less likely?"

They had been on this topic for a while, turning it this way and that, without anyone feeling satisfied.

"It is dangerous work," Yoor said, in a distant, almost singsong sort of voice. "It is dangerous. It is dirty. It's hard. It's unhealthy." He singsonged a bit more, wordlessly, talking to the wind. "It is dangerous. It will continue to be so. If it will continue."

He slapped his hand on his thigh. "That's it!" he shouted.

Everyone startled.

"It is dangerous. Will continue to be dangerous. If it continues. But does it need to continue? Does it?" he challenged them eagerly. "No! We can close the mines! And no one will have to work in there any more. No one will be hurt, no one in danger." Yoor's eyes were gleaming. "Of course, then there will be no new diamonds. But is that

a problem? No!"

He held a hand to his heart. "I love jewels. And I have bought jewels in the past. But I do not need them. Not to be happy, not to be beautiful. And, fortunately, not to be loved."

Yoor spread his arms wide. "And that is true for other people too. We can be beautiful, and happy, and loved, without jewels. Without sending people down into darkness and danger. We can just close all these mines. They only produce diamonds."

They all looked at him. Nobody said a word.

Eventually, Cahuan cleared her throat. "But then what people in Shebbetin will do?"

Yoor's brows went up. "Well," he said, spreading his arms. "I am not working in a mine. And I always find things to do. I am not bored at all. Surely everybody likes doing something?"

He waved his hand vaguely. "They could spend time with their children, for instance. That would be good. And with their friends and lovers too." He warmed to his topic. "Then the Mansion needs safe roofs and water pipes and lights. Meanwhile, keep the kitchens running, grow potatoes, feed the horses, repair the wagon. Sing a song, play a game and do some beautiful magic to amuse people. Truly, I cannot imagine us running out of things to do," Yoor concluded.

"No." Cahuan rubbed the back of her head.

Out in the courtyard, Pulan whistled for Lunin's help, and the boy sat his rag doll down in her unfinished cart for a dream ride while he held a plank in place.

Kaya slapped a hand down on her thigh. "How people get food?" she snapped. "That question."

Yoor spread his arms wide. "No problem! There will still be as much food as before, if we close the mines. Even more, perhaps, because there will be more people who can help grow it. Just as with houses, and books and pots and all things. All of that is as plentiful as before, or even more so, because there are more people who can work on it."

Yoor clapped his hands together. "All the people liberated from the mines. They can tend to food and children, rather than just diamonds!"

Manaam's voice was trembling with amusement. "Close all the mines? To let people work on useful things instead? On housing and childcare, rather than mere diamonds?"

He chuckled as he shook his head in wonder. "Your friend is quite something, I gather." Manaam's eyes danced as he glanced at Cahuan. "But he is right. I agree, on a basic level. That would be a radical approach to the whole problem."

A crooked smile lingered on in the corner of Manaam's mouth, unwilling to let go.

\* \* \*

Pale morning light filled the Snuggery. A few children had decided not to get up today and stayed huddled into a sleepy heap back in one corner. But most had gone to follow one of their passions.

Lasa patted Enim's vest inquisitively, running her hand over the many bulges that suggested hidden treasures inside. "Nice one," she mumbled approvingly. Having thus distracted Enim into a snort, she pulled a flask from the back of his belt. "What's that? Powerful potions?" She held it up against the light, squinting at the green liquid with an appraising eye.

Enim took it back. "Not for you to drink. This is only for crystals to bathe in while they are being enchanted."

"The most magical tub in the world," Lasa commented. She pulled Enim's cap off his head while his hands were busy at his belt. In an instant she had sensed the paper within the double layers and gotten it out. "Really, you are a wonderful teacher. You make me so curious! 'Find the mystery in my secret pockets!'" She giggled.

"Well, I am happy to please," Enim said, taking his cap back. "Even though it's not exactly a secret pocket. It is just practical, having things tucked into your clothes. Usually they don't get lost that way either. Except when people can't keep their hands off me."

Lasa was engrossed in a sheet full of intricate lines. "So this is how you build a traption?" Her brow furrowed in concentration. After a long silence, she wordlessly pushed the paper back into Enim's hand and ran away in order to listen in on another conversation.

Full of anticipation, Lasa crouched beside the staircase that led from the tailors' shop down into the courtyard. Or from the courtyard up into the tailors' shop, if one were to look at it that way.

And the tailor in the door was looking at it that way. "I am sorry," he told Som, his tone decisive, "but we cannot have this. No attracting wrollics into this courtyard. Having our tailor's world turned upside down by a small creature who finds everything fascinating and wants to know how buttons tumble and what scissors can do—no. No way. I am sorry. It simply is not an option."

However, giving up on the wrollic altogether was also not an option. At least not for Som. So negotiations continued.

A wrollic might come into the tailor shop anyway, Som pointed out. Just as he had come into Enim's room, all by himself. Wrollic disorder was just one of the general risks of life, to be contended with. The slight increase in likelihood that her wooing of the wrollic might bring—well. Som acknowledged that.

The tailor patiently kept talking. Eventually, he even invited Som in to have dinner with the family, so all the tailors could have a say.

Som came back to Cahuan with shining eyes. "Excellent!" she exclaimed, highly satisfied with the first great diplomatic mission of her life.

She began counting off the best points on her fingers. "For one, I will help clean the tailor shop from now on. So I know where everything is and can help tidying up. In the event, you know. Two, maybe we can also help the tailors save time even now, by bringing in their lunch together with ours, or by having the baby here with us more often." Som looked up at Cahuan. "I said I would have to check with you first, though. And with other children, to see if enough people would join in. I mean, actually bring lunch, feed the baby and so on."

Som proudly presented her third finger. "And finally, I will draw up a Wrollic Protection Scheme for the tailor shop. We could hide the scissors at night, perhaps. Or put bells on all the drawers, so there is a big noise when a wrollic pulls them open. I'll work something out."

Som danced a few steps, circling Cahuan in a swirl of colorful ribbons. "Isn't that great? Whether or not the wrollic comes back to us, I believe we have already befriended the tailors a bit more." She giggled. "In their loose, open, freedom-loving sort of way."

The tunnel was dark, dimly illuminated by lights tied to the brows of the miners. Dusty clouds billowed between them, a thick fog that made their vision blurred, the shapes of their fellows mere ghosts in a sickly yellowish haze.

Quinetopu coughed.

An empty wagon rolled up before him, like a gaping mouth, an unspoken command. Quinetopu obediently lifted his bucket and emptied a load of debris into the cart, sending up another wave of dust.

Quinetopu's face was covered in sweat. He did not see the blood his cough had left on his sleeve. His thin frame was shaking, his gait tottery as he stepped back from the rails. In rhythm with his gang, Quinetopu picked up the next bucket, his arms straining under the weight, his heart pounding against his ribs like a bird in a cage. His head was reeling. The bucket slipped from his hands. Quinetopu gripped the edge of the wagon, skeletal fingers holding on to life, to the world with all their might. But the world dissolved. Quinetopu sank down into darkness.

"He is breathing."

A woman had caught Quinetopu just in time, before his head hit the rocks. She laid him down gently, turning questioning eyes to the man who had come to crouch down beside them. "Do you know where we should take him?"

Quinetopu's limp form seemed to melt into the rocks, a thin ghost the color of dust.

The miner took hold of his hand. "All his family are dead. He's got two small boys, that's all who's left."

"Two boys. Old enough to take care of him?"

The man wagged his head. "No." His face bore a sorrowful frown. "Young enough to need care."

\* \* \*

Yoor was confident. Closing the mines was a good idea.

Enim could see the rightness of it. In principle. But...

Yoor twirled around once or twice before sitting down by Enim's side again. "We just need to make sure that people freed from the mines really still do get food."

"But how?"

"Ah." Yoor shrugged with a visible lack of concern. "Any old way that will work. One way to organize it would be to still give people

coin, just like now. Only it would be to work on housing and children, not diamonds.”

“And where would that coin come from?”

Yoor made a circular motion with his hand. “Well, mostly, coin is going round and round. The baker gives it to the one who builds her home, and he gives it to his kid’s snuggery, who spend it on bread, and so on. Coin does not get used up. Many folks can use it, one after the other.”

He half-turned toward Enim. “But it depends on what we give the coin for. Take me, for example. I used to buy jewelry until now. I can still give that same coin I would have spent anyway. And it still goes to Shebbetin, to the very same people. Only now they get it for working with children, instead of just diamonds.”

Yoor raised a finger. “This is not about some small amount. Not a tiny bit of coin for happy childhoods, and all the rest for jewels. No. The whole amount that has come to Shebbetin for diamonds still needs to flow. Everything I have spent on trinkets in the past will go to well-being now. And still to Shebbetin.”

Yoor raised his arms and pushed a huge invisible burden from left to right. “If we use all of the coin differently, all of the structure will be different too.” He nodded contentedly. “The entire situation will change.”

He rested his hands on his hips.

“And all it takes is: We have to actually do it!”



A small furry head peaked out from under the eaves, ears twitching.

Yoor held his breath. Cautiously, he let a slow trail of golden stars float upward.

Round-eyed, the wrollic watched them glide past. Then, quick as lightning, he jumped and snatched one out of the air, golden gleam clutched to his chest as he spiraled down, free-falling in a series of summersaults and pirouettes. A whirl of bushy tail, a quick dart up the wall, and the wrollic had disappeared onto the roof again, spark in hand.

Yoor stared. "That's impossible."

"I see too!" Som proclaimed. "He catch star."

"But you can't." Yoor's voice was nearly inaudible. "It's an illusion. No one can grab a mirage."

A cackle came from the thatch. Dark round eyes shone down at Yoor.

Yoor bit his lip. He raised a hand to his heart and bowed, his words a whisper of awe, of disbelief, of wonder. "Who are you?"

Yoor glanced up. He barely dared to breathe. "Have you come to teach me? To show me something I have failed to see all my life?"

The wrollic laughed lightly, kissed the star and danced away over the ridge.

\* \* \*

Manaam leaned against an intricately carved pillar in his parlor, his hands playing with an ink brush, lazily twirling it this way and that. He raised his eyes to Cahuan, a wry smile on his face. "I have sought legal counsel," Manaam said. "And found a way to create an institution to hold all the snuggeries."

He pushed himself off the pillar and walked a few steps into the room. "It would be modeled after the healing bags. So I call it the snuggery bag. The main idea is that whoever contributes funds will pay into that bag. This way the coin will not be given to an individual caretaker or child, but will be contributed to the overall

cause, the support of poor children in Shebbetin. The funds in the bag must be spent for that purpose and nothing else.”

He painted an invisible sign onto his palm with the brush. “However, how exactly that purpose is best served, how the coin is to be spent, will be decided quite freely by the holder of the bag. Which will be you, I suggest.”

He laid the brush down on the desk before Cahuan and kept his lashes lowered as he spoke. “How does that sound?”

Cahuan stood very still, her gaze resting on Manaam.

When she spoke, her voice was soft. “I thought you said you were not going to do it?”

Manaam blushed. He turned away abruptly. “I did not really do it, you know. I did not truly give up my position, or my wealth. Only very little.”

He glanced back over his shoulder. “But, yes. You will have a stronger stance, more independence, more autonomy. With respect to both me and any new donors.”

Cahuan took a step toward Manaam, and another, until she had closed the distance between them. She reached up, placing her hand at the back of his head and pulling him in, meeting his lips in a kiss, gentle and tender at first, then warm and full. When she drew back, there was a spark of sungold in her deep green eyes. But her voice was calm and professional. “I think it sounds very good.”

Manaam looked flushed and a little disheveled, with a decidedly lopsided smile on his face.

“Ah,” he said. “I am glad to hear.”

Somehow they had made it up to Manaam’s bedroom yet again. And to a joint celebration of sensuality. Cahuan lay curled up around Manaam’s legs while he sat up on the mat to feed them both with bits of fruit. Cahuan watched the shawl around his shoulders slip time and again with his movements, affording her the pleasure of glimpsing different parts of his naked body every time.

She hummed contentedly. “Is this going to become a habit, then?”

Manaam laughed. “Maybe. I admit it has come to look like one recently.” He let another berry be kissed out from between his fingers. “But your life is full of love anyway, isn’t it?”

Cahuan cradled his knee. “It is. But it certainly isn’t full of lovemaking. Lhut and I can go to Kaya, but we don’t do that very often. And whenever I kiss anyone in the Snuggery, some of the little

ones instantly recognize the signs of tenderness and come close to get their share. And of course I include them. So I soon end up in a group hug with a heap of children, which is very nice and very loving, but also the definite end to any erotic twosome I might have envisaged."

Manaam grinned. Cahuan snorted, but then joined him, smiling along ruefully, but happily. She sat up to snuggle into his arms.

Manaam gently rubbed his cheek against hers. "You are full of love, either way," he said in a low voice. "And you have always represented truth to me. True affection, true friendship. But truth, also, in other things. Truth for what we all need here. Justice, or love again, in society." He pulled her close to his chest, resting his head on hers. He toyed with the strands of hair on her back, gazing straight ahead into nothingness.

"Not truth, perhaps, after all," he said after a while. "Perhaps it is not truth you represent to me. But rather... an ideal." He breathed a kiss onto an earlobe of green and gold. "An ideal of how things should be. Of how we should be with each other. Of how, of who, I should be."

A crooked grin stole into his face. "And that is where it gets uncomfortable." He ran his hand down her spine. "Not just with the ideal version of my self, which I do not correspond to. Or not entirely, anyway. But it's the same with everything else. You give me the inspiration, the guiding star. You give me both the direction and the motivation to go. Whenever I see you, I wish to make everything better, and to be better too. But I am unable. There is only so much I can do. And when I feel powerless to move, I don't want to be unhappy with where I am. It is too exhausting. I could not keep it up."

Manaam dropped his gaze and buried his cheek in the palm of Cahuan's hand. "Perhaps that is another reason why I did not meet you all that often in the past. It is too taxing to be reminded of the ideal all the time. I need rest. When I cannot bring change, I need to be at peace with things as they are. Even if they are very wrong."

Cahuan's eyes were dark. She pushed a lock of hair from Manaam's brow, tenderly touching his skin.

"I love you."

Manaam almost snorted. He shook his head with a little laugh. "Cahuan!" He pulled her close, still shaking his head. "What sort of a reply is that?"

Cahuan smiled into his shoulder. "Truth?" she suggested. "Even if not ideal, it seems."

Manaam gave another little laugh. He cradled her warmly in his arms, burying his fingers in her seaweed hair. He rubbed his cheek gently against her head.

"Maybe it is ideal, even," he said softly. "You may have hit at the very core of the question. Or of the answer."

“The mines have always been haunted. Everyone knows that.” Dark eyes shone at Naydeer from beneath the broad-brimmed wizard hat. “The ghosts of the mountains dwell in the deep and feel disturbed by the humans, by their hammering and trespassing. They fight back. Many poor miners have met a terrible end that way!”

Pramus straightened up, running a hand over his gray beard. “And now that a demon has appeared in Behrlem, magical protection is called for more than ever.” He paced across the parlor, a few long strides that sent embroidered runes of silver swirling among the folds of his silky robes. “We have been negligent. There are quite a number of new miners now who have never gone through the ritual. This might mean danger. We need to act.”

He turned around to face Naydeer.

She held his gaze for a long while, in perfect silence, her face blank, inscrutable.

Then she inclined her head.

\* \* \*

The cabin was quiet. All the children had gone to sleep, and the cabin master too. Or so Yunda hoped.

Stealthily, she crept out from under the gallery toward her workbench, crouching down beneath it. She planted her foot exactly where the mage had put it, back then, at her initiation. Her hands shook slightly, but her eyes held a fierce determination.

From her pocket she pulled two twigs, tied together at an angle, like the crossed fingers on a human hand. Keeping her tongue firmly in her cheek, Yunda ran the magical artifact around her ankle, right there where the demon chain had been fixed. It was difficult to do the whole move in one single go, and Yunda almost let her tongue slip out from between her teeth in her concentration. But she caught herself just in time.

Then the loop was closed. The chain opened.

Yunda paused, breath bated. She watched the ground. No demon reared its head.

A silent shout of triumph echoed through Yunda's heart. Now it would all be won! She crawled to the back door beneath the gallery, the one where she had seen the cabin master come and go. Here, the bolt was on the inside. Yunda, on her knees, softly lifted it up. The door slid open, just one tiny bit, and Yunda squeezed through like a cat.

The night was wild and stormy. Dark clouds scurried across the sky with violent agitation.

Yunda ran as fast as she could. She fell, got up again, and scrambled on through the darkness, down the endless hillside.

Her lungs were burning. Her leg hurt from the fall.

Yunda thought she could hear the cabin master's screams in the wind as she reached the first houses of Shebbetin. Like a black shadow, she darted into a narrow alleyway, racing ahead, rounding a corner—and bumped straight into a huge, massive man.

\* \* \*

Manaam had brought the papers over himself, making one of his brief visits to the Snuggery.

Now Torly was leafing through legal texts she could not read. It was all in Vanian, a first draft. With only the slightest of apologetic gestures, Lhut pulled the bottom sheet from Torly's hands and showed Enim and Cahuan the passage he had been referring to in their discussion.

Yoor looked over Torly's shoulder. "A snuggery bag." He began to hop lightly on one foot, his arms spread wide, his torso bending and swaying, like a dancer lazily contemplating taking wing. "A big, round bag," Yoor repeated to himself, lost in his dream. "Hmm. Hm." He stopped suddenly, staring fixedly at Torly. "Say. Will that be for everyone?"

Torly looked up in surprise. "The snuggery bag? No, not for everyone, exactly. It will be for children in need."

"I mean, will everyone be able to drop coin into that bag?" Yoor was beginning to get excited. "We should ask Manaam. That would be just the thing! Just what we need. When we are back in Varoonya, we'll tell people about Shebbetin, and of course everyone will want to contribute. But how? What are they supposed to do?"

Yoor spread out his hands. "This is perfect! People can bring about

the Transition is a very easy, direct way. Not just by choosing the Mountain at solstice. But also by changing the structure right away: making the snuggeries happen! No more jewels! Let's have happy children instead of diamonds!"

\* \* \*

"The miners would never agree to that." Kaya shook her head. "They would not want the mines closed. This is their livelihood, after all. And as horrible as life in the mines may be: It is better than nothing."

The wind played with the leaves in the courtyard, turning them this way and that, letting them go with a sigh.

"Maybe we could ask them? You know so many, after all." Enim rubbed a hand along his arm. "They could at least talk about it. Consider whether that might not be the best option after all."

Cahuan looked up from the spoon she was carving. "Yes. I believe it would need a sort of council among the miners. Which we can only suggest, or help initiate. But I also think that as long as people do not see a real alternative, they will cling to the misery they know. And demand only the tiny improvements they can envisage right away."

Lhut gently shifted sleeping little Quena onto his other shoulder. "Then let's tell them about an alternative! Until they begin to imagine their own." He tilted his head to one side. "I can do that. After all, I have lived through it myself. I used to be in a mine. And here I am, happily settled into my new life. If enough coin will come in now, other people will get a chance to walk this path too. To work with children. Or, say, in a bakery, if the previous baker goes to a snuggery."

A loud thump came from the back of the courtyard, followed by a rush of excited voices. Lhut's gaze went to the children instantly, but a moment later, he calmly went on talking. "I have crossed over the hard way." He touched the edge of his thigh. "But fortunately, no one else has to do it like that. They will be able to walk out of the mine on their own two feet, straight into a better kind of work and life. My own world has grown so much richer, so warm, so loving. I can share that with all those holding on to the mine."

\* \* \*

An expectation of dawn was creeping into the vast summer sky, the slightest pale gleam far off to the eastern horizon. Yoor yawned hugely as he staggered across the inn's courtyard. In the dim light of a

lantern, Torly had already saddled the horses. Yoor handed her one bag and began to fix the other onto the back of his mount. He leaned his tired head against the horse's warm neck and was rewarded with an encouraging snort down his back.

Torly and Yoor got into the saddle. The air was fresh, and so were the horses, apparently, prancing a little in anticipation of a long ride across the sun-kissed highlands. But just as they rode out of the inn's gate, a shadow shot out from behind the corner. Torly's mare jerked away, rearing lightly and tossing her head.

"Whoa," Torly calmed her down. "Whoa." She squinted into the darkness, where a black outline had pressed back against the wall. "Hello?"

A shady figure detached itself from the stones. Stepping out into the lane, it turned into Kaya. "Good morning." There was a crooked grin on her face. "I come right moment, no? Big surprise."

Torly snorted. "Yes, big surprise. For the horses, especially. But even for us." She dismounted, and so did Yoor behind her.

Kaya waved at them, a negligent don't-worry gesture. "I only come say good-bye." She pushed a small bundle into Yoor's hand, no more than a tied-up kerchief. Yoor held it to his nose, looking at Kaya with raised eyebrows.

"Dry mountain berry. For you, for Varoonya. So you remember." Kaya's eyes sparkled. "We need you now. You find out, make Mountain grouping. So we go Choosing, we go Council. We make Transition in Shebbetin!"

Her voice turned low, urgent. "Do not forget."

A wicked grin stole into her face. "You start grouping, and I say you not no tourist after all. You do very good, and I even say sorry."

Her eyes darkened. She squeezed their arms, with a brief, hard grip.

"Thank you. Good luck."



The stagecoach rattled over the cobbles of Farewell Square and finally came to a halt. Yoor stepped down into the heart of Old Varoonya. Stars were out in the sky, but the air was still warm and pleasant, a soft summer night. The smell of horses accompanied the clatter of wheels, the murmur of greetings and goodbyes.

Yoor looked around uncertainly. Magical lights shimmered all around the place, lining the doors and shingles of the surrounding inns. The colorful stitches in the velvet of the night welcomed him, gifting him with a tale of tangled secrets, with the enticing wink of a lounging beauty.

"Thank you," Yoor murmured. "But I am not sure about adornments any more."

Torly dropped the baggage at their feet and Yoor turned to her, his eyes full of questions and doubts. "Can I still hold on to the belief that I have built my life upon? My faith in the value of beauty and charming delights, of pleasures and amusements?"

Torly's gaze followed the glowing threads of rose and amber tracing the edge of the square. She leaned into Yoor, interlacing her fingers with his. "The people who put up these lights," she said earnestly, "did not suffer while doing it. They did not risk their lives, nor go down into darkness and danger." She squeezed his hand. "That is the crux. And the difference. This beauty is not grown from misery."

\*

Torly had gone straight to her academy dormitory, to prove she still existed and belonged. So Yoor came home alone, and the bay balcony welcomed him with a night sky above and the colorful lights of river boats below.

But his bedroom threatened. Yoor knew very well what was in there.

He walked up slowly, his steps faltering. With grim determination, he laid his hand on the knob and pushed. A thin sickle moon looked in through the window, giving hardly any light at all. Fortunately,

Yoor had brought a magical lantern that lit up the room with a soft, comforting glow.

Nevertheless, Yoor licked his lips as he put the lantern down and came to stand before his dressing table. He swallowed. And pulled open the drawer with one swift, decisive move.

The box was still there, as always. But it seemed hostile now, alien. Hesitantly, Yoor reached in.

He raised his eyes to the mirror as he slowly laid the headpiece into his pearly hair. The diamond came to rest in the middle of his brow. Yoor flinched.

He looked at his own reflection. His velvety skin shimmered in hues of lavender and midnight blue, the sparkling diamond at the center cold and bright.

Yoor cringed, close to retching. With one quick move, he tore the diamond off his skin. The chain dangled off his fingers like a poisonous snake. Yoor held it as far away from his body as he could.

He watched it, with his arm outstretched, his breathing shallow.

It did nothing. It just hung there, as if harmless, or in wait. But the telltale glint was still there, cold and hard.

Carefully, Yoor pulled a linen pouch from his drawer.

The chain sank in obediently. It was at his command, after all.

Yoor let out a deep breath. Then he reached down and took one brooch after the other, every ring and chain and bracelet beneath his mirror. The pouch filled up.

Like a bag, Yoor thought. A lush, round bag, full of well-being and children. The smile returned to his face. And to his eyes, to the depth of his heart.

\* \* \*

“Hello,” Torly said to the palace scribe.

Waves of murmured conversation drifted across the great entrance hall, complemented by the subtle patter of a hundred interweaving footsteps. From the ornately carved cabin window, an imp winked mischievously down at Torly and a seductive elf bared his legs. With a conscious effort, Torly tore her gaze away from the elf’s slender thigh and focused on the scribe, who was tapping his fingers against the wood, looking at her expectantly.

“I would like to know what it takes to have a new grouping participate in the Choosing,” Torly began. “Does one need to register? How, or where? Is there a document that explains all the steps, right down to the day of the Choosing?”

The scribe looked up at her without making a reply.

The silence stretched.

At the bottom of the window, a troll sat on a wooden stone, pensively resting his chin in his hand. A motionless river wound around his feet.

Irresistibly drawn, Torly touched a fingertip to the silent stream.

The scribe dipped his brush into the ink.

“Will you leave me an address here, please?”

\* \* \*

Lenoren was away, representing Yurvania at the Canopy gathering, and her daughter put the family home to good use in the meantime. The rainy season had started, and while a heavy downpour washed over the roofs and lanes of Old Varoonya, Nin cuddled on a heap of cushions with her friends and watched in awe as the wide, open valley of Shebbetin came to life in her parlor.

Yoor was not giving the youngsters the grand, metaphorical vision he would bring to the stage; but a humble, passionate tale, a personal account of where he had been and what had happened to him.

Nin saw Lhut laugh and Kaya slap a hand against the cart. Saw dead bodies being carried from a mine, and a hawk circling high up in a sky of gold. Children with hunched, bony shoulders were crouched fearfully over workbenches until the walls of their prison faded into the Snuggery courtyard, where Cahuan was hauling in a large barrel of water, her butterfly skin shimmering green and gold. A wrollic danced past, followed by a cooing Som full of colorful ribbons, and a wide-eyed little Quena.

Finally, Yoor’s illusions began to fade. His voice grew quiet.

But Nin knew, beyond a doubt.

Yoor had come back for a reason.

This was her call, her quest. Now more than ever.

\* \* \*

Yoor’s legs twitched beneath the blanket.

}}} The mountains were fay. Yoor knew that. Even though they appeared to be just wide, open highlands covered in herbs and wildflowers. But Yoor felt the otherness deep inside.

The grass looked like grass, but it was weaving unknown patterns full of meaning, full of purpose and urgency. The blades were whispering to him as well as to the wind and the mountain, passing

on messages. They told of Yoor, revealed his presence. Their rustle ran ahead up over the crest, giving away his secrets to whoever was waiting there, invisible, unknown, but aware of his coming.

Yoor moved up the hillside. The grass murmured soothingly. It consoled him now. Supported him, accompanied him. It was a friend. Was it not?

Yoor felt his heart beating. The sky above him was of a dark blue, so deep and wide it reverberated like an enormous glass bell, shivering with a faint, distant sound. An eldritch call, meant for Yoor. This was his summons.

He needed to get across the crest of the mountain. He knew that now. He had to reach the top, to see over the edge, to be with whatever was there on the other side.

Yoor pushed on up the slope. But his feet were getting heavier and heavier. They were pulled down by the earth, tied to the ground. Yoor lifted them up with enormous effort. His breath came raggedly.

A strong wind rose in his face. As he neared the ridge, it turned into a gale, nearly throwing him over, forcing him away, driving him back down the hillside. Yoor averted his face and pushed on against the storm, into the storm, shouldering his way up over the mountain crest.

All of a sudden, the wind stopped. Total stillness reigned.

Yoor stood on the edge, looking out over the glade beyond. He saw an elf, a prince, a young man of unearthly beauty, sit on a fallen tree and cry. His head was bent, crystal tears running down his cheek as his shoulders shook with sobs that could be seen but not heard, muffled in the utter silence of a soundless world.

