

The Starlight of Shadows

A Yurvanian Transition Novel

Nicole Lieger

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[pronounced like: Nee'kol Leaguer]

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You can find a
background chitchat glossary
for the world of Yurvania
on my website:
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To David Abram,
author of the wonderful book *Becoming Animal*
and a magician of this world

1

The sky was streaked with gold, but under a canopy of ancient trees, shadows reined. Amalai let a velvety blossom fall into her palm. Crouched beneath the waving ferns, she breathed in moist forest air and the sweet, cloying scent of the trumpets that had, just now, opened their bodies to the night. The one moment when their fragrance was wildest, their power strongest. The one time to collect them.

Tendrils of ambiguous aroma rose up to tease Amalai's 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, how to lure and coax their disturbing essence into a vial. From where, eventually, it would flow into a hot bath and bring ease and joy to a troubled human body.

Amalai sighed contentedly as another colorless blossom fell into her hand. Just one or two more, she thought. The rest she would leave.

At that moment the monkeys shrieked and birds flew up in alarm. Some large animal broke through the undergrowth without care or caution, but loudly and rudely, with sounds of distress.

Amalai ducked down deep among the ferns, her body tense, her ears pricked. She could feel the blood pulsing through her veins. Cautiously, she crept forward between the black trunks until she could see.

It was cadets, from the Diamondtip fortress. They moved awkwardly, as if tied together. No, they were carrying something, a burden both heavy and delicate, it seemed.

Amalai followed.

As the cadets approached the back wall of the garrison courtyard, two guards came out across the little bridge to meet them. Soon, another soldier followed from inside, and another. An agitated little group had formed by the time Amalai reached them. She waited on the fringes of the small crowd, slowly and unobtrusively moving forward until she could get a peek between the uniformed backs.

A young man, a youth really, lay on a makeshift litter, eyes closed. He

was no more than maybe sixteen years old and strikingly beautiful, 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.

A large cloth covered his body, and Amalai did not know if she could truly see the shapes of crushed and mangled limbs underneath or if this was her imagination running wild. She turned away, shuddering. But then she turned back, anyway.

The soldiers surrounding the stretcher were mumbling. Some were silent with shock, some cursing under their breaths or growling angrily. The cadets explained, again and again.

Until one of them lost it. "I swear! I swear! I saw it with my own eyes!" His voice broke. He was a sturdy lad, with strong, bulging muscles. But his body was shaking.

One comrade put an arm around his shoulders, trying to calm him down. "There, now, Kortid."

But Kortid did not want to be calmed. "I am telling you!" he shouted. "I was the one who found him. And I saw! There was a shadow crouched over him, a ghost, a demon! It killed him, pinning him down, drinking his blood dry!"

Kortid was shivering. His face was unnaturally pale, even for one as white-skinned as he, and little beads of sweat were standing on his brow. Some of the soldiers seemed to believe him and were awkward and uncomfortable with fear. Some still tried to soothe him like a sick child.

"See for yourselves then! Go check his neck!" Kortid shouted.

The soldiers looked at each other uncertainly. Then one of them, a squat woman, stepped up and pulled back the blanket in one short, measured move. In the glow of a lantern, the neck of the youth shone like the pale moon, as white and immaculate as his face. It was not mangled, not slit, nor did it show any other sign of violence or injury. The only thing visible on the snowy skin were two small red dots. Right above the artery.

The soldier pulled back.

Others leaned in more closely.

A hushed murmur began to weave through the group that had fallen silent in anticipation before. The murmur grew, and turned, and came back to its origin as a full-grown rumor, a tale, a suspicion. A denial, a question. Heads were shaking or nodding in the middle of deep conversations.

They broke off abruptly when orders were shouted from the garrison gate. All the soldiers snapped to attention immediately.

They carried the stretcher inside. The gate closed.

Amalai began to walk back home slowly, haltingly, her body and mind in a daze.

* * *

“But demons don’t exist! Everyone knows that!” Rebonya asserted hotly, her almond eyes shooting fire at her fellow cadets.

The common room was full of agitation.

Hun had died.

Over by the fireplace, Kortid was telling and retelling his story of the fiend, the terrible shadow he had seen in the forest. Several cadets were listening, asking questions, their faces pinched and troubled. Some were kicking the wall or crying quietly, heads in their hands.

Heated arguments had broken out in various corners.

“Demons are just a fairy tale! Used in the feudal age to scare people into submission!” Rebonya shook her head vigorously, sending her short black hair flying. “Old mages conjured up illusions to make people afraid and, once afraid, easy to control. We’re not going to fall for that again!” She snorted.

The cadet beside her wagged his head. “But Hun did die in—”

“Yes, he did die!” Rebonya’s rage interrupted him. “And I can tell you which evil spirit has killed him!” She pointed an accusatory finger in the general direction of the castle’s core. “That spirit! A spirit that sends people into danger for no reason, calling that ‘correction’. Which is really just a flimsy excuse for the powerful to inflict suffering on their underlings.”

Rebonya’s hand clenched into a fist. “These ‘corrections’ have never helped to improve anyone’s character or conduct.” She sneered. “They have only brought about fear, pain and humiliation. Self-deprecation, making people think they deserve such things. And making them ready to treat others the same. Everyday cruelty, preparing future soldiers for dealing out what they have received, and more.”

That was going a bit far. Was one allowed to say such things? The other cadet drew back a notch, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at Rebonya with narrowed eyes.

Rebonya charged on regardless. “You may say Hun has had a logging accident. But why did that accident ever happen in the first place? Why was he cutting down that tree on his own?”

“It was not an accident.” Kortid passed beside her just then, his face still pale, taut. His voice had grown tired. A mere whisper.

“I saw. It was a demon.”

* * *

‘A demon.’ Berqar took a few strides toward the window, looking out between iron bars. The castle lay cold and stern beneath the gathering darkness.

‘A demon has appeared in the forest. And it has killed Hun.’ This was how the tale had come to her, the Commander of Diamondtip. It seemed like an omen, an oracle. A sign, full of secret meanings, full of foreboding perhaps, or full of hidden promises. A road to follow, if only one knew how to find it, how to decipher the signs that had arrived at her doorstep, but in disguise, in veils of both mystery and urgency.

It was a call. An order. Berqar felt it. But she could not yet name it. Could not spell it out. She looked up into the dusky sky, at streaks of crimson hanging over the castle’s tower.

Slowly, meaning began to come to her.

She saw the menace hovering over the forest, over the soft, helpless town of Behrlem. A darkness full of power, immense, unearthly, inhuman. A force that would kill without mercy.

Berqar felt a glow, a red-hot energy rise up in her. This was it. Her quest was clear, and its call pulsed through her veins like fire from the core of the earth. She turned around, a gleam in her eye that had not been there for a long, long time.

But it was back now.

* * *

Amalai leaned against the wall of her rooftop terrace, pulling the warm body of her lover more firmly against her chest. Lahoon eased back into her arms. His torso was bare, leaving his butterfly skin to shimmer in muted hues of blue and turquoise. He looked for all the world like a fay lost in the terrene realm. But he was of this earth, as far as any of them knew, as much a human animal as the rest of them. Yet the yearning for the otherworld ran deep within his soul, making him ready to clutch at straws, or to reach for the stars. And this was how he had heard Amalai’s tale. Lahoon tilted his head back, meeting Amalai’s dark eyes. His voice was raw, riddled with hope and longing. “This may be the time. Maybe, just maybe, this is my chance to touch fay.” He pushed a strand of ink-black hair from his brow. “I will go into the forest tonight. I will call for the fay. For the shadow. For whoever may be there, if anyone.”

His eyes were out on the horizon, where the black mass of the forest lay beneath a starry sky. “I have called so often. Prayed and waited, beckoned and lured. The fay are there, I am sure. But I don’t know who they are. Demons, fairies, unicorns? Angels and spirits? Beings beyond name or conception?” Lahoon’s words turned to a whisper, carried away

by the wind. "They have never revealed themselves to me. But maybe tonight, they will."

Lahoon rested his brow against Amalai's dark curls. "I need to go alone. You will not fear for me, will you?"

"No."

An owl hooted in the distance.

Amalai shifted a little. "Yes," she amended. Her fingers closed around Lahoon's hand. "You are going into danger. But what else could you do?"

The plants of the terrace rustled beside her, in the language of leaves. Amalai leaned into their comfort. "I trust you will know how to call to that shadow in the forest. That your love for the fay will guide you well."

*

The night forest closed around Lahoon like a sea, drawing him into its depths. No moon was in the sky, and gloomy shapes of fern and leaf shuffled between the black outlines of trunks. There was movement all around, stirrings of wings and feet and branches, shiny eyes and twitching nostrils.

A magical lantern swayed in Lahoon's hand, casting a circle of muted gold onto the forest floor. It allowed Lahoon to see as far as his next step. But, by contrast, it made him visible for miles around, a single glowing light in an ocean of darkness. All beings of the forest would know where he was. No hiding in the shadows for him.

However, maybe that was just as well.

Lahoon was a seeker. But one who mostly relied on being found. All of his nature was to be an invitation, an enticement, an overture. He wanted to meet, and his way to do it was not to pursue, but to beckon, to charm, to offer.

So Lahoon sent his borrowed light out into the darkness without regrets. He even wanted to do more.

Lahoon listened. The voices of the night were cooing and rustling, croaking and chirping all around him. Monkeys moved in the branches overhead. Twigs cracked beneath his feet.

Lahoon felt his way into the polyphonous symphony of the forest. And let his own sounds chime in. Humming and clucking, whistling a low, hesitant question, Lahoon moved on, letting himself be guided by the thick intensity of life and by his own quivering intuition.

It led him straight to the fallen tree.

The massive trunk lay across the edge of a clearing, in a scene of devastation and disarray. Grass was trampled all around, among traces of

branches torn off, of loads pulled across the ground, of past commotion and agitation. They all lay silent now in the black of the night. Only the muted glow of Lahoon's lantern spilled light over the body of a mighty tree that had died here tonight, taking the life of a boy with him.

Lahoon sank to his knees, touching his brow to the gnarled bark.

For a long time he remained motionless, feeling his breath leave his body, mingling in with the smells of wood and sap and moist forest soil. The breeze whispered in the wilting leaves around his head.

Slowly, cautiously, Lahoon began to respond, to join in with his own rasping breath, with the sounds his own wind made as it moved through his human body, through the leaves and cords in his throat. A gentle hum vibrated out from Lahoon, soft and low, turning into a plainsong, a lament.

A mourning and a call, tuning into the mystery of death and the shadow of fay looming above it. Lahoon's voice broke from his chest without his own doing now, a calling, a quest in the realm of ether.

The pain over death mingled with his endless yearning for a life he could feel but never touch.

Lahoon did not know if he spoke in words, or only in the shape of his melodies, the tone of his voice, the swaying of his body. But he knew he spoke. And he felt the presence, sensed the fay he could not see.

"Who are you? What is this?"

Tendrils of death were still swirling over the scene. Lahoon could feel them. He leaned into their remains as he continued, singing to the fay in low, tentative tunes. "You came here at a moment of death." The leaves trembled. "Who are you? Why did you come?"

Lahoon's voice was raw. "Did you kill?"

His fingers caressed the rough bark. Looking for an answer, or a better question.

"Do you accompany the dying? Soothe the pain, guide the soul?"

Lahoon's finger caught on a cleft the ax had left.

"Or is death the only moment you can cross between the worlds? Is that chink, that little fracture in the fabric of being, the portal you pass through?"

Lahoon's vision shifted.

He felt the world around him grow denser, fuller, as if layers of reality he never knew existed had made themselves available to him.

The forest was full of death. Lahoon knew that now.

In the glow of the lantern, at the edges of the night, a beetle was eating a leaf. Lahoon could see the leaf dying, transforming into beetle.

Its delicate green cells dissolved, their complex structure evaporated. But all of the life force remained, rearranging itself, turning itself into cells of a beetle, into dark eyes, into transparent wings hidden beneath a carapace. The beetle sniffed the air with delicate antennae and took off into the night, vim from a leaf flowing through its shiny body, tiny muscles knowing how to rise and fly.

A golden dot drifted out of the lantern's light.

And turned into a bat. The beetle cracked between small sharp teeth. Death tore another sharp, painful rupture into the fabric of life, like a scream, a searing flash. And then the beetle cells dissolved. They stopped being beetle, and became bat. They turned into a beating of leathery wings, into the sensitivity within the ears of a mysterious being calling itself through a tangle of leaves, a flurry of life. The energy flowed on, the life force pulsing as strongly as ever, a wellspring of motion, of unfolding, of desire.

Lahoon felt the bat leave in its jerky, angular flight and had a sudden vision of its death. The small, furry body lay on the ground, sprawled, still. It became home to the beginnings of beetles, and to a microcosmos of beings so unfathomable Lahoon lacked the words to name them. The bat's body was the space of a universe, a whole teeming, alien world, until that world had used itself up and died, falling in on itself, turning into soil, into the origin of trees.

Lahoon licked his lips.

He could sense the passing that was in the forest at all times. The death, and the transformation. There were millions of rips in the tissue of reality. Moments of instability, places where the unimaginable was happening, where shapes shifted, where life force passed from one to the other.

If death was the portal that allowed the fay to cross from one realm to another, there must be myriad ways to come over.

"Or is it a human death that you need?" Lahoon whispered. "Those of you who cannot squeeze through the chink of a beetle?"

Lahoon shivered.

Was he ready to die? To be eaten, to have his body and his life force transformed into a fay?

"No," Lahoon whispered. "No. Not yet. I am not ready to dissolve, not even if it means melting into you. I wish to meet you first, as who I am now. I want to have this very body to feel you touch me. This very soul to know you with."

All around him, Lahoon could see death, could see the cracks in the essence of the world. They shimmered like ghostly fireflies, like spiderwebs of moonshine.

With the gentle touch of a druid, Lahoon reached into that light, into that darkness. It came up his hands like a gossamer veil, an ethereal fabric.

When Lahoon began to lift his arms, thick folds of starlight gathered above his fingers, full round pleats of invisible velvet. Silvery shimmer came together like a lintel, like the edge of a blanket Lahoon had lifted, leaving a gaping hole of blackness underneath. A cave, a passage. Just large enough for a human to crawl through.

"Come," Lahoon whispered into the tunnel. "Come."

There was no movement. No sound.

No living being Lahoon could ascertain.

He sang softly into the darkness, a ballad of welcome, of hope, of invitation. Of longing, of love.

The sounds disappeared. There was no echo.

Lahoon's soul cried out with yearning and need. His body was shaking.

With a sleepwalker's certainty, Lahoon raised the folds of starlight in his hands and, ducking in underneath, fell into oblivion.

2

Clauded in gilded armor, Rebonya stood perfectly still beside Hun's body, a guard of honor. Night fell in through the window. The last streaks of crimson had deserted the sky long ago.

Hun was laid out in state. The shallow case around the body was big as a bed, covered by a huge flag, with only his head showing.

Rebonya glanced down at Hun's face from the corner of her eye. Her fist clenched.

But then the sign came.

In perfect synchrony with her line, Rebonya lifted Hun's coffin and carried it inside.

The vaulted ceiling of the great hall arched above them, high as a temple. The floor was filled with formations of soldiers. Some had taken up position on the wide stairs, some on the hallway balconies one or two stories up. They were all standing to attention. Hundreds of eyes watched as the case was set down on a mighty table in the middle of the hall.

Hun, still as beautiful as a marble statue, looked like the epitome of an ancient prince, a hero on his tomb.

Berqar had paused dramatically in her speech.

Now she took up again, her voice low, but even her whisper could be heard in the utter silence of the hall. "An unimaginable peril is towering over us, over the gentle, vulnerable town of Behrlem."

The fiery glint of torches caught on armor. Berqar's voice grew stronger. "Hun was the first to have been taken. By an enemy such as we have never seen before. An evil, a menace! Full of bloodlust, devoid of mercy."

She let her gaze roam out over the assembled soldiers, calling out loud and clear now. "A force of darkness has torn away our comrade's life. May his sacrifice not have been in vain! Let his death be our wake-up call, our rallying cry!" She tore the cloth off Hun's bier.

Hun was naked, his body mangled and covered in blood.

A gasp went through the hall, an indrawn breath in a hundred throats, a missed beat in a hundred hearts.

"This is the demon's work!" Berqar's voice thundered through the hall. "This is what you will look like if you don't fight! But I say: No! We will not end up like this! We are strong! And we are at war!"

The pulse in the soldiers' veins resumed. And quickened.

"War! War!" Berqar bellowed into the vastness between ancient walls.

Slowly, the soldiers began to join in, as they were meant to, picking up Berqar's shouts, giving them force and volume until the whole hall was resonating with the fervor of their cries, the echo stirring up ghosts in in the dungeons.

"War!! War!! War!!"

* * *

Lahoon woke. His head ached. Dreams and shadows were dancing across the back of his eyes, the depths of his mind. He groaned.

And was answered by myriad voices. Chirping and singing and rustling.

Lahoon opened one eye. A monkey hopped down to the ground before him and disappeared up the next trunk. The warm light of morning was dancing through the treetops.

With difficulty, Lahoon pushed himself up on one elbow. His body was stiff, sore. But Lahoon had no doubt. Despite all the images in his mind, all the marks of travel on his weary body. He knew he had woken up in the same old forest. In the world he had always lived in, firmly and securely rooted in the terrene realm.

He was not in fay. And all he remembered of the night was his own seeking, his own endless yearning.

*

Exhausted, Lahoon leaned back against the wall of their home, looking out over the rooftop terrace. The first rays of sun were reaching the neighboring bath palace, making all colors come out soft and warm. The deep golden yolk of the walls, interspersed with dark oleander green on doors and windows. The soft muted red of tile roofs proudly tilting upward at the corners. The luscious verdancy of the gardens.

Lahoon placed a kiss on Amalai's dark curls, followed by a sigh. "It was powerful. It was magical. But it wasn't fay."

He rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes. "Unless I have forgotten. Lost consciousness." Lahoon's voice drifted on, seeking its way through the uncertainty of wind and air. "Or unless the meaning of fay is precisely this. All these wonders I do remember. Perhaps fay truly is nothing other than the magic of the terrene, as you keep saying."

Amalai softly shook her head. "I keep saying that only for myself. For

me, every herb is a miracle. And a person, a living being. I don't need to see a little fairy sitting inside the flower to relate, or to be amazed. I am awed already. By who the plants are, as themselves. I will never tire of the mysteries of this earth."

She turned toward Lahoon. "But I fully believe in your path, too, as I always have. If you feel the fay so strongly, I am sure that they do exist. And that you will meet them one of these days."

She kissed his shoulder.

Lahoon pulled her close, a pained look in his eyes. "One of these days."

A flock of birds rose and circled upward, higher and higher still, aiming for the clouds, for the distant forest, for the mountains beyond.

Lahoon sighed. "However, last night, as all the times before, I have not seen. Not touched. Not met."

Lahoon ran a worried hand through his hair. "I felt close. So close. But no."

Amalai shifted slightly. "Well. Maybe there never was a fay in this. No demon, either. That cadet's neck did bear marks as if from a bite. However, he bore other marks, too. Much more serious ones. He had a tree fall onto him. That seems very likely for a logging accident. Very unlikely for a hunting method of some otherworldly being."

Lahoon caressed the round terra-cotta pot beside him and let the plant play with his fingers. The dead, dried-up body of a blossom fell to the ground.

Lahoon's hand tightened into a fist. "That boy died. He truly died. While felling a tree under perilous conditions, because those were his orders. His 'corrections'." Lahoon swallowed. "They risked his life like that in the garrison. Dealing out danger, disciplining people." His lips were pale. "Really. What kind of a place is that?"

Lahoon pushed himself up in an impatient move, pulling Amalai along with him onto the narrow balcony running around their roof. He stopped where they could best see over the garrison wall into the courtyards. They were full of soldiers, standing in straight lines and neat squares in the early light of dawn, drawing and sheathing their swords in response to shouted commands.

Lahoon gritted his teeth. "Here. This is where the actual danger lies. With our neighbor. An institution ready to use violence. Against people!" Lahoon's fist clenched. "Honestly. What is this? Or: When is this? In the time before the Transition?"

He let his breath out with a hiss. "It sometimes seems to me like that. As if the garrison, filled with fear and aggression, were some little marble

of ice, frozen in time, where the world of decades and centuries past has been preserved. Where the same play is being re-enacted again and again. Where every time you shake the crystal ball, the snow begins to fall and the little soldiers move, all in the same moves, all at the same time, caught in some hopeless and endless repetition of servitude and brutality.”

Lahoon fell silent. He let go of the balustrade and leaned back against the wall of the house. His eyes grew a little unfocused as they wandered out into a place far beyond the castle towers. Lahoon raised the flute around his neck to his lips and let out a plaintive song, a mourning. A lament coming from a harsh gray world, a place of endless hurt, of people caught in a cycle of cruelty without hope and without exit. He played on, letting the notes fall into the air, blow away with the wind.

Then he stopped. He kicked against the post of the balustrade. “It is not true! There is a way out. There has been an exit, and we have gone through. We are out! Aren’t we? The Transition has taken place! How come there still are these remnants of old spirit? And of old practice.” He gestured angrily. “What is this? Why haven’t we gotten rid of this yet?”

Amalai shrugged woefully. “Because the Transition was not done in a day? Even though it had a few very dramatic days in the middle, I admit, where it all seemed to happen very fast. But in truth, the movement had built up over decades, if not centuries, gathering momentum. At least that is how I believe it has won, and is winning still. By perseverance more than drama. And you can see that slow, steady, inexorable change right there.”

Amalai made a sweeping gesture toward the castle’s west wing. It was standing empty. So were many of the stables and the auxiliary buildings. They all lay still, lifeless, with their doors barred and their windows dull, no sign or sound emanating from them. Useless and forgotten, they yawned over at the spectators, reminders of ages past, when the number of soldiers in Behrlem had been many times that of today and all courtyards full of shouting and commotion. When Diamondtip had been one of the biggest garrisons in Yurvania, dominating the whole south.

Lahoon grunted. “I know. The garrison will be closed, like so many others. And the cadets still here can’t even fill the rooms of the school any more. It is all dwindling away.” He clenched his teeth. “Slowly.”

Amalai sighed. “Yes. Slowly.” Her finger traced a firm line along the length of the banister. “But for now, while the soldiers still exist, at least they have no power, no presence in town. You and I and all citizens are living in the spirit of our new society, in freedom and equality. With decisions taken by the community, not orders given by overlords. With

no one kept in poverty. Behrlem is free. The remnants of trouble, as they are, are banished to inside the garrison.”

Lahoon looked at the stark, warlike castle and was suddenly seized by nausea. He felt the trouble coming out of the garrison like a thick black liquid, leaking out under the doorways, running down from the windows, rising up like a cloud of soot above the towers and drifting toward him, drowning him and the whole town in its poisonous embrace. Lahoon’s hand cramped around the banister, his head reeling with premonition.

“Are you all right?” Amalai’s concerned voice penetrated the haze. Slowly, the clouds dissolved. The world came back into focus. Lahoon was wheezing. He straightened up slowly.

“Yes,” he rasped. “Yes. I guess so.” He took a deep breath, leaning back against the wall of the house. “It is just . . . that this place makes me sick. Apparently.” He turned around wearily. “Let’s go.”

Lahoon wrapped an arm around Amalai and walked her back along the balcony, taking his time to look down into the lush green of Amalai’s herbary, and then over at the wide, open meadows and flower beds of the bath gardens.

3

Rebonya sank down onto her mat with a huff. They had started exercising before dawn. Everyone. And would soon be back at it.

‘Now that we are at war,’ Rebonya thought viciously, ‘I am sure we cannot overdo it. Allow people to get some sleep and they just might forget to clench their teeth for a while.’

At that moment, her only roommate made his entrance. The morning light played on his black skin as Gureev quietly closed the door behind him.

Rebonya watched him laconically. No one she had ever met had come anywhere near this perfection of poise and posture, had moved with such irrepressible grace, had been so incessantly dignified. It was quite annoying. And it came naturally to him, quite visibly. Gureev did not have to concentrate to move like that. No one possibly could, Rebonya thought. You would have to concentrate your head off to keep on doing that all the time. No, Gureev was used to it. He would probably have to concentrate to make an inelegant move every once in a while. Well, he might still get there, given time, Rebonya thought with a wicked grin.

Gureev cautiously laid down a heavy tome he had been holding to his chest.

Rebonya came up, curious. “What’s that?”

“Strategy and tactics. I am to read a chapter each week and hand in an essay summarizing my thoughts on it.”

Rebonya looked at him in surprise. “To whom?”

“To Berqar. She will discuss them with me.”

Rebonya let out a low whistle. “Berqar is giving you private lessons. On strategy.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, why be surprised? It was to be expected, really.” Rebonya’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Gureev. “She knows of your family. Ever since you came to Diamondtip a few moons ago, she has considered you a prince. Her prince. The one who should be her ruler. And mine, too. But I can tell you right now that is not going to happen! Not ever!”

Gureev raised an eyebrow. "Do you have to keep pointing that out every other week? In case I might forget?"

"Yes. I think I had better. Just to make sure," Rebonya scoffed.

She frowned at Gureev. "You may say it's not your fault Berqar gives you preferential treatment. But it is your fault if you don't even notice she does."

Gureev looked a little uncertain. He touched the binding of the voluminous book. "I get to do extra study on strategy because I need it. I am not good enough yet. And especially now that there is—" He checked himself. "Especially now."

Rebonya huffed. "Now that Hun has died from Berqar's reckless corrections, you mean. Now you need lessons in the strategies of armies. Very logical." She pursed her lips. "And you think the reason Berqar does not give me extra lessons is because I am already brilliant? As is everyone else in this school?"

Gureev said nothing.

Rebonya scoffed. "Huh. Never hope. She'll be using you in the end, just like everyone else. Like Hun." Her eyes narrowed. "Even in his death, Berqar still used Hun. But who will fall for that? Soldiers are not idiots, after all. Just people, under pressure in a brutal system. Many will nevertheless hold on to their minds, or find them again soon enough."

She raised her gaze, eyes sparkling. "Ever wondered why Hun's body looked the way it did? Why he had not been cleaned, dressed and straightened up, as is common when people get laid out?" Rebonya's fist clenched. "Hun was not naked in the forest. And where did all that blood even come from? Maybe Berqar had to sacrifice a rabbit for dramatic effect?"

"Enough!"

Gureev's voice was cutting, authoritative. He held her gaze. Then Gureev turned around and carefully picked up his book. He did not open it, though, just held it in his hand, with his back turned to Rebonya.

"You do not believe in anything," Gureev finally said, cold reprobation in his tone.

Rebonya stiffened.

Gureev turned around in slow, measured moves to face her. "Why are you here?" he asked, his voice aloof. "What are doing in this school? If you think you know it is all so very wrong?"

Rebonya snorted. "I'll be out as soon as I can, don't you worry. As soon as I get my seal, I'll be admitted to the Academy of Magical Arts in Varoonya. And that'll be it. Just a few more moons to go."

Gureev's eyebrow rose again. "Of course. So you said. But why did you come here in the first place? Why did you not stay with your family?"

Rebonya exploded. "Not everybody has parents who spoil and pamper you," she snarled. "Some people actually have to leave, no matter what." She shot Gureev a venomous look. "My parents were terrible, and all their friends weird. The whole atmosphere was just poisonous. And at age eleven, I managed to get myself out. 'The Diamondtip School of Cadets' sounded wonderful to me." Rebonya crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I was a child. I had no idea. And once I realized where I had landed, it was too late. I just had to survive in here while figuring out where to go next."

That was a bit more than she had intended to say. Rebonya cast a sideways glance at Gureev. "Anyway. I am here now, and so are you. With your family at least as far away as mine. And as much surrounded by tactful silence."

"There are reasons for the silence, in the case of my family." Gureev drew his head up a notch.

"Yes, and in the case of mine, too," Rebonya sneered.

"That is nothing like it." The verdict of a king could not have been delivered with more authority. "Nothing like it at all."

"Oh, no, not at all." Rebonya made a sweeping gesture with her arm. But her eyes held a certain gleam, and her hand ended up in a fist. "Your family were Feudals, and mine were just ordinary nasty. So except for the nastiness, no overlap. But then, maybe your people were never nasty to you, only to others," she added sardonically. "They may have spoiled all their nearest and dearest even after they had left Varoonya with their pockets full of jewels."

"When they were driven into exile, the only jewels the feudal families were able to take with them were the ones in their hearts," Gureev pronounced with dignity. "True diamonds," he added, at the exact same moment Rebonya said, "Hearts of stone."

Gureev did not grace her with another reply. Head held high, his face set in regal equanimity, he turned away to arrange the folded sheets on his rolled-up mat into even greater perfection.

Rebonya watched. This was so like him. Even to make his bed Gureev would go down on one knee rather than bend over. All so that he could keep his spine straight and look poised and dignified.

Rebonya shook her head and thumped down onto her own mat, thoroughly rumpling her sheets.

The buzzing and bustling of Behrlem had faded into the distance. The air was quiet out here, a strange quality of silence, devoid even of birdsong.

Berqar rode into the empty courtyard overgrown with weeds and thistles. Blackened walls rose all around, silent accusations, memorials of mourning. Remains of a fallen roof still moldered in a corner among ashes and charred beams. What had once been a lively homestead, teeming with ducks and goats and running children, was now a ghostly stillness, dead, abandoned.

Berqar dismounted.

She stood facing the one part of the building that, in its innermost chambers, still had not crumbled, and clapped her hands in a short, precise rhythm.

Then she remained motionless, her gaze fixed on the walls, her strained face betraying no other emotion.

Suddenly, an eerie wind began to blow out of the forsaken farmhouse. The whole courtyard blurred, shifting out of vision as if losing substance, as if all reality was transformed into a mirage of glimmering hot air.

Berqar did not move.

All around her, the universe stretched and twisted in wavering contortions of half-transparent images, writhing ghosts of a reality that once seemed solid. A thin, hungry wail wove into the wind, haunting this dream or nightmare of a world.

And then the waves parted. As the whine transformed into the beautiful sound of a flute, a path of perfect clarity opened before the charred wall, around the remains of a door. With an aura of purest power and solemnity, a mage in dark flowing robes stepped out into the open.

Berqar bowed down low, in the courtly posture of a reverent liege.

*

Pramus strode across his antechamber, the burnt remains of the homestead's hall, his long, gnarled staff in his hand. "This is our quest indeed! Never has a moment called to us more strongly in all these years. The demon realm itself is reaching out." His voice was firm, with only the slightest tremor betraying his excitement.

Berqar stood by the gaping window, her hand lightly resting on the charred remains of an old pitchfork. The handle was all black. But the pikes were still long and sharp.

"Will you go to the forest?"

"No. The demon is not there. It will reappear elsewhere. And when it does, I will become its master! Enslave it, make it my servant, bound to true power! I will summon and banish the fiend at my will. And the world will cower in fear and awe, as it has done for centuries."

Pramus ran a hand down his long gray beard. "This is a door opening. We have been patient for so long, biding our time. How much of my life have I spent traveling, seeking out all those loyal to the Restitution! Weaving the ties, tying the knots, feeding the covens. So that one day, when the time has come, we will be ready! When the Restitution holds sway, mages will walk alongside princes once again, and generals in golden armor, in all their glory! People will bow down low in reverence, as they should. With the force of staff and sword unleashed, power will once again lie where it belongs!"

Pramus had talked himself into elation. He turned with a flourish, sending the embroidered beasts on his robes shivering. "It is lucky I am in Behrlem. We have to be quick. Feed the flame, move like lightning."

Dark eyes glowed at Berqar from beneath a broad-brimmed wizard's hat. "My servant will be ready tonight. If only you create the opportunity." "But do we even know where?"

Pramus waved it away. "It's a habit. We can take that chance."

* * *

"I can do it with you." Gureev's hand came up in an elegant overture.

Kortid shot him a grateful look. "Thank you." He took a step into the corridor. "It is not that much. It's just . . ."

Gureev nodded. "I know."

Kortid turned and led the way up to the chamber. He paused with his hand on the handle. Then he tore the door open.

Gureev stepped inside.

Hun's things lay about haphazardly, mingling in with Kortid's, as if in the middle of a day, of a life. As if Hun had just gone out for a minute, quickly, without making his bed or closing his books, only calling back over his shoulder to his roommate. The crumpled sheet still showed where Hun had lain. The comb beside it still waited to run through his hair.

Kortid stood on the threshold, his arms tightly locked around his chest.

Gureev went down on one knee, gently picking up the comb.

He ran a finger over it. Then he laid it down in the packing bag Kortid came to hold out for him.

* * *

"You are early." The innkeeper scratched his head, looking at the five soldiers. "Garrison note said extra meat's being ordered, they running short in their kitchen. But it was not supposed to be ready until later."

He wagged his head. "Can't take it off the spit now. Would be a shame." He gestured toward an empty table. "But never mind. Just you sit down here for a little while, and it'll be done before you know it."

The soldiers stood by the counter, their faces grim, their bodies tense. A cold cloud drifted off their group, slowly reaching the tables where farmers and craftspeople had been talking and bantering, playing cards or enjoying a quiet dinner.

The atmosphere changed. The baker cast a furtive glance at the uniforms. A farmlad cleared his throat and shuffled on his seat. Nevertheless, the mood might have swung back to humdrum ease very quickly had it not been for Tenatetlan, a peddler woman who began to draw the soldiers into a conversation. Asking them questions. Had there not been a death in the forest?

Kortid was there. He had not recovered ever since he had found Hun's body in the dusky woods. Every time the matter came up, he either walked away or talked himself into a fervor. As he was doing now, his face flushed with vehemence.

"I am telling you! I saw it! That was a demon that got him!"

The disbelief of the peddler spurred him on. The woman drew in guests from other tables, appealing to them for their opinion and judgment. Kortid was burning with intensity, the claims of his tale stampeding on with fury and ferocity, drawing all his comrades along in support.

Tenatetlan began to waver. After her initial skepticism she swayed and got drawn into the fear and alarm that Kortid radiated. She became oil to the soldiers' fire. Now they were all raving. About the nature of the demon. The bloodlust. The danger that they may all be in, each and every one of them, any day. No telling who's next. No moment was safe. Any corner might be a death trap now, at any time. This very moment. When you leave this inn, when you go home. The shadow might pounce on you from behind, sucking your blood dry. Where was their protection?

The air at the inn was seething.

Ojorsven, the town scribe, who had been hoping for a calm convivial evening in his favorite tavern, shifted uncomfortably.

The sun had set, leaving the summer air soft and warm, full of memories and promises. Amalai stood on the roof terrace of her home, leaning back against the wall, sipping a glass of dark, aromatic juice.

In the neighboring bath gardens, magical lanterns of all colors hung up high on lines between swing seats and blooming bushes, their reflections floating gaily on the waters. They filled the wide, generous grounds with a pattern of gentle glows, like flowers opening at the invitation of the night. People idled between them in the pools, sending ripples of splashing waves over the edges, or strolled around the winding pleasure walks.

Amalai listened to the low hum of contentment, human murmurs mingling in with the song of devoted birds after sundown, with the rustling of leaves and petals in the wind. Then a soft thread of music began to weave into the mellow air. A smile came to Amalai's lips.

That was Lahoon. It was his concert tonight at the gazebo, and the sweetness of his melodies reached straight for Amalai's heart. She had heard this so often. In endless practice sessions, going over the same sequences again and again. Yet, once more. Once more she was entranced, enchanted by the yearning, the sense of wonder that Lahoon managed to weave into his music.

Amalai leaned her head back against the wall and let herself drift away, carried along by the river of harmonies flowing through the air, companion to the magic of colors and scented blossoms.

Then she froze. Surprised, she squinted down into the obscurity of her own garden. Something had moved there. Someone? She took a careful step forward, toward the balustrade. She leaned over. And she saw. No doubt. There was someone in her herbary, a black shadow ducking behind bushes, hiding from the light. A fast, noiseless, inscrutable presence. Darting forward, quickly, furtively. Rushing from darkness to darkness, cover to cover. Disappearing into the night.

Amalai kept on looking, searching. But she saw no more.

* * *

The courtyard lay dark, still, empty. Gureev walked past the stables to the forsaken west wing and sat down on a cornerstone. Long shadows fell from the walls of the garrison, stern, black, implacable in the dying light. A torch was lit somewhere far away beneath the portcullis of the main gate, and the walls of the castle drew together around it, a massive hulking bastion of night.

Gureev still felt the memory of Kortid's shaking shoulders against his arm, where he had held him out by the bridge. Saw the wild, panicked eyes.

Gureev bit his lip.

Visions from his childhood rose in his mind.

A dark, secret library, full of polished wood and dusty tomes. A ray of sun falling in through a skylight, pointing a golden finger at the greatest treasure of all: a heavy volume with gilt edges and large, embellished letters at the beginning of each tale.

Gureev's small hand reverently turned a page. To see the knight in shining armor ride out at him from a hand-colored painting, his head held high, his heart kept pure. Slaying dragons and protecting the innocent, the essence of a hero, a true prince.

Gureev had learned the story by heart. The way the book told it, and the way his grandfather told it by the fireside. It had sunk into his dreams, into the core of his being.

And yet. Somehow . . .

Against the dark silhouette of the castle, Gureev could see the image gleaming like a mirage. The rider came toward him, the white steed stepping proudly across the courtyard. But suddenly the mare reared up in fright, nostrils flaring, eyes torn wide. In the dust between her hooves lay Hun's dead body.

4

In the pale light of morning, the silhouettes of two fighters charged forward. Their bodies locked, drew apart, met again, their moves deft and forceful, their swords flashing, clanking. In restless pursuit of each other, they lunged and danced, thrust and withdrew, in a vigorous, driven encounter that knew no other purpose. Sweat ran down their chests as they crouched, muscles tensed, bodies poised, ready to plunge.

Then one sword fell to the ground. A shallow cloud of dust enveloped it as it hit the sand. One fighter's arm came up in a gesture of surrender, of protection, of persuasion.

"Enough already," Gureev panted. He leaned against the wall of the courtyard. A cool, scented breeze from the forest touched his sweaty skin. Gureev shook his head lightly as he regarded Kortid. "Give us a break. We'll still be exercising all day."

Kortid was just as winded. But nowhere ready to quit. "We need to prepare," he hissed out with the bit of breath left to him. "We need to be the best fighters we possibly can. With all our strength, all our skill, all our mettle. And when the demon comes, when the enemy rises, we will give it all we have." Kortid bit his lip. "And hope that it will be enough," he spat out through clenched teeth.

He gripped his sword more tightly. There was a gleam in his eye that did not yield to exhaustion.

* * *

A golden sun caressed the county house with long, lazy fingers. It was a thick-set, friendly building, much as one might expect in a provincial capital such as Behrlem. Red wooden beams of a timber frame shone between tidy white plaster inlays, some of them decorated with lacy lacquered woodwork. A wide porch ran around the building, sheltered by a roof with tilting edges and broad eaves, giving a sense of both quiet pride and comforting homeyness to the place.

And usually, that worked. Ojorsven, in all the decades that he had been a scribe in the Behrlem county house together with Nenimoria, had felt

very much at home both in the house and his position. Despite all the rapid change the country as a whole was going through, Ojorsven's own life was a calm one, gentle and convivial. Full of old acquaintances, of farmers and craftspeople coming in with requests and suggestions, leaving well satisfied after a little chat and a helpful service.

But now . . . Things were disquieting, really.

Ojorsven wished that Nenimoria was here. To share thoughts and doubts with, to form an opinion. But his trusted colleague was on leave, with her family in the countryside.

Ojorsven sighed. He took off his high felt cap, looking at the ornate embroidery as he carefully set it down on a side table. His morning tea waved at him with thin steamy flags and soothingly familiar scents, and Ojorsven leaned back in his chair to take a sip. Nevertheless, he absentmindedly tapped his fingers on the desk as images from the night at the inn kept replaying in his head.

People were worried. Frightened and agitated. Was there a demon? Did demons exist? Ojorsven had always rather thought they did not. That's what they told you as a child, after all. That it had always just been inventions and illusions by old mages. The central office in Varoonya would certainly hear none of this, either. And yet. People were upset. And seemed to believe that he should be doing something about it? As the county scribe?

Ojorsven had no idea what, though. He heaved a heavy sigh. But anyway, he did not have to know. He was only the scribe. Implementing the wishes of the citizenry, not deciding or divining what those were. As soon as any concerned citizen had an actual idea for measures to be taken, they could put it up on the board outside and call for a vote. Or come to Ojorsven directly, if it was a smaller matter. And as long as no one had any suggestions to make, Ojorsven would let the matter rest.

Nodding to himself, ignoring the uneasy feeling that remained in his stomach, Ojorsven brushed over the surface of his desk with one hand, then pulled up some papers from a stack beside him. Some other business. Business he actually did know how to attend to.

At that moment, the door of the county house flew open and two people stormed in, stomping to a halt right before his desk.

"Scribe Ojorsven!" Berqar bellowed, as if she expected him to stand to attention. Ojorsven did indeed get up, disoriented and a little apprehensive. He ran a hand over the neat side parting on his head.

Berqar charged on like a general before an epic battle. "Behrlem is in danger! A ravenous monster is roaming at large, vicious and cruel! We

must defend the town! It is a matter of life or death!" Her eyes were flaming. "I know the county house has no means to fight such danger. But fear not! Diamondtip comes to your rescue! Soldiers will take up position right away. The town will not remain unprotected!"

Berqar slammed down a sheet of paper in front of Ojorsven. "This is a state of emergency. No time to call a vote. You need to give interim authorization for immediate action. Sign here!" Berqar's finger rested on the respective spot on the paper.

Ojorsven looked down. His eyes moved up to the top of the document as he began to read. But the letters danced before his eyes. His head was spinning.

"Hurry up, scribe!" Berqar barked at him. "We have not got all day. People's lives are at stake! So get a move on, unless you have a better plan at hand."

Ojorsven did not have a plan at hand and would not have known where to look. Or what to look for. Driven by the expectant pose of the woman before him, he took up the ink brush and let a hesitant hand waver over the paper. Then he signed.

* * *

The garrison castle rose up cold, unforgiving. Its stone was old as the mountains, but no longer wild, nor free. Hewn, and arranged to another's will. Subjugated. And subjugating, in turn. With a mug in his hand and misgivings in his heart, Lahoon looked down from his balcony into a courtyard full of people. People made uniform. Arranged in neat, tidy squares, they marched forward, turned, marched sideways, stopped. A shout cut through the air, telling them what to do next. They marched again. Shout, stop. Shout, turn. Like puppets ready to do whatever the string-puller commanded.

Lahoon shook himself. "Those soldiers. All the things they have done in service to the Feudals. 'Quelling peasant uprisings.' 'Subduing restive provinces.' Which just meant: bloodshed. Killing anyone who dared to say that maybe all humans are born equal, and no divine right puts one on top of the other." Lahoon's eyes held an ardent gleam.

Amalai crossed her arms over her chest and stared into the tower's shadow. "True," she said to Lahoon and to the darkness looming above them. "True. And still, in spite of it all, we have won. Change has taken hold in society, slowly but steadily. Irreversibly, in the end. And in defense of the soldiers' honor it has to be said that at long last, most of them did indeed desert."

Lahoon huffed unwillingly. "At long last. When the soldiers finally

decided they would not go on slaughtering people, even if someone called that an order.”

Amalai nodded and gave the threatening fortifications a defiantly triumphant smile. “They did walk away, turning their backs on violence. Becoming farmers and merchants, fathers and mothers, sons and lovers. Ordinary people, who had other things to do than to kill someone.”

The fortress looked back at Amalai with bland walls and a forbidding expression, making no response. But Amalai had not finished. She turned to Lahoon. “And indeed, it was the soldiers’ desertion that let the Transition reach its peak. After all, only when much of the army had disintegrated did the palace guard step in, siding with the delegates who announced to the king that the monarchy was abolished and that all Feudals were under arrest, awaiting exile.”

“How wonderful,” Lahoon commented. “The soldiers have been brutal and oppressive for ages, but eventually they stopped doing it. How good of them.”

Amalai held his gaze. “Yes. Exactly.” She leaned heavily onto the balustrade and let her eyes roam over the scene in front of her. There was a sky over the stern, grim castle. It was just as vast and blue as anywhere else. And there was the bright little stream that marked the end of garrison grounds. Beyond that, she could see the rich dark green of the forest.

Amalai half turned her head toward Lahoon, black curls blowing across her cheek. “Actually, it is not quite true. You can’t say that ‘the soldiers’ have been oppressive for ages. It was not the same soldiers. It was only the institution that has stayed the same for centuries. The people in it have changed.”

She let her gaze drift back toward the garrison, where a few soldiers were marching away from their formation. “Most of the people in the garrison today are too young to have served under the Feudals. They have never killed anyone.”

Lahoon followed her gaze and watched as the lone soldiers disappeared under the portcullis. “Yes. Many were even born after the Transition. But still, or even more so: Why did they join? Why did they go into an institution like that? The institution has indeed been oppressive for ages. It can be blamed. And it should be blamed. Blamed, and dismantled.” Lahoon slapped his hand down on the banister impatiently.

Then he froze, staring.

The garrison gate had opened.

The soldiers were marching out.

When Amalai and Lahoon burst into the Behrlem county house, they found that a friend of theirs was already there, and on the same mission. In fact, she had already gotten halfway through the conversation.

"There is no way you can authorize the soldiers to march into town like that," Unleha scoffed at Ojorsven. "Hunting down some imaginary demon. Really!" Unleha radiated disapproval like a steaming dragon.

Ojorsven cleared his throat. "People were quite worried," he said somewhat defensively. "Upset. There was a real frenzy last night at the tavern, I am telling you. So something had to be done quickly."

Unleha shook her head angrily, her numerous short braids flying. "I don't know what happened last night at the tavern. Or why there was a frenzy. But I can tell you that the town as a whole is not shaking with fear. Nor are we all beset by beliefs in demons and ghosts. Lay off it!"

Unleha pointed a finger at Ojorsven. "A youth got killed in the garrison when he was put into danger as a sort of punishment. That's worth an inquiry! Even in their internal dealings, the garrison should be held to some basic standards, should not be allowed to subject people to violence of that scale. So here is something for the county to do: Increase control over the garrison! Have a scrutiny! But don't let the soldiers come out of the garrison and into town! That is exactly the wrong way around. There is no way we are going to tolerate this!" Sparks gleamed in her dark brown eyes.

Ojorsven drew himself up high, looking very dignified in his blue caftan and silvery dhoti. "There will be a vote, of course," he pointed out, his voice official. "Within one moon, as is stipulated. We put the placard up directly. What I have signed is only an interim authorization. To cover the period between now and when a vote has been taken. So." He twirled his impressive black mustache. "No need to get all worked up. There will be a vote, and if general opinion is as you say, no doubt the interim measures will be put to an end soon enough. Before the moon is new again."

*

"It's outrageous!"

They were walking down a quiet, peaceful lane, and gentle sunshine bathed Unleha's black face in mellow hues and a soft warmth. But none of that calmed her down in the least. With well-aimed force, she kicked at a pebble and sent it flying off the road in a high arc.

Then she glimpsed the soldier standing guard at the next corner. Now that was all she needed! She charged straight at him. "Buzz off!" she shouted into his face. "You are not welcome and have no business in this

town! Be gone! You're the evil spirit here, the one and only! And we'll have you out before you know it!"

The soldier was young. A cadet, probably, no more than sixteen. He stiffened, eyes narrowed, his hand instinctively moving toward his sword. But at that moment, another soldier stepped out of the doorway, his face open and searching, looking from one to the other.

"What?" he asked.

Amalai laid a hand on Unleha's arm. "Leave him be. Don't take it out on the individual person."

"Why not? It's his fault, too! He does not need to be a soldier. He chose to go into that system, offering to take orders. He should know what we think of it. And he should know he's personally responsible for his actions." But Unleha allowed herself to be pulled along, just shooting a venomous glance back at the uniformed pair.

"All true," Amalai sighed. "It is indeed unbelievable. And it should never have come this far. But there is no doubt where it will go next." She flicked her hand in the obvious direction. "Out." Her black curls bounced with the decided shake of her head. "No one wants to return to the feudal ages."

"Someone wants to return to the feudal ages," Lahoon said darkly.

Unleha glowered. "Yes. And her name is Berqar. I am sure in her dreams she is galloping over people's corpses and calls that glory."

Amalai snorted. "Come, now." But she had to concede. "I admit Berqar may be a Restitutionist at heart. And it is all very worrying. She is still head of Diamondtip, and she shouldn't be, and the whole garrison shouldn't exist at all."

She tapped her fingers against her thigh. "It was a coup. An attempt to overthrow the current rules in one swift move. And Berqar has succeeded. In that. But she doesn't stand a chance overall. Society is a long-term thing. You can't change it with just one single act. And Berqar will never be able to hold out for long."

Amalai's eyes narrowed. "The Transition is strong. And we will prove that right here and now. And make sure that when the moon is new again, the soldiers will be voted out of town."

* * *

Berqar was down on one knee before the mage, amidst a cloud of thunderous darkness. Blood-red lightning flickered around her, outlining her body as she held her head up high, her sword upright before her, the epitome of the eternal warrior.

Berqar remained poised, motionless, while the rumbling died down and the colors changed. With a turn of his staff, the mage beckoned her to rise.

Pramus's voice echoed through the vault. "You bring honor to your name. One first foray, and a sweeping victory!"

The torch let flickering flames lick up into the darkness.

Berqar's eyes caught their spark. "Soldiers have a presence in town. Like they have not had in ages." Her shoulders were straight. "We'll be on every street corner. Every day. People will get used to seeing soldiers on their doorstep, in uniform, and on duty. Making it their business to ensure everyone has come home safely. Asking questions about the neighbors. Concerned questions, of course. Followed by good advice, which may over time turn into small admonishments. And outright orders," Berqar concluded with barely veiled triumph.

She carried right on. "Some citizens will complain, resist. Get aggressive. There will be civil unrest in town. Needing a strong hand, to keep the peace." She tilted her chin up a notch. "I have declared war. Inside the garrison, where I can do so without fail. Now it will take time and skill to let that tremor ripple out into society."

Berqar still held the sword in her hand. "All the soldiers know the danger. Have seen the mangled body, the demon's legacy. They will pass on their alarm until the whole town takes it for granted that we are in a state of emergency. In exceptional danger, needing exceptional measures."

Pramus's dark eyes glinted at her. "Very good. But move carefully. Our first sally was victorious. Now we will lay siege. Appear to be doing nothing while in fact we are fortifying our positions, preparing the ground. Until the time is ripe for us to lunge again."

* * *

Amalai had pulled up a sun sail for midday. She stretched out languidly on the mats of the terrace, carefully avoiding the remnants of lentils and delicious rice balls beside her.

A satisfied sigh mingled into her speech. "We'll not let the soldiers rule our lives. Not even indirectly."

Lahoon's face was still clouded. Amalai interlaced her legs with his. "It is easy to get drawn into a warrior world just by constantly worrying about them, or figuring out how to fight them. We will vote them out, definitely. And in the meantime, we shall go on being ourselves. I will not sit here all tense and fearful, living in battle mode as they do. Life is still luscious and enjoyable to me, and I'll relish every single moment, best that I can. As I have been doing for years."

Lahoon reached for his lute, a few doubtful tones falling out. Voices from the neighboring bath gardens mingled in with birdsong and the familiar far-off noises of Behrlem, the rustlings of a country town, the sound of home.

They reassured him. More courageously, Lahoon began to play himself a path back into his own life.

Amalai listened, memories of night gardens and luminous colors coming back to her, of sweet melodies drifting over from Lahoon's concert.

And then she remembered.

"Lahoon." She turned to face him. "There was something in our garden last night. Someone. I saw it from the terrace. A shadow. A dark figure, hiding, running, darting from cover to cover. Disappearing into the night." Amalai moved a little. "What do you think that was? Who could possibly want to lurk in my herbary?"

Lahoon tilted his head, his hands busy with his lute. He let an explanatory ripple ring out. "Perhaps it was a couple from the bath. You know how people tend to withdraw into the last corners of the park to make love. So perhaps some of these lovers got lost and withdrew a little too far. And when they realized afterward that they had ended up in someone else's garden, they wanted to leave as unobtrusively as possible."

Amalai smiled, a little crookedly. "You think so? So I would have seen the last of the lost lovers leaving?"

Lahoon nodded, well satisfied with his own answer. And, perhaps inspired by that marvelous alliteration Amalai had just come up with, he turned his strumming more in the direction of a song.

*

That night, when the moon was new and the sky fraught with dark, scurrying clouds, a shadow moved through the herbary. Hiding, darting forward, hiding again. There was noise and agitation all around. The wind tore at the bushes in angry gusts, making leaves rustle and shutters rattle against window frames. Grasses bent down low to the ground, yielding to the onslaught. A thin shingle, torn loose from a barn roof, was hurtled along by the stormy wind, sent crashing against a fence, then torn off and driven on once more.

The shadow kept moving, inexorably, purposefully.

This time, no one saw. No one knew.

5

Lahoon woke. It was way before dawn. But he felt the call, the unspeakable pull at his soul. His heart was raw, open. He tried to go back to his dream. To the forest. To the portal. To the fay who had called to him from beyond, who had danced his magic, who had summoned flames of moonlight.

Lahoon stayed quiet for a while. Then he got up. Silently, careful not to wake Amalai, he slipped out of the room.

He found himself in the usual disarray of his studio. Cautiously, he made his way between the shadowy shapes of easels, between stacks of frames and paintings leaning against the wall. Lahoon sat down on the polished wooden floor, arranging the cushions before the low table. In the soft glow of a magical lantern, he pulled up a new sheet of paper and began to draw.

*

Soft stripes of rose and amber filled the sky with light, and Lahoon was able to add dashes of color to his sketch.

A creaking floorboard made him look up.

Amalai, a sarong around her waist, came up to him on quiet, naked feet. Lahoon smiled, leaning a tired head against her rounded hip.

Amalai buried a hand in his hair, looking down at the paper. "Dreams?" she asked sleepily.

Lahoon nodded. "Yes. Dreams." He heaved a sigh. "Or not dreams." He picked up his drawing and ran a finger along the lines. "It is a call," he whispered. "I feel it." His voice grew rough. "I know the fay realm exists. I just do. I don't know what it is. I don't know where it is. But it is where I belong."

Amalai pulled him close, cradling his head in her hand. He lay quiet against her body, feeling her breathe, feeling her belly rise and fall. Lahoon gently moved his cheek over her skin, in both question and comfort.

Then he looked up. "I cannot find the path on my own. I have tried, and I am trying still. But I need help. And I am running out of options."

Amalai let a strand of inky hair flow through her fingers. "Hmm. Yes. If Varoonya was no good."

Lahoon sneered. "It wasn't. I was excited to go to the capital. And 'the Academy of Magical Arts' for sure sounded promising. Like the right place. But. It wasn't."

He scoffed derisively. "At the academy, they would not notice a unicorn walking down their corridors, nor a wraith sitting on their lectern. They have no perception, no knowledge, no interest. No tolerance, either. They are firmly of the opinion that fay beings do not exist, and they have convinced the rest of society to agree with them. So that's it. Nothing else to be done about it. Not at the academy. They have dismissed the fay along with the old mages, saying it was only ever illusion, a despicable deception."

A deep sigh escaped from Lahoon's chest. He impatiently pushed away from Amalai and stood up. "I must find another way. I absolutely have to. I can feel the fay in my heart, but I don't know who they are, or how to reach them. I need help."

He ran a hand through his hair. "And I will try to get it wherever I can. Even if it seems dodgy, or unlikely, or dangerous. I just have to try."

Amalai took a step back. She crossed her arms over her chest, her brow furrowed. "That mage, you mean. Pramus."

Lahoon's hands held on to the frame of an easel, clutching it tightly. "Yes. Pramus."

The silence between them stretched, tense, uneasy.

Lahoon stared down at his fingers. "I know this is awkward. He is a mage. Such as history has seen throughout the ages, ruthless and imperious, walking alongside feudal rulers. Banishing demons at their behest, commanding fear and submission from the people. Until the Transition came to oust them all from power." He swallowed. "It is a grim heritage. Why would anyone still walk in that tradition today?"

Lahoon's knuckles were turning white as his grip on the easel tightened. "What kind of path would I take, asking to be apprenticed to him?"

He raised his head, his eyes wild. "But what if the mages truly can find demons? And if this is my only chance to come through. To touch at least one kind of fay."

Lahoon's voice was raw. "I know this is dangerous. And it may be very wrong. But as long as there is a slim chance that it may be right, or at least help me forward a sliver of a step, I do need to try."

Amalai grabbed hold of the easel as well, her hand right beside his, her knuckles just as white. "If there is a way to try, yes. Which I hope there will be. But as soon as he proposes to take you any place, inner or outer, where you cannot leave again on your own, I am begging you, please don't go!"

* * *

Berqar pulled a torch from a sconce and advanced deeper into the murky gloom of the castle's old armory. Swords glinted along the wall, neatly lined up, one beside the other, a long row of deadly teeth. But the beast was asleep. No jaws would snap shut just yet, no ravenous bite tear into enemy flesh.

Berqar let a finger trail over the cold steel. She could sense the strength, the unyielding power lying in wait. She turned. In the shadows of the back wall, two halberds crossed in mute salute, in warlike reverence. Beneath them, an antique painting showed muted glows of oil in a darkening frame. Berqar stepped up to it, raising her torch.

A windswept plain surrounded by mountains lay before her, the grass bending down low, the last leaves torn off withering trees. Dramatic clouds scurried across a thunderous sky, pierced by a setting sun. Its reddish glow reached down to the bodies of hundreds of unknown soldiers lying on the ground, their limbs distorted, their blood staining swords, soaking dirt.

In their midst, a glorious general let his steed rear up high. His cloak billowing in the storm, his eyes shining proudly, he held his saber in a determined grip, ready to rip open the sky if he must. An inaudible war cry was breaking from his throat, echoing through the scene of death and destruction around him, and down through the centuries until it reached Berqar.

Her spine straightened imperceptibly. Berqar held her head high, the gleam in her eye much, much deeper than a mere reflection of flaming torches.

* * *

Unleha was crouched among the ferns. Along the far side of the bath gardens, hidden among the greenery, a huge tube of copper lay in the grass like a giant old snake. Where it met the creek, it rose up in a tower of coils, its aged skin spotted gray with dust and lichen. Only a few patches of bare metal were still gleaming as gloriously as sunset.

A round dome hunched on the ground, squat and heavy, half buried among the bracken. Unleha was bent over it, listening in deep concentration to the low thumping sound coming from within, a drum that was deep, regular, unceasing, like a heartbeat. Magic was pumping the waters up into the spirals, just like it should. Unleha pulled out her wand. As an

artificer, she was the type of specialized magician capable of handling this traption and the countless others the bath used for all its needs and purposes, from heating the waters to illuminating the gardens.

Unleha carefully took the lid off the pumping traption before her.

The late evening light caught in a gossamer web spun out of glass, fine as a spider's threads, an intricate design connecting precisely marked points on the dome. In between, pure crystals glinted.

Unleha's palm came up open before the glassy miracle, offering a shiny dark amethyst. Her lips began to move, forming just one syllable, vowels round and full, ending in a grating lisp, the perfect pronunciation of an ancient rune. And at the touch of her wand, the stones danced. From the heart of the spidery labyrinth, a crystal floated out, a deep purple like the one in Unleha's palm.

The pipe gasped and spluttered, choking on water caught in midmotion, on swirls of upward and downward and chaotic roundabout flows in its insides. But the new stone had already drifted in among the arabesque crisscross, never touching, never disturbing any of the delicate threads. Neatly and naturally, it lodged itself into place.

The pipe gave one more drowning cough. Then, with a deep sigh, the pumping resumed. Unleha listened attentively to the steady rush, to the sound of magic underneath.

She touched her wand to the midst of the ethereal web, sunstone meeting dark amethyst, and let another incantation roll out over her tongue, arcane words of power and meaning. The stone heard. A spark flared up in its transparent heart, then ran swiftly and purposefully along the gossamer threads, lighting up crystals along its way. Each one glowed with its own color, with the force of a spell held deep within. Unleha leaned forward, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

"What are you doing there?"

Unleha whipped around. A girl with black hair and eager eyes was standing behind her. "Rebonya," Unleha sighed. "One of these days you'll give me a heart attack."

"Sorry," Rebonya said, not overly apologetic. She was already bending forward, leaning in toward the traption and its crystal heart. "Why did you replace that one? Is it the vim stone?"

Unleha pulled the purple treasure from her pocket. "There's hardly any vim left in this one. I'll take it back to be refilled."

Rebonya nodded. "And the spell at the end?"

"Was just to make sure it works all right. Wait, I'll show you again."

The evening air had turned soft and mellow, and the lights were almost completely faded from the sky, just leaving an inkling of deep blue over one side of the horizon and a last stroke of purple on a cloud.

Amalai was idling in the garden, saying good night to the plants that were still up, plucking a leaf here and there, breathing in the scents of the summer evening.

Then she froze. There it was again. A rustle, a secret motion. A shadow. A dark shape darting forward, swiftly and furtively, hiding between the bushes, flying on. Without thinking, Amalai stepped right into its path. Into a collision.

Violently stumbling backward, she grasped for a hold to keep from falling. Her fingers closed around firm human flesh. No ghostly shadow, no smoky demon dissolved under her touch.

Regaining her balance, she found herself staring into dark almond eyes.

“Um. Hello,” Amalai said.

The girl before her glared. Then she tore loose in one frantic move, causing a black mass to hit the ground with a thud. A book, Amalai saw. Like a hawk, the girl swooped down to pick it up. She had a somewhat panicked look on her face by now.

“Don’t tell,” she whispered, threat or plea or urgency in her voice. Then she turned and ran. In a swift, desperate flight she bounded across the garden and ducked into the shadows of the hedge. A few more crushing, rustling sounds, and she was gone.

Amalai looked after her. Then she followed slowly, in contemplative, uncertain steps, up to the spot where the girl had disappeared. Amalai ran her hand over the leaves of the hedge. She wavered. Then she slipped through. Finding herself just outside the garrison grounds, Amalai edged along the length of the bordering wall, squeezing into the narrow space behind the hedge. She felt the twigs scratching her shoulder on one side, the rough stone chafing against her probing hand on the other.

Until her fingers caught. Amalai bent down.

Right before her was a hole in the wall, low, uneven, small. Just large enough for one person to crawl through. And in its middle, crumpled into a messy ball, lay the loose cloak the girl had been wearing.

*

Rebonya was cursing under her breath. How could she have been so careless? How could she have missed that someone was in the garden? Now the herbalist had caught her. But she would not tell on her, surely? Or would she?

‘Perhaps I should have stayed and negotiated,’ Rebonya thought. ‘Explained and pleaded. She sighed. ‘Or maybe running away was the right thing to do. She won’t remember my face. Will she?’

Rebonya was moving stealthily along the far side of the garrison wall, as far as she could get while still under the cover of plants. At the edge of the kitchen gardens, she squinted out into the courtyard, very thoroughly this time, before strolling out into the open in the manner of someone who has just taken a little turn for the sake of fresh air.

As she entered her chamber, Gureev looked up from his book.

“You’ve been out,” he commented.

Rebonya hummed a brief reply and sank down onto her mat.

“You’ve been out a lot lately,” Gureev persisted.

Rebonya froze. Silence filled the room. Expectant silence.

‘Oh no,’ Rebonya prayed. ‘Oh no. Not Gureev, too.’

“Almost every moment you are not on duty, you seem to be out,” Gureev kept on going.

“I was in the courtyard,” Rebonya murmured.

Gureev waited. Then he said, “Yes, of course. In the courtyard. Where else would you have been? You are not allowed to leave the garrison, after all.”

The expectant silence was back in the air. Rebonya writhed inwardly. What now?

She turned around on her mat to face the room. And her roommate. “Exactly. I am not allowed to leave the garrison. So I would not do it, would I? And most of all, I would not let you know if I did, so as not to force you to go against your conscience by keeping my secrets. After all, you might feel honor bound to report me. For anything. Even for having a disrespectful look on my face.”

Gureev stood up rapidly. “In fact, I have not,” he said, his voice scathing. “I have not. As you might have noticed. You’ve had a disrespectful look on your face every single minute I have shared this room with you. Not to mention the things you’ve said. But I have not reported you. Nor have I remarked on your frequent absences to anyone.” His brow was furrowed in angry lines by now. “But maybe I should. Now that you mention it. It might be my duty. You could be a danger. A subversive element.”

Rebonya burst out laughing. “Thank you.” Her laugh was shaky, though, a bit like a cough or an attempt to catch breath. “I don’t think anyone has called me a subversive element to my face ever before. Much less a danger.” She sat up on her mat.

Then she even stood up and made a move toward Gureev, a small, hesitant one. "I am, alas, not involved in some secret plot to overthrow Diamondtip. All I do is get on with my life. The life that I truly wish to lead." She looked down at her feet, then raised her eyes to meet Gureev's. "I am preparing for the Academy of Magical Arts in Varoonya. I borrow books from an artificer who has studied there. I watch her work. Ask questions."

Rebonya dropped her gaze again. Her voice had become lower, softer. "So. I am not a danger to anyone."

Gureev assessed her with a glance. "I believe you," he ruled with a gracious nod. "I believe that you have been out studying. For the academy. And that this is where you wish your life to go." He paused. And arched an eyebrow. "I am glad you have something in your life that you find worthwhile. Something you believe in."

Rebonya kept her gaze fixed on the floor, making no reply.

Gureev went on in measured tones. "Being an artificer is useful. A good occupation. I respect your endeavors. And your fervor for study." He hesitated. "But it is still against the regulations. Soldiers, including cadets like us, are not allowed to leave the garrison on their own." Gureev drew himself up straight. "There are reasons why such rules exist. And why we are actually expected to follow them." He looked at Rebonya expectantly.

Rebonya ran a hand over her hair in a worried gesture. "Well," she muttered uncertainly. "Actually, that is one of the few rules that I do indeed agree with myself. In principle." She cleared her throat. "However, I was not strutting around town. I was not showing a soldiering presence anywhere. I went out discreetly, going directly to my studies, and straight back." Images of the meeting in the herbary came unbidden to her mind, and she cursed inwardly.

But she kept on talking. "Truly, I am no danger. I am in danger, much more likely. Of expulsion. Or of being ordered into correction, into some terrible, perilous kind of work. Like Hun." She crossed her arms over her chest in an anxious, agitated gesture.

Gureev had gone silent. He turned away.

Rebonya took another tiny step toward him. "Gureev. I will be more careful. I can see it was too risky this way." She unfurled her arms and clasped her hands in front of her. "But I do want to go on studying. I need to." She looked at Gureev, her eyes intense, pleading. "I do not know if this is enough for you. Truth, and a promise. Please tell me if it is. For even though I can't tell what exactly my punishment would be if I got discovered, I sincerely hope that it will just never happen."

She cleared her throat. "And in that sense, I will indeed be grateful if you do not report me."

Gureev gave her a long, appraising look, his head held high, his body poised. Then his posture eased. He inclined his head, a subtle, courtly move. But he did not utter a verdict this time. "Grateful, indeed?" he asked instead. "You will be grateful? That would be novel. Do you intend to even let it show?"

Rebonya scoffed. Then a rueful look stole onto her face, together with a tiny lop-sided smile. "Yes. I do. I intend to let it show. If you truly won't report me, I admit you deserve it." Her nascent grin grew a little more pronounced. "I am not in the habit yet, I am afraid. Showing gratitude is an untried challenge to me. But I will go at it valiantly. And should I succeed, I am sure it will be a valuable lesson for me, one of the most useful skills I may ever have acquired in my years as a cadet."

6

“Strategy and tactics.” Berqar was pacing up and down the officers’ room, lecturing. She paused beneath a large oil painting that had recently found its way to the far wall. A general beneath a crimson sky, astride on his rearing steed, blood and corpses at his feet.

Berqar turned around, a spring in her step.

Gureev had put his essay back down atop the heavy tome, his dark eyes earnest, his pose lithe and graceful as he was listening.

Berqar relished his full attention. The fire in her voice grew stronger. “Our battle is not only one of the body, but one of the mind. And of the heart, too.”

She proudly puffed out her chest. “For war to triumph in glory, it takes more than sheer force and brutality. The true believer, the right ruler needs to be cunning, scheming, just as much as any fiend.”

The charred remains of an old pitchfork leaned in the corner. Gureev vaguely wondered what they were doing there. But Berqar touched a hand to the iron pikes as if to a source of inspiration, her voice growing intense, in the way of someone driven by vision, or by nightmarish compulsion. “The enemy will not wait for you. Nor meet you with honesty and integrity. War is a dirty business. And you need to be prepared. Prepared to be sly. Ruthless. To do whatever it takes.”

* * *

Dawn rose in misty pastels, framing the stern dark towers of the garrison castle. Within the cadets’ chamber, Gureev was rolling up his mat conscientiously, never casting so much as a meaningful glance at the sloppy heap of a bed Rebonya was standing beside as she buttoned up her shirt.

But Rebonya had comments of her own and was not holding back. “The right ruler!” Gureev had given her a very limited account of last night’s lesson with Berqar. Nevertheless, Rebonya’s eyes were narrow, angry slits. “Do we have rulers? In this time and age?”

Gureev paused. Then he straightened up, turning away. "No." His ears were burning. "Of course not."

But he still attempted a rescue. "Berqar was speaking historically. Or metaphorically." Gureev cleared his throat, touching the worn binding of the tome. "Also, these are simply terms used in the book. Berqar was referring to that. It does not mean anything."

* * *

"Fare well in my absence." Lahoon placed a kiss on Amalai's dark hair. "And keep an eye on the soldiers."

"I will," Amalai promised. "Good travels to you." She tapped one of Lahoon's numerous crates. "May you return with empty trunks and full coffers," she added pompously, making it sound like a traditional benediction from some foreign realm.

Lahoon chuckled. "We will see." He pulled Amalai close. "Toan is a nice town. Much like Behrlem, really. Except that my presence there is rare, and people tend to give me much more attention whenever I do come. I am really looking forward to the concerts. And I will surely sell a painting or two. So even if I may not return rich, I will at least be well-fed and satisfied."

The cart driver arrived, and Lahoon hopped up onto the back, next to his trunks. A tone both tense and wistful stole into his voice. "And the temple library is calling me, too. Perhaps I will see something this time. A sign, a hint. Some breath of an idea of how to find my path into fay."

*

Amalai had to hurry. Precetlan and Naleewa were going up into the mountains today with the other shepherds and their flocks and had promised to take her along. Precetlan thought he had found deewelarque bushes in a remote little ravine, and of course Amalai wanted to see.

So it was with happy anticipation that Amalai rode her now-empty pedalcart straight to the livery stable and saddled a horse. She caught up with the shepherds just as they passed out of the dark, dense woods into the open highlands. The wind was fresh and enticing up here, and Amalai felt it ruffle her hair, like a constant loose caress in her curls. The air carried the smell of wildflowers, but also a sense of the far-off peaks, of snow and ice. Precetlan began to chat and banter easily, telling Amalai stories of mountains and loneliness, of sheep and companionship.

It was after midday when they parted from the flock, promising to catch up with the other shepherds in their camp at night. A long and winding path took the three riders around slopes and valleys until finally

Precetlan, with a proud inviting flourish, pointed them to a deep rift in the mountainside. "Right there!"

They left the horses by a copse of shrubbery and carefully approached the edge of the ravine. It was awash with scrawny, angular bushes full of dark leaves and long, thin needles of thorn. Amalai reached out to one that had managed to crawl over the edge and picked a berry, full and round, black as night. Amalai squeezed it, feeling the juice run over her fingers, sensing the rich, strong fragrance sting her nostrils. She jerked back her head. That was deewelarque. No doubt. Amalai turned around, her face beaming.

"This is wonderful!" She gave Precetlan an enthusiastic hug and Naleewa another.

"Deewelarque are poisonous, aren't they?" Naleewa asked.

"Yes, they are. You should certainly not eat these berries. But they can give enormous power to certain potions. If added wisely and competently." Amalai hesitated. "They can also cause wild, feverish dreams. Hallucinations. Or clairvoyance, some say."

Amalai looked down into the ravine. In between the bushes, bare rocks punctured a fall that led down into invisible depths. Yearningly, she let her gaze roam over the innumerable deewelarque in the cleft. "I would love to be able to reach those. I would love to."

"Well. There may be a way. From below." Precetlan pointed, craning his neck.

It took them a while to round the hill and descend as far down as the bottom of the ravine. But once there, they saw that, indeed, there was a way in.

Not a very easy one. They climbed over rocks and boulders, scratching their knees, squeezing through in between the thorny deewelarque that were now growing thickly all around them. They moved on, farther back into the ravine. Sheer cliffs rose up on both sides, and the shadow of the towering mountain plunged everything into gloomy twilight. They had gone quiet, as if taking care not to awaken the place.

A trail of soft, green grass appeared beneath Amalai's feet. Like a silky thread, it wound across the otherwise hard and stony ground. Amalai raised an eyebrow. And followed the path ever more deeply into the realm of shadows, beckoned on by a meandering lure of vivid life. Until she reached a sheer wall. At Amalai's feet, the grass spread out into an inviting carpet.

Cautiously, Amalai knelt down upon it. "A well," she whispered. She parted the long blades before the cliff and found crystal-clear water

bubbling out of the rock, running over her fingers with the cold freshness of glaciers. Amalai turned around to beam at her companions.

But she froze in horror.

A black cloud was drawing up behind Precetlan like a ghost.

Precetlan looked over his shoulder and jerked back.

The dark shape moved and turned out to be a thin little man in black clothes. His hair was black, too, and his skin pale as the moon. He stepped back a little, seeing the shocked faces, but said nothing.

Precetlan cleared his throat. "Um," he rasped, his voice shaky. "Good afternoon."

The little man inclined his head, somewhat shyly. After the first fright of his sudden appearance, he seemed almost strikingly inoffensive. "Good afternoon." His words came in low, gentle tones, like a tentative offer.

"What are you doing here?" Precetlan asked, not entirely logically.

"I live here." A cautious gesture, a half-raised hand. Between the deewelarque bushes on the side of the cliff, a little stone house stood pressed against the rock. It was half covered by greenery, and generally so much embedded in its environment that it was no wonder they had not noticed it before.

"And you?" The question drifted out toward them.

"We are just visiting," Precetlan said, and it sounded extremely odd even in his own ears.

But their host seemed to find nothing unusual with three people just visiting an almost inaccessible little ravine full of thorny bushes. "Visit, then," he said, with a quiet friendliness that made Precetlan relax instantly.

Precetlan let out a deep breath. There was something incredibly reassuring about this man, something inherently trustworthy.

The stranger turned his gaze to Naleewa. "Will you come in?"

And Naleewa unwound. She, too, began to smile and gently nodded her head, entirely at ease now. "My name is Naleewa," she offered, "and these are my friends Precetlan and Amalai."

"Verlem." His fragile body bowed in an almost imperceptible motion. "Will you follow me?" And his eyes shifted over to Amalai, getting lost in her gaze for one endless moment. Then he turned and began to walk toward the cabin.

Amalai's heart beat fast. She could feel her pulse racing through her whole body. She wanted to run. And to come close. She wanted to be with this man, and to be as far away from him as possible. She felt incredibly reassured by his presence, by his calm gaze, his quiet voice; and her whole body screamed panic. Amalai knew, if she followed Verlem in now,

followed him into his room, into his realm, she would fall for his charms and lose herself in his world completely. She was yearning for it. The longing tore at her heart. It tugged at her in a way that was agonizing, beautiful—and not altogether natural, her mind told her. The remnants of her mind. The last thin shreds of her mind that were capable of thinking such thoughts, those last ragged threads of consciousness were screaming at her. Then the tug at her heart came again. In a moment, she would have lost all ability to think at all, to know anything other than trust and loyalty toward this man, Verlem.

Amalai took a small step sideways. Naleewa and Precetlan were already walking up to the cabin in Verlem's wake. They reached it. Verlem opened the door and disappeared.

And Amalai ran. She scurried along the grass trail, stumbling but not falling, and on across the shrubbery. She scratched herself incessantly on the deewelarque but did not care. Her lungs were stinging, her breath ragged. She hurried on, somewhat blindly, and was almost surprised that she found the opening again, the way out. She climbed over the rocks, slipping, hurting her knee, but making it through.

Amalai came out onto the open grassland on the other side. She charged on, then threw herself behind a lone boulder. Her pulse was racing, her whole body throbbing with pain and exhaustion. A whirlwind was raging in her head, her heart. Amalai closed her eyes and leaned back to let the storm inside her blow out. She stayed as she was, sprawled on the ground, in complete exhaustion and disarray. For a long, timeless moment, she knew nothing else of the world.

Then she sat up with a jolt.

Naleewa and Precetlan. She had just left them there. Abandoned them to a situation that had aroused such a strong sense of danger in Amalai that she had run with all her might. If it was that perilous, how could she possibly have forsaken them? But there was nothing else she could have done. She had only had one last moment in which to run herself. If she had stayed an instant longer, come one step closer, she would have been lost completely.

What could she do? Amalai hugged her knees. Then she hugged the boulder, the solid, reassuring presence of ancient rock, and prayed for strength and guidance.

At least some strength came. Her heartbeat slowed down, and the vertigo subsided. With her brow still against the boulder but her eyes open, Amalai noticed a flicker of movement on the periphery of her vision. She drew back, looking harder. There was something between the

last deewelarque of the ravine. Right by the entrance, there was a shadow. A large animal. A human, Amalai saw. Climbing out. Two humans. Naleewa and Precetlan were coming toward her.

Amalai slumped onto the ground and exhaled.

*

Precetlan and Naleewa gave Amalai a concerned look. "Why did you go?"

"I didn't go," Amalai said. "I ran."

She tried to explain. And failed, mostly.

Precetlan could not see the point at all. "There was nothing scary about Verlem," he asserted. "Quite the opposite. I feel he inspires a sort of deep trust in you with his shy, quiet ways. We were just startled to find him there all of a sudden. But once you take a closer look at him, there is no reason to be worried at all."

"Yes," Amalai replied helplessly. "That is just what I mean. You take a closer look at him. He takes a closer look at you. The moment he looks at you, you begin to trust him. You begin to trust him so deeply, so unquestioningly, so implicitly, that there isn't anything else anymore. It is too much. It is more than is natural. It is as if Verlem has used magic on you. As if you have drunk a potion, one that makes you forget your doubts, or feel warm and safe no matter what. There are such potions, you know."

Precetlan wagged his head. "Well, yes. In a way. I suppose there are. But, anyway, Verlem did not feed us any potions, did he?"

"No, he didn't," Amalai admitted. "It would have to be some other kind of magic. One that he can work just through his presence. Through his gaze."

Precetlan gave her a look. So did Naleewa.

"I've never heard of any magician able to do that," Naleewa finally stated. "But really, even if he could, why would he need to lure us with magic? Verlem is a hermit who collects herbs and berries. What could be more harmless than that? Of course we would trust him. What do you think he would want from us? What could he want that we wouldn't willingly give?"

"I don't know," Amalai said wretchedly. She was exhausted, and could still feel the turmoil within.

"Let's go back," she suggested weakly.

They made their way uphill slowly, laboriously climbing back to where they had left their mounts. The horses were still there, fortunately, well and unharmed. Amalai was relieved and instantly felt ridiculous for it.

What did she expect? She shook her head, trying to clear it. It did not change much.

In silence they rode back the way they had come.

When they reached the crossroads, Precetlan reined in, looking at Amalai with friendly, concerned eyes. "Are you all right?"

"No. Not quite. But I will be. Thank you." Amalai shook her head with a rueful grin. "I am sorry for the drama. I could not help it. I don't know what came over me. But, in any case, I am very grateful for the deewelarque. It is a wonderful discovery. Thank you so much for showing me."

"Of course," Precetlan replied. With a few more worried looks and warm hugs, Precetlan and Naleewa left, riding up into the highlands to rejoin their friends and their flock.

Amalai stared up into the sky, her eyes unfocused, unseeing. Then she turned her horse and let him lead the way back home under a rising sickle moon.

'In legends and fairy tales,' Amalai's inner voice said, 'there are more reasons why people are irresistibly drawn toward another. It is not only the use of magic, of spells, of potions. It can also be fate, prophecies, the stars. Like lovers destined to be together.'

Amalai was not sure she wanted the voice to continue. But it did. In a calm, quiet tone. In an inexorable manner.

'And then, there is yet another kind of legend, of myth. There are stories of fay. Of otherworldly beings, some of whom have the ability to lure humans, just through their presence, or their willpower. Like nymphs.'

Amalai turned her head aside.

'Like vampires.'

7

It was almost noon, with the sun up bright and strong, and beads of sweat were running down Amalai's face as she hung the last of her bushels on the racks in the drying shed. She swept her brow with her forearm, dislodging glimmering drops from their trails over her hazel skin. Time for a break, Amalai thought.

She walked up the path into town, stopping at the third house only to place a dish on the doorstep, now filled with fresh mint leaves instead of the delicious pastries her neighbor sometimes regaled her with. She blew the sturdy man a kiss when she spotted him up on the balcony between lines of laundry.

Amalai began to hum a little, heading in the general direction of the plaza. She was retying a colorful scarf over unruly curls as she turned the corner into a busy street, but even with her hands in motion about her head, her subconscious mind noticed.

Someone was watching her.

Amalai turned around.

The soldier on the corner quickly looked away. But then she secretly glanced back over her shoulder.

And locked eyes with Amalai.

Amalai knew instantly. That was the girl. The one she had caught in her garden. A cadet.

The girl realized Amalai had recognized her. Her eyes grew wide, filled with—fear? Pleading? Amalai intuitively made a calming motion with her hand. The soldier girl watched her, suspicious. Hopeful. Amalai sent her a cautious smile and a short, small nod. That seemed to help. The cadet's pose grew a little less rigid.

Amalai took a few more tentative steps, approaching at an angle, feeling her way in to make sure she was not startling anyone. The girl allowed her to get close without showing any renewed signs of panic. Amalai was as pleased as if she had managed to befriend some strange, shy animal. As she took one more step toward them, Amalai finally drew the attention of the second soldier, a black-skinned youth who stood

poised and upright, looking very proper and official. Amalai cleared her throat and introduced herself to the pair of them. She was rewarded with words of greeting and two names: Rebonya and Gureev.

Amalai smiled.

"It is unusual to see you here," she ventured. "For the longest time, soldiers were not allowed to leave the garrison."

That brought an instant gleam into Rebonya's eyes, who by now had lost all signs of shyness. "No, they were not!" she responded a little hotly.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, in a pose very far from exuding either timidity or soldierly discipline. "But there is an exceptionally good reason for this change of rules, as you may know," Rebonya continued with an edge to her voice. "In any case, we've had it explained to us at great length. A terrible demon is threatening Behrlem, an unearthly horror. No one but us soldiers can step in to save you all. So fear not. We are here for you. We are your protection."

Amalai regarded her thoughtfully. Rebonya stuck her chin out a little. Gureev had chosen to turn away slightly, looking out straight ahead with an expressionless face.

"You know, some say demons don't even exist," Amalai probed.

Rebonya gave her a knowing look from underneath her black fringe. "Fear not. We are here for you regardless. We will even fight nonexistent demons. So that you are safe. And under our protection."

"Ah." Amalai nodded. Her interest in Rebonya increased by the minute. "And how exactly will you protect us? When the demon comes?"

The glow in Rebonya's eyes grew so intense it practically equaled a grin spreading all over her face. "At the moment," she related with palpable complacency, "we will mostly say, 'Begone, demon!' And tell the citizenry to seek shelter. We could also draw our blades, in case they have any kind of effect on demons." The edge in her voice grew sharp. "However, soon there will be more."

*

"But demons do not exist!" Rebonya practically stomped her foot, gesturing at Gureev. "They were only ever illusions! A deception mages used to inspire fear and subordination in people. Demons are just a fairy tale from the age of the Feudals!"

Rebonya shot a spiteful look at Gureev. "And so I am not surprised to see you doubt and waver. To see that you have some liking for such tales."

Gureev held his head up high. "Yes. Of course. Everything I think must be because of my family and what they have told me. Whereas everything you think has nothing at all to do with what people around you have told

you. Your opinion is not influenced by anyone, and therefore is so correct and indisputable that it is not really an opinion at all, it is just obvious Truth. Isn't it?"

Gureev turned toward her. "You always have all your explanations ready. You never listen, never consider. You simply rule out all other possibilities, and that's that." He unfurled his hand in a questioning gesture, raising it up before his chest. "At least I am uncertain. Open. At least I can admit that I do not know. Have you ever been ready to do that?"

* * *

Kortid's hand dug into his pillow.

}}} Darkness was creeping into the forest from all sides. Beings of the night awoke and spread their wings, turning their senses toward those who lingered, those who trespassed in foreign land. Ferns whispered as Kortid passed, touching his knees, wondering whether to object, to hold him back. Gnarled faces hid in the bark of old trees, watching Kortid with inscrutable expressions. On thin silvery threads, spiders climbed and descended over Kortid's head, looking down from the heights of ancient bows onto the large, awkward animal beneath them.

Kortid stumbled over a root. He caught himself, rasping his hand roughly against a tree by his side, scraping his skin. He moved on purposefully, urgently. Cautiously. He had to find Hun, to bring him back home before night fell and the forest swallowed them whole.

Kortid called out in a subdued voice. Hun did not answer. The woods did, in a thousand murmurs and rustlings, gray waving fingers, swift darts of movement between the roots. Kortid licked his lips. He moved on, his eyes searching the gloom. The undergrowth was thick all around him. A fallen tree blocked his way. Kortid sat down on the trunk, swung his legs over—and landed in hell.

A scream tore from his lungs. Right before his eyes, Hun's naked body lay on the ground, mangled, covered in blood. A black demon pressed down on him, a specter of nightmares. At Kortid's piercing cry, the fiendish ghost flinched. It turned into a huge flag tearing away into the night.

Kortid stumbled forward. He fell to his knees beside Hun, grabbing his shoulders, calling his name, looking down into his face with pleading urgency. A white mask stared back up at Kortid, its eyes empty, dead. }}

Kortid woke with a gasp, his hands tangled in the sheets in a cold, sweaty grip. Kortid could feel his heartbeat, quick and shallow. He bit his lip.

Limbs tense, shoulders hunched, Kortid stared out at the darkness of his chamber, at Hun's empty mat, and at the images replaying, without pity or reprieve, in his mind.

* * *

Amalai was roaming through the forest, foraging. Birds and monkeys commented on her presence, calling down at her and hopping away through the treetops. The afternoon sun lit up leaves from behind, making them shine a bright young green.

Berries and bits of bark lay in Amalai's basket, roots and shoots. Even the mushrooms she needed for the ointment the bath had requested.

A good harvest. Amalai could turn back and go home now.

But she did not. Something was calling her, leading her away from her usual paths. She had gone much farther east into the forest than usual and kept moving in the general direction of east, then south. Soon, the ground began to rise up before her. If she were to continue along that route, she would soon find herself climbing up into the highlands.

She did not stop.

Amalai did not know where she was going. Or rather, why she was going. But she did not argue with herself. She did not spell it out, neither the question nor any attempts at an answer. She just kept walking. Just a little farther. The slope before her grew steeper and steeper, until the trees and bushes were barely holding on to the sheer fall between the protruding rocks. With difficulty, Amalai found her path taking hold of a root here, a stem there, scrambling on.

And then she was out.

She emerged from the woods to find herself bathed in bright sunlight, with the mountains' wind in her hair. The highlands rolled on gently to her right, granting a view of an endless sky above and a gentle earth down below. But to her left, steep slopes lead the way on to higher peaks. Boulders and dark, spindly bushes came out onto the meadow on that side, with stark, forbidding walls of sheer rock rising behind them. The ravine.

This was where Amalai had gone. This was where her roaming and rambling in the forest had led her. She had known it, somehow. She had felt the tug, sensed the place. Rather than taking the long and winding road of the shepherds and then going back down again around the hill, she had climbed up straight through the woods.

And here she was.

She could see the first of the deewelarque bushes, the ones that had managed to sprawl just beyond the outskirts of the gorge. She could see the entrance, sense the darkness behind it.

Amalai walked toward it, halfway, then halted. She remained still, looking up toward the boulders, the deewelarque, the rise of the cliffs. The wind took up once more, tugging at her robes, blowing her skirt into a billowing sail, then letting it fall. Amalai stood, unmoving.

She watched. Was there anything unusual, anything unearthly? There were rocks. There were dark, thorny, poisonous deewelarque. There was a breeze flowing through them, making the leaves turn and susurrate. There were whispers, becoming clearer, louder, more personal over time, a dark green voice reaching out in blurred, husky murmurs.

Amalai tilted her head back. She closed her eyes. She listened. She entrusted herself to her ears, taking in the rise and fall of airy tides in the bushes, the muttering of gnarled wood and craggy stone, of soft young shoots and swaying stems.

And Amalai responded, after a while. She murmured back. She hummed a little under her breath, mumbling, weaving in words she herself did not know. Amalai let her chant rise with the wind, with the agitation of the leaves, becoming louder, more urgent, as if in an argument. And she subsided again, relenting, as the breeze died down. Amalai crooned a few soothing sounds, a reconciliation, a concession. An understanding. She returned to the softness, the quiet, the listening. The peace of companionship. Companionship with the rustling leaves, the whispering grass. She remained there a long time, listening to their utterances, singing with them in as hushed and secret a tone as they did themselves, weaving in sounds that came from she did not know where. Her own sounds, the ones she had within her, to talk to the wind and the whispers.

Amalai did not feel time pass. But she did see, eventually, how the shadow of the mountain moved across the meadow. The sun had almost gone down behind the crest, and evening was beginning to creep up into the highlands on all sides. A pale moon had grown well beyond a sickle.

Amalai turned slowly. She began to walk back, a few hesitant steps at first, then more firmly, until she moved with a clear, steady stride, headed toward home, toward human settlements, while there would still be light enough to let her make the steep, unfamiliar climb back down.

At the brink of the forest, she stopped and looked back. The entrance to the ravine lay quiet, unmoving. The deewelarque were turning from dark green to black, and taciturn boulders guarded an opening that, slowly, was beginning to be covered up by night.

She did not see Verlem.

8

“How old were your parents during the Transition? When all the Feudals were sent into exile?” Rebonya asked.

Gureev raised his eyes to her, then looked down at his book again.

Rebonya calculated a guess. “Toddlers, probably. They were not interested in politics at the time.” Rebonya’s tone softened. “We are too young. Even your parents are too young to have been directly involved in the Transition. How could you still be affected that much?”

Gureev shut his book. He got up and walked over to the window, staring out into the courtyard, or into nothingness.

But then he turned, and decided to answer. “I did not grow up with my direct ancestors. Those were more like aunts and uncles to me, not parents. I spent the winter moons in town with them sometimes, when I was older. They were kind. And interesting. Just not as close as parents.” Gureev ran a hand over his curly head. “It was my ancestors’ ancestors who became my parents, who gave me care and love and attention day after day.”

A full moon came out from behind a cloud and lit up the window beside him. Gureev let the pale light play on his hand. “So my parents are much older, over seventy by now. And they did hold positions of power at the time of the Transition. They were princes at court. In their thirties they had their future before them. So they were perceived to be a threat, and got exiled to a far-away estate for the rest of their lives.” Gureev stared at the bare walls of their chamber. “I shared their exile. On the estate, I was given a home. And an education.”

By former princes of the feudal court, Rebonya thought, and choked down a scathing comment. Hooking her fingers in her belt, she stared down at her feet. And managed to keep her silence.

Gureev turned his head to look at her.

“Tell me about the estate,” Rebonya mumbled.

A warm glow came into Gureev’s eyes. “It is beautiful land. Soft, rolling

hills. A few orchards. Mostly fields, vegetables. Some pastures. The estate itself is not terribly large. A few dozen people lived there." He paused. "It is in Zonzelon. All the feudal families have been spread out over different counties in Jovaden, as you probably know. Without contact. So my parents have never heard from any of their friends again. Nor from their families, except those closest few who were exiled with them." His tone took on an edge of anger and bitterness. "And of course, the few dozen people on the estate were all our prison guards. Even if they tried not to look it. If they kept up appearances. As if we were some random genteel family spending time on their modest country estate."

"Very modest," Rebonya murmured, and instantly wished she hadn't.

Gureev spun around. "Why am I even telling you. Anything," he snapped. "All you do is look for new material to reproach me with. To turn against me any way you can." He grabbed his book and walked out the door.

Rebonya kept gazing down at her feet. She kicked at an invisible pebble. Then she turned to follow Gureev.

The common room was almost empty. A few magical lanterns gave a soft golden sheen to an old coat of arms here, the curving lid of a trunk there. Two young cadets were seated at low tables by the wall, enveloped in an amber glow beneath the black square of a window, poring over open books before writing down another line on the sheets in front of them. Other than that, there was only Gureev, his gaze firmly locked onto the page of his book.

Rebonya walked up beside him. She let her gaze roam over the tomes on a shelf by the wall, letting titles of faded gold wink at her through the twilight, as if she had come for that. She stood quietly for some time, running a finger down the weathered spines.

When she finally spoke, it was as if to herself, her voice very low, the word just falling out.

"Sorry."

Rebonya turned and went back through the door, not waiting for Gureev to respond.

* * *

A warm, mellow light slanted in through the high windows of the Toan temple library, playing on the worn limestone floor, on the winding elegance of the pillars. The whole room was bathed in invisible mists of dust and sunlight, suffused with pale gold and a quiet sacredness.

Lahoon began to wish he were dressed in white so that he could blend in, be another figurine of honey and ivory in this beautiful tableau.

But then the temple servant came back and all of Lahoon's attention reverted to the treasures she carried.

"Thank you!" Gratefully, Lahoon received a bundle of old scriptures into his arms. He settled onto a mat by the wall, the stillness of the temple all around him. As he unrolled the first bamboo scroll, the dust of decades and spirit of centuries welled up to greet him. He reverently ran a finger along the painted slip, sinking down into ancient tales and deep absorption.

Hours later, the sunlight had faded, and only the muted glow of magical lanterns shone between the shadows. Lahoon had noticed none of it. He was buried in divine chronicles, in old yarns and forgotten prophecies. But finally, the temple servant came to bid him good night. And that was just in time.

Lahoon mumbled hasty words of gratitude for being allowed to leave a heap of legends to lie until morning. He grabbed his bag and hurried on toward the Summerstar, the most celebrated tavern in Toan, where his concert was about to begin.

* * *

As she climbed over, Rebonya let her hand rest on the giant copper pipe snaking through the bath gardens. She listened to the sound of rushing water within, and to the steady heartbeat of magic underneath.

Rebonya smiled as she pushed through the high ferns. Before her, a small house lay hidden among the bushes, its low roof of terra-cotta tiles overgrown with moss. The yellow coating on the walls was tarnished and crumbling, as was the dark green paint on the shutters. It looked homey, secret and magical all at once, Rebonya thought. She could not imagine a better place to spend her evenings off. Her heart was beating in happy anticipation as she cautiously knocked on the door.

"Hmm?" answered a voice from inside. Rebonya pulled the door open a crack and slid in. Unleha stood bent over a narrow workbench, looking down at the intricate patterns and myriad lines on a large scroll. All around her, the disarray of magic piled up: heaps of glass thread and crystals, half-opened wood cases, metallic instruments of an outlandish nature, and more scrolls.

"Rebonya!" A scrawny twelve-year-old girl hopped off the bench by the wall. Veertan, one of Unleha's daughters. "Look what we've got!" She proudly held out a slim oval wooden case, smooth and polished, about as long as her lower arm. "A traption, built from scratch. Unleha has just finished setting it aglow, and I helped!"

Rebonya stepped closer gingerly and peered inside. A labyrinth of

nearly invisible threads glinted back at her, interspersed with shiny clear crystals glowing pale green and amethyst purple.

"What will it do?" Rebonya asked.

"Don't tell, don't tell!" Veertan instantly begged of Unleha.

"I'll show you!" She grabbed Rebonya's elbow to pull her out into the wilderness around the cabin. The evening light was dim, full of blue shadows, the trees a black outline against a sky striped with lavender. They waded a few steps through thick, knee-deep greenery until, among the vines and the bracken, Veertan found an open, even patch of moss and sat the traption down upon it.

Rebonya squatted beside the girl, her dark eyes full of anticipation.

"Watch this," Veertan whispered.

At her touch, a column of bright blue light shot from the wooden case, a clear, incandescent beam cutting through the shadows of night creeping up all around them. Beneath the fading colors of evening, amidst the waving shadows of ferns, the blue glow seemed almost otherworldly.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Veertan turned to Rebonya, bright-eyed.

Unleha came to crouch beside her. "It is very special. An entirely new form of putting light together. No way any of our old magical lanterns could ever have produced a beam like this."

Rebonya let her eyes rest on that brightness of blue, on that finger of a god, pointing straight to the heavens. She was suitably awed. It was only after long moments of admiration that she turned around to ask, "And what do people want that for?"

Unleha shrugged. "No idea. Does it need a purpose beyond looking great?"

"Did they not tell you when they ordered it?"

"No. I did not speak to the people directly. I only talked to Tenatetlan, the peddler, who wanted it for somebody else. I think she even ordered several of these, asking all the artificers she could get hold of. But, anyway," Unleha switched topics suddenly, "there is another bit of good news, have you heard?"

She sent her beaded braids flying with an energetic turn of her head. "The scrutiny has started. Because of Hun's death. So the county scrutinizer will be showing up in the garrison soon. In the Diamondtip School of Cadets, to be precise. To find out how it could have happened that one of the youths got killed." There was a wicked gleam in Unleha's eyes. "And whether perhaps anything needs to be changed within that system, to make sure it does not happen again."

Kortid wielded his blade with strength and precision, cold metal flashing in the evening light as he spun around, parried an invisible enemy, then lunged for another. Straw puppets winced as the sharp point touched them, withdrew, came again. Sweat was running down Kortid's face, but his eyes were fierce, unrelenting.

He turned only when his companions called him. This was the hour. Time to move out of the training court and into the streets of a dusky town.

"This is the last time we will go out unprotected, thank goodness." Kortid squinted up at the pale round moon rising in the sky. He sheathed his weapon with a deft, forceful move. "Tomorrow the magic swords will arrive." He pressed his final comment out through clenched teeth. "We can only pray that we will survive another night."

Rebonya scoffed behind him. "'Survive another night', my word. It's not as if our lives were hanging by a thread."

"Shut up!" Kortid spun around, eyes furious. "Don't you dare say another word," he hissed. "Don't you dare question me again. I saw what I saw, with my own eyes, and I won't have anyone tell me I didn't. You were not there. You have no idea! So shut it!"

Rebonya's body tensed. "I was not there, but I am here! And I have got eyes too, and I can see what is going—"

"No, you cannot!" Kortid shouted ferociously. "You know nothing! All you have is stories and conjectures. Theories. But I saw that demon! Directly. In front of me. Sitting on Hun's dead body." Kortid's face was pale by now, and every muscle in his body hard as steel. Images of night came unbidden to his mind, of a forest of darkness, of looming black trees. Of Hun's mangled limbs, his lifeless mask of a face.

Kortid's breath had grown shallow and ragged. His eyes were feverish, fixing Rebonya.

"Don't you dare!"

9

Dark clouds were hanging over the town square of Behrlem, making the late afternoon seem tired and gloomy. However, every now and then a ray of light fell through the cracks, and lines of silver flared up dramatically in its wake, tracing the outlines of the billowing clouds with exclamations of brightness. Then they disappeared again, swallowed up by mountains of rainy gray, plunging the town into shadow.

The soldiers stood in formation at the far side of the plaza. A small, orderly squad in the middle. Around them, a wider circle of individual soldiers, with plenty of space between them, a very loose boundary. But still a boundary. People stood around that wider circle, watching. No one crossed in.

Within this theater's arena, one soldier after the other stepped up, leaving the formation to come to Berqar at the front. In a solemn gesture, each soldier received an oval wooden case, polished and shining, into outstretched hands; bowed in reverence; and turned to march back into the formation. Each one, except the very last. Gureev, receiving a special command from Berqar along with his case, took up position outside the orderly lines of the squad and remained, singled out and alone, in front of the first row of his comrades.

Berqar stepped back.

Light seemed to drain from within the circle, leaving the soldiers to drown in darkness. But then a creek of sparks began to pour in, bringing a warm glow back into the murky theater. The shimmer grew deeper, denser, finally becoming strong as burning embers, bright as sunlight. People shielded their eyes for a moment.

When they were able to squint out again, their pupils slowly adjusting to the return of the twilight, a mage with a long, gnarled staff stood in the fading glimmer of gold, his gray beard coming down to his chest, his blue robes swirling.

Pramus.

He stood upright, proud, and unbending, an image of power and authority. Imperiously, he raised his staff.

All the soldiers went down on one knee. They held out their wooden cases before them, reverently, expectantly. Their eyes were fixed on the mage. Pramus seemed to hold them all with the power of his gaze. Then he released them. With a turn of his hand, he made the soldiers touch the wood, all at the same time, all in the same way. And a forest of light shot up.

Bright blue beams pierced the gloom, reaching for the clouds.

A growl of thunder came from the sky. People looked up in worry. The rumbling grew louder, closer. But it was not natural. Lights of purple and crimson formed in the darkness above, deepening, gathering into a spinning vortex right above the soldiers. As the thunder grew almost intolerable, the whirlwind began to descend upon them. The soldiers did not waver. Down on their knees, their swords of light upright before them, they held firm as the gyre came down at them from the clouds. Blue light pierced the maelstrom of black and purple and flared up for a moment at the contact. The thunder became deafening, and as the swirl touched the soldiers' heads, it exploded out into the roar of a dragon. Or a demon. All the swords flared up in bright white. Then they cooled. The thunder had died, the vortex gone. Silence rang through the air as the magic swords dimmed their glow, going back from a white-hot flame to a gentle blue.

The soldiers still knelt. Breathless, speechless, they remained in a pose of reverence, of awe. Briefly, the spirit of the eternal warrior became visible in the air, larger than life: dark, slim, beautiful, wielding a sword of light with immeasurable grace and power.

The apparition faded.

The mage tilted his staff. As one, the soldiers rose, sheathing their swords. They turned to march, and in a heartbeat had disappeared into the dusk.

* * *

"She is trying to get you," Rebonya told Gureev. She turned over on her mat to look at him, then threw herself onto her back again with a thump. "What do you think? Why were you singled out to stand in front of everybody else? Like someone special. Visible to everybody. Not only to us soldiers, but even to the people of Behrlem."

Rebonya shook her head. "Everybody was meant to witness. To see that traptions are just banal contrivances giving light, but the arcane art of a traditional mage can endow these swords with real, earth-shattering power. Able to ward off demons. And while it takes loads of us unknown soldiers to do the fighting, there is one above all others who is destined

for the final deed. The lone hero. You. No coincidence that dream warrior at the end looked like a Gureev.”