The prince's feet rested on the dead body of a child. A girl covered in dust, with gray smears on her face, her clothes torn and grubby, showing a skin full of scars. Her legs sprawled out at unnatural angles. The string of a miner's basket wound around her shoulder. Rocks and debris were scattered all over her body, pressing into her chest, her hands, her hair. Into her face, which was adorned with a jewel. A clear, pure diamond, resting in the middle of her brow. {{{

Yoor woke with a start. The silence of night surrounded him, with only the thump of his heartbeat loud inside his chest. Yoor did not move. He kept his eyes closed.

Then he got up in one swift move and recreated the image from his dream. Again and again, he cast illusions into the darkness.

The prince, all graceful limbs and silky hair, his beautiful elven clothes flowing around him. Glistening tears running down his cheek.

The girl beneath his feet.

The mountains, the sky, the vastness. Stars shining down ancient light from immeasurable distance.

Grass, waving, whispering, telling. Being there, always.

The girl, waking up, howling a scream of rage and running off.

A jewel falling to the ground. Or into water, slowly sinking down into the depths.

Yoor did not feel time pass. He was lost in his illusions, making one rise after the other, letting them come, go, transform. Allowing himself to get carried away.

Slowly, the sky outside turned pale, then rosy.

Yoor smiled. The grass had calmed down. It was still swaying, waving, but it was grass. There was no more urgency in it, no threat, no dangerous message. It was still speaking to him, but quietly. Whispering a lullaby.

Yoor lay down on the floor, in the meadow of his illusions and closed his eyes, the green blades around him still waving placidly. Slowly, they began to fade.

Yoor's breathing had calmed. It was slow now, regular. With difficulty, Yoor pushed himself up on one elbow and crawled back into bed. He pulled his pillow over his head, and with it a darkness that let him sink into a deep, dreamless sleep.

\*

The sun tickled Yoor's nose. Wafts of warm air floated in through the open window, bringing birdsong and the rustle of leaves along with it.

Yoor turned in bed, shifting his face toward the light and the voices of Varoonya. He was grateful for them after the uncanny silence, the soundless world of the crying prince. He kept his eyes closed for one more moment.

Then he reached out for paper and began to write. Notes on the scenes, on the sequence. On the music and the silence. The order in which things might appear. Or how they might change.

Yoor could see this coming. He could sense how this would be in a theater. How this was the raw beginning, the very first budding image, of what he would bring to the stage.

An envelope had arrived at Yoor's house. It contained two pages of neatly written text and a little note saying 'in response to your inquiry,' with regards from the Council bureaus.

"Very good!" Torly took the papers from Yoor with eager hands.

"Yes." Yoor gave her a wry grin. "I have looked through them and understood almost one tenth of it all. It mostly consists of references to other documents. So I guess this is not so much the answer to our question, as our reading list for the coming weeks."

"Excellent," Torly replied, completely undaunted. "The library has not seen much of me this year, anyway. It's about time. I understand I will have charming company?" She looked at Yoor with an elegantly arched eyebrow.

"Very charming," Yoor affirmed, his blue eyes twinkling up at her as he bowed.

✧

Dust drifted lazily through the reading room, like tiny fairies floating from window to lamplight, making their home on ancient tomes and worn wooden shelves.

Torly sat with her head propped up in her hands, dark curls pooling around her shoulders as she stared down at the parchment before her. Several scrolls lay beside her elbow, as well as stacks of papers, open books, rolls of bamboo slips, and more papers, some of them pushed in between the pages of leather-bound volumes, as markers or just as parts of general disarray.

Torly ran her fingers through her hair, pulling it back. But her eyes were still fixed on the scroll before her. She looked up only when the commotion at the other side of the table caught her attention.

Yoor had pushed back his chair and stood up. He flashed her a glorious smile, then turned to walk out.

Torly followed.

Yoor was waiting for her in the sumptuous antechamber, pacing impatiently across the ornate mosaic floor.

"So?" Torly asked. "You have found something? Something good?"

"Yes!" Yoor replied, all aglow. "At least I think so. I hope so. I can see it coming." He began to gesture, arms spread wide. "It is still very much in the mountains. They are grand. And otherworldly too. And within them, the Transition is happening. I will not call it that, of course. But there will—"

"Yoor!" Torly interrupted. "What are you doing? What are you talking about? Did you read any of these texts at all? Or have you been dreaming of illusions and stage magic all this while?"

Yoor looked startled. For a long moment, he just stared at Torly. Then he bowed his head. "I have indeed," he confessed, "been dreaming about stage magic all this time. I am sorry. No. I cannot be sorry." A radiant smile crept irrepressibly back into his face. "It will be great. You'll see," he beamed.

"But I do apologize," he continued more soberly, "for leaving you alone with all these documents, these procedures and officialdoms. I can see that I am really no help at all."

He scratched the back of his head. "Perhaps I should formally excuse myself from this duty. So at least I won't go on disappointing your hopes. And if you need help, let's try to find it elsewhere. But I can't do it, I am afraid. I can be a stage artist, a magician of dreams. But not a scholar of the law. It is beyond me."

Yoor took a step forward and wrapped his arm around Torly's waist. "But then who will follow through on all these inquiries? You, on your own? You seem to be surprisingly good at it, concentrating for hours on end. Have we discovered a hidden talent in you? A secret passion, even?"

Torly laughed. "I would not go so far as to call it a passion. But it is true, I do find it much more interesting than expected. Difficult, yes. But also fun, a bit like a riddle or a treasure hunt. You find one hint first, and then another, and that leads you to some totally unexpected place, one that is really hard to reach, even. But once you get there, you triumph! You have made your discovery! And you hold your next clue in hand, and it is urging you on... quite exciting, in a way."

Her fingers dug into Yoor's pearly hair. "Even though I would much prefer to go treasure hunting with you, together." She sighed. "But perhaps it makes sense if you stick to what you do best. And what you love."

Torly stood up straight and put her hands firmly on Yoor's shoulders. "You have my blessing. Go be a dreamer." She placed a solemn kiss on his forehead.

When she pulled back, there was a sparkle in her eyes. "While I will dive into ancient writings and cryptic messages, to emerge gloriously at the end of my quest, in possession of the amazing power to register a grouping. And, of course, to make the wheels of history turn!" With a last daredevil wink over her shoulder, Torly ventured back into the labyrinth of dusty trails on which the past had created the present.

\*       \*       \*

In the depths of the mountain, the miners kneeled on the ground in dense, huddled rows. Their breath was bated, and their hands clasped together anxiously in front of their chests.

The mage stood before them, arms raised. A raw, alien voice broke from his throat, an arcane chant, an ominous incantation. With the last haunting sound, dark smoke billowed forth from the folds of his robes, flowing down between the miners, pooling into a gloomy lake at their feet.

All of a sudden, lightning struck. It hit the rock right above the mage, outlining his figure against flaring brightness. An ear-splitting roar of thunder rolled through the tunnel.

In the deafened silence that followed, the haze on the ground turned pale, an eerie gleam that seemed to penetrate the stone itself, making it insubstantial, see-through. And deep down in the abyss, shadows moved.

The miners shivered.

The rock itself seemed to groan and growl. And while the tunnel roof began to glow like lava, the wraiths of the deep were climbing up toward the humans.

"Repeat after me!" The mage's voice rang through the tunnel like a divine command.

And the miners obeyed, a confused, anguished chorus.

A fiery glow descended from the ceiling, a golden light that came to envelop their heads, then their shoulders. With each word of the magical oath, it sank down deeper, closing protectively around their bodies.

Beneath them, the demons advanced, hungry hands outstretched. A first ghostly claw reached above ground, right between the miners and the mage's feet. A disfigured head pulled up.

The chorus grew frantic. "... to bind and hold my life, ever loyal to this mine and its owner."



At the very last word, the magical fire touched ground, sending red hot flames out toward the monsters. They reared up with an ear-splitting screech. Writhing and whining, they fell back down into the darkness.

The miners watched in horror as a bottomless pit opened beneath the ghosts and swallowed them all.

\* \* \*

“Why do you think I am running a warmlings oven?”

Kaya grinned broadly at Lasa as she helped her pluck the last winter berries off the brambles in the courtyard. “It makes me go around town with my cart a lot, talking to loads of people. I get to know them, they get to know me, and sometimes they even get to know each other better. Of course they all already have their friends and neighbors. There is a whole network of people, each knowing someone who knows someone. And I have so many entry points into that web!”

Lasa was getting an invisible pedalcart ready.

Kaya obligingly shoveled hot stones inside. “In the moons before solstice, which are so very cold, I’ll even be doing several rounds a day. What could be better for passing on a message? I’ll be meeting hundreds of people every day! I can tell them all about the Choosing!”

“Yes!” Lasa’s eyes were shining. “I’ll help you! You need more people.” She started pedaling her imaginary cart, shouting, “Warmlings, warmlings! Come, everybody, buy your warmlings and hear the latest news! Very good news! Very important news!” She pulled up to Lunin and started selling him hot stones together with hot stories.

Kaya watched her. “She is right, actually. We need more people. It can’t just be me in person, talking to everyone.”

Pulan gave a low, thoughtful whistle. “We could go sometimes,” she suggested, looking at Cahuan. “We’ll trail along, and when we have heard Kaya talk often enough, we might also be able to do it ourselves.”

Cahuan wagged her head, then turned to Lhut, meeting his eyes. Lhut gave her a little nod and a one-shouldered shrug. “Yes. Let’s try. I definitely want to be in as well. We won’t be able to do it every day. But if enough children volunteer to keep things running at home in the meantime, some of us can go and talk about the Choosing.”

Pulan and Som exchanged a glance and nodded decidedly. “We’re in.”

Kaya looked at them proudly, as if she herself had carried all that courage and commitment into these young souls. Which maybe to some extent she even had.

But Kaya's thoughts were already moving on to another potential source of support. "We might be able to recruit more people once the gatherings have started. Those who volunteer. Those who stand out."

Kaya's fingers were drumming a steady beat onto her thigh. "Yes." Her eyes were aglow. "I think we can make it."

She stood up. "As soon as the Mountain grouping raises its flag in Varoonya, we'll go!"

In her quest for the treasure of knowledge, Torly was beginning to make her way through the secret tangles of the library. She began climbing remote ladders and hindmost galleries. Soon, she was in forgotten corridors, underground vaults, and creaky little attics full of dust.

She was up in one of those now, a reading room where apparently the furniture had been temporarily removed, to be returned whenever someone remembered where all of that had initially come from.

Anyway, the books were still there, at least the one Torly wanted, and she happily squatted on the floor underneath a dim skylight, propping her book up on a trunk before her. She sneezed. But she never let that break her concentration. She had a lock of hair wrapped tightly around her finger and pulled at it, reproducing the pattern of strain in her thought.

Then she let go. She moved up closer to the trunk, taking the book in both hands, rereading a passage. She stared up into the air, then swiftly pulled a sheet from her bag and began to write feverishly.

\*

Torly cautiously peered through the half-open door. No ghosts were howling inside, no dragons taking wing. No bright light descended on wide open highlands.

It was just Yoor, sitting in the bay balcony, looking out into dark, rainy clouds. When Torly knocked, he turned his head and smiled. "Come in. I am ready to receive human company."

"What a fortunate moment." Torly snuggled up beside him, dipping her nose into his scent.

But then she pulled back to look at him. "I know you have excused yourself from the treasure hunt of library enigmas. But I fear... we are in trouble." She looked at him questioningly. "Do you wish to hear?"

"Yes," Yoor replied. "Please. Try me. I'll do my best."

Torly pulled out her stack of papers, but then did not read from them after all. Instead she tried to explain, getting straight to the point. "It's all somewhat confusing. But as far as I understand, this here," she tapped the topmost paper, "says you need five thousand people to sign their names in support of your registration."

Torly bent her head. "And we need to hand it in ten days from now." She looked up at Yoor.

He gazed back at her. "Five thousand people," he said. "Ten days."

"Yes." Torly hugged her knees. "We got started late. Now we are so close to the Choosing already, and everything's very tight." She cleared her throat. "I have no doubt that Kaya could get five thousand people in Shebbetin to support the grouping. Even more. But right now? In an instant? We won't even be able to get a letter to Shebbetin and back that quickly. And we cannot possibly get five thousand people to sign here in Varoonya. Can we?" She looked at Yoor both hopefully and doubtfully.

Yoor leaned back. His eyes drifted out into the rain, tiny drops in the inexorable pull of the earth, falling relentlessly. He sighed, and edged away from the cool spray.

"May I see?" He held out a hand for the paper Torly had been tapping.

Yoor read through it. And read through it again. Then he let it sink with a groan. "I am so glad I have excused myself from this ordeal," he grumbled. "I can hardly make it through one paragraph."

Yoor tried once more, his brow furrowed. "What is 'equivalent weight'?"

"What?"

"It says here, 'with the endorsement of the registration of said grouping with equivalent weight of signed names of five thousand persons entitled by all legal stipulations to participate in the Choosing relevant to these proceedings...'" Yoor looked at her questioningly.

Torly took back the paper, squinting at the words. "I have no idea," she finally shrugged. "I guess I just filed that expression away together with 'all legal stipulations' and 'relevant to these proceedings.' If I tried to check up on all of these I am afraid I will end up a mummy in a dusty attic, or in some moldering archive. The library is a trap, you know," she grinned at him, her natural spirits bubbling up again, in spite of everything.

"But you are right," she went on. "Or let's assume that you are

right. That there is some hope left, somewhere. In 'equivalent weight,' for instance. Or in Varoonya. You can stay here and dream up a way of getting five thousand people in Varoonya to stand up for the Mountain, or of flying to Shebbetin in an instant. Meanwhile, I will try to identify 'equivalent weight.'"

She hopped up, pulling her hooded rain cloak from a hook by the door. "But if I come back suggesting that I'll next check up on 'all legal stipulations,' I beg that you do stop me. I am still young, and I want to live." She winked back at Yoor and disappeared.

Yoor watched her go, a warm smile on his lips.

\*

Torly released a large spray of drops from the cloak when she shook it before hanging it up to dry.

Yoor was lounging in the bay balcony, one leg dangling out in the sky, just like before. He had prepared dinner in the meantime, however. Torly was famished and eagerly dipped her nose into the pot. As she shoveled her portion onto a plate, she looked at Yoor expectantly.

"I have dreamed up wonderful solutions both ways you suggested," he related. "However, translation of dream into reality within the next ten days might still pose problem, I am sorry to say. Therefore, if you have anything hopeful to report, I suggest we start with that."

Torly nodded, her mouth full. "I do. I have," she mumbled. She swallowed, then slowed down the progress on her food in favor of her report. "I asked my cousin. To ask a friend of his, who is a legal counselor. And she said: This is about proving political relevance. If five thousand people say it's important, it's important enough." Torly's eyes were shining. "Or if someone representing five thousand people says it's important, that's also enough."

Torly pointed her spoon at Yoor. "This means: If we can get at least one member of the Council to sign for our grouping, we've won." She beamed at him. And dug into her food.

Yoor looked at her uncomprehendingly. "A member of the Council?" He rubbed his chin. "A member of the Council. But they are all members of groupings themselves. That is how they got in. Because they were on the list of their grouping. So how would any them want to support a grouping other than their own? They wouldn't, would they?"

"No, they wouldn't," Torly admitted. "You've put your finger right on the weakest spot of that strategy."

She munched another spoonful of gorgeous curry. "However, this is all we have got," she said with a degree of satisfaction that suggested that since there was no other option, this particular option would have to feel obliged to do her bidding.

Yoor nodded vaguely. "I see," he said, not quite truthfully. His voice swam searchingly across the room. "So what are we going to do?"

Torly raised her eyebrows. "Well, there's only one way, isn't there?"

\* \* \*

The dark clouds were breaking up and a few golden fingers of evening sun reached in through the palace windows. Lenoren ignored the beauty of it as she pushed her office door shut behind her with one foot and sagged down into her chair with a groan. It had been a long day. A day full of talking and talking, of sitting around tables, comparing notes and shuffling papers, and talking some more.

Lenoren liked talking to people. She really did. But at some point, it was simply enough for a day.

She leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes, then her elbow. Her beloved old tunic had suffered a tear there today, and not even just a burst seam. No, this here would need an actual patch. Lenoren sighed. She rummaged in her bag and came up with a few rice balls and a half-full water bottle. Ha! That was at least something.

As Lenoren began to eat, her belly thoroughly approved, spreading an increasing sense of well-being to her whole body. She even began to hum a little. It had not been such a bad day after all. Tiring, yes, but they had gotten quite a few things done, and done well, she believed. So it had been worth it.

Lenoren pulled a stack of papers from her bag and carefully wiped crumbs and droplets from her desk before putting them down. Her notes. She might as well sort them now, while she could still remember what was what and why. She dug into the papers, dividing them up into smaller heaps, and throwing a great number of them down on the floor altogether. She was rapidly getting near the bottom of the stack.

What was this? Ah, still stuff from the Canopy gathering. Well, that was a fine way to conclude the day, she thought. Not only because the gathering was over, contrasting nicely with things crowding the agenda for tomorrow. But also because it had gone well. They had reached a consensus about voting rights for each country within the Canopy. An important decision. And it was going to be based on population size, just as Lenoren had wanted it to be.

Lenoren gave a satisfied grunt, and secretly admitted that Zurre's tactical scheming had proven powerful once again, however much Lenoren might dislike that outdated attitude.

In any case, now there was going to be a folkcount in all the regions of the Canopy, including Yurvania. A lot of work, Lenoren was sure. Scribes would have to travel from busy city centers to the hindmost corners of the countryside, recording every single person who lived anywhere. But fortunately, people within the bureaus were in charge of organizing that. People who were not Lenoren.

With a deep, contented sigh, Lenoren bit into the last of her rice balls and put her feet up on the desk as she sifted through the remaining papers.

\* \* \*

Almost all of Nin's parents had gathered, and brought a couple of other kids along as well. It was one of those big family dinners. Nevertheless, Nin's attention was all on Lenoren.

"Yoor needs our support," Nin declared. "They all do. The Mountains are calling us!"

"Are they?" Lenoren asked distractedly, reaching over the table for another helping of vegetables.

"Yes, they are!" Nin affirmed hotly. "And if you had been paying attention, you would know this by now! They have been needing us for ages, and nobody noticed! And you are in the Council, and you should have known and done something about it!"

Lenoren sighed, but silently.

"Fortunately, there is something you can do now, and it won't even be hard," Nin asserted, more conciliatorily.

"That is good news, for once." Lenoren carefully kept her note of sarcasm down.

"Yes," Nin nodded emphatically, "it is. Yoor will come to see you in your office tomorrow. I don't know at what hour."

"Neither do I," Lenoren mumbled.

"He will explain to you in person. You need to sign their document, saying that it is all right for the grouping of the Mountain to be up at the next Choosing. They can't do it without that signature, you see?"

"Oh?" Lenoren raised an eyebrow, but only very slightly. "Well, I shall have nothing other to do than await his visit, then." And she topped up her glass, gratefully receiving the crooked co-parent grin Qin Roh sent her from across the table.

\* \* \*

Lenoren bowed politely to Yoor and Torly and bade them farewell. She would surely let them know if she could think of anything helpful. And yes, of course they could leave the documents with her.

Zurres leaned back in her corner and watched them go. Thoughtfully, she followed their progress across the ornate floor of the parlor in which Lenoren had received them. Or where they had intercepted her, if one chose to look at it that way.

As usual, the parlor was filled with a low hum between relaxation and busyness. People were strolling up and down, getting themselves a hot drink or a small meal. Informal conversations floated across the room, filling the air with a constant murmur, accompanied by the soft splashing of the fountain. Zurres liked the room. It was very useful.

She got up.

Lenoren flinched as a dark shadow suddenly flowed across her neck.

But Zurres was only picking out grapes from a bowl behind Lenoren's back.

"It was quite good at the Canopy in the end, wasn't it?" Zurres hissed in a way that made Lenoren think anything other than 'good.'

"Those decisions might be useful in many ways," Zurres continued inexorably. "The folkcount, for example. What if it turns out that some remote areas have a lot more people than we thought? That affects the Choosing. Pity only that none of us would have the capacity to go to such forgotten places to woo. One could only hope that some small local grouping crops up and gets very active. They would never make it into the Council, of course. But the choices of those locals would get redistributed afterward, and might even end up with us, with the Crane grouping."

A last grape met its fate between Zurres's teeth. Lenoren thought she could hear a discreet cracking sound. She turned around irritably, but Zurres had already disappeared in a flurry of black robes.

\*

Lenoren sat at her office and shuffled Yoor's documents around on the desk. Simultaneously, she shuffled Zurres's words around in her head.

Lenoren clicked her tongue angrily. Did Zurres have to do that? Couldn't she just talk in some normal, friendly way, and appear at least halfway honest while she was doing it? These were not the



times before the Transition, after all, where scheming and intrigue might have been common demeanor in the palace.

Anyway. Now what had Zurrès been trying to tell her?

That here was a nice and easy way to improve the Choosing results for the Crane, probably. By having a small local grouping do all the wooing. An idea Zurrès presented to Lenoren at precisely the moment a local grouping was asking for Lenoren's support. All while her daughter was pestering her over breakfast and dinner and while Lenoren herself was sympathetic to the cause anyway.

Lenoren grunted, uncertain whether she was angry at Zurrès, or at herself, or at Nin and those artless Mountain people. Or at the world in general, for being muddled and confusing, instead of simple and straightforward. Or maybe it was straightforward, in this case? Everything pointed her in the same direction, after all.

All Lenoren needed to do was to ensure that the Mountain registration included a reallocation clause in favor of the Crane. That was all.

\* \* \*

A thick letter had arrived at Yoor's house. From the palace.

Yoor turned around to Torly, wide-eyed. "Would you believe it?" He shook his head softly, as if trying to make sure he was awake. "Lenoren has signed the document. She actually has." His voice wavered. "Lenoren, faithful member of the Crane grouping, has signed the registration of the Mountain. Thus bringing it into existence."

He stared down at the paper, then handed it to Torly.

Torly looked just as astounded as Yoor. She turned the sheet over in her hand as if some explanation might be forthcoming that way.

"There is a note with it," Yoor added. He pulled it out from in between all the papers in the envelope and began to read. "Lenoren says she is very glad to be able to send us this. She had the papers run through by people versed in legal matters and has made a few minor changes. If all of that is to our liking, we only need to hand it in at the palace in time. Best regards, and good luck."

Torly rubbed the back of her head. "Well, we too are glad she was able to send us this," she said. "Amazing. Who would have thought this could possibly work?"

Yoor burst out laughing. "Well, you did!"

"Did I?" A grin stole up into Torly's face. "Oh, yes. Of course I thought that. Or—knew it!"

“The flag is raised!” Kaya slapped Enim on the shoulder with so much enthusiasm that he crumpled the letter in his hand.

Kaya’s eyes shone brightly. “Now we’ll come from the shadows! Everybody will see!”

Her final words were no more than a hiss. “Including Naydeer.”

\* \* \*

The little courtyard lay deep inside the Mansion, behind a hundred turns of stone-walled alleys. So at least here the wind wasn’t so harsh, and all the rain ran into carefully tended cisterns rather than down Kaya’s neck. Kaya ignored the last warmings in her cart, which no one was going to buy if she didn’t move on.

But she had a reason to stay.

Kaya let her gaze roam over the loose assembly of people who had chosen to linger, to listen for a while, to put a word in. Right in front of her stood a thin old man with a white fur cap that framed his dark face like a mop of silvery hair. And indeed, the few curls that peaked out underneath were pale as snow too.

Slunyew. That’s how he had introduced himself. And now his deep, hoarse voice rumbled through their little crowd. “Of course they’ll know. You can’t give a sneeze in the Mansion without people noticing.” Slunyew raised his hand in a slow, even motion. “So what? Let them notice. We are holding a gathering. Why shouldn’t we?” Slunyew stood firm and calm like a tree.

“We should!” A young boy next to him was practically bouncing with excitement. “Let’s do it, I say, and let everybody hear about it too! We’ll be in the Choosing!”

A stout man softly wagged his head, saying nothing. Another walked silently away. A woman with a thick brown shawl threw in a question, looking down at her shoe, kicking a pebble around on the

ground. Her daughter had her arms crossed firmly over her chest, her gaze boring into Kaya.

Slowly, night descended over the Mansion, letting the cold creep in ever more deeply into the nooks and crannies.

Slunyew pulled the flaps of his cap down over his ears. His grating rumble wove into the tapestry of voices as a quiet steady base, a reliable ground beneath everyone's feet.

By the time Kaya left, the time and place for the gathering had been set.

\* \* \*

Cahuan's gaze rested idly on the large, bulky form of Herun, who was singing softly in one corner. Quena had fallen asleep in his lap, pressing her little angel face into his belly. Her tiny fingers were curled around his thumb, and her fine hair tumbled all over her head in an unruly manner. She sighed in her sleep.

"Let's go to bed," Herun whispered to the twins, who were hanging on beside him with half-closed eyes. Herun carried Quena to the back corner, the twins in his wake. They both fell asleep before Herun had even properly tucked them in. There was quiet murmuring here and there, of children half asleep. Three older boys still huddled by the door, whispering secrets to each other.

Herun tiptoed around the kids lying on ground. "I will go now," he told Cahuan in a quiet voice. "But I can come back for four days next week, if you like?"

"Yes," Cahuan smiled, "that would be wonderful. You truly are very good."

Herun blushed slightly. "Thank you," he said. "I love it here too. It is great to see how you do things. How you relate. I am sure learning a lot here." He crouched down beside Cahuan and gave her a hug. Then he turned around to embrace Lhut. "I will see you next week, then." He waved good-bye to the Snuggery in general and ducked out into the rainy courtyard.

"He really is special," Lhut said thoughtfully. "Of all the people we have asked to work with us for a while, many have been good, and kind. But Herun is exceptional. And so much will depend on that one single person, on their spirit, their strength."

He caught Cahuan's gaze.

"Have we found our hero? Is Herun the one?"

\* \* \*

In a narrow chamber hidden away in the Mansion's labyrinth, Yunda was looking into a mirror shard she had propped up on the shelf.

A thin, wiry girl looked back. One who had her hair cut very short, and was wearing a huge purple shawl wrapped around her like a sari, covering up her clothes. She looked familiar. And unfamiliar. Totally unlike the girl who had run from a work cabin, her gray trousers flapping, her long hair flying. Totally unrecognizable, Yunda hoped. And yet...

She pressed against the wall by the window and squinted out into the lane. A woman walked past. Then two men, in the other direction. None of them was the cabin master. None of them anyone she knew, anyone who might know her.

Yunda leaned forward cautiously. How long would it be before the master gave up searching for her? Very long?

It was not as if he would run out of children for his cabin. There were plenty, always. He had probably gotten himself a new one already, to take her place. And all the others were still there, she assumed. It was not as if children ran away from a cabin every day. But she had! Yunda proudly stuck out her chest.

And now she was here. With Herun.

Herun, who had promised to help her when she had literally run into him during her flight. Who would hide her, as long as necessary, and give her food and shelter even after that. Yunda wrapped herself more closely in her purple shawl, hugging her arms tightly around herself and dipping her nose into the fabric to smell the scent of Herun still lingering there.

Then she raised her head up high and gave a little hop, somewhere between a dancing step and a fencing lunge, that brought her back in front of the mirror.

\* \* \*

With practiced moves, Kaya helped Lhut up out of the cartwheel and let him come to sit on the table. She had a look around. This would work nicely.

Slunyew had put the table up against one wall, an improvised dais, and emptied the room out of mostly everything else, to make sure as many people as possible would fit in. And that was indeed necessary. The room was not big, and it was crowded already. Yet more and more people kept squeezing in through the door. Slunyew's hoarse rumble welcomed them all.

"All right?" Kaya asked Lhut. "Ready to give rousing speeches and answer all questions?"

Lhut grinned and nodded.

"I'll leave you to your gathering, then," Kaya continued, "and be off to mine. I'll come back round when I'm done, to pick you up. Good luck," she said, and leaned over to kiss him.

"Som and I will be coming with you, Kaya," Pulan informed her with a short affirmative whistle. "We've heard Lhut speak twice already, and we would like to know if you say anything different."