Gureev pulled at his sheets uncomfortably. “He did not look like me.” He turned over. “He did not have black skin, either. It only appeared that way because of the strange light. That is all.”

* * *

“And to think that I unwittingly contributed to the whole thing!” Unleha fumed.

“They’ve used us.” Tenatetlan pressed out her words through gritted teeth. “They sent out inconspicuous middlemen to ask me, as a peddler, to ask you, and so they have solicited the services of dozens of artificers who would never willingly have lent their skills to the fabrication of lies and illusions. Swords of light, indeed! What an affront to the profession of artificers!”

An involuntary grin spread across Unleha’s face, her black cheek dimpling. “The traption is great, though,” she conceded. “I had a lot of fun making it. Seeing how you could put together a beam like that. Amazing method, really. Totally new approach to light. Never seen anything like it before.”

“They have abused you!” Tenatetlan spat out venomously. “Are you some despicable underling, to be treated like that? They spit on you! Every time they are waving their ‘magic swords’ around in town is another slap in your face! Will you let such an insult go unrevenged? Do you have no pride at all?” Tenatetlan’s eyes were on fire. “You have to show them! Fight!”

* * *

Kortid posed the wooden case gingerly beside his mat. He let his hand glide over it, feeling the smoothness, the polish. He took a deep breath and pressed down.

Light flared up. Straight, bright, blue, the sword of magic pierced the somber darkness of the chamber. The ghost of a smile came to Kortid’s lips. He leaned back, cautiously releasing his hold on the sheath.

Kortid slid in underneath his covers, his face turned toward the room, making sure he could sleep with one eye open if need be. Checking that the sword was well within reach and that he could brandish it in an instant.

He lay still, listening to his thoughts.

It was at nighttime that the danger was greatest. He was sure of it. The demon would come in the gloom. When it came. When it struck again. It would be in the darkness.

Which was why there must be not any darkness. There must be light, at all times. And the swords must be out, ready. The soldiers must never be defenseless. Not for a moment. Especially not at night. Not a night like this, when the full moon was swallowed up by remorseless black clouds.

Kortid bit his lip. He turned back toward his blade, toward its unfailing brightness, its promise of power and safety. A deep sigh escaped from his chest. This was how it should be. They must be ready for combat. With the swords' magic by their side, they might stand a chance. Including the chance that the demon might not even dare to draw near. That the magic of the light would keep it away. Would keep them safe.

Even if people did not see it that way. Thought it exaggerated. Or let their little comforts of the moment blind them. Like preferring to have lights off at night.

'Fools,' Kortid thought. 'Risking their lives. Going to sleep, even if to never wake up again.'

* * *

Amalai squinted into the pale morning light. Her hand crawled over to the mat beside her but found it cold and empty. Amalai wavered; but then she remembered. Lahoon was in Toan.

She got up and walked into his studio. Amalai carefully stepped around Lahoon's easels and the half-finished paintings that still crowded the room. Unicorns and dragons looked out at her from the canvas, alongside unearthly beings of light and ether that bore no names. She saw a pilgrim lost on his way to a desert temple, and the subtle lines of water fairies in a pond. Amalai walked on among the images of dreams, of tales waiting to be told, of worlds wanting to be found.

She felt the love and the yearning.

She thought of Lahoon.

And she thought of Verlem.

* * *

In the deep dense green of the forest, Amalai was walking up toward the highlands. Again. And again. She had given up any attempts of arguing about that with herself.

She just went. For another fleeting moment, another immeasurable hour spent with the wind and the grass, the mountains and the deewelarque, the sky and the wildflowers. For a presence, for a whisper of fay.

Amalai approached the entrance of the ravine very slowly, very cautiously, never directly. She changed her path a little, drifting over just

one bit toward the side. She edged forward a small measure, then stood there for the rest of the afternoon, listening to the wind and the whispering leaves.

Another time, when she came back again, she moved in only one step farther and sat down, still as a plant, until a rabbit came and sat down opposite her, a good distance away. They remained there, exchanging glances, until it was time for the rabbit to go home.

Amalai felt the air move around her, drift into the ravine and out of it. She came to know the particular smell it carried of the atmosphere within, of the enclosure, of the darkness and secrecy in its depth. She touched the boulders, conversing with the cold hardness of stone. She made friends with the lichen growing upon it, with the ever so tender shades of gray and whitish green they shared. Allowing them to show her the pace at which time passed for them. Staying with them, ageless.

Amalai saw streams of cloud pass over the mountain. Saw the light shift on the meadow, a waning half-moon fade into morning. She saw the darkness of the ravine behind the boulders change texture.

She felt Verlem.

He was there. He had been there all the time. Every time. Amalai had known it, even on that first evening, when she had not seen him. But he was there. Verlem was watching her, sensing her. Feeling her presence. Just as she was feeling his presence. Or the presence of the whole mountainside, the grasses, the thorny bushes. Amalai could not distinguish between Verlem and the wind, or the scents of the ravine. But she did not care. It did not seem to matter. Or, somehow, to amount to the same thing, in the end.

Amalai returned, again and again, to be with him, with them, with all of it.

And Verlem was there.

He never came close. He never approached her. He never made a move to meet her, or to speak to her. He was just there. He was sitting on one of the boulders in the opening. He was standing beside one of the deewelarque bushes, a shadow in its shadow, blending in so much she noticed his outline only after having been there for hours. Or maybe he had only just got there? No, she was sure. He had always been present, all the while that she was there. She felt him much more than she saw him.

Sometimes he looked toward her. As she was looking toward him. But he did so only for a moment, just one glance, just enough to acknowledge that he had seen her. That he knew she was there, and that he knew she knew. Then he turned away again, to look out into the open valley.

He was sitting there now, on the grass before the boulders. His eyes were turned toward the slopes of the mountain, toward the waving grass and nodding wildflowers, toward the forest down below.

Verlem was keeping very still. He had his feet planted on the ground, his legs falling open slightly, his hands joined loosely around his knees.

She could see his profile clearly, his fragile body, his face gazing out over the highlands. The soft light of the afternoon sun lay upon his features, touching his tender white skin, outlining the contours of his cheekbones. His hair was fine and wispy, drawn back from his brow, with only a few strands falling loose.

He seemed as quiet, as inoffensive, as always.

Amalai felt her heart beat fast.

But she had gotten used to that by now. She had advanced gradually, carefully, only one little move every hour, or every day. Every time she had come to him. She had always gone just as far as her quickened pulse would allow her. Just as much as had felt safe at that moment.

Her heart was still pounding rapidly.

She took one little step toward him.

Verlem did not move. He had seen her, no doubt. He perceived her. She was sure he could feel exactly where she was, could sense all her movements. And probably the tension and relaxation of her limbs. And the speed of her throbbing heart.

Amalai sighed. And breathed in again, letting the mountain air and its spicy scents fill her lungs and her spirits. Her exhale was long and deep. Like a wind goddess, she blew a gentle breeze toward the fields and valleys below. She felt reassured.

She moved closer, another tiny pace. Confidently, but still timidly. And quietly. Verlem was so quiet himself. She felt any kind of noise or rash movement would tear some invisible gossamer thread between them.

Amalai sat down, mirroring his pose. Her feet on the ground, her arms wrapped loosely around her knees, she let her gaze drift out into the valley, following the fall of slating rays of sun on the treetops, the shifting haze of evening clouds, the dance of a swallow.

Even though Amalai remained still a pace apart from Verlem, there was no doubt she was sitting there with him. She had joined him.

10

Kortid went into battle stance. In one swift move, before his brain had even caught up with his body, his feet were firm and supple, his muscles tensed, his eyes alert. But none of that would save him now.

“You can’t keep that sword with you at all times,” the soldier scoffed. “Give it here! You know damn well we do not have enough magic swords for everyone. At least not yet. And all the ones we do have must be with the people on duty. I wonder how you got away with this behavior for days! Or how you could ever consider doing it, at the expense of everyone else.” He glared at Kortid.

Kortid clenched his teeth. “Of course.” He shoved the wooden case in his hand to his other side, covering his sword of light protectively with his arm. Then he gave up. He handed it to the soldier on duty.

* * *

Unleha had always frowned upon the interior decorations of the Teapot Library. But she had resigned herself to them. What did it matter? After all, the Teapot Library catered to everyone’s needs. To hers most certainly. It was here that Unleha received the rare and precious dispatches of the ‘Artificer’s Future’ whenever they came in from Varoonya.

On those glorious evenings, the coven of artificers in the Behrlem region gathered together in the Teapot to break open the envelope that would reveal a disorderly flurry of loose sheets of paper, filled with dense scribbles and the most intricate drawings of myriad fine lines. Unveiling the secrets of some of the newest and most extravagant traptions people had come up with, things you might perhaps have dreamed of, but that were now birthed halfway into reality. Creatures of ingenuity and cooperation, the traptions beckoned you to feed and nourish them, to copy and multiply, to add and improve.

Whenever a new specimen of the famed envelope arrived, the usual suspects gathered at the Teapot, looking over one another’s shoulders to peruse and comment and inquire, and mostly to get excited no end about

it all. And sometimes, to come up with actual arrangements as to who would team up with whom to try it out, to replicate these newest flights of the imagination, and to contribute to them as best as they could. But whatever the productive output on those scores, there certainly always was a bounty of mouthwatering little delicacies, fragrant teas and excellent gossip. So Unleha had many happy memories of nights spent at the Teapot.

It seemed only natural to hold her other gatherings here, too, in the run-up to the vote. You could bespeak the main room for such occasions. The Teapot often hosted conversations and book circles, or theater groups and wisdom discernments and skillsharings. And of course, healers and farmers and various craftspeople were each having their own coven meetings, much like the artificers, each poring over the latest ideas and practices in their fields. The Teapot was, the owners prided themselves, a heart of wits in the Behrlem region, filled with as much life and spirits as the open rooms in the county house.

Unleha let a long-suffering gaze travel over the faded tapestries full of unicorns and mysterious vines. The broad clay kang along the wall, inviting you to lounge on richly colored carpets and cushions. Unleha sighed inaudibly at the ornate lushness of just about everything in the room.

But the number of people ambling in lifted her spirits, and as Unleha began to talk and banter with friends among the slowly growing crowd, the lively glow in her eyes knew no more complaints.

* * *

Amalai had edged closer to Verlem, bit by bit. She was so near him now that she could practically have touched him with an outstretched arm.

The sun was low in the afternoon sky, giving a soft, glowing light. A few clouds drifted up above, long drawn-out stretches of hazy white beginning to show the first signs of color, just as the sky itself was paling on one end, and preparing to darken and blush at the other. It had been a warm day, and the soft breeze that took up every now and then still carried the remnants of heat and the scent of sunbathed flowers.

Amalai lay back on the grass. She looked up into the sky, feeling the earth beneath her, the massive weight of an enormous mountain, the timelessness of rock supporting her body. The high blades around her swayed softly. She whispered to them, inaudibly. Then she stretched out her arm, cautiously, toward Verlem. She did not touch him. She reached out for him, but still left a little distance, allowing her hand to rest in a place a few fingers' width behind his back.

Verlem had not moved. He sat there, very still. Amalai had felt him tense, alert, when she had brought up her hand, but then he had gone quiet again. His body was at ease now. He turned his gaze toward her, briefly, in acknowledgment. Then he looked back out toward the valley, the forest.

Amalai held her palm still behind Verlem's spine. She could feel him, more strongly than ever. She sensed him radiating out like a star. He was not hot, not warm. But the intensity of his being glowed beyond her palm, strongly, clearly, soothingly. She did not need to move closer to feel it. Just as with a bright light in a night sky, the presence was powerful and unambiguous. There he was.

And he felt pleasant. Comforting. Trustworthy. Truly very much like a star, she thought, steady enough to navigate by. Amalai let his energy radiate through her. She felt it on her palm, in her hand. She felt it run up the veins of her arm and into her heart. Her heart that was beating quietly, steadily, now. She was reassured. This was right. He was good. She wanted to be here. She was home. With him. She smiled softly.

Amalai looked up at Verlem. This time, he looked back at her. His dark eyes met hers, and she felt the faith she had in him. A sense of belonging. And no resistance this time. She still held a little shiver inside of her, a little fear. But she wanted to be with him, to know him, to feel him. And her trust for him was true, voluntary. She was sure of that now.

Verlem moved. Just a little. His posture shifted, almost imperceptibly. He inclined his head slightly, in silent acknowledgment, or in welcome. It was a shy, humble gesture. And then he began to smile, a small, timid smile at first, matching the moves of his body. But he went on, widening his smile, and revealing himself to Amalai fully through it. As his lips parted, she could see that he had no teeth. Or, only two. Long, thin, and sharp like the fangs of a snake.

*

Verlem let his lips close again, ending his smile. He turned his eyes back to the valley. He was sitting on the meadow, very still again. In just the same way he had always been there, quiet, allowing her to look at him. As she did now.

Her insides were frozen. She could not move. Slowly, very slowly, they began to thaw as she regarded Verlem. He was still there, just there, being in her presence, defenseless, honest, unobtrusive. He made no move. Not to explain, not to reassure. Certainly not to attack.

Amalai let the essence of what he had done rest within her. And in the vague and ambiguous ways of signs and oracles, the deep conversions of symbols and gestures, it began to feel like an offering.

He had allowed her to see him. He had given her the truth about himself. And she was melting into that truth, one breath at a time.

Amalai lay back down on the grass. She closed her eyes and reached out with her hand behind Verlem once more, feeling for that sense of starlight, of him, radiating out. It was still there. Just the same way. The lines on her brow eased. She kept her hand outstretched, allowing that energy, that quiet brightness of Verlem to run through her body like a secret invisible river, a gentle glimmer of snowflakes and crystal pooling in her belly, flowing out through all the bones of her body, reaching the tips of her toes, the crown of her skull.

Amalai opened her eyes and looked straight into Verlem's face, with a warm, trusting gaze. He looked back down at her, his eyes dark.

Amalai sat up, resting beside Verlem, so close their shoulders almost touched. The deewelarque stood behind them in silence, their branches gnarled, old, angular.

Amalai whispered, "Verlem."

He turned toward her, half of his face falling into shadow.

"Verlem," she breathed, "may I ask you?"

He nodded slowly.

"What are you?" Amalai's words drifted out like a gentle breeze.

Verlem remained quiet. His eyes searched the old, weathered shapes of the boulders. The darkness between the slim, rustling leaves of the deewelarque. Then Amalai.

"If I asked you that," Verlem said softly, "would you have an answer? To the most profound question of all?"

Amalai was silent.

She tried again after a while.

"You . . . You are not human, are you? Not an animal of the terrene realm?"

"No." A hazy cloud beyond the edge of the mountain caught a last ray of sun, lighting up in a pale, thin white.

"Are you a vampire?" Amalai's voice had turned vague and misty.

Verlem looked over to the ravine again. From a crevice within ancient stone, a tiny head appeared. A lizard, or a snake. In the blink of an eye, it was gone.

Verlem answered hesitantly, uncertainly. "I cannot say. I do not know what a vampire is, to you."

Amalai looked at him.

"Neither do I," she murmured eventually.

She gazed out over the forest, watching the clouds shift and shape, taking on hues of gold and lavender on their sedate journey toward the evening. A small hawk was still circling high above the meadow, a tiny dark spot in the sky.

“Let me ask you something else, then.” Amalai watched the muted light of the sinking sun catch on Verlem’s cheeks as he turned to her, giving her an almost imperceptible nod.

Amalai wavered. “Did you kill Hun?” she finally whispered. “The youth in the forest?”

Verlem seemed to pause, to search inside himself. His gaze was out in the coloring sky, with the hazy clouds, the shifting light. Then he turned to Amalai.

“Yes.”

11

Amalai closed her eyes. Her heartbeat was faint. She could feel Verlem beside her, motionless, intense.

"Why?" she breathed. "Why did you kill Hun?"

Verlem's voice was very low. "I could hear his pain. That was how I found him. He was dying. I sent him to sleep with a look, so he could go softly."

He hesitated.

"When he slept, I drank his blood. I came to him because he was calling. I saw him, and I liked him. He was strong, vibrant, if he hadn't been dying. I liked him very much. So I drank from his neck."

Amalai shivered. "Did you bring down the tree on him?" she forced herself to ask.

"No. I did not. And I never would have."

Amalai was breathing heavily. "Am I safe with you?"

"Yes."

* * *

In the officer room, Pooton, County Scrutinizer for Learning Pavilions, was standing with her back to the wall. And with her eyes narrowed. "The death of a youth is certainly reason enough for a county scrutiny. Especially a death that might be related to an order given to him by his instructors."

"This is a garrison!" Berqar barked at her. "The Diamondtip School of Cadets is not some cozy nursery where children are pampered and kept away from the harshness of life. We are soldiers! You have no idea of the danger cadets put themselves into in order to protect the citizens of this town! And they do so proudly, willingly. It is what they have come here for. To be brave, to be strong! To go out into danger. Not to be sheltered from it by some solicitous county bureaucrat. You have come to the wrong place! Diamondtip is not part of your mandate! You are responsible only for pavilions, not garrisons!"

Pooton drew herself up straight. "The Diamondtip School of Cadets is, legally speaking, a learning pavilion. And it does fall under the steward-

ship of the county. There can be no doubt about that. And, much as you may dislike it, the laws of Yurvania do in fact apply in here. You are not the ruler of some isolated island. The garrison is not a state within the state. The youth in here are protected by the laws of the county as much as anyone else."

Berqar made a forceful, sweeping move with her arm. "The laws of Yurvania have done nothing to keep that demon away! And they will not do so in future. It is us, the soldiers and mages, who have the courage and the power to stand up to that threat. Hun has died in the forest, and it is us who will prevent any such thing from happening ever again. If anyone can. We will be there, braving the danger."

Berqar's neck was bent forward as if she were a bull about to charge. "So don't you come here pointing out regulations written on parchment. It's all dust and ink stains to me! The real world is out there, right there! And there are demons in that world, and perils. We are soldiers! We will not be told that felling a tree is too risky a thing for us to try. Because we might hurt ourselves." Berqar scoffed derisively. "And I will not have anyone tell me how to run a garrison, either. Least of all some rosy-cheeked scribe who thinks this is a pavilion full of fragile children."

Beneath her white skin, Pooton's cheeks turned a shade darker than rosy. She ran a hand down the front of her caftan. Her voice grew cool and official. "We will start with the conversations in a couple of days. It will be one-on-one, with selected cadets and soldiers. We will be using some of the empty rooms in the west wing. I will let you know in time about the exact arrangements."

* * *

The sun was brooding over a milky shroud of haze, and the late afternoon had become hot and heavy. Amalai had pulled off her blouse in the vain hope that a breeze might touch her skin, and wrapped the cloth around her head instead to keep reticent curls from falling back into her eyes over and over again.

Now she was in communion with her herbs, sharing the humid dankness with them, the steamy heat, the windless air. Pulling, coaxing, digging her fingers in between roots and growing seedlings, she sank down ever more deeply into the world of earthly smells and slow unfoldings, all else forgotten. She did not feel time pass. Nor did she hear the footsteps coming up behind her. But a voice, low and gentle, finally wove its way into her absorption.

"I hail thee, fair maiden! Pray, wilt thou shelter me? I have traveled far."

Amalai raised her head in amazement. Then she laughed. "Lahoon!"

She rose from her flower bed, black curls plastered to her forehead. Sweat glistened on her naked torso of dark bronze. Lahoon came close and kissed her shiny shoulder, a taste of salt and summer and woman tickling his tongue. He moaned happily.

Amalai buried a hand in his hair, letting her lips graze over his velvety butterfly cheek. "Welcome home, my love! Yes, indeed, I will shelter thee. Best that I can." She kissed him deeply, relishing the feel of Lahoon's hold on her back, the delightful caress of his hands on her wet, bare skin.

Finally, Amalai drew back, somewhat reluctantly, but shining with excitement as she looked into Lahoon's eyes, holding on to his shoulders. "Lahoon. I need to tell you. Something has happened."

Lahoon's brows rose. Amalai could hardly contain herself any longer. "I have found someone. Up in the mountains. He has come to me. Revealed himself to me."

Lahoon looked at her uncomprehendingly. Then understanding began to dawn in his eyes. And hope, mad, passionate hope.

"No," he breathed. "No. Not that? You have found? The fay? They have come? Have they?" He made a fast, impulsive move toward her, grabbing her arm.

Amalai pulled him over to the garden bench. "They have. Or, he has. Just one. But that is enough."

Lahoon hung on her every word.

12

A pale moon was fading into the morning sky. When Lahoon and Amalai set out, the light barely filtered through the dense canopy of trees. But the birds knew what was coming, and were singing loudly to the miracle that was about to break upon the world, to the glory of sunrise. Dawn was as laudable that day as it had ever been.

And dawn was as long as Lahoon could possibly have held out. He had spent the evening bathing and grooming, preparing himself. Trying to eat, which had proven difficult. Trying to meditate, which had proven impossible. Pacing up and down, resisting the temptation to run out into the night. Finally, Lahoon had taken up his lute and played to himself, sometimes asking Amalai another question, having her retell another part of her story, all accompanied by the soft, hopeful chords of his melodies. Lahoon had played on and on, to calm down, and to dream himself into his meeting with Verlem, his moment at the threshold of fay.

He looked a little ragged in the morning, but there was no question of anything other than departure. And so they had set out.

Amalai was taking Lahoon along the best path she had found. There was still a steep climb in it, but nothing near the cumbersome crawl she had gone through on her very first visit.

Soon, they were up over the crest. When they stepped out of the forest onto the open highlands, dawn was already painting the expanse of the sky with light and colors. Golden clouds drifted on pale blue seas, rosy hues lay on the cliffs of far-off mountainsides, and snow glinted frostily from the tops. The air was cool and fresh, smelling of morning.

Lahoon's eyes were fixed on the crags rising to their left, up on the sloping hillside before them. That would be it. The entrance. His hands were twitching.

Amalai led him halfway across the meadow. There she took hold of his arm and pulled him to a halt. "I will leave you here," she declared. "Kiss me so that I can trust you will remember to return."

Lahoon laughed, but it was a rough and ragged sound. With an effort, he turned his back to the ravine and took Amalai into his arms. His kiss was soft and warm. Amalai held him close, in a deep, tender embrace.

Then she released him. "Verlem will have seen us, sensed us, I believe. He will know that you come from me. That is enough. From now on, I believe you should go on alone. So that you can find your own path, your own way of being with him." She brushed Lahoon's shiny black hair out of his face. His butterfly skin shimmered a pale blue in the morning light, with some shadows of peacock green, making him look as much a fay as anyone could have wished. Amalai kissed his cheek lightly. "Fare well, my love. We will be together again soon."

She left.

Lahoon watched her go.

Finally, he turned and walked on up the slope.

When he came near the first deewelarque bushes he slowed down. His breath was uneven, and his heart hammered loudly in his chest.

He stood in the grassland before the large, round boulders, outside the entrance, and bowed reverently in the direction of the ravine. In the stillness of his pose, the rushing sound of his pulse seemed like a torrent. Lahoon remained motionless, giving his heart a chance to calm down, his senses time to attune. To feel their way into this realm of ancient mountain, of shadowed rock, of scraggy bush. To probe, ever so gently, for a whisper of fay. To listen, to open, to become ready to hear that whisper whenever it would come.

Lahoon raised his head and brought up his arms, palms turned toward the sky, in a pose of offering, of receiving.

The wind roamed through the highlands, ruffling his hair, breathing into his ear. The scents of wildflowers and far-off fields of snow filled his lungs. Between the boulders, high stems of grass glinted green and golden in the morning light, bending in the breeze, dancing back and forth to the tune of the air. Higher up, they grew sparse, timid, cautious, withdrawing before the shadows of the deewelarque.

Lahoon let his senses roam over the entrance to the ravine, across the rocks, into the shadows. He could not find Verlem. His eyes wandered over to the deewelarque, to their gnarled skeletons full of dark, slim leaves and sharp thorns. Slowly, Lahoon took a step toward them. And another. He walked up to the nearest bush where it cowered in the shelter of a tall, bulky boulder, drinking in the moist, dark air coming from the ravine. The deewelarque reached out to Lahoon with flat fingers. Cautiously, Lahoon let his own fingers intertwine with hers, making the tips touch.

He reached in more deeply, running the soft velvety back of his hand over the rough, furrowed skin of the branches. A lush black berry dropped into his upturned palm.

Lahoon withdrew his hand. Gently, he pressed the ripe berry between his fingers and felt the juice running over his skin. He raised the hand to his nose, breathing in the strong, rough aroma. It was sweet, raw, intense. Alluring, enticing. Dangerous and unknown. Lahoon kissed his fingertips. He felt the stinging burn and licked his lips. His eyes were shining. He turned back to the bush to find another berry ready to fall. And another.

His hollow hand holding soft, juicy pearls, Lahoon stepped back onto the grassland and began to lay out a pattern, a pentacle, marking each of its points with one of his black marbles.

Lahoon had begun to hum to himself, a low, monotonous sound he made without being fully conscious of it. The vibration was growing stronger in him now, coming out as a chant rather than a hum, a wordless song of no melody. He stepped back into the deewelarque's shadow, picking one last delicate pearl, squeezing and scratching its inky skin. Lahoon slid his hand over the branches, caressing a long, hard needle of thorn. Slowly, deliberately, he held the tip against the tender skin of his inner arm and pressed down. His veins let a tear of ruby fall onto the opened berry, their juices mingling.

Lahoon moved back to his grassland temple with unseeing eyes, the hymn in his chest growing stronger, guiding him on. He placed the gift of his blood, enshrined in a broken pearl of deewelarque, in the center of his magical star and stepped back.

The shadows of the mountains closed in, plunging him into uncertain twilight. The lines of the pentacle began to show, softly glowing threads of silver on the ground. A strong wind rose up. Lahoon stood outside the sign, his arms raised, wide and open toward the sky.

The chant broke from his lungs deeply and fully now, an ancient raga of sounds old as the mountains.

A sudden gust bent the grass down low around him. The deewelarque began to whisper, to moan, to shuffle. The sky turned crimson. Purple clouds scurried across it, haunted, unsteady. Lahoon gave himself to them, to the sky, to the hymn breaking from him. He stepped across the silver lines into the rays of the star, making his own body rise up like a beacon in its outmost pike.

Total darkness fell. Lahoon felt it, black and bottomless as a starless night, all around him. The world had disappeared.

In the utter stillness of the void, Lahoon's voice carried out into the cathedral of the universe, reverberating in endless vastness. The great cold of emptiness floated around Lahoon. But it did not make him shiver. The chant carried him on and on.

Above him, an eerie glow transpired, ghostly auroras of shifting colors, forming and transforming into beings of another dimension, specters beyond comprehension, wraiths of glimmer and unearthly beauty. Beings from the infinite space of stars danced an ethereal presence into the nothingness, brought a universe back into being.

They swirled in circles, a slow, inexorable vortex of glimmering color spinning around complete darkness in the eye of the storm.

And within that darkness, substance began to form. Right at the heart of the magic star, at the empty core of the auroras' dance, a shadow condensed, coalesced, became impenetrable. It became solid. Nothingness was turning into being.

A figure of blackness rose up high before Lahoon, towering over him. An ancient power, a column of pitch and thunderclouds holding up the sky, a demon reaching up toward the stars. Or a force of darkness descending upon the earth. A god of night mating with the profundity of the mountain.

Lahoon dropped to his knees.

His chant had become almost inaudible among the roaring in his ears. And yet his voice continued to pour forth, flowing and breaking free like a river from the depth of his being. It was growing softer now, pleading, alluring, as the overpowering geyser of ink eased down to earth, as the goddess sat down to rest, as the dragon of charcoal coalesced into a shape of more human proportions. It sank in on itself, its force metamorphosing, becoming calmer, quieter.

The night of the world turned to ash and twilight, and then to hues of violet, purple, gold. As the glimmering rings of aurora transformed into the flaring colors of sunrise, the center of the star sign was filled with the dim, hesitant light of morning. Only one black figure was left, quiet, immobile, standing upright at the pentacle's heart.

Lahoon was still on his knees. His chant had subsided into a soft song of worship and longing, of beckoning question, of wish and surrender. His outstretched arms held the air, his palms feeling power and light running through them. His gaze was on the dark spirit at the center, the being that had coalesced before his eyes, out of the depths of the universe.

A man. A thin, small man, his black robes falling loosely over his delicate bones. Quiet, fragile, reticent, he stood motionless, his face calm and inscrutable.

Verlem.

He inclined his head toward Lahoon, a breath of a move.

The lines of the pentacle disappeared. The light of an earthly day shone calmly upon the grasslands of the mountain. The air was quiet.

Lahoon's chant had ended. But his gaze was fixed on the man before him, his eyes deep, intense. Lahoon touched his hand to his heart and bowed deeply, still on his knees. He stayed there, his head low, his heart pounding. Then he looked up into the stranger's eyes, his face open, giving, unprotected.

Verlem stood quietly, in his shy, humble pose, his eyes dark and unfathomable. Cautiously, he began to move toward Lahoon, in small, tentative steps, pausing in between, as if in question. Lahoon answered him without hesitation. He touched his fingertips to his lips, then let them come down on the ground before him, among the waves of grass, laying his kiss at Verlem's feet.

Verlem moved closer. Lahoon stayed motionless, letting him come, opening himself up to the long, quiet gaze of those dark eyes holding his.

Verlem came to his knees before Lahoon, so close now that Lahoon could smell the strange, eldritch perfume emanating from him. Lahoon took a deep breath and leaned forward. Eyes closed, he sensed Verlem's presence, the subtle song of starlight pulsing through him. A strand of soft hair brushed against Lahoon's cheek. He could feel Verlem's breath against his ear, against his neck. Guided by some deep inner impulse, Lahoon tilted his head to one side, bringing his own lips to hover above Verlem's neck. And to kiss him.

13

“I know we are meant to radiate tension and alarm. Like fierce warriors facing a terrible danger.” Rebonya looked around the Behrlem town square, where people were bustling between stalls or idling under the shady trees, making music with a friend or having a chat. Over on one side, old women were playing a game. Children were chasing dogs, each other, or small balls across the sand.

Rebonya grinned. “But really. I guess most of us are beginning to enjoy ourselves. There are worse ways of spending your day than hanging out in the plaza.” Her grin became a smirk. She intoned her next words like a quotation from an old teacher. “The humdrum serenity of the general public is corroding the warrior soul!”

Rebonya leaned back comfortably against the wall. Gureev kept on standing, lithe and poised, as usual.

“But the best part of it is the increased freedom of movement.” Rebonya’s brow furrowed. “Or the worst part, perhaps. It’s not just that we are stationed at corners, no. Even after our shifts are over, we do not return straight to the garrison. The soldiers stay in town.” She shook her head. “Unthinkable, only a few days ago. There used to be no compromise whatsoever of the civil character of the town. Not a flicker of doubt about what the role of soldiers in Behrlem was, and what it wasn’t. But now? We go wherever we please, in uniform. As if we were here in our function as soldiers.”

Rebonya kicked at a pebble. “Horrible, if you ask me, in terms of this society. But perfect, for my private pleasures.” A smile began to creep back into her features, adding a glint to her almond eyes. “Never has it been easier to go and see Unleha. Watch her work. Ask her questions.”

Rebonya turned fully toward Gureev. “Not that much danger now of being caught and punished. But don’t you worry.” She laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Her lips were twitching. “I will continue feeling grateful. And even let it show.”

The large, oval entrance hall of the bath palace was filled with light and sunshine. But then, it always was, or at least it always felt that way. The soft yellow tone of the walls gave the whole room a feel of being bathed in mellow rays of sun even late at night, when the hall was lit by nothing more than magical lanterns.

Amalai walked past the numerous stalls, booths, and announcement boards. Works of art could be found here next to books and remedies, skillsharings and group meetings. She let her eyes roam over Lahoon's paintings as she walked up to her own booth and surveyed the contents. A lot of her ready-made herbal mixtures had disappeared, mostly those used for pleasure. Some of those with healing properties, too, and a few tinctures. She would have to replenish those, she thought, as she absentmindedly reached for the box of coins where people left their dues. It was not a bad harvest, Amalai noted contentedly, looking at the stream of silver and copper pouring into her hand.

"Precious bounty," a husky voice snarled, breathing down Amalai's neck in an overbearing drawl.

Amalai looked up.

A pirate queen leaned against her stall, very close, with one hand possessively up on the wall. Her bare arm, adorned with brazen bracelets, blocked Amalai's path in a posture somewhere between menace and lasciviousness.

Amalai laughed. "Indeed. Should I pay you tribute, O ruler of the seas?"

Unleha waved it away with a gracious gesture. She stepped back.

"How did the gathering go?" Amalai inquired, a little more seriously.

Unleha shrugged. "Well enough. A good number of people turned up, and everyone was indignant and in agreement. As expected. Tenatetlan was there, too, storming like the wrath of the gods. We truly do not need to hold our breaths. Half the town is upset about the soldiers roaming the streets, and no one is really in favor. Except a very few, perhaps. I am sure someone, somewhere, is in favor. But really, the race is run. People are angry. There is no doubt that once the three days of voting are over, the soldiers will be gone. Berqar does not stand a chance."

Unleha sighed unhappily. She pushed back her short braids, which showed first threads of silver in between the black. "I still wish we could speed it up. But at least the path is clear, and the end is in sight. Only a few days now."

Amalai nodded. "Yes. It'll be over soon."

And they both believed it when they said it.

The sun was high in the sky and on its way down when Lahoon woke. Dazed, he sat up and took in his surroundings. The mountain slope, the swaying grasses. The pale sky, the rocks, the deewelarque.

Lahoon ran a hand through his hair. He must have fallen asleep in the meadow.

He lay back down and closed his eyes.

Verlem had disappeared. Right before Lahoon's eyes, Verlem had dissolved into shadow and nothingness. Lahoon had remained right where he was, on his knees at the edge of the faded pentacle. He had watched, bewildered. He had called, gently, wordlessly. He had whispered Verlem's name. He had waited and waited. And finally must have fallen asleep.

Lahoon sat up again and looked around. The high grass was bending softly in the breeze, shimmering, speaking to him in rolling waves, in the language of its body. Telling of the highlands, of rain, of life as blades and roots.

Strong, hard, ageless, the boulders of the ravine's opening lay heavy on the earth. The deewelarque bushes gathered around them, crouching behind them, holding back before the expanse of open grassland. They stayed close to the shadow, to the deep rift that cleft the mountain behind them. Darkness lingered in the ravine, its depth only to be guessed at from the outside.

Lahoon got up and walked, haltingly, toward the ravine. He paused a respectful distance before the entrance and stayed quiet, feeling the slow, steady beat of his heart. Listening to the whispering breeze. To the silence of the stones. To the rustle of the deewelarque.

Verlem was there.

He stood in the shadow of one of the bushes, his eyes on Lahoon. Lahoon blushed, then bowed, slightly, shyly.

Verlem walked away between the deewelarque. Lahoon saw him move with easy, fluid motion, over the outcroppings of the ravine's entrance. Then Verlem turned, his dark eyes looking back at Lahoon.

And Lahoon followed.

He could not see Verlem anymore, but he felt no doubt.

He had been invited, called in.

* * *

When Kortid came back to the garrison after hurrying across the dusky streets of Behrlem, seeing the black outline of the castle approach was a welcome sign of home, of refuge, of safety.

But it was all fake. As Kortid walked across the courtyards and into the east wing, darkness only wrapped around him more tightly, more menacingly. When night fell, all magic swords of light moved out into town with the guards. There was no one and nothing to protect them here. In their sleep, they were utterly defenseless, tender and vulnerable as a litter of soft-bellied puppies.

Kortid crossed his arms over his chest. No soldier could fight off a demon this way. They were just laying themselves at the fiend's feet like willing or clueless sacrifices, ready to be devoured at a whim.

Kortid gave a short, hoarse laugh, a cough of desperate anger. He sat down on his mat, hugging his knees to his chest, staring at the waning moon as it slowly paled into the morning sky.

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Kortid saluted. Berqar did not seem to notice. Eventually, she did look up from the papers on her desk and acknowledged his presence.

“Speak!”

“Commander!” Kortid's voice held grim determination. “I beg to volunteer for guard duty in the castle. At night. With a magic sword at the ready, so that my comrades may sleep safely.”

14

Lahoon walked up to the little house hidden in the ravine, a humble abode pressed up against the mountainside, made of unhewn stone, the same as the rock behind it. It looked old and comfortable, and very small. Lahoon ran his hand over the lintel of the low wooden door. He went through.

The room inside was dim and filled with a dusty smell. The whole place did not feel lived in. It seemed more like a painting. A theater scenery stored in an attic. A dream of an old place. A pressed flower in a book. Lahoon turned a page. He ran his finger over the sideboard, feeling the dryness of dust, smelling the age. The floorboards creaked very softly under his step. Lahoon strained his eyes, striving to penetrate the shadowy gloom. He tried to find Verlem. He could not.

He turned around to walk the short distance across the room. There was a small fireplace, but no fire in it. No ash, either. Lahoon sat down on a narrow, creaky bed by the wall. The mat felt hard and lumpy. He ran his hand over the covers, half expecting them to crumble into dust under his touch. They did not. Lahoon looked up. Verlem was there. His eyes were on Lahoon.

Lahoon licked his lips. He stood, in reverence, in anticipation, in uncertainty. He felt his heart beat against his chest, a steady pounding, an alert, a call, urging his whole body into a state of attention and aliveness. His breathing grew shallow. He regarded Verlem for a long while from across the room. Then Lahoon began to walk toward him, with shy, hesitant moves, holding Verlem's gaze.

Verlem did not stir.

His face delicate and pale, his eyes almost black, he watched and waited.

Lahoon moved on cautiously, closer and closer. His feet followed the call of a long-suffering yearning, a pent-up desire within Lahoon's soul. They came to a halt when Lahoon was so near he almost touched Verlem with his body. He remained there, motionless.

Verlem let his breath fall into Lahoon's hair, over his ear, his cheek. His voice mingled into it, very softly, an ethereal crown on the stirring waves of air. "You have come to me."

"Yes." Lahoon's murmur rolled out without doubt, without hesitation. A confession, and a pledge.

Verlem touched a finger to Lahoon's cheek, caressing the tender, velvety surface, the shimmering tinges of cerulean and forest green. He breathed in the scent of Lahoon's body, deeply, longingly, closing his eyes. "I would drink your blood."

Lahoon froze. Out of the cold, he whispered. "Will I die?"

"No." Verlem's eyes flew open. "No. I will not harm you. You will live, and be well. I only take what you can easily spare."

Lahoon moved back a pace and leaned against the hard, solid wall of rock behind him. He rested his head on the stone, feeling its roughness, and took a deep breath. He could still sense Verlem's presence, just as strongly, even at a distance.

"This is how I live." Verlem's voice was low. "By taking the life force of others into myself. Their essence." He touched the bend of Lahoon's arm, and Lahoon felt the brief pressure of his fingers. "But it is for pleasure, too. And sometimes for love."

Lahoon let his gaze rest upon Verlem. Verlem stood in his shy, unobtrusive pose, his slender form showing underneath his loose black robes. With the slightest of moves, Verlem came to lean against the harsh, uneven rock of the wall, just beside Lahoon. Their shoulders touched. Lahoon closed his eyes. His skin tingled. His blood tingled. His whole body was breathing in the presence of Verlem.

Lahoon could feel a sense of magic run through his veins like a soft golden fire, filling the marrow of his bones with its glow. His breathing grew shallow, unsteady. He was taken in by a cloud of longing, a sense of power, of alien and unspeakable otherness. His whole being yearned for it, craved it, stretched toward it. Lahoon could sense the realm of fay calling out to him, with a deep, hoarse sound, a sweet, soft tune, a siren song. He could not resist. He did not want to resist. He reached for it. He felt for Verlem's presence beside him, for the silvery starlight, the dark shadow, the ethereal wraith, the unfathomable enigma of him. And Lahoon let himself go, let himself be enveloped by that presence completely, in utter abandon.

His body softened, leaned toward Verlem, eased into the mounds of rock and body beside him.

"Yes," Lahoon murmured. "Yes. I want to be with you. Fully. In every way I possibly can. I will give of myself to you, of my body, my blood. I want to. I will share my essence with you."

Lahoon pulled his tunic over his head, the play of muscles beneath his skin barely visible as his torso stretched, his arms reaching out over his head. In the twilight of the abode's chamber, his butterfly skin shimmered softly, in mysterious hues.

He turned toward Verlem, letting his gaze roam over Verlem's still, pale face, the lines of his cheekbones, the hair drawn back over his temples. The slim, fragile bones of his wrists, his shoulders. The black robes falling loosely around his body in smooth, wide folds. The robe's fastenings, running down his chest.

Lahoon stared. Slowly, he raised his eyes to Verlem's. And then, guardedly, pleadingly, his hand, to let his finger touch the first clasp, the one right beneath Verlem's neck. Verlem did not move. His dark eyes held Lahoon's gaze. Lahoon swallowed.

With restrained, deliberate motions, he opened the first of the fastenings on Verlem's robes. Verlem stood quietly. Cautiously, Lahoon opened another. His heart was hammering in his chest. He breathed in deeply, inhaling the smell of the chamber, the dust, the age. And the strange, enticing, alien scent of Verlem. Lahoon stepped closer, taking in the fragrance. His face was right beside Verlem's now, ever closer, never touching. He opened yet another hook, and another, without any other contact, any other movement. Finally, he had reached the last one, down at Verlem's waist.

The fabric fell open just a crack over Verlem's chest. With great care, Lahoon touched the line of clasps, the edge of the fabric, moving his fingers up and down along it. Then he let his hand slide underneath. Gently, he let it come to rest on Verlem's skin, on his chest. Lahoon felt a strange rhythm pulse against his palm, a beat no human heart could possibly make. He bit his lip. He bent his head and dipped his face more deeply into Verlem's hair. He began to move his hand slightly, shifting the cloth aside, over one delicate shoulder. It fell halfway down Verlem's back. Lahoon, still standing close, began to push the cloth up over the other shoulder, letting it fall back. Verlem moved now, just a little. He shrugged the robe off, pulling his arms free, letting the fabric pool around his feet. He stood naked. There, still as quiet, as inoffensive, as shy as always. And it tugged at Lahoon's heart as much as it ever had. In the dim and dusty light, Lahoon's eyes moved over the smooth surface of Verlem's body, seeing no nipples, no navel. Between his thighs, his belly curved in, smooth and round, with no interruption, no opening. Just white, tender skin. Lahoon's bewildered eyes met Verlem's.

"I am not animal," Verlem said softly. "I am not born. I do not give birth.

I do not spread my seed to others of my kind. I do not eat and drink the way you do.”

He came up just a little, a breath of a movement, bringing him closer to Lahoon. “But I do feel,” he whispered. “With all of my body. And with all of my soul.”

The air rasped in Lahoon’s lungs. His breath came ragged. Verlem’s skin shone pale as a cloud before him. His body seemed as fragile as rare china. Slowly, deliberately, Lahoon closed the last distance between them, letting the naked skin of their bodies meet. As his arms embraced Verlem, holding him, treasuring him, Lahoon felt the sense of his presence fill him.

Excitement spread through Lahoon’s whole being like a wave. He sighed, a half moan. His hand began to roam across Verlem’s back almost of its own accord, exploring him keenly, reverently. Lahoon rested his temple against Verlem’s head, his eyes closed. He could feel Verlem’s smile, Verlem’s pleasure, like his own. Or perhaps it was his own. He could not distinguish anymore. Nor did he want to. He touched his lips against Verlem’s cheek. His skin felt as tender as it looked. Lahoon savored every bit of it. His hands wandered over Verlem’s chest unhurriedly. The same dust-dry skin. A light, delicate body. Lahoon let his mouth move over to Verlem’s, and kissed him. His tongue caressed Verlem’s lips, then slid over a sharp, thin fang. Lahoon felt the sting, and a slight taste of blood on his tongue. He deepened the kiss.

Then Verlem pulled back. Just a little. He took a small step away from Lahoon and disappeared. He dissolved into shadow. And reappeared, only an arm’s length away, an apparition made of fog and stardust. His skin shimmered pale as moonlight. Lahoon took a step toward him, involuntarily, as if drawn by magic. Verlem dissolved into darkness. And reappeared, just a little distance away, his back half turned, his dark eyes looking back at Lahoon, inviting, beckoning. Lahoon followed, lost in the call of the fay appearing and disappearing before his eyes, the forms of shadow and mist leading him on, across that room filled with night, onto the dusty bed.

Lahoon lay down on the worn sheets, stretching out beside the thin white form of Verlem’s body, only to see him dissolve into nothingness once again. And then, to feel him reappear right on top of him. Verlem’s naked body came to lie on Lahoon, legs between legs, brow against brow. Lahoon felt the tingle of Verlem’s body all over. As if stardust had settled onto his own skin directly, as if that energy of the universe was pouring out all over him. Lahoon tilted his head back and moaned.

Verlem kissed his cheek. And then his neck, his chest, his dark nipples. He let his lips roam Lahoon's butterfly skin, leaving a trace of sparkle, the feel of magic wherever they went. Lahoon's body stretched, one arm up behind the head, enthralled by the touch, begging for more. Lahoon's breathing came raggedly. He was half lost. Yet with his other hand, he held Verlem's head, guiding it softly, or following it, on its move down his body.

Verlem's mouth roamed his belly, every tender, yielding bit of velvety skin on it. Then his fingers found the bow of Lahoon's trousers and pulled them open. Consciously, deliberately, Verlem's hand followed the round curve of Lahoon's buttocks, the long slender thigh, the intricate delicacy of the knee, the arch of his foot, pulling all the fabric down along with it on its journey. Lahoon felt his touch, his move. He lay naked, his inky hair in disarray around his head, his oceanic skin glowing in mellow hues of blue and aquamarine. He felt Verlem's dark eyes upon him. And then he felt Verlem's lips again, on his thigh, on his belly, all over his body, and gave an uncontrolled sound. His eyes were half closed, wild with desire. As Verlem started to caress his arousal with a silky, teasing touch, Lahoon's body began to writhe, to arch into Verlem's hand. He tossed his head from side to side, his lips parted, until finally his moans turned into screams of pleasure and abandon as he exploded into the ecstasy of Verlem's firm strokes and the embrace of his whole being.

*

Lahoon lay exhausted, feeling the aftermath of the last waves of bliss roll through him. His limbs seemed filled with a glow, the balmy shimmering light of embers. He exhaled deeply. His whole body lay soft and warm, deep and heavy in a pool of surrender and fulfillment.

As he gazed out from under his lashes, Lahoon saw Verlem's dark eyes resting on him. A lazy smile played over Lahoon's lips. "Come," he murmured. "Come to me."

Verlem bowed down, breathing a kiss onto Lahoon's palm, skimming the velvety line of his wrist. Lahoon opened to his touch, yielding to him in tranquil welcome. Verlem's mouth was on his inner arm, grazing its tenderness, rasping against its smoothness. On the fine, sensitive skin—almost translucent—of the elbow's crook, where blue veins formed a shimmering current in the ocean of Lahoon's azure skin. Their pulse was beating live and warm against Verlem's lips. Verlem raised his face to look up. His dark eyes seemed bottomless.

"Yes," Lahoon whispered.

A brief, icy glint. A swift move, almost imperceptible, and Lahoon sensed the strong, warm pulse of his life force gush out in the rhythm of his heartbeat. He breathed in deeply. He could feel the blood drain from his body, a flow, a letting go, a river on its inexorable course toward the sea. Immersed in peaceful acceptance, bathed in the afterglow of lovemaking, Lahoon let himself be washed away, melting ever more deeply into the great calm that enveloped him already. Undone, consummated, Lahoon sank down into an unfathomable sea of deliverance, of homecoming.

Notice

from the County Scrutinizer
for Learning Pavilions
Behrlem District

to

Diamondtip School of Cadets
and all staff and students within it

- o) No order given may endanger the life or the health of a cadet. This includes orders given for purposes of correction.
- o) If you receive any such order, do not follow it.
- o) If you hear of anyone else receiving such an order, help them not to follow it.
- o) Report any such instance to the county scrutinizer.

The county scrutinizer will pay regular visits to the Diamondtip School of Cadets. Please leave messages on anything that could possibly be of interest to the scrutinizer, including small matters or unverified suspicions, in the sealed box behind the kitchen. Please also alert the scrutinizer directly in case of urgency.

Unleha let the sheet sink down and raised her eyes to Rebonya.

"These notices have been put up all over the garrison, including in each cadet bedroom." Rebonya clearly thought that hilarious. "In addition, the county scrutinizer said it all again in a speech given in front of all cadets. All cadets who did not happen to be out on indispensable duty warding off demons," she amended. "So that was only a fraction of the actual number. But still." She grinned. "That speech did happen. With Berqar present, having to listen to it all. And having to keep her face as straight as she possibly could." Rebonya sneered. "In fact, she kept it so extremely straight that the disdain and opposition could not have been expressed more clearly. But she had to be there, and to let that speech happen."

Rebonya wriggled in the tight space she had on the bench beside Unleha. "That in itself feels like a huge victory to me."

The inside of Unleha's artificer cabin was as crammed with magical implements as always. As full as it could possibly get without becoming completely unusable. Rebonya picked up a long, shiny wand of brass. "The scrutinizer was talking to people one-on-one," she related. "She had a clever system for that. A smart way of guiding people into and out of rooms so that no one would know who has been with her for hours, and who only said, 'I know nothing' and left." Rebonya nodded approvingly. "A wise thing to do. And necessary, given the state of things in the garrison. Nobody here would want to be identified as the traitor. The one who actually talked to the scrutinizer."

Rebonya turned the smooth wand over in her hand, a thoughtful expression on her face. The amethyst set in the brass tip shone gently in the muted light of the cabin. "But even with all these efforts, it will not change all that much. Yes, those notices will be hanging on walls for some time, because they have to. But everyone knows damn well that they are to think and to speak and to act as if they despise those notes. Public spitting is encouraged."

Rebonya lunged into a low, menacing stance as she pointed the wand at the disarray of spun glass and scrolls on Unleha's workbench. "And everyone is still under Berqar's command. That has not changed. The structure is still the same. We are not free. Nor equal. We are still underlings in a system of order and obedience."

Relenting, Rebonya sank back onto her seat beside Unleha. She tapped the wand lightly against the palm of her hand. "But there is a little chink in that power now. A little scratch. A little note saying that power has limits. That another way of looking at things may be possible."

A wicked grin spread over Rebonya's face, reaching from one ear to the other. "Do not follow orders'. 'Judge for yourself if an order given is all right'. 'Help others to not follow orders'." Rebonya was close to bursting. "It was priceless. I could have been shouting with joy and laughter all the way through."

* * *

In the still, dark hours before dawn, Kortid was standing guard in the east wing. His steps left a hollow echo in the surrounding silence. Like a warrior's cathedral, the vaults over the main garrison staircase rose up before him, vast and empty. A torch flickered at the bottom, licking up at the darkness in alcoves and corners. Swords long unused and archaic halberds lined the walls, gruesome maces and dull, dented breastplates. Shadows among shadows lived there, conversing hushed murmurs. The ghosts of ages had settled into discomfort here, haunting the fortress.

Kortid turned. In the hallway, he passed door after door, trying to imagine the sleepers behind them. Their slow, even breaths, their soft bodies, their closed eyes. The trust they had in the calm of the night. Kortid clenched his teeth. A barred window beside him gave him a glimpse of the moon, its pale remains waning to a sickle, its feeble shimmer outlining stern iron rods against the sky. Before him, the corridor lay silent. Magical lanterns were placed at great distances along the walls, their paltry glow only accentuating the darkness in between. Like a fathomless ocean, the night loomed in the passage, hiding unknown creatures in its depths, the frail, distant shine from some far-off lighthouse doing nothing to deter them.

Kortid tightened his hold on the magic sword. He peered into corners, into their shadows. He heard his heart beat in his chest. He lowered the blade, letting the bright blue beam pierce the obscurity, reveal all alien presence within the waves of darkness. There was none. Only the walls. A closet. A narrow wooden bench. Kortid spun around. Behind him, only walls. The stone slabs of the floor. Kortid released a breath. He walked on. A shutter creaked. Kortid jerked. And he saw. Before him, where the corridor turned, a dark mangled mass lay in the corner. Fallen, pressed down. Limbs distorted, the belly torn open. Kortid stepped forward, drawn by inexorable horror, by a vision of Hun's frozen face, a stare from cold, dead eyes.

Kortid's feet grew unsteady. His head was swimming. He sat down quickly and put his head between his knees, all the while keeping the sword raised and his grip firm.

His head recovered. The faintness left. Kortid looked up. The shining blue beam lit up the corner. And within it, the broken parts of an old suit of armor. Dull and black, the helmet gaped at him with hollow emptiness. A cuisse stood out at an impossible angle from beneath the breastplate. Gauntlets devoid of hands pointed into nothingness. All around the lifeless body parts, tools and wire lay spread about in random disorder, as if those working their craft to restore a vanished knight to his erstwhile form had been spirited away in midmotion.

Kortid exhaled. He slumped against the wall, listening to the feeble, irregular beat of his heart. He stared at the bare slabs of the floor before him, seeing nothing. Slowly, his body recovered.

Kortid heaved a deep sigh, a shaky, desperate affair. He slid up the wall and rested his weight against it for a moment. Then he pushed off and walked on, sword at the ready, jaw set, shoulders squared. On, for endless rounds along the hollow, echoing hallways. A lone sentinel, dwarfed by the towering darkness of a forbidding castle, determined to brave the demons of the night and of his own heart.

16

The light of the sun filtered down into the ravine, filling the world with colors. Lahoon was lying in the soft grass near the well, looking up into the sliver of sky above him.

He reached out a hand toward Verlem. "I do not wish to leave you," Lahoon said. "I have only just found you. And a whole world with it. One I have always yearned for."

Verlem bent forward and let his hand touch Lahoon's hair. It shimmered like spilled ink in the morning light, flowing out into the green grass. Behind him, the slim leaves of the deewelarque rustled softly in the breeze.

Verlem leaned over him, closer, and touched his lips to Lahoon's brow, to his cheeks, to his closed eyelids. Then he withdrew. "I want your love. Very much," he said quietly. "But I do not know how to be with you. No human has ever loved me as fervently before, wanted me in their animal life that much. I do not know what I can do. Or what it will do to me."

Verlem's dark eyes were on Lahoon's face. "But I know I cannot be with you night and day. It would be too much. I cannot hold it." His legs moved lightly against Lahoon's side. "I want to be with you, but I need to be away as well. I need to be with the air. With space. With cosmos. I need to dissipate."

Lahoon curled up around Verlem's touch, cradling him with his whole body. "You are a miracle to me. A mystery. And I wish to know you. To feel as you feel, see as you see."

The deewelarque bushes stood quiet, gnarled, their spindly branches crooked and angular. A black beetle crawled along a shadowed twig, tiny sharp feet holding on to the bark, making his way in between thin air and a web of narrow wooden footholds.

Verlem's voice drifted out toward Lahoon from a place somewhere deep in the branches of that deewelarque. "There is magic in you. And in me. And the beings around us." The leaves held very still. "We may be able to share that way."

Amalai lit a magical lantern, the soft golden glow making the hazel sheen of her skin come out and her black curls glint with embers.

Lahoon looked at her. He had come to the end of his tale, in a rambling fashion, with many pauses. He had given Amalai images of what had happened to him, where he had been, with Verlem. Amalai had leaned into his arms, against his chest, and listened. She had heard him.

Lahoon reached out to her, touching her hand, her arm. His voice was low, melodious, dreamy still. "I hope you do not mind that I love him so passionately? You are not afraid?"

"Do I have reason to be afraid?" Amalai turned her dark eyes toward him.

Lahoon swallowed down an instant reply. Instead, he leaned in, touching his brow against her temple, giving himself time to feel, to discern. To be truthful, as deeply honest as he possibly could, to himself as well as to her. "Do you?" he murmured, a question to himself. "Do you have reason to be afraid?"

He listened to the soft waves of her breath, her chest rising and falling in rhythm with his own. Her skin was warm against his brow, and her curls pulled back at his fingers as he probed them questioningly.

Lahoon drew back. "No," he said, his voice firm again, his eyes holding hers. "No." He shook his head slightly. "No reason. You will not lose me. Why would you? The love I feel for Verlem is in addition to the love I feel for you. Not instead of. It does not replace anything. It only adds."

Lahoon cupped her cheek in his hand, holding her gently. Tenderly, thoughtfully, he traced a line along her chin with his finger. "Your presence is rooted so deeply in my life. It is so strong, so important. And it has been there all this time. We are good together, very good. I cannot possibly imagine I would want to lose that. To lose you." He drew her close, hugging her tightly as if to ward off the danger of her drifting away.

"And there is no reason. Is there?" he asked, needing reassurance. "Unknown worlds are opening up before us. Worlds I have always longed for. And now can reach." He turned to Amalai. "But I do not need to go alone. We can go together, and our relationship will be all the deeper for it."

Lahoon leaned in closely, feeling Amalai's scent fill his nostrils. "You are home to me," he breathed into her hair. "And you always will be. I need a home, even to be able to travel, to see other worlds. I need a place to come from, to belong to. I would be a fool to think I should cut my roots in order to grow into the sky." He kissed her temple. "We need both. Home and travel. Roots and sky."

Lahoon drew back to look at her, uncertain, hopeful. "Don't we?"

Amalai nodded. She snuggled up against his chest. "We do," she purred into the crook of his neck. "And I cannot imagine a more cherished travel companion than you. Or a more beloved home."

She wrapped her fingers in the cuff of Lahoon's sleeve, burying them between the weave of the fabric and the velvet of his butterfly skin. "We do not have to lose each other when we go to Verlem. We can both go, together." She straightened up a little. "Or, we can be together, and both go. Even if we each go on slightly different routes. Each in our own way."

She laughed, a low, bubbling sound. "I am quite glad I have had a head start, meeting Verlem on my own before you burst in with your passion. I might never have stood a chance with my slow, quiet ways otherwise."

Lahoon wagged his head, a lopsided grin on his lips. "Verlem is so quiet himself that I would be surprised if he had not responded to you. Even with my explosions of yearning to distract him."

He covered Amalai's entangled hand with his own. "There may be a little trouble, though," Lahoon added hesitantly. "A little reason to be afraid. For at the moment, I am indeed overwhelmed. It may well be that, for now, for some time, all my thoughts and feelings and dreams and actions do indeed circle around Verlem. This is all so new, and so elating. I may be lost, obsessed, one-pointed in all my attentions for a while. Even if underneath it all, your presence in my life is as important as it has ever been. And my love for you just as strong. I may still be somewhat absent for a while. With my whole world revolving around Verlem, with all my senses turned toward him, toward his wondrousness, always." There was worry in his voice now. "Will it be all right? You will not suffer too much from it? Will we both feel the strength of our bond and be reassured?"

Amalai held his gaze. Then a crooked smile came to her face. "Well, you have been half lost to fay for as long as I have known you. Only, back then, it was unfulfilled yearning. Now your love is requited, the path opened. I take that to be an improvement."

She ran her free hand through his hair with a teasing tug. "And I have my own life to live. I will not sit by the window and sigh, waiting for you to come home. You can go off into a whirl of passion and mystery with Verlem. I will garden. I will see the sun rise, and smell the scent of the leaves as they unfurl. I am deeply immersed in the community of life, and every root holds wonders enough for me."

Her fingers slid down over his tender cheek, down to moss-green shadows beneath his chin. "And I have my own love for Verlem, too. Even if it is a quiet, patient kind of love, a gentle companion. It may look like

a young seedling sprouting, slim and tender. But the force a seedling holds within is the force of life itself: phenomenal. In its quiet, steady ways, it grows the biggest trees of all. So I am not even sure that in the end, my love for Verlem will not go just as far as yours, or beyond. I am simply not in a hurry," she grinned at him.

Lahoon laughed, a low, pleasant chuckle. "No, you're not. You rarely are." He sank down deeply into her embrace, giving himself over to a lingering kiss and the blessings of coming home to her warm, round, earthly body.

17

The night of the new moon crept up on the square, oozing out of shadowy corners and narrow alleyways. Thick round clouds of gray drifted across the sky, heavy and sullen beneath the darkening arc of the sky.

But a good number of people were still crowding the place before the bath palace. Gureev stood guard by the ornate entrance like a natural part of the ensemble, another statue with graceful limbs and endless patience.

Kortid beside him was shifty, uneasy. He looked haggard, worn, like a knight-errant suffering through an endless quest, having traversed mountains and deserts without sleep or food, but still on his feet, still determined to brave the impossible task.

There was always only one magic sword for each pair of soldiers, and Gureev felt the responsibility of carrying it. He would be the one to fight, with Kortid guiding townsfolk to safety. If it ever came to that. So far, on all these evenings they had been out in town, the only event that could be observed was people coming up to tell them they shouldn't be there. But most often, not even that. Usually, the guards just stood there for hours on end, being ignored by everyone until the streets had gone dark and empty, and the shift ended. It seemed rather flat, day after day.

But then, Gureev reminded himself, that probably was just the nature of the dutiful guard. You stayed in place for ages, silently, reliably, apparently doing nothing at all, only to be there without fail at that one crucial moment when you were needed. When you had to be fast as lightning to save people's lives.

He took a deep breath and straightened up a bit more, his eyes roaming the place before him. People were sauntering in and out of the bath palace, idling in small groups, talking and laughing. They ambled across the square, sat down on benches, or disappeared into lanes between the houses, where one window after the other began to glow with the gentle golden light of magical lanterns. Tall trees with huge, wide crowns lined the place on either side. Their leaves were rustling, a little restlessly. The wind was uneasy.

Then a sudden gust swept across the place, so unexpected and violent that everyone hushed, holding on to their clothes, surprised and wide-eyed. The susurrations of leaves grew louder, uncanny, eerie. Beyond what any tree on earth could possibly produce. People looked about in confusion.

Between the inky trunks, whirling wraiths of dust rose up from the ground in raging vortexes, whining in thin, high wails, in bodiless whimpers. From the bushes and undergrowth, darkness black as night began to seep out, pouring across the ground like rivers of pitch, gathering together on the square, a bubbling quagmire of nightmare.

People were staring. A paralysis of dread had fallen over the square. Frozen in fear, people watched as the blackness grew.

A shadow began to rise up from within the pool of boiling pitch, a vague shape that had nothing human to it despite the outward form. Still half composed of dripping liquids, the being turned its head.

"Demon!" Kortid's scream tore through the air. "Demon!!" His voice turned impossibly high and thin, like a cry from the realm of ghosts itself.

"Seek shelter!" Kortid grabbed the first man by his side and shoved him toward the palace. Then he spun around to let his feverish eyes dart over the scene. People were fleeing into lanes and doorways, huddling together in the far corners of the square. Others stood frozen outside the bath palace, paralyzed like a hare caught in the gaze of a snake.

Kortid acted fast. His hand was a grip of iron on their arms, hurtling them forward. With deft, forceful moves, Kortid manhandled the lingering crowd through the palace doors. The echo of his screams hung over the square like an omen.

The black shape began to advance, slowly, flowing across the sand toward the bath palace.

A sword of light blocked its way.

Gureev stood poised and ready, his eyes narrowed.

There were no thoughts left inside him. All he knew were the figure of darkness coming toward him and the moves of his own supple body.

Gureev stepped forward, his arms raised, his blade of magic aglow. Like opponents in a duel of honor, or ancient enemies in a fated encounter, the two figures faced each other, alone on the planes of the empty square.

The shadow oozed forward in an unnatural, untraceable kind of motion, but slowed down several paces before Gureev, seeming to waver. The eerie whines grew higher, even more plaintive, more piercing, an insufferable screech just beyond hearing.

Darkness flowed from the being like an odor, like tendrils reaching hungrily into the air. Slyly, evasively, the creature began to shift over to one side, starting out in a half circle toward the palace doors. Gureev matched it every step, in perfect synchronicity. He kept himself and his long sword in a precise, flawless line between the demon and the bath. In slow waves, the shadow swayed back and forth, left and right, always met directly by the parries of Gureev's shining blade.

Then time was up. The shadow had made its decision. It drew back a pace and, gathering in on itself, gave a deafening shriek as it rose up high, growing long and thin, almost lifting up off the ground. Towering above Gureev, the heinous specter hung in the air like impending doom, like an eagle about to swoop.

Gureev readied his sword.

As the figure bore down at him like lightning, Gureev struck. His blade cut through black smoke without the least bit of resistance. Gureev was thrust forward by the force of his own move, but fell on his feet lightly, using the impact to propel himself into a quick turn, the pirouette of a dancer that landed him right in combat pose again.

But the demon had been hit. Gureev's cut into thin air, into apparent nothingness, had left the fiend seared. It cringed, whimpering. But then it reared up again with a menacing howl. An arm, a tentacle, a tendril of ghostly ink was flung out, making a grab for Gureev's sword arm.

Gureev severed it with one move.

The creature screamed, the pitiful screech of a wounded animal, searing pain disfiguring its sounds. The black shape collapsed. Rivers of ink began to flow out from it like streams of blood, forming pools on the ground, seeping away into crevices. The apparition dwindled, faded. Died, or fled. Disappeared without a trace.

Utter silence lay over the scene.

The wind had stilled. No leaves moved. The people huddled on the fringes of the square held their breaths.

A first curious face poked out of a palace window.

"Heads down!" Kortid screamed. He was white as death. His body was shaking, and his voice had turned unrecognizable, alien. The demon's power had come to possess him. It spread to all the people nearby. Slowly but inexorably, it settled into their bones, cold as a shiver.

18

The third day of voting had come to an end. In the fading light of the evening, one last person gave their voice to terminate or to prolong the authorization for soldiers to stand guard in town. Then the county house closed to count the results. And to re-count, just to be sure. Since the margin was so very narrow. But then it was clear. Certified, and made official.

The race was run. And won.

By Berqar.

The soldiers would stay.

* * *

"I can't believe it. I can't believe it!" Unleha raked a desperate hand through her hair. "How could that possibly have happened?" Unleha thumped her fist against the wall. Then she sat down heavily, resting her head in her hands, staring down at the table with unseeing eyes.

The evening air flowed in through the window in slow, unperturbed moves. A bird sang to the coming of night, sweetly, melodiously, as if nothing was more important than the beauty of the sky and the love of your companion.

Unleha let her head fall forward onto the board.

* * *

Gureev licked his lips. 'What have I done? Who have I fought? I have no idea.' The knight of his vision made no response.

Gureev brought up one arm in a courtly gesture of entreaty. 'I thought it was a demon, a lethal danger. But what if it was just a being very different from me? Did it actually mean to attack? Or was I just scared of the wind, the screech, the darkness? These are signs of extreme danger to me; but to another, that may just be their nature. What they look like, without any intent to harm. If that shadow had come to me for help rather than fight, would I have realized? Would I have understood?'

Gureev could not see the knight's face beneath the helmet. The iron mask seemed hard and distant.

Gureev pleaded. 'I have hurt someone. Without having any idea who, or why. Only based on my fear, and an order.'

He shook his head. 'Hun has died. But was this the demon who killed him? Did that shadow have anything to do with it?'

Gureev stared out into the cloudy sky. He whispered inaudibly to himself, to the mare, to the knight of his dreams.

'Who have I hurt?'

* * *

Lahoon was walking through the stillness of the ravine. The deewelarque stood quiet, unmoving. The very air seemed forsaken.

"Verlem?"

Lahoon's voice was no more than a hopeful whisper.

"Verlem?"

His feet tread on stony ground, looking for the trail of soft green grass.

"Are you there? Are you all right?"

* * *

Berqar was strutting across the officer room. From the courtyard, the echo of yelled commands reverberated up to her window, mixed with the subdued thud of a hundred uniform steps.

She came to a halt with her feet firmly on the ground, her chest puffed out, undaunted by the enormity of the oil painting above her. There was a glint in her eyes as she faced it.

From a stormy highland beneath a blood-red sky, the general gazed down at her, his saber poised over the earth, the eternal war cry on his lips.

The corpses at his feet looked up at him with bulging eyes.

* * *

Lahoon carefully made his way among the rocks. A lizard fled before his feet. Murky twilight filled the ravine beneath the towering mountain, casting the world into uncertainty. Whispers fled into the deewelarque, and shadows cowered among the thorny branches.

And yet Lahoon noticed the one shadow that was different. The black shape that was a curled-up body, lying on the ground in a sea of ruffled robes.

"Verlem!" Lahoon was by his side in a heartbeat.

Verlem turned his head to look at him. He sat up, brows raised.

Lahoon let out a deep breath.

*

The air moved again in the ravine, with one cautious breath here and there, whispering to the thorny branches. The strange aroma that emanated from Verlem mingled with the scent of the deewelarque and the silence of the stone.

Lahoon breathed in deeply. He had reached the end of his tale, and the beginning of his question. "That shadow flowed out of the darkness, drew together into a form almost human." Lahoon's eyes found Verlem's. "When I first saw you, you came to me in a shape of night and shimmering aurora." His voice was low, questioning. "Was it you? Last night, at the bath?"

Verlem held his gaze, quietly. His voice was calm, as low as Lahoon's. "No."

Verlem sat still, pensive, uncertain. "How you first saw me," his voice came out hesitantly, "was due to you, more than me." He halted. "On my own, I just coalesce."

Lahoon looked at him.

Verlem looked back. Then he disappeared.

Lahoon stared at the thin air beside him, the space where Verlem had just been. His gaze fell upon stones and herbs, the blossoms of wildflowers, a bumblebee. Then the air over the ground began to dim. A shadow hung over it, a darkness growing dense, full, black, with a shimmer of starlight in its midst. It drew together, gathering its air of night within itself, closing up around the silvery gleam. And it became Verlem.

Verlem, sitting beside Lahoon in his shy, unobtrusive pose. His eyes sought out Lahoon's with a cautious, questioning gaze.

Lahoon's heart overflowed. His breathing grew ragged. He lay a finger on Verlem's hand, longing for the touch, for the feel of connection. Verlem did not move. He sat still, his dark eyes filled with listening, with waiting. Then he covered Lahoon's hand with his own. His touch was light, feathery, but it sent shivers of longing into Lahoon's body, and rivers of glimmering embers through his blood. Verlem leaned in slowly, breathing a kiss onto Lahoon's lips, loving, intangible, ethereal. Then he drew back.

Lahoon gasped. His whole body turned toward Verlem, following the pull almost out of its own volition. His hand came up to rest upon Verlem's chest, to beg him to follow as Lahoon sank down into the grass with a moan of yearning, a soft cry of desire.

Verlem came to him like a cloud of stardust.

The fragrance of wildflowers and shadowy moisture from the well drifted around Lahoon as he lay on the grass, caressing him with cool, wispy fingers. He stayed still for a long time, feeling his body press into the ground, sensing Verlem beside him. Slowly, gradually, Lahoon's mind began to ramble again, to wander along the paths of memories and open questions. Lahoon drew a deep breath.

He sat up. "That shadow outside the bath palace," he murmured, tracing lines on the ground, a pattern of riddles. "If it was not you," his voice rose in incertitude, "then who?"

Verlem let his eyes wander out across the ravine, the scattered bushes of thorns and dark leaves. The boulders, clothed in shadow on the far side. A green snake poked out her head and disappeared again in an instant.

"Who?" Verlem's question sat at his feet like another small animal, at home between the rocks and the gnarled roots. Verlem stretched out his hand and held very still, as if his fingers might be able to lure the vanished snake back into light. But nothing moved.

"Who, I do not know. Neither who, nor why."

* * *

The ferns grew up high behind the artificer's cabin, softly scraping against the crumbling amber coat of the wall as they waved and swayed in the evening breeze. A single firefly rose up, a soft green glow of fairy floating on airs of dream and midsummer nights.

Inside the cabin, Unleha had made space between shimmering crystals and heaps of scrolls, between gleaming instruments and cobwebs of spun glass. Just enough space for both of them to sit down. The dim light caught on the beads in Unleha's braids and made them glow, surrounding her black face with colors.

"So are you willing to come?" she asked, her eyebrows raised.

Rebonya nodded. "Sure. If you think so." But she hesitated. "It will be only the two of them, though, right? No one else?"

"No one else. Amalai and Lahoon. And you and me. That is all."

Rebonya nodded again, a little more confidently this time. "All right, then. Let's go." The tension had not fully gone out of her voice. But she stepped on ahead, leading the way out of the artificer's cabin into the dense bushes of the bath gardens.

A thin sickle moon hung in the sky. Rebonya was nothing more than a fleeting shadow, nearly invisible as she darted with long-practiced moves from one cover to another, keeping out of the light, out of sight. Straight on the path into the herbary.

*

The soft glow of lanterns made the floor of Amalai's craft room shine a warm golden brown. Lahoon added a cushion for Rebonya to the circle around the low table. Jars and vials glinted on the shelves, and dried bushels hanging from the rafters let a strange aroma waft through the air, scents somewhere between summer hay and forest deep, between kitchen peace and a witch's cauldron. Her eyes shining, her mind alert, Rebonya settled in beside Lahoon's velvety blue limbs.

"Masses of people turned up at the county house," Unleha fumed. "Masses. On the very last day you could cast your vote. Time enough for them to vote. No time left for us to rally more people."

Steam seemed to be rising off her. "I am sure the soldiers would have been voted out. They would be back in the garrison by now if people's general opinion had decided. But this way—all the people wanting the soldiers gone thought the race was run. No need to bother, to take the trouble of showing up at the county house. So the majority stayed home. But those few panicked ones, those who were caught in a haze of horror at the bath palace, those captured by scary tales—they all went. And carried the day."

Unleha emptied her cup and put it down on the floor behind her as if to move it out of harm's way.

"Yes," Amalai murmured into her mortar, slowly grinding her thoughts along with her seeds. "It is very suspicious. It smells of a staged illusion."

"Of course it was an illusion!" Unleha snorted. "What else could it have been? We all know there are no real demons in this world."

Amalai wagged her head.

Lahoon looked down at his hands.

But Unleha charged on, oblivious to anyone's hesitations. "That old mage used illusions to frighten people, just as mages always did before the Transition. Frighten them, and then, in their fear, have them do what he wants them to."

Unleha slapped her thigh. "And it worked! I can't believe it! I'm so angry I could scream!" She did not scream, exactly. But it was not a far way off. "How could people actually do that? Panic at the appearance of an illusion, and then run to vote in Berqar's favor?" Unleha was shaking with outrage and disbelief.

"It is worrying." Lahoon's lips were pale. With grim determination, his knife cut through his last cassava root before he left it to soak. Lahoon got up and began pacing up and down, wiping his hands with more energy than needed. "Frightening." His brow was drawn into a troubled frown. "It shows there is method in this. The interim act placing soldiers

in town was not just some random, spontaneous move by Berqar. She has a plan. And an ally. At least one ally. They are moving purposefully, deliberately. Skillfully. I don't know what they are aiming for, ultimately. But I am sure it is more than having soldiers stand at street corners for a little while. Much, much more." Lahoon turned away, rubbing his arms like someone trying hard not to shiver. "They will want to bring the old order back. As much as they can."

Amalai nodded, raking a hand through her short black curls. "We must not get caught by surprise again. We need to understand much better what is going on."

She turned her large brown eyes on Rebonya. "And that is one reason why we have asked you to join us. Because you are inside the garrison. You see and hear things that the rest of us do not. If you bring a few extra pieces of the puzzle, we might be able to put them together."

*

Amalai returned to the table, the teapot in her hand sending up wafts of steam again. "Of course we will call for a new vote," she stated. "Whatever ruses Berqar may or may not have up her sleeve. We will certainly go for another round and strive to have the soldiers voted out that way."

"You can't do that," Unleha pointed out. "You can't call a vote on the same issue right away. You'd have to wait at least one moon before you can even put up a new placard. And then half a moon until the sounding, where hopefully enough people give their voice to prove that another vote is warranted."

"Yes," Amalai agreed, unimpressed. "And when the sounding has resonated, it's yet another half moon until the voting begins." She refilled their delicate glasses with a fragrant brownish-green liquid. "So? I am not about to leave Behrlem. I will still be here when the moon is new, and full and then new again. I am not in a hurry."

Unleha ground her teeth. "I am in a hurry. I want the soldiers out tomorrow, if not yesterday."

Lahoon gave her a crooked grin. "I support that motion." He looked down upon his folded fingers. "However, in the absence of an actual plan on how to achieve that, I'd still say we go with Amalai's suggestion."

"But will you win that vote?" Rebonya wondered. "Will it not just go like the first one?"

"Certainly not!" Unleha spat. "We'll make sure it won't!" Her brow furrowed. "And that means we will call a vote. But we will need to do more than that, much more! The problem is: We do not yet know what."

* * *

“Gureev?” Rebonya’s voice was hesitant, doubtful. Almost a little pleading.

Gureev looked up from his book.

“Who else knows about your family? Apart from me and Berqar, I mean. Have you told anyone?”

Gureev shook his head.

Rebonya regarded him uncertainly. “Would you mind? If I told someone? A friend? Would it be all right?”

Gureev stood up in one quick move. “No. It would not be all right. Yes, I would mind.” He glanced at Rebonya with narrowed eyes. “What makes you think of such a thing?” He clucked. “Seeing the effect it has had here has truly let me understand why there are regulations about these matters. I should never have told you, in fact. Not admitted to it, even when you had basically figured it out on your own. You’ve never treated me as Gureev after that. All I was to you is ‘the Feudal’. And the fact that you hate Feudals does not change one bit of the principle. You’ve done it just as much as Berqar, if not more. You’ve treated me by category, with the category determined by my parents. You’ve never related to me as a person.”

Rebonya stared down at her feet, her fingers clutching the sheets. Finally, she looked up. Her eyes slid off Gureev’s face, however, and came to hang somewhere in the air beyond. “I think I have apologized for that already,” she muttered, the sound coming out through clenched teeth. “For the bit of it that is true. What’s more, I am hoping to improve. And whether you think I am doing well enough in my efforts or not, I will keep on trying.” She turned her head away, gazing intently at the wall.

The silence grew heavy.

“Sorry,” Gureev’s voice eventually floated toward her through the thick air. “I did not mean to launch an attack.” He cleared his throat. “I can see you are doing your best. And things are much improved already. We still disagree, quite often. On most things, actually. But we can talk. Like people. So I avow it is much better now.” He fell silent.

Rebonya turned to look at him. Her gaze did not slip off this time.

Gureev ran a hand over his hair. “I would just prefer not to have to go through this all the time. If other people knew, and half of them hated me for being a Feudal, and the other half adored me for being their prince, I would have no space left at all to be Gureev.” His eyes locked with Rebonya’s almost pleadingly. “I need some air to breathe. I want to be able to be myself. Or to find out what that even means. If people around me put me into categories all that much, how will I ever be free?”

19

Clear, cold water seeped through the depths of the mountain, pressed on through tiny crevices until it burst out into the open, into air, into light. In a pearly trickle it jingled down the cliff, catching glimmering sparks of day until it fell down into the embrace of polished wood.

Verlem held a dark round bowl pressed firmly against the rock. It was half full by now, a tiny mountain lake of pure, icy water. In a move so smooth that the tarn within barely lapped its shores, Verlem withdrew the vessel. He walked over to the shadow of a large old deewelarque, where a low, heavy-set boulder lay hunched on the ground, like a sunken altar, its even surface only dented by a slight hollow in the middle.

Lagoon followed wordlessly. They stood facing each other over the stone, their shoulders scratched by thorns as they sank down onto their knees. Solemnly, Verlem placed the bowl on the mountain's shrine.

The waters gave subtle, wavy signs. Then they grew still.

Verlem's back arched as he tilted his head back, reaching up into the sky with his arms. A pure tone rose from his throat, almost impossibly high, like the ring of a glass bell, while his fragile fingers wove invisible patterns into the air. Then he brought his hands down, folded them before his chest, and reached in deep between the branches of deewelarque. When his hand came back out, a lush black berry lay in his palm. At his gentle squeeze the juice spilled out, running over his fingertips, spreading its aroma of enticing sweetness, of dangerous spice, of raw unknown. With one softly spoken word, Verlem let the broken pearl fall into the water, releasing a swirl of inky threads that wove through the water like the drifting wraiths of an oracle.

Verlem's finger was soaked in black, burning juice. He raised it to paint a sign onto Lagoon's brow, the same as on his own. Lagoon took a deep breath. Reverently, he brought up his hand and let his knuckles run lightly across Verlem's closed eyes, until his fingertips came to rest against his temple, that fragile, delicate portal of skull.

Their eyes locked. Silently, they leaned in, coming ever closer until their brows touched, one searing mark against the other.

Their gazes fell down into the water that lay clear and still beneath them, now perfectly transparent again. On its surface, light and shadow danced. The sky called out to the waters and was heard, halfway. Absorbed, reflected, cast out again. As were the stark, heavy cliffs, the dancing leaves of deewelarque. The crystal lake in the bowl saw them all, held them all, and held nothing.

With breaths deep and even, bodies poised in a prayer of magic, a human and a fay allowed themselves to be met by the waters, to let their gaze get lost in the depths of emptiness and mirage, of clarity and vision.

}}} Darkness reigned. The wind howled in the crowns of trees, and the whole forest was in a state of agitation and unrest. In the middle of the narrow dirt track the body of a woman lay sprawled on the ground. Her skin was a deathly white. A few splatters of blood had spilled in the beginning, when she had tried to fight, and now formed dark stains on her collar. Other than that, only two small red marks were left on the side of her neck.

He moved away from her, satisfied. He had had his fill. He dissipated into rest, into calm, into the infinity of cosmos.

Then it came again. Gnawing hunger. Need. The feeling of lack, of unrest. So he went out to hunt. It was easy, usually, quiet and quick. And after the hollow aching, he could sink into the solace of nourishment. The strength of it, the pleasure. The life force, flowing into his being.

But there was a cost, a tension. An upheaval.

Two children howling over the corpse of the woman. A man running out toward the body of a boy, fallen just outside the farmstead. The panicked eyes of the boy, just before he died, the horror, the unspoken plea. Tears, screams, wailing.

He dissipated. He could not stand the crying. It was too much.

But he came again. To a dark courtyard, driven by a hunger that had already waited for too long, that was growing unbearable, all-consuming.

He waited, to see the door opening, the sliver of light falling out. A woman walked out to the stables, and gave a short squeal before she fell with a thud. Her hot blood gushed out in waves, full of strength, rushing into his need, into his desperate craving. All of his being was reeling with relief. He sank down into salvation, into utter absorption.

And did not hear it coming.

Suddenly, flaming torches were all around him, too close, moving fast.

Gleaming pitchforks, and a stampede of people, screaming rage and disgust. He had not a moment to lose. He tried to draw back. But it was so hard, the effort of pulling away from the gushing source of life an impossible exertion, like swimming up against a raging torrent.

He did not make it.

The pitchfork ripped into his body.

A sharp, searing pain tore through him like a scream, his own scream, high, screeching, eerie, a harpy's death cry. {{{

Lahoon jerked back. The bowl skidded over the altar and fell off with a splash, spilling the holy waters into the dust. Verlem pulled away, his eyes unfocused, confused.

Lahoon's breath was coming raggedly. He was slow to gather a sense of his surroundings. Erratically, haphazardly, images of the ravine came back into his consciousness. The dark deewelarque bush beside him. The sheer wall of the cliff. The air. He breathed in deeply.

By now, Verlem had come back enough to be able to hold Lahoon's gaze.

"What was that?" Lahoon whispered, his voice husky, broken. "Is this what happened?"

Verlem folded his legs beneath him. He sat up still, erect, beside the hunching boulder. His dark eyes were on Lahoon, his voice low, tentative. Verlem nodded, with his mind more than his body. "It is what happened. Or how it felt to me. Who I was, how it was, when I lived like this. When I did not even think to ask if there was any other way."

20

A languid afternoon breeze blew down from the mountains, making the herbs on the terrace nod in acknowledgment, mingling their own minds and scents and pollen into the fragrant breath migrating down from the highlands.

"But we should be doing something in the plaza!" Unleha slapped her thigh. "We need to mobilize people properly this time. Have a whole crowd turn up on the days of the sounding!"

Lahoon wordlessly elbowed the mending basket over, and Rebonya picked out a random sock.

Amalai wagged her head. "Maybe we should." She squinted into the sunny sky over the roof terrace. "But it should be of a different nature. In a different spirit. Not another round of fear or anger."

Unleha huffed. "Like what, then? Do you want us to joke around a little?"

Amalai grinned. "Why not? Would that be so bad?" She poked a ball of wool with her needle. "Really, why shouldn't we make everything more lighthearted. Joyful. Friendly. And patient, or trusting and tolerant."

Lahoon rolled up his perfectly darned stockings with a sour expression on his face. "I don't think I can muster any trust or tolerance for the soldiers." He paused. His gaze drifted over to Rebonya. "Present company excluded, of course." His ears had gone from blue to purple, a self-conscious grin stealing into his features. And then the sparkle was back in his eyes. "This is good! Seems I can even learn something here. I am beginning to like it."

Rebonya winked at him mischievously.

But Unleha was not going to get sidetracked. Impatiently, she drew her thread tight. "We ought to hold rallies in the plaza." She half turned. "Without the participation of our most trusted soldier, I am afraid."

Rebonya sneered. "Don't be too sure. No telling where my guard duty will take me. If I am lucky, I may be positioned right in the middle of your party that very day."

"A party?" Amalai looked at her, wondering. "Like a celebration?" She turned to Unleha, then to Lahoon. "Like a fair? Like a pleasant evening out in town? With food and amusements?"

"With music," Lahoon put in, his eyes locking with Amalai's.

"With music," Amalai agreed.

Lahoon's eyes were shining as he turned back to Unleha. "How about it? I could give a concert in the plaza. Or invite people to improvise with me. It would draw some folks." Lahoon spread his hands out over his yarns. "Wouldn't that be good?"

Unleha beamed back at him. "It would. Even though I don't like your songs. As you know. But many others do, and if those all show up it'll be great." She thoughtfully tapped a finger against her lips. "One of my lovers wanted to host a seed swap anyway. That would be ideal. We could combine that, and a few smaller fun things to do. Then loads of people will turn up. All idling around, having lots of time to drop in at the county house and add their voice. We'll only need to suggest it to them."

Lahoon's grin was irrepressible now. He turned to Amalai with palpable satisfaction. "There. You wanted a mood totally unlike anger or fear. And here it is. A celebration, a creative, convivial fair. That's practically the direct opposite, is it not?"

* * *

Kortid was still far from the castle. He moved through the dusky lanes with a stride both swift and furtive. His lips were set in a thin line.

His comrades had swerved toward a tavern, so Kortid was walking home alone, against his own better judgment. Evening descended upon the town, and gloomy dimness was gathering in nooks and crannies, in courtyards and alleyways, in the hindmost corners of people's gardens. The broad eaves were filled with shadows, hovering overhead in vague congregations. Slate-gray bushes hunched like cowering strangers behind open archways.

Unbidden, a memory rose up in Kortid's mind, of a tenebrous forest, of a black outline, a demonic shape. Heavy as coal, inexorable as the night, it pressed the last of Hun's life out of his helpless body.

Kortid drew his sword. The only sword he had, one of hard, cold steel. It gave no shining beam, but as Kortid tilted it sideways, it caught a gleam from the streetlight that ran up and down its sharp edge like a promise, a small spark of hope.

Kortid inhaled deeply. His body poised, ready, he walked on, his eyes darting ahead, into every hidden alcove, every murky doorway.

When the shadow moved, Kortid was faster than lightning.

He had his sword up against the throat of an elderly woman before she even realized he was there.

Kortid lowered his sword instantly.

"I apologize," his voice came, almost unrecognizably low and rough. "It is hard to tell one shadow from another in the darkness. I am watching for demons. It is now that they are most likely to come. At dusk. That was when they killed, in the forest."

Kortid cleared his throat and took a step back. His eyes were hard. "You had better stay inside at this hour."

He nodded an ominous farewell at the woman, who stood frozen and speechless at the threshold of her home, staring after Kortid and his blade as they disappeared into the night.

* * *

A cloud moved in before the sinking sun, casting shadows of blue and gray over the plaza, letting night come out early from corners and alleyways.

Rebonya stood behind Gureev, grinding her teeth as usual. Gureev stepped forward fluidly, athletically, to greet the soldier coming toward him from the opposite row. They bowed.

Berqar's shout cut through the air, and bright blue beams shot up, rays of hope in the gloom, beacons of power and glory. They began to move, slowly and gracefully, rising up, turning, falling, and coming back with a flourish. The soldiers wielded their swords in practiced moves, a courtly dance rehearsed again and again inside the garrison. To be repeated in town. Every night. The changing of the guard. A ritual, freshly invented, yet carrying the sound of tradition, and the air of magic. The beauty of a performance. The promise of a presence. The promise, or the dire, unspoken threat.

*

Lahoon and Amalai walked home in silence through the falling night. The large, bulky shapes of houses around them settled down comfortably into the darkness, seeming ever sturdier and more grounded as the colors faded. In their windows, softly gleaming eyes blinked a mellow gold. But the minds of the two wanderers still held other visions. Of a plaza filled with soldiers, filled with magic.

"It was beautiful," Lahoon finally said, in a voice of reproach and disdain. His arms raised, he offered an elegant flourish, a half turn, a dancer's step. He stopped, shaking his head in anger. "How dare they abuse beauty for such a thing." Lahoon crossed his arms over his chest. "And it all builds on Pramus's magic."

He strode on grimly. "Even if all the lights and thunder of the sword blessing were illusion, Pramus did do real magic. He changed reality with his ritual that night."

Lahoon stepped onto their porch, kicking off his shoes.

"For people believed. I am sure of it. The power of Pramus's performance bound them. Some of the soldiers, and some of the townsfolk, really are convinced now that these swords are magical, able to challenge a demon. As we saw at the bath palace."

Lahoon glanced up at Amalai while washing his feet. "Belief moves mountains. If perceptions have changed, behavior will also change. And so, reality on all levels has changed. In people's hearts, in people's actions, and in whatever results these actions bring."

He lit a lantern. "So. Never say Pramus's magic is not real. For its effects surely are." The gentle light let shimmering waves of blue and turquoise play over Lahoon's torso as he pulled the blouse over his head. "We see Pramus now, blessing the soldiers. Clearly in league with Berqar. And for all we know, he might well have been the one to conjure up the threat in the first place. The demon at the bath."

Lahoon shook himself. "Think how close I have come! How ready I was, in my despair, to offer myself up to Pramus as an apprentice. To ask him to be my master. It was by a narrow margin that I escaped this demon summoner."

A crooked grin played around Amalai's lips. "Yes. And instead, you have gone straight to the demon himself."

Lahoon laughed. All the weight and tension slid away from him like a wet cloak dropping to the floor. He turned around to Amalai, wrapping his arm around her waist. "Yes. Because it turns out that the demon is much more trustworthy than the summoner. And beyond trustworthy, he's generally miraculous. Wonderful. Ravishing." Lahoon's eyes were shining, awash with irrepressible happiness.

Amalai chuckled, tracing the line of Lahoon's chin with her finger. She gently placed a kiss on his cheek. "You are beautiful when you are in love," she breathed into his ear. "Very beautiful."

Lahoon turned toward her, his face very close, their breaths mingling. "Good," he whispered engagingly. "I am glad to hear." Lahoon's fingers played with her black curls, tugging and teasing. His body moved against hers as his words danced a leisurely caress along her neck. "You are welcome to all you see."

21

Unleha shook her head. “No.” All around her, the people pouring out of the county house ambled off into the lanes of Behrlem. Regulars, most of them, who kept coming back for the hours of teaching and practice the town conciliators offered. A community of competence that had grown over the years. An old man turned and waved back at Amalai.

Unleha grumbled. “No. Although it was very good to have seen it once. It’s great. And it is all right for the likes of you. You can hold discernment circles and other quiet, meditative affairs of deep listening, where people speak from their heart, sharing their personal truth. You are a natural with that.”

She imperceptibly quickened her step. “But I am not. I can only host boisterous, passionate, argumentative sessions, as is in my nature. And I am not about building bridges, either. I want to win people over! And win the vote by the end of it. I don’t just want to understand everybody, I want to get the soldiers out, dammit!”

Unleha kicked a pebble down the street.

Amalai put a hand on Unleha’s arm. “That’s just what I mean! You go ahead and do your own thing. Your way. It is all right to woo, to rally. We do want to win people over, after all. And you are great at it. You, Unleha, bring a sort of energy to such meetings that I never could. We need the kind of spirit you radiate, the fervor, the commitment, as much as anything. So go out, share your flame.”

She gave Unleha a gentle squeeze. “Just do it in a way that does not burn down the bridges. Do no harm spreading your fire. Make sure we end up with a thousand golden candles, not one terrible wildfire.”

In the stillness of the ravine, Lahoon was on his knees before the stone altar, his hand cupped around the bowl. Deewelarque leaves rustled over his shoulder, whispering their liturgy for the familiar ritual.

Lahoon felt the mark of black, fragrant juice burn on his brow. Slowly, he inclined his head, until he sensed Verlem's skin softly brushing against his own. Lahoon's gaze fell down into the water, into crystal clarity, into a liquid emptiness that might hold anything.

He sank in deep, enveloped by the soul of a fay.

}}} A tired peacefulness hung over the world. The air was hot and heavy, and sweat seemed to be dripping off the swaths of moss hanging from the branches. Naked, with his skin shimmering ambiguously in the emerald light of the swamp, he sat on a fallen tree, its mighty bough reaching down into stagnant waters. Murky fish and half-buried worms lingered in between rotting underwater twigs and the muddy ground.

A few paces into the water, a blue dragonfly sat on another half-sunken tree, perfectly still, a trace of light lingering on her transparent wings. Then she launched herself into the air, the lines of her flight threading an invisible cloud of short advances and jerky turns into the air. When she settled down again, it was on the same spot on the same branch, facing the same way as before.

He felt the rough bark against his thigh, the dense air in his lungs. Thin, spindly beings were walking on water, crossing the dark image of mirrored leaves, leaving a miniature ripple.

The dragonfly took wing again, whizzing another puff of angular flight over the bog, then returned. To the exact same spot, facing the exact same way as before.

She did that again and again, venturing a pace or two from her place, zigzagging up and down, then returning to precisely her previous position, like a statute that was secretly coming alive, trying to hide all signs of her intermittent wanderings.

One time, she flew a little way toward him, letting her dance hang in the air half-way between him and her home. Then she turned and headed back.

He frowned. Had that meant him? Had she seen him, come to him, looked at him? Or was that just a coincidence? Did she take off in whatever random direction, and this time it had just happened to be his?

But then the dragonfly rose up and flew, not in a jagged cloud of airy exploration, but in a straight, direct line, at great speed.

Straight at his eye.

He jerked back, closing his lids.

But she did not hit him. When he squinted out again, the dragonfly was already on her way back, settling into position on the branch.

He stared at her, his breath shallow.

That had meant him. No doubt.

He did not move.

What did a dragonfly know of his eyes, of their tender vulnerability, their openings into his inner being? His dark pair of pupils, this unflinching sign of a presence, of another animal—what did it mean to her?

Had she meant to attack him? To test him? If he had been one to possess a long, sticky tongue that came hurtling out, this would have been her death. She had taken a great risk. But came out unscathed.

He eyed her wearily.

And just as he did, she took off again. In a clear line, but at gentle speed. Her long, slender body poised, her predator airs all around her, her fairy wings fluttering. She advanced straight toward her goal, and for the very first time, she sat down in a different place.

Right on his shoulder.

He shuddered.

He was naked, and in the humid, brooding air his body was bathed in sweat and fragrance. The dragonfly had flown right into his sensuous mists, to let his swirling essence penetrate beneath her carapace, to drink him in. To touch him, to have her fine, small body meet this heavy giant. To sit on top of him.

"What is this?" he whispered.

"A gesture of friendship? Of communion? Of exploration?"

The dragonfly did not move.

"Are you making me your dominion?"

Tiny delicate feet scraped against his bare skin.

He licked his lips. He had been claimed, in one way or another. By an alien presence. A sentient consciousness. By a living, breathing body. {{{

Verlem drew back, sinking down onto the stony ground beside the altar.

"I realized then." He spoke as if still half in a dream. "It is obvious, in hindsight. But I had not seen it before."

A rustle of leaves accompanied his voice. "The dragonfly is alive. Sentient. And she is in relationship with me." He paused. "And if she is, so is everyone else."

Verlem trailed his finger along the arabesques of a lichen. "I used to assume that all the animals around me are numb. That they do things, but in an unconscious, random manner. That they do not realize who they are, where they are, who they are with."

His hand stopped before an ant, who came up to him with waving antennae. "But they do. I had been the one who was numb. And out of my own numbness, I had assumed everyone else to be dull and empty. But in reality, anyone wild is ferociously alive, and sensitive to all stirrings around them. Of course a dragonfly would notice a huge, smelly animal sitting down a few paces away. Of course she would know. And of course she would care. This is her world, after all. Her space. Her life."

Verlem withdrew his hand and let the ant walk on alone. "From then on, I began to see it more and more. How everyone is alive. And how much it matters."

He looked up and held Lahoon's gaze with own dark, deep eyes. "I had always known that humans are living beings. Also, in a way, that they have feelings, and that they cling to life. I knew. Even before. But it did not seem to matter, somehow. As if all of that did not really count. But then, slowly, I began to feel it. To let it sink in. How important this is. What it means that all beings are alive."

22

With a brisk step, Unleha overtook the oxen plowing the field beside the road. She was already well out of town, and if she kept up a good pace, she might be back from her errand before noon. A good neighbor to all cart-drivers, she still took the time to pull a fallen branch off the tracks.

And then she froze, staring.

Spanning the sparkling river from one green edge to the other, the old bridge rose before her in a graceful arc of woodwork, as practical as it was beautiful in the simplicity of its high, round curve. But it was not the bridge itself that made Unleha stand in the bend and gape. It was the man flying underneath.

Barely holding on to the rafters and beams, he seemed to be dancing with the ease of a squirrel, a leisurely playful monkey, an ant walking skyward without a second thought. Swaying easily from one side of the bridge to another, he spoke of lithe elegance with all of his limbs, belying the enormous strength any such move must warrant. The sun roamed over the naked skin of his arms, shiny with sweat, revealing the play of muscles underneath. But then he finished. With one last loud, hammering noise, he ended his performance and climbed up onto the bridge, shoving a small case onto the path beside him. He sat still, leaning against the railing, breathing heavily.

Unleha walked up to him. "Hello, there, hero."

His eyes flew open.

Unleha grinned at him. "Veertan, my precious daughter, thinks you are just fabulous. Ever since she started training with the recourses' youngsters she regales me with tales of your many qualities." Unleha looked down at the bridge. "And I admit, seeing you fly around here I can understand why. If training as a recursor under your inspired tutelage makes one able to move like that . . ." Unleha trailed off into a low whistle of astonishment.

Dorarin, Heart of the Recourses in Behrlem as well as the town gardener and handyman, flashed a winning hero's grin at Unleha. "The

volunteers among the recourses are not required to mend bridges," he related, giving the toolbox beside him a little shuffle. "That remains my personal privilege."

"I am glad to hear," Unleha replied. She admired the freshly restituted plank, or as much of it as was visible from above. Meanwhile, Dorarin had recovered enough to push himself upright and stand, all light-footed energy again, beside Unleha on the arching path of the bridge. He unfastened the belts and ropes around his hips.

Unleha turned toward him. "Say, Dorarin, as heart of the recourses, what do you make of the presence of soldiers in town? If anyone were to stand guard in the streets, ready to use force to protect the citizens, that would be the recourses, wouldn't it? Certainly not the soldiers?"

Dorarin nodded. "It would be us. Of course. If ever the use of physical force were considered." He ran his hand lightly over the railing. "But there is no need for physical force here. None at all. So . . ." Dorarin shrugged. "People being afraid of ghosts, and voting soldiers into town . . ." He raised his brows. "That is worrying, to my mind. But people have a right to be silly, and we certainly have no right to use force in response."

Dorarin brought his flat hands together slowly and carefully, like a ritual move in some ancient game of symbols. "As recourses, we only come in at the order of a court of deliberation, as you know. And they never give that order lightly. It's only when all the conciliators' efforts have failed, and even the final say of the deliberators is not respected—then we are sent in. To make sure that coin is indeed paid, or that fence repaired, or whatever it was the deliberators decided." Dorarin tilted his head. "Or, of course, to separate people who are turning violent. But that is rare, very rare."

Unleha looked at him thoughtfully. "Do people actually ever fight you when you come?"

"Hardly ever. Usually, the authority backing us up is enough. People know they can't go against the decisions of society. In case of true danger, we do use magic to stun. But mostly, we just turn up in great numbers."

Unleha laughed. "Oh yes. Veertan told me. She said you looked like half a monastery on pilgrimage. A quiet, peaceful little crowd, standing at a respectful distance as if on the verge of a group meditation. And the quarreling parties just cast a sideways glance at you, knowing very well who you were and why you had come. So they handed over the coin the court had decided they owed. It all went very smoothly."

Dorarin looked at Unleha with slightly narrowed eyes. "Indeed. And how does Veertan know all of this?"

Unleha cleared her throat. "Oh. Well. Maybe I should not have mentioned. But, conscientious person that she is, my daughter had a peek before she signed up to train as a volunteer recursor. She had a glimpse at the practice sessions, but also at the real action when the rare occasion for that arose. Don't ask me how she knew. But she watched it from a very safe distance, she assures me." Unleha's eyes twinkled. "Safe enough, I gather, to not even be noticed by the great hero in their midst, a man of extreme skill and perceptiveness."

"Don't flatter me." Dorarin failed to cover up his grin with mock gruffness. "I am impervious."

"As any proper hero would be," Unleha agreed ceremoniously. She tilted her head. "Say, what do you think of the soldiers' sword dance in town every night? Wouldn't the recursors look just as beautiful doing their own kind of practice?"

Dorarin rubbed his chin. "I am sure we would." He paused. "But we couldn't do it in the plaza. Not in this way." Dorarin wagged his head. "We always practice the attitude along with the skill. Humility and reticence. That is also why all the recursors are in training as conciliators as well. To learn that kind of calm, of balance. All of that would not sit well with showing off in public just for the sake of it."

Dorarin's eyes went out into the distance, unfocused for a while. "Power is a delicate thing. And the use of force a dangerous one, always. It has to be a last resort, when all else has failed. And more than that: It has to be clear that, in that instance, force would indeed help. Which is not necessarily the case just because the other solutions did not work either."

Dorarin tore his eyes from the horizon and let them return to meet Unleha's. "Anyway: With respect to soldiers or demons, the recursors have no mandate here. We will stay clear."