"Not too different, I hope." Kaya smirked. "Although perhaps I do say it another way."

\* \* \*

Herun waved his good-byes all around the Snuggery and stepped out into the muddy lane.

Big dark eyes were watching him from around a corner. Herun noticed, and slowed down. He slowed down more and more, until he had basically stopped in the middle of the street. He did not seem to be looking anywhere in particular, perhaps observing his shoes, the sky, the thatch on the roofs.

He stayed there for a while, with just one aimless step here, another there. Finally, the thin, dirty form of a boy of about seven became visible behind the street corner. He peeked out cautiously, still observing Herun, as he slowly allowed himself to be seen. He moved up along the wall until he was almost level with Herun.

Herun was still not looking at the boy directly. He kept his gaze on the ground and rocked back on his heels, nodding slightly. "Yeah," he murmured. "That's right. I'll just go back in for some food. Will only be a moment." And, keeping the boy in the periphery of his vision, he turned around slowly and walked back into the Snuggery.

Enim watched from his window. Something about the whole scene riveted his attention. Something about the boy. That boy. What was it about him?

Then a second shadow came crawling out, from behind the same corner where the boy had been hiding. A little girl this time, much younger.

And suddenly, Enim knew. That was the one who had attacked him during his very first days in Shebbetin, in that uncanny, terrible quarter. She had bitten his leg, and hit him until her brother had come to haul her away.

It was them. Those two kids, sprung from a place of violence and despair.

They were here now. Here, where Herun was waiting for them, patiently, as if for a wild animal. Here, where Herun was slowly getting to know them. Feeding them, when they would accept it. Talking to them, when they would allow him.

As they did allow now.

Enim could see Herun come back out of the Snuggery, a bowl of cold potatoes in his hand. He left it on a windowsill, from where the boy snatched it up eagerly, instantly handing one bit to his sister. They both retreated back against the wall of the house, but as they crouched there, eating, they permitted Herun to crouch down beside them, only a little stretch away, and to talk quietly, his eyes out on the lane, but his presence with them, with them always.

A cold wind blew down from the mountains, rattling the shutters. Nightfall was close. Kaya pulled the long shovel from the oven and dropped one last load of hot stones into the double-walled pedalcart. "That's it, then." She pushed down the lid and turned around to Slunyew, who was fastening up his cloak while rumbling his readiness and agreement.

A deep glow came into Kaya's eyes. Was it sheer luck that the first person who had responded to her talks on the Choosing had also turned out to be the best? Becoming more and more deeply involved every day?

Kaya gave the pedalcart a proud and happy clap. "You're going round to the southern quarters again tonight?"

"Yes, I am." Slunyew peered into the box to reassure himself that Kaya had filled it only halfway, so that it wouldn't be too heavy for him. With a nod, Slunyew pulled the flaps of his fur hat down over his ears. "It's a week since I've been, and things went rather well last time. People were interested. Skeptical too, of course. But, interested. Let's see how far things have progressed with them in the meantime. Whether they've been talking about the Choosing, to their families, their friends. Whether some may be ready to host a gathering. Only to explain things more properly, of course? Nobody needs to commit to anything beforehand. You know. I'll just give it a try. And report back afterward." Slunyew grinned at Kaya, then swung himself onto the cart and pedaled off into the falling night.

Kaya stood in the open door. The wind howled in, making a cloud of dust rise up in front of the oven where it glowed like a fiery spirit.

The dark gray sky made even the elegant homes of the owners appear gloomy and threatening. Naydeer was pacing up and down her study, her hands clasped at her back, her eyes hard.

The young man by the door gave his report in a low, raspy voice. He was pale, even for a white-skinned lad, and his hair was arranged meticulously, as if he had worked some special magic to make sure not a single one could move out of place. His eyes were on the floor, his gestures restrained and oddly angular.

Finally, he came to the end of his account. He cleared his throat and waited, his posture stiff and rigid.

Naydeer had stopped pacing and stood in front of the window, looking out. A cold wind was howling through the garden, tearing violently at the branches.

Naydeer spoke in an expressionless voice, without turning around. But her words reached the young man without fail.

"Send someone, Joonster."

\* \* \*

Herun walked up to the door of his neighbor's house and knocked softly. A boy of about five opened, peering out into the cold.

"Hello." Herun ruffled the child's hair as he entered. "How is your father?"

"The same," the boy said, pointing to the bed.

Herun stepped closer. His worried eyes rested on the thin, frail form of a man with gray skin and shallow breathing. Herun's voice was soft, half a whisper. "Quinetopu?"

The invalid's eyes flickered open. His hand moved slightly, as if he wished to raise it. But it fell back and stayed where it was. Herun sighed. This was how they had brought Quinetopu home from the mine. It was not getting better.

Herun turned around. "Will you fetch your brother?" he asked the boy. "I have brought fresh warmlings and some food. I can help Quinetopu with his soup while the two of you eat."

\* \* \*

Herun let his massive shoulder fall against the wall of the Snuggery. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Quinetopu has always been frail," he told Cahuan, his voice slow and heavy. "He was never meant for work such as the mines. He can't take it. Hard labor plus hard winters is simply too much for him. He should have been a scribe, or anything else that has him working at a desk. With the room heated



and his body fed. But, things being what they are, he had none of that. And so he has worked himself to death, slowly but surely."

Herun sighed and pushed himself off the wall. "I am afraid he will not recover this time. And if he dies, his little boys will be on their own." He drew a pattern on the ground with his foot. "Except, of course, that they will be with me."

Herun looked up, holding Cahuan's gaze. "We can't wait any longer. We need a new snuggery. Now."

\* \* \*

An icy wind had been coming down from the mountains for days, freezing the valley, making its inhabitants hunch their shoulders and shiver under their cloaks. Only now it relented, diminishing its wailing howl among the roofs, allowing human sounds to take over again.

Little Quena and both twins had caught a cold, and in their feverish state they made their suffering and unhappiness known loudly and frequently. Lhut and Cahuan were trying to comfort them while keeping everyone else from catching the fever.

On top of it, Pulan and Som were having some sort of relationship crisis, alternating between loud quarrels and icy sulking, the tension filling every last corner of the room. Finally, Cahuan had requested each of them to go to a friend in the Mansion and ask if they could stay there for the night. And four of the younger ones were over at the elder's place anyway.

Nevertheless. It was one of those days.

Cahuan felt drained and was quite glad to leave the Snuggery in the evening to respond to Manaam's call. Thank goodness Kaya had come by after her last warmling round to back up Lhut.

Cahuan took her time walking across Shebbetin, stopping on the way to breathe and to take a look at the sky. She was somewhat restored by the time she arrived.

Perched on a windowsill in the parlor, Cahuan looked at Manaam expectantly. "I thought we were all set with the legal texts for the snuggery bag. Has something else occurred to you?"

"Yes," Manaam said stiffly. "Something else has occurred to me. And I am loath to speak about it."

He stood behind a high armchair, holding on to its back. "It is not about the legal papers, though. Those are fine, as far as I can see." He paused. "It is about the party."

The chair scraped over the floor as Manaam pushed it back and forth. "It is quite obvious, in a way. And yet. It had not occurred to me to pay attention. But I need to. For even if we could avoid it at that party—this issue will come up sooner or later."

He looked at Cahuan uncertainly. "Perhaps you know already. Perhaps you have realized long ago." His fingers dug into the ornate cloth covering the chair. "But maybe you have not, or pushed it to the back of your mind as much as I have, and will be shocked beyond measure when I tell you now."

Manaam turned and accidentally pulled the cover off with his move, revealing the hideous upholstery underneath. "I hope not. I hope you will not turn away from me." He twisted the cloth into an untidy ball and threw it back onto the chair. "I do not know. But the best I can do is to be honest with you. About who I am and what I will do. Even if... it is not pretty."

He fell silent.

Cahuan got up from the windowsill and moved over to Manaam. She stood close beside him and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. His arm came up around her waist. But his body was tense. "Yes," he said. "Precisely. This is what it is about."

Manaam pulled back slightly. "We are very close. But I will not own up to it in public. I will not stand by you. In the company of the other owners, I will belong to them, not to you. I will behave like that and to a certain extent, I will even feel like that. Otherwise I could not keep it up. I am not a great actor. I can only show myself as I actually am."

He licked his lips. "So I will show condescending benevolence just like the other owners do, and as they expect of me. A detached arrogance. I will speak and act, and even feel and think as if I were part of a group of somewhat superior people. I will carry on as if all the wealth I have somehow proved that I deserve it."

He ran a hand through his hair. A golden earring blinked between the inky strands. "All that conceit will be masked in polite conversation and gestures of generosity, but in reality even all that form only serves to rub in the point once more. Not only am I rich and therefore entitled to wealth, I even have the superior manners to treat you civilly. How adorable of me. And how much humble admiration for me and rightful deprecation of yourself it should inspire in you."

Manaam looked down at his feet. His throat felt dry. "So. That is what I will do. I will not own up to the depth of our friendship. I will not show it, nor allow you to show it. I will cast you off in public. I will act like a stranger, and not allow anyone to see that I consider you my equal. Or that I love you."

He cast a shy glance up at her, then lowered his lashes.

Cahuan sat down. She perched on the corner of the chair, beside the ball of crumpled cloth, and let her finger trace the lines on the upholstery.

Then she shrugged. "You said, 'in public.' But it is only the owners, isn't it? What's that to me?" The corner of her mouth bent into a dismissive crook. "The owners are not the world. Nor 'the public.' They are just some people. And: your people, not mine. I do not have to see them every day, and am not held spellbound by their opinion. I already know that I disagree with them. They believe, implicitly, that not everyone is equal, and that they are somehow worthier than others. I do not think they are, nor do I find that kind of attitude attractive in people. So I do not care for them overmuch. Nor for their views."

Cahuan gripped the back of the chair, just where Manaam's fingers had been a moment before. "They hold power over you, over your perception and self-image. They do not have the same kind of dominion over me. They rule your thoughts much more than mine. I am not defined by their judgment."

She gave the chair a negligent tap and stood up, planting her feet firmly on the ground. "Fortunately, I spend my days surrounded by friends who have absolutely no doubt that I am their equal and that everyone else is too. That is how I live my life. It is very pleasant, and very reassuring. This is how I want my world to be. It my truth, and I feel it, hear it, am immersed in it every day."

She rocked back on her heels, letting her strong round body sway like a gentle tide, then brought her full weight to a rest on the floor again. "Having that sound foundation within me, perhaps I can handle a short moment with some weird people. If I can see it coming and keep my inner distance from the start, maybe it will not uproot me."

She cocked her head. "So it is good of you to warn me. For it would have caught me unawares, in spite of everything I know about you, about your position in this little circle of polite society."

Her eyes narrowed. "All of that adds up to what you just described. But somehow I had not thought it through, not made the connections."

The light outside shifted with the moving clouds, and sent a wave of gold-green hues over Cahuan's cheek. "But now I can prepare. And make sure I won't get hurt." There was a spark in her eye as she looked at him.

Manaam held her gaze. Then he gingerly reached for her hand and pressed it against his heart. "Thank you," he said hoarsely. "This is the best I could have hoped for."

He touched his lips to her fingertips. "I am immensely relieved." With tender regard, he ran a hand through her hair, burying himself amid thick, green-black strands that fell down her back like waves of seaweed. His eyes were warm, but a wry pain still creased the corners. "As usual, I wonder if this is quite right. If I am not simply shifting a burden I find too heavy to bear onto you."

Manaam arched an eyebrow. "How come you are the one to ensure this is not hurtful? Why can't I live in a way that does not create this kind of situation in the first place?"

He sighed. "But I cannot. I am where I am. The best thing I managed was to be honest." His mouth twitched. "And that is already not bad. I should give myself due credit for that."

Manaam drew a breath. "For the rest, you are the one with the solution. The one who is strong and free, rather than weak and imprisoned."

"Hmm. Yes." Cahuan's voice was as melodious as a peal of chimes. "However, you are welcome in the land of the free any time. The doors of poverty are open to everyone. All the things you would lose are things I already do not have."

The hand in her hair made a small move in the direction of a fist. Manaam groaned. He pulled her head back to look at her. Cahuan's eyes were green as a forest pond, with streaks of golden sunlight falling in. And far, far down in the depths, like a sunken treasure almost out of sight, shone a warm, enigmatic smile.

The evening enveloped Old Varoonya in darkness, mist and rainclouds. But in the Singing Phoenix, the magic of a vast mountain landscape had opened up, with a bright sky holding mysterious colors and the long grass weaving patterns of oracle and destiny. A beautiful elven prince sat in a glade, glistening tears running down his cheek. The dead girl at his feet suddenly woke, shook the diamond off her brow and rose up to wrestle fate and power.

A mythical tale of courage and wonder, of fairies and humans, of suffering and struggle unfolded, growing in a fulminant crescendo until it bombastically exploded into release and resolution.

Music flowed across the room. People let out a deep breath, leaning into the embrace of their companions, savoring the balm of well-being offered after heart-wrenching excitement. They clapped and sighed, singing their approval to the stage. As the curtain rose once again, Yoor appeared with a ravishing bow, a blown kiss and a promise: He would join them later in the foyer to talk about his art, his life, his time in the Mountains.

So people stayed. Sipping spicy tea, they made themselves comfortable in the weathered elegance of old furniture. They talked and ambled around the room, letting themselves be drawn into a conversation by some youths at a side table.

Nin held her position with sparkling eyes. Her passion followed on seamlessly from the opera of magic that had just rolled out over the stage. "Who would want a diamond!" There was a contemptuous curl to Nin's lip. "It would make you look like a Feudal." Her voice was trembling with suppressed emotion. "Actually, you are like a Feudal, in that moment. You are wearing the visible sign of a power: the power to oppress and exploit others. To make them crawl into darkness and danger, just for your amusement." Nin shook herself. "And the Feudals thought that would make them look good." She nearly spat on the ground. "So despicable. Embarrassing. Who would want to be like that?"

The young man in front of her picked up a small linen pouch and pensively fingered the round budge.

"Exactly!" Nin pointed her finger at the pouch, or straight at the man's chest. "Because now there is something better! A way! Not only the Mountain grouping, but also this. We can change the structure directly! Get the children out of the work cabins, right now! What could be more important? More natural? Than to make sure all children can grow up well?"

The young man could not come up with an example. And with no further resistance either. His heart had been won, and his mind too. Yes, of course he would share with the children of Shebbetin, every moon. How could he not? We all live here together, after all.

\* \* \*

Torly jerked awake. It was pitch dark. A thick cover of clouds still hung over Varoonya, making the night air full and heavy.

"Yoor!" Torly whispered, urgency in her voice.

"Hmm." Yoor indicated that he was asleep.

Torly fretted, tense and anxious.

Yoor felt it and agreed to wake up. At least a little. Enough for an indistinct mumble. "Hmm?" He reached out a hand toward her.

Torly grasped it immediately. "I have completely forgotten! I got so tied up with the grouping, with only a few days left and all—that I forgot about the most important thing!"

Yoor tried to open one eye. Torly's body was an indistinct shape in the dark. But her voice came through, carrying so much worry it practically shook Yoor by the shoulders.

"We forgot the people! They've never been included. Will they be, this time around? Will there be a Choosing in Shebbetin at all?"

\* \* \*

The owner's cabin was tucked into the mountain slope, off to one side. It had a clear view of the mine entrance and all the comings and goings, even though it was half-hidden by shrubbery itself.

The last of the miners pocketed his coin for the week, then lumbered out, ducking beneath the low lintel. But Joonster stayed on. In Naydeer's service, he had learned when to linger. And how to read people's poise.

Slowly, meticulously, Joonster closed his books, arranged them neatly into a stack, stowed them away one by one. He swiped a speck

of dust off his desk. He peered into a small mirror, making sure that not a hair on his head was out of line.

Then the knock came. On the back door, the one that could be reached unseen through an abandoned tunnel of the mine.

Joonster opened. It was the miner he had expected.

"I have been to two of their gatherings now," the sturdy woman mumbled, her eyes downcast. "And they have said pretty much the same thing at each. How exactly they are planning to prepare for the Choosing."

Joonster fished an extra coin out of his bag.

\*       \*       \*

The Mansion was cold. Herun's breath left little clouds in the air while he checked the warmings under the duvet. They were all still radiating pleasantly against his palm.

But Quinetopu's face was gaunt and gray. His eyes seemed very large, sunken into the sockets, his cheeks hollow. A ghost come home from the mine. He had not spoken for days, nor caught his children's gaze. He was lost in a dream, or a void. Quinetopu looked thin, ethereal, a shadow of his former self. A being of the otherworld, about to drift away.

Both of his boys had snuggled up in bed with him, kissing his cheek, burying their faces in the crook of his neck. Herun was with them, sitting on the bedside, his large hands on the children's backs.

Quinetopu's breath was shallow and uneven. A slight rattle had crept into it. He tried to cough, but his body was too weak. It only shivered with the effort.

His little boys nestled in more closely, holding him tight, pressing their warm chests against his frail figure. Sending the strength of their hearts, of their longing, of their pain. Hot tears fell onto Quinetopu's cheek. Herun began to sing, a slow, soft lullaby, a wordless greeting, a mourning.

And Quinetopu heard them. He felt his children's love, their need and their youth. But he had nothing left to give. He knew life would go on, without him.

He could do nothing more now than trust it.

He let go.

The rain had come early that day and stopped soon thereafter. By evening, hues of gold and lavender arched between the last gray shreds of cloud.

Enim was just ducking through the archway into the Snuggery courtyard when he saw a movement out of the corner of his eyes. He stopped. The wintry light was mellow on the thatch, and a gentle breeze brought down scents of snow from the mountains. Enim breathed in deeply.

Then it came again, just a flash.

A whisk of fur darted across the roof, fell lightly down to earth and flew up again over the staircase, dancing graceful circles around the railing.

"Oh, hello, wrollic," Enim said in a low voice. He touched his hand to his heart and bowed slightly. "You are welcome here. More than welcome, in fact. Very much sought after. You have won everyone's heart with your charm and beauty."

The wrollic cackled lightly. He danced up and down the railings, then sped up and whirled breathtakingly before slowing down again into a languid display of elegance and weightlessness.

"Yes, exactly," Enim agreed. "That kind of beauty." The wrollic chittered. Then he flew down to the ground, twirled around Enim's calf, held on to his knee and was back up on the balusters again before Enim realized.

"Oh," Enim breathed. "My word. Thank you. I thought the likes of you hardly ever touched anyone." Enim's voice was still a whisper. "I am deeply honored."

The wrollic cooed with a sensuous tremor in his voice. But he did it only very briefly. Then he hopped onto the wall and the thatch, climbing up all the way before he turned around once more to look down at Enim. The wrollic sauntered along the ridge, waved one last line of dance at Enim, then disappeared over the roof.

Enim felt as if he had been kissed. With his ears red and his heart soft, he stepped inside.



In the Snuggery, the children were eagerly helping Cahuan prepare.

"I will be in a play," she had told them. "I will be pretending to be a fay, a wondrous mermaid who comes into this world in order to save her own. She is of another realm, but she does not press that on people who are not ready to hear. She lets them believe whatever they like. And when the humans try to draw her in, to bind her with the laws of their world, the waterwoman just stays with what she has come for. She willingly shares her charms and receives the—ouch!"

Cahuan raised her hand to where Pulan and Som were trying out the umpteenth fay hairstyle that would make her look really nymph-like. If ever her green skin should prove insufficient for that.

"Sorry," Pulan said with a regretful whistle. "We just need to pull it in a little more tightly here. We'll only do it once more on the other side. It won't hurt much, don't worry," she reassured Cahuan.

Thoroughly reassured, Cahuan continued with her tale, for the benefit of those still listening rather than busily improving her appearance. "Manaam will also be there. He will play an arrogant Feudal. But he is good at heart, even if he can't let it show."

Pulan pulled in her hair on the other side, a little more softly this time, and Cahuan restricted her reaction to a quiet groan.

"Have you learned all your lines yet?" Lasa asked, her face eager.

"No, I have not," Cahuan confessed. "Unfortunately, there are no lines. That would make it a lot easier. But it will all be improvised, you see? There is just the general setting, and then we have to make it all up as we go. So it is quite hard."

"Not hard at all," Lasa contradicted her. "We do that all the time. It all comes to you, as soon as you truly play. Get up, we'll show you!"

\*

Cahuan stepped out of the water, her fishtail transforming into human legs, her whole body still radiating the beauty and grace of a river. The humans on the shore greeted her with pleasure and gifts, showering petals and herb salad over her head. Fishergirl Lasa presented her with a wonderful straw star.

But scribe Lunin harbored a sinister plan. "Welcome, beautiful neighbor," he intoned in a sickly sweet voice. "I know you have come for the riches of this land. To take them home and work miracles where they are most needed. I hear your call. Let me give you a token of my powers. Precious metals, such as you will never forget. As will stay with you always, wherever you go."

Cahuan reached for his proffered hand, and within the blink of an eye found herself in shackles, both her wrists bound. Cahuan froze, panic creeping into her eyes, hurt searing through her heart from this betrayal.

But then she remembered. That she was magical, and free. That she would receive all gifts precisely the way she wanted to.

She gave scribe Lunin a friendly smile. With the fluid grace of an octopus, she slid her right arm out of the handcuffs, pushing the ring up over her left. Like bangles, they clanked happily on her wrist.

Cahuan's deep green eyes found the scribe's face. "Thank you." Her genial voice flowed out easily, unperturbed, like a stream bubbling around a boulder.

Scribe Lunin stared. At the handcuffs, at her arm, at her freedom. "Ah..." His voice was slow to come back. "Of course. My pleasure."

He offered his next gift, a shackle around Cahuan's neck, which she instantly let ease onto her collarbones, a precious ornament that never held the power to touch her sovereignty.

Cahuan beamed. The mermaid had mastered the art! She was free to accept all riches graciously, never feeling obliged, never bound.

\* \* \*

Sitting on the cold floor, the miner cast an uncertain look up at Herun, who had brought him here. But then he turned back to Yunda. She had her tongue locked in her cheek, just like the young miner himself. His fingers firmly crossed in his pocket, his body tense, he watched the wiry girl move her token around his ankle in deep concentration. In sweeping, ritual moves, she wove one single, seamless loop around his limb, coming back to the beginning, to the exact same spot on his tendon where she had started out.

Yunda let out a deep breath. She drew back, looking down at the two twigs in her hand. They were still tied together by a string, in the perfect angle, like two human fingers crossing each other.

Yunda nodded in profound satisfaction and relief. "There. You are free now. Evil spirits still cannot take hold of you. But Naydeer cannot take hold of you either. She owns the mine, but she does not own you."

The lad gingerly touched his foot. He was awed, impressed. But there still was a trace of doubt in his voice. "How can you be sure?"

Yunda raised her head with pride. "I know because I have saved my own life like this. I have seen the demon in the cabin. I have felt the

chain tying me down." A bright gleam shone in her eye. "And I have broken my shakes! I've fled! But the demon never found me. And not the cabin master either."

Yunda spoke with the assurance of someone who feels the magic flow in her veins. She knew, and she could tell him. "You have been bound by the same mage. And this is how you can break free."

Yunda fell silent. She turned to the miner, her body poised, her face solemn, presenting the tied twigs to him with outstretched arms, as a sacred offering, a potent charm.

The miner took the token carefully into his palm, covering it up with his other hand.

Yunda held his gaze. "You know how to do it, now. You only need a strong heart." She leaned in more closely, conspiratorially. "You can show others, those you trust. They can all free themselves, one by one, in secret. So the mage will never know of our powers."

The large duvet lay spread out on the Snuggery floor, with several children burrowing around between warmings and various pairs of legs. Little Quena slid out at one end and climbed onto Enim's lap, reaching up to crumple the letter he was waving around in his hand.

"Our messages must have crossed on the way. Torly has written this answer before she could even have received my question." Enim let go of the sheets, and Quena happily gave them her full attention.

Enim went on gesturing empty-handedly. "Torly had indeed forgotten about making sure that all people will be included in the Choosing. However, as soon as she remembered, she went to ask at the palace. And we are lucky!"

Quena had finished crumpling and moved on to smoothing pages out on the floor, which unfortunately resulted in a torn edge or two.

"Just imagine!" Enim beamed. "If anyone had been attending the Canopy gathering with no other aim than to help us here, they could not have done any better." Enim shook his head. "It is amazing how sometimes aid comes from the places you least expect."

"What Canopy?"

"Well, the Canopy." Enim looked at Cahuan and raised his hand in an uncertain gesture. "The union Yurvania has with the countries upriver. They make rules to encourage trading, travel, friendship, such things. And every once in a while, delegates from all countries meet in huge colorful tents on a meadow to discuss it all."

Cahuan gave Enim a skeptical look. "Anyway," he continued hastily, "at the latest of these gatherings, they have decided this!" He tapped Torly's letter on the floor triumphantly. "Just what we needed!"

Quena tapped the letter too, just as triumphantly. Enim gave her an encouraging nod. "There will be a folkcount! In all countries of the Canopy. And in every small region, every last corner. Including the Mountains. Including Shebbetin." He pulled up one knee and

caused a draft of cold air to sweep in underneath their shared blanket. "Scribes will come and make a proper list of everyone who lives in Shebbetin. Not just the owners. Now just the usual few. It will encompass everyone."

Enim drew the blanket back down while gesturing with his other hand. "And once the scribes report to Varoonya that there are so many people here, they will also relate that the Choosing needs to happen in Shebbetin itself."

He leaned back against the wall, fully satisfied. "So all is well. All taken care of."

\* \* \*

Kaya held Torly's torn and crumpled letter in her hand. She could not read it, of course, since it was in Kokish. But she could wave it at Enim with a vengeance.

"This is the key." Kaya's voice was intent. "If it is as Torly says, then the folkcount is a pivotal point. A delicate joint in a powerful machine. Everything hinges upon it."

Deep furrows lined Kaya's brow. "If the folkcount goes well, then the Choosing will happen. In Shebbetin, and with the whole population." Her muscles tensed. "However, if anything should go wrong with the folkcount, anything at all," Kaya's eyes narrowed, "then Naydeer would be a great deal happier."

Enim's throat felt suddenly dry. He squirmed, casting a questioning look over at Lhut. But Lhut's eyes were dark, somber.

Kaya leaned forward, arms crossed tightly before her chest. Her voice had come down to a scathing hiss. "We will not wait for Naydeer's ruses. This time, we will move first. Before she even dreams of it. The folkcount must happen. And we will make sure of it. Now!"

\* \* \*

The first snow of the year had begun to fall at night, but when Enim set out in the small hours of morning, only a cold wind met his face. Enim's horse followed the narrow mountain trail, guided by instinct more than by the weak, mellow gleam of a magical lantern.

Slowly and hesitantly, dawn began to touch the vast highland sky, turning it from pitch black to midnight blue. Then to pale azure, with a hazy mist, a frozen breath shimmering in its midst. The winds relented. And finally, the sun came up over the crest.

All of a sudden, Enim was riding out into a blinding radiance, an endless field of glittering crystals. The mountains gleamed an

unbearable white and all the land was bathed in gold, with ethereal glitter drifting over the snow like fairy dust.

A miracle had broken loose. The light of the heavens had come over the earth. Enim took a deep breath and howled his jubilation into the sky. Even while the frost bit his skin and the dazzling sun hurt his eyes. But with a firework of brightness and beauty exploding out all around him, Enim could not feel anything other than elation.

This was an omen.

His quest would be successful.

\*

At the inn in Hebenir, Enim was the last one to rise in the morning. And the first one to be grateful for the much warmer climate of the lowlands, and the brevity and ease of the ride on to Behrlem. Beautiful as the snowy highlands might be, they were still cold, and the journey long.

But here, down among the soft rolling hills, things were different. Gentle, welcoming, of a human scale. Behrlem too felt cozy and homey, with a small-town charm. The county house sat on the central square, timber-framed, solid, with a broad porch under a wide, tilting roof.

Enim knocked on the door.