Unleha held his eyes in a long, deep gaze. "Yes." Her voice was low. "I knew. I agree. But I love to hear you say it, you, as the heart of the recursors."

* * *

A fresh breeze was blowing over the highlands, meeting the warming day with wisps from snowy peaks and sky-filled horizons. Amalai was walking up the hillside. She could see the ravine already, the dark cleft of its entrance, the sprawl of heavy boulders.

She could see Verlem.

He was sitting on the meadow, in the shade of the last deewelarque, just as she had always found him, his feet on the ground, his arms loosely

linked around his knees. His eyes were out over the valley, over the forest below, the crowns of trees murmuring softly of deep, hidden stirrings.

Amalai came up quietly and sat down on the grass beside Verlem, mirroring his pose. She let her gaze drift out into the sky. The black outlines of birds were circling underneath hazy clouds, dancing elegantly to the tunes of the wind.

Behind her, slim leaves of deewelarque breathed out moist green air, deep and nourishing, filling Amalai's lungs. Slowly, Amalai blew a little cloud of human back at them. Her air drifted among the twigs like an invisible mist. The plant drank of her essence what it could, to become leaf, to become root, mixing Amalai's breath with the light of the sun and sap drawn from dark soil.

Amalai felt Verlem's presence beside her. His shy, fragile body. His calm, tranquil energy. She moved, with the gracious ease of the grasses, the unhurried nods and sways of their stems. Sliding up the hillside just a sliver, Amalai came to sit halfway behind Verlem, her open knees almost touching his shoulders, holding her resting arms. All her limbs were encircling Verlem, cradling him in a loose embrace, hardly touching him, but sensing him, his closeness, everywhere. His invisible rays of starlight. Subtle, and strong. Distant, and fully present.

Verlem welcomed her. In the stillness of his body, of his mind, he allowed her to be there, near him.

Cautiously, in one sinuous move, Amalai brought her arm down behind her back and pulled out of her sleeve. She could feel Verlem's eldritch scent tease her nostrils as she leaned in, letting her face come to rest against the nape of his neck, her black curls mingling with his fine hair. She closed the loose embrace in which she held him as he sat before her on the meadow.

With slow deliberation, Amalai laid down her arm on Verlem's knee, right in front of his chest. The sun shimmered on the golden brown of her naked skin.

She could feel Verlem's breath catch. Other than that, he made no move, no sound. When he turned to face her, his eyes were dark as night.

"You will give of your essence?" A mere whisper.

Amalai nodded, a gesture of the mind and the heart more than of the body. "Yes." Her lips were very close to his ear, but her breath moved out beyond, toward the wind, toward the open sky of the highlands.

Verlem tilted his head back ever so slightly, bathing in the light of invisible stars, praying to the depths of the universe. Then he came back, to melt into the curve of Amalai's limbs. He sank back just a fraction, in

a small, timid move, a rustling of robes against her chest. Amalai could feel the pounding of his heart, the unknown rhythm, the foreign beat.

Verlem's fingers sought the palm of her hand, begging it to rise up just a little in his ethereal hold. Ever so lightly, he touched his forehead to Amalai's warm, brown flesh. He let its smoothness glide over his brow, over his cheeks. Over his closed eyelids. Verlem turned her arm over gently, bringing up the soft inner side, his lips roaming over the tender skin, feeling the sweet, strong beat of her pulse. He rested his head on her arm, his face turned sideways toward Amalai.

He held her gaze.

There was nothing but trust and welcome in it.

Verlem grazed Amalai's skin and cut down in one swift, deft move.

Amalai felt the sting, but did not twitch. She stayed with him, felt him, as he drank of her blood, savoring her life force, his head on her arm, his whole body in the soft embrace of her limbs. Amalai's face rested safe and steady on Verlem's shoulder, in the crook of his neck. From half-closed eyes, Amalai let her unfocused gaze drift out over the form of Verlem's body into the valley, into the swaying grass, the patterns of wind and sun. The hazy clouds, still mellow with memories of a slow, golden morning. The pirouetting birds, outlined against the sky.

For long, timeless moments, Amalai stayed in gentle communion with Verlem's body, with the mountains and the firmament around them. Long after Verlem had ceased to drink, had closed up the wound with a lick or a kiss or some fay magic of his own, Verlem still remained with her, his head resting on her arm, his gaze following hers out into the vast openness of the valley and the cosmos. Amalai felt Verlem with all her senses. His fay presence, his calm. His gentle glow of starlight and night. Deep peace, within him, within her. The warm breeze, the sun on the grassland, the aroma of wildflowers in the air, Verlem in her arms, and her own happiness seemed to flow together into one big, hazy, indistinguishable whole.

*

The leaves of the deewelarque cast a moving pattern of shadows over the meadow. From within Amalai's embrace, Verlem's voice joined their gentle rustling, seeming to speak to them as much as to Amalai and to the mountain.

"I cannot believe what is happening to my life. To me. Who I have become." Verlem fell silent. His face was very close, resting on Amalai's arm. "You would not believe who I have been."

Verlem's eyes wandered out into the distance. "I never dreamed this could be possible. People are coming to me. One after the other. To give of themselves, freely. To give, to me." His voice was soft and low. "There is a beauty and richness in my life I could not have imagined."

A lush black berry full of juice shone between the angular twigs of the deewelarque, in between hard, thin needles of thorn. Two tiny birds of amber and vermillion picked at it with a careful beaks.

Verlem whispered to them. "This used to be a battlefield. I used to kill people. They fought me, I fought them. I had to. I needed to, in order to survive. Or so I thought. So it felt. So it seemed obvious."

The berry fell to the ground and burst open, an offering to the winged beings. All around, colorful bells began to shake in the breeze as the breath of a blessing flowed down the mountain.

Verlem let his cheek glide over Amalai's skin, feeling her silky softness. "My world has turned. It was a war zone, once. But now . . . What used to be enmity and battle has turned into generosity and love. The very same thing. The way I drink blood from humans. It has turned from a fight to the death into a path of friendship and beauty. Who would have thought it possible?"

23

Unleha had entered the Teapot Library through the other door, the one of the bookshop. She eased her way through a dusky labyrinth of shelves and stacked volumes to peek into the adjoining tearoom discreetly. But apparently Amalai's discernment circle had just come to an end. Unleha would not disturb anyone.

A good number of people had come, by the looks of it. People were idling in corners, lounging on the kang, pouring out tea.

Unleha noticed the baker from the wool market, who she knew was terrified of demons, and a fervent advocate of soldierly protection. He gratefully accepted a drink from Amalai, leaning lightly against a shelf full of bamboo scrolls. The baker's pose was easy now, relaxed, his head bent as he thoughtfully stroked the rim of his glass while listening to Amalai.

All around them, a warm, low hum of murmurs filled the room. Folks were leaning back in contemplative silence, sipping contentedly from their steaming cups. Others were gathered around small tables filling up with tempting bits of food, talking amongst themselves in those soft, muted tones people often held after a practice of speaking from their hearts, and listening without comment.

Unleha nodded to herself. It must have been good. Quite good.

* * *

"We always worshiped back home," Kortid said, his gaze distant. "It's just what you do. It is proper. To show respect to the divinities." He turned to face Gureev, the ardent gleam back in his eyes. "And in times of need, it would be the pinnacle of foolishness not to."

Kortid clenched his fist. "The force of demons is unfathomable. We've never faced an enemy such as this. Never seen such ominous danger. In our blindness, our overwhelm, how are we to meet the unknown? We are in dire need of divine protection. Divine power, to steel us in our fight, to match the threat of demonic attacks." Kortid took Gureev's arm with a hopeful, almost pleading tone to his voice. "So. Will you come?"

*

Kortid had met Gureev out in the courtyard at night, with a pale half-moon up high and a nasty wind hurling up dust devils from the sandy plains. They scurried along the walls of empty stables until they reached a low, half-hidden door by the west wing. The black vertical slit of an embrasure stared coldly at them as Kortid knocked. For a long, silent moment, nothing happened.

But then the door opened. Blindfolds were fastened over their eyes before they were led down into the underworld. Stairs after stairs, they descended into an entangled web of vaults and caves and tunnels, a labyrinth of a size and depth Gureev had never suspected. He lost all sense of orientation.

Then they were told to kneel. Gureev could feel the cold, rough slabs beneath him. The blindfold came off. They had joined the community of believers that was gathering in an antechamber. A limbo. A place for the unworthy to purify, to prepare in silence for the admission to a sacred space.

Gureev's mind cleared, calmed, and yet became honed, alert, as his body began to ache after endlessly holding out in a pose of reverence and surrender. But time was coming to an end. The grave voice of a priest sounded out from an alcove hidden beyond sight, hollow reflections of his words passing between the high columns of stone.

"I solemnly swear," he intoned, and the crowd echoed, all the voices uniting into one deep, sonorous being. "I solemnly swear."

"Darkness will remain darkness, silence remain silence. Never will I tell what my soul partook of."

They repeated after him, obediently, faithfully. They yielded, believed, surrendered. Followed him into ever-increasing fervor and passion, yearning and hunger, into the ardent need for an overpowering wave to come and sweep them away.

*

The stone columns of the crypt reached up into endless heights, the bows of the vaults lost in dark invisibility high above. Curls of smoke rose up, cringing wraiths of incense greeting the flames of flickering torches. Kortid swam in the stifling air, the mysterious arcane scents mingling with the hot breaths of humans squeezed together by stern walls closing in all around them.

Kortid vaguely recognized the baker who had come in with the townsfolk, those worshipers who had knelt and prepared in the other antechamber. Who had poured in at the same moment as the righteous soldiers, to throng this underground chapel with intensity and devotion.

Kortid's voice dissolved into the hundredfold thumping of loud, steady rhythms and chants, driven by some primordial trance, a deep instinct telling him of strength in numbers. A way of getting lost, of melting into, of becoming absorbed in something much, much bigger than one small self. A mass so huge, so loud that its thrust carried him away with it like the torrent of a river, the pulling tide of the ocean, some force of nature so huge, so strong, so inevitable, that any single being would be dwarfed before it.

Kortid was overcome with relief and exhilaration. He allowed himself to be lifted up beyond his own small, vulnerable body, the fragile mortality of his flesh, into the greatness and invincibility of people united, of elemental forces, of original might. The power of the gods.

Golden lines began to glow in the dark. The outlines of an enormous bull, horns wide and strong, with the eyes of a tiger, the teeth of a dragon. The chorus grew louder, clearer, one-pointed. All awareness homed in on the image of Vineehah the Warrior, the Rage, the Destroyer.

The tension grew overwhelming, unbearable, until the glowing lines of the god burst into flames, flaring up like a raging blaze, ravishing the masses. As Vineehah finally bared his ravenous fangs to give a roar of hellish thunder, a hundred voices boomed along with him, the crypt on fire, the air a single devastating blast of fury. The stone itself vibrated.

Slowly, the divine apparition began to fade, turning into a golden glow that descended over two figures singled out on the dais beneath. Berqar, down on one knee, her head bent in reverence, her arms held in a half circle before her. Pramus, upright, his arms raised in prayer, his chest bared to the glory of the god. Remains of crushing thunder lingered on in Kortid's ears, a deafness like in the aftermath of an earthquake.

Berqar rose. She came to stand beside Pramus, who turned to the crowd, his arms still raised, the gesture carrying all the power, all the might of the gods with it. He turned it on the audience.

"Rise up now, soldiers! Storm, break loose!!"

Pramus's words echoed in the darkness, otherworldly, irrefutable.

Huge double doors in the side wall of the crypt opened. Kortid stood at the threshold, high vaults before him, a large hall plunged into darkness. Only a few torches sent flickering tongues of amber over the stones. Thick, oddly sculptured columns rose up, supporting an invisible ceiling, hiding passages from view.

Kortid drew his dagger and stepped forward, his muscles tense, his senses alert, overflowing with the unbearable power of ritual. Soldiers began to pour in around him, the gleam of blades and cold, pointed tips

protruding from their fists. They moved slowly, cautiously, their bodies poised, knives at the ready. Night gathered up shadows behind the columns, hiding the room, driving mystery into corners.

Then havoc broke loose. A being shot out of the darkness in sudden onslaught. It bolted sideways, vanishing from view. A war cry broke from the soldiers' throats. As one, they charged, sweeping Kortid along in their torrent.

A black shape flew, skidded, turned. Then it came straight at them. Cold panic gripped Kortid's heart and fused with the elation and the reeling vertigo already there. The storm around him hurled on. Squeals of terror cut through the air. Roars of triumph. Another rush of movement, a frenzied hunt, a chase to the death. The creature escaped, disappeared. Was stirred up in the corner, driven on. With the frightened screams of a wounded pig, it bore down on Kortid and he threw himself at it, stabbing mindlessly at the hot, moving body before him. Other soldiers pressed in around him. The body fell at their feet, and the shrieks of agony became searing as Kortid and others thrust in their daggers in frenzied rhythms, driven by panic or bloodlust or madness. The pig's death cry was like that of a child, high, eerie, ear-splitting. The soldiers answered it with a scream of their own, a howl of rage, a roar of violence unleashed.

*

Gureev closed the chamber door behind him quietly and carefully. He let his hand slide along the stone wall, trying to walk to his mat without a light or a sound.

But Rebonya woke anyway. She drowsily lit a lantern for Gureev, shielding her own squinting eyes from its glow.

"How was it?" Rebonya asked in an untidy voice, drawing the sheets up closer to her chest.

Gureev looked down at the ground. Then he turned away.

"That bad?" Rebonya wondered, still half befuddled by sleep.

But she had her answer.

In the cozy mysteriousness of Amalai's craft room, Rebonya had made herself comfortable on a cushion beside Lahoon, her hands wrapped around a delicate cup steaming with outlandish fragrances. Tea, Amalai had assured her. Meant to be drunk and enjoyed. No magical or otherwise dubious qualities to it. Rebonya gratefully took a sip as Unleha settled in beside her. The last rays of the sinking sun bathed Lahoon's cheek in a glow of iridescent ocean waves. He sat the teapot down.

"We need to tell you something," Lahoon began, uncertain where to start. "We might have let it lie if it was only a matter of personal world-views. Of ways of going about our own private lives. But if we are going into town, rallying people, making proclamations—well, it is a different matter. We need to be explicit. Honest with one another." He cleared his throat. "I could not go into town announcing something that I do not believe myself. Or that, in fact, I know to be untrue."

Lahoon was searching Unleha's face. "I cannot say about demons," he offered, his voice low. "But I do know that there are beings in this world that are not human. Not animal. We have met one. A fay."

*

The sky outside had turned black, an inky expanse filled with stars. The magical lantern softly illuminated the faces in the circle, and threw questioning shadows up to the rafters and the scented bushels of dry herbs dancing between them.

Rebonya stared down into her tea.

"Lahoon," Unleha said, her voice wavering between her own alarm and an attempt to calm Lahoon down. To indulge him, yet make him see reason. "I know you have always been dreaming about a fay world. It is what you do. You've even made a livelihood out of it, with your paintings and your music. But these are dreams. Fantasies. You've always said so yourself. You've never claimed that you have been to the places shown in your paintings. Or met such beings."

She cleared her throat. "And now would be a particularly bad time to start doing so," she added, a sharp edge to her voice. "I don't know what kind of relationship you have struck up with some hermit in the mountains, and I don't need to know. You do whatever seems right to you, and to him. I don't need to understand. And if you are using deewelarque berries in an unhealthy way, or losing touch with reality, I believe that is a matter of serious concern, but still more yours and Amalai's, who is your lover and companion. It is still not my business, really."

Her dark eyes took on a fierce gleam. "However, if you intend to go into town now, now of all times, and announce to people that you have seen a demon, I cannot permit that. You would be playing straight into Berqar's hands. Surely even in your current state you can see that? You have not forgotten your abhorrence of the garrison, I hope? Of all that it stands for? You can still hold on to some last shreds of your beliefs, and not counteract the Transition?"

Unleha took a deep breath. "At least hold your tongue for now. If you need to announce your acquaintance with demons to the world, at least do it after the vote, not before."

She got up with a harsh, angry move and turned to leave, her back rigid, her hands clenched.

*

"What's the matter?" Gureev asked after one look at Rebonya's face.

"Nothing," she mumbled.

Gureev waited. Rebonya came to sit on the mat beside him. She sighed. She rested her elbows on her knees and let her head hang down. Then, suddenly, she stood up with a jolt and kicked the wall. She sank down onto her own mat, covering her eyes with her arm. "You would like this," she muttered. "I guess you would. It will give you a nice chance to say, 'Told you so!'"

*

Gureev sat on his mat silently, thoughtfully. His hand stroked over the covers in a gentle, careful move, smoothing the surface. "So Unleha did not believe," he said. He raised his gaze to Rebonya's face. "But you? Did you? Do you?"

Rebonya squirmed.

She pressed her hands over her eyes, her face a pinched mask of revulsion and disgust. "I hate it," she muttered. "I hate it." She looked up at Gureev. "I would give anything to make this turn out untrue."

*

Amalai leaned her head against Lahoon's shoulder, her hands still wrapped around the delicate cup. "Unleha is right in that respect, you know," she murmured unhappily. "We really will be playing into Berqar's hands if we are perceived to be saying that we know a demon. And we will be perceived that way. No matter how careful we are in what we actually say about Verlem. Someone will come and twist it around. And then be loud about it."

Lahoon thought of some people in the occultist groups he knew and nodded sadly. Then he thought of Berqar, and gritted his teeth.

At that moment, the door opened to two people stumbling in from the night.

"Hello," Rebonya said uncertainly. "This is my roommate. Gureev. You've seen him before," she nodded at Amalai. She shoved Gureev in front. "We talk. More and more. So I told him what you said about Verlem." Rebonya stared down at the ground, her fists clenched. "I hope it is all right." She looked up into Amalai's face again. "He wants to know. To ask you." Rebonya lightly rested her hand on Gureev's elbow. "And in exchange, Gureev has agreed to share something with you. Something I was not allowed to mention earlier. Something that concerns him, personally. And Berqar's plans, possibly."

* * *

The night lay still and deep over the garrison. Pale moonlight cloaked the castle in patterns of feeble white and ashen grays.

Within the confines of the chamber, a ghost began to stir in the corner, shifting, shuddering, as if the air itself was coming to life. The inky black of nothingness swirled and flowed, forming shapes and contours. It began to thicken, turning dense, material, deepening into itself until a shadow of shadow coalesced beside the wall, a figure of darkness growing out of the essence of the night.

He raised his head. The room was cold, stern. But there was warmth, and movement, from the youngsters who lived there. The slow, steady rise and fall of their chests, the drowsy sounds of their sleep. Their scent filling up the air, an aroma of life amidst all the heavy load of cut and polished stone towering over them.

Noiselessly, Verlem stepped up to one of the mats. A beautiful youth lay on it, his skin black, his breath slow and even. Verlem gently touched his arm. The youth opened his eyes and, feeling Verlem's gaze upon him, instantly sank back onto his cushion, into a sleep much deeper than most. A sleep without dreams, without memory.

Verlem turned to the other mat, where a girl was tucked in, her back to the room, her blanket drawn up over her shoulder to leave only a shock of tousled black hair visible. She jerked around at Verlem's touch, but as her startled eyes met his, she sank back into oblivion without a sound.

Verlem laid her down gently. He regarded her face, ran a finger over her cheek, brushed a strand of hair back from her brow. He loved being with her. With both of them. They were graceful, strong, full of energy. And they felt right. Verlem came back as often as he could without weakening them.

Slowly, he pulled the rough blanket down over the girl's shoulder, her chest, her belly. The wide sleeve of her nightshirt had fallen back from her wrist. Verlem's hand closed around her arm, pushing upward in careful, deliberate motions, pulling the fabric along until it pooled underneath her shoulder. Her arm lay free and bare before him. Verlem was on his knees. He inclined his head, his brow touching her shoulder, and stayed there, feeling her breath, her warmth, her smell envelop him. Then Verlem moved down, over the heap of fabric, to the soft, delicate skin of her inner arm. He looked up into her sleeping face. Two fine needles glinted in the shadowy uncertainty of diffused moonlight. And ripped the skin open.

Verlem felt her blood flow, her pulse beat, her life force run into him, fresh, hot, delicious. His lips pressed against the softness of her arm, he melted into the relief, the pleasure, the life-giving power.

25

The day had been hot, and the sun lay down slowly, lazily, on the curves of the horizon. The air was perfectly still, and not a ripple disturbed the surface of the lake. Evening came to the sky with an abundance of gold and crimson on one side, with subtle gray and lavender on the other. Small white clouds were drifting across the luminous space, and Verlem looked out between them toward the pale, distant face of a bulging moon.

Verlem had never gone into deep water before. It was an unknown world to him.

He sought Amalai's eyes, with a question, a need for reassurance, and found warmth and confidence in them.

Slowly, Verlem moved one hand up to the clasps of his robe. Undoing one, then another, until the cloth fell to the ground and he stood as naked as Amalai herself.

Timidly, Verlem placed a toe in the water.

The shore descended in a gentle, sandy slope.

Verlem moved forward, one small step at a time. He felt the coolness of the lake, the licking surface kissing his toes, trying out his calves, his thighs, his hips. The lake gently sucked on every bit of skin that was offered.

Verlem halted. He looked out over a wavy mirage of clouds and sundown, of an evening sky dreamily floating away.

Then he sank to his knees. Slowly, unhurriedly, Verlem let himself drift down into the smooth embrace of the waters, immersing his entire body in their wet touch. They swallowed him whole, closing above his head.

Verlem could feel Amalai come in beneath him, raising him up to the surface, keeping his face turned toward air and sky. Her breasts were soft and warm under his back, her arm firm and strong around his chest. He could feel her legs moving beneath his, in slow, gentle strides, the presence of a confident land animal keeping him safe as they floated away into this foreign realm of silvery fish and underwater greens.

With the lake's fluid caress all over his body, Verlem raised a hand, reaching for the endless realm of cosmos above, for all its light and color. A perfectly clear drop fell back toward him, touching his cheek, flowing on into reunion with the waves of gold and lavender around them.

With a deep sigh, Verlem let go, giving himself to the sensuous world.

*

The round belly of a lute lay in Lahoon's lap. He was singing lullabies to the world, slow sounds of evening floating out to follow the sun beyond the horizon, to calm tiny dreamers in burrows, to croon curled-up flowers to sleep. Golden hues in the air had given way to shadowy blue, and the murmurs from the bath palace told of rest, of contentment, of calm. Lahoon had not lit a lantern, staying out beneath the darkening sky and its purple-gray clouds, looking over at glowing tinges of magic in the bath gardens, at lanterns twinkling back at themselves in the shiny eyes of the pools.

Amalai tilted her head back and felt Lahoon's back against hers, the gentle movement of his lungs, of his shoulders. She let her eyes drift up into the sky, to the first pale stars, and over to Verlem, who stood in the corner by the door, very still. He seemed like an old gnarled plant that had grown up along that wall for ages, holding on with dried-up tendrils, a withdrawn, crooked kind of presence, full of natural ease and taciturn beauty.

Amalai felt her heart well up warm and strong. Gently, she came toward Verlem to stand beside him, to share in his presence. She breathed a kiss onto his cheek. Feeling his tender skin on her mouth, his strange, alien scent in her nose, that spicy fragrance of an unknown flower, Amalai leaned in and kissed him again, softly, on his lips. Then she drew back, searching his dark eyes. She found a smile in them, a small, timid one that was mirrored on his lips.

Lahoon had turned around, watching them, singing to them. He came over slowly and let his lute sink to wrap one arm around Amalai's waist, embracing her from behind. He continued his song in a hum, a low murmur of love and contentment, of beckoning and question. Burrowing his face in the disarray of Amalai's dark hair, he whispered happiness into her ear, nibbled playfulness over the lobe.

Lahoon emerged from the heap of her curls with a warm gleam in his eyes and a half-remembered question in his mind. "Verlem . . . We promised to ask. There is someone who wishes to know you. Who would like to see. Because he has heard about you, from us."

Lahoon looked questioningly at Verlem over Amalai's round shoulder. "Would you be willing? Could you meet him?"

The wall of the terrace gently radiated the heat it had drunk in all day. Verlem seemed to be rooted to the stone behind him more strongly than ever. "I am shy." His voice was as low as the rustle of leaves in the distance. "And easily overwhelmed."

A lizard came out from secret passages within the wall to bask in the memory of sun enshrined in the stones. A tiny ornament of green and gold, the lizard hung on to a rough shoulder of unhewn rock, then disappeared again, a minute flash of lightning striking a secret place somewhere out of sight.

Verlem's hand went back to touch the wall behind him lightly, reassuringly. "But I can meet humans. As I have met you. If it is one at a time."

Verlem looked into Lahoon's eyes. "It depends. On who it is. How it is."

Lahoon nodded. "His name is Gureev. He lives in the garrison. I don't know if you have seen him. Very young, slim, with black skin and short kinky hair. He moves gracefully, and speaks gently."

Verlem's gaze was out beyond the sky, in a place of images and memories. "Yes," his low voice floated back to them. "I have seen him. Been with him. Many times. He is not new to me. I have felt him before. And liked him, very much."

Verlem turned to meet Lahoon's eyes. He gave a small nod. "Yes. I will come to him. If he wants me."

* * *

Gureev was tugging at the corner of Rebonya's folded sheets, arranging them into even greater perfection. He had never done that before. But now, since he was expecting a visitor, it seemed called for. Respectful. Proper.

Rebonya had not left chaos behind when she had gone out for guard duty. Only a mild form of disarray. Tolerable, under normal circumstances. But tonight, Gureev wanted the room to be at its best. Also, he wanted to prepare. Somehow. And not much else he could do had occurred to him.

Having smoothed the sheets one more time, he took a few steps back and stood between the two rolled-up mats, looking over at the small square of a window, the bare table, the blank walls of stone. The shadows in the corner.

The shadows were dark. Darkening. And they began to swirl, to dance. Gureev's breath quickened.

The essence of night seemed to be drawing together in that corner, creating an opening, permitting a glimpse into the far distance of the universe, into endless nothingness gaping unseen over the earth in the early hours before dawn. Then a slight glimmer of silver appeared, giving the infinite universe a center, a heart, a purpose. A small, pale gleam of light, almost fading, an ethereal shiver of mist. And all the darkness gathered around it. It began to turn from void to substance, becoming more and more palpable, more solid. And coalesced into form.

Verlem stood in the corner, small, slim, his black robes falling loosely around his fragile figure. His pose was quiet, almost timid. The delicate features of his face exuded a sense of calm, but also of wakefulness, like an animal sensitive to every breath of life around him. Verlem did not move, nor speak, but his dark eyes on Gureev's face were full of listening. Full of receptiveness and presence.

Gureev lost all doubt. His heart pounding strongly, he inclined his head, gracefully and respectfully. Then he gave in to impulse.

He went down on one knee, joining his hands in a half circle before his chest, and bent his head low before Verlem in the full courtly greeting of a highest noble.

*

Gureev was standing by the window, his back half turned to Verlem. He was looking out beyond the iron bars, his eyes unfocused, unseeing.

"Do I want you to drink my blood?" Gureev's voice was low, deep. Hesitant. "No." A mere whisper. "No. I can't say I want that." He turned around toward Verlem, not quite facing him. "It feels wrong, somehow. It is my blood, and it should be running through my veins, nowhere else."

He took a few steps away from the wall. "However. . . I do see, of course. This is your life. It is the nourishment you need. To live." Gureev stood in his lithe, graceful pose, as if he were about to walk out into a ballroom. "So . . . if anyone asked me . . . would I be willing to give a little, in order to save somebody else's life—of course I would."

He turned to face Verlem fully. "Be that your life, or the life of the person you do not need to kill. Because you are nourished in other ways, by many people, by a hundred small contributions."

Gureev did take a few steps forward now, but rather than into a ballroom he seemed to be walking into a cathedral, all his moves full of reverence for the divine. "I am deeply touched by what you have done. By who you have become. How you have created a new self, a new life."

The awe reverberated through his voice. "You have turned your back on violence in a world where battle seemed inevitable."

"You thought you would die as soon as you stopped killing. And yet you turned around." Gureev came to a halt, as if having reached the altar, the sanctum of the shrine. "You have created your world anew. Such transformative powers are breathtaking. Are sacred."

He found Verlem's gaze. "And I want such power to live among us." Gureev spread out his hands before him in an open gesture, both an offering and a closure. "So. Any one of these reasons would be enough. If it were only to allow you to live. Only to save one other person. Only to bow to that transformation of your life, your self. Or to bless us all with the presence of such a power. It would be enough."

Gureev's voice was low. "So, yes. Of course. I am willing. I will give of myself, to make this possible." He swallowed. "I will allow you to drink my blood, as much of it as I can easily spare."

Gureev looked down at the ground. He cleared his throat. "Will you come here? You will come to my room and send me to sleep? And the next day I will be a trifle tired, but that is all I will know of it?"

Verlem nodded.

Gureev brought his head up, his decision made, his conscience clear. "So be it."

26

The sound of huge, ancient bells slowly faded away. The last purple glow of magic died down. On the mage's sign, the soldiers sheathed their newborn swords, letting the beams of light disappear. As one, they rose and vanished into the darkness of a lane behind them.

The watching crowd in the plaza began to disperse. Unleha was fuming. "The audacity of it! How dare they! It is getting worse and worse." She shook her head angrily. "I even wonder if it was stupid of us to have stayed and watched. Adding to the crowd. Giving those soldiers yet another bit of attention."

Amalai tugged her arm under Unleha's and grinned. "I guess it was all right. After all, when it comes to ruining the spell of an enchanting performance, there is nothing worse than the running commentary of a discontented grumbler right beside you in the audience." She winked at Unleha. "I think you did just fine."

Unleha snorted. But she looked pleased nevertheless. "Well, let's hope so." Then she shook her head, the grimness coming back into her features. "But really. It is getting unbearable. That speech Berqar just gave! To her soldiers, ostensibly. But to the town, really. I bet she used to do that inside the garrison. And now she dares to bring it out into public. Calls to war and violence, in the name of safety and freedom. Honestly! We should not let her get away with it! She is using that flimsy excuse to put herself up as a public orator. To take on that pose of a statesperson, explaining the need of the hour to the citizenry."

Lahoon came out of the bakery, a bag on his back, and quietly joined them. Amalai took his hand, but her voice was grave as she kept on talking to Unleha. "Yes. It was well-staged, as usual. The positioning of the soldiers, the formation, to draw attention, to gather an audience. Then Berqar's speech, increasingly fervent, ever more dramatic—and finally a display of grandiose magic, lightning and thunder, blazing bright swords and a mage who can vanquish all evil." Amalai held on to Lahoon's hand more tightly. "It was impressive. Frightening. Captivating." But then the grin came back. "Except for the running commentary by my side."

Unleha huffed. "But what will we do?" She walked on, her body tense, her moves angular. "Perhaps we should come here more often. Regularly. Even for the changing of the guard. And make sure we ruin their performance." She caught Amalai's glance. "Or make fun of them. In a very friendly, lighthearted kind of way." Her lips twitched. "Or do some constant grumbling just out of earshot."

Amalai smiled back at her. "Yes, perhaps." She wagged her head. "Although it will be a fine line between undoing their spell and creating extra attention. Giving them more power, by just adding to their performance. Even if it is a counter-element: It may still end up adding. Adding emotion, adding energy, adding importance."

Unleha waved a dismissive hand, impatient now with her own former argument. "We have to get serious," she pressed on. "Berqar and Pramus clearly have a plan. We can't just stand here and hope everything will turn out right. We need to do something!"

Amalai nodded. "We will. Although I still believe most people won't need our help. They are as clever as me or you and will find their own course of action."

She raised one hand up before her chest in a half gesture. "The bath demon was a dramatic act. It had people under its spell for a day. Some people. But it seems quite likely that after the first frenzy, even those will come to the conclusion that it was probably just a staged illusion." She turned her wrist around to open a palm to the sky. "After all, that is what we were all told when we were kids. That demons never existed, except as a mage's mirage. So. It is probable people will remember that tale. And revert to that belief." Amalai nodded at a man in a stable. "And vote the soldiers out."

The man waved jovially back at her, accompanied by a companionable snort from his horse. A streetlight let a shiny globe hover at the edge of the lane.

"Illusion, illusion." Lahoon was humming and clicking and swaying gently as he walked.

His eyes unfocused, he skipped a little, trying another rhythm, a fairer melody as he sang on softly to himself and to the coming night.

* * *

Lahoon poured the last of his bounty onto the kitchen table, already an overflowing cornucopia. Small purple balls and long stalks of emerald, violet plums and cerulean grapes, sun-tinged honey and snow-white milk congregated in a copious assembly of richness, a feast for the senses.

Lahoon sat down with an appreciative sigh, taking hold of a melon that, like most of these treasures, had come from their own garden.

Amalai was carving away at a root, half of its body already soaking in clear water in a bucket behind her. She shook a curl from her brow and picked up the thread of conversation she had started while washing the vegetables. "Being with Verlem opens so many new paths to me. Ways of seeing things."

Her gaze found Lahoon's across the landscape of plenty. "Like this." She gestured toward a scattering of grain among the stalks. "Who are they? They grow on sunlight, creating themselves out of the forces of cosmos." Amalai touched the veins running through a dark, lush leaf. "We animals cannot do that. Like Verlem, we feed on living beings."

Her fingers found a brown egg, lightly rolling it back and forth. A bird seed. An animal fruit, that might still grow into a new bird, to sing and to fly. Or that might go to feed someone else in the large, intertwined world of all being. "I take their life force into me. As Verlem takes mine."

Lahoon came over to stand by Amalai, embracing her from behind, placing a kiss on her hair.

She half turned, leaning her cheek against his chest. "I wonder. Am I feeding on others in the way I would be willing to have them feed on me? Am I showing at least as much veneration and respect as Verlem? Do I take care not to cause too much harm, and to let the other live well, too?"

Amalai reached out to the stalk of corn with sensitive fingers, with a pensive gaze. Seeing the seeds grow, or die.

"We have always been nourished by others. Now another has come to be nourished by me. Letting me experience the same process from the other side. And feel my way into the web of life as I never have before."

* * *

Kortid was tossing feverishly on his mat. His teeth were clenched in his sleep, his brow covered in sweat.

}}} Darkness encroached upon him from all sides. Vague shapes and menacing shadows hovered between black trunks, between towering columns. Kortid stumbled on, unseeing, unfeeling, over uneven ground, between snares and entrapments. An eerie sound blew in from the distance, a screeching wind, a hollow whine.

Kortid hurried. Twigs or ghosts slapped into his face, tore at his clothes. He tried to draw his sword but could not find it. The sheath was empty. The hilt would slip. He grasped it, but lost it, feeling it slide from his fingers again and again.

He tried to call out, but his voice did not come.

Kortid ran on, breathless.

Then his feet caught, and he fell down hard. A dark, tangled mass lay on the ground before him, with Hun's dead eyes looking out from a mask.

Kortid jumped up. His back against a broad tree trunk, his whole body got ready for combat. And already a black creature was shooting out of nowhere, charging straight at him. Kortid screamed and threw himself at it. His scream turned alien, shrill, earsplitting, filling the whole world. The monster's scream. Kortid stabbed at its body in a maddened frenzy, blood on his hands, on his face, on his soul, the ground beneath him turning into a deep dark pool of whirling blood, of wet, fetid darkness, sucking him in, pulling him down. {{{

Kortid choked. And woke. His hands were clenching the drenched sheets. His stomach was tied into one big, hard knot.

Kortid stared out into the darkness. The real darkness. The one inside his chamber. Through the barred window, one sliver of paleness fell in, thin and brittle, speaking of a full moon outside. Deepening the shadows within.

Kortid bit his lip. He would go on staring, frozen, motionless, until the break of dawn. He knew it. He had known it, every single time. Every single one of these past nights, alone with the shapes of gloom.

* * *

The soft glow of magical lanterns illuminated the tavern, brought out warm hues in the wooden floor, made spoons and glasses wink at each other with a golden glint. A few soldiers came in after long hours of standing guard, settling down at the counter. The barmaid took their orders, wiping her hands on her apron.

Kortid sank onto his stool as if weighed down by pounds of lead. He rubbed his temples, suppressing a groan. The sounds of the tavern wafted around him, clattering bowls and mugs, gentle murmurs interspersed with pearls of laughter. Behind him, a table was occupied by a boisterous group in a celebratory mood, their bright robes shining in the muted light like patches of oil color in the careful composition of an old painting.

Kortid saw them move in the corner of his eye, in the back of his mind. He heard their toasts, their jokes, their banter flow through the air around him. He sighed. The backs of his eyes burned.

"Just take care not to walk home alone, my friend!" one of the youngsters at the table shouted in the tones of a hilarious joke. "Not after dusk! The monster might come and get you. After all, there are deeeemons afoot!" The whole group roared with laughter.

Something within Kortid snapped.

He stood up.

Like a wraith, he turned. His face pale, his movements empty, driven by some unknown power outside his own volition, he stepped up to the table. He felt like a wasteland.

The company fell silent, gazing up at him uncertainly. Kortid had no thought, no will of his own. An alien force spoke through him, with a memory of death, a foreboding of impending doom.

“Don’t you dare.”

His words came out in a toneless voice, vacant, ghostly.

“Don’t you dare make fun of this.”

The youngsters stared up at him. Gaunt and haggard, a lifeless mask glared back.

By now the other soldiers had stood up as well, following Kortid in bewilderment, forming a line behind him.

The group at the table had gone rigid, paralyzed in the clutches of an icy cloud that slowly spread out from Kortid over their table and on across the whole tavern.

Kortid did not notice. His unblinking gaze was fixed on the youth before him. There was no light in Kortid’s eyes. Emptiness and madness stared out at the speechless girl. She swallowed, her hands closing tightly around her mug.

Kortid gave a rasping hiss.

Then he turned.

With the convulsive moves of a zombie, of a jerky undead body, he left.

The soldiers looked after him. They wavered, and then, without a word, they decided. They stomped their feet, shot the assembled company a menacing look, and walked out after Kortid.

A hush had fallen over the entire tavern. And it remained there, even after low murmurs began to rise up again. Even as conversations resumed, as comments were made and opinions exchanged, the hush persisted. It was there to stay. It had settled into the corners, into the nooks and crannies, together with the fear and the shadows.

Kortid let his back slide down along the wall until he rested on the courtyard's sandy ground. He buried his head in his hands. "I can't go on like this." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked up at Gureev with sunken eyes. "I haven't truly slept in . . ." He trailed off, making an empty gesture with his hand. "I just can't."

Gureev came to sit beside him.

Kortid leaned his head back against the wall. "I already asked Berqar for a potion to allow me to sleep. At least during the day, when there is light enough." Kortid took a breath. "But somehow, it does not seem to work. Not even with that potion. It only makes my stomach clench, so I cannot eat."

He clasped his hands together with a force that made the knuckles stand out white. "I do not know what to do. I am scared." His voice was low, monotonous. "I am about to go mad with exhaustion."

Kortid closed his eyes. His face was lean, taut. Pallid. He looked awful.

Gureev shifted. He moved in closer, leaning his temple against the wall, just beside Kortid's tired head. Their shoulders touched. Gureev listened to their breaths rising and falling, their slow, steady rhythm. Kortid relaxed imperceptibly. He leaned sideways a sliver, letting his head come to rest against Gureev's.

"Thank you," he murmured. "Gureev. You are a comfort to me."

Kortid sat up and opened his eyes. "At least I can talk to you. At least you listen to me. You hear me." Kortid's gaze went out into the distance, somewhere far across the courtyard.

Gureev watched Kortid's face for a long while, then let his eyes wander out toward the castle walls as well. He hesitated. "You know," he said uncertainly, "there may be someone who could help you sleep."

Kortid's head turned around.

Gureev cleared his throat. "I don't know if you would want it that way, though." He saw Kortid's expression and went on hastily. "I do not know if it would work, either. But I think it might."

"How?" Kortid's voice was no more than a breath.

Gureev looked down at the ground before him. "He has an ability . . . to send people into a trance. If you would like to call it that. Two types of trance. One is instant sleep. Deep, dreamless sleep. Almost like a loss of consciousness." Gureev paused. "The other one is a trance of trust. He can bring about a feeling of reassurance, of, well, trust. It is an artificially induced trust, and it is focused on him as a person. But it is trust, nevertheless. And it might help with anxiety, I imagine."

Kortid did not move. His gaze was fixed on Gureev. "He is a healer?"

Gureev's ears were hot. "No. Not exactly." He cleared his throat. "He is entirely unlike anyone I have ever met."

Life was coming back to Kortid. There was color in his face now, and movement in his body. "Of course I would like it. I will try. I have to. Anything. Anyone. Anything to get out of this state. It is unbearable." He needed an answer. "What must I do? Where can I meet him?"

Gureev looked out into the courtyard again. Then he faced Kortid. "He does not hold shop in town. But I will try to find him, to contact him for you. To ask if he would be willing to help. If he thinks this is appropriate at all, or could possibly work. And I will come back to you, tell you what he said."

Kortid took hold of Gureev's arm, pressing it tightly. "Thank you," he whispered, his eyes fervent. "I hope you will bring him here. Soon." He saw the look on Gureev's face and almost laughed, a hoarse, helpless, rasping sound. "No pressure, of course. You are only saving my life."

* * *

Lahoon's peacock skin shimmered softly in the light of the lantern as he set it down gently on the floor between Amalai and Verlem. His mind was on the tale Gureev had brought them, on the suffering, the need. On danger and promise.

"I am not sure," Gureev sighed. "About any of this." He raised his head. "Would you be willing to do this?" Gureev looked at Verlem pleadingly, both hopeful and doubtful. "Do you think it would work?" He hesitated. "And would it be the right thing to do?"

A dog barked in the distance, disturbed by an unknown presence drawing near his home.

Verlem held Gureev's gaze with his own dark, quiet eyes. "It would work." His voice fused with the plainsong of crickets in the herbary. "I am willing to do it."

Verlem paused. "Whether it is the right thing to do, I have no idea."

Their bodies threw long, night-filled shadows into the golden air of the craft room, dark, round beings hovering in the ether.

Amalai's eyes were thoughtful, doubtful. She touched Verlem's sleeve lightly. "It would mean that we are leading you to him. You, of all people. When it is you who scares him senseless, who terrifies him to the brink of madness. You who are in his nightmares, in the horror of his shadows."

Amalai's fingertips met Verlem's, felt their light, feathery touch. "Or not you. Not you at all." She raised her gaze to meet his. "You are the one he saw in the forest. But you are not the one he is scared of. You are not his demon. Not at all."

"No." Verlem's voice drifted off across the room like a cobweb on a breeze, into the darkness beyond the lantern's glow.

Gureev cleared his throat. "Kortid would not know of your nature. Or at least, I did not tell him yet. And I imagined we would not. Not yet, anyway. Not at the beginning, not beforehand. Because right now, everything is too much for him." Gureev shifted uneasily. "But we do need to tell him. The moment we can."

He crossed his arms before his chest. "I shudder to think what might happen if Kortid finds out on his own while he is still frantic." Gureev turned his head aside. "He would feel hopelessly betrayed. By me. And by the world, I suppose. Kortid might, from then on, believe that everyone is a traitor, or a demon in disguise. He might slip into a form of madness that he may never be able to escape again." Gureev ran a worried hand over his hair.

His brow furrowed. "So I ought to give Kortid the truth from the start. But if he cannot bear it . . ." Gureev shifted. "What if it is too much for him? And then for you." Gureev looked up at them. "Already, Kortid is doing harm with the things he does, the tales he tells in his panicked state. Will he do even worse, once he knows more about Verlem and the people who befriended him?"

Gureev's eyes were seeking reassurance, or guidance, as they wandered between Amalai, Lahoon and Verlem.

They all looked back at him. They did not know.

Silence hung between them, drifted across the floor, curled up in their laps. The vials on the shelves glinted warmly in the glow of the magical lantern, and the dried bushels between the rafters sent down their scents of hay and summer, of healing and pleasure, of seed and rebirth.

Amalai inhaled deeply. "Well. Perhaps we ought to try, and make the offer. Even though Kortid does not fully understand who is offering. But the offer itself is precisely what you said it would be. A trance of deep

sleep. A trance of trust. An enchantment, a unique form of magic." Amalai faced Gureev squarely. "So. Kortid can choose consciously. The offer is honest. It is real, and it is what it says." Amalai's warm brown eyes harbored deep concern. "And from what you were telling us, Kortid may need this offer as much as anything."

Gureev clasped his hands tightly. His breath was even, controlled. "All right, then. I will speak to him, as honestly as I can. And reveal as much about you as feels possible at that moment." He glanced at Verlem uncertainly, questioningly.

Verlem held his gaze, his eyes dark, quiet. "Yes."

Gureev exhaled. Then he closed his eyes. "I only hope that this will work. That it will not backfire."

The tavern was bustling with the usual noises of a busy evening. The scraping of chairs and clinking of glasses, the murmurs of conversations, with a peal of laughter or a burst of excitement rising above the general hum every now and then.

Such as Unleha's increasingly heated speech, gaining momentum with each prompt coming from Tenatetlan. "Demons do not exist! This whole thing is ridiculous!" Unleha's outraged voice carried clearly not only across their little group, but over a few neighboring tables as well. "Everyone knows that all demons ever were is illusion. A ploy used by old mages trying to scare people and make them manageable."

A group of soldiers came in through the door and settled at the counter.

An old man at Unleha's table pushed her shoulder. "Hush now," he mumbled, nodding his head in the direction of the soldiers.

Unleha looked at him in confusion. "What, hush now?" Her gaze traveled back and forth between the old man and the soldiers.

"They don't like it. That kind of talk. They won't allow it, in fact. You know."

Unleha stared at him, aghast. Then her spirit broke through. "They won't allow it? I beg pardon? Since when do I need to ask the permission of soldiers to find out what I am allowed to say?" She turned around in her seat, half facing the counter. "This is a free country! And we are in the age after the Transition, not before! We are not under the thumb of either Feudals or soldiers. Or mages, for that matter, with all their ludicrous tales of demons and monsters!"

The soldiers at the counter half turned toward her, sensing the burst of aggression. Still confused about what was the matter, they stood up, just in case.

Unleha rose and took a step toward them, a gleam in her eye. "What are you doing here, anyway? For as long as I remember, soldiers were not allowed in town wearing uniforms. Now you have that permit to man the

street corners, which is bad enough. But you showing up inside taverns is not a part of that act. And certainly not dealing out rules about what anyone is or is not allowed to say. So get out of here! Come back when you have shed your uniforms and look like civil people!"

Unleha's arm was stretched out, pointing to the door. Tenatetlan was right beside her, fists on her hips, daggers in her eyes.

The soldiers drew together more tightly, their bodies tense now, ready for battle.

A couple of other people rose and walked up to the scene, trying to mediate, to calm things down. Or to put in a word. Telling Unleha to let it go. Telling the soldiers to go. Or not to worry. People started arguing amongst themselves. A general cloud of agitation and urgency was building up over the group, larger and denser every minute. The rest of the tavern fell quiet, watching in strained silence.

Tenatetlan was right in the middle. She stepped real close to one of the soldiers, pushing her chin up aggressively, her whole body in a posture of challenge. He tried to talk to her. But she would hear none of it. "Get out of here! Go back to your garrison!" She pushed him in the chest, causing him to stumble back a step.

"Hey!" he shouted. As he caught his footing, he instantly went into combat pose. As did all the other soldiers, unconsciously taking the cue.

"Stand back!"

"No way!" Tenatetlan barked. "We will not take orders from you!"

She moved forward impulsively, shouldering past Unleha in her thrust. Unleha stumbled, bumping into another soldier, who shoved her back so hard she fell to the ground.

Tenatetlan screamed.

And the kettle boiled over.

* * *

In the fading light of evening, Kortid was squatting in the courtyard, his back against the wall, his feet set on the arid plain of sand underneath. Gureev came to join him, crouching down by his side, mirroring his pose.

"I have found him. The healer," Gureev began.

Kortid's head spun around. "And?" His eyes were eager.

"He is willing to come and to give you a trance of sleep. Or of trust. As you wish."

"I do," Kortid replied without hesitation. "Anything."

Gureev smiled helplessly. "I ought to tell you," he went on. "About the healer. Why he is so unusual." Gureev paused. "He is fay, in fact. That is how he comes to have his powers. His magic."

Kortid began to wave a hand dismissively, then stopped in midgesture. He stared. "He is fay?" His voice was thin, wavery.

Gureev held his gaze. "Yes."

Kortid's face was pale. "He is not human?"

Gureev laid a hand on Kortid's arm. "No. Not entirely, at least. Not only." He pressed down gently. "He is fay. That is how he can bring a magic of healing no one else can." Gureev leaned back slightly. "But you do not need to see him if you do not wish to. That is why I am telling you. So that you can choose. Whether you wish to have him, and his fay magic."

Kortid turned his face away from Gureev. He stared straight ahead into the sand before him. A shiver ran through him. His hands were clasped together in a tight grip.

Gureev said nothing. He just stayed by Kortid's side, his hand on his arm, his body beside his, his gaze following Kortid's across the courtyard. A light breeze whirled up phantoms of dust before them. The wraiths danced for a moment, then dissolved into thin air or lay down a little farther on, spreading themselves thinly over their companions on the ground.

Finally, Kortid turned. "I do not know," he pressed out, his voice thin and tired. "I do not know. I know nothing these days. I just can't go on." He leaned his head back against the wall. "Let him come. Let him send me to sleep." His head jerked up, his eyes wild. "But not make me trust. When maybe I shouldn't." Panic shot through his voice. Then he gave a short, choked sound, an aborted laugh. He let his head fall back against the wall once more. When he opened his eyes again, his hand came up to cover Gureev's where it rested on his arm, gripping it tightly. "Will you stay with me? When he comes? Will you be there?"

"Yes." Gureev's voice was deep, and a little raw. "I will. I promise."

* * *

A sky of midnight blue and lavender arched over the plaza, a few streaks of gold outlining errant clouds. In the gathering darkness, the blue swords shone brightly, beams of radiant hope and power converging in a purposeful choreography for the changing of the guard.

Rebonya wielded her blade skillfully, moving with commanding strength and precision. She met the soldier before her in an elegant pas de deux, turning full circle while bringing her sword down low, then up again as the pairs wove sinuous paths across the set, switching places in a fluid motion of covering each other's backs.

Matching the exquisite symmetry of the warriors' ballroom, the sound of music drifted across the mellow air of the evening, accompanying the nightly performance.

Even though no one in the garrison had planned it that way.

Halfway in between the soldiers' formation and the back of the square, Lahoon sat on a wooden box and played, his black hair greeting the night, his shimmering skin offering hues of ocean and ash to the dusk. But his voice called out to the amber rays of light in the sky. Round, lush, and beautiful, melodious tunes rose from his lute, as fluid and effortless as the graceful moves of the changing guard. In Lahoon's rich, sonorous baritone, the refrain of a song carried across the square strongly and clearly.

"Illusion! Illusion!"

A small crowd had gathered around Lahoon, as usual. And as most evenings now, they joined in as a background choir, adding a second voice to the refrain. The changing of the guard was not allowed to take place without comment anymore. A chorus accompanied the enchanting duel of magic swords the soldiers performed, changing its power, its meaning.

"Illusion! Illusion!"

A creed, an appeal, a proclamation danced across the square in the silky, shimmering cloak of a song.

Amalai's craft room had temporarily taken on the air of an infirmary. A number of people had poured in from the tavern for ointments to clear a bleeding wound and keep it from festering. Lahoon had come home by now and had begun to serve soothing teas while Amalai applied the last bit of salve to Unleha's bruises. Tenatetlan had joined them, too, a self-made bandage winding roughly and unevenly around her head, with a round dark bloodstain showing over her ear. She wore it like the sign of a pledge. A warrior's oath.

"This is it!" Tenatetlan's eyes were smoldering. "They have crossed a line! This is too much, and there is no going back now!"

People were murmuring, shifting on their cushions. Tenatetlan leaned forward, her body tense, as if ready to spring. "First they came pouring into our town, manning the corners like they own the place. And they have not stopped there! They have gone on to roam the taverns. To rule there. To tell us what to say, and when to keep silent. They are trying to control our thoughts! Our minds! We must never allow that! We will strike back! Fight with all our might! For our homes, our freedom!"

Lahoon put down a mug of tea in front of her. His face was pale.

Amalai stowed away her vial, but half turned back toward Tenatetlan. "We may be playing right into Berqar's hands if we do too much of that." Her voice was even, temperate.

But Tenatetlan exploded. "You and your cowering! You are always keeping your head down, hoping for acts of goodwill. But we can see where keeping calm has got us! There are soldiers everywhere, and if we dare to speak our minds we end up bruised and bleeding!"

Tenatetlan's fist closed. "No. The time for patience is over." She slid over to Unleha's side, closing ranks with her. Tenatetlan snarled at Amalai. "You may well be sitting here, clicking your tongue, fearful of making waves. But while you were watering flowers, we have been in a fight!" She linked arms with Unleha.

"And we will do battle! We will drive the soldiers out!"

Verlem knelt before the stone altar, feeling age and weight radiating out. The water in the bowl before him lay still, cold, clear, reflecting the light of the sky, the dusky shade of the deewelarque.

Lahoon gazed into the tarn's crystal. A broken berry sank down into the depths, releasing a swirl of darkness, dreamy black tendrils dancing in ever-changing shapes across perfect clarity, slowly dissolving into invisibility.

The magical mark burned on his brow. Lahoon leaned forward, his fingertips on Verlem's temple, his gaze down in the lucidity of the waters, ready to receive whatever image its emptiness might hold.

}} He was walking along a large, deep furrow in a barren field. There was a well-trodden path beneath his feet, and he was making swift progress. Except that it was no progress. He was moving fast, but not in the right direction. This was not where he wanted to go.

He stopped, disconcerted, and looked around. The light was dim. The ground around him was gray, heavy. Glum. Dreary twilight covered the endless expanse of the field around him. A wasteland.

He felt uncomfortable. Uneasy. The path was familiar, in a deep, inescapable way. He had been here before. Perhaps always. Maybe he had never been anywhere else in his life.

And yet. He did not belong here. He did not want to keep walking this path.

He turned. All around him were deep, hollow trenches. All leading in the same direction. All staring back at him without offers, without compromise.

But he knew he had to leave.

He turned from the path at his feet, trying to walk away at an angle. He could not. The small mound before him turned into an insurmountable obstacle, a gray mountain of clay clinging to his feet, weighing him down, holding him back. Wet and heavy, the sodden clay sucked at his legs, making them sink in deep, giving them no foothold to come back out. Keeping them prisoner. Using all the weight of his body, he leaned backward, freeing his feet as he fell back into the space he had started out from.

Breathing heavily, he stared at the mound before him.

And went at it again. He lay down over the crest, spreading his whole body out, and rolled over. Covered in mud, his heart pounding, he stood up. He found himself at the bottom of the next trench. There was a well-trodden path beneath his feet, leading in the exact same direction, one way only, no diversions.

Behind him, he could see the marks of his body disturb the straight lines of the furrows. The crest was dented where it had held his weight. Slowly, the clay oozed back in, smoothing over the disorder. But some traces remained. A slight depression. A pass. A crossroad. The inkling of a possibility of another direction.

All his clothes and all his limbs were the color of mud now. Thick, heavy clods of loam clung to his legs, weighing him down, making every move impossibly slow and strenuous. But he knew how now.

He rolled over one crest after another, laboriously making his way. Leaving marks in his wake, the idea of a different path, a faint memory of deviance.

He was breathing hard. His muscles were growing tired. And his legs felt weird. Not just weak or strained. Some jittery current, some alien transformation was passing through them.

He looked down at his body and saw his trousers come loose, broad strips of cloth flowing down from his hips like the parts of a split skirt. Their muted grays were taking on hues of blue, of a rainy ocean first, of a clear mountain sky later. His legs showed in between, longer and rounder than they had been before.

His heart began to beat a strong, happy rhythm. A breeze took up, carrying sweet, promising scents, dreams of something rich and strange, distant and mysterious, yet welcoming, beckoning.

He looked up. With widening eyes, the wind in his hair, he saw the whole landscape around him shift and change. Water was gathering into a creek, then a river. Trenches were being washed away, riverbanks formed, drawing first straight, then meandering lines across the land, creating bends and curves and bays entirely unthinkable in the world of rigid furrows he had been in just before. A fountain of sparkles welled up deep within him, reaching his heart, his eyes, finally easing his lips open, into a sound of helpless overwhelm, of recognition and surrender, of happiness and awe and confusion. {{{

The vision faded. Lahoon drew back slowly. He released Verlem's brow, the touch of fingertips on his temple. Lahoon's eyes were unfocused, his mind vague and dreamy. His voice came out in tumbling whispers. "Was that in the realm of fay?"

Verlem knelt quietly beside the stony altar. "It was inside of me."

The deewelarque held out a protective branch above Verlem.

"When I did not want to kill anymore, I knew what to do." He paused. "It was simple. Clear. But it was unbelievably hard."

Beneath the rustling leaves, a small chrysalis cracked. Verlem's dark eyes held it in their gaze. Two thin antennae appeared, and a delicate black head. The being struggled within its prison, within an old shell that had become too tight. Verlem raised a finger, but did not touch. Only his voice flowed on.

"I had done things one way for a very long time. Then I wanted to do them another way."

Verlem turned his hand, holding out his palm beneath the shivering chrysalis.

"It sounds very simple. But it was tough. The toughest part. To become someone else. To see and do things in a way different from the way I have always seen and done them. I knew where I wanted to go, and why. But every step weighed me down. My old habits sucked me in, again and again. Into the depth of a furrow that had been dug not only by me, but by thousands of beings before me and all around me."

Verlem caressed a gnarled branch of deewelarque, each knotted bend the mark of moments lived in the past, turned into memory embedded in body.

"There are patterns in the fabric of reality. Furrows. They become deeper and deeper. Each time a word is spoken, a move is made, the furrow of that word, of that move, becomes deeper. Leaving grooves in our bones, our souls, our world."

Verlem let his finger run down to where a thin young leaf sprouted beneath the old wound of a broken twig.

"Changing the patterns of reality is hard, strenuous. It takes effort, to move out of a furrow that is deep already. To create a new furrow, where there has not been one before. To go across trenches, to set a direction that is at angles with all the trenches already there."

Verlem opened his hand to the world. "So many others have helped me. With their wanderings, with their lives. It is impossible to go alone."

A thin black beauty had crawled out of the chrysalis. Raw and fragile, her wings still small and crumpled, she ducked against the age-old trunk of the deewelarque, catching her breath, marveling at how to live as someone new, in a world that would never look the same again.

High above, in the sky over the ravine, clouds moved, letting the light shift and change. The hues of gray in the altar's surface responded, subtly, softening imperceptibly.

Verlem turned back toward the shrine, dipping a finger into the crystal-clear waters of the bowl. Bringing up one shimmering drop, he washed the mark off Lahoon's brow.

Lahoon closed his eyes as he felt coolness flood the stinging scorch on his skin. Verlem touched another sparkle to his own forehead. Then his hands closed around the round, polished wood as he turned to the shades of the old deewelarque, inclining his head, holding the bowl up before him like a sacrifice, like a holy grail.

His lips moved, and Lahoon felt more than heard the sounds coming out, the light, high tones almost beyond perception. The leaves of the deewelarque stirred, moist scents of bark and berries wafting out from the depth within the branches. Verlem opened his eyes. Touching his finger to the waters, he let another shining drop fall onto the gnarled stem of the deewelarque. Then he poured out his offering, all the light splashing forth, all the life-giving force trickling down to meet the roots of the sacred old plant.

Verlem turned around to hold Lahoon's eyes. "I believe it is deep magic. That power to reshape the furrows of reality, in our souls, in our lives."

30

The morning's clarion call reverberated high and clear through Gureev's dreams. He stretched.

On the other mat, Rebonya turned toward the wall with a grunt.

Gureev smiled. He did not know whether Rebonya really was perpetually slow and grumpy to wake up, or whether she was just kind enough to give him a bit of time to himself, knowing he needed it in the morning.

Either way, Gureev gratefully melted into the opportunity. With a slow, luxurious motion, he let his hand trail over his chest, down his naked stomach, savoring the touch. His skin responded hotly and instantly, as did his whole body, full of pent-up yearning from the night.

Gureev sighed and tilted back his head.

Rebonya's eyes were still closed. She had no part in Gureev's morning ritual, nor did she want one. But she was glad for the vibes filling the air. Whatever else she might find annoying about Gureev, his way of waking up did endow the austere, hostile bareness of their chamber with an aura of sensuous enjoyment, with the living warmth of life force, with the very opposite of hatred and cold discipline. It made for a much better mood to wake up to. By the time a wave of blissful release rolled through the room and Gureev moved on to his meditative stretching poses, Rebonya felt almost ready to crawl out of bed, too.

Gureev surprised her by turning around. "I still wanted to thank you, Rebonya. For having asked me."

Rebonya looked up at him, blurry-eyed, rubbing her head.

Gureev raised his arms in a flowing motion as he stepped into position for his next exercise. "For having introduced me to Amalai, Lahoon, and Unleha." His hands touched with lithe precision, then came down gracefully beside his bending knee. "You were quite right about it. None of them has made any move to lock me in, to restrain me to a category of 'the Feudal'. No one hated me for my family. And no one expected me to rule the land, either. Or to be their superior in any way."

Gureev met Rebonya's gaze, giving her a gentle nod. "It has turned out well. People have related to me easily and naturally. I am free. Freer than I thought." An ironic smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Like an equal among equals," he said, quoting the solemn oath of the Transition, and silently slid back into the contemplative flow of his moves.

* * *

Kortid was pacing across his chamber. Thin morning light filtered in through the window, and with it the yawns and muted conversations of his comrades.

Kortid clenched his fists. He took another step toward the window. Then he spun around at a sound. The chamber's door had opened and was already closing again behind Gureev and the one who was with him. A fragile, delicate man with black hair and pale skin. Verlem.

Kortid swallowed. Fear welled up inside him, and hope, shaky, desperate hope. As he inclined his head before Verlem, his hands were trembling.

Gureev settled onto a cushion in the corner. But Verlem stayed by the door, seeming shy, withdrawn. As if waiting to be admitted, to be called in. His dark, quiet eyes were on Kortid, full of listening. Kortid stood before him, shaking. Worn out. Tense to the point of falling to pieces.

Verlem took a tiny step sideways, a breath of a movement. "Do you wish me to be here?"

Kortid jerked. "Yes." His eyes were wild, feverish. "Yes. Please come." He sat down on his mat. Verlem followed, staying one step behind, waiting for Kortid to make the first move.

Kortid slid in underneath the blankets. He arranged himself so as to make space for Verlem.

Verlem knelt on the edge of the mat, looking down at Kortid, his dark eyes unfathomable. A gust of wind moved through the courtyard, kicking up dust, tapping against the window panes.

"I can send you to sleep. A deep, dreamless sleep. It is a gift of magic I have. Do you want me to use it?"

An icy fist closed around Kortid's heart, without explanation, without warning. He froze. His breath caught. He moved back against the wall, pushing himself up on his elbow, staring at Verlem. Verlem caught his gaze. He got up instantly and moved a few steps back.

Kortid's breath returned. But his fists were still clenching the sheets. Kortid drew up his knees and hugged them tightly, resting his brow against them. He tried to let his heartbeat calm down, become deeper, more regular. He lifted his head to look up at Verlem.

Verlem was still standing a few feet away, in a pose of listening, of feeling into the air around him. Thin, shy, unobtrusive. He seemed utterly inoffensive.

"I am sorry," Kortid whispered.

Verlem shook his head, an almost imperceptible move. "No." His voice drifted through the air like a falling leaf. "Do as you feel. Only as much as you feel true."

His words dropped straight into Kortid's heart. It opened, and drank them in eagerly. It warmed, melting the ice around it, feeling freed and alive and able to beat, a strong, steady rhythm of life. Kortid's hands released the sheets. His expression softened as he raised his gaze to Verlem.

"Please come back." Kortid let his legs stretch out again.

Verlem moved up to the mat and crouched down gingerly.

Kortid licked his lips. He had to ask. "If you send me to sleep . . ." He turned his head away. His voice was a raw whisper. "Will I wake up again?"

Verlem sat perfectly still, his pose frozen, his breath inaudible. His eyes stayed on Kortid, without movement, without expression.

"Yes. You will wake up. You will not die." Verlem's words came quietly. "For a few hours, your sleep will be so deep as to be unbreakable. But come evening, you will wake by yourself. And you will be alive, and well."

Kortid nodded. He turned his head back toward Verlem but was still not looking at him. "While I am asleep . . . While I sleep so deeply that I will not wake, no matter what . . ." Kortid raised his eyes to Verlem now. "You will not do anything to me? You will do nothing other than send me to sleep? Can you promise?"

Verlem held his eyes in a long, quiet gaze. "Yes. I promise."

"Thank you." Kortid let out a deep breath. "Thank you for coming here. And for being so patient with me."

His eyes flicked over to Gureev, who gave him a curt nod.

Kortid lay back on his pillow, resting his arms loosely by his sides. He raised his eyes up to Verlem's. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes, please. Use your magic on me. Send me to sleep."

His gaze met Verlem's deep, dark eyes.

All tension and anxiety faded away as Kortid felt the blessing of release envelop him like a warm, welcoming ocean, bottomless, unfathomable, a cradling sea that finally allowed him to drift away, to sink down into the healing restfulness of oblivion.

Mists and vapors rose over the slope between the forest and the bath palace, thick and white and fragrant, a swirling dance of ethereal wraiths. A huge old copper pipe opened its mouth at the forest's edge, releasing a warm, fragrant well that carried the memories of healing and joy, of all the pleasures of a hot bath. Slowly cascading down the terraced slope, the water rested in pools of moss green here, purplish red there, each basin home to whispering reeds or drifting algae, to tiny beings that lived in the depths but would never be seen.

The bath palace had transformed a patch of harmless village green, which usually held no more than the occasional grazing horse, into a hot steaming swamp full of exotic creatures. There even was a small herbalist crescent, where Amalai tried to lure obscure vines and heavy-scented bogflowers from far-away lands, enticing and powerful beings that would otherwise never have made a home in Behrlem. But here they were, Amalai thought with a secret smile, her hand trailing in the water.

The half-moon slowly faded into the morning sky as Amalai made her way back down between the pools. And unexpectedly ran into another early bird, one bent over the controls of an intricate system of weirs and dams and watersheds.

*

"She did not mean we should wage a war," Unleha said, twiddling a crystal-tipped wand in her hand. "Tenatetlan is a peddler. She's not timid. And she just wants us to take real action. To be strong and loud, to have rallies in the plaza with masses of people. To stand up to the soldiers, head on. With force and vigor. Not to be meek and cautious, seeking compromises in negotiations all the time, keeping to the rules, waiting for procedures."

"What we wish to protect here, ultimately," Amalai replied carefully, "are our values. The values and practices of the Transition." She rubbed a cloth over the vial in her hand. "And one of the key practices, as I understand it, is to always seek solutions through negotiation. And to find majorities in the procedures that we have established for ourselves."

The glass caught a ray of light and glinted, a shining promise of healing. "As well as treating each other with respect. With kindness, even, if possible." Amalai hid the tiny flask in one palm. "I fear that what Tenatetlan suggests would be counterproductive."

"How so?"

Amalai made a vague gesture. "Violence breeds violence. Fear breeds fear." She reached out into air, searching for words. "In a quiet country town with lots of competent, cooperative people, who is going to see any need for soldiers? Or for the use of force? There is just no reason at all to turn brutal."

Amalai let her thumb and forefinger touch. "So Berqar needs a threat, any threat. Like the demon: here is a reason for fear, and thus a need to fight back. The demon was the first pretext Berqar gave. The next one is supposed to come from us."

Amalai's fist closed into a firm grip. "The more tension there is, the more aggression and belligerence, the more calls to 'defend ourselves' we will get. Riots or civil unrest would be ideal for Berqar. Any form of violence. So she can respond with more violence."

Amalai's hand opened again, like a flower at the slow, irresistible call of morning. "Our best bet is to be a peaceful, easygoing town. As we have been most of the time, anyway. Able to talk to each other and to organize our own lives in a community."

*

Tapping a wand against her thigh, Unleha lounged in the bend of a large pipe.

Amalai had one last thought to add. "Essentially, this is about how Yurvanian society is organized, and how we relate to each other. So in all our actions, we ourselves should strive to embody the values we wish to see in the world."

Unleha gave her a little applause, wand tucked under her arm. The corner of her mouth twitched. "Well spoken, noble friend."

She dodged the cloth Amalai threw at her and continued unperturbed. "So, wise one, what exactly would that look like, in your opinion? Bearing in mind that we also want to have a real effect. To see the soldiers gone."

Amalai shrugged. "We've got a good plan. I see no reason to drop it." Her eyes narrowed. "But we should add some key components. Seeing how things went just now."

*

"I am certainly not going to apologize to a soldier!" Invisible hairs rose at Unleha's neck, and she suppressed an angry growl.

She stood at the banks of the lowest basin, where huge copper pipes rose up in a tower of coils, catching the light in gleams of reddish gold at the top. From the lofty heights of that beacon, the tube leading clear waters back to the bath palace spanned the dirt track and the creek like some monumental archway, as if trying to awe the mere mortals occasionally passing underneath. At the foot of the tower, where the tubes wore a muted coat of grayish green and hid among thick undergrowth, the ferns began to sway as someone moved in between them.

"Not all soldiers are evil," Amalai said in measured tones, her eyes on the twitching leaves, then on Rebonya as she emerged from the greenery.

Unleha turned around, following Amalai's gaze, and saw Rebonya standing beside the old pipes with a slightly baffled expression in her almond eyes.

"Rebonya is not a soldier," Unleha scoffed, turning back around and waving a hand at Rebonya impatiently to make her step forward. "She is only a cadet."

"So in a few moons' time, she will turn evil?"

"In a few moons' time, she will turn to Varoonya," Unleha grunted. "But I take your point. Except that I never said all soldiers were evil. I just said I will not apologize."

"But you will?"

Unleha sighed.

*

One of the small weirs opened, and a little gurgle of rivulets told of one basin being emptied, another refilled. Delicate tendrils of forest green waved underwater, flowing with the commotion, easing back into place.

"Berqar is making an epic out of that tavern brawl," Rebonya related. "And an extreme emergency. Truly, I believe she could not have dreamed of anything better. And is eager for more." She leaned lightly against the broad round pipes, feeling the rush of the waters within, the pumping thud of the traption like a low, steady heartbeat underneath.

"You should have heard Berqar talk this morning," Rebonya continued, pushing her black fringe from her brow. "She was all aflame. All excited. You'd think the garrison, if not the entire town, was beleaguered by a hostile army. Soldiers have been wounded. Attacked while they were off duty. What a treacherous thing to do. After they had been out protecting the citizenry for endless hours, they get a knife in their back."

Rebonya caught Unleha's gaze. "Except that there were no knives, of course. It was scratches and bruises with the wounded soldiers, just as it

was with the wounded citizens. But never mind that. We'll not get distracted by facts. Figuratively speaking, and in Berqar's mind, it was a knife in the back. In the back of all soldiers, for that matter, and even in the back of all honest citizens who wish to be protected from demons. So we have treason, and treacherous elements in our midst, and an enemy army bearing down on the city, and extreme danger and hostility all around. Which calls for more soldiers!!" Rebonya concluded in mock triumph, her arms raised. She shook her head. "Honestly."

An outlandish fragrance wafted down to them from a basin up on the hill. The patinated tubes responded by losing some vapor of their own, a few droplets running down from a weld, from the space between oversized old screws holding a world together.

Amalai pulled a black curl back behind her ear. "Now." She arched an eyebrow pensively. "Can we think of an action that would very directly undo that story Berqar is telling?"

Unleha shot her a venomous look, crossing her arms over her chest.

Amalai almost managed to hide a grin.

* * *

Kortid was walking down the lane beside Gureev. The sky was still full of light, but blue shadows gathered in the corners, and birds sang of the coming night. A good number of people were out on evening walks, visiting friends, finishing business.

They were not far from their assigned corner now, their station of duty. Kortid wiped a hand over his face. "I feel a wreck," he murmured. "It is as if one day of sleep has only pointed out to me how exhausted I am." But there was a burning undertone of excitement in his voice. Hope might come back. Hope among ruins, hope burnt and battered, gray with the ashes of past devastation. A thin, weak hope. But hope. Real hope. Kortid's soul skipped along the lane, in a giddy, shaky, tottering gait.

Then Kortid stopped dead in his tracks. His gaze was riveted on a figure before them, some way down the lane. Verlem.

Kortid inhaled audibly. He took another step, and another, the world forgotten, narrowed down to this one man, this fragile body standing half hidden in the entrance of an empty courtyard. Kortid walked toward him as if drawn by an invisible current.

He stopped inside the doorway, halting underneath the high arch of stone, sheltered from view. Kortid stood rigid, transfixed. Then he inclined his head wordlessly, a torrent of exhaustion and gratitude flowing through the air around him.

Verlem stood quietly, listening. Hearing him.

Kortid raised his eyes, meeting Verlem's. "Will you come again?" he murmured, desperately, hopefully.

Verlem's eyes were dark and calm. "Yes. As often as you need me. As often as you wish."

Kortid sank back against the wall of stone beside him. His body eased as a wave of relief washed over him, deep and warm, a promise of balm and solace.

"Thank you."

The information Rebonya had given Unleha turned out to be correct. At the corner of the wool market, two uniformed guards were doing duty. And one of them was the soldier from the tavern. A short, broad-shouldered man. Johalen, Rebonya had said. Unleha recognized him instantly. And sighed. She clenched her fists lightly by her side and moved up to him with uncertain, hesitant steps.

“Um, hello.” Her voice was strained and wavery. Her eyes kept sliding from his face. “My name is Unleha. We—ah—met in that tavern the other night.”

Johalen took a small step back, fixing her with narrowed eyes. But he waited for her to continue.

Unleha had her arms crossed in front of her chest and was rocking back on her heels. “I am very sorry about the way things turned out that night. I don’t think anybody wanted that. Violent, like that.” She looked up at him now. “I certainly did not.”

“Well, then maybe you shouldn’t have cannoned into me,” Johalen murmured gruffly.

“I didn’t—” Unleha caught herself. “I did not mean to bump into you,” she took up, her voice carefully calm. “I was pushed from behind and I stumbled.” She saw the look on his face and huffed. “Feel free to believe or disbelieve. In any case, I did not mean to attack you. Or to run into you or touch you in any way. I am sorry.”

Then she could not help it. “I stand by what I said, though. You really can’t come to a tavern wearing uniform.”

Johalen visibly drew a breath and Unleha hurriedly pressed on. “But that is no reason to hit you. Or to push you or shove you or bodily assault you in any way. I am very sorry any of that happened. It never should have.”

Unleha clasped her hands tightly in front of her, her shoulders tense. “So. That is what I have come to say. I regret that evening turned violent in the way it did. And I am sorry you had reason to believe you were being

physically attacked. I never meant for that.” She held his gaze. “So please consider believing me. Or letting go of grudges to whatever extent you can.”

Unleha swallowed hard. Her eyes focused on the wall behind Johalen. “If there is anything that would help make up for harm suffered, please let me know,” she pressed out in a barely audible voice. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She let out a breath and gave Johalen a nod, briefly, a little uncertainly. Then she left.

*

Unleha had finished her business in town and considered taking a detour to avoid crossing the wool market again on her way back. But she did not. Why should she, after all? Her jaw set, her head up high, she walked a straight line along the square, not looking at the corner ahead.

But of course she saw anyway. That Johalen had noticed her. And that he hesitated, taking a step forward, raising an arm halfway, unsure.

Unleha stopped. And looked at him. He met her gaze, and she came up to the corner.

Johalen cleared his throat, looking down at her toes. “Whatever you did or did not mean at the time,” he muttered, “I take it that this is how you see it in hindsight. That you are sorry it turned out this way. That you wish it hadn’t.” He looked up, past her ear. “So, good enough.”

Unleha stood stiffly before him. “Good,” she said.

Johalen kept staring past her. Finally, reluctantly, he added, “I did not mean for things to turn out this way, either. No one did, I believe.”

“No,” Unleha said.

He met her eyes briefly and gave a curt nod.

“We’ll do better next time,” Unleha promised on behalf of both of them. She nodded back at him and turned.

As she walked down the narrowing lanes toward the bath palace, a broad grin spread all over her face as she stubbornly resisted a strong urge to skip along, or to sing out loud.

* * *

The sun was up. Cautiously, it peered out into the world through the narrow gap between the horizon and a large gray bank of clouds lined with silver. Beneath it, muted rays of mellow gold combed the meadow, the tips of the reeds, the long, slender, fingery leaves of trees.

Verlem sat beside Lahoon, nestled in between protruding roots of a large ancient tree.

Half of the lake's surface had already emerged from the shadows of the orchard, and where the wind sent tiny ripples running over the water, the crests caught sparks of sunlight here and there, delightedly throwing them back up into the sky and the air.

"I will be with Kortid often." Verlem's voice drifted out toward the waters, low and quiet. "And I need to dissipate afterward."

The reeds on the shallow shores swayed and whispered.

"There is so much intensity, so much animal density there. I cannot be with another human straight away. I need to be out in the cosmos."

A boat drifted across the lake. A long, slim form, easing through with natural grace, leaving only the softest of waves to fan out in a growing V behind it. A woman stood in the stern, her figure outlined in black against the light, her hands pushing down a long pole with slow, practiced moves.

Lagoon shifted. "You will dissipate. And when you come back from being starlight, you will go to Kortid again."

"Yes."

"Not to me."

The sun disappeared behind the thick bank of clouds, bereaving the world not of light, not of color, but of a certain quality of glow, of one very special reason to be alive.

Lagoon leaned back against the rough bark of the tree. He closed his eyes. His hand, unobserved, stole over to Verlem to touch him. His fingers reached coarse black cloth. Fine, pale skin over delicate wrists. The contact sent a shiver, a glimmering stream of longing coursing through Lagoon's blood. His head turned around involuntarily, his eyes wide open again, dark, vulnerable.

Verlem's fingers came to cover the hand on his wrist.

Lagoon held on to him tightly.

Then he leaned back again. He took a deep, shaky breath.

"Kortid needs you," Lagoon breathed.

"Yes."

"I need you, too." Lagoon's gaze was out over the waters. "Even if in a different way." Beyond the reeds, a crane stood in quiet solitude, on one leg, perfectly still.

"I could not bear to lose you." Lagoon's voice was almost inaudible, a rasping whisper. "But I will not. Will I?" His eyes on Verlem's face were intense, imploring.

"No. You will not. I want your love, as much as ever. I will stay."

Lagoon drew a deep breath and exhaled, a slow, long flow of air back into its ocean.

"I might learn how to be patient." Lahoon tried out the sentence, waiting to see if it would fill up with conviction.

It did moderately well.

He turned around to Verlem. "Kortid will get better. We hope. He may not always need you as much as he does now. Not always be as incredibly intense."

The leaves above their heads rustled in a low murmur. Verlem's leg rested among the gnarled roots of the tree as if it were one of them.

"I will be with you. Even now. But I cannot search for your portal into fay. And I cannot let you travel into my soul through magic anymore. It will have to wait." Verlem hesitated. "Because of Kortid, but not only because of Kortid."

His eyes roamed over the orchard, the lake, the flock of birds skimming the surface near the shore. "There is so much for me here. So much that is new. Wonderful. Daunting. I have never before seen this world as I do now."

He turned to face Lahoon. "At the moment, it is me who has found a portal into another realm. And stepped through. I am the one who is discovering, learning, changing. The one who is overwhelmed and challenged. Elated. Confused. Frightened, and drawn irresistibly."

Verlem's fingers moved over the back of Lahoon's hand, gingerly, reverently. "There is such awe-inspiring richness here, such overpowering intensity. I can hardly bear it." He raised his gaze. "I cannot do anything more."

A pale, waning moon timidly peered out high above, then hid again behind the blanket of clouds.

"You will have to wait, for your journeys into fay." Verlem's lips brushed lightly over Lahoon's fingertips, leaving a sparkle of starlight in their wake. "For right now, it is me who is traveling, through this earthly animal realm, letting myself be overwhelmed by its wonders."

33

The door opened and closed quietly as Gureev and Verlem swiftly stepped through. Kortid turned around to them in anticipation. Gureev settled into his corner again, and Verlem followed Kortid to his mat. Carefully, he came down on the edge. "May I ask?"

Kortid nodded.

"I stepped through the door very quickly," Verlem began. "I took great care. So that no one would see me."

At the end of this moonless night, morning cast a hesitant hue of gray over the walls.

"There would be an easier way for me to come," Verlem halted. "I would not need to walk through the castle at all."

Kortid's brow furrowed as he tilted his head. Verlem held his gaze, still crouched on the edge of the mat. "I am fay, as you know. Would it frighten you to see proof of that? Or would it be all right?"

Kortid shifted uneasily, drawing back a little toward the wall. "What proof?"

Verlem's robes formed loose folds over his fragile bones, his thin limbs. "I can dissipate. Dissolve into thin air. Become waves of energy." He paused. "And I can reappear out of thin air." His eyes sought Kortid's. "That is the way I could come to you directly. I could coalesce in your room. Appear in the shadows of a corner." His voice softened. "But I will not do it if it might scare you."

Kortid's hand clenched the sheet. He stared at Verlem.

Gureev got up and walked over. He sat down beside Kortid, almost touching his back. Kortid's eyes flickered over to him, irritated, confused. But he leaned toward him, just a little, and Gureev put his arm around Kortid's shoulders.

"You knew this," Kortid said in an accusatory tone of voice.

"Yes, I did," Gureev replied calmly, almost soothingly.

Kortid shook free of his arm. "Is there anything else you have not told me?" His wild eyes moved back and forth between Gureev and Verlem.

"Yes," Gureev said. "There is. Lots. In fact, it may take quite a long while to get to know Verlem. To understand, truly, everything he is." Gureev inclined his head. "I cannot say that I have, yet." Gureev looked up into Kortid's eyes. "But I trust him enough to believe he can heal you. He will help, and he will not harm. That seemed like enough to me. For now."

Kortid was shaking slightly, random shivers running over his skin. His eyes were feverish, uncertain. But he took hold of Gureev's arm, pressing it tightly. Kortid cleared his throat. He gave Verlem a nod, a tiny, jerky motion.

"Show me."

* * *

The day had grown hot and heavy, the burn of the sun summoning a cloudy haze into the sky and glistening pearls of sweat onto Amalai's brown skin. She straightened up and wiped her brow.

Amalai scanned the horizon. It would be some time before the rains began. She laid down her tools and set off toward the end of her garden, to the little stream running along its border. She reached the spot where, right when she had moved in, she had broadened and deepened the creek to form a little oval pond with water flowing in and out at the ends.

Amalai squatted on the broad, straight stone at the edge and looked down into the shallow glazed basin that formed the bottom. A number of tiny fish had chosen to hang out in the quiet waters, their scales glistening in the sunlight, the whole school enjoying her open bathtub as much as she did. Amalai dipped in her hand, and that motion together with her huge dark shadow falling over the waters was enough to make a pattern of silver darts flit away to safety.

Amalai let her clothes fall to the ground. With a deep sigh of relief, she submerged her legs in the water, and then allowed her whole body to ease into the clear freshness of the pool.

Softly, the water murmured around her, telling of pebbles and rocks, of jumps and swirls and constant movement. It whispered of memories of mountains, of snowy peaks and deep bedrock, of sudden wells bubbling out into sunlight. Of metamorphosis, of being a cloud and air and sky, a hazy mist, a falling raindrop. The currents babbled on and on, easily, happily, calm and constant in their perpetual change. Smooth and cool, they flowed around Amalai's naked body, licking over her skin, easing the pent-up heat out of her veins. She groaned contentedly, leaning back into the never-ending caress of the stream.

*

Amalai sat back up and drew a deep breath, her hair dripping and her skin glistening as she emerged from underwater communion with her stream. When Amalai opened her eyes, she saw a black shadow standing between her and the sunlit sky. She blinked.

"Hello, mermaid," a familiar voice said.

Amalai raised an eyebrow.

"May I disturb you?" Unleha asked.

"Only if you allow me to keep on sitting in here." A trace of hedonism crept into Amalai's grin.

"Ah, shame." Unleha slipped off her shoes and scrambled down to sit on the bank beside Amalai. "I was hoping you might offer me your place. But I will make do with a pittance." Unleha dipped her naked feet in beside Amalai's, just where the basin ended and turned into a creek again. The clear water swirled over her black skin, playing joyfully with her ankles. Unleha's dark eyes gleamed at Amalai's. "You know what?"

Amalai shook her head and looked expectantly up at Unleha even while she was pulling her sarong down into the water and began to rub and rinse it, her hands in unhurried motion as her mind turned to the tale.

"I have been to the county house," Unleha started off. "To put up our placard, as we discussed. Calling for a sounding in a dozen days, and then, if the sounding resonates, a vote after another dozen days. To get the soldiers out of town. All very well and proper. I put it up, spoke to Ojorsven and Nenimoria about it, had a nice cup of tea and left." She paused for effect. "And guess what? When I came back a little later on my way home, what did I see?" Amalai did not know. But Unleha was about to tell her. "There was another placard up right next to ours. Signed: Berqar."

Amalai's brows went up.

"Yes," Unleha agreed. "Just what I thought." She splashed about in the pool with her feet. Then she propped her arm up on one knee, leaning forward toward Amalai. "It is a direct counter-motion. Which means it will be combined with ours. The sounding, and later the vote, will be held for both of these motions together, with people having to choose either one or the other."

Amalai waved her sarong through the water, a colorful flag over her hazel skin. "A direct counter-motion?"

Unleha nodded grimly. "Direct enough. It is almost the exact same wording as ours. With only some very slight minor differences. The negation, of course. And just one tiny half sentence added here and there.

Saying that the soldiers should be entrusted with ‘standing guard and other measures needed to protect the safety of our town.’”

Amalai’s brow furrowed. “Other measures needed?”

“You’ve spotted it right away, my dear.” Unleha wriggled out of her shorts and sat down on her heels in the creek, letting the cool water flow over her thighs and hips. A sigh of relief tempered her angry voice. “Other measures needed. That could be anything.” Unleha trailed her hands through the clear water. “Interpreted, at any given moment in time, to mean exactly what Berqar wants it to mean.”

Amalai followed Lahoon through the fields, her eyes on the brittle sun that stood low behind a shroud of hazy clouds, pale and weak like a full moon. A battered orange lay by the roadside, one that had rolled off a passing cart and fallen into oblivion. Lahoon picked it up and softly rubbed the dust off the bruises. But his voice was strained, worried. "Should we hold concerts in the plaza at all, then? If Berqar has added her counter-motion to ours?" Lahoon tapped his fingers against the shiny fruit in an agitated pattern. "If we are trying to get people to come to the sounding now, to make the vote possible, will we be campaigning for Berqar's sake as much as for our own?"

Amalai wagged her head. "Yes. In a sense." She crossed her arms over her chest. "But we simply have to call a vote. There is no way around it."

Lahoon bit his lip. "Well, then we'll take the way right through. At high speed."

* * *

The bright blue beam of the sword shot out, searing the gloom, blinding the eye. Gureev held it steady, his body poised with the strength of a young tree, with the grace of a dancer. Rebonya pressed back against the wall behind him, peering out into the shattered twilight.

Across the room, Verlem detached himself from Amalai and Lahoon and slowly walked up toward the cold ray piercing the dusk. Gingerly, he stretched out a hand, let it hover above the sword, with just a sliver of distance.

Gureev heard his heart pound in his ears.

Verlem closed his eyes. He felt for the gleam, for the magic. He slid his hand along the blade, up and down, in modest, deliberate moves. He let it rest, float, just above, coming closer, advancing a mere breath. Then Verlem's hand fell right through the sword.

He opened his eyes. "Light," Verlem said, in his quiet voice. He walked across, the blue beam catching on his robes, against his chest. "It would blind me, or anyone, if pointed directly into the eyes. Otherwise, there is no danger." He looked up. "No effect."

*

"It is appalling." Amalai shook her head. "Of course, we knew, in a way. That the blue swords have no power. But seeing it demonstrated in that way . . . by the very person they have supposedly been designed against . . . that is still another matter. It makes the lie so visible. So palpable."

Gureev cleared his throat. "There may be some other sense in standing guard," he suggested feebly. "Even if the swords hold no magic against the fay. Even if that was untrue. Still the soldiers in the streets might be a protection. Able to see things. Like an ordinary sentinel would."

"They did not see me," Verlem ventured. All eyes turned toward him.

Verlem took a step back. But he still had everyone's attention.

He hesitated, taking another step back, holding on to the wall with one hand.

"I have been in town. Often. I coalesce in people's chambers at night. I send them to sleep with a look. In the morning, they know nothing of me." He paused. "And neither do the guards."

The bushels of herbs swayed gently in the air, their perfumes mingling. Verlem's words hung in between them, leaving an echo, a brittle image of themselves behind as they faded. Their aftermath began to prick and bite Rebonya like an acrid smell. Tension rose up inside her, an irritation she could not name yet, but that already had the power of making her stomach clench. Then sudden realization shot through her.

She jerked around. "Have you ever crept up on me like that? In the middle of the night, when I would not notice?" She was a hissing menace, her body leaning forward toward Verlem and recoiling at the same time. "Have you ever drunk my blood? Have you? Have you ever slit open my veins and made me forget all about it afterward?" Rebonya's eyes were narrowed to tiny slits, her body shaking.

Verlem looked at her, saying nothing.

Rebonya lost it. "You bloody vampire! How dare you suck me dry! Who do you think you are?" She lunged at Verlem. "I'll make you regret you ever—" Verlem had dissipated. Rebonya's hand closed on thin air, a prickling shimmer running over her skin before it faded. Rebonya screamed and jerked her hand away, stumbling backward. Gureev caught her. Rebonya did not care. She was staring at the empty space where Verlem had been, another scream lodged in her throat. But it did not break free this time. She choked.

Gasping for breath, she held on to Gureev's arm, looking around frantically with feverish eyes. But Verlem was gone.

Rebonya's hands were shaking. Raggedly, her breath tried to come back, to regain a rhythm.

Amalai and Lahoon were staring at her.

Rebonya blushed.

She took a deep breath and turned away. She listened to the beat of her heart. It was there. Steady, more or less. Calming down.

Rebonya turned back to face Amalai and Lahoon, Gureev still by her side, covering her back. She cleared her throat.

Just then, Verlem returned.

Silently, cautiously, he coalesced in the far corner of room, as if uncertain whether he should be there at all.

Amalai reached out a hand. Verlem made a small move toward her, then stopped to look over at Rebonya.

Rebonya crossed her arms in front of her chest, her eyes locked to the ground. Her whole body was tense, strained. She glanced up defiantly at Verlem, who was still watching her. She instantly looked away again. Silence hung in the air expectantly, waiting to transform into something else.

But nothing came.

Slowly, the silence began to harden into something solid, something dark and thorny.

* * *

The cadets' chamber was full of night, with only a bit of dim light filtering in through the small window to make the shadows stand out, black on gray on black. Gureev pushed himself up on one elbow underneath his blanket, his voice finding its sure way across the darkness toward Rebonya.

"You attacked Verlem, physically," Gureev stated. "Of course I think you should apologize."

"He should be the one to apologize!" Rebonya retorted hotly. "He is the one who attacked! I was only about to grab his arm, and did not succeed at even that. But he struck me down unconscious and made me lose a great deal of blood. Is that an attack or what? Will he apologize?"

"I actually think that he will," Gureev said tersely. "If you have the good grace to grant him the opportunity to do so."

Rebonya snorted. "I may as well not." She crossed her arms in front of her chest, thumping back against her pillow. "He did it on purpose. And more than once, I suspect." She banged her fist on the mat. "He has no right to drink my blood! It is my blood, and my body! How could he possibly touch me!" She huffed. "And I don't see why I should be overcome with gratitude just because he is kind enough to refrain from killing me. He has no right to kill me! I have a right to live! It is the least that can be expected of him that he does not kill me. Really."

Rebonya pulled the blanket close to her chest. "He just kept doing it, that sickening specter. Sneaking up on people in secret." She shuddered. And clenched her fist. "He's disgusting."

Gureev remained silent.

Rebonya kept on going, shaky with revulsion. "No one should be like that. No one should have such powers. I can't stand it." She hunched her shoulders. "To appear out of nothing, out of nowhere, any time. While I am walking down a corridor. While I am sitting down to eat. While I am asleep."

Her grip on the sheets was so tight the knuckles stood out pale and bony. "It is like you are never truly alone. That phantom could be hovering right behind your back, always. Ready to pounce on you. Don't feel it when he is there, don't remember afterward. You're just completely helpless, exposed. To that creepy, intangible ghost."

Her voice was breaking. "No one should have such powers. No one. It is unbearable."

She turned over, drawing her knees up to curl into a ball, pulling the blankets firmly and tightly around her back. As much protection as anyone could get.

* * *

One by one, the windows of the bath palace had turned from mellow gold to the black of night. A waxing moon rose over the quiet gardens.

Lahoon raked his fingers through his hair, a wry smile on his face. "So I have always had a secret lover. Secret to myself, even."

Amalai looked at him, a warm glow in her eyes.

She let her gaze wander over to Verlem. "Clearly, some people are delighted to find that you have always come to them at night to drink of their essence." She bent forward to place a kiss on Lahoon's hair. "But others are horrified. As we have seen."

A soft breeze whispered to the leaves, and they responded in a dance of shifting moonlight sheen and small blue shadows.

"Yes." Verlem's voice joined their low, rustling tune.

They sat in silence, their senses charmed by the gracefulness of subtle conversations of the night.

"I never thought anyone would object so violently," Verlem said, half to Lahoon and Amalai, half to the grass and the trees. "Suffer so passionately, over something they have never even noticed. Never known."

"Well, she knows now," Amalai sighed, hugging her knee to her chest. Lahoon turned toward her. "Do you wish she didn't?"

Warm, damp summer air breathed over Amalai's skin, caressing her face, the thoughtful expression it held.

"No," she said slowly. "I think not. Although it would have saved us a lot of trouble, in a way. But ultimately, I believe people have a right to know. And to say yes or no. It is their body, after all." She sighed again. "Even if people themselves are not always showing that kind of respect to others. Many of us are still feeding on other animals without a care. Using their land, using them, killing them, even though we know they want to live, want it passionately. Just as much as we do."

A few monkeys chattered sleepily in the trees of the bath gardens.

Amalai laced her fingers. "Still, we should strive to do our best here. And be respectful. Even to people who may not always be respectful themselves."

Clouds drifted on winds up high, tore open, closed again. On the meadow between the bath's bushes, a rabbit sat nibbling at blades and wildflowers. Suddenly, he perked up. Within a heartbeat, he had disappeared into the shelter of a burrow.

"I wonder . . ." Verlem's voice floated out into the night. "Will many people feel this way?" His eyes were wandering through the darkness, seeking out shapes in the undergrowth. "I would like to spare the ones who think it such a horror. But, who?" The trees looked back at him in silence. "How will I know?"

A gentle beam of moonlight passed through the parting clouds, causing the garden's shadows to crowd together underneath the bushes.

Lahoon's gaze rested on Verlem. Gently, he touched a finger to his sleeve. "Ideally, we would have enough people who know, and who willingly offer. Then you could be nourished without the need to go to anyone who has not agreed." He looked at Verlem a little worriedly. "But at the moment, that is not possible, is it?"

"No."

"How many people do you go to?"

Verlem let his gaze roam over the ponds, which lay still and quiet now. He seemed to be looking for an answer, in the clarity of their depths, in the mirror image of the world. "When I am in my body as much as I have been now . . . and when I take as little as I do, each time—" Verlem hesitated briefly. "Perhaps one a day. Or three every three days."

"One a day!" Amalai was wide-eyed. "But there are so few who have offered. Me, Lahoon, Gureev. And you have not even come to us again."

"No. I believe the body needs time to recover. So I have spread it out over more people. I only come again after three or four moons."

Amalai still looked somewhat dazed. Her mind was trying to wrap around this. "But that means we would need a hundred people in all."

"Yes."

The air around them smelled of summer, but it was dense and heavy already, carrying a call for the rains, for downpours of release. Verlem raised his hand to Lahoon's, which closed around his immediately, warm and sure.

"The most beautiful way," Lahoon mused, "is how it has been with me and Amalai. People who love you, who befriend you, who feel it is a privilege to know you." He raised Verlem's hand to his cheek and softly brushed against it, savoring the dry, feathery, tender touch of Verlem's skin. "But this would have to grow gradually, naturally. It cannot be rushed."

Verlem's hand looked thin, fragile, almost transparent; a brittle wisp of foam on the deep blue ocean of Lahoon's skin. "I cannot make friends with a hundred people. And not quickly." His fingers intertwined with Lahoon's. "I am still surprised I can make friends with people at all. Surprised, and somewhat overwhelmed."

"It is overwhelming for everyone." Lahoon's eyes were soft as they rested on Verlem. "No one here has ever met a fay before. You bring the existence of a whole realm with you when you come. It is breathtaking. Your mere presence is shifting worlds for us." A wry smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "And in the midst of the whirlwind that creates, you ask to drink our blood. No wonder people explode. Be it into love and awe, or fear and rejection. Or total confusion. But the intensity is likely to be there, one way or another, whenever you show yourself to anyone."

Amalai's eyes rested on Verlem, whose black robes seemed to slowly melt into the surrounding darkness. "So you cannot meet people. Not so many, so quickly. You cannot declare yourself and ask them outright. It would be too much."

A bat fluttered across the terrace in an angular, erratic pattern, a wayward splash of ink traversing the airy night.

"But some people will not mind if you go to them in secret. When they hear, later, they will greet it with acceptance. And you, with welcome." She turned her face to the moon. "Like I did. And Lahoon, and Gureev."

A small owl hooted once, twice, in the distance.

"But who? And who would hate it, like Rebonya?" Her words drifted out into the air, an open question the night had no answer for. "We should have a way to find out. A gentle, easy way, one that does not overwhelm anyone. That does not cause drama or hurt." Amalai gently tapped a finger against her lips. "I wonder how we are going to do it."

35

A sea of shoes had gathered outside the county house. Inside, people were seated all over the floor of the upstairs room, a disorderly crowd on comfy cushions.

Tastefully colored fractals adorned the walls, images of endless symmetry reflecting back on themselves, intricate arabesques winding around each other in floral patterns of infinity and self-identity. One of the fractal sculptures had even been set alive with the help of a traption. A hundred filigree threads of a luminous root system kept sprouting out and weaving together in a perpetual dance, an image of constant change within a larger whole.

The creator of all these wonders, a dark-skinned woman with slender limbs, was standing beside a grid on the wall, the names of days running down one side, those of rooms adorning the tops of columns.

“Please come forward now!” Her voice was firm and warm, as befitted her position as one of Behrlem’s official conciliators. “Let’s have your announcements! Just a few words each, please, so we can move through all the offers, of which there are many, I am happy to see.”

Indeed. Amalai let her eyes roam around the room. These open board meetings, which happened on an irregular basis in normal times, had turned into a weekly affair now, and might become even more frequent, given the size of the crowd.

A number of people felt there was a crisis brewing in Behrlem and were moving into action. Each in their own way, with their own skills. But roughly united in the belief that the bedrock of peace was a competent society, full of people able to talk to each other and to organize themselves. And so they did what they could. With ideas as weird, phenomenal and varied as people themselves. Amalai gave Unleha a happy wink across the room.

A young boy with smoky eyes and swirling skirts stepped onto the dais. “Societies are made from within,” he singsonged in a melodious voice. “Just as the pattern of the larger resounds in the small, so the small always echoes in the large, in an endless conversation.” He reached out a hand to the unfolding root fractal. “We need to hold in our hearts what we which to see in the world. So my companions and I strive to cultivate openness

and compassion in our souls every morning. If you feel called to join us for this meditation, once or every day, please do. Meet at the Green Temple. You will find us beneath the ancient tree at sunrise.”

He turned to pin his announcement card onto the grid, in the column of Other Locations.

Meanwhile, an energetic woman jumped onto the dais and began to run through her talk in a crisp, efficient manner. “Now, here is a way to make all your conversations go smoothly. Just a few principles to keep in mind, plus some practice, and you will find that even the most difficult encounters suddenly turn out well. This path is tried and tested and will be presented to you”—she bounced over to the grid—“tomorrow morning in this very room.”

The next speaker climbed the stage with a teetering step. “We need to connect with one another, to bring people together,” the old woman said, her voice brittle, but her eyes sparkling. “People who disagree, or who are scared and outraged. We will create a space where everyone can say out loud what’s on their chest. And where they will be heard, enough to enable them, by and by, to also listen. To hear others. Even those who are on a completely different trail at that moment. So if you are willing, please come to our Eve of Harkening at the Teapot Library in three days’ time.”

Several people helped the woman climb down and stick her card to the respective spot on the grid.

At this moment the door flew open and Tenatetlan rushed in. Accompanied by a gust of wind, she stormed right up to the stage and burst into her speech. “We’re holding a rally in the town square! A strong, loud protest! Come, everyone! This is the time for people to stand up, united, and show our strength in the face of a terrible danger! This is the time to fight!”

Tenatetlan had jumped the queue. And she did not stop taking. Rather than making just one short announcement, she was giving a full-length harangue.

The town conciliator intervened in a calm and discreet way. Then in a firm and assertive way.

“Don’t interrupt me!” Tenatetlan screamed. “This is so important! I will not be stopped!”

It took several more minutes. All the town conciliators were in action now, trying to salvage the nature of the meeting. People in the queue and across the room were beginning to shift restlessly, brows furrowed.

By the time the conciliators managed to get Tenatetlan off the stage, the atmosphere in the room had changed perceptibly.

In the slow, wearisome hours after midday, Amalai decided to retreat onto the porch rather than labor on in the brooding heat when the air was laden with tension and pressure. In the shadow under the eaves, her hammock swayed softly like a boat drifting on lazily between the green banks of her herbary. The occasional croaking of frogs came over from the creek, filling the listless air with some signs of life.

Amalai let her gaze drift out between the leaves. She fell asleep.

In her dreams, dark clouds drew together under a leaden sky, weighing heavily on the earth. Dense and portly, showing a hundred shades of twilight in the ponderous weight of their bellies, they billowed like promising, threatening, shape-shifting omens. Shadows gathered within them, growing thick, massive, until the clouds could hold out no longer and burst open into release. A catastrophe, a liberation. An ending and a solace. The beginning of all life.

The rushing sounds from Amalai's dreams began to nudge her consciousness, to whisper inside her ear. "Here, here! Come!"

Amalai's eyes slid open a crack, just enough to let her squint out from under her lashes.

The herbary was in a deluge.

The air had turned misty and gray with water as the world was swallowed up by the overflowing abundance of Quanalua the Bountiful, goddess of the rains.