An elderly woman with dark skin and a big round body greeted him from behind her desk. Nenimoria, she introduced herself in a warm, sonorous voice, offering Enim a seat and a cup of tea. Enim gratefully accepted.

"I have come to inquire about the folkcount," he finally came around to the purpose of his visit. "About the procedure, for Shebbetin in particular."

Nenimoria looked at Enim. "Shebbetin," she said in a bemused tone of voice, patting the white curls on her head.

"Yes," Enim affirmed. "Shebbetin. In the mountains. It is part of the Behrlem region, I understand. So I assume the folkcount will be organized here, in the county house of Behrlem?"

"Yes. Yes, it will be," Nenimoria replied hastily, seeing the troubled look on Enim's face. "Don't you worry about it. We'll take care of it. We'll do the folkcount, even in the mountains. Ojorsven will be going up there, specifically. All the long way."

Enim's face brightened up. "Oh, wonderful. Do you think I could speak to Ojorsven, then?"

"Sorry, dear, but Ojorsven is in Toan. Has to travel a lot on duty, poor Ojorsven has. But Toan is all right, he says. He quite likes it as a town, you see? And he'll be back in a couple of days. But you can talk to me in the meantime. It will be just as well," she nodded at him encouragingly.

Enim considered. And then he explained about Shebbetin, and how people there had never been included in the Choosing and had no access to healers either, and no learning pavilions for the children, and not even a pouch collection point. And anyhow, how the folkcount was key to all of that, and how they really needed to make sure to get it right and have everybody accounted for.

Nenimoria listened to Enim with a growing look of concern on her face. In the end, she assured him that everything would be just fine, all neat and proper. They would come up to the mountains, in person, and do the folkcount there, right in the place itself. All the people will be taken care of. They will not forget anyone. Ojorsven will be going around to every single house. He even had a special traption from Varoonya, a receptacle, just for that. So Enim need not worry. They had it all in hand.

Enim let out a sigh of relief. He thanked Nenimoria profusely, and she reassured him once more that all would be well. She even accompanied him to the door when he left.

Nenimoria watched Enim walk away across the plaza.

She ached for him in her heart. 'Poor boy,' she thought. 'It is so hard to be young. And so far from home too. No wonder he is confused and worried. And does not know what to do, or how to make sense of things. But,' she consoled herself, 'he will come around, given time. He will figure out how things work, and he will find his place in the world. Even if he has to live up there in the mountains. He is a strong young lad, and he has a good heart. He will manage. He will get his feet on the ground, after a while, and be well.'

Nenimoria nodded to herself. A trace of concern still lingered within her, but her general good humor was already getting the upper hand again. As she went back inside to make herself another cup of tea, she began to hum along with the song of the steaming kettle.

**M**anaam's hall was aglow with golden lights and colorful robes. Perfumes filled the air, mingling with the sweet sounds of a lute. Large mirrors doubled the spark of jeweled pins, the sheen of elegant hairstyles crowned with elaborately embellished combs. Delicious tidbits were handed round on silver plates, their journey weaving into the dance of polite conversation, of meetings and greetings and pleasant remarks.

Cahuan smiled, slipping past insults.

She advanced through the reception where, in a rustle of crystal and extravagant silks, condescending benevolence was offered to her together with the finest of wines.

The soft light played on Cahuan's skin in quivering shimmers of green and gold, and she remembered the mermaid. Remembered she lived in a vast, open, fluid realm with her friends, who were her real world. This here was just a visit among strangers, an excursion into an alien realm that was mostly a pretense, but whose inhabitants she would not disturb by revealing what she knew to be true. If these humans chose to live in a mirage, they had a right to do so. This was their life, and Cahuan was a guest here. Come to graciously receive all the riches of this world, which no doubt would be offered, and to nourish her home.

Cahuan inclined her head. Her smile was artless, affectionate and, all in all, ravishing. The owner next to her could not help but smile back at her with genuine warmth.

\* \* \*

It was a small and dirty stone house, as dilapidated as all the others in the outer quarter. Debris lay strewn across the floor of a single room, in between an array of empty bottles.

A seven-year-old boy and his little sister crouched in a corner, wearily watching two men who hung in each other's arms, kissing,



and swaying dangerously in their uncertain balance. All of a sudden, one pushed away, letting the other thump on the ground. A raw, drunken laugh mingled with muttered swearing, with a hateful, vengeful voice. The fallen man pushed himself up, the leg of a broken chair in his hand. Roaring ferociously, he attacked and received a kick in the guts, which sent both men reeling to the ground in a tangle of limbs. They hammered fists onto each other's head, shouting insults, or hooting and squeaking in animal sounds.

The small girl started screaming, her eyes wide, fixed on the fight. She turned to her brother and began hitting him with her tiny fists, wailing while tears streamed down her face. The boy tore at her hair, jerking her head back hard when she tried to bite him.

Her mother hollered at them. "You idiots! You useless brats!" She gestured wildly toward the wrestling men. "Why don't you do something!"

Her words slurred. She picked up a stone, aiming at her children.

Olfwer and his sister ran for the door.

\* \* \*

All traces of the party had already been removed from the parlor. Only a bowl overflowing with fruit and a small plate of pastries still spoke of past splendors. When Cahuan entered, Manaam came toward her in two long strides, taking her hands. "Cahuan! You were magnificent. How did you manage to do that?"

She gave him a wry grin. "I had a lot of help. Including from you, with your warnings. But also from Yoor, and from Lasa and Lunin. I could find my own way then. So, yes. All in all, I am very proud of myself for having escaped the path of suffering and almost turned it into a form of enjoyment."

Cahuan wagged her head. "Even though I could not often devote such an enormous amount of energy to just one single evening." She considered. "But maybe I won't have to. Maybe now that I have mastered the skill, I could easily do it again. Should I ever need to, which I even hope I might not."

Manaam pushed back a strand of hair from her face. "We shall see. In any case, I am glad you have come out unscathed, and so has our relationship."

"Yes." Cahuan wrapped her arm around his waist, arching back to look into his eyes with eager impatience. "But now what about the children? Will they have a home?"

“Soon. I hope.” His fingers intertwined with Cahuan’s. “Many owners have made pledges. But we need ongoing commitments, rather than just one-off donations. It takes years for a child to grow up, after all.”

Manaam bit his lip. “And we are still waiting for the coin from Varoonya, which might turn out to be everything, or nothing.”

\* \* \*

Yoor sat at his desk, surrounded by forms and papers. He paused, brows furrowed, his brush motionless over the paper. Then he dipped it into the ink and continued.

Nin had made herself comfortable beneath Yoor’s blanket, snuggling up with embroidered vines and dragons, flowers and fairies. Her fingers idly played with the little linen pouch, feeling the softness of the fabric, the hard edges within, while the rustling paper sang her a wordless lullaby.

Her eyes fell shut.

}}} A diamond brooch crawled across the brambles like an awkward, mysterious caterpillar. The branches were black and bare, without signs of life. Sharp and heartless, their thin needles pointed out into the twilight. A silver spark caught on the back of the creeping diamonds, a cruel or hopeful star in the gloom. With an effort, the caterpillar made it around another threatening thorn. But then he had arrived.

Exhausted, heavy and pregnant, he slid into the pouch that limply awaited him on the brambles. With one last move, he collapsed onto the gold coin lying within.

The pouch closed around him like a cocoon. Perfect silence held him like a great mystery, like the safety that opened up the shrine of the final dare.

The caterpillar dissolved.

His self disintegrated, became one with the gold of the coin, with the emptiness of being, with the essence of life. In absolute unknowing, he transformed into a completely new creature, was still the same as before, yet also the exact opposite.

Slowly, the vague mass of life-force within the cocoon took form, became shape and body. Laughter could be felt, along with a push and a shove and a cry of fury. Tempestuously, the new life burst forth, squeezing through a chink, splitting open the prison. The broken cocoon birthed a boisterous horde of children who flew across the

brambles like colorful birds, who clapped and sang and complained until green leaves broke from all the twigs, swaying in a fragrant summer breeze. {{{

Nin turned in her sleep, a deep, endless sigh rising from her lungs, a breath that drifted away into the depths of the world.

\* \* \*

Herun raised his gaze to Cahuan, pushing his cap back and forth over his brow in a restless motion. "You know Yunda has been living with me ever since she fled the cabin. Olfwer and his sister can't stay on where they are either. In that horrid quarter of theirs, in that house full of violence. They trust me enough by now. They would come. And they need to get away, as soon as possible."

Herun heaved a heavy sigh. "Quinetopu has died. Where will his boys go now? We had better have a place ready for them. For all of them. I cannot bear sending any of them away. I just cannot. Who? Who? Which of these children are we supposed to abandon?" Herun shook his massive head. "None of them. I just couldn't do it. I couldn't. We have to give them a home."

Cahuan shifted fretfully. "Yes. I know. We're almost there. Almost."

\* \* \*

Cahuan was pacing across the polished floor, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest.

Manaam's fingertips tapped against the window frame. "I am expecting it any moment now. Including the actual sums." He licked his lips. "Yoor already announced the sheets in his last letter, after all. And it sounded hopeful. Promising. As if they had really made it."

He took a quick step into the room. "Perhaps they truly have touched people and changed the way they understand beauty, from things around their necks to a beautiful world, with happy, healthy children in it."

Manaam took Cahuan's hand and raised it to his chest. "If people give their coin to what is most important, then it will be enough. I am sure."

There was a knock on the door.

Manaam's secretary came in and placed a tray full of envelopes on the table. "Thank you." Manaam hardly looked at the man, so eager was he to busy himself with his pouch.

"Ah!" His voice caught as he fished out one of the letters.

"This is it?" Cahuan came up close behind him. Her fingers clutched his arm as she peered over his shoulder.

Manaam opened the envelope. Cahuan's gaze slipped on a tumble of illegible signs and numbers. It was all in Kokish.

Manaam's shoulders tensed. With narrowed eyes and shallow breath he perused the paper in his hand. He bit his lip.

"And?" Cahuan whispered.

Manaam turned around. A warm light shone in his eyes.

"Yes!" He pulled her so close he took her breath away.

"We made it! It is enough. The children will have a home!"

\* \* \*

Cahuan danced in the snow.

From a cozy cottage halfway out toward the meadows, two more people emerged. Together with Cahuan, they gathered snow in their arms and threw it up into the air until the sun caught in the floating crystals and bathed them all in a cloud of gold.

\* \* \*

It was time to celebrate.

"Aah," Cahuan moaned as she leaned back into the warm water of Manaam's bathtub. Flowers petals floated on the surface, along with fragrant mountain herbs. She fished out one of the leaves to rub it between her fingers. Touching it to her nostrils, she breathed in the potent smell, allowing her senses to be carried away by the pleasure.

Between the lashes of her half-closed eyes, she idly let her gaze roam around the room. Taking in the light of candles, the soft golden glows reflected in the warm sheen of the polished wooden floor. The fire in the hearth, burning steadily, breathing soothing sounds of coziness to mingle with the soft splashing of her bathwater. A stick of incense was sending off trails of smoke beside her, little ghosts of vapor, forming and transforming with the questions sent by the fire, by her movement, by the rising air over the hot tip. Cahuan watched them move, disappear, rise anew, in a continuous riddle, a never-ending oracle, or an eternal lullaby.

She leaned her head back against the bathtub.

There was a soft knock on the door just before Manaam slipped in, setting two wicker baskets down by the fire. He was wearing breeches today, and a wide shirt was that came down in a soft bow around his arms before being drawn tight at the wrist. He did not seem to be wearing anything else.

Manaam pulled a bottle from the basket. As he poured the dark red wine, Cahuan could see the glow of the fire get caught in the liquid, making it shine and sparkle with some deep, half-hidden mystery. Manaam came down on one knee beside the bath, holding a glass out to Cahuan. She swirled it softly, inhaling the rich aroma, looking at the melted sunset inside.

Then, unexpectedly, Manaam linked his arm with hers, looking deep into her eyes. "We have done it. We really have. The children have a home."

Cahuan held his gaze. "Yes. Love has come. Finally."

Their glasses clinked, the sound ringing out like the purest of bells. Together, they raised the wine to their lips, their arms intertwined, their breaths mingling.

Cahuan savored the sweet earthy taste as it spread out slowly over her tongue, over her gums, leaving a softly glowing trail down her throat.

She leaned back into the water. From under half-closed eyelids, she let her gaze wander over Manaam. His dark hair, the single strands falling loosely across his brow. His slim form, to be divined under the fabric of his clothes. His warm eyes on her.

Cahuan knew what he must be seeing. She herself had noticed the effect of the candlelight, of the reddish glow from the fire, on her appearance. She seemed to be made of gold. The green in her skin had become almost invisible in this light, had turned into mere shades of darkness, into hues of shadow and jade alternating with the richness of molten iron, of glowing embers, of the sun near the horizon. Her butterfly skin shimmered and glittered in the dark, catching the sparks of fire around her.

Manaam's gaze roamed over her face, her naked arms. The reflections of candlelight on the surface of the water, between the floating petals, hiding and revealing some of the secrets that lay in the depths.

He leaned in slowly, letting his lips rest on Cahuan's for a moment, then kissed her, softly, warmly. He tasted of wine, just as she did, and she savored his touch, his sensuous presence.

"You are a gift," she whispered when he withdrew.

"So are you." His voice was low. He let his eyes linger on her face for a moment more before he said, "No. Much more than that. You are a goddess, really. In very thin disguise." He murmured into her ear. "But I have seen through you. You dwell in the heavens, or

perhaps in the seas, and you have come to earth now to spread love to those in need. And you are doing it very effectively.”

Cahuan chuckled softly. “Yes. I surely am. With the help of my humble servants.” She solemnly turned toward him and kissed a blessing onto his brow.

“Hmm.” Manaam’s eyes held a secret smile. “I believe today is the day of the goddess. Time for a ceremony.”

He turned around to the basket. His hand came back covered in a mitten, which he drenched in the tub. He touched it to a piece of scented soap, then began to massage Cahuan’s fingers. Softly pulling her arm down to the water, he dipped the mitten into it again and again, always coming up warm and wet, and wrapped it around her hand, rubbing her palm, gently pulling out her fingers, pressing and stroking, coaxing a hundred tiny muscles to soften under his caress. Slowly, he moved on toward her wrist, her arm, her elbow. Cahuan leaned back against the tub and melted into the warmth of the water, the glow of the room, the tender persistence of his touch. She sighed. “Oh, very good.”

Manaam looked at her, a pleased smile on his face. Leisurely, he worked his way up one arm, then the other. He pulled up her foot, rubbing every toe, every fragile bone, every sensitive spot on the sole. With great deliberation, he let a trail of well-being spread up her ankle, her round calf, her muscled thigh. And another leg, glowing golden in the firelight, growing warm and heavy with pleasure and release under his touch. Finally sinking back down into the waters.

Manaam leaned in over Cahuan.

Her eyes flickered half-open, holding his before they roamed down over his chest. His shirt was half-soaked and clung to his body in places, becoming transparent with moisture. As Manaam moved before her, the cleft at the top of his shirt fell open, then closed again, revealing and hiding him from her gaze, letting her see and not see his bare chest, his lean body, his tender skin.

“Hmm,” she hummed. “I think I can see a reason to stay awake. And to not close my eyes quite so much.” She raised her hand to his neck, tracing the collar of his shirt and coming down toward the front.

Manaam caught her hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed her fingertips. “You are quite welcome to keep your eyes open,” he murmured. “But other than that, I suggest that you truly just give in

this time. Let me spoil you. Lean back and do nothing, nothing at all. If you would like that? For tonight." He looked at her searchingly.

Cahuan held his gaze. Then she nodded and smiled. She gave his shirt a rueful look and a little tug, just once, just lightly. But clear enough. As she sank back into the tub, Manaam pulled free of his sodden top.

He dipped the mitten in warm water again and began to rub Cahuan's neck and shoulders. She tilted her head back. The fabric was coarse and soft at the same time, and the warmth on her neck delicious. As was Manaam's touch. She sighed with pleasure as he moved his caresses along her collarbones, down over her heart, and around her full round breasts, pushing their weight up, letting it slowly come down again as he worked around them in soft, purposeful circles. His massage moved underwater as he caressed her waist and belly, always with the same deliberate, firm but gentle moves, the same coaxing, reassuring pressure of touch that made all tension or reserve leave her body.

"Come to me," Manaam breathed, and she leaned forward into a wet half-embrace that left her back bare.

Manaam's hand moved over her muscles with soft pressure and unending generosity. With his other arm, he held her close, his head against hers. He murmured something soft, unintelligible into her hair. Then, slowly, he drew back. Reaching behind him, he came up with a huge towel, and dabbed its corner invitingly on her shoulder.

Cahuan smiled, and consented to waking up enough to stand up in the tub and allow the towel to be wrapped around her. She stepped out into his arms, humming as he caressed her through the lush fabric, rubbing her dry.

Manaam pulled her over to the fire, and Cahuan willingly sank down onto the mat, her belly pressing into the sheet, her face turned toward the crackling flames.

She could hear Manaam rummage behind her. Then she felt it.

Warmings, of a special kind.

Round and even, like large pebbles polished by a stream for ages, perfectly smooth and heated to just the right temperature.

Manaam placed them very deliberately on one carefully chosen spot after the other along her back. Cahuan sighed. They were warm, very warm, and as the heat began to radiate into her body, it filled her with its glow. It ran not only along her whole spine, flowing through it like the force of the inner earth, but also reached parts of her body

way beyond it. Organs deeply embedded inside her seemed to receive that nourishment like a healing. They responded with a sense of release, of melting into their proper shape, their proper place, as in a homecoming. Cahuan breathed deeply, sensing the inner realms of her body with wonder. She was warm and heavy throughout, with unfathomable depth and thoroughness. There wasn't a tense cell left in her body.

Manaam took off his breeches and slid on a small and near transparent bit of second skin. He came to lie beside Cahuan, halfway on top of her, holding some of his weight on his arm. He kissed her nape. Then he withdrew, and his hand came back slippery with scented oil.

Cahuan groaned once more. She felt Manaam's hand roam her body, lavishly spilling warm oil onto her skin, gliding over her neck, her arms, her sides, her buttocks. And this time, he did not stop there. He let his hand slide down to the tender folds between her thighs, rubbing gently, tugging, coaxing. Cahuan's body responded without reserve, opening up to him, welcoming him. Manaam's hand kept on caressing her as his body rubbed against hers along the full length, pushing the warmlings aside, gliding on Cahuan in a film of fragrant oils, spreading them further over both their skins.

She could feel his heat, his excitement. His kisses on her neck, his hips on hers. Gently, he let himself sink down between her thighs, let the softest, hottest spot of his body rest against hers, the breath of a touch, like a question, a yearning. He waited another moment, feeling the utter relaxation radiating out from Cahuan, her open welcome, her calm desire.

Gradually, he moved in.

A deep, satisfied sound broke from Cahuan's throat. Manaam stayed still for a while, feeling her engulf him, savoring her. Only then he began to stir. Slowly, purposefully, he rubbed against her as in one more form of massage, of caress, of indulgence of her body. Another blessing bestowed upon her. It certainly felt like one to Cahuan as another wave of well-being spread through her body. She moaned luxuriously. Otherwise, she did nothing, as promised. She just lay there, bathed in pleasure.

Manaam rubbed and rolled, pressing into her warm body, then withdrawing slowly, only to find his way in again. Small archaic sounds rose up inside him, like the voices of his inner jungle, of sleepy wild animals making their deep and raspy calls into the night.



Manaam's breath quickened, became the hoarse rustling of branches before the approaching storm. He tenderly bit into Cahuan's shoulder, brushed his chest over her hot, slippery back, his hips over her soft buttocks.

And got carried away by a tempest.

An ardent storm raged through his body, making all the animals of his jungle cry out at once, sending all leaves on all trees into a flurry. The rushing air left Manaam gasping.

Gently, the storm let him glide down again from up high, deposited him safely onto Cahuan's back, warm and spent.

He sank onto the mat beside her, his heart still pounding.

Manaam kissed Cahuan's ear. She smiled sleepily and turned toward him. With a low purr, she buried her face in the bend of his neck and nibbled lightly on his skin. Then she let go, and just pressed up closely against him.

A warm glow had spread through all of Manaam's body. His fingers toyed with dark seaweed hair. There was nothing more he wanted.

Elo was standing outside the door, in a private capacity. Everyone knew, of course, that he was working as a guard in Naydeer's mine. When he was at work, which he wasn't, at the moment. He was just being a private person, out in his evenings, standing at some random place within the Mansion. Why not? Shebbetin was a free town. Anyone was allowed to walk along the lanes, or to stand there. It was not his problem if a door right behind him was the entrance to a place where people had been called to come to a gathering tonight, to hear about the Choosing, was it? Elo crossed his arms in front of his broad chest and leaned back lightly against the doorpost.

A young woman in a black cloak came walking up the lane, eyeing Elo, eyeing the door behind him, and slowing down to almost a halt. She wavered. Then, without saying a word, without looking at Elo, she walked on.

A few people came around the corner, deep in conversation. They saw Elo and stopped talking. They also stopped walking. Withdrawing into the shadow of an archway, they began to whisper in low, urgent voices, and finally slunk away into a small passage behind them. All except one.

A woman with a thick gray turban walked out of the shadow, heading straight toward Elo. Her body was poised and upright, her strides long, with an energetic spring in them. She stopped in front of Elo, meeting his cold stare with sparkling eyes.

"Good evening," she said and slid past him, into the room behind that door.

\*       \*       \*

"Intimidation," Kaya said. "Threats of violence. Threats that might get acted upon, as we know." She leaned forward, gazing into the eyes of her friends. "It does affect us. Very few dare to show up at gatherings now. But," Kaya added, with a wicked grin, "all the right ones. Naydeer is sorting them out for us. We know straight away

where to find the people with grit now.” She winked at Ngyrya, who smiled back at her, her gray turban almost hidden under a big shawl she had wrapped tightly around her head and shoulders.

“Hmm.” Lhut rubbed a hand along his arm. “Yes. But not for much longer. People will not be setting up gatherings any more at this rate. We will find it hard to contact new people.”

“Maybe,” Kaya replied. “Maybe not. Who knows. That threat of violence makes it clear to everyone what the situation is. It makes the oppression more palpable. More obvious. It may make people angry. ‘What is this, after all? We only want to take part in the Choosing, like everyone else. And for that, we get threatened? Surely not! That can’t be! What, you push me? Just you wait! I’ll push right back!’ You know? It might spur people into action.”

Kaya tapped the ground at her feet with a stick. “If people are agitated enough, nothing will stop them. They won’t even need gatherings then, to know about the Choosing. They will talk to each other, one on one. It will spread like a wildfire, if the fire is hot enough inside them.”

\* \* \*

The owner’s cabin ducked deep into the cover of the night, shutters closed, door locked. Only a tiny sliver of light pouring out spoke of the presence within.

Joonster’s body was stiff, taut. He held his tongue in his cheek and his fingers crossed inside his pocket. The miner could not see. She was kneeling before Joonster, focused and tense, as she finished the loop around Joonster’s ankle in one smooth, sweeping motion.

“There.” Her voice was shaky. “That’s how they do it, in the mine. Break free of the demon spell.”

Joonster reached out a hand wordlessly, and the woman dropped the magical amulet into his palm. Two twigs, tied together at an angle, like the crossed fingers of a human hand.

Joonster let the coin fall into the dust before the crouching miner. “Trace it back. To who it came from.”

The woman picked up the coin, brushing dirt off her knees. She silently opened the back door and disappeared into the blackness of the abandoned tunnel.

Joonster sat still, motionless. Then he stooped, running a finger around his ankle, just along the line of the miner’s touch.

\* \* \*

Ojorsven hated going up into the mountains. It was by far the least favorite part of his position as a Behrlem scribe. He loathed traveling, and on horseback at that. Proper carriages were bad enough, but this? And now, of all times! Up here, it was winter! Unbearable. And they still were not safely out of the rainy season either. Ojorsven had actually spent last night in one of the emergency shelters along the path, seeking refuge just in time before an icy sleet began to fall from the sky. Getting soaked in the freezing wind, with still half a night's ride ahead of you—that could mean actual death, with all the fevers you'd catch.

Ojorsven grumbled. He distrusted these vast highlands even at the best of times. They invariably made one feel tiny and lost, with those mountains towering over one.

But, well, nothing to be done about it. It could not be helped. It was just a part of his position, and that was that. And Ojorsven loved being a scribe in Behrlem, generally. It suited him very well. It was stable and steady. There always was something to do, but never too much, or in too much of a hurry. Always some news, but always some olds too. Lots of olds, actually. Lots of reliable, predictable parts of his work and of his world. People he knew, who kept coming by every now and then, with a bit of new gossip about old acquaintances, or a little request for something or other. Ojorsven loved to oblige in that way. A little service here, a helpful word there, a duty well done, and people well satisfied. Really, it was a good position. Very pleasant, all in all.

Except for things such as this trip to the mountains, amidst the howling winds. The only consolation Ojorsven could find, apart from inevitability, was the excellent reception that would await him, unfailingly, at the end of his journey. He had been a scribe in Behrlem for quite some time now, and whenever duty forced him up into Shebbetin, Naydeer had provided him with an excellent welcome. She was one of the old acquaintances that sweetened up his life, really. A very special woman. With a very special winery as well. Exquisite, really. Not something that he would enjoy on a regular basis in Behrlem. Or on an irregular basis, even, to tell the truth. And the same for the food. And for the rooms. For the company, for the way he was treated like some very rare, treasured, highly important visitor. Just the general air, the quality of his reception there. Yes, that truly was something to look forward to. He had not met Naydeer very often, but he enjoyed the occasion all the more for it.

Kaya paced up and down Enim's room, rubbing her scar underneath the thick woolen cap. "We really do need to know! People are getting impatient. They are on their toes, and we must tell them. When will the folkcount happen?"

She turned around and gave Enim a hard look. "And what if it won't? In spite of all the sweet talk. We've been expecting it any day! What if they never come at all? How will we notice that they don't? Will we just sit here and wait forever?"

Enim pulled the blanket hanging down from his desk up more closely around his waist. His feet searched for the warming on the ground. "I don't know."

He tapped his fingers on the boards in an irregular rhythm. "The Behrlem scribe did not give a date. I did not ask for one either, I have to admit. It just seemed obvious that it would be very soon. They had their plans all ready, even before I showed up. For her colleague Ojorsven to come up to the mountains with a receptacle, and do a complete folkcount."

Enim looked up at Kaya with a worried frown. "I would have expected him to be here by now."

\* \* \*

On the evening of his third day in Shebbetin, Ojorsven contently settled down on lush silky cushions by the fireplace. With a happy sigh, he let the plum wine swirl around in his glass, breathing in its exquisite aroma. He had relished all the luxuries and attentions offered to him. He loved visiting the beautiful large villas so typical of Shebbetin, as well as talking to their occupants, most of whom he knew, and very few of whom were new. Ojorsven had recorded all the changes very conscientiously. The receptacle traption he had been given for that purpose was an unwelcome bit of new to Ojorsven, but never mind. He had managed even that. And enjoyed himself well enough during his days, and very well indeed during his evenings.

However, after three days, he was beginning to feel a certain longing for the pleasures of his own little house in Behrlem. For his familiar surroundings, his worn-out slippers, his favorite cup and his cat. Nice as it was to be pampered and spoiled here, he could not feel sorry if, soon, it would be time to go home again.

But there was something that nudged him uncomfortably at the back of his mind. Some part of his orders, his commission of what he

was supposed to do here. He was not quite sure he had understood it properly. And Nenimoria had also mentioned that someone had come to the county house in Behrlem specifically to request that everything be done with extra care.

"Naydeer, may I ask you something?" Ojorsven made a go for it. "I have gone through all the houses now, registering any changes. But I wonder... There are more people in Shebbetin, obviously, than I have counted. There is a whole settlement over there, which I have seen from a distance but never gone into. Because I have headed straight here, for very good reasons," he smiled brightly at Naydeer. She beamed back at him.