Amalai drew a deep breath, a heartfelt sigh of relief, as the charged atmosphere found release, as the pressure dissolved, got washed away into deliverance. Pent-up tension flowed out of the air, and out of Amalai's nerves and muscles, to relax into the downpour, the water, the falling. The soaked earth. The myriad of droplets that changed the world.

Amalai stepped off the porch, out from under the eaves. The gifts of the goddess were showered upon her, soaking her hair, drenching her shirt, freeing her breath. Amalai cast a brief glance around, saw that all the drainage she had dug was leading small torrents away, that all the covers she had placed held fast.

Amalai shed her clothes and walked out into a full embrace of the goddess just as she heard a song rise up behind her. She turned. Lahoon had come out, half-naked already. Glistening drops ran down his torso, licking a luminous trail over his skin of ocean blue.

Amalai went to meet him, her arms raised to the sky, to join him in their hymn, their liturgy, the beginning of their dancing worship of Quanalua.

"You have known me for so long."

Lahoon tugged at the towel around his hips as he leaned against the wall of the porch beside Verlem's delicate form. Beyond the broad eaves, the rain kept pouring down in strong, heavy release.

Lahoon's eyes rested on Verlem, on this frail white fay who had finally come into his life. His voice was soft, full of question. "You have heard my song in the forest. You have shared in my essence at night. You have been with me, all this time." There was a fine edge of pain to his words. "Why did you not show yourself? I was calling so deeply. Yearning so desperately."

Verlem dropped his gaze to the wooden planks of the porch. "I was shy. And I was afraid you might run." His pale skin shone in the uncertain twilight of the overcast sky. "I was not sure who you were calling. Whether you would want me."

"I want you." Lahoon's hand secretly crawled over to Verlem, touching his robes.

Verlem's hand moved, acknowledging Lahoon's furtive fingers on his sleeve. "When you called out to fay, I was the first to come through. The only one. And you fell in love with me straight away." His body stayed still, an ethereal presence in the thick, heavy realm of the terrene. "If someone else had come, would you have loved them instead? For being fay?"

Lahoon did not answer immediately. Colored shards of memory, dreams of past emotions, visions of possible unfoldings drifted in the depths of his heart, mingling, conversing, arranging themselves into communion inside one self. Finding their way out into words.

"I would have. Probably." Lahoon rested his head back against the wall. "My first meeting with that other realm had me in raptures. I exploded into ecstasy with the pent-up force of years and years of passionate yearning. I would have fallen for almost any fay coming through at that moment. It is true." Lahoon's gaze traveled over the pale skin on Verlem's face, the fine lines, the dainty features. "But it was you. You, who, I now know, I would have loved anyway. For the gentleness of your spirit. The beauty of your soul."

Lahoon raised their joined hands to his lips for the breath of a kiss. "You are the one who has finally made my dreams come true."

Verlem stayed very quiet, his gaze out in the flooded garden. Full round drops kept falling, leaving silvery-gray lines to linger in their wake. Verlem's voice mingled into their susurrations. "I may have been the one who kept your dreams from coming true. For all the time before."

Lahoon's blue eyes, flecked with black in the obscurity of the rainswept eaves, turned to Verlem.

"How so?"

"Many other fay shy away from me. If I had not been near you, maybe some of them would have come."

The rain kept drawing blurry veils in hues of ash and diamond over the herbs in Amalai's garden, the sensitive leaves of shrubs and bushes nodding acceptingly with the arrival of every new drop. Lahoon watched a single pearl sit among the butterfly shimmers of his arm.

"Why do other fay stay away from you? Are you a danger to them?"

"No. I am not. But they may not know that."

Lahoon could almost hear the sucking, the swelling of a thousand tiny roots underground, an all-encompassing sigh of saturation, of smothering abundance. He breathed in Verlem's rich, eldritch fragrance as it mingled with the earthy mists.

"You are no danger to me."

Verlem's gaze stayed out on the falling rain.

"I would have been. Not only dangerous. But lethal, very quickly. If I had been who I was most often."

Lahoon sat very still.

"So I was lucky."

Verlem turned, his face so close to Lahoon's now that their breaths mingled.

"Yes. And so was I."

* * *

"It is at least as important as any other part of our war." Berqar paced her office impatiently. "Establishing our autonomy within the state. It is even at the heart of what we seek. Nothing more vital to bringing back the right order."

Pramus watched her, his eyes dark above his silvery beard, his staff placed firmly on the ground. Berqar brought her hand up in a cautioning gesture. "We just need to take it slowly. One battle at a time. With a wise strategy, even including a tactical retreat at times. As I have done with the scrutinizer."

She clenched her fist. "As I had to do. That once. But in the future, when our position is stronger, I will not let any civilian come and undermine my authority inside my own garrison!"

Berqar took the scrutinizer's note from her desk and crunched it into a ball. A cannonball, possibly. "We will let them know we are not subject to their laws. We will have our own, a martial law, the law of war!"

She hurled the paper cannon into the fireplace. But there was no fire. Except in Berqar's soul. "All these scrutinizers and conciliators! Civilian weaklings. They will all learn that Diamondtip is outside their reach!" Her eyes held an ardent gleam. "And that in future any citizen who dares to insult a soldier will answer to the garrison! The law of war does not stop at the gates!"

* * *

Silky cushions shone with a muted glow in the light of magical lanterns, like night blossoms of amber and wild orchid. The Teapot Library, and the large circle of people within it, was full of attentive silence.

"I could have died that night."

An elderly woman in a purple bonnet held the talking stick in a firm grasp, speaking with her voice low, her pauses long.

"I was just stepping outside. Bringing an empty bucket back to the garden. And when I reached my porch again, I was assaulted." She hugged her chest tightly. "Just like that, out of nowhere. Out of a peaceful, ordinary evening. On my very own doorstep."

She swallowed. "That soldier had his blade right at my throat. If I had panicked, or even just flinched, I would have died. Even the slightest involuntary move, on his side or mine, would have driven that sword under my skin."

The woman took a deep, shaky breath. "But I did not panic. I did not stir. And I survived."

She looked up. "The soldier who pounced on me left right away. But I have been haunted by his ghost ever since. I do not sleep well. I jump at my shadow when I walk. I do not go outdoors without checking every which way."

The woman shook her head slightly. "Talking to the conciliator has helped. Even though she could not get hold of the soldier yet. And I might need that. To hear him. To see that he is a normal, sane, trustworthy person, after all. Which I hope he is. In spite of what he did that night."

A strand of hair fell out beneath the bonnet, framing her face. Her dark eyes were fierce, and wretched. "I want out. I want my life back. I want to walk across my garden, whistling, carefree and lighthearted. I want to feel at home in the world. Like I used to, all my life." She sighed. "But now it's gone."

Half hidden behind a latticework of brass, a few candles were flickering, bringing to life the tales woven into carpets along the wall, allegories of lost treasures and mysterious beasts.

Gureev, arms tucked into the wide sleeves of his robes, sat in the circle

silently, sharing in the patient attention, the deep listening. The group held the space open for the woman, to speak from her heart, to share of her silence.

She took a deep breath. Then she raised the talking stick to her brow in a gesture of closure and gratitude and laid the staff back in the center.

Kortid had his gaze fixed rigidly on the floor. His lips were pale. He had not thought about the woman, not once, ever since that night.

It had been a brief moment of fight to him. Part of his constant alert, his readiness to defend. But to her? Kortid had never thought about that, never tried to feel it.

Only now.

Amalai eased over the huge, mottled snake of a pipe that wound along the edge of the bath gardens. Through chinks in the greenery before her, she could already see the crumbling yolk-colored walls of the artificer's cabin, a pale half-moon above it in the late afternoon sky.

Amalai stepped up through a jungle of ferns and practically bumped into Unleha, who was hurrying out the door.

"Uh!"

"Good uh to you, too." Amalai grinned. "And here I am with news from the county house."

"Tell me all about it!" Unleha tucked her arm under Amalai's, pulling her along. "If you can do so on my way to the palace. I'm a little behind schedule, I am afraid."

Amalai nodded and trotted alongside her hurrying friend. "About the tavern brawl. You know."

"Yes. I remember," Unleha grumbled.

"Well. The conciliators have begun to work on that, as one might expect. But they are having trouble."

"Oh?"

A path had appeared beneath their feet, or at least a loose assembly of moss and broken bricks. Winding through the high ferns like a forgotten river, it led them up toward the back of the palace.

Amalai was doing her best to keep up with Unleha while still continuing their conversation. "Apparently Berqar is refusing to let any soldiers participate in conciliation talks. She claims the usual provisions do not apply. Not to the garrison. She knows, of course, that for any normal scuffle, the county conciliators would come in and host talks. So that people can hopefully smooth over some of their ruffled feelings, and perhaps even offer reparations to each other."

In a jumble of walls and nooks and added wings, the outer edge of the palace appeared before them. The path turned moist and slippery under their feet as it descended toward a broad wooden door, hunched low,

halfway underground. Wisps of steam were protruding through the cracks, and low thumping sounds emanated from within. Amalai gave the door a suspicious glance. But Unleha charged straight on.

“For this tavern brawl, however,” Amalai carried on bravely, “there can be no conciliation talks, Berqar says. Because the soldiers were not there as themselves, she claims, but as a representation of an institution, the garrison. So it is not a matter of citizens quarreling among themselves, but of individuals attacking the state, or order and authority and whatnot, and must be dealt with in an entirely different way. Not one of peacemaking and reparations. But one of judgment and punishment. Of a ruler dealing with underlings.”

Unleha opened the door. A wave of steam and heat and noise broke over them and swallowed them whole. Amalai coughed and blinked, trying to get her bearings in the middle of a hot, humid cloud.

“Have you never been to the heater room before?” Unleha half shouted, making herself heard above the hissing and clanking.

“No, indeed I have not.” Amalai squinted through the vapors swirling around her. Metal pipes of all sizes crisscrossed the room in a maze, interspersed with huge copper domes and cauldrons, tubes reaching up into the sturdy vaults, disappearing into the mists of the cellar. Rusty stains on the floor met with shallow puddles underneath dripping welds, and above it all throbbed the pulse of a rhythmical cacophony of thudding and clunking, of whistling and gurgling. Amalai felt as if she were climbing into the guts of a metallic dragon.

“This is where your hot bathtub is born.” Unleha grinned, baring a delicate web of spun glass within a brazen globe. Then she stepped into the fog, wand in hand.

Fortunately, Amalai had almost come to the end of her tale. She shouted her conclusion at Unleha amidst the huffing and puffing. “For the tavern brawl: Berqar says the garrison is not subject to normal procedures. So before that is cleared up, nothing can happen. No soldiers are permitted to go to conciliation talks.”

Unleha’s face reappeared behind a large round cylinder giving off suspicious creaks in an uneven beat. She wore a smudge across her brow and a broad grin on her lips. She hollered at Amalai over a pipe running at chest level. “Fortunately, the conciliation talks have come to the soldiers in the meantime. We’ve had quite a few by now. All the soldiers in the tavern that night have been visited by at least one person involved in the brawl. Maybe more. And most of these talks have gone well. Not gloriously, perhaps. But well enough. Hostility really is low, on an

individual level. Whatever the official policy. Even my special friend Johalen was quite likable by the time the third person had come to him to apologize.”

Her words were underscored by a triumphant thumping from the copper kettle beside her. She laughed. “So there is something good about soldiers standing around town all day. They have become much more accessible.”

Amalai nodded. “Kortid has made up with the woman he assaulted. After the discernment circle. It was very good for her.”

“What?” Unleha ducked underneath the hissing tube.

Amalai waved it away.

Unleha gave her a roguish wink, dimples showing in her dark cheeks. “Let’s keep going. Let’s make friends with the soldiers before Berqar finds out and forbids them to talk to anyone. By then, we’ll have charmed them all.” Unleha leaned over to give Amalai’s shoulder a hearty clap. Then she disappeared into the maze of pipes and vapors.

* * *

Kortid fished out a little pouch from his pocket and emptied it on the table. A splatter of copper coins poured forth. He looked up at Verlem.

“I am afraid that is all I have at the moment. I can save up more over time. But you may have to hold out for quite a while until you feel you have been paid appropriately.” His eyes sought Verlem’s in a worried question. “Will that be good enough? Can you wait?”

Verlem looked at him with his calm, quiet eyes. “It is good enough as it is. I do not need your money.”

Kortid halted, confused. “You do not?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Kortid straightened up. He ran a hand through his hair, then rubbed it up and down the back of his neck. “Well, then . . . ah . . . what can I give to you? How can I thank you?”

Verlem’s thin hands were folded together, his spindly fingers intertwined. “You have thanked me already. By telling me. And by getting better.”

Kortid looked at him. “Is that enough? Is this why you are doing it? Just to see me get better?”

“Yes.”

Kortid looked at him in silence. The light fell in through the window, reflecting the burn of the bright sun outside, parching the sand of the courtyards. Kortid’s voice was soft when he spoke.

“You are a true lover of humanity, then.”

Verlem stood very still. His robes fell loosely over his shoulders, around his frail body. Tiny stars made of golden dust danced in front of the window. Verlem’s voice drifted in between them. “I have caused hurt in the past. If I can bring healing now, it is balm on open wounds.”

The sunspecks whirled with a cloud of breath, then slowly began to sink down toward the shadows.

Verlem inclined his head.

“Yes. I do love. More and more.”

Evening came down slowly but steadily over the garrison castle. Shadows began to grow in the courtyard and the old corridors, under the tables, behind the closets.

Kortid clasped his arms around his chest, his back half turned on Verlem. "It sounds good to sleep through the night. Normal. Better than sleeping through the day, in theory." Kortid paced a few steps, hastily, worriedly. "And I will sleep if you entrance me. But will I be safe? What if the demon comes, at night? In the dark?" Kortid fidgeted. "We do not have a magic sword. And Gureev is on guard duty. He cannot even stay here with me." Kortid turned a haunted face toward Verlem.

Verlem held his gaze. "I can stay with you. If you wish."

Kortid looked at Verlem with gratitude. Then with doubt. "Thank you. But will that truly help? We still do not have a sword of light. What would you do when the demon comes?"

Verlem's voice was calm, quiet. "I do not know what I would do, since I do not know who would come." He paused. "But I rather believe that they will not come at all. Not to me." His eyes were down on the ground. "I have a particular kind of magic about me, as you know. Some beings can sense it. And they tend to shy away. So while I am here, I believe no demon will appear."

Kortid looked at Verlem, speechless. "You are a protection. You. Simply by force of your presence. Just like the swords?"

Verlem did not move. "Better than the swords, I think."

Kortid stood arrested. His gaze was riveted on Verlem's face, his eyes beginning to shine with an inner light that was no longer that of fear. His voice was husky when he spoke. "You said you were fay. But you are much more than that. You are an angel, truly. First you bring me healing, now you bring protection. And all for love."

Kortid sank down onto his mat so that he was practically on his knees before Verlem as he gingerly touched his hand. "A guardian angel. Radiating with a magic, a power like no other."

The halls of the bath palace were filled with idlers strolling about, laughing and murmuring, embalming the place with the gentle hum of contented human company. Nibbling small delicacies or holding on to a glass in their hand, they drifted from one stall to another, discussing a book here, learning a knitting pattern over there.

Amalai let the sound of music lure her through large glass doors at the back into, well, not exactly a portal. But a sort of in-between place. Gradually, imperceptibly, the farther she went in, the more the palatial parlor she had entered transformed into an old, arabesque greenhouse. White-coated iron held up large panes of glass, and playfully wrought chairs and tables sat between increasingly large potted plants. More and more, the place turned into a hot, humid forest at the edge of the gardens, sharing in the secret whispering of their verdancy, the cloying scent of velvety blossoms, the hidden lives of tiny beings on spindly legs and silvery wings.

At the far end, Lahoon sat bent over his lute beneath a canopy of white and gold, elevated to the height of small dark tree crowns. A few gentle notes were flowing from his strings.

The audience was hushed, spellbound already. Lahoon had entranced them slowly over the course of the evening, taking them further and further into a forest of magic, an enchantment of fairies, a realm of the fay.

And now his voice rose up, rough and sorrowful, to give them another tale. One born in fear and danger, in enmity and fight. A tale rising up from the dark side of fay.

Night fell over Lahoon's song. The moon stood high and white in it, pale. A ghostly wind whistled through bare branches. And behind them, a deathly shadow grew, silent, huge, threatening. The moonwolf.

Gliding on soundless paws across the snow, the moonwolf sought her prey—human prey, always. Hunger gnawed inside her, mindless need driving her on.

A piercing scream, with a sudden end. A body torn to pieces, raw flesh, bared bones.

Sorrow, cries of mourning. Human eyes full of tears. Full of fear and fury. Torches, searing the night. Pitchforks. And the moonwolf, moving on, endlessly on.

But then. A falling star. A turning tide.

The moonwolf, meeting a human child and letting him go.

An offering, made on the silver bridge of the night. A small trickle of blood, a taste of life, given in love. A dam broken, a flood set free.

The child's friends, coming to feed the wolf. Then the parents, and their friends. A creature of the night, nourished by many, befriended by a few. A danger tamed, a miracle set free.

In the darkness before dawn, when the moon stood thin and pale and the wind whistled through the bare black branches of trees, a being of beauty and grace appeared, gliding on soundless paws across the glittering snow. Fay. Wild. Breathtaking.

The moonwolf.

Lahoon's song had ended. Only a few stray notes still fell from the lute, floating across the silence of the old greenhouse.

Lahoon rose to stand at the edge of the dais, his skin shimmering softly in the muted light.

"I make this solemn vow," Lahoon's voice flowed out like a melody, "to give of my blood, in love and nourishment, to let a fay live among us without harm. May wonder and beauty follow us all the days of our lives."

He bared his arm before them and began to sing, a gentle flow of oddly disconnected tones, slightly incongruous, eldritch, otherworldly.

With silvery ink, he painted runes of moonlight onto his arm, signs of welcome and mystery, of friendship and nourishment. Lahoon wound a fine cord over the shining marks and secured their spell in a knot, drawing the loop tight around his wrist.

He turned toward his audience, his eyes dark, his voice deep. "I ask of you: Show yourselves tonight. Those willing to make a pledge, please come to me now."

Silence filled the hall. Reflections of lanterns glinted on the glass panes above like twinkling stars. With the soft sway of blossoms, a beckoning fragrance drifted over the humans who sat in their midst, enchanted by a call, lured by a promise.

An old woman stood up.

Reverently, Lahoon took up his song again, his alien chant, his siren song of wooing for a foreign realm, for a life of fay.

With graceful sincerity, the woman stepped onto the dais and bared her arm. She chose her own words, spoke her own vow. And allowed Lahoon to mark her skin with the corresponding runes. The binding cord closed around her wrist.

She turned to face the painting behind her. The night of a snowy landscape filled the canvas. A bridge made of silvery writings arched up—and ended, unfinished, over an empty void, a gaping darkness.

“Build a bridge for the moonwolf,” Lahoon intoned, sounding dreamy and priestly. “We ourselves are the path a fay can walk to come out of the shadows.”

The woman took up a long, white brush, to dip into the same pale ink that adorned her arm. Carefully, she signed her name, adding small, delicate letters to the arc over the abyss. Writing the spell that would read a fay into her world.

Charmed by the antiquated hothouse and the ambling chants of liturgy, people allowed themselves to drift along with the sense of love and wonder Lahoon exuded. Dreamily, they watched the ritual before them unfold as more than a dozen believers rose from the audience, one by one, to partake in the offering, to make their very own pledge.

Only a few people got up to leave. “Honestly. Too much is too much. We are not a cult,” a young woman complained in a low voice.

“Hmm,” her companion agreed as they passed Amalai. “It’s over the edge, even for a metaphor. That just doesn’t happen in the real world. Monsters do not turn around to become friends.” Happily agreeing in their discontentment, they made for the stalls of the main hall.

In the shadows beside the dais, half hidden amongst swaying branches and small crimson fruits, Verlem stood very still, a quiet, delicate presence himself. His dark eyes were on the ceremony, on the dedication of vows. Full of listening, he drank in each face that appeared before him, each person’s stance and moves and scent. His whole being was going out toward them, meeting them, enveloping them, committing them to the memory of his body, of his soul.

“There are too many moderate elements,” Berqar remonstrated. “Calming people down as soon as anything begins to get really heated.” She paced the room with an impatient step. “We’ll never get a fire going this way. People are pouring out water all the time. As soon as they see as much as a burning straw, or a glowing ember. Or even before, just preemptively.”

From an old painting full of war and corpses, a general on his steed looked down at Berqar reproachfully. She thumped an angry fist against the wall. “How is a raging fire meant to sweep across a land if all the wood is sodden? How will we ever even get to purgatory, not to mention to a flaming inferno? We’ll never make it to a true uproar this way!”

Berqar drew an ornamental saber from its scabbard on the wall. She turned to the window and let a gleam run up and down along the blade. “The tinder was bright, but the blaze won’t come. And the rebel is sleeping. Meeting any attempts to provoke an awakening with no more than a drowsy grunt. We haven’t even got as much as an angry crowd so far. And we won’t get one, not before the sounding. Not even before the vote.”

Pramus regarded her steadily. “Well, if we don’t, we don’t. We will do without. We have other means.” His broad-brimmed hat shaded his eyes. “A belligerent minority is just as well as an angry crowd. Even better, perhaps.”

Light caught in Pramus’s robes, making the silver threads of embroidered runes flare up. “We will bide our time. We will win the vote first, and you know how. Afterward, that very night, the county house burns. Torched by members of that violent minority, who hate the soldiers and all order. Who scorn the county as much as a majority decision. Who know no limits, no respect. They are few, but they are dangerous, treacherous, fiendish. No better reason, no better moment, for a strong force of order to be called in: the soldiers, whose role has just been confirmed by popular vote.” Pramus spread out his hands in a wide, open gesture of triumphant conclusion.

Berqar looked at him in silence. And in doubt. She held her saber level before her hip, the tip resting loosely in her other hand. "I am not sure," she ventured slowly, "that even the small group that is gathering now will be ready to put a torch to the county house. I rather wager they will not."

"No, of course not," Pramus expounded. "There is no need, either. It only takes one person to start a fire. All the rest will take care of itself." He walked a few steps across the room and took up position in front of the desk. "A small aggressive group of people has been observed all that time leading up to the vote. They have been visible, very visible, and loud. They have made no secret of their opinions, and of the force of their emotion." Pramus's eyes held an eager gleam. "They lose that vote. Everyone knows. The next day, the county house has been torched." Pramus raised his hands to let the obvious conclusion hang in the air. "One of the main agitators has fled the area and is nowhere to be found. All the others are still there. Easily picked out."

Pramus folded his hands behind his back. "The rebellious elements will be detained, of course. By the new force of order. To keep the town safe."

He took a measured step forward. "Recoursors, mediators and all kinds of people will challenge that force of order. But in this emergency, Diamondtip will not waver. We will handle the crisis with a firm hand. Interrogating the traitors, making them reveal their co-conspirators. It turns out that some have escaped and are still threatening our peaceful town. Our public order. And all our citizens. So we will need to go on searching and fighting. With an increasing number of soldiers, and an increasingly active role for them."

Berqar regarded him without moving, transfixed. "We will stage the entire rebellion with just one person?" Berqar sought an anchor in Pramus's eyes. "Just one? Your agent?" She lowered her blade and turned around to look out into the courtyard.

"It is not really just one," Pramus pointed out. "There is a ferocious little group, ready to do enough to be publicly noticeable as belligerent elements before the vote."

"And we will round them up afterward," Berqar said to the window. "For arson."

"Yes," Pramus replied, without hesitation or remorse. "True, they will not have done it, in actual fact. But they very well might have, given a little more time and provocation. And after all, it is not as if they are going to be hanged for it. They will only be incarcerated. And who knows, by the time they get released, they may indeed have transformed into truly vicious rebels. Or, in the meantime, other people might have spoken up

for them, and gotten into trouble that way. Divulging themselves to be co-conspirators. Just like all those people who keep questioning the role of soldiers.”

Berqar turned around, and Pramus was able to tell her his conclusion to her face. “It is a very promising path. It could lead to success in a number of different ways. And it is unlikely to go wrong. To trail off, without any excitement or consequences at all.” He scoffed. “Even in as slow and sleepy a town as Behrlem there will be some kind of turmoil.” Pramus arched his brows, intoning his phrase like a magical spell, like ancient words of wisdom. “Violence will breed violence.” He raised his staff. “Unrest will call for order. And for a force of order.”

His fingers, ringed with winding dragons, carefully ran over the gnarled surface. “And we are not alone. Do not forget. We are part of a larger scheme. Behrlem is only one battle in our war.” His fist closed tightly on the wood. “But a battle we must win.”

“Win.” Berqar licked her lips. “With such a move.” Her words came out slowly, unwillingly.

She raised her saber up beside her face, standing poised, ready. Then she turned suddenly, bringing her blade up to touch the iron bars of the window in a challenging stance. A sharp, angry furrow was etched on her brow, searing down like a burn to the ridge of her nose. “War is a reality of this world! But people in Behrlem have forgotten. They do not even believe in fighting anymore. In strength, and in force. All the old virtues are lost.” She withdrew her blade in one rapid, powerful move. “Peace, love, and understanding is all that people care about now. And making sure no one gets hurt.” Berqar scoffed. “What kind of a world is that supposed to be?”

A gust of wind rattled on the window case and blew a cloud of ethereal dust against the panes. Berqar argued back at it, only driven to more and more fervor in her contention. “People have no idea! They cannot see; but I can. And I will do what it takes. I will build up an army, a force like no other! And it will be ready for war. Like a knight in shining armor, it will brave any enemy.”

Her eyes gleamed with an uncommon light.

“Our hearts are pure, and our truth is deep.” She turned around to face the room, and the mage, once again. “Even if we have to use mirrors and smoke screens for now. Even if we should have to pay with the lives of our men. We are ready to make their sacrifice. To rekindle the memory of war, before it is lost forever. We will grow strong again. We will bring violence, to be ready for violence.”

She raised her saber in a solemn salute before Pramus. "Old times will be great again! May power lie where it belongs. For courage, truth and honor!"

* * *

The rain had stopped, and mists were drifting up from the hot ground, lingering in the fading light of the evening. Lights had come on in one house after the other, painting a golden glow into one window here, another there.

Lahoon was strolling down the lanes with Verlem by his side. "The large house here on the right is one," he said, making an effort not to point.

Verlem's eyes roamed over the building and moved on, always easy, always quiet. Nowhere near staring. He seemed to be drinking in the place, the smell of the neighborhood, the space and depth of the houses as much as anything.

Lahoon's lips held a secret smile. Walking the town with Verlem was special. In many ways. "Would you like to see yet another?"

"No. Not tonight," Verlem replied quietly. "If it is all the same to you." He half turned his face toward Lahoon. "It is easier for me to remember if we only go to one or two at a time."

Lahoon nodded. "There are still three names for which we have not found the homes yet. We will go on trying. For the others, I can show you whenever you wish."

The swirling ghosts of vapor that rose up from the steamy ground filled the streets. Darkness gathered in the walkways between houses, the nooks under the eaves. A streetlight came on. Among the growing shadows, its muted glow caught white shrouds drifting up with aimless grace, with natural ease, wraiths from the season of rains courting the night. Lahoon breathed in their moist bodies, reached out with his hands, touching them with his fingers, his open palms. Walking through the dusk with Verlem, he felt himself flow along with the smooth, quiet moves of these beings of mist, entranced in a slow, secret dance with them and with the fay by his side.

* * *

In the depth of the night the air had become crystal clear. A soft breeze moved in through the open window, letting the curtains blow into the room, billowing sails of thin white tissue. A full moon was up high, sending cool silver light down to earth, playing with the moving cloth of the curtains, making shadows dance up and down, and out across the

floor of the room. On the mat by the wall, a sleeper turned dreamily, with an unconscious sigh, a question spoken in the realms of the mind.

Clouds moved in the sky, hiding the moon. They made the shadows beside the window lose their silvery edge, sink down into murky grays. The light had gone. Within the darkness left, the night grew dense and solid. And took form.

Slowly, noiselessly, the shadow came toward the mat by the wall. But the sleeper woke. Despite the absolute calm of the movement, despite the perfect silence. The man sensed the presence. And woke.

He half opened his eyes and tried to find the find the contours of a familiar room. What he found instead were two deep, dark eyes.

“What—”

He forgot the question. Instead, he sank back onto the pillow. Meeting no resistance, oblivion closed around him like water, gently and inexorably drawing him down into the deep.

Verlem lightly touched the man’s cheek. He had found him, recognized him, without fail. It was a burly man, with a face full of wrinkles, a permanent jovial smile furrowed into his features. His body was round and full and radiating an appetite for life, even in his sleep. He felt like a whole solstice party all by himself, a meadow full of people celebrating, a summer afternoon filled with relish and conviviality. His life force was strong, very strong. And good.

Verlem leaned in and remained close to him for a long time, breathing in his scent. He let his hand glide down the sturdy arm to touch the man’s hand, to find the slim silver cord tied around the wrist. An offering. A welcome, an overture of partaking in the celebration.

Verlem bent down to kiss the base of his palm. He turned to look into the man’s face once again. “Thank you,” Verlem whispered.

And then the icy glint of two sharp fangs cut through the night and the strong, warm stream of blood flowed out to fill up Verlem’s being, to feed and nourish him, to give life and relish. Verlem drank deep, his eyes closed, his soul in song.

Amalai snuggled onto the kang of the Teapot Library, drawing up her legs and leaning back against the wall with a satisfied sigh. The morning had been fresh and cool, and she had loved the hours of labor in the garden. But now, a break, a rice cake, and some pleasant company were in order. Lahoon clinked his glass full of shiny mint against Amalai's, whose infusion was black as night.

Amalai let her gaze drift lazily over the other guests at the Teapot, people sipping their drinks, perusing the loose-papers, flipping through a book they might want to buy or borrow. Low murmurs were floating across the room, mingling with occasional calls from the kitchen. The Teapot was frequented by quite a number of people at this morning hour, but the back corner was secluded enough to give them some privacy for their conversation. Careful not to disturb the powder of roasted seeds at the bottom, Amalai took a delicate sip from her glass.

"I have tried talking to Tenatetlan," Unleha related. "But she did not like it. Not one bit."

Her mind a bit slow to wrap around the topic at hand, Amalai gave a quiet prayer of gratitude for the reinvigorating powers of the coffee tree, a friend to humankind, as so many other plants were. She let the hot liquid run over her tongue.

Unleha looked down into her own glass. She liked her coffee green, bitter and spicy, the unroasted seeds enriched with cardamom, anise, and a conundrum of other ingredients enshrined in the secret depths of an ancient recipe. It was the Teapot Library's specialty, a pungent, aromatic concoction brewed with a reverence no magical potion could rival. Unleha raised the steaming glass to her nose, then to her lips, before she continued. "Tenatetlan has become more warrior than peddler by now. I am not sure what to do. She is so aggressive. She seems to think belligerence is the strongest form of opposition. Rather than unintended collusion with the opponent."

Unleha put her coffee down. "Tenatetlan does not see that a violent, authoritarian system may be thriving on rebellion. May be longing for rebels, in fact. For the more aggressive the revolt, the more justified the oppression."

A woman weaving the image of a dragon on a huge wooden loom looked at Unleha from the depth of a tapestry. Unleha stared back angrily. "And worse, Tenatetlan is making it a matter of personal hostility now. Inciting hatred, not just against soldiers, but even against other townsfolk. Against people who fear demons, or are sympathetic to the guards. Tenatetlan basically spit fire onto the baker from the wool market last night. If we had not intervened, it might actually have turned into a scuffle."

Unleha shook her head disapprovingly. "It ought to be about the structure: the garrison. True, soldiers have to answer for their own presence in that system. But it's the whole system we want gone. Not just individual people."

Unleha crossed her arms over her chest. "I am afraid Tenatetlan is really offtrack now." She sighed. "But I think the only effect all my talking had was that she has written me off. And is focusing on more amenable people in the group." Unleha looked down at the faded pattern of the kang's carpet. "There are some. Not very many." She rubbed her arm. "But very excitable ones."

Unleha placed her hand on top of two books she was going to borrow. She shifted them around aimlessly. "I wonder if they will try to make up for weakness in numbers by strength in action."

Unleha looked up, firmly holding Amalai's gaze. "I just hope they are not going to do anything stupid."

* * *

It was a very different kind of concert. But Lahoon enjoyed it just as much, in its own way.

The seed swap was already packing up, but all the people were still there. Happy with their newfound treasures and a wealth of conversation, they were now ambling across the plaza, munching pastries, talking to friends. Making artwork from orange peels, playing boules, or learning how to juggle. Casting a glance over at the musician, maybe lingering for a while, a glass in their hand.

There was no rapt attention here, no deep, spellbound absorption. No space for bringing up the moonwolf. Lahoon would have to save that for another day. But there would be many concerts, he was sure, that would grant such depth. And he did not even need all that many. If people kept

offering at the rate they had at the first evening, there would soon be enough. So Lahoon settled into the free-floating, easygoing nature of this event without regrets.

Two old women came to clap a complex rhythm underneath his fairy song, and a young lad with a sonorous bass hummed a second voice. The children in his wake started to dance, and to draw various bystanders into their whirling round. Lahoon sang with all his heart. He knew why he loved living in Behrlem.

Then, in the smothering heat after midday, the rain broke. With one definite clap of thunder, the clouds split open, and a heavy downpour flooded the plaza, forming puddles, letting crowns of water jump up excitedly around every new droplet falling in. People fled from the square, holding makeshift covers over their heads, calling out to children splashing through rivulets.

Lahoon had grabbed his lute just in time and made it to the porch of the county house. And he had drawn quite a bit of his audience with him, Unleha noted, pleasantly surprised. People who would not be going anywhere soon, but had all the time in the world to briefly step inside and support the sounding.

It had been going well before, with Unleha's own rounds around the plaza. Her talks in the speaker's corner, and Lahoon's short announcements between songs. But this, Unleha thought, was the perfect conclusion to their efforts.

She hunched her shoulders, getting ready to sprint across the square.

* * *

Amalai and Lahoon carefully picked their way between mountains of orange peel and clouds of sweet-sour smell. Amalai thought she could practically feel the soles of her shoes sticking to the ground as she traversed the courtyard of this old farmstead undergoing the transformation of its life.

A few kids were talking to the chicken in front of the main house, which had been renovated with lots of love and wayward creativity.

But the other side of the courtyard was rumbling and bubbling vigorously, with heavy carts full of oranges drawn in by stomping oxen and shouts from people waving them along, finding a path between constantly moving piles of boxes, barrels and bottles. From within the high barn, a regular thumping and clanking underscored the bustle, as if to drive it on in its own impatient rhythm. Since magic had come in to transform the processing of oranges, and traptions had turned the barn into a trabarn, the buzz in the air was unprecedented.

Unleha's home had always been teeming with life, a vibrant horde of a family with lots of kids and lots of love relationships crisscrossing the community. But the orange trabarn had added yet another dimension. In its industrious commotion, mixed up with the constant development of new traptions and the exhilarated excitement of artificers, it was the epitome of an emerging world, a world Unleha belonged to. A revolution quite apart from the Transition, a metamorphosis that had been sweeping through society for decades, turning work and life upside down. And that showed no signs of slowing down.

Still, even in Unleha's home, there were some quiet corners. On one side, the courtyard opened out into a garden, and in the shade of two old trees a huge hammock was swaying softly, with a tangle of legs and arms and shocks of hair hanging out. Lahoon approached carefully and peered over the edge.

"Hello!!" a girl of about three piped shrilly and gleefully, clearly proud of having discovered him.

"Hello." Lahoon smiled back instantly, if a little more guardedly. A small portion of Unleha's extensive family seemed to be assembled here.

Unleha herself pulled out of a deep kiss and turned her head, her silver-threaded braids falling over her eyes. "Ah, hello there," she huffed while trying to push herself upright in the hammock.

"Sorry," Lahoon apologized. "We did not mean to disturb."

"Not at all." Unleha began to disentangle herself from her lovers. "I am eager to hear!" She looked at Lahoon intently, and he nodded.

"All good."

"Ha!" Unleha shouted, bright-eyed. She struggled to get up. A corpulent man in a faded shirt pulled the three-year-old into his arms while at the same time freeing Unleha's legs. With the help of the woman beside her, Unleha finally got her feet on the ground and, after a final round of hugs and kisses, started off with Lahoon and Amalai.

She waved a hand at the landscape of orange peels around them. "Look at this! That trabarn has no intention of sticking to the barn. I'll have these mountains creeping into my bed at night before long, I am sure. Konelle is not talking about anything else anymore, either. Sometimes I wonder whether this is why she has so many lovers." Unleha winked at them. "She does not actually want us for company or as co-parents, but simply as backup laborers in that orange-juice trabarn she and her gang are growing." Despite all her complaining, Unleha could not hide the pride and excitement in her voice. She did not mean to, either.

She turned around, her face aglow. "It is enormous! You would not

believe the speed at which they are already processing at the moment. With the right use of magic, we can do in a day what used to take a moon. Traptions simply are the future. There is no other way of saying it." She frowned. "Although the past does come around regularly to complain. Old farmers who we will be putting out of business before long. So now they claim that peeling oranges by hand is a way of life. That you ought to make a personal acquaintance with each orange before you eat it. That juice from this trabarn is soulless." Unleha gave a snort that was both amused and derisive. "Ridiculous. As if plants had a soul." Amalai thought of the slow unfolding of her herbs and of her own way of life. But she said nothing.

Unleha picked up a curl of orange peel and slung it around her wrist, where it contrasted beautifully with her black skin, snaking up her arm like a priestly ornament from the deity of artlessness. "The new traptions for treating peels will be up to speed anytime now. Just a few last hiccups to be designed out. Then we'll be producing not only juice, but also fodder and spices from the peels. And there won't be any waste anymore. This is a disgrace in more ways than one, after all." She pointed at the spoiling peels. And finally returned to her original concern. "So tell me about the sounding, then. It has resonated?" She beamed at them.

Lahoon nodded. "It has. Very much. We had a lot more support than we would have needed. It has gone extremely well. Almost suspiciously smoothly." A slight furrow creased his brow.

Unleha raised an eyebrow. "What's suspicious? We did not think Berqar and Pramus would do anything to sabotage the sounding?"

"No," Lahoon said gruffly. "We did not think. And that is precisely why they might have succeeded. If they had done anything." A deep breath escaped from his lungs. "But they have not. As far as we can see."

He shook his head in a small, quick move. "Anyway. Here we are. The sounding has resonated, and another vote will be held when the moon is new. The placard at the county house is already up."

Unleha kicked aside half an orange and planted her hands on her hips belligerently. "And within that half moon, or in the three days of voting that follow, Berqar and Pramus will be making their move. But we will be there. Ready to fight back. Ready to undo their wiles!" Unleha paused. "Whatever they are," she added, vexed.

* * *

Rebonya was standing beside the shack in the herbary, her feet planted firmly on the sodden ground, her arms crossed over her chest. Her neck was tense, her brows drawn.

On a boulder in the ground, Verlem sat in his subdued, unobtrusive pose, his face averted, his eyes cast down on the grass. His pale face reflected the muted light of the evening. His voice was low when he spoke.

"I am sorry."

"So am I!" Rebonya shot back, and it was quite clear she meant that she, too, was sorry Verlem had ever come near her.

Verlem kept still, his pose unchanged, only the wind moving a strand of hair over his brow. The high grass around them nodded slightly in the breeze, waving wispy heads of flower and seed at them.

Verlem's voice was no more than a whisper.

"You don't like me."

"No. I don't like you! I know everyone else seems to love you. But I don't. I am revolted. I am horrified. I can't stand you! I wish you didn't exist."

Verlem was silent. He held his face averted. He did not move. But finally, he raised his head a shade.

"I am scared," he said, his voice low, rasping. "Will you hurt me?"

Rebonya snorted. "I couldn't hurt you if I tried!" she spat out.

Verlem said nothing. He sat there, in his timid pose, his face averted.

"Could I?" Rebonya asked, wondering. And she almost wanted to.

Verlem remained silent.

Rebonya dropped her gaze to the ground. "No," she said, with an effort. "I will not hurt you." She took a deep breath and exhaled. She turned her face away. "It would be different if you killed people. But as long as you cause no injury, I have no right to harm you, either. I should not." She took another breath. "And I will not. I can see that you need to eat. Just as I do. And I take my food from living beings, too. As carefully as I can."

A wry, pained smile came to her face. "I don't know why this is so hard for me. Why should it be? But it is. It is hard. For me."

Her hand gripped the edge of the shed. "I can't stand you near me. I can't stand the thought of you. I abhor you. I truly wish you did not exist." She exhaled. "But you do. And you have a right to, like everyone else."

She moved a step closer to the shed, leaning her shoulder against it as if she were closing ranks. "So I will not hurt you. You need not fear. I will control myself enough to refrain from attacking you again." A bitter grin tucked at the side of her mouth. "I will simply go on shaking with revulsion. But never mind that. It can't be helped."

"It can be helped." Verlem moved, just a breath, where he sat. "I could take your aversion away with a look. But you would not want that?"

"No!" Rebonya snapped. "No! Absolutely not! I don't want you to work vampire lures on me to make me trust you! I don't want you to mess around with my thoughts and feelings! You stay out of there!" She was practically beside herself with horror and disgust by now.

Verlem sat there, silently. And slowly, it began to dawn on Rebonya.

"You have not done it. You have not. You could have done it, all this time. When I began to accuse you. When I attacked you. When I discovered what you are, and hated you for it. You have not done it. Even when you began to fear me. To fear I would do you harm. You could have spared yourself all of that, very easily. With just one look you could have forced me into trust. And I would not even have been there to reproach you. I would not have known. Nor would anyone else. But still, you bore my hatred, rather than interfering with my heart. Just because you knew I would detest it."

Rebonya looked at Verlem's back, at the thin strands of hair blowing in the wind. "And instead, you have come to talk to me."

Rebonya fell silent. She lowered her eyes to the ground. Her hands were clenched into fists.

"Verlem," she said haltingly, reluctantly. "I do not want anybody to have the kind of powers that you hold. I hate it. I fear it. However, I understand there is nothing you can do about it. You just have them. And the most you can do is to not use them, I suppose. Which is precisely what you are doing."

She looked at him, but quickly averted her eyes again, gazing out somewhere beyond him into the garden. "I can see you are doing the best even I can think of. So I apologize. I am sorry if I have frightened you. It never occurred to me that you might be scared, truly scared. Of me. I thought I was the one who had reasons for fear. You were the one with the powers."

She looked down at her feet, slightly kicking at a pebble on the ground. "I am sorry. I will try to do better in future. I will be civil, at least." She crossed her arms over her chest, her shoulders tight. "Other than that, I guess we can just stay out of each other's way." A little shiver ran through her once more. "My feelings have not changed. I don't think they will. But I can see reason, and I will control myself," she finished, her jaw set. "And if ever I am not doing well enough, if ever I make you feel afraid again, please tell me. Come and talk to me. As you have done now."

She looked up, meeting his eyes fully this time. "Thank you. For letting me see your fear."

40

Amalai had brought a late breakfast or an early tea break into the bath garden for Unleha. Snuggled comfortably into one of the swing seats, they both nibbled pastries and watched the chicken cluck and pick and walk around at their feet.

Even if their conversation inevitably came back to the state of the town.

"It's now or never!" Unleha gestured with fervor and agitation, adding a vibrant counterpoint to the idyllic peacefulness around her. "This is the decisive moment!"

"Sure is, sure is," Amalai agreed soothingly. "But it already was the decisive moment last time. Remember? The vote we lost. That was crucial. Pivotal. And all that." Amalai reached into the bush beside her and picked a few more ripe berries, carefully giving them a crowning place atop her cookie. "But things come around again. Even politics. The Transition was not done in a day. It was done on many, many days. One time you win, one time you lose, and the important thing is: In both cases, you will have to do it again the next day. And the one after that. Again, and again."

A berry rolled off her cookie. Amalai searched for it in the folds of her clothes and finally found it. She put it back up. It rolled off. She put it back up. It wavered. With a quick move and a tongue protectively wrapped around the cookie's edge, Amalai took a hearty bite and gleefully chewed on the delicious mix of fluffy pastry and fresh, juicy berries, her eyes shining.

A triumphant undertone stole into her voice as she presented Unleha with her full-mouthed conclusion.

"Building a society is not a deed. It is a process. That has no end. It is never too late. And never too early. We are always right in the middle of it all."

The last light of evening fell in through the windows of Amalai's craft room, mingling with the first glow of a lantern.

"But that is exactly how they are trying to get away with it!" Rebonya could not let go of the argument. But she had lowered her voice to a murmur. "A frenzy is all they need. Never mind, then, that the measures have nothing to do with the problem. As long as there is an emergency, harsh measures are called for! No matter which."

But when Gureev laid a hand on her arm, Rebonya actually did hush.

Unleha had come back in through the door. She stopped a few paces away, looking over to where Verlem waited beside Amalai, his black robes falling in soft folds around his thin, fragile body.

Verlem took a cautious step forward. And dissipated.

Unleha stared into the emptiness.

Then shadows began to swirl on the other side of the room, darkness pulling together, getting dense and solid. Until Verlem stood in the corner, shyly, quietly, in the same unobtrusive pose as before.

Unleha scoffed. "All right. You can do illusions, too. So?"

Verlem looked at her, in his timid, diffident way. He walked up to Unleha with slow, halting steps. His hand came up before her in a proposition, an offer. "I am here. In my body."

Unleha shrugged. She took his hand.

Verlem held her hand, and her gaze. And dissipated. The substance between Unleha's fingers transformed into a glimmer, a shiver running over her skin, and then into nothingness, into empty space. Her hand closed on thin air.

Unleha spun around. Verlem was right beside her, his hand on her other shoulder. Unleha had felt the sparkle of his coalescence, and then the weight of his hand on her body.

Unleha stepped aside, shaking free of Verlem.

"Look," she said. "This is great. You are doing it very well. I have never seen anything like it. But it is somewhat wasted on me." She shook her head. "I know I am not able to explain the tricks you are using. You can work magic, no doubt, and it's a kind of magic I am not familiar with. I am an artificer, and I specialize in traptions. You have specialized in something else, clearly. And I will not be able to explain what it is. Just as many others cannot explain how I am able to create traptions."

Her hand came up to her chest. "But none of the magic I do means that I am not human." She pointed a finger at him. "None of the magic you do means that you are not human." She paused. "I am sure there are many

more things you can do and show. And I won't be able to explain or replicate them." She let her arm sink. "But nothing you could do or say will convince me that you are fay."

*

"I don't know why she said that," Rebonya mumbled. Unleha's words kept echoing in her mind. Rebonya was pacing up and down the narrow space between their mats, holding on to Gureev's presence and his patient listening, to calm her thoughts. Or to let them shuffle around, acting out all their agitation, until they found a way to rearrange themselves into a proper order.

"The artificers are the ones who have rejected doctrine," Rebonya repeated. "Their belief is in direct observation. In trying things out for themselves and seeing firsthand how they work."

Rebonya pushed her fringe off her brow. "It is what I like about the artificers. One thing I like about them. This commitment to truth. No nonsense."

Rebonya crossed her arms in front of her chest and rocked back and forth on her feet. "Unleha is an artificer. Committed to observation, to proof. As opposed to doctrine, or preconceived tenets of belief."

Rebonya paused, balanced on her heels. "Much as I hate to say it, Verlem's dissipation looks like pretty good proof to me. As does his body, his mouth. How can Unleha just sweep all of that aside, without so much as a closer look?"

Rebonya gave up. Her arms untangled. Her feet touched ground. Her thoughts leaned back into the corners of her mind for now, tired, undecided. "I don't know." Rebonya shrugged. "I don't know."

* * *

Kortid rested his back against the gray slabs of the chamber wall. He gently rolled a smooth, round stone between his fingers, tracing its age-old patterns of sediment, the lines of beauty left behind in the muted colors of moss and lichen.

"A musician was playing in town the other day, on the plaza. And since I was stationed right beside his spot, I heard him all the while." Kortid's eyes were full of memories. "It was quite something." He turned to face Verlem. "He had shimmering blue skin. A butterfly. Perhaps you have seen him?"

Verlem nodded.

Kortid went on. "He sings songs of wonder, of fairies, all filled with mystery and love." Kortid shook his head. "I envy him. I am sure he lives

in that world. Or that world lives in him. When he dreams at night, this is where he goes. When he tells tales in the day, this is what they are.”

A deep sigh escaped from Kortid’s lungs. “I so wish I could live in his world. I wish I could cross over. From this world of demons and darkness to one of friendship and awe. If ever such a journey were possible.” Kortid shook his head. “But of course, it is not.”

Verlem turned his head. He took a tiny step forward.

But Kortid went on. “We all know the real world is dire. We are living under a threat of death, an invisible enemy looming over us. The whole town is cast in shadow, facing a fight to the death.” Kortid clenched his fist. “I could scream at him, really. This careless singer. Because for all their beauty, his songs are a danger. They lull us to sleep. They entrance us into thinking we may be safe and all is flowers and fairies.” Kortid clenched his teeth, and his next words came out as a hiss. “But the real world is one of menace and violence. Unfortunately. And what we need to do is fight. To kill the demon, before the demon kills us.”

Verlem looked at him, with his long, quiet gaze. He said nothing.

After the rain, clouds were still hanging low and the ground was damp and muddy, but people were already streaming back out onto the plaza. And the soldiers came, too. As they did every night, for their half hour.

Lahoon was sitting in his usual space with his lute, a little crowd gathering around him, some clapping a rhythm and humming along, all ready to join in the chorus of “Illusion! Illusion!” later on.

The changing of the guard began. Lahoon recognized the burly lieutenant in charge that day as Johalen. Unleha had pointed him out to Lahoon the other night. And he could see Rebonya among the dancers, wielding her sword of light with strength and precision, seamlessly matching the moves of the soldier in front of her.

But then a sudden commotion broke over the scene, shattering the calm routine of the ritual. A boisterous group shouting loud, angry slogans burst out from one of the alleys, making their way straight into the formation of soldiers.

“Soldiers out! Soldiers out! Beat them into desperate rout!”

They soon dropped the second line of their chant, which seemed too complicated for their agitated state of mind, their urgent fervor for engagement. Tenatetlan was first among them, her fist raised high, as if clutching an imaginary battle flag. People flowed in behind her, disrupting the orderly lines of the soldiers.

A young woman stomped her foot before Rebonya, shouting straight into her face. “Soldiers out!!”

From underneath her circling sword of light, Rebonya winked at her, conspiratorially. Or flirtatiously? The young woman stared at Rebonya in confusion. She even missed a beat, falling silent for a perplexed moment while the chorus of “Soldiers out! Soldiers out!” pounded on around them. Then the woman moved on, her eyes avoiding Rebonya’s.

An elbow hit Rebonya in the back, making her stumble forward a pace and leaving a tender spot over her ribs. From the corner of her eye, she saw a middle-aged man stumble on like a drunk, shaking his fist and

roaring insults. Rebonya did not turn. She kept on dancing her steps and bows, bringing the sword down in a half-circle move.

Johalen before her was thinking fast. And then, as if by silent agreement with his soldiers, he managed to weave his commands into the rhythm of the dance as if they belonged there, as if they had always meant to form the music to that choreography. Rather unobtrusively, Johalen succeeded in ending the performance early without any blatant signs of haste or disorder. The soldiers drew up their swords in their final salute. The squadron stood to attention.