"But I wonder. What about the people living there? Should they not be included in the folkcount, perhaps? Even though they never have been so far? Who are they, anyway?" Ojorsven turned a questioning gaze on Naydeer.

Naydeer topped up his plum wine with a genial expression and a slight shake of her head. "Oh, no," she said. "Never worry about that. It is not worth the trouble. There are people there, of course, but only temporarily. They don't live here. They are nomads. Shepherds. Surely you have heard? How there was nothing here, before we owners set up the mines? Only some isolated cottages up in the mountains, and passing vagrants."

Ojorsven nodded. There was a dim image in his mind of the primitive past in these parts. The huge, empty mountains, with some grazing animals and a few forlorn wanderers who spoke very little and understood even less, knowing nothing of the world beyond.

"That is who they are," Naydeer continued. "The descendants of those herders. They used to trek in the mountains, and now they have come here for a while, because they saw that they can get coin in the mines. But they don't stay. They do not belong here. They just come to work for a bit, and then leave again. They don't even speak Kokish. So do not bother chasing after that lot in the icy wind, trying to get anything out of them. It is not worth the trouble."

The image of scurrying after people in the icy wind stuck with Ojorsven. Especially since he might have to do it for quite a long time. The settlement did not look very small. Nor did it look purely temporary, to be honest. It did not seem to have been set up yesterday, to be dismantled tomorrow by its nomadic inhabitants. These were stone houses, after all, even if small and cranky ones. But they were not tents.

He mentioned that to Naydeer.

"Oh, yes," she replied with a supercilious sneer and a knowing wink at Ojorsven. "The houses stay. But the people go. When they come, they move into whatever empty shack they find. And when they leave, they abandon it behind them without a care. They have no sense of belonging to this place. Not even to Shebbetin. Much less to Yurvania. They don't even know what that is. They have no understanding, and no interest either. They are simply not a part of it."

Ojorsven nodded slowly. That would explain it.

"But do not take my word for it." Naydeer offered him a plate of tidbits together with an earnest gaze. "I am only one person, and I have my own perception of things. I may be wrong. So please, by all means, do get a second opinion, and a third. There shall be half a dozen people coming here tonight to our little dinner party. Please feel free to ask any or all of them for their opinion. I shall be interested to hear what they say. But I am pretty sure that they will all confirm what I have just told you."

\* \* \*

Enim's horse trotted steadily along the mountain path, traversing a tableau painted in hues of white. Ash gray clouds hung low in the sky, heavy with snow. Ghosts of icy crystal blew across the track, losing themselves again in the foggy twilight.

Enim shivered beneath his thick cloak. But he gritted his teeth. He would see this through. This time, he would get an exact date for the folkcount from the scribe in Behrlem. And not just that. Enim would go for all the details he could possibly think of, on every little aspect. He would not settle for an easy answer again. This time, he would know everything when he left, truly everything.

\*

"How could this possibly have happened?" Enim gripped the counter of the Behrlem county house, aghast. "And I had even come here beforehand to tell you! How could you possibly have failed to see all the people of Shebbetin?"

"There, there, young man!" Nenimoria's tone was soothing and admonishing at the same time. She could not let Enim rail at her colleague like that, after all.

Ojorsven crossed his arms before his chest protectively. "I have done the best I could, under the circumstances," he professed. "I have

built on the records of previous folkcounts, making sure to note any changes.”

His brow furrowed. “As to those people who have never been in the records in the first place, I did indeed notice them. And I have made inquiries, I assure you. I have asked a number of different people as to whether those ought to be included in the folkcount, and so far, you are the only one who thinks they should have been. Everyone else was clearly of the opinion that those people are not part of the population that ought to be counted. So.”

“But did you ask any of the people concerned?” Enim was shaking with outrage and disbelief.

“Look here,” Nenimoria intervened again. “What’s done is done. Ojorsven has given it his best, and he has returned from the mountains after many long days. With the completed receptacle, which we have sent back to Varoonya, as we were supposed to. So it is gone now. Nothing to be done about it.”

But Ojorsven made another offer of reconciliation. “If the county office in Varoonya decides to send new receptacles and to have some extra folkcount done, so be it. Up to them. However, if they want that, they had better make sure they send some additional scribes along as well, to do all that counting. For including a whole new population in a folkcount surely is more work than one person alone can do. Especially in winter,” Ojorsven added, with emphasis.

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Yoor held the open envelope in his hand and read a little note out loud to Torly.

“I am in Behrlem and have no time before the courier leaves for Varoonya. Please make a copy of this report for yourselves and one for me. Give the original to Lenoren. Urgently. Love, Enim.”

Yoor looked at Torly.

Torly looked at the report in her hands.

She began to skim through it.

“Oh, damnation.”



Herun opened the oven door in the kitchen to throw in another log, a reddish glow of embers dancing across his face. Hidden behind the hearth wall, the hot air made its way along the passages underneath the floor of the main room, half a level up, before escaping through the vertical shaft at the back. Herun grunted with satisfaction. Finally a snugger with a properly heated floor. Just as it should be wherever kids were crawling around.

Taking a pot of steaming tea with him, Herun went back up to the children.

Over in one corner, Olfwer and his little sister were guardedly huddled up together and slowly getting used to the idea that no one was going to attack them. Even that no one was going to attack anyone else either. That things might be safe, here. They clearly did not believe it yet, but they kept on watching everyone around, slowly taking in the possibility that there might indeed be another way to live.

Olfwer glanced over at Yunda every now and then, with looks somewhere between suspicion and admiration. But mostly his attention was on Herun, who was repairing one of the low tables together with Quinetopu's sons.

Both of the brothers had taken their father's death in stride. They had seen it coming. For a long time, they had been more or less on their own, their sick parent too weak to talk. And so the two little boys had grown more and more silent as well, wrapping into their quiet ways.

But now, things had changed. They had moved out of their old home, into a new one. With other children in it, who would be living with them, like siblings. To their amazement, the two little boys now saw their family grow rather than shrink. They noted it with wonder.

And in the midst of it all, there was Herun. Herun, who was strong and alive. Herun, who was doing things. With them! They pricked

up their ears and became livelier than they had been for moons. Doing chores, playing games, taking an interest in all the things that one could suddenly take an interest in. Eagerly, they turned over the tools in their hands, waiting for their chance to put a nail into the broken table on the floor.

Behind them, Yunda, still as wiry a girl as she had been, was dancing through the room, accompanying herself with a bit of improvised singing every now and then. She had perfected the art of integrating fencing lunges into her dance too, just in case she might need them some day. She would be ready then.

But right now, she did not need to fence. She had left the horrors of the work cabin behind. The master had not found her. Neither had the demon. He never would. She was free. And she was home! With Herun, with siblings, and with an oven! Yunda sang out loud and strong, from the depths of her heart.

\* \* \*

A freezing gale howled across the highlands. The thick white flakes that had covered the path knee-deep before were now being blown into dunes and valleys, an alien, unrecognizable landscape. Needles of ice raced with the storm, an onslaught of tiny pikes, angry and cold. They turned the air a misty gray, a twilight come before its time, melting without distinction into the clouds that shrouded the higher slopes.

The rabbits had felt it coming, the evil weather. They knew, and had found shelter deep within the earth. There they huddled together in the darkness, seeking warmth and comfort in the soft, moving bodies of their companions, far from the rage of elements that would sweep away every single breath of life it met.

\*

“Enim has not come back.”

Cahuan’s brow was furrowed. She rubbed a hand over her arm. “He should have been here days ago. What could possibly have happened?”

Lhut snuggled up to her and, seeing that, Pulan and Lunin instantly followed suit.

“He didn’t ride out into that snowstorm the other day, did he?” Pulan let out a low and worried whistle, sounding a bit like an icy wind. With one hand, she reached out to Lunin, pulling him closer.

Cahuan heaved a deep sigh. "I don't know. I am not sure how well he can judge these things. Like what kind of weather is coming over the mountains."

"There are shelters all along the way." Lhut tucked the blanket in around the edges of their little huddle. "Enim would have gone in there if indeed he had been caught in a storm. He'll be safe."

"But does Enim know where the shelters are? Would he be able to find them, even if he can't see in the snow and the wind?"

\* \* \*

Flickering flames were hissing merrily inside the oven of the Behrlem county house, mingling their discreet song with the sound of human voices.

Enim cleared his throat. "I do have another question, in fact. If you could spare me a little more of your time?" He had brought a package of tea along, as a gift, as an offer of reconciliation. And as an indication of just how long he was hoping to talk to them.

Ojorsven put the kettle on with a deep sigh of relief. He had all the time in the world, and all the good will too. If only he didn't have to do battle with anyone. But pleasant, drawn-out conversations were a most welcome part of his life. And if it all could return to that, Ojorsven would be the first to go in with relish.

\* \* \*

Deep in the gardens of the Behrlem bath palace, a small cabin with crumbling paint and a mossy roof lay hidden among the ferns.

The artificer who worked there turned her eyes to Enim, the glass beads in her many braids catching the light, surrounding her black face with a coronet of glowing colors. In her hands, she held the last pieces of the puzzle.

Enim touched a reverent finger to the magical implements. He stowed away these precious acquisitions in his bag, taking care not to damage anything. Puffy clouds of fine, see-through threads fitted in beside bespoke crystals that already carried some of the most important spells within them. Just as an intricate design pattern was waiting to be engraved inside the beautifully polished wooden cases.

"I think I will be able to patch things together myself from here on." Enim looked up into the face the artificer who had provided all these treasures, so minutely tailored to his specific needs. "You've been incredibly supportive. I can't thank you enough. I would never have managed without you."

She waved it away. "That's how life works, isn't it?" She gave him a roughish grin. "Where would we all be if we didn't constantly help each other out?"

\* \* \*

On his way back, Enim stopped at each of the shelters he knew. To renew his acquaintance with them, to let their life-saving presence sink more deeply into his bodily memory, so that he would hopefully be able to find them even in fog and hailstorm should he ever need to.

Also, Enim wanted to do his bit. He knew all the passing traders chipped in to keep the path marked and the vital shelters ready.

Enim put a stone onto the cairn pointing the way to rescue. He had already changed the vim-stone in the magical lantern inside the hut and even left an additional lantern there, together with a mouse-proof jar of dried bread.

He patted the neck of his horse, who had waited patiently outside and now snorted at Enim's face in the sunshine.

"Right," Enim nodded. "Shall we, then?"

\* \* \*

"Enim!!!"

Cahuan threw herself at him, closely followed by Som and Lunin. Enim soon found himself enveloped in a wriggling group hug. "You're safe!"

Enim snuggled in under their duvet, happy to press his feet against a warmling. As soon as Kaya had made it over, he gave his report.

"Oh, damnation." Lhut's voice was a deep grunt, a rasping sigh. He pushed his cap back on his head, then pulled it firmly down again to cover both ears.

"Two more things," Enim put in quickly with a worried glance at Kaya, who looked dangerously close to a fuming volcano. "One, I have written to Lenoren to ask if they can send new scribes to do a folkcount. A proper one. Before the Choosing, hopefully."

He cleared his throat. "Two, I have brought back these." He opened his bag, and a glimmer of glass and crystal became visible. "I can build a receptacle. And we could start doing a folkcount ourselves. I've asked the scribe how."

Kaya the volcano exploded. Into Enim's arms.

“I did not know,” Manaam said. “I am sorry.” He walked over to the window, turning around to face Cahuan. “I have asked my secretary now, and he has confirmed. The county scribe has indeed been here. It seemed a small, uninteresting, bureaucratic affair to him, a routine thing. He did not tell me about it, nor did he see some big contentious political affair lurking behind this. And neither did I, I am afraid.”

His fingers gripped the sill. “I could have watched out for this, if I had seen it coming. I could have alerted you.”

Cahuan watched him, her eyes dark. “Would you have?” she asked softly.

Manaam blushed. “Of course I would have! I may be a cautious person, but I can do as much as that. I would have let you know the scribe is in town.” Manaam walked a few steps into the room. “I would have spoken to him myself too, and told him to include all of Shebbetin’s people in the folkcount.”

Manaam looked into Cahuan’s eyes directly now. “But I was not on the lookout for a scribe. Should I have been? Did you tell me? Did I just forget?”

Cahuan held his gaze. Then she dropped her eyes to the ground. “I am sure I mentioned it at some point. But I should have asked you much more explicitly. And been much more alert myself, in fact. I, and we, did not imagine this might happen. So we all missed it.”

\* \* \*

A bright autumn sun shone down on Old Varoonya, warming the labyrinth of terraces and rooftop gardens. Everything was lush and green after the rainy season, and the slight chill in the air dissolved swiftly in the light of noon.

Yoor had been too lazy to walk up the long ramp. So now he climbed off a swaying rope ladder and over a small ornamental wall that playfully symbolized boundaries where, really, there were none. Leaves as big as his head waved at Yoor, obscuring his vision, blinding and welcoming him in the middle of the jungle, a verdancy of herbs and vines and flowerpots. Yoor advanced along a narrow ridge lined with orange trees, then up a pirouetting staircase of this huge park, this whole landscape leading a life of its own several stories up from the tangled lanes on the ground.

Finally, in the greenery between a laundry line, a windmill and a bright red sun sail, Yoor saw where Torly and Nin had settled. And gotten at least halfway through their discussion.

Nin's eyes were blazing. She stomped her foot. "This can't be! We're not in times before the Transition, after all! Not even in Shebbetin. Or at least, we're not going to let it stay that way!"

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, her chin raised up defiantly. "Even though that is precisely what this Naydeer person seems to be aiming for. To have people excluded. Making sure they are not counted and don't count. That they cannot make themselves heard, and so can be exploited as before."

Nin took Torly's hand and pulled her to her feet. "We won't let that happen! We will send new scribes there right away and have everyone take part in the Choosing! Everyone!"

\*

After the sunlit roof gardens, the room seemed cool and dark. Lenoren was about to hurry out to her next speech or her next listening circle, as always during these moons of wooing. But she paused, her hand on the doorknob, glancing back at her daughter. "There is no way this is going to happen."

"But—"

"Not for this Choosing," Lenoren cut Nin short. "The lists of choosers are already being drawn up. We'd never be able to do a folkcount and have the results come back in time. I am sorry. But it is too late."

Lenoren turned to leave. "Ask me again once the new Council is in office."

Nin screamed, throwing the crumpled letter after the retreating form of her mother.

Lenoren sighed as she disappeared into the streets of Varoonya.

\*       \*       \*

Cold was oozing off the rough stone walls of the baker's home. Three children were hiding underneath a thick duvet, telling each other stories in the dark.

Kaya patted the stack of papers in her bag. "This way, we will know."

She put the last sheet and a pencil down on the table, looking up at her host. "We will have the exact number and the names of people who really do live in Shebbetin. We're going through the whole settlement now, recording one house at a time. And when the scribes finally do come, we already know what their results should be. If they have missed anyone, and who. We will not be fooled a second time, not even by a notch."

The baker nodded. She wrote down the details for all people in her household, adding a few comments about neighbors who would be out for work at this time, but whose names she could just as easily provide.

Kaya sent another prayer of thanks to Enim for having had the foresight to tease every last bit of information out of the Behrlem scribe. If Kaya had just made a guess herself, she would never have hit upon the exact official format for a folkcount.

\* \* \*

Enim nodded with satisfaction. The scroll had still been there. Squeezed in between the sample reports he had brought back from Varoonya, letters from friends and interesting notes about this and that, there were all the copies from the Artificer's Den. Including the complex layout Enim had just rolled out on the table.

His eyes roamed over the intricate design of lines and pentacles, symbolized crystals, explanatory scribbles. Some of them his own, Enim thought proudly.

A smile lingered on Enim's lips as he remembered how Kaya had squeezed and kissed him for his suggested plan. That was just Kaya, he supposed. She hardly ever touched him at all, but at moments like that she turned so fervent and fiery it practically left a burn.

Unobserved, the corner of Enim's mouth stayed curved lopsidedly while his eyes focused on the pattern. With skillful, practiced fingers, he began to unravel the glass thread and reached for his wand.

“I’m sorry, I cannot sell any of it to you,” the merchant repeated, his voice terse, his face turned away. “It’s all been... reserved.” He stood in his barn, his legs spread apart, his arms crossed over his chest. Behind him, firewood was piled up in neat stacks reaching up to the rafters.

“Is that so,” Kaya replied, looking at him with narrowed eyes. “That is strange. You know, I have just been to your neighbor’s barn, and she also said that all the firewood had been reserved and she could not sell me any. Someone has been reserving an incredible amount of firewood around here. I wonder who that may be?”

“None of your business,” the merchant gave back gruffly, turning away, his posture tense. “Couldn’t tell you. Various people.”

Kaya looked down on the ground. Her scar was beginning to show, an angry pale line across her dark brow.

“Just go,” the man said, his voice low, almost pleading, his face averted.

Kaya nodded slowly. “I will,” she said. “I won’t put you at risk. I can see that you have been threatened. There is danger, and it is up to you to decide how much of it you are willing to face. It is your life and your decision, not mine. I have no right to take it for you.”

Kaya looked up at the merchant’s face, speaking with quiet intensity. “You know that my livelihood depends on this. I am running a warmlings oven, and without firewood, I cannot run it. I have been buying wood with you all these years. So you know. You also know that I want us all to participate in the Choosing. Like everyone else in Yurvania. They don’t get threatened for it. They don’t have to risk their lives or their livelihoods for it. If we do, here in Shebbetin, then there’s something wrong, very wrong. We know there is. We have been suffering from this for ages. And we will set it right.”

Her eyes sparkled. “There are many ways to contribute. You decide. What is it that you can give, and when you are ready to do it.” With one last long gaze into his eyes, Kaya inclined her head and left.



The moon had grown half-full again and was looking in through Kaya's window with a pale evening face. Kaya tapped the dwindling pile of firewood behind her oven. "We cannot go on like this," she sighed, turning to Slunyew and Ngyrya. "People are very brave, smuggling firewood to us in small bundles. But, really, this isn't working. They are all taking risks, and what for?"

Kaya grumbled. "We still keep running out of wood. And, worse, we keep running. From one secret meeting place to another. We have no time left to do anything else any more." She sighed again.

Slunyew underlined her words with a deep bear rumble, tugging relentlessly at a white curl beneath his cap.

Ngyrya wrapped her shawl more tightly around her big turban. She cleared her throat. "Perhaps we could buy directly from the traders, when they come up from the valley? They come from outside Shebbetin. Surely, Naydeer would not have threatened them?"

Kaya looked at Ngyrya thoughtfully. "No, she would not. Not yet, anyway. She does not expect us to do this."

Kaya ran her hand over a chopped bit of wood, slowly, teasingly, as if beckoning an answer to come forth from its midst. "We would have to buy very much. Not only to be independent for the rest of the winter, but also because those traders only sell bulk. They sell to barns, not to individual people. We might just make it into their field of vision if we buy wood for the oven for half a year."

Kaya turned around to face Ngyrya. "And we would have to pay upfront. All that coin, ready in advance."

\* \* \*

Enim cleared his throat. "I was wondering," he said, stealing a glance at Manaam's lounging figure, "if you would be able to lend me some coin." He cleared his throat again. "I have some rather large expenses coming up. I do have regular income, of course, and will be able to put a small amount aside each moon. However, since I'll have to give the whole sum upfront right now, I am not able to do it without help."

Enim bent his head, then looked up, directly into Manaam's eyes. "I can, of course," he said in a low voice, "tell you what exactly these expenses are. And why they are necessary. I will tell you, everything, and honestly. If you wish to know."

Manaam held his gaze. "No." He leaned back in his chair. "No need. Not at all. I am not involved in any of this, it is not my affair. And I

will be able to honestly say that to anyone who might ask. All I have done is lend coin to a friend, an artificer working for me, who had some personal expenses he could not cover at the time." Manaam looked at Enim with a wry half-smile. "And I was able to help out."

\* \* \*

Kaya hauled down a last batch from the cart. Slunyew, Ngyrya, and a handful of others were busily carrying the wood in, stacking it up nicely, finding some clever arrangement to make such a huge delivery fit into the various rooms and nooks of the oven house.

"Excellent," Kaya beamed at the merchant. "Very good, indeed. Thank you so much." She wiped the sweat off her brow that had formed there even in the winter air.

"So," Kaya continued, "you are staying in Shebbetin till tomorrow, and then headed back?"

The woman nodded.

"You're at the Sky Inn?" Kaya got another nod for this, and went on, "A very nice inn. I like it. I sometimes have meals there with my friends, and I have met some very good new people there too," she smiled up at the merchant, and got a friendly grunt in reply.

\* \* \*

The merchant sat in the tap room of the Sky Inn finishing up the last spoonfuls of thick broth, feeling grateful for rest and nourishment. People around her were laughing and debating, and tuneful songs in several voices drifted in from the back room. She let out a deep sigh, leaning back in her chair and stretching her legs out under the table.

"Excuse me," a voice said. She turned her head and her mouth fell open. The woman standing beside her was a butterfly. The merchant stared. She had seen a butterfly before, from a distance. But this... this was... She stared some more. This butterfly was like an apparition. Of incredible beauty. An ethereal being from a fay world. A shimmering gold-green, with dark green hair flowing down her back, billowing out like a cloud. Her body was round, and full, and only a few feet away.

The merchant closed her mouth with a conscious effort.

"Good evening," the butterfly said in a warm, melodious voice. "I am sorry to interrupt you like this. You are the wood merchant come up from the valley, aren't you? My friends have mentioned you to me. I hope you would not mind if I joined you for a while?" She let her

voice end in a question, her eyebrows slightly raised, a soft smile playing around her lips.

The merchant nodded, or shook her head. She gestured vaguely toward the chair beside her and made room.

\*

They had emptied their mugs, gotten fresh ones, and emptied those as well. Cahuan was toying with hers, softly turning it this way and that, spreading the spilled drops on the boards out more evenly. "You see," she said, "this is how it is, around here." She let go of the mug, laying her hand down flat on the table like a conclusion. "So if anyone comes up to you telling you stories, weigh them carefully. Should they try to intimidate you, or bribe you, you know who they are. And you can choose, freely, consciously, who you want to be yourself." Cahuan finished with a gleam in her eye.

The merchant's head was spinning.

Behind her back, a thin young man with a meticulous hairstyle entered the inn and silently moved closer until he came to a halt right behind their table. For a moment, he just stood there, his angular body stiff and rigid.

Cahuan turned and froze.

Joonster looked down at her with an expressionless face. His voice was low, monotonous. "You will excuse us. We have business to discuss."

Cahuan's throat was dry. She knew very well who Joonster was. But she did not know what to do. She looked at the merchant, who said nothing.

"Well, I am sure it will not take very long," Cahuan decided. "I will simply wait." She got up and sat down at a table by the wall, nearby and in full view of the two on them.

Joonster seemed annoyed, although Cahuan could not have said how she thought she could tell that from his restrained demeanor. She watched Joonster talk.

She had meant to go to the merchant again afterward. But when Joonster stood up and seemed ready to leave, it was to him rather than to the woman that Cahuan turned, following some spontaneous impulse.

"Joonster," she said somewhat shyly, "will you come and sit with me too for a little while?"

Joonster halted. He wavered, his thin face pale and impassive.

Then he nodded, very cautiously, and took a step away from her at the same time.

Cahuan exhaled. They sat down, stiff and awkward.

"I know you are working for Naydeer," Cahuan began, a little hoarsely. "I assume you have come here tonight to tell the merchant that it is not a good idea to sell wood to the likes of Kaya."

Cahuan cleared her throat. "I am working with Kaya. And I have come here tonight to say that it is a very good idea to sell wood to the likes of Kaya." She paused. "No," she amended, "not true. This is not exactly what I have told the merchant. That is not what matters most either."

Her voice was gaining strength. "I have told her about life in Shebbetin, as I see it. How people have no access to healers. How children are locked up in work cabins, and how we even have to struggle to take part in the Choosing. About all the things that are missing in Shebbetin, even though they exist everywhere else in Yurvania. Why not here? And why should that idea be so much of a threat? Trying to get healers and learning into Shebbetin. Why? These are good things, for everybody, aren't they?"

Cahuan looked at Joonster, her eyes intense. Then she dropped her gaze. "I am sorry. I did not mean to petition you like this. You don't have to reply to that. These are the things I care about. This is what we work for. But you know that already, I suppose. And you know, just as well as I do, what I am talking about. You have lived through all of this yourself. You are one of us, after all, one of the people of Shebbetin, who have a life like that."

Cahuan's restless fingers pulled at her cuff, and a piece of knitting fell from her sleeve pocket. A half-finished cap for a small head in need of warmth. It had slipped off the needle, and all her craft and labor was unraveling. Cahuan caressed the thick fabric in the middle, as if the artful loops might tell her what to do next.

When Cahuan finally spoke again, her voice was soft and low. "I do not know what kind of strain you are under, what pressure. What you have gotten yourself into with Naydeer, and why. I don't know what sort of orders you have received, or will receive in the future."

She bit her lip. "I am scared. Very scared. Where is all of this going?"

Joonster made no move. His face was expressionless, unreadable.

The woolen thread wrapped around Cahuan's finger so tightly it

cut off the flow of blood. "Will you ever be ordered to hurt one of us? Or kill us? And if so—would you do it? Where will you draw the line?"

Cahuan let her hand circle back, freeing herself. "Would you be able to get out? If you wanted to?"

She did not expect an answer, as he must have known. She was still speaking as if to herself, thinking out loud, letting the questions hang in the air. Giving voice to the questions that hung in the air, in their lives, anyway.

"If you wanted to get out and needed help, would you come to us?" she asked.

Joonster snorted. The first actual reaction she had gotten from him. "You have some amazing powers, I gather, that would save me from harm?" he sneered.

Cahuan smiled, bitterly, with him. "No," she said. "I do not."

She pulled on the woolen string, unraveling yet another bit of set pattern.

"Actually," she amended, "I do not know what powers I have. I keep finding out, each time I try. And I am often surprised. Both ways," she added wryly.

The sky over Varoonya was dark, full of anguished, scurrying clouds driven by a nasty wind that made even the coziest corners feel uneasy and haunted. Yoor kept the windowpanes of his bay balcony firmly shut. Torly pulled the blanket tight around her waist as she lowered Enim's letter.

"Now that." Torly's voice was shaky. "That is too much."

Nin was hugging her knees.

Yoor licked his lips. "Kaya." He almost whispered. "They are destroying her livelihood. And threatening her, and even the wood merchants. With actual violence."

Nin got to her feet. She pulled at Torly's arm, her face pale, but her eyes determined. "Get up. We're going to call the recoursesors."

"What?" Torly cleared her throat. "You can't call the recoursesors, can you? They only get sent. By a court of deliberators, at the very end of a dispute, if at all. After all talks have failed, and after even the final say of the deliberators has been disrespected." Torly tilted her head. "The ones you call yourself if problems get too big to handle are the conciliators, right? They can host conversations, help people figure things out."

Yoor's gaze came back from the distant clouds. He moved in beside Torly. "You actually can call the recoursesors directly, I think. In extreme, exceptional circumstances. When there is a direct threat of violence. Then they come and ensure no one gets hurt. Separate people first, talk later."

"Really?" Torly rubbed her chin. "Well, that's just what we need!" She turned to Nin, a question in her voice. "So how does one do that? Call the recoursesors?"

Nin shrugged. "I have no idea. Let's go ask the conciliators, like a normal person. They should know what to do."

"Absolutely," the conciliator said, his round face shining. "The recursors would do that."

Torly beamed at him.

"You just need to tell the local conciliators," the burly man continued.

Torly's smile fell.

The conciliator apologized. "We can't do anything from here, you see. We're only dealing with the city of Varoonya. You need to get the local conciliators involved."

"But that's just the problem!" Torly exclaimed. "There are no local conciliators! And no recursors either."

The conciliator looked at her uncertainly. "Well, surely... I mean... at the very least..."

He was young, not yet thirty. The times before the Transition were a history book to him. He had never seen anything like this, never experienced it. No mental image was forming in his mind.

"But look," Torly tried again, "Varoonya is not only a city, it is also the capital. Surely someone here must feel responsible for the whole of Yurvania, and be able to intervene on behalf of remote regions that are in trouble?"

The conciliator wagged his head, slowly, irresolutely. His gaze drifted out the window, following the shadows of passers-by.

Finally, he turned back to his visitors. "You know what," he said with a mix of hesitation and daring, "I'll arrange a thing for you. A meeting with someone who... well... intervenes in unusual ways sometimes. People say. So... perhaps this what is called for."

\* \* \*

Eyes cold as steel bore into Torly.

Torly did not flinch. "We need this! Now."

The old woman swirled around in a harsh, sudden move, coming to stand by the window, a picture of menace and austerity in her straight, black robe. "I see."

Zurres arched an eyebrow. "More than you think, perhaps."

She fixed Torly with her gaze. "You are young. But I have seen feudal times. I know what they were. And I recognize the signs."

Zurres's lips were a thin line. "But few people will. Young recursors today only know small-scale problems, like handling one disturbed person in the middle of a healthy society. That can be dealt with rather easily."

Her eyes narrowed. "But what it means to have injustice rooted deep within the structure, few people will be able to grasp. What that is, and what kind of intervention it needs."

Zurres turned around. Her voice was impassive. "I will do what I can. I will try to prepare the recourses and the deliberators. Find some who might be sympathetic. And, unlike me, able to initiate action."

She weighed the letter thoughtfully in her hand. "But I fear this will not be enough. They may want more proof."

She hissed her last words out between her teeth. "I only hope the proof does not come in the form of a dead body."

\* \* \*

The door to Enim's room opened. Slunyew came in with a collar of snowflakes—and with fresh warmlings!

Enim beamed at him. "Slunyew! You are a true friend!"

Slunyew laughed. "And some more of these," he rumbled in his hoarse voice, dropping several papers onto the pile on Enim's desk.

Enim shoved the delightfully hot stones under the blanket that was tucked in beneath the desk's top, forming a cozy tent around his legs. As he bent down, he accidentally toppled the paper tower.

"Hey ho!" Slunyew caught it just in time.

"Thanks." Enim reappeared from underneath the table. "I promise I'll take care." He pulled the receptacle close. "And I'll also have all the people registered in here, at a pace even quicker than you're collecting." Enim gave Slunyew a roughish grin. "Even if that turns out increasingly difficult with you working in ever larger gangs."

\* \* \*

Cahuan was already heading back to the Snuggery. A heavy box filled with baked potatoes hung from each of her shoulders, freshly fetched from one of the kitchens. Balancing the weight carefully, she maneuvered her way across the busy square toward her pedalcart.

Even in the cold, people were standing around in thickly cloaked flocks, chatting and laughing, drinking hot tea, singing a bit or exchanging skills and stories. Cahuan loved the liveliness of the plaza, the hum and the hubbub. In spite of the beam on her shoulders and a chilly bite in the air she smiled, lingering a little longer than necessary, letting her gaze roam over the crowd.

Which was how she saw Joonster. She almost dropped her yoke. With a hard thump, the boxes came to stand on the ground. Cahuan's



heart was racing. With unseeing eyes, she stared down at the pottery displayed at the stall in front of her.

Cahuan tried to calm her uneven breath. What was the matter? Was there any reason for this kind of panic? It was Joonster, all right. She had every reason to be worried about Joonster. If he approached her in a dark corner. But here, in the plaza? He wasn't going to attack her in bright daylight in the middle of a crowd, was he?

But her heart was still beating rapidly. And she was still staring down blindly at the jars in front of her. Which also meant that she had lost sight of Joonster.

Cautiously, Cahuan raised her gaze to squint over to the stall where she had seen him.

He wasn't there.

Cahuan let out a deep sigh.

She bent her knees to arrange the yoke on her shoulders and regain her boxes. As she straightened up, she felt Joonster's breath in her neck.

"Take Kaya to dinner at the Sky Inn tonight," he whispered hoarsely. "Go very early, and stay until you hear word. You'll be glad you have come."

And he vanished into the crowd like a ghost.

\* \* \*

"Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous," Kaya complained, not for the first time. She scanned the tables of the Sky Inn with angry eyes. "We have run straight into their trap. They only had to ask nicely, and we are happy to oblige." She snorted. "There is either nothing here, or danger. We must almost hope that it is nothing. Nothing at all. As we have been observing with great attention the whole evening." She shook her head. "What were we thinking? That some wonderful revelation would be waiting here for us? That one of Naydeer's minions had seen the light and changed sides to support the cause of justice? Proving an invaluable asset, but only if we show up here tonight? Ridiculous!"

To Cahuan's relief, a half-frozen Enim came in through the door at that moment. He nodded at them and ordered hot soup at the counter before settling onto the heated kang.

From the back corner, Slunyew and Ngyrya shot a glance at him, then got up and walked out.

The cold night air hit them as they stepped through the door.

Slunyew brought the flaps of his cap down over his white curls and blinked away tears as they moved on, cautiously, staying close to the walls of the courtyard. As quickly and noiselessly as possible, they flew up the outside stairs to the uppermost floor and helped each other climb up onto the roof from there. Lying low on the thatch, they wriggled forward until they found the woman who had shared Enim's shift and was still holding watch on the ridge, so that the roof would not be unoccupied even during their brief changing of the guard. She nodded at them. Nothing had happened. Nothing to be seen. "So good luck and enjoy your evening," she whispered with a smirk, sliding toward the staircase on stiff limbs.

Slunyew and Ngyrya separated, each taking position on one side of the roof, so they could see the courtyard and a pretty good part of the lanes leading up to the inn. If any hostile-looking groups were to approach, they would at least see them coming. And drop a traption with a magical flash in front of the Sky Inn window, a signal sure to be noticed by everyone inside.

So they had not come entirely unprepared, Cahuan reassured herself. They may still have run into a trap, but what sort of trap she could not possibly imagine. Just as she could not imagine very much else about this mystery rendezvous. Who was supposed to come? What was supposed to happen?

Cahuan had no idea. But she was determined to sit it out. It had been their joint decision to come, and now Cahuan wanted to see the end of it. Even if the end only meant that the Sky Inn eventually closed. The way things were going, she thought grimly, that might well be the first or only thing to happen.

All around her, an ordinary tavern evening was underway. A healing bag was meeting in one corner, a study group in another. Most tables were filled with board games or quiet conversation, and from the back room came the harmonious songs of a choir.

Cahuan picked up her mug and took a deep draft. And nearly choked when Pulan burst in through the door with a piercing whistle of alarm.

"Kaya! Your house is on fire!"

\*       \*       \*

Flames licked up brightly into the sky. Kaya stood and watched the roof of her house cave in, the proud stacks of wood go up in smoke.

The red and gold of the fire burned through the night, with

glowing embers falling from the sky, hanging on to the walls, coming down to earth. They ignited a new burst of flame around them, or darkened into a last deep red, a midnight black. Soot painted shadows across the walls, mingling with the ghosts of smoke that danced a raging feast around the oven.

Kaya bit her lip. That had been her house. Her home. And her livelihood. It was gone.

The morning came pale and cold over the valley. Kaya got up early and sneaked out through the Snuggery yard, back to her oven. It looked very different now. All black and gray. No glowing embers, no red and gold. No fire, no passion. Only ashes. Cold, gray dust. The ruins of a home, without a roof, the scorched walls reaching desperately into a gaping sky.

Kaya came closer carefully and took one step into the protective circle that surrounded her house. Last night, the first people to discover the blaze had dug a trench there, to keep the fire from spreading.

She scoured the black marks on the walls, the desert of ash on the ground. And noticed footprints. Fresh ones, leading in through the burnt doorway, but not out again.

Kaya tensed. She drew back. Like a wildcat, she crouched down beside the ruins, half hiding, half ready to pounce and fight, as she listened for sounds from the other side of the wall. They came. Someone was there, moving up to the entrance. Kaya could see the shadow come through the doorway first, then the person who cast it. She straightened up.

The man turned and jerked back with a cry, raising his arm. Then, breathing heavily, he leaned back against the wall, laying a hand on his heart.

"Goodness," Enim sighed, shaking his head. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, I assume."

\* \* \*

Kaya and Enim had presented their proof.

Opinions among the people in Shebbetin were divided, as usual. Even among those who had volunteered to go and examine the traces around the oven as neutral outsiders.

There were those who were entirely convinced it was arson, and that the traces on site were clear and irrefutable evidence of that.

Others said that, surely, it couldn't have been arson. So the fire must have spread out from the oven, which had been left all to itself with an unusual amount of firewood stacked all around the house. So no wonder. And if there were some marks on the outside wall that were darker than others: well, really. What sort of argument was that? To conclude that oil must have been poured onto that spot beforehand was really far-fetched. Just as a barely visible black line running outward from such a spot could mean anything besides a fuse.

So by and large, people held on to what they had already believed beforehand, and found plenty of evidence for their conviction in the observable facts of reality. Including the people who believed that one could never be sure, and that the observable facts in this case were not conclusive.

Kaya, of course, also held on to her conviction as to what, or who, had caused that fire.

"So," Cahuan said, when they had all gathered in the Snuggery again. "What do we do?" She stretched her feet out toward the warmlings under their shared blanket. Warmlings that had come from another oven. And would always have to come from another oven now.

"We'll be on our guard," Kaya said through clenched teeth.

Lhut looked down on his hands. "How? Will we stand watch at night? And sleep during the day? Or not sleep at all? For how long? And would that even be enough?" Lhut shook his head. "I am afraid this is too much. We cannot cope with this kind of violence."

Cahuan swallowed hard. She pulled up the blanket, as if that easy source of comfort could bring forth an actual solution. Her voice was tentative, uncertain. "Perhaps we should negotiate?"

Kaya snorted like a dragon blowing out steam. "We have tried that before. Remember? When we went to Naydeer for safety in her mine. It seemed sensible, back then. We had rather modest suggestions, all things she could actually have done. But she did not. She only kicked us in the guts."

Kaya looked at Cahuan. "I know that is not the end of the argument. Many things that are very good do not fly the first time around. One has to keep on trying, again and again, until they finally work out." Kaya rubbed her scar. "I just don't think negotiating with Naydeer is one of those things."

"No. Probably not." Lhut heaved a heavy sigh. "Kaya. We need to make sure you survive this. And you too, for that matter," he turned to Enim. "If we can do nothing else at the moment, then let's at least keep you safe." Lhut clutched his hands so hard the knuckles showed. "You should leave Shebbetin."

"What?" Kaya spat out. "Leave? Now? When I have just told everyone to make a stand?" She shook herself. "No. No."

Lhut's voice was low, but determined. "You'll be of no use to anyone if you're dead. Your assassination would only serve to intimidate everyone else, just as Naydeer wants it to." He cleared his throat. "You will be much more useful if you are alive. Talking to people in Varoonya."

Enim clenched his fists. His face was pale. "Let's stand guard, every night, just until solstice. If we have not won by then, we'll flee."

\* \* \*

Joonster held his eyes averted. But he could feel Naydeer's gaze upon him, sensed it penetrate his very soul.

"Are you telling me," Naydeer asked, her eyes narrowed, "that you did not even know?"

Joonster stood paralyzed, exposed. Beside him, Elo hardly breathed. His status as Naydeer's favorite guard seemed to have evaporated. His broad shoulders offered no more protection.

Naydeer's unfeeling voice carried on. "It seems that even she knew more than you did. She was out, at just that particular moment. How come, I wonder?"

Joonster's head was bowed. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

Naydeer came up to Elo and stood directly in front of him. Very close. Elo's face grew pale. Small drops of sweat were forming on his brow.

"Well?" Naydeer asked softly. "Any explanations?"

Elo swallowed. Naydeer moved one little step closer, just the breath of a move. And Elo cracked. "Joonster has been talking to the butterfly," he blurted out. "Being friendly, like. He's been going round near her that day too."

The air in the room grew very still. An icy chill descended on Joonster and froze his body. He made no move.

Naydeer turned toward him. "Well, Joonster?" she whispered.

Joonster was trying hard to unfreeze. He struggled against the chill that held him in its grip, that paralyzed his whole being. It half-worked. With his stomach still in ice, he had his mind working feverishly. "I was in the plaza that day," he rasped. "She did see me there."

Joonster licked his lips. "I can try to find out," he promised breathlessly. "I will check if she thinks that was a sign. If she does, I will affirm it and say that I have warned her on purpose. To her, that must be proof that I have saved her friend's life. So she would trust me now. It will be good. She will believe whatever I tell her. She'll give me information. On what they plan. On who is involved."

Naydeer gave him a cold, calculating look.

\* \* \*

Joonster came through the door of the Snuggery like a gust of wind. Swift, unstoppable, bringing in a wave of icy cold. Cahuan froze. So did most of the children, impacted by her reaction.

Joonster did not stop. He came straight for Cahuan and pulled her into a corner. "I need to leave. Quickly. And for good," he breathed. "Give me as much coin as you can, and any names that might help me."

Cahuan shook his hand off her arm. She took a deep breath. She felt his panic. Or her own panic, rising inside her. She looked around, meeting Lhut's eyes.

"Sit down," she tugged at Joonster's sleeve to make him crouch and stay put. "I'll be right back."

Cahuan walked over to Lhut and murmured in his ear. Lhut wrapped his arm around Cahuan, looking over at Joonster. He murmured back. Then they both gazed at Joonster, whispering to each other.

Joonster snapped.

He got up and came over to them in quick, jerky moves. "I need to go. Now," he hissed.

"Yes," Cahuan said. "We will help. If you are going on foot, we will send someone after you, on horseback. Enim. He will bring coin. We do not have enough at the ready, here in the Snuggery. Will you be heading out on the road to Hebenir?"

Joonster looked at her with feverish eyes. "No." He hesitated.

"Yes," he amended. "If you give me that horse."

\*

Enim rode out into the snowy grassland, Som in the saddle before him. He was wearing his warm hooded cloak, as instructed, and had the saddlebags filled with food and water. A thick blanket, a pouch full of coin and some paper. A pencil, a lantern. That was all Enim could grab in their hasty packing that he thought someone on the run might need.

They followed a well-worn path that led up to one of the mines. But at this time of day, it was completely deserted. Enim rounded a lonesome barn and reigned in.

Pulan came running up to them with a low signature whistle. In the shadows, Cahuan pulled the blanket off the handcart and revealed Joonster, who squinted up at the horse silhouetted against the sky.

"You'll need to give him your cloak," Cahuan told Enim as he dismounted, "We'll pack you into the cart now and bring you home under the cover of blankets. While Joonster rides off on your horse, wearing your cloak, with the hood up."

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Pulan beamed, her dark eyes shining. But the adults were all too tense to appreciate the adventure. Joonster rose, cold and stiff. He took the cloak from Enim without meeting his eyes.

"I need names," Joonster said. "People to turn to. People you know. People who might help, or at least pass me on."

"We have no names to give you," Cahuan said a little apologetically. "But if you come to Varoonya, check at the inn called The Golden Kettle if there are any letters for you. You can also leave messages for us there. To Cahuan. Someone will come and collect them."

Joonster looked at Cahuan. "I need to hide. I need shelter. And later, work. Surely you know someone in Varoonya? Or elsewhere? Just give me their names. Just the names."

Cahuan held his gaze. "Yes, we do know people," she said. "But this has come too quickly. We have not had time to consider. And we do not know you well. We do not wish to pass on their names without having asked them beforehand. Without having explained to them, even. So this is what we can give. A horse, a bag, a disguise. Some coin. And a contact point."

Joonster's face was very white. He nodded. Then he turned to take the horse's reins from Enim. But Enim did not let go. His face was almost as white as Joonster's.



"Please," Enim breathed. "I cannot believe. I need to hear it. I need to." He swallowed hard. "Did Naydeer tell you to kill Kaya?" He looked at Joonster imploringly. Joonster stared back.

"Please. Did she?"

Joonster turned around and mounted the horse. He looked down at Enim.

"She did."

Enim let go.

Joonster rode off without looking back.

\* \* \*

"You gave him coin," Kaya said, her brows raised. "He's been Naydeer's minion for years. He burned down my home. And you go and help him. You give him coin. For having had the good grace to not kill me." Kaya was shaking her head. "Honestly. You people are the craziest lot I have ever come to spend a life with."

Kaya clicked her tongue. "Actually," she added, "there are a number of people who have also not killed me. A very, very large number of people. Shouldn't they all be getting some coin, perhaps, and a horse?"

Cahuan pushed in a cushion behind her back with jerky moves. "Yes," she said, her voice gruff, "they should. They should all have enough. They should get coin, for their work and for their needs. And they should all get healing when they are sick, and good care when they are young."

She pushed in yet another cushion. "It is not as if we weren't taking note of everybody else. We do what we can. And what seems right, at each moment. Joonster was there, at that moment. We had no time. He was at risk, for having helped us. Probably. So we supported him best that we could."

She looked up at Kaya, meeting her eyes directly. "This is what we did," she said. "I don't know if it was right. But it was our best try, at that instant. And I hope it was good."

Kaya looked at her. A deep, warm light rose in her eyes. She shook her head once more. Then she leaned in and smothered Cahuan in a long, passionate embrace.

“He owed me his life. His skills. Everything. And these are my thanks?” Naydeer set the decanter down with a heavy thud. “Who can one trust these days? Never one of the peons, that much we have learned, again and again. What I thought to be a central pillar has turned out to be hollow, crumbling beneath the least bit of weight.”

She walked over to the window in quick, harsh strides. “Now who will I ever turn to again, with anything slightly delicate?” Her eyes were on Pramus as if she felt it his duty to come up with an answer.

The mage shook out his sleeve, seemingly lost in the contemplation of the embroidered runes. Fine lines of silver shone out at him from the folds. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, his pronunciation deliberate. “I too have pillars to lean on. And I believe at least one of them will not crumble under the burden of duty that now is upon us.”

He raised his gaze. There was a cold gleam in his eye. “Find the traitor.”

\* \* \*

The river port in Varoonya was bustling with crews of sailors, with boats docking and leaving, boxes of all sizes being unloaded and stacked ashore. Brightly colored sun sails flew over the market stalls, the heavy scent of exotic spices mingling with the smell of algae and the voices of myriad people all talking on top of each other.

Such as the newly arrived peddler woman, who kept asking questions of everyone all day long. Pursuing her one single topic, which seemed to be much more important to her than even selling her wares. Now she was imploring the cloth merchant down at the edge of the market.

“He is my younger brother, you see,” the peddler explained. “He left home in a quarrel. But all will be well again, if only I can find him. You are sure you have not seen him? A young man, thin, a bit stiff. Used to keep his hair perfectly groomed. He is from the

mountains, you know, so you would notice his accent, which is just like mine. Though he does not talk much. He's very reticent, my brother is. You've not met anyone like that? If you find any trace of him, anyone who might have heard of him, please do let me know! I do so wish to find him. Don't let him get onto a boat without having met me first!"

The cloth merchant promised. He would watch out for the lost brother, and ask around as well.

\* \* \*

Joonster was walking along the Roon River just outside Varoonya. He could see the meadow to his left and the one big, solitary tree in its center. Just as in the description from the letter that had been waiting for him at the inn.

Joonster looked around surreptitiously. There were a few people strolling up and down along the bank. Some were playing games in the meadow, talking or kissing. It all seemed incredibly unreal to Joonster. Except for the very palpable sense of danger that had accompanied him all of his life. It was still there. Just the same. Just as strong.

But he had to risk this. He needed protection. Shelter. Food. Work. Coin. He needed a new life. And all the help he could get.

He walked up to the tree with tense, restrained moves.

Torly watched him approach, her face friendly, or so she hoped, but her throat dry. Joonster came to a halt and gave her the shadow of a nod, a curt, jerky dip of his head.

Torly's heart was fluttering. She licked her lips.

"Joonster. Please. Will you help us?"

Joonster stared at her, speechless.

\*

A boat with old, ragged sails made a laborious journey up the Roon. The people aboard were climbing over mountains of cargo.

Joonster spoke in a low, monotonous voice. "I have committed many crimes."

His face was taut. "You are asking me to name all of them. To a recursor. A servant of the law."

The wind picked up, making the boat's worn sails billow, the strings drawn tight. Joonster's inscrutable gaze lingered on them. "I have been bound to Naydeer with my life. I know her secrets. You want me to betray all of them."

Torly's nails dug into her palm. Her voice was a mere breath. "And will you?"

Joonster's eyes were vacant, expressionless.

"Yes."

\*

Zurres had ordered her to wait there. Torly shivered at the memory of that woman's cold, hard eyes. But this was their only hope. Their way forward.

The place was no more than a small alcove, ducked into the wall of a long, stern corridor somewhere deep underneath the palace. Torly heard footsteps echoing on a staircase far above, a hollow, lonesome sound.

She wrapped her arms tightly around her chest.

And then the stone slab behind her slid aside as if pushed by a ghost.

Torly whirled around. A large black hole gaped at her. She felt her skin crawl.

Torly clutched the edge of the opening with a sweaty hand and looked back over her shoulder. Joonster was right behind her, pale, but determined.

As Torly stepped into the darkness of the tunnel, she saw no more than a black cloak outlined against the gleam of the lantern.

The door fell shut behind her.

And the shadow began to move.

\*

Zurres came to an end. With her cold, harsh voice, she read out the last words on the last page. Her black robes rustled ominously as she placed the sheet back on the stack.

In the silence that followed, Torly could hear Joonster breathe.

"Yes," he finally said. He touched a finger to the pile of papers covered in the elegant hand of the recourser. "That is what I said." His voice was coarse. "That is how it was."

The tall young woman on the other side of the desk pulled up her chair. The legs scraped over the floor with an awkward sound, but her voice was full and resonant. "Thank you. Your testimony is invaluable. We will keep it safe, rest assured." She picked up the sheets. "You need to stay in Varoonya for a while, in case we have further questions. Or for when you are to speak with the court of deliberators. It all takes time."

A brown folder came to encase Joonster's report. "We will offer

you a room. No need for you to leave the building. Even though there is probably no reason to fear actual murder here in Varoonya. But we'll take no risks. You will be safe. Hidden, impossible to track. No one has seen you come, no one will see you leave."

She put the folder aside. "And for later..." Her desk drawer opened. "These are lives we have prepared, because we know that every once in a while, someone ends up needing one very urgently. So they are all set up, and only need a little adaptation. When you leave here, no one else will know you are still alive. Where you are, and what name you carry."

She pulled out a stack of envelopes. "So what shall it be?" The recursor let an appraising gaze run over Joonster. "Small town vibes? The lost nephew of a deceased old lady, who now comes to settle in his aunt's charming home and hire himself out as a secretary?"

\*

It was a small, sunlit room. Joonster stared out into the verdant courtyard. "They will give me a livelihood. The recursors. After all I have done."

Zurres let her gaze rest on Joonster's profile. "Yes. Especially after the last thing you have done."

Her eyes narrowed. "You have refused to kill. People's lives were in danger, and you have risked your own in order to spare theirs. And later, when they needed truth, a truth that you held—you were willing to give, even though you thought you would face punishment."

Joonster licked his lips. "But I won't?"

"No. You won't." The old woman brushed a hand over her black robes. "We do not care so much for what you have done, but rather for what you will do."

Her fingertips came together in a delicate gesture. "And right now you are doing the best anyone possibly could. Your testimony is key. You may well be saving these people's lives all over again. By coming to us. By entrusting yourself to strangers."

She arched an eyebrow. "There's nothing more courageous and more helpful I can think of. What other signs of personal integrity should one ask for? We're not scouting for angels here, after all. Just for people able to live without harming others."

Zurres leaned back against the wall. "And it very much looks like you are," she glanced at Joonster. "Going from here."

\*

Torly let her question hang in the air, giving it all the time that was needed for an answer to crawl out, bit by bit.

Joonster was sitting on the floor, his gaze averted. "Naydeer took me when I was ten. She saved me. And she claimed my life." His voice was low. "She has given me everything I have. Made me who I am. I am hers."

Joonster seemed to be talking to the wall, or the air in between. "I was her slave. Bound by a demon. A demon of loyalty and fear. Naydeer summoned it, but the mage sealed my fate."

The leaves from the courtyard threw shifting shadows onto the floor.

"Naydeer rules my soul, still. If I had not left Shebbetin before she could set eyes on me again, she would have reclaimed me. She would not even have needed to kill me. A word from her, a spell from the mage, and I would have been shackled once more. Never to escape again."

Joonster swallowed. "That is why I had to be so quick."

He pulled a small box from his pocket, rolling over onto his knees as he opened it reverently. Inside lay two twigs, tied together at an angle, like two human fingers crossing each other.

"There was only one powerful mage coming through Shebbetin in recent times." Joonster looked up at Torly. "Only one who could weave a spell with so much force and so much precision. Able to keep a mighty demon locked up while freeing the person bound to it." Joonster held the amulet up for Torly. "Your lover. The butterfly. Will he want it back? Or should it go to Shebbetin?"

Torly raised an eyebrow.

But Joonster's gaze had already sunk down again into the little box, and into his memories. "I have never told Naydeer there was a charm going round among the miners. That much I could do on my own. Withhold that bit of news, just for a little while. And before time was up, before I had to give in, I was freed myself." Joonster traced a finger around his ankle. The exact same line the miner had drawn at the time, never knowing how much effect she would have.

Joonster took a deep breath. "That freed me. I was able to do everything else I have done after that. Talk to Cahuan. Warn her. Refuse to kill. Run."

Lenoren sat down on the corner of a heavy desk and squinted into the gloomy twilight of a room that was almost underground. It was just the kind of office Zurrès would choose for herself in a palace full of airy, sunlit rooms, Lenoren thought maliciously.

A small window and a hunched door at the back led out into a forgotten little courtyard filled with dank air, moss, and vines. The rough stone walls breathed an atmosphere of dungeons and conspiracies. Lenoren could almost sense the hidden passages behind them. And as Zurrès's dark tale wore on, an invisible snake began to wind around Lenoren's chest, threatening to choke her.

"But what should I do!" Lenoren burst out, shaking off the snake. "It's not that easy! True safety does not come from arresting one single wrongdoer. It comes from a healthy society, where everybody can have a say and a good life. From a convivial culture, and a free, egalitarian structure. If there is no justice in the system, there will always be some people terrorizing others."

Zurrès sneered. "Of course. So we need to bring the Transition to the Mountains, don't we?"

"Yes, we do!" Lenoren scoffed. "But it will all take time. Even sending recourses to arrest Naydeer will take time. And we cannot wait any longer! If you say people might get murdered any time. Tomorrow. Today. We would have to do something quickly. But what? How? What could possibly work within a matter of days?"

Zurrès arched an eyebrow. "Well, one option seems to present itself, don't you think? Given what we know about the workings of Naydeer's mind."

\* \* \*

The night was freezing cold, holding the Snuggery in black, icy clutches. Everyone had cuddled up inside, sharing duvets and warmings, slowly sinking down into an ocean of darkness. A whispered argument over pillows mingled with soft toddler snores and the rustling sounds of dreamers turning over in their sleep.

Cahuan shifted in her position by the door, the sentinel's post. Her hand reached out in the dark, to feel the reassuring presence of the siren traption that would call in the neighbors if need be.

Cahuan leaned her head against the doorframe. She was so tired. Staying awake day and night simply was too much. This was impossible to keep up. Maybe they should ask more friends to take over shifts. Or think of something. Cahuan closed her eyes with a sigh.

In the courtyard, the wrollic had burrowed deep into a nest of his tree, his bushy tail wrapped firmly around the small furry body. But then his head perked up, ears twitching. His shiny round eyes peered out, alert, intent, over the sheltering ring of his tail. Then he jumped up and danced over to the Snuggery window, making the shutters rattle.

Cahuan jerked awake. Hearing boots on the steps to the Snuggery, she quickly reached for the siren. Her hand groped helplessly in the dark. And before she could do anything, the door was flung open. A warning scream remained stuck in her throat.

"Torly!" she croaked instead.

Now the whole Snuggery was waking up, blinking into the light of a lantern.

"We have written to you. But we figured we might arrive before the letter." Yoor had stumbled across the threshold, his limbs stiff and numb from the ride. Behind him, half a dozen teenagers became visible. A girl of about fourteen squeezed to the front.

"We are a surprise!" Nin declared, bright-eyed. "We are here to protect you!"

\* \* \*

Lenoren paced across the bedroom, arms wrapped tightly around her chest. "Do you believe we were right to let them go? They are just kids, after all!"

Qin Roh sat up on the mat, pulling her knees up to her chest. "It is the best we could do. And Nin has been on fire all this time. I'm not even sure we could have restrained her if we'd tried." Her gaze followed Lenoren's trail. "The kids will be all right. Zurres said that the danger to the observers would not be that big. And she even has sources in the Mountains. So if she can't judge, who can?"

Lenoren turned and paced back. "Yes. Of course. Sure." She cleared her throat. "Anyway, life is full of dangers. And children do grow up, no matter how much you'd like to protect them."



Qin Roh gave her a rueful smile. "Indeed. But knowing in theory we can't keep Nin at home forever is quite different from actually physically letting her leave." She shook her head. "Never mind. They'll be fine. And Nin is doing good things. She is protecting people. This is the kind of adventure we will be proud of too, once she has returned safe and sound."

Lenoren snorted at the last three words. But then she sighed deeply. "Right. At least she did not go all alone. Lots of people will be there, looking out for each other. Including experienced ones."

\* \* \*

Zurres woke up to an icy room. Her breath hung above her face in a hazy little cloud. The warming by her hip had cooled down to body temperature and was no more than a hard stone sitting on her mattress.

Zurres felt the chill inside her bones. It had crept into her marrow during the long ride across snowy mountains, and had stayed there all night. If it did not leave now, it would turn into serious illness, Zurres could tell. She groaned while she shivered. This was a level of danger she had not reckoned with. Her mind had been on threats and oppression, on deceit and violence. But not on sickness. Not on old age.

Grudgingly, Zurres admitted that she had underestimated the journey.

Zurres's identity, her memory of who she was, had always included a fit and able body. She was used to being young. She had been for decades, after all. And the fact that it was no longer so, and never would be again, was slow to sink in. For as long as she possibly could, Zurres had treated old age like a temporary inconvenience, a short spell of weakness that would heal away soon enough.

But it would not.

She could not handle such hardships anymore.

Her body was frail and would only be getting more so. She had better accept that fact. And act accordingly.

\* \* \*

"Aaah! What a relief!"

Zurres stretched her legs toward the open fire. Even though the whole room was already pleasantly warm thanks to the heated floor. "You would not believe how cold it was even at the inn." Zurres shook herself. Then she winked at Naydeer. "Or perhaps you would.

Only I did not. Just as I did not know what exactly it would mean to travel up here." Her face darkened. "I dare say the people who sent me here did not know either. Their decision was based on reports, papers. But now I am here, physically!" There was a slight undertone of outrage in her voice.

Naydeer instantly offered her hospitality, along with her opinion on the limited understanding of said people. And, after some hesitation, Zurres gratefully accepted the invitation, the sympathetic views, and another one of those delicious tidbits.

Zurres even got a tour of the villa when she asked for it. Her praise for the architecture, the carpets, and the delicate paper screens all told Naydeer she was speaking to a true connoisseur, and when Zurres said she felt reminded of her youth in the palace, Naydeer believed it immediately. Pleased and animated, the two women settled down for dinner with fine dark wine in sparkling glasses. A flutist in the corner was weaving gentle melodies into the background of their conversation.

But Zurres still had some worries on her mind. She wagged her head. "Even if I am staying here, I believe I should go around and at least visit some other owners in their homes. Both as a matter of courtesy and to fulfill my formal obligations. I am only an observer without any formal powers, but I do wish to honestly report that I have made my inquiries."

Naydeer instantly offered to take her around. A pleasure. And with that, there was only one small matter left that needled Zurres.

"In fact, I believe I should speak to some other people as well. Not just the owners, but some random folks. For instance, what about the guards we saw outside your mine earlier? Do you think they might volunteer to show me their homes and answer a few questions? For how long they have been living there, and so on?"

"I can certainly ask them. I am sure they would be happy to give you a firsthand account," Naydeer nodded amiably.

The roasted mushrooms on the table sent up a wave of enticing fragrance and both women turned to their plates with the deeply satisfied feeling that things couldn't be going any better.

\* \* \*

"Why has Zurres moved in with Naydeer? With Naydeer, of all people! Doesn't she know?" Kaya was fuming.

"Maybe she has gone there to spy," Lhut said, unconvinced.

"Or maybe she is telling herself she has gone to spy, while in reality she is slowly but surely being co-opted with the help of luxuries and pleasant conversations," Kaya huffed. "But no matter. We did not expect much from Zurrus anyway. What could she do, coming here with the toothless mandate of an 'observer'? She can only signal a bit of attention, adding to Nin and all her friends from Varoonya, so that we will be safe until solstice."

Enim scratched his head. "Well, that's already quite a lot, I'd say."

Kaya clasped her hands together tightly. "Yes. But there will be no folkcount. That was the other message. Zurrus will not be doing one. Nor will anyone else. Except perhaps in a year, or four, or a hundred."

She scoffed. Then she raised her head, her eyes wild. "The Choosing will be at solstice. The Mountain grouping is in. We have spent all these moons wooing. People are ready. Now! But they will not stay on their toes for years. If we miss this Choosing, we've missed it! And after solstice, when all the observers from Varoonya leave, what will keep Naydeer in check?"

\* \* \*

"But when will the recourses come? The same year as the new folkcount?" Torly grunted, shaking her head in desperate defiance. "And I will be lying to all my friends all that time? Even to Yoor? It's unbearable!"

Zurrus stood in the inn's back room, very stiffly. "We have been through this before. It is necessary. When the recourses come, they will rely on surprise. Do not spoil their chances for them. And do not betray Joonster. No one must even know he testified. All you can say is you met him, gave him coin, and never heard from him again." Zurrus raised an eyebrow. "Is that so hard?"

"Yes." Torly was reticent, sulky. "It is. It is deceitful and dishonest and despicable. And cutting a cleavage between myself and those nearest and dearest to me. It violates basic trust. In a group that utterly relies on honesty and confidences."

She raised her hand. "And I'll do it nevertheless. It sounds right, even though it feels horribly wrong."

\* \* \*

"One of them is the daughter of a Council member, it would appear." Naydeer's voice was clipped. "As if to point out that anything untoward happening here will be receiving the greatest possible attention in Varoonya."

Pramus sighed, folding his mage's robe over his chest. "Unfortunate timing."

"Very unfortunate." Naydeer slammed a book down on her desk. "If we had known, we'd be ready by now. That home-made folkcount would be over already. But we have been caught by surprise. And we missed our chance."

Pramus raised an eyebrow. "Maybe not. These children imagine they are protecting the people. They will have no interest in the tools. Until it is too late."

Pramus ran a slow finger down his gnarled staff. He turned, his face falling into the shade of dark blue velvet, his broad-brimmed hat all but hiding him from Naydeer's gaze. But his voice came through deep and sonorant. "When just before solstice their nearly full receptacle is suddenly lost, and all their hope and hard work with it, it should dishearten them sufficiently. Or in any case, they won't have time to come up with yet another antic. The Choosing will take place in Behrlem, as usual, and it's the owners who are expected there. And the rest will be history. Folkcount, grouping, and all."

\* \* \*

Nin was winding a long cord around her ankle, holding it out to Pulan, who wanted to show her the best-ever professional sailor knot anyone had ever learned. Nin briefly wondered where Pulan had acquired a sailor's skill, living as she did in the middle of a fairly dry highland, but the question quickly slipped her mind as soon as Pulan started handling the string in deft, swift moves. Nin had to ask her to tie and untie the knot six times until Nin was sufficiently sure that she too had mastered the art. And, reassuringly, would be able to free herself any time she chose to. She whistled through her teeth, almost as well as Pulan.

"You really believe it necessary, you tie yourself to receptacle?" Cahuan eyed the arrangement a little skeptically.

"Yes! Really necessary!" the girls chorused without a trace of doubt. Then they whistled in abominable disharmony. "We'll always be with you," Nin explained to Cahuan once again. "With Kaya and Enim in particular, but with the rest of you too. We even sleep here in the Snuggery, and in Enim's place as well. No one will hurt you while we are near!" Highly satisfied, she tapped the string around her leg. "And we'll be guardians of the receptacle too. So freedom, love and justice will finally come to the Mountains!"

Yoor was sitting on the warm floor of the new snugery. He kept his tongue in his cheek and his fingers crossed.

Yunda knelt at his feet, her eyes narrowed. In one smooth move, she closed the loop around Yoor's ankle, ending up at that exact same spot on his tendon.

She straightened up and checked her amulet, then held it out to Yoor with a satisfied sigh. Two twigs, bound together in a narrow cross.

Yoor gingerly let it come to rest on his palm. "That is how you do it?" He touched a gentle fingertip to the wood.

Yunda gave him a meaningful nod.

Yoor bowed his head. "My goodness." His words were barely more than a whisper. "I am learning things about magic here that I have never dreamed of."

In the back of the room, Herun was talking quietly with the boys. The little sister was huddled up in a blanket, drowsing.

Yoor let his gaze come to rest on Yunda's scrawny body, her straight spine. He felt the power radiating out from her.

"You have freed a hundred miners like that." Yoor licked his lips. "And yourself too." He weighed the amulet in his hand. His voice seemed to come from a great distance. "I have never tried. Never dared to use the craft in the old mages' very own realm. I was so afraid I would become one of them."

Yoor raised his palm, holding the amulet up as if to let it shine down on them from its high altar. "But maybe the old powers can be used for good. To undo the past. Or even to create something new."

Yunda laid a hand on his shoulder, and Yoor let his eyes fall shut. "Have I found the master who will teach me how to walk that path?"

\* \* \*

Enim heaved a sigh of relief. All the thousands of names he had entered were still there. He leaned back against the wall of his room and ran a hand over his face.

"All right?" Nin asked hopefully.

Enim squinted out at her between his fingers. Even after several days, he had not gotten used to this bodyguard concept. It made him feel incredibly itchy to not have one single moment to himself, to be under constant surveillance.

But of course, this was much better than the alternative. Much, much better. Enim was quite sure that their new sentinels actually did keep them safe, through their mere presence. These youth from the capital, who had started their solstice holidays early to travel to the Mountains for the adventure of their lives, really had saved them. In one way.

"It's all right," Enim confirmed. "I have managed to put both the crystal and the spell back in place, and all the names are still there. No harm done."

"There you are," Nin beamed at him.

Enim snorted under his breath. "Nevertheless. This could have ended very badly. You really need to be careful. If three six-year-olds tie themselves to a receptacle at night to be guardians, it may happen that one of them knocks it over while asleep. As we now know." Enim ran a gentle hand over the polished wooden case. "Traptions look solid enough from the outside. But inside, they are very delicate."

Nin cast a timid peek over his shoulder into the intricate web of spun glass. She looked sufficiently awed to mollify Enim's ruffled feelings.

"I'll do my best to keep it safe too," Enim promised. He glanced guiltily at his bag that still held crystals and cases. 'I really must finish the others now,' he thought. 'And store all names in each receptacle every night. I have been unforgivably reckless in not doing so all along.'

Enim shook his head. That was all they needed, really. After all the threats and dangers, all the hard work. To knock themselves out, merely through their own clumsiness.

\*

As Enim rummaged through the magical supplies on his shelf, a large roll of parchment fell out. Enim picked it up.

The Scroll of the Special Representative for the Region of the Mountains, from back then, when Enim had been appointed. Enim unfurled it with a sigh, his gaze roaming idly over the calligraphy. Until they caught in the small text at the bottom. Enim's eyes focused. He reread the same line again. And again.

He raised his head, staring straight ahead with an expressionless face. A deep light began to glow in his eyes. His breath quickened. He turned around to Nin. "Come!"

Enim was already out the door, darting across the lane to the Snuggery. "Kaya!" he called even while still in the courtyard. "Lhut! Torly! Look at this!"

\* \* \*

They had agreed to meet at the Sky Inn. And almost everyone had wanted to come along, so now there was over a dozen voices filling the back room with an expectant hum of hope and argument, of plans and dreams. If this could work... The string of uncertainty that held people suspended was drawn taut to the point of snapping.

Then all voices fell silent at once. All heads turned.

The door flew open and a swirl of black robes came rushing in.

The latch fell shut, clicking in the sudden stillness.

"Well?" Zurres raised an arrogant brow over cold, hard eyes.

Enim hesitated. He licked his lips. Torly gave him a little shove.

Enim unrolled the Scroll of the Special Representative. "I am told you are well versed in legal matters? Able to say how certain passages would be interpreted in Varoonya?"

Zurres gave him a curt nod.

And Enim made his case. Pointing out passages, interpreting, arguing. "...can act as a county official in any matter concerning the region.' If it is urgent, an emergency. And if other county officials are unable to take appropriate action, or have failed to do so."

Enim spread out his arms. "So this is it! It is urgent: The Choosing happens in a few days, at solstice. Thousands of people risk being excluded: an emergency! Other scribes, who should have done a proper folkcount in time, have failed to do so. And that is why I, the Special Representative for the Mountains, am entitled to take charge. Legally. Officially. I will complete the folkcount and hold a Choosing in Shebbetin."

Enim's hands were shaking slightly, and his eyes were feverishly bright as they bore into Zurres.

The old woman pulled the scroll toward her in an unhurried gesture. She let her gaze roam over the calligraphy, and over the small paragraphs at the bottom. With unseeing eyes, she stared through the table into endless nothingness.

Then Zurres raised her head. The room lay in utter silence as she pronounced her verdict.

“Yes. That might hold.”

Enim sank onto a chair, his knees weak.

But Torly jumped up, whooping among a firework of stars exploding out from Yoor, while Som whirled Nin around in a furious dance full of flying ribbons. A wild, glorious rallying cry burst from Kaya’s lungs. “We’re on! Go for it!!!”

\*

The inn’s back room had turned into the unofficial base camp for the team of the Choosing.

In one corner, Enim was demonstrating the use of receptacle traptions to one person after another.

Slunyaw stood bent over the center table, his finger roving over a list of names. “We will have to work through the nights,” he rumbled at Ngyrya. “Only five receptacles, and thousands of people. We’ll never finish before solstice if we have so much as a break.”

“That means we need a bigger crew.” Ngyrya rubbed her chin. “We’ll be doing shifts.”

Pulan was getting a headache translating into Kokish and explaining everything to all the Varoonians who were not following.

But Kaya was ready to start the wave that would now wash over Shebbetin. She motioned to Lhut as she turned toward the main room of the inn. Lhut followed, pushing a chair in front of him. He held out a hand to Kaya to let himself be helped up as they began to survey the crowded tables.

“Look!” Lhut hissed. “Isn’t that the cistern liaison meeting back there?”

“Our lucky day.” A wicked grin had spread over Kaya’s face. “There’s our entry point. Talking to them will get the message to all the neighborhoods that have cisterns. Which means: all of them.”

“And the folks at that corner table are firefighters.” Lhut pointed discreetly. “A local bunch only. But they have their network all over Shebbetin. And they can spread news as fast as...you know.”

Kaya snorted happily. “We’ll hardly have to mention it to any of the other individual guests here at all. But we’ll do it anyway, of course. After. First, let’s split up. You take cisterns, I’ll do fire?”

And that moment, Som burst through the door in a whirl of colors, Manaam in her wake.

Manaam’s eyes were bright. He took hold of Lhut’s sleeve and cautiously pulled in the direction of the back room. “Please.” He glanced at Kaya. “Before you tell everyone. Can I make a suggestion?”



Kaya eyed him suspiciously. But she did lead him in.

Heads turned around as they entered, and Manaam launched into his speech directly. "Please. Listen. I have come to ask you," he pleaded. "Much will depend on how this day goes."

Manaam took a step into the room. "I am not one to reach for the stars, to try for the impossible. But this is a falling star I might be able to catch. Even though perhaps it will burn my palm, or slip through my fingers. But it might just work, and that would have incredible power." Manaam pulled off his woolen cap. "I am talking about the owners here. How will they take it? Will they feel shocked and overrun? Naydeer will certainly suggest it to them."

Manaam's eyes narrowed. "But I could come in first. Presenting a story of joy and triumph. At this moment when it is already happening, owners may find it convenient to proclaim, to themselves and to others, that they have always been in favor anyway. That they have never quite understood why people have not been part of the Choosing, or why the most basic county services are not available in Shebbetin. 'Of course they should be! I have always said so.'"

Manaam looked down at his feet. "Even if that is not exactly true. This might be our chance to have the owners, collectively, come out in favor of the Transition. If we play it well."

He cleared his throat. "So here is my plea. First, please let us celebrate today as the Day of the Transition. The more we present it this light, the more likely it is to become just that. A great turning point. A pivotal moment in history. So if you can, then bring masses out into the street, making loud, noisy, jubilant proclamations."

Manaam spread out his arms in a wide, open gesture. "Secondly, please allow the owners to join in. Let them feel that this is their Transition too. Even if they have failed it in the past. If they are willing to support it now, that is what matters most. That is the future we want them to live into. So please don't make enemies out of them. Invite everyone in, to celebrate the coming of the Transition as their own triumph, their own blessing and delight."

Manaam's eyes were searching now, pleading. "Can you do that?"

Gazes traveled and met across the room. Opinions were sought and given silently among a group of friends so deeply attuned they were able to sense each other's state at a glance.

"Yes," Lhut summed up. "We will go for it. We'll have a big celebration. And we will include the owners."

"The bastards," Kaya muttered.

The plaza teemed with people jostling and bustling, shouting and joking. Hot spicy tea was handed round, and the strong rhythms of songs and dances came from every corner.

All the mines were closed for the day. Manaam had used his persuasive charms, accompanied by Zurres who had radiated state authority and a vague aura of Varoonian powers.

All of that combined had been enough for the vast majority of owners to sign a memorandum in which they declared themselves shocked at the discovery of irregularities, and glad to see that everyone had finally been included in the Choosing. They welcomed the prospect of proper county services and good living conditions and had proclaimed a new holiday to memorize this epochal moment in Shebbetin's history: Transition Day.

They did not have to say that twice. People were already on their way, after all. The message had first spread through the living network of Shebbetin like ripples in a pond, then like ocean waves crushing ashore in triumph.

Now people were whirling around town in one big dance, one huge fair dedicated to joy and affirmation. Colorful flags waved from every window, and jugglers, acrobats and artists of all trades were practicing in the streets. Fortune-tellers had sprung up out of nowhere and were predicting Shebbetin's golden future. Yoor had joined one of them, who was recruiting both the questions and the answers from her delighted audience.

"All houses in the Mansion will have a hearth!" a young girl shouted, and Yoor instantly created the vision of an evening lane which a warm fiery glow shining through every window.

"And fountains everywhere!"

There they were. Everyone burst out laughing when they saw a wrollic jump out of a pool and shake himself dry in a haze of sparkles.

Only in one corner of the square people were not taking on top of each other, but instead all looking in the same direction, in silence. On the one official stage that there was, a young owner was giving a speech. And even if the people who were all listening instead of giving their own opinions presented an odd picture: It became clear soon enough what the actual effect of this performance was. The owner's eyes were shining. Just a bit longer, and she would have talked herself into honest enthusiasm. The jubilation in the square and the energy of the attentive audience giving her supportive

rounds of applause let the owner discover or develop an entirely new aspect of herself: the visionary. A vanguard of the Transition.

"How did this even happen?" Torly was shaking her head in amazement, looking out over the creative, passionate crowd on the square. "If I decided to have a big celebration in Varoonya, people would not be pouring out into the street simply on my word. They all have their own lives going on. Their own parties, even. They are not sitting by, waiting for my call."

Enim grinned at her. "That is what Kaya and her friends have been doing all these years. Building up connections. There is a structure here, a network that is strong and healthy, and fraught with anticipation. That is why one small spark was enough now to let this firework explode." Enim spread his arms wide, as if in a huge embrace of the crowd.

But then he turned around and pulled Torly away. "Let's go. We are late already."

There was a long queue outside the Gray Dragon Inn. So long, in fact, that the people not only filled the lane, but had begun to make themselves at home in it too. Warmlings and hot soup were brought out from the houses. Little groups sat on borrowed chairs and discussed the Choosing, the Transition, the future of Shebbetin, all the while slowly advancing toward the receptacles.

In passing, Enim heard an animated voice and a fraction of an idea that instinctively made him veer in that direction. But, no. He could not simply sit down and join in. For inside the Gray Dragon, Lhut was waiting to be replaced at the receptacle.

Enim let his gaze travel along the lane.

Hundreds, thousands of people, who had all found their voice. Who would be choosing a new Council, and a new future. One in which all the children had a home, and all the sick access to healers. One where everybody could have a good live, and be free and equal in rights and dignity.

Enim closed his eyes for a moment.

This was it.

They had made it.

A scattering of stars stood over the mountains. In the heart of a winter night, Enim led his horse out of the livery stable, his breath forming small frozen clouds in the air.

Enim had slept a whole day and half a night after the Choosing and by now, he felt almost capable of going on such a long ride.

He heard noises behind him and turned, peering into the darkness of the yard. The magical lanterns of a sledge became visible, surrounded by half a dozen shaggy mountain ponies with tired young humans on their backs.

Yoor and Torly brought the sledge to a halt. Enim could vaguely discern the bulging shape of Zurres in her new sleeping bag, with warmings inside and the hood drawn tight.

Pulan and Som were giggling excitedly beside her. They were bundled up just as warmly, but sharing one bag, which promised to be much more fun. Besides, they were sparkling with excitement. They were going to Varoonya! Where Nin's family would no doubt be just as delighted by this wonderful surprise as they were themselves.

"Ready to go?" Enim rubbed his stiff fingers.

"Only if you lead the way," Yoor's voice drifted over. "I am lost in the night."

"So am I," Enim assured him. "But the horses are not. We'll let them lead. And at some point in time, there will be a dawn. I am sure of it."

They rode out into the wide snow-covered valley. Darkness enveloped them as they traveled, a few small figures moving under a vast sky, an immense, boundless expanse full of stars. Pale and distant, the lights of the firmament watched as the gentle golden glows of magic slowly made their way across the open highlands, far down beneath them.

The air was still and cold, carrying a scent of snow that cradled the strong, vibrant smell of horses in its ethereal realm like a promise, like a seed in winter. The grasses were silent, their eternal whispers contained within them, kept secret underneath a blanket of crystals

until spring would turn the world to the sun and release their voices. But for now, it was only the snorts of the horses, the deep muffled sound of their hooves on the snow that spoke of life to the night, of the presence of warm, moving animals in a large cosmos full of stars.

The frost bit Enim's cheeks, but he was wrapped up well and still warm with the tea of this morning, and with the memories of recent days. That spirit of celebration and optimism still lived on inside him. He fondly thought of passionate debates, of loud laughter, and of so many people joining in and helping out, that everyone on the Choosing team could also have a break at some point, and a bit of rest.

Almost everyone. Enim himself had not slept much. His nerves had been too strained. As the Special Representative for the Mountains, he had been officially in charge of the whole process, and as an artificer the only one capable of caring for the receptacles in case of trouble. Neither of these functions had come to be called upon, as it turned out. But still. They had kept him up, together with the general excitement about everything.

After the first two days, the commotion in the streets had calmed down. People had still queued up for the Choosing, but more quietly now, without singing or dancing. Just patiently. Still talking to each other, but mostly chatting and making little jokes rather than debating grand visions of the future.

But they had all come. All of Shebbetin had taken part, and would never disappear off the map of Yurvania again.

It had gone well, Enim felt. Very well.

\* \* \*

"That would have been the moment. That last night, when they thought it is all over and won, and they can relax. But no. Even in the aftermath, they still tied themselves to the receptacles."

Naydeer huffed derisively. "But never mind. Let them wallow in their imagined triumph. It will all collapse soon enough. Such an improvised procedure will never get recognized in Varoonya."

She turned with a rash, impatient move. "And even if it did. Those stupid miners don't know what they are doing. Surely they have all chosen the Mountain, which is going to be irrelevant. It will never make it into the Council. That little groupling of theirs is going to disappear right after the Choosing, leaving nothing in its wake but exhaustion and disappointment. All that expectation, all that

euphoria, and then—nothing? All hope will vanish into that abyss. And should there ever be a Choosing in Shebbetin again, no one is going to believe in it.”

Pramus ran a finger over the delicate paintings on a paper screen with a slow, pensive move. His thoughts seemed to travel out between landscapes of ancient mountains and gnarled, weathered pines. “Right. Maybe it was wise not to draw attention. To not even have bandits appear on the path to Hebenir, where there have never been any. Let the whole thing die the slow but certain death of disappointment.”

His eyes sparkled beneath the wide brim of his hat. “A good thing then that they celebrated so much. This way it will hit them even harder when their pretty bubble bursts.”

Pramus stroked his gray beard. “The rabble-rousers will run out of steam, and so will the rabble. The owners will regain their senses and remember who they are. Things are not turned upside down that easily.” His lips twisted into a thin, mirthless smile. “And we too will have more room for maneuver again. Already the eye of Varoonya is no longer on Shebbetin.”

He strode toward the fire and turned around so suddenly the silver dragons in the folds of his robes took wing. “We have come through hardships much worse than this. We will not doubt, not waver. And we are not alone.”

The old Vanian they always spoke among themselves took on the sound of a mysterious, arcane language of power as Pramus intoned the creed of the Restitutionists, round vowels rolling off his tongue, hard clicks and sharp hisses punctuating their flow.

“Old times will be great again. May power lie where it belongs! For courage, truth and honor!”

\*            \*            \*

As soon as the carriage arrived in Varoonya, all the youth went straight home, as promised, to prove to their respective families that they were alive. So only the adults stumbled up the steps to the palace, tired and travel-worn, yet determined to bring their quest to its glorious conclusion right there and then.

The old city glowed softly around them, stitches of a thousand colors adorning the silky night. But from the open palace doors, bright light and waves of music drifted down toward them.

“What...?” Yoor wondered.

"Big Choosing celebration," a young man sitting on the balustrade smiled an explanation at him. "Results have just been announced."

"What??"

Yoor's lips grew pale.

"No!!"

He clasped his receptacle and ran up the stairs two steps at a time.

Their little group burst through the palace doors like a tempest, bustling people left and right, leaving confusion and indignation in their wake. But all around them, the celebration continued. Laughter and voices drifted over the colorful throng. The huge board on the side wall no longer held a hundred colorful notes on upcoming gatherings. Instead, the names of groupings were listed in big, bold letters, next to the number of seats they would have in the future Council.

The Mountain: Zero.

"No! Wait! Wait!!!"

Yoor's voice rang out through the hall with the power of magic. "The Choosing is not over yet! The results are not out!" Lights in the whole hall dimmed at the behest of his spell, and the crowd fell into a stunned silence. Countless heads turned to look at the bright beam of gold that fell only onto the receptacle Yoor held raised up high in his arms. "These are the voices of people from the Mountains. They must be heard! They will be included! Now!"

\*

Zurres was the only one to be admitted to the deliberations of the Choosing committee. Enim, Torly and Yoor waited outside closed doors.

In the great palace hall behind them, the festivities had resumed. People were joking and drinking, chatting and dancing. Yoor frowned at them. "The Choosing is not finished. They shouldn't be celebrating yet. Did they not hear us? Not believe us?"

Torly lightly bumped her shoulder against his. "Come on, let them. It's all right. Our receptacles will change the world for us, but not for them. We'll only get one position in the Council, maybe two. All the rest will stay the same. So they might as well applaud their own results right now. We will not disturb them by very much when we join in."

Torly rocked and rolled a little, her energy bubbling up again despite the fatigue from the journey. "In fact, we might as well start celebrating ourselves. We've got enough to be happy about." She

began twirling around Yoor for a turn or two. "It was brilliant," she huffed, a little breathlessly. "I've never had sleepless nights so well spent."

Yoor beamed back at her, burying his hand in her hair. "Well, I've had a few others," he murmured in her ear, pulling her back toward the dance.

But then the door opened and the committee chairperson stood on the threshold.

Torly hopped straight into her path. "So? Please! How does it tally? Will the Mountain have an observer in the Council? Or even more?"

The wiry woman looked at Torly in astonishment. It took her a moment to rally. "Uh. That was not our task. We did not tally." She gave Torly a probing look. "We only determined whether the receptacles will be taken in at all. Whether this late amendment to the list of eligible choosers can be accepted."

The chairperson cleared her throat. "And it cannot, I am sorry to say. So, no. The Mountain will have no presence in the Council. None of these receptacles will even be counted. The results as announced in the hall are final."

Torly's mouth fell open. "But..."

The chairperson carefully stepped around her. "You can ask Zurres for the details. Now, if you'll excuse me."

She walked away.

Torly's gaze followed her as if in a dream. Or in a nightmare, where you can see your heart's desire drift away on a current, so close, so close, but just beyond reach. And you try to catch it, to hold on, but you cannot make a move, not a sound.

Frozen, petrified, Torly watched the woman disappear.

She turned around. Wide-eyed, she sought Yoor's gaze. But Yoor just stared down the deserted hallway.

Enim was the first to come out of the trance.

With a rash move, he tore the door open and stormed in. Yoor and Torly rushed in at his heels and almost ran him over when he stopped short.

The room was empty.

A few ink bowls and brushes lay strewn across the table. That and a disarray of vacant chairs were the only traces left behind by the commission. And a door in the far wall, standing ajar.

Enim fought his way through the jumble of chairs and pushed the back door open. He stood in an empty corridor. "No."



"No way!" Refusal radiated off Torly like a steam off an indignant dragon. "This Zurres person is not going to make off without us!"

Enim was already on his way. "We follow her. We need answers. This can't be the end! The people of Shebbetin must be included!"

He was running down the hall when he stopped abruptly and turned around to stare back. The corridor also continued in the other direction. From where another passage forked off to the side. There was no indication whatsoever as to which way Zurres might have gone.

Enim looked at Torly and Yoor.

"We'll split up!" Torly was already pulling Yoor away. "We'll meet up later in the entrance hall."

Enim nodded at their retreating backs and took up his own pursuit again. He turned right at the next corner. Then right again. And left. Endless halls and flights of rooms stretched out before him, all empty, silent, forsaken.

Yawning doors and dark windows gawked at Enim as he passed uninhabited desks and yellowed pages. Enim hurried on. He had lost all sense of orientation. One room looked like the next, all dusty and motionless, an unreal still life.

But then he heard voices. Distant, at first, louder and clearer each time he turned a corner to follow their call. Until, finally, he burst out through the last door into the merry exuberance of a Choosing celebration.

"Where is Zurres?"

Enim took hold of the first man by his side and turned him around almost violently. Astounded, the man raised his eyebrows, then his shoulders.

Enim let go.

Surprised and disapproving glances landed on him from all around. A dozen shrugs met his demand.

Enim pressed on through the throng, in between bright robes and clinking glasses. People were laughing and dancing. The music was too loud, too fast. Enim's breath turned ragged. He felt like in a fairytale castle, where the fay were holding a great feast while the human world was dying. Where one lone traveler was desperately trying to find his loved ones, to save his world, to go back home.

But fate held him in its iron claws.

Enim hurried on endlessly between mirrors and chandeliers, between glints and colors, lost in the whirling press of the ball.

All the Snuggery was asleep. Except for one other small, worried corner.

"Maybe you should have gone along to Varoonya," Lhut fretted, tossing on the mat while still trying not to wake the kids. "Just to be safe. Like we said you would, after solstice."

"Bah." Kaya waved a dismissive hand under the duvet. "We have won! True, all the observers from Varoonya have left. But Naydeer will not dare to touch us now. It is over! We have been in the Choosing, we will be in the Council. We will never be powerless again!"

Her eyes were gleaming in the dark.

Lhut wagged his head. But before he could respond, Cahuan, rolled up beside him with Quena in her arms, came in with a tired whisper. "Can we do this in the morning?"

Lhut smiled ruefully and snuggled up beside Cahuan. "Yes. It is late. Let's go to sleep." He whispered a kiss onto her ear. "Help me, still?"

He felt her nod against his lips.

With Kaya's hard, warm body in his back and Cahuan's soft song of sea dragons in his ear, Lhut relaxed onto the mat. As his mind let go, the pain roared up in his limbs and Lhut gasped before he managed to keep his breath even, a steady ebb and flow while the raging beast of agony flailed among crushing waves. But Lhut's spirits, safe within a prayer and a chant, drifted away to float in the quiet realm of the stars, to rest and to dream.

But the night was long, and dark. And while the sea dragon dove down deep into the ocean, another beast reared its head, beginning its hunt.

Black shadows crept around the building. A silhouette crouched beneath a window, hiding from the light of the moon. Another shadow stood by the door, pressed back against the wall.

The door opened.

The shadows moved.

Noiselessly, they made their way into the house. A floorboard creaked and the sleeper woke, even from that little sound.

As he half-opened his eyes, shock jerked him awake, but before he could move, a cloud of dark green light enveloped him, making his limbs impossibly heavy. Trying in vain to raise his arms, to struggle, he felt his hands bound behind his back and his mouth speechless.

The shadows flowed up silently, from one room to another, one sleeper to the next. They moved on to another building, all over town, choosing very deliberately where to enter. Who to come to.

Another door opened. Another sleeper woke and struggled against the magic, against the bonds. She tried to scream. She could not. The shadow above her held her tightly. Then he pulled out a brass medallion from under his shirt and let it dangle before her eyes. She recognized the intricate pattern engraved on it. She knew what it was. Knew what it meant. Then a low, deep voice spoke right above her ear.

"We are the Recoursors of Yurvania. You are under arrest. Please come quietly."

\* \* \*

Enim had found Torly and Yoor again, on the corner of the entrance hall.

But that was all. No trace of Zurre. No answers.

The empty corridor behind him stretched on silently, with its worn stone floor and half-open doors. The festive sounds from the hall seemed distant, unreal.

Enim felt dangerously light-headed. He sat down on the floor. Resting his back against a marble column, he interlaced his numb fingers with Yoor and Torly, who had sunk down beside him, staring straight ahead into unfathomable distance.

Time passed, with nothing in it. Nothing at all.

Then a pair of feet appeared before Enim.

"Get up," a voice said. "I need a word."

He raised his gaze.

Lenoren.

Torly, Enim and Yoor scrambled to their feet, like the disheveled and shaky lot they were.

Lenoren did not waste time. "I'm on my way to a presentation. But just quickly."

She looked at them, and by now they were able to look back at her, their wits sufficiently gathered. "Your receptacles have not been included, the voices from Shebbetin never counted. I assume you are disappointed." They did not bother to confirm. Lenoren went on without pause. "However, there is something else in this that you may not be aware of." A thin smile came to her lips. "But Zurres was. And she has seen it through with the respective officials, including me."

Lenoren leaned forward slightly. "The folkcount you have done came in too late for this Choosing. But it will be accepted, provisionally, for everything else. As the approximate number of inhabitants of Shebbetin."

Lenoren was positively beaming at them by now. "All the county services will be calculated from that. How many healers are needed in the area. How many learning pavilions. How many pouch collection points. Practically everything."

Lenoren took a little step back. "You have not made it into the Council. Not even into the Choosing. But you have won, as far as I can see. All that truly matters. A good life for all."

\*

"Really?"

Torly raked a hand through her hair. She looked down the corridor where Lenoren had vanished. "We thought all was lost. But in fact, all is won?"

She turned around, eyes wide. "Is this actually true? Is this what is happening?"

"Apparently." Enim rubbed a hand over his arm. "Even if it seems a little hard to believe."

"What, even to you?"

Enim tentatively raised one shoulder. His eyes roamed out over the hall, into the golden light lingering between glinting chandeliers.

He took a deep breath.

True, when Enim had first arrived in Shebbetin, he had trusted, beyond a doubt, that everything would be put right straight away. Even in all his outrage, he had felt sure, positive.

But by now, Enim had been through so many highs and lows, so much tension and surprise, passion and disbelief, hope and disappointment, that he did not know what to believe any more. At least not tonight.

"I am confused. Overwhelmed. Dizzy." Enim leaned his head back against the wall. "I guess I will need a bit more confirmation before I am able to believe again. To fully trust. To know that, yes indeed, we have won. That the Transition truly has come to the Mountains."

At that moment, a black-clad figure swooped down the corridor like a famished hawk and bore down on their little group.

Enim jolted upright. They all froze, staring at the apparition with dread. With hope. With tense anticipation.

Zurres came to a halt so abruptly that her dark robes billowed out all around her.

Her thin lips actually held a smile.

"Yes!"

\*

The music swelled, filling the palace hall with its glory. Torly whirled around the dance floor like a dervish. She fell into Yoor's arms, bathing him in peals of laughter.

Enim called out loud, drunk on a little wine and a lot of triumph. "There will be a hundred snuggeries!"

Yoor instantly let an image of Yunda's beaming face drift past, followed by the curled-up form of sleeping little Quena. A gloomy mine entrance dissolved into bright sunlight and became a bustling Mansion full of people with their eyes shiny and their limbs intact, taking old thatch down from the roofs. And then the inevitable galloping horse appeared, the rider's cloak billowed dramatically as she rode off into the sunset, a letter held high in her outstretched hand.

Tory snorted and ruffled Yoor's hair as the vision faded.

"What?" Yoor tried to pout over his grin. "It is true. Pouch riders are great heroes, intrepidly at our service."

"They sure are," Torly agreed, kissing his velvet cheek.

Enim opened his mouth, but his words got lost as a horde of boisterous youths stormed in through the palace doors like wild ponies, whooping and whinnying as they threw themselves upon Yoor and Torly. A moment later, they rushed off onto the dance floor, pulling even Enim along in their irresistible tide.

When the sun rose bright and shiny the next day, Yoor's little mountain house was one of the first beneficiaries. Distant sounds from the waking city floated into the bedroom, intermingled with birdsong and the rustling of leaves.

Yoor rolled out of bed. He met Enim and a boiling kettle in the kitchen. "Ah," Yoor rumbled appreciatively, "well done, my friend. I see you can make yourself useful in more ways than one. More than ten or twelve even, I should say, considering all the things I have seen you do so far."

Enim blushed, laughing. "Yes. The ability to make strong tea is just one of my many accomplishments. Thank you."

When they arrived at the palace, Lenoren was already in, but could not receive them right away. So they settled in the parlor and waited. They had another round of warm drinks, and, after a while, some more food. Some rounds of pacing the parlor, then drinks again. Pacing again, and waiting some more. Finally, Lenoren was ready to see them.

Lenoren showed clear signs of having been up late the night before. And the night before that and before that, perhaps. She had moons of wooing for the Crane behind her, after all. And the constitution of the new Council before her, and ongoing business in between. She looked slightly more ragged than Enim and his friends.

But she was in good spirits. "Congratulations!" She beamed at them. "You have done it!" A wicked grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Or I could say: You are going to do it!"

Her eyes shone with the wryness and enthusiasm of years of experience in the Council. "It is tempting to think that now it is all over. But this is a beginning more than an end. The door of possibilities has opened—now someone has to step through. And to keep on walking, on and on. The Transition in an endless path, steep and winding, exhausting and wonderful."

She pushed a strand of hair from her brow. "Hundreds of learning pavilions need to be set up. And healers, and homes for the children in work cabins, and housing that isn't a death trap, and lights, and water, and everything. This will be enormous."

Lenoren leaned forward. "Scribes from the bureaus in Varoonya will be in charge of expanding the existing services, of course. But they need a counterpart in Shebbetin. And these people will be key. This is your call." She pointed her pencil at them. "Find the miracle workers!"

Lenoren pushed herself upright in her chair. "We need at least two scribes in Shebbetin. People who are committed and competent, and capable of relating to many different kinds of folks. Able to hear what they say, to understand what they mean, and to somehow conclude from that mess of opinions and perspectives what ought to be done next."

Her eyes narrowed. "Try to find people like that."

Barely waiting for a reply, Lenoren made to open the door for them, then turned around once more, a hand on the knob and a grin on her face.

"Find good ones."

\* \* \*

Zurres crossed the small, sunlit room with a few strides, coming to stand by the window that looked out onto a verdant courtyard.

Joonster's eyes followed her without visible expression.

"It has gone very smoothly." Zurres's voice was outright smug. "Naydeer and Pramus have been arrested. And dozens of others, at the break of dawn. The recoursors from Varoonya had come to Shebbetin in the guise of merchants, and then went through the whole settlement in one swift move, arresting everybody on their list. Before anyone had time to give warning, to hide documents, or to run away."

Zurres shifted the map under her arm to the other side. It held her hand-drawn sketches of Shebbetin, the location of the guards' houses, the interior of certain villas. She would not need them anymore. But the recoursors had returned them to her anyway.

Joonster stood stiffly by the door. "Will Naydeer be punished?"

"No. We don't do punishment anymore. We're past the age of the Feudals, after all."

Zurres met Joonster's gaze and realized that more of an answer would be needed. "Naydeer will have to make amends. She will be

given ample time and opportunity to come up with suggestions for that herself. However, if she does not offer, or if her offers stay way below what would be appropriate, eventually there will be a court decision. Which will be implemented even without Naydeer's consent."

"She should make amends," Joonster repeated tonelessly. "How?"

Zurres crossed her arms over her chest. "Usually, a good start for the offender is to ask the hurt parties what matters most to them. What they want. What they feel would help them now, to live on." She tilted her head. "Then it depends. On what those harmed have to say. In some cases, the apology, the remorse, the healed relationship is most important to them."

Zurres cleared her throat. "But with Naydeer, certainly one thing that will be expected is that she pay reparations. For having violated basic safety standards in her mines, as well as decency of working conditions and pay. Causing death and injury to countless people."

Zurres's lips were a thin, pale line. "Her mines will not reopen until some new owner has improved them. All her property has been frozen. I don't expect anything much will remain after compensations have been paid. Her wealth is gone, back to the people who have created it."

"That is not a punishment?" Joonster's voice was impassive.

"No. The reasoning is completely different. Punishment is meant to cause pain. Restoration is meant to ease pain."

A beam of light fell in through the window and painted patterns of leaves onto Zurres's robes.

"No one here wants to hurt Naydeer," she said. "But we do want to support those she has harmed, even if Naydeer does not like it."

Zurres arched an eyebrow. "And most of all, we want to ensure that it won't happen again. That the structure in Shebbetin changes."

Joonster regarded her stoically. "Will Naydeer ever get out again? Of that place where she is kept now?"

Zurres's eyes narrowed. "I don't know. It depends on how she behaves, and on how trustworthy we all judge her to be. Most people go free again. But perhaps Naydeer will be under guard for the rest of her life. In a nice, agreeable place; but unable to leave, unable to do harm."

The past welled up inside Zurres, unbidden. Her hand clenched into a fist. "Like it was done with the Feudals at the time of the Transition. They had to be kept in exile, under guard. They were too



dangerous. Maybe Naydeer is like that.”

Zurres sat down on a bench by the wall. She had learned a lesson about old age recently, and there was no choice but to abide by it. Her body needed rest, whatever her mind had to say about that. She leaned her head against the solid stone.

“Naydeer’s power is gone. She has no mansion, no mines, no social standing in Shebbetin. All the owners have turned their backs on her. Naydeer may even be glad for an offer of seclusion in the countryside.”

Joonster watched her without comment. But then he did ask another question. “What about the mage?”

“Pramus cannot be held responsible for the mines or the accidents. And otherwise, he has done no harm anyone could put a finger on. We cannot condemn someone just for having been friends with Naydeer. Nor for having created scary illusions. Ever since the Transition, people are supposed to know for themselves not to believe in such things.”

She let her lids fall shut, avoiding Joonster’s eyes. But she spoke on quietly. “We were only able to arrest Pramus because there are already other charges against him. For which he will be facing a court soon.”

Her eyes opened again. “I don’t know if Pramus and Naydeer will forever be held in seclusion, under supervision. But even if not. They can never go back. Naydeer has lost her wealth, and Pramus his patroness. Their position and status are gone.”

Zurres leaned forward, her gaze locking with Joonster’s. “They hold no power now.”

\* \* \*

The wind tapped against the window of the new snugery.

Olfwer’s eyes narrowed and his body tensed, ready to fight, to run. But Herun only cradled the little sister in his big arms as she bit him, amidst wild screams and flailing legs. Herun kept on crooning softly to her. He simply sat there, large and calm like a mountain, endlessly patient, an unwavering presence. The girl’s wails transformed into deep heaving sobs, and she let her tears run free as she curled up into a ball. She pressed her face into Herun’s belly, like a small animal rescued by a warm den. Holding her safe in his embrace, Herun gently hummed on.

Olfwer sank back onto his heels. Crouched in the corner, he still observed, weary-eyed, wondering. But he did join in with Herun’s

hum, very cautiously, to see what that would do. It loosed a deep breath from his lungs, for one thing.

Before it could do much more, a small laughing whirlwind burst in from the far end of the room. With a practiced fencing move, Yunda lunged out of the kitchen, followed by her eldest brother.

"Look!" She proudly propped herself up in front of the two visitors she had heard coming. Manaam and Cahuan gazed down into a bowl of unbaked dough.

"You may. But only very little!" Yunda warned, and Manaam obediently ran just his pinkie over the rim.

While Manaam was sucking his finger, the younger brother peered out from behind Yunda. Still holding on to the hem of her tunic, he ventured: "Will we have more siblings soon?" His dark eyes searched Cahuan's face.

"Yes," Cahuan smiled. "Very soon. We only need to find you a second parent first. There are many people visiting us in the old Snuggery now, to understand how it works. And two or three of the nicest ones will come over here, one at a time, so you can spend a few days with them and see who you would like to live with."

The boy nodded slowly, his eyes wide.

Yunda wrinkled her nose. "And what happens to the ones that we do not choose? I mean, they may also be very nice. But if we can only have one?"

"They will become parents for other children. There will be many new snuggeries, you know?"

That satisfied Yunda. With gusto, she licked up another—very little!—bit of raw dough and danced off toward the kitchen, the two brothers in her wake.

Manaam waved a silent good-bye at Herun and Olfwer, tucking his arm under Cahuan's as they stepped out the door.

The air was fresh and moist, smelling of spring after the recent breath of warmth that had sent the snow melting. But it was winter still. There would be several hard bites of frost coming their way before the sun truly warmed the earth enough to let seeds and bulbs stir in the depths. Nevertheless. Days were getting longer again, holding a bit more light every morning.

Cahuan and Manaam walked across the meadows, following a path that circled around Shebbetin in a slow, lazy arc. Behind them, halfway up the hill, they could see the two stone houses flanking the old mine. And the wooden bars that now blocked the entrance.

"So now finally Naydeer's mine has a wooden grid over it," Cahuan grimaced.

An eerie silence hung over the place.

Manaam averted his eyes. "Yes. It took that long. That much." The mountains winked at him in the distance, their flanks still covered in white.

Manaam shook his head. "Everything seemed so fixed, so immovable. And it was, in a way. Until it changed."

His lips twisted into a wry smile. "The first mine is closed. And I think the rest will follow, one after the other."

Manaam tugged at his earring. Then he pulled it off, addressing it angrily as it lay in his palm. "The mines will close when the Transition not only comes to Shebbetin, but also catches up with itself in Varoonya. Nobody will want to buy jewelry anymore, not when the true cost is known. People do not wish to look like Feudals, after all. The patent ability to exploit others is not something anyone would be proud of anymore." Manaam stuffed the offending earring into his pocket, into invisibility, into oblivion.

His gaze rose up, traveling across the sky, and over the tangled roofs of Shebbetin. "So much is happening now, on so many levels. We'll get snuggeries instead of mines. And the freed miners are not wasting time. Not while they are still receiving coin from the county."

Cahuan followed his gaze to the crooked landscape of roofs. Here and there, people could be seen climbing across the Mansion's slopes and ridges, taking out thatch, carrying fresh rafters and bundles like purposeful birds following the plan in their hearts long before the word 'nest' had ever occurred to anyone.

"They are good dreamers." Manaam clicked his tongue. "They have made full use of their miners' circles, trying to imagine their futures as ex-miners. As new people. From general visions, they quickly progressed to an actual plan as to which neighbor would help which, forming gangs that rotate from one home to the next to renovate. And even to house the family while the roof is missing."

Manaam whistled softly through his teeth. "I knew it was a good neighborhood, with people talking to each other. But to take it to that level..."

Cahuan grinned. "Yes. You know, sometimes I feel that the essence of the Transition has reached Shebbetin long ago. Or has never been lost. We do know how to be a community."

Manaam's eyes seemed to travel out into the distance, wandering between the golden glints the sun left on windowpanes. "Yes. And maybe some of that spirit will even catch on in our little circle of polite society. Already, conventions are changing. What are the rules? And who makes them?"

He arched his eyebrows. "I have been playing along for ages. But now, the moment has come where I am strong enough to change the rules of the game. More than ever before, I hold the power to determine what kind of behavior is expected and acceptable." Manaam turned around. "What used to be a quirky eccentricity can become the height of fashion now, the obvious thing to do. Such as: treating equals as equals."

Manaam paused to look at Cahuan. He gently ran his finger along her cheek, her hairline. His eyes were dark as they held Cahuan's. "It includes respect for your work. Recognizing that taking care of children is at least as important as taking care of a mine."

He hesitated. With a subtle gesture, he pointed toward the owners' quarter in the distance, to all the posh villas, his own among them. Manaam's voice turned very low as he took hold of Cahuan's hand. "It might also mean that I will no longer live alone in that beautiful big house. That one of the snuggeries might move in, filling the empty rooms with children, and with their parents. If you would like that?"

Cahuan stood perfectly still. Manaam's dark eyes sought her gaze, then hid beneath lowered lashes.

With one small move, Cahuan came so close she could smell the scent rising from his collar. She dipped her nose into his fragrance, whispering into his hair. "And so wealth and power fade away."

Manaam snorted. "To be replaced with something better?"

"Much better!" Cahuan wrapped her arms around his neck. "We'll come!"

Manaam laughed. He squeezed Cahuan hard. His eyes were shining as he murmured into the seaweed strands that protruded from her cap. "This might also mean that you and I will be kissing in public. Now that times are changing. What do you think?"

"I think we could give it a try."

Cahuan licked his lips tentatively, then pulled him down into a warm, endless kiss, entirely happy with their current public of brown, shaggy cows.

\* \* \*

Enim pinned the sheet up on the wall. The writing was neat, beautiful, as good as any kind of calligraphy he could manage.

Enim stepped back, squinting, giving the lines a long, searching look. He wasn't quite sure what was the best wording, the true call.

"Find the miracle workers."

"Find local scribes."

~ ~ ~ The End ~ ~ ~



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and the right people find this book!

# The Starlight of Shadows

Crouched among the ferns, Amalai touched the velvety blossoms that, just now, had opened their bodies to the night. Tendrils of ambiguous aroma rose up to tease her nostrils, an impudent earthy call somewhere between lust and decay, enticing to the point of nausea. But Amalai knew how to be a companion to the pale, ghostly flowers. Another delicate trumpet fell into her hand. Just one or two more, Amalai thought. The rest, she would leave.

At that moment the monkeys shrieked and birds flew up in alarm. Amalai ducked down deep among the ferns, her body tense, her ears pricked. She could feel the blood pulse through her veins.

Cautiously, she crept forward until she could see.

It was cadets, from the garrison. And on a stretcher between them lay a beautiful youth, with a face so even and perfect it could have been that of a marble statue. It was as white as marble, too. He was dead.

"I am telling you!" one of the cadets shouted. "I was the one who found him. And I saw! There was a shadow crouching over him. That was a ghost, a demon that killed him! I saw it!"

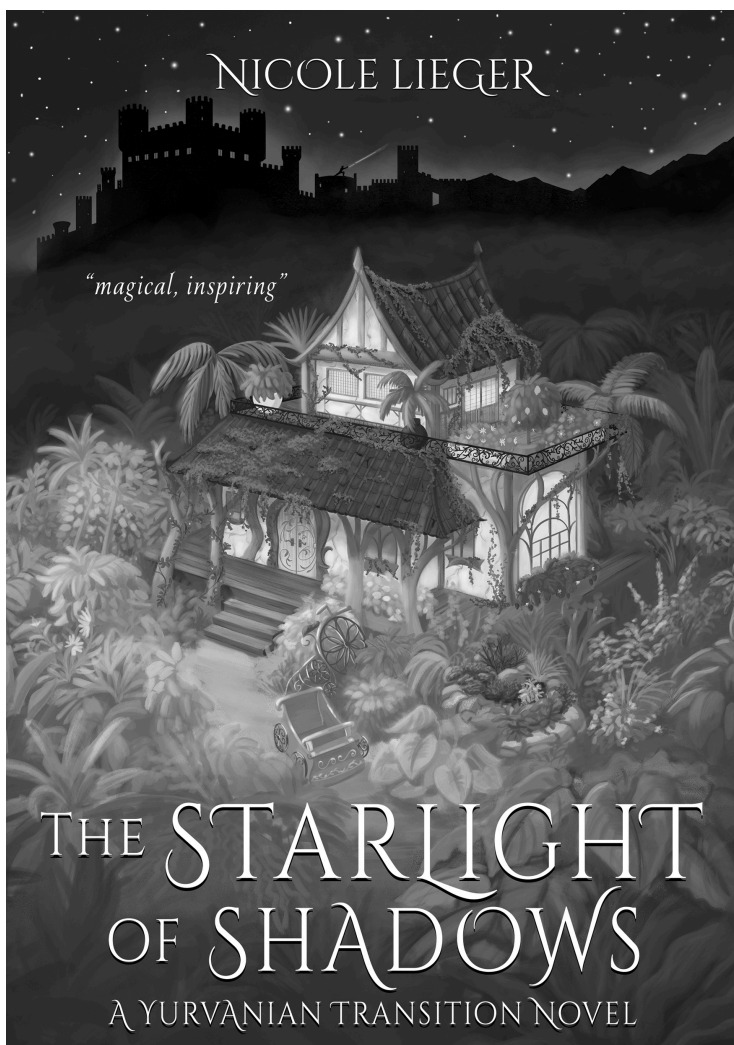
He was shivering. One of his comrades seemed to believe him, becoming stiff and awkward with fear.

But another stomped her foot. "Demons don't exist! Everybody knows that!" she asserted hotly, her almond eyes shooting fire at her fellow cadets. "And I can tell you which evil spirit has killed him!" She pointed an accusatory finger at the Diamondtip fortress. "That spirit! One that sends people into danger for no reason, calling that 'correction'. It is the garrison that is the danger here, no one else!"

Up high on a warlike tower armed with battlements, the garrison commander stood staring out into a blood-red sky. Slowly, the tale she had heard began to reveal its meaning. The commander felt a fiery glow rise up within her. This was it! A demon was threatening the town, and Diamondtip would rise!

But out in the forest, among ancient trees and rustling leaves, gleaming eyes and moving shadows, Amalai could hear her lover whisper in her ear. "I will go and seek, call and beckon. Maybe, just maybe, this is my chance to touch the fay."





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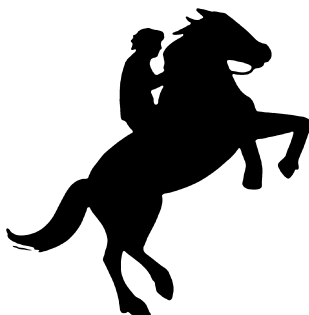
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## About the Author

Nicole Lieger has a background in social sciences and humanities. From campaigning for human rights she moved into management of NGOs, then into supporting more ephemeral structures of civil society.

Her topics include restorative justice, deep ecology, uniting means and ends in political action, social progress, material simplicity and a rich inner life.

When she is not teaching at university or writing novels, she is passionately cultivating everyday practices of living in alignment with a breathing earth and a mind-boggling humanity.

And she's happy to hear from you – Do get in touch!