Johalen made to lead the soldiers out, but three youngsters put themselves up like a living barricade before him, shouting slogans to his face, their chins raised up in aggressive challenge. Johalen politely waited for them to pass, and when they didn't, he carefully stepped around them in a visible detour.

That set the tone for the rest of the retreating soldiers. Like an ocean wave quietly pulling back into the open sea, they flowed around every obstacle, never hitting or pushing, but never letting themselves be held back, either. Like waters silently sucked back into the sea, the squadron disappeared into the lane beyond the square, leaving the empty sand of the plaza behind.

Tenatetlan charged after them with a battle cry, but her whole group stayed on the freed beaches, raising their joined hands, howling in triumph and yelling, "Beat them into desperate rout!" The space around them, while still charged and crackling, was beginning to open up again, and air was flowing in.

Lahoon walked over to join them, followed by his little choir. Lute and voices took up their slogan, embraced it, seduced it, and soon the shouting transformed into chanting and song, and the general atmosphere from fight and victory into pure celebration. Singing or listening or ambling, the musicians as well as other townsfolk mingled in with the boisterous busters until they were diluted beyond recognition as a separate group. When one or two of the wheeled food stalls pulled up close, the routine of social evenings in the Behrlem plaza had fully reinstated itself, giving a satisfied nod while tapping a full tummy in rhythm to an easy tune.

*

"How could you!" Berqar roared at Johalen. "You were in charge! Meant to lead, not to cower. How could you possibly allow the changing of the guard to be disrupted! How dare you let a gang of rowdies break up a formation of soldiers!"

Johalen swallowed. "They no doubt meant to be provocative. But they did not actually attack us."

"We will not let ourselves be provoked!!" Berqar barked.

"No," Johalen replied, full of pride and satisfaction.

Berqar stared at him. Gradually, Johalen's shoulders began to tighten again.

"The honor of Diamondtip is at stake here!" Berqar hissed. "Our good name and everything we stand for! You," she spat out in a scathing tone, her finger pointing straight at Johalen's face, "have spoiled a unique opportunity."

"Opportunity?" Johalen's honest confusion was palpable.

Berqar caught herself, then charged on hurriedly. "You are putting the safety of the town at risk! We can never let our soldiers be disrespected! We will not tolerate any provocations!" She drew herself up. "You ordered a cowardly retreat when it was your time to lead into battle! Never waver, never surrender!"

"Into battle." Johalen cleared his throat. "That is what I feared. If we had not been supple, it might have gone like the tavern brawl, or worse. We might have clashed with townspeople once again. But we are here to fight demons, not citizens, aren't we?"

Berqar exploded. "These are not citizens! They are traitors, treacherous elements in our midst! Practically in league with the demon. There always are profiteers seeking pacts with a demon, betraying their neighbors to their deaths. These deceivers are as dangerous as the demons themselves! A knife in our backs! There must be no tolerance!"

Johalen looked disconcerted. He opened his mouth, as if he were still going to give his own thoughts, in a remarkable deviation from unquestioning obedience.

Berqar shouted her command right into his face.

Johalen snapped to attention and stared straight ahead with an expressionless face. He now accepted whatever stricture came at him, without so much as blinking an eye in comment or response. No outward sign of own thought was visible anymore.

The day had been just as hot as any other. But the rain had come late, later than usual, albeit with redoubled vigor and almost as a surprise. It was already getting dark when the clouds burst open suddenly, forcefully, drenching the garrison in a rabid deluge. They caught Rebonya out in the courtyard, and rather than dashing back across the sandy plains to the east wing, she decided to seek shelter under the eaves of an abandoned stable behind her. She would wait it out.

The waterfall before her eyes blurred her vision. She leaned against the wall of the stable, tilting her head back until it rested against the rough wood, and let her eyes wander out into the fuzzy grayness. Until they caught. Rebonya leaned forward slightly.

What was that? Or rather, who was that? But she knew already. No matter the broad hood drawn up around the head, and the billowing cloak covering up silky robes. There was no doubt. It was Pramus, the mage, who had been hurrying along the wall of the empty west wing, steps tense and shoulders hunched, to be swallowed up by the darkness behind a low, half-hidden door.

Rebonya did not think. Swiftly and cautiously, she left her shelter and ran across the courtyard until she could press her back against the stone wall, easing up toward the shady door. Her breath was coming raggedly by now and she felt ridiculously conspicuous. She held still for a while, allowing her lungs to calm while she squinted at the blackness of the arrow slit beside her. Even that crenel was barred. Rebonya's mouth contorted. But she listened intently and could not hear a sound from within. She switched tactics. Not knowing who might be waiting for her behind that door, Rebonya took the handle with the air of somebody who belonged there and pushed.

The door swung open.

There was no one.

Rebonya carefully let the hatch click shut behind her. She was in a small guard room, with a simple table, two chairs. A low archway in the far

wall, and steps leading down into the dark. Or not entirely the dark. A last shimmer of golden light swayed somewhere down in the distance, diminishing.

Rebonya grabbed the remaining magical lantern from the table and started down. She descended swiftly in the golden glow she carried, but extinguished the light just before reaching the bottom. She had no idea how she was going to do this. It was pitch dark all around her. She could not see anything without her lantern. Surely she could not walk across a tangle of unknown underground passages without any light at all? But her lantern would shine just as far as Pramus's, so as soon as she could see him, he could see her.

But she could not see him, in fact. Not anymore. She was all alone.

Rebonya lit her lantern again. The passage continued straight before her, with a small corridor branching off to the right farther on, and some stairs leading down to the left. Rebonya cursed under her breath. If she went into that labyrinth, was she ever going to get out again? Not to mention finding Pramus, without being found by him.

Rebonya gritted her teeth and, for better or worse, dismissed all questions of probability. She pulled her shirt over her head and wrapped it around her lantern, dimming the light. She began to scoop up loose stones as she walked. At any junction she crossed, she laid down two stones right next to each other along the wall of the corridor she had come from. Subtle enough, she figured. Not something anyone who was not looking for it would notice.

All the scooping and marking and wondering where to go slowed Rebonya down considerably. After a while, she gave up on hurrying. Or on trying to calculate what Pramus would have done. She began to wander like a fairy-tale girl in the Palace of Plentiful Portals. Each turn, each hidden door, each beckoning stairway held a certain feel, a particular call. And she always took the one that, for unknown and unquestioned reasons, felt most like Pramus to her.

Rebonya walked down endless passages, crooked hallways bending back on themselves as if trying to mislead her. She came into large old wine cellars full of dusty bottles and enormous oak barrels. She traversed huge halls with vaulted ceilings, found little alcoves and squeezed through hidden exits. She descended stairways, broad and polished, or old and tattered. Iron ladders, even. She went down, down, whenever she could. She crawled through a tiny doorway, or a hole in the wall.

And suddenly, she was out.

A huge natural cavern opened before her. In perfect stillness, an underground lake lay at her feet, expanding out into unseen depths. The enormous jaws of the mountain hung over the waters, matched by pointed teeth rising up from the rocky shores.

Rebonya's light got lost in the hopeless immensity of space. But it left a golden reflection on the waters, revealing a sickly-colored olm rearing its head for a moment, then disappearing again like a wraith, without leaving a ripple. Rebonya extinguished her lantern.

Complete darkness enveloped her. The cool air of the cave touched her naked skin, held her torso in the embrace of a ghostly breath. Rebonya could hear a lone drop fall into the lake, the impact echoing ominously across the huge cavity of stone. She could hear her own heartbeat, and the sound of shifting gravel under her foot. And then she heard something else. A sound off in the far, far distance, drifting toward her like a memory of centuries past, like the voices of feeble ghosts blown away by the winds of time until they got caught up here, in the echoes of emptiness and ancient mountains.

Rebonya held her breath. And, in the utter darkness of inner earth that reigned all around her, she saw the dream of a shimmer. A faint, faint glow, outlining the teeth of stalactites before her, where they bit down into the wall of the cavern. Showing a sliver of a breach between them.

Rebonya lit her dimmed lantern again and began to sneak along the shores of the lake as quietly as she could. Until a low, coarse roar hit her and made her spine shiver. Rebonya froze. Then she hurried on, heading straight toward the spot where the light had come through. She had to climb up the last bit, loose gravel and raw rock forming a rising barrier behind the banks of the silent lake, scratching her unprotected skin. Rebonya struggled, holding on to the lamp, to the rocks, and to caution.

But she made it.

Lying squeezed among the jaws of rock around her, her lantern extinguished, she waited. And was rewarded by seeing a sliver of light fall through again. She crept up and pressed her face against the tiny slit between the mountain's teeth.

There was only darkness on the other side now. But from within it, the roar rose up again, deep, alien, threatening. It grew, slowly, steadily, like an angry growl, like an ominous rumbling of thunder in the distance, a premonition. Then a flare of lightning blazed up with a hiss. Rebonya jerked back involuntarily, but quickly pressed her eye to the crevice again.

The sizzling of fire and boiling oil accompanied by an acrid stench filled the air, and smoky wraiths obscured the large dark red flame licking up

toward the ceiling. The wraiths seemed to gather, to grow stronger, thicker, until they all fell back to reveal just one large, imposing shape of blackness right in the middle of the enormous flame. The rumbling was back, and it sounded like laughter. Low, but powerful, triumphant. The figure of darkness that had taken form inside the flame raised its limbs, spread out wings like a bat. Its body emerged from the shadows, a scaly red and black gleaming in the firelight. Then it tilted back its head to bare fangs the color of molten iron, large and sharp enough for a dragon.

At that moment, a cold blue glow appeared to one side, and with the deep chime of an ancient gong, the figure of a mage manifested. Enveloped in a sphere of light, his robes billowing in a swirl of azure and silver, Pramus held his large, gnarled staff poised above his head.

His shape was dwarfed by the looming body of the demon, but the mage's voice carried strong and clear, the incantations flowing through him with inexorable power, finding their way even among the hellish thunder.

A bright light gathered around the end of the staff, and finally a spidery hand of lightning broke out from the tip, reaching for the demon with angular, crackling fingers, gripping its heart.

The demon roared. It turned. But it could not respond, for the thin fiery limbs clutched it hard and would not let go.

The roar turned from triumph to agony as the figure bent over, cringing, swaying under the magical onslaught. It seemed to crumble, to fall to its knees, to sink into the floor. The flame was getting darker, feebler. It fell in on itself, burning the ground, then disappeared.

Silence reigned.

The hand of lightning had faded. No sign of the demon remained. No scorch, no cleft in the earth. No ash.

Only the blue globe around the mage illuminated the space now. Its soft glow expanded to reveal the hall he stood in, the wide floor, the oddly chiseled columns that rose up high toward the vaulted ceiling.

Rebonya stared. There was movement in the back, behind one of the columns. Something was there.

Someone.

Rebonya swallowed.

It was Berqar.

And behind her—the peddler?

Rebonya pressed her face against the chink.

Berqar came up to the mage with a slow, reverent step. She bowed down deeply as she raised his hand to her lips for a kiss.

"Your Magnificence," Berqar pledged herself. "Old times will be great again. The soldiers of Diamondtip will stand by your side as one. We will win this war, in the name of courage, truth and honor! May power lie where it belongs!"

*

"Gureev," Rebonya whispered.

Gureev opened his eyes. Rebonya was squatting beside his mat.

"May I tell you?" Her eyes were intense, yet uncertain, holding his.

Gureev sat up, running a hand over his face, then pulled the blanket up over his shoulders like a cloak, unconsciously giving himself the air of a nightly king admitting an urgent messenger.

* * *

Morning air, fresh and hopeful, filled the garrison courtyard as the soldiers filed into their formations, murmuring greetings to each other, buttoning up their cuffs. Berqar rode up before them, the coat of her chestnut mare gleaming in the sunlight, the play of muscles visible underneath.

The soldiers stood to attention as Berqar declaimed her morning speech. On the plans for the day. On the mission and purpose of Diamondtip. On pride and duty. Gureev's mind was all on the apparition of the demon last night. No vague shadow, no foreboding. But a real demon, fully visible, fully present. Gureev was eager to get Berqar's account, her orders, her explanation. He was pining to hear what she would say.

She said nothing.

Gureev's hand twitched in his sleep.

}}} The knight in shining armor drew his sword and spurred on his horse. Helpless, frightened villagers hid in the background, cowering fearfully by the walls. A youth. A girl. A man in his prime. They all needed his protection.

Valiantly, the knight charged forward, into the storm and the swirling mists.

Against the backdrop of deep, shadowed mountains his white steed shone like a unicorn, and a golden glow hovered about the rider's brow.

The hellish monster reared up before him, baring ugly teeth and threatening claws. But the knight held steady. As he raised his sword up high, the blade began to shine in the most beautiful magical light. But then it crumbled to dust. The knight reined in hard, staring at the sand running through his fingers.

As he looked up, the monster was bearing down at him with lethal fangs. But just as the knight braced himself in the face of death, the monster itself turned to mist. To light on a smoke screen, to shreds of cloud blown away by the wind. Like a mirage, the fiendish beast disappeared into wisps of vapor.

The storm grew gusty, panting, uneven. With one wailing howl, it tore the cover of fog off the world.

What it revealed was not the pits of hell, nor a crouching demon. It was the king, the captain, the knight's commanding officer astride his rearing horse, saber raised up high, a ravenous battle cry on his lips. At his feet, haplessly strewn about, lay the corpses of the villagers. A youth. A girl. A man in his prime. All dressed in uniform.

The knight took his helmet off, shaking his head free. Then he dismounted. He walked among the dead, touching their faces, closing their eyes. Tears were streaming down his cheeks.

With one long, sorrowful move, the knight pulled the beautiful cover off his horse's back, a silken coat of arms.

He waved it through the air, magic in his every move. And the flag turned into a grave, a shroud, drawing all the dead bodies, all the passed souls up into itself.

The storm tore at the cloth with all its might.

The knight let go.

Lost lives and broken dreams flew up into the sky as the knight watched the silk rise and billow, the embroidered crest of honor flaring, faltering, disappearing. The wind carried it all away over the mountain.

The knight was still crying. But he did not waver.

Without a glance back, he rejoined his horse and rode away.

Behind him, the general was left standing dry and lifeless, a brittle, motionless memory on an endlessly rearing steed. Alone on an empty plain, shouting noiselessly at nothing, ruling over no one. {{{

* * *

The downpour had started just as soon as everyone had made it safely inside Amalai's craft room. Lahoon lit a lantern, and a scattering of diamonds fell down from the eaves, passing through space and night as they briefly caught a golden sparkle from the window's light.

But Unleha's voice held the sun itself. "This is great!" She beamed. "I mean, it is horrid and outrageous, of course. But we knew we had to expect something horrid. Only now we know what it is." She slapped Rebonya's back hard. "Well done, girl!"

Unleha rubbed her hands together. "So this is what Pramus and Berqar are going to do. They will try to win the vote. They won't march on the county house to obstruct the voting. They won't assault individual people at night and blame it on fiendish shadows. Instead, they will make a demon appear, a huge, loud, colorful one, one more convincing, more impressive, more terrifying than ever before. A real demon."

The rain drummed a low, steady rhythm to Unleha's speech, a gentle backbeat or applause. "Their demon will come on the last day of voting. Or rather, on the evening before that last day."

"Will it?" Amalai's voice held a trace of doubt.

"Definitely," Unleha asserted. "Like last time. Panicked people rushing in on the last day to vote, with no time left for anyone to regain their senses or to mobilize the unpanicked majority of citizens." Unleha nodded to herself. "And the swords cannot be seen as well in daylight. So for best effect, it will be in the evening. With the lights dim, and enough people out to bear witness."

Unleha tilted her head to one side. "There is just a bit of uncertainty left. One, it may be that last evening, or one evening before. Either of these might work for Berqar. Most likely, though: the very last one."

Unleha hesitated. "But more importantly: We do not know where. In a place with lots of people, to be sure. But which one? The plaza? The bath palace? Another? There are a number of spaces that would meet the criteria." Unleha drummed her fingers on the table. "And we need to know which one. Otherwise, we stand no chance of being at the right place at the right time."

"We know," Rebonya asserted brightly, pushing Gureev's shoulder forward. Gureev pulled away, and Rebonya let go, blushing slightly. "Sorry." But she went on. "We will know in time. Because Berqar has already chosen the hero who will defeat the demon. So all you need to do is follow the hero. And you will be exactly where you want to be."

*

"But then what is it we will do?" Lahoon pushed back a strand of inky-black hair from his brow. "We will be at the right place at the right time. And when the demon starts appearing, we will sing 'Illusion! Illusion!'"

Unleha wagged her head. "Yes. Of course we will. Or, let's say, people will. We hope. After all, we've been spreading the idea and the practice for quite some time now. It has caught on. Whoever is in that place that night will hopefully remember, and do it." Her eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "However, that also means that Pramus and Berqar will expect it. They know."

Lahoon leaned back. "They will have their response ready."

Unleha nodded, her jaw set. "Yes. We need to do something else. Something more. Something they do not see coming." There was an ardent gleam in her eye now. "And we will."

Her voice turned into a low, intense whisper as she began to explain.

* * *

Night had fallen over the garrison, and no moon was out yet. A light but gusty wind swept invisible question marks of dust across the plains of the courtyard before letting them go again, unresolved. Inside the cadet chamber, the glow of magical lanterns brought mellow spheres of gold into the shadowed darkness.

"You are better now. Stronger." Verlem's gaze rested on Kortid. "If you wish, I can ease the trance, from one of dreamless sleep to one of trust. Perhaps now, that alone will be enough to let you sleep. A more natural sleep. A sleep more refreshing."

Kortid hesitated. He looked at Verlem doubtfully. "What will it do?"

Verlem sat still in his subdued, unobtrusive pose. "I do not know what it will do, exactly. It seems to depend on the person. And I have not yet done it often, not with people I know well, and who would tell me afterward."

His legs were folded underneath him as he sat on the empty mat opposite Kortid's. "But I know it will make you feel well and safe. It will make you trust me, in particular. And it will wear off gradually, over time." Verlem paused. "If that trust is very, very far from your natural feeling toward me, you may wake up to intense disgust and revulsion once the trance fades." Verlem looked into Kortid's eyes. "So you should only agree to this if you trust me already. In good measure."

Kortid nodded diffidently. He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. He looked away. He clenched his hands together, his fingers fidgeting. "While I am in that trance of trust," he hazarded, "I would do anything you ask of me?"

Verlem regarded him quietly. "Most things. Probably. But I promise I will not ask you for anything."

Kortid looked at him anxiously. "Will I remember, after the trance? What I did or did not do? What you said and asked?"

"Yes."

Kortid exhaled. He turned to Gureev. "You will be here? For as long as Verlem is?"

Gureev nodded. "Yes."

Kortid took a deep breath. "All right, then. I am ready. Let us try."

He smiled a shaky smile, gazing down at his clasped hands. As he looked up, he felt Verlem's deep, dark eyes meeting his, and a sense of immeasurable peace and calm built up within him. All his muscles relaxed. Warmth filled his stomach, and his heart opened together with his lungs, for a breath of air. A homecoming. A respite.

Kortid exhaled deeply. He leaned back against the wall. A faint smile came to his lips. And then even a soft laugh. "Well," he murmured, his voice warm and easy now. "That certainly did it." He looked around as if he had arrived in a new room. And he had, in a sense. He laughed again, the same soft, gentle laugh of happy disbelief. "Who would have thought."

He ran a hand through his hair. "This is as if I had made the journey after all. You know? Into the fairy tales of that singer. It is a safe and beautiful world, all of a sudden." He shook his head. "I only dimly remember that that is not the truth."

Kortid had fallen asleep in Gureev's arms. It was a natural sleep, and as the night wore on, it filled up with dreams. Kortid tossed and turned. He mumbled. His eyes opened, in the dark hours before dawn. Kortid sat up and looked around, trying to penetrate the gloom with his eyes.

"Gureev?" he whispered.

Gureev turned over on the other mat. The sound of his name slowly sank down into the depth of his consciousness, drifting deeper, pushing in underneath a ponderous dream, to tell Gureev that this meant him. Gureev woke.

"Hmm?" he asked.

"Sorry," Kortid breathed. "Shall I let you sleep?"

"It's okay," Gureev mumbled, making space for Kortid.

Kortid came over and slid in under his sheets. Gureev was smooth and solid and generally delightful. By virtue of being there.

"Thank you," Kortid murmured. "You are great, Gureev. Truly. Thank you." And he fell asleep, curled up in the warmth of an embrace.

Amalai picked another melon cube from her bowl as she turned her worried gaze on Unleha. "There is something else, though." Her brow furrowed. "What about Tenatetlan? The innocent peddler. The most fervent enemy of soldiers. Who has suddenly been seen in the demon's dungeon with Berqar and Pramus?"

Silence fell on the terrace. Unleha looked down at her hands. She shifted uneasily. "I do not wish to believe," Unleha finally whispered, her voice rough, raspy. "I do not. I cannot imagine." She turned her face away.

Amalai looked down on the ground. "That she has been working for Berqar and Pramus all along? That everything she has ever said was only a trap, luring us off the right track?"

Unleha nodded, wordlessly. She stared down at her plate with unseeing eyes, her expression forlorn, vacant, vulnerable. Amalai carefully laid an arm around her shoulders. Unleha leaned into the full, strong body and buried her face in the crook of Amalai's neck.

Finally, Unleha drew a deep breath. She straightened up. "It is true, however. The more I think about it. Tenatetlan has always been one to pour oil on the fire, any way she could. She even was the one who pushed me into the soldiers at the tavern, sparking the brawl. It all would fit well for someone who has conspired with Berqar to provoke unrest, just to have an excuse to call in the soldiers. Or more generally, to have violence breed violence." Unleha's voice was pained. "But I still cannot believe." She shook her head. "Even though I have known Tenatetlan only for a moon or two. Working together in a group, toward a goal you care about passionately—that felt close enough."

Unleha heaved a deep sigh. "Well," she mumbled. "We will see. We have got time to get used to the idea, after all." She cast a searching glance at Lahoon and Amalai. "Or haven't we? Is there anything that we need to do about it right now? Anything that we can do?"

Amalai raised a questioning eyebrow. "Warn the people who are with her? That small radical group?"

Unleha wagged her head. "I doubt that they would want to hear from us. And we can't even accuse Tenatetlan without giving away our secret. That we know about the demon in the dungeon."

Mosquitoes were buzzing around them, saying out loud what all the mice just expressed by lying flat on their bellies, all the herbs by letting leaves hang limply and dully in the windless air: how hot and damp the atmosphere weighed down on the earth today.

"There is something, though," Lahoon put in thoughtfully. "That might help to ease things a little." He raised up an open hand before his chest. "We could stay in touch. We know some of these people, after all. There is the woman who used to row with you on the river." Lahoon nodded at Amalai. "And the one who sometimes joined me in improvisation sessions, with her flute. And you know practically all of them anyway, at least by sight." Lahoon sought Unleha's eyes before he went on. "So let's just go and say hello to them from time to time. Not to talk politics. And not to pretend to be best friends, when we aren't. But just to stay in touch, at a level that still feels natural. So that they will not easily think of us as enemies. Or believe that they have no one in this world they could possibly relate to outside their radical gang. That they need to close themselves off, to be a tight-knit little in-group, barricaded against a hostile environment."

A slow smile began to spread over Amalai's face. "Oh yes," she hummed. "That is exactly the kind of subtle art I believe in." Her large brown eyes were shining. Excitement animated her voice and gestures now, irrespective of the midday heat. "It would not work if we tugged and pulled at them, trying to convince, or to get them to stop talking about what is important to them. No. We'll just leave them be. We won't join in, but we will not turn away completely, either. We can offer our presence like a standing invitation. They will not be hopelessly locked in. Should any of them ever wish to take a breath of air, they can. They can step outside for a bit if they wish, when they wish, entirely in their own time. Maybe never. But we will keep the door open."

* * *

The night was dark and still. Not a breath of wind moved outside. All the leaves in the herbary rested, quiet and sleepy. Drowsing under the feeble light of stars, basking under a pale half-moon as it emerged from behind a cloud. Amalai felt their presence in her dreams. She listened to the silence, reached into the mellowness of summer night around her. And so she heard it, through her dreams.

On the stairs up from her craft room, a floorboard creaked.

Involuntarily, Amalai's ears pricked up. Her hand reached out across the mat, still in half sleep, and felt the warmth and firmness of Lahoon's back. He was there, right beside her. At that realization, Amalai's unconscious mind paused. And then made an urgent effort to wake her up.

Another floorboard creaked. Up in the studio this time, right outside the chamber door. Amalai's senses were all alert by now. The door slid open with the softest of rustles. Amalai did not move, did not give a sign of being awake. Through slits of night-filled eyes, she squinted up at the dark shadow filling the doorway, hovering at the threshold.

Then a polite cough filled the room.

"Are you up?" Unleha whispered, and Amalai snorted.

*

"We are getting midnight calls," Lahoon murmured in a tousled, sleepy voice as he scrambled to sit up, leaning against the wall. "Secret surprise visitors. If I were not so extremely tired, I would certainly find it quite adventurous." He made room for Unleha. "What brings you here, my sweet daredevil?"

"It is way past midnight, my inevitable poet." Unleha pulled her legs in as she installed herself at the foot end of the mat. "That being said, I apologize for waking you up. And I thank you for taking it so kindly." She cleared her throat. "But Tenatetlan has driven people into action." Unleha's face was grim. "Tonight."

*

"So that is what they have done," Unleha finished her tale. "And I am sure this is another part of Berqar's plan. First, they have artificially created a demon, to make us afraid. Now, they are artificially fanning conflict, to have a reason to control us."

The lantern light let the contours of Unleha's face stand out. There was a gleam in her eye. "Berqar will pounce on this, I am sure. Exploit the hurt and confusion, treat it like some catastrophe that can only call for more soldiers. No matter how harmless it really is. Berqar will fan the flames, and then present herself as the savior. But really, she is the danger. Nothing else."

Unleha's voice had grown sharp, thin. "We need to preempt her. To act, quickly. Effectively." She clenched her fist, her shoulders drawn, her jaw set. "But how?"

A lopsided grin tugged at the corner of Lahoon's mouth. In the golden glow of the lantern, his butterfly cheek shimmered in hues of midnight blue and aquamarine as his voice singsonged out in portentous delight.

"Stride out into the heart of night? Right the wrongs?"

✱

The first crack of dawn was slowly beginning to widen, letting more and more pale blue luminosity flow into the arching sky, making the world reemerge from shadowy twilight.

With a new clarity of vision, Amalai critically surveyed the red wooden beams of the county house. They had looked just fine by lantern light, but the approaching sun already told her that smears of paint were still visible all over. Well, never mind. She would rub those patches again, and if traces remained after that, then they simply remained. Not everything needed to be perfect. Not even a county house, Amalai grinned, secretly infiltrating subtle sloppiness into what she had always felt was a bit too much neatness and propriety.

"Should I go and try to find more whitewash?" Unleha asked in a concerned voice.

But Lahoon shook his head. "We'll be fine. With what you have brought and what Amalai and I still had left over at home, we'll cover it all. Not a trace of a smeary slogan left." He grinned at Unleha conspiratorially. "But the words will remain etched in my heart forever. 'Soldiers Out!'" he intoned very earnestly, straightening his spine. "Never forget!"

"I won't," Unleha promised. "I solemnly swear."

"Good," Lahoon nodded contentedly. "I am reassured."

Unleha threw a fallen flower at him and began to refill the last of Amalai's planters with the earth they had brought. If they kept working fast, then by the time Ojorsven and Nenimoria arrived, all would be well again. All broken flowerpots replaced and holding actual live blossoms. All the debris cleared, the walls white, the beams red, the window mended with fine paper, even if not with glass as before. But good enough for now.

When Ojorsven and Nenimoria arrived in the morning, they would be spared the shock. Their office would still feel welcoming and familiar to them. Not a scene of devastation, or of a home violated, desecrated by marks of hatred and ominous threat. No. Their personal boundaries would be safe, and everything all right, as usual. The most important thing had been rescued. Trust would remain.

✱

Ojorsven had not even settled in behind his desk when Berqar stomped into the office. She looked disconcerted, but still determined to forge ahead. "There have been attacks on the public order tonight!" Berqar barked. "Lawless, devious elements taking advantage of the absence of soldiers in the hours before dawn."

"Oh, don't you worry, now," Nenimoria said soothingly, arranging a neat white circle of lace on the tea table. "It is quite all right. The neighbors told us. There was indeed a little ruckus at night, but apparently some of the people involved repented right away, and they came back to make amends even before morning. I am sure they never meant any harm. And they have made quite an effort to tidy things up again. They even left a package of extra fine teas here for us, would you believe it? So sweet of them. Will you have a cup? Come sit down here." She patted the large armchair by the window. "I put the kettle on just a little while ago, and it will be nice and ready any minute now."

By the time Lahoon came by to check, Berqar had already left.

* * *

Amalai had gone straight to the lake. The sun was up now, but the air still held a certain hush, a stillness left from the night. She shed her clothes and sank into the welcoming cool of the water, letting its smooth caress swallow her up as she swam out into the morning.

When she returned, her hair dripping and her limbs shiny, she found Verlem waiting for her on the shore, pale and white as the half-gone moon. She came to him, lying down beside his fragile form underneath the orchard trees, feeling the leafy crowns shower touches of light and darkness over their bodies. With Verlem's eldritch scent in her lungs and in her soul, she fell asleep.

When Amalai woke, Verlem was still there beside her. He kissed a secret smile onto her lips. And, eventually, listened to her tale of Berqar. How Berqar fanned violence, to justify violence. How she tried so very hard to let the old order rise again.

An image of a huge, barren field appeared before Verlem's inner eye. Deep furrows lined the clay, all straight, all pointing the same way, without exit, without reprieve. Until the moment when a river began to flow and transform the whole landscape into soft, open, meandering green.

Verlem's voice wove in softly between the whisper of leaves and grasses. "Berqar is protecting her furrow. The path she has been walking all her life. She needs it. She has no other."

Amalai's temple rested on Verlem's shoulder. Her gaze had followed his out over the lake, to the gentle waves, the blossoms floating beyond the reeds. "You understand an awful lot about humans, Verlem. Given your claim that we are all novel to you."

The wind lifted a strand of Verlem's hair, tentatively, then let it go. "I do understand humans. Much better than I understand how to be with them."

A mouse peeked out from under a root and quickly disappeared again.

"But for this, I do not need to understand humans. I have lived through it myself."

Verlem's delicate features shifted, ever so slightly. "I come from the same world as Berqar. A world of battle. Where fighting and killing seem normal. A world of monsters."

The billowing clouds over the lake shifted, the deep shadows in them gathering and dispersing. "I left. And even though I came out in paradise, by comparison: The metamorphosis was terrifying. Beforehand, most of all."

Verlem's gaze followed the changing shapes in the sky, and their mirrored reflections in the lake.

"I wanted to leave. And still it was hard, so hard. How horrible must it feel if you don't even want the change? If it is forced upon you? If the ground is pulled out from beneath your feet, and your whole world is lost, because you are unable to hold on to it?"

The wandering clouds cast their fleeting images into the water.

"The realm around us has to fit who we are. We can only ever be what the world allows, makes possible. In order to be a soldier, body and soul, Berqar needs a world of battle. It does not make sense otherwise. In a friendly, loving world, brutal harshness is no longer a virtue. Her whole ideal of discipline and callousness does not hold up anymore. There is just no way."

A frog jumped off a lotus leaf and tried to land of the mirror images of trees. Calmly and softly, the waters took him in.

"In a new world, she would have to be new. She would have to travel into an unknown, other self. And who knows if she would ever arrive? Many end up shipwrecked. It is not easy."

The frog had pushed his long legs hard, making an underwater journey. He resurfaced at the spot where his kin spawned. A thousand translucent pearls hung in between the reeds, in silent question, in quivering anticipation of an uncertain future.

"I understand Berqar. It must be terrible to see your world vanish

around you. Your truth disappears, because there are none who live in it anymore. No wonder she recoils. For no matter how harsh and hostile a world is, how painful or repulsive, if it is the one we know, we will be tempted to cling to it."

Verlem reached up toward the sky. "Berqar has to recreate a world of war, to be able to continue to live as who she is." The seeds of storms lay hidden in the darkening clouds. Verlem spread his fingers around them. "And she needs to draw more people in. You can never hold a world all by yourself. It is always done by many. So we seek out others, to create a brutal world together." His delicate hand closed on air and light. "Or a loving world."

* * *

The peddler's cart pulled into the courtyard of a forsaken farmstead. Dark clouds were gathering overhead, and the air lay thick and heavy on the broken stones.

Tenatetlan rummaged inside her cart and emerged from beneath the canvas with a large woven basket. Neatly stacked, a five-layered box held hot meals from the nearest tavern. Bread and ham squeezed in beside, and fresh fruit piled atop in luscious abundance.

By contrast, the courtyard looked like a wasteland. The rains had washed thin black riverbeds of ash across the sand. Thistles and scraggy weeds held on to the desert plain and to the debris along the edges.

With slow, deliberate steps, Tenatetlan approached the blackened walls, the gaping hole of a door. She halted at the threshold, her breath baited, her whole body listening. Then, with one more step ahead, she sank down onto her knees.

Her brow touched the wood of an old cupboard, high and narrow, and so ornately carved it seemed no less than a shrine.

Tenatetlan opened the door. With careful, reverent moves, she took out an empty basket and replaced it with her own, like a pilgrim making an offering to unseen gods who leave burnt incense and used dishes behind, but never let a mortal watch them eat.

Tenatetlan closed the cupboard and remained still for a moment.

Then she rose and walked in.

Right at the center of the old hall she stopped. All around her, the once life-filled room lay empty, silent. Only soot marked the bare walls now, the remains of a blaze long gone, with bleakness and ash left in its wake.

Tenatetlan took a deep breath.

In one round, sweeping move, she clapped her hands. Then she went down on one knee.

Silence reigned. Nothing stirred.

But finally, there was a rustling beyond the door. A sizzle of lightning, a swirl of silky robes.

The mage had appeared.

There would be new orders.

* * *

The rain had passed, and the herbary was a landscape of rivulets and tiny lakes. The dampness of a jungle was floating in between glistening stems, white shrouds of mists playing with the dripping leaves, with the closed buds of flowers.

Still under shelter from the broad eaves overhanging the porch, Lahoon breathed in the moisture of a rain-soaked earth. He watched a single silver drop fall from the roof. His voice was uncertain. "Can we be sure that it was only an illusion, down there in the dungeons? Could it have been a true demon?" Lahoon turned to Verlem, full of doubts and questions. "Do such beings exist?"

Verlem listened to the whispers and gurgles of water seeking its way into the earth. A tiny frog splashed into a puddle.

"I know no being like that. Like you describe. I have never met one." A long sinuous snake slithered away into the grass. "But many beings exist in the fay realm. I could never say for sure what cannot be."

The clouds began to thin and open, a little crack here, a faded patch there, letting hues of light and darkness paint patterns in the sky. Verlem's eyes followed their shifting shapes. "But I do know the shinn. The shinn, who come to the animal realm often." A soft breeze ruffled his hair. "The shinn, who can take any form. Who could take the shape of a demon, anytime."

Lahoon froze, staring.

The sun was breaking through, scattering stars and crystals over the dripping garden.

Verlem tried to tell, to share. "The shinn respond to a need. To a dream, or a fear, or a presence. They are drawn by the intensity of a situation, and join in. They become whatever a situation is calling them to be."

Lahoon ran a hand through his hair. "So do they take the shape of humans? Or other animals? Of demons and unicorns?" He shrugged. "Of flowers?"

"Yes."

"Whatever they choose?"

"No."

Verlem's voice was hesitant. His eyes were out in the distance, searching for an answer, for words. He tried. "I do not believe that they choose. As such." He paused. "They become. They embody." His words hung in the air, waiting for companions. "It is what happens to them. Who they are."

Verlem turned around to face Lahoon. "They turn into whatever is called for, at that particular junction. They embody the essence of what life is there, then. Or of what is missing, in there."

"So if a mage conjures up the illusion of a demon, will the shinn become that demon?"

"No." Verlem hesitated. "Probably not." The sun disappeared behind one last cloud. "But if very many people become more and more scared every day, and tension builds up until it explodes at the moment where the mage creates the illusion of a demon—then they might come. They might get pulled in."

"And then the demon would be real? And deadly?"

"Yes."

At the end of their shift, soldiers were ambling in between the stalls of the plaza, buying drinks, telling jokes.

Gureev had fallen behind unobtrusively, halting right before the doorway through which he had seen Amalai disappear. She stood half hidden in the arc of the courtyard's entrance now, quietly telling her tale. Gureev listened, his body blending into his surroundings, his gaze still out in the square.

His voice was low, uncertain. "So what can one do to prevent a real demon from arising?"

Amalai shrugged a little helplessly. "I guess the best way is never to have a situation that calls for it in the first place. Only if reality is already arranged around the essence of demon, is whirling like a vortex with that center, only then would the shinn be drawn in. It seems to be the intensity of feeling, the one-pointedness of attention that creates the fiend, more than the image of the illusion. It is the fear that holds the power. The anger, the panic. The clench in people's hearts, the urgency in their speech."

"So we need to fight people's fear?" Gureev's jaw was set.

Amalai wagged her head. "I am not sure fight is the word. For if we go at it in a spirit of battle, we may just end up adding to the tension. And creating an even stronger pull for the shinn."

Amalai leaned back against the heavy slabs of the archway. "We should not be just another force of rage and anxiety. We need to be something else."

A loud voice cut through her last words. "Gureev!!" The soldiers had finally spotted their missing comrade and were waving him over with sweeping gestures.

Gureev reached back into the shadowed doorway to touch Amalai's hand behind him, ever so briefly. Then he was gone.

Amalai let her feet hang into the clear waters of the creek, lying back in the shade of an orange tree. One of the ripe fruits had beckoned to her, glowing a warm red-gold between dark leaves, and Amalai had succumbed to its temptations. She held it in her hand, gently pricking the skin with her thumb and letting the sweet scent play around her nostrils. She heard Verlem's voice mingle into its swirling fragrance.

"A shinn can become much more. She can be a bird, but also a flock. She can be a river. Or a storm brewing."

Lahoon was leaning against the trunk, one arm resting lazily on his knee. His butterfly skin murmured a conversation of subtle greens to the shades and the treetop.

Amalai pushed herself up on one elbow. "From what you say of the shinn, it seems that their being is determined from moment to moment. They get pulled in quickly. So we may be seeing the illusion of a demon before us, and know it is only smoke and glimmer—but the next instant, it could be full of life. Real life. And power. Because a shinn has coalesced into the mirage."

Verlem nodded. Ruffled by a breeze, the leaves in the crown sent a pattern of light and shadow scurrying over the ground, ever-changing, ever-shifting.

Lahoon ran a hand through his hair. "Would you know a shinn for a shinn if you saw one?"

Verlem's features were riddled with the fleeting tattoos of darkness and sun the tree left on his face. "I could not easily tell the difference between a shinn and another being. But I can tell the difference between someone and no one at all. I could feel the emptiness of illusion."

Amalai sat up, holding on to the golden orb of her orange like to a token of hope. "So when the demon appears, could you feel into it, and make sure that it is nothing? Right before we show?"

"I could. I would need to coalesce close to it. Then I could feel."

Amalai exhaled.

But Lahoon looked uncertain. "Well. We would know we are safe. If indeed no shinn has come in. Which is most likely." He turned his head. "But what if she has?"

Amalai held his gaze. "Then we will not show."

"Yes. Of course. But what else will happen? What will the demon do to the citizens? And what will it do to Verlem when he coalesces close to it? Will you be in danger?" Lahoon's hand reached out toward Verlem in a small, involuntary move.

A dense, knotted silence descended on the group.

Finally, Verlem's voice drifted across it, undoing some of the knots, wrapping itself around the bends and twists of the others. "There is no knowing." Verlem rested a thin, pale hand on his knee. "That demon has no being yet. No likeness, either. Its power, its nature, its truth will be a creation of that moment only. It will be what everyone there believes it to be, fears it to be, hopes it to be. It will be whatever the shinn feels to be the call of reality, there and then.

"Will the shinn not shy away from you? Stay away, if you are there?"

"No. Probably not. Not a shinn."

Lahoon touched the sleeve of Verlem's robes with two fingers. "So will you be in danger?"

"Maybe."

"Will everyone be in danger?" Lahoon had to add the question. Even though he already knew the answer.

* * *

Heavy rains were washing over the walls of the garrison castle, filling the courtyard deserts with a landscape of stormy lakes that barely found their way into the earth from the hard, trampled ground. Ponderous dark clouds hung beneath the sky, letting only an uncertain dimness filter through into the cadet's chamber.

Kortid turned toward Verlem. And with one gaze from dark, quiet eyes, Kortid felt his world change. All anguish and fear disappeared, and joyful trust filled their place. Kortid's limbs grew warm and soft, and a prickling glow eased open the knot in his stomach. Kortid let out a little huff, almost of disbelief, but mostly of lightheartedness. His face was bright and free now, his voice rich. Gratitude washed over him in a huge, liberating wave. "You sure are a wizard." Kortid's eyes sought Verlem's. When he found them, he got lost in their depth. "An angel," Kortid murmured.

He saw the look on Verlem's face change. "Do you mind if I call you that?"

Verlem's shoulders, thin and fragile, moved under his robe. He hesitated. "I do not know," he said. "It overwhelms me."

In the chamber's twilight, Verlem's skin shone pale and white like ethereal mist under a silver moon. "I never ever thought that this is who I could be. To anyone."

Verlem's delicate features caught the shadows. "It seems unreal. Beautiful. Frightening." Verlem lowered his gaze. "And I fear I might disappoint you."

Kortid smiled. "It's a bit late for that, isn't it? You have given me so

much already. How could I possibly be disappointed after all that?"

Verlem turned his face away. He said nothing.

Outside, a myriad of raindrops kept falling, on and on, drumming a low, steady rhythm on the castle's roof. They gurgled and murmured in the drains, humming a muted background tune to the words and voices in the chamber.

Kortid moved on his mat. In one fluid, gracious motion, he rose and came to stand before Verlem, his hand open in a gesture of welcome and invitation. "In fact, you have given me so much that I really want to give something back. To thank you."

Kortid hesitated. "I know you cannot ask anything of me now. You have promised. And I should not give, not offer, until the trance has worn off." He turned to Gureev. "I am asking you to help me stay true to that." Kortid saw Gureev nod and went on. "But, Verlem, perhaps you can tell me now? Talk to me?"

A gust of wind let raindrops tap against the window, as if wishing to be let in, or giving a discreet sign to come and meet them outside. They kept on murmuring their tales in subdued tones just beyond the panes.

Verlem stood very still. He seemed to be listening, to the humming rain outside, to the inner whispers of his soul. To the way the air moved around Kortid, to his breath, to his heartbeat. Finally, Verlem raised his gaze. "I will try."

Muted sounds drifted in from the corridor, voices calling, a door banging shut. Steps coming closer and echoing away into the distance. The rain kept on falling unperturbedly.

"I live," Verlem said very carefully, "by grace of the life force others give to me. They share of themselves. They give to me in small measure, as much as they easily can. And they nourish me. They allow me to live, through this sharing."

Kortid looked at him, intrigued, puzzled.

Verlem turned away.

Kortid followed his move, in an involuntary gesture. He stood behind Verlem, poised, open, intensely aware of his presence. "It sounds beautiful," Kortid offered. It also sounded intimate. He did not dare press Verlem further. He waited.

Beneath the cloudy sky, the battlements of the tower, refusing to be bothered by the fancies of gargoyles, let a stern, simple slab of stone protrude, a gurgling river frothing in its cavity. The turbulent waters went over the edge without warning, falling straight down into the deep, missing Kortid's window by no more than a pace.

Verlem turned around. He felt for Kortid, for a sense of him, for a taste of the intangible energy around him. Then he found his clue, his reassurance. Verlem reached out, holding Kortid in a gentle embrace of invisible starlight. "The way they share their life force with me," Verlem's voice carried on, in a low, quiet tone, "is through their blood."

Kortid stared at him without comprehension. "Through their blood?"

Verlem stood before him, shy, passive. Patient.

The sound of the rushing waterfall drifted in through the window, mingling with the patter of raindrops. A brief gust tore wisps of spray loose from the pouring river, throwing them lightly up against the panes.

"Through their blood," Kortid repeated. He tilted his head. "How?"

"I drink of their blood. As much as they can spare without suffering."

Kortid took a step back. He crossed his arms over his chest. His voice turned thin, shaky. But it did come. He could still breathe. "You drink blood."

Verlem inclined his head imperceptibly, his eyes lowered in affirmation, in humility.

Kortid looked over at Gureev. "Did you know this?"

Gureev's nod was just as subtle, just as gracious. "I have offered. I give of my blood to Verlem. So he can live, and be well."

Kortid stared at Gureev, and then out beyond him, into empty space. Murky twilight enveloped the castle walls. A thousand droplets kept on falling from the heights of the sky, their monotonous murmur a chant of acceptance, of things being what they are. Of gravity pulling them down. Of the clouds, drifting away into nothingness up high.

Kortid took a deep breath. His head was spinning. He leaned back against the wall. "So the demon drinks blood. In its kill. And my angel drinks blood, too. In nourishment. In a sharing of life force."

He laid a hand on the rough wall, feeling the calm, the solidity of stone. "I did not know what a trance of trust could do. I never dreamed it would bring me deliverance and bliss in the way it has."

Kortid licked his lips. A slightly desperate smile twisted the edge of his mouth. "I never dreamed it would bring me such truth."

“There are no fay beings.” Unleha explained it patiently this time, speaking slowly and enunciating every word very clearly. She held Amalai’s eyes in an intense gaze, as one might do with a very small child who needs to understand a simple but very important thing. “So there are no demons, and no jinn.”

“Shinn,” Amalai mumbled involuntarily, carefully ducking beneath the rafters of the bath’s old attic.

“You see?” Unleha went on, ignoring Amalai’s interjection, keeping up the calm explanatory tone. “Anything that may look like a demon is only an empty illusion. There is no harm that could possibly come from being close to it.” Unleha turned her back on the disarray of dislodged boxes on the floor, future triumph already in her eyes. “Or more than close. Which is precisely where we are going to be when the day comes!”

“Yes,” Amalai agreed, picking up another dusty box and trying to unobtrusively enter into the flow of Unleha’s argument. “That is the plan and I still agree. It is a very good plan. Overall.” She nodded at Unleha encouragingly. “We are just making a very small addition to that plan. Just one little extra step. We will wait for Verlem’s confirmation a moment before we actually do anything.”

Unleha held her gaze.

And Amalai gave up.

“Look, Unleha,” Amalai said, shaking her head and putting the box down. “I am sorry. I don’t want to start playing games with you. Which is what we are about to be doing, I am afraid. We are trying to forge ahead, each with our own perspective in mind, trying to pull the other one along. Even though she clearly does not want to come out of her own free will.”

A cloud of dust had risen up around Amalai’s shuffling feet and was very leisurely considering the surroundings it might possibly settle down on again later. Amalai reached out a hand into the hazy air. “I don’t want to become manipulative. It should not be necessary. There should be another way.”

She sneezed. "Even if the first way we tried does not seem to work. The first, and perhaps in principle the best way. Which would have been to agree. To convince each other, through talking, through listening, and to end up with a shared vision of things."

A dim gray paleness fell in through a skylight.

"We have tried that, several times and from various angles, and reasoning just does not seem work. Not this time, anyway. Not on this issue."

In the distance, rafters and pillars disappeared in the shadows as the attic stretched on and on, far beyond their little corner. Amalai sat their lantern onto a high pile of cloth. "So what do we do? Can we at least accept that this is where we are?"

The magical glow shed light upon the silent presences all around them. A small bathing beauty, white as marble, with dried-up twigs of ivy still clinging to her calves, beckoned to a pixie at her feet.

Amalai turned to Unleha, who was impressively framed by a huge ebony crow taking flight above her head. "Perhaps we can agree to disagree? You are convinced that fay beings do not exist. You have even met Verlem, seen him dissipate, but you still do not believe. Right. So that is just how it is. This is how you see things. I feel certain you've got it wrong, but I realize that this is how you see it. It just is. You simply do. I can't change it, so I have to take note of the fact that you do."

A few gold threads shimmered in an old curtain.

"And the same thing the other way around. You are sure that I am mistaken with my belief in fay, and you will continue to be sure. But I will continue to believe. That is just how it is."

Amalai looked at Unleha searchingly. "Do you think you could say this? Can you say, 'I am sure your view is wrong, but I take note of the fact that it is your view'?"

Unleha picked up another box from the ground and stacked it neatly back into the pile along the wall. And another. And another. She took hold of the one salvaged treasure chest she had come questing for originally, and carefully moved it from its provisional resting place to even greater safety, at the feet of a stern brazen merman near the door.

Finally, a crooked grin began to steal onto Unleha's face. She turned around to Amalai. "I can certainly say 'I am sure your view is wrong'," she conceded. Amalai snorted. But she did hand Unleha another box for her stack. Unleha took it with a sigh. "I can also take note of the fact that it is your view," Unleha added with a shake of her head. "And that you will continue to hold that view."

Unleha made a face somewhere between despair and disgust, mirrored by a stone imp behind her. "I hate to see some of my closest allies go down this route. Taking utter nonsense for the truth, believing in fairy tales and superstitions." She suffered visibly. So did the imp. "But if that is where it is at, then I might as well face it. You are right, we ought to be honest with each other. And accept the truth, even if it is unpleasant."

"Yes." Amalai spoke softly. "It is hard. But still. We might make it. Let's see if we can find enough common ground, even with our divergences. Even while we disagree on very basic matters: Can we still be friends? And act together, for the good of our town?"

*

"You know," Lahoon offered Unleha, together with a tiny delicate glass of mint tea, "there may even be an upside to this." He settled back down beside Amalai. "Even though it feels extremely uncomfortable to us to be in such disagreement. But in terms of approaching people in Behrlem, it may actually be a good thing."

Lahoon folded his feet underneath him on the rug. "Because this way, everybody in town can find someone to relate to." He gestured toward Unleha. "Those who are firmly convinced that fay beings do not exist can talk to Unleha." He pulled his own tea toward him. "And those who think that the fay may exist after all can come to me. And all these people still get the same message: that we cannot have soldiers in town. Fay or no fay, all of us need to show up and vote the soldiers out."

The light caught in the shimmering liquid as Lahoon raised his glass. "Our internal differences may turn out to be a strength rather than a catastrophe: if we handle them well."

*

The sun was making a brief appearance, squeezing in a few amber rays between the departing clouds and the approaching horizon. The sky quickly snatched up a bit of gold and purple before getting ready for the night.

Unleha sipped her mint tea. She put her glass down and tilted her head, a skeptical look on her face.

"Just humor us," Lahoon pleaded. "Even if you think we are total idiots in this. But you will not lose much. It doesn't cost you anything, really. Just wait for one small moment when the illusion appears. Verlem won't take long. We will wait, just for that blink of an eye, until he returns to confirm that it is an empty illusion. Then we'll go for it, all together." Lahoon's voice was courting her favor, her indulgence. "Can you do that?"

Wait for us, just one brief moment?”

Unleha fixed him, her eyes narrowed. “Fine,” she spit out. “I will wait. Just a moment.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “But I am telling you. I am not a believer, and I will not be stopped by this nonsense. So. If Verlem comes back after a moment to say we can act, that is fine by me. But if he comes back to say that there is terrible danger and that the demon is real, I can tell you that I will forge ahead anyway.”

“What shall we do?” Lahoon was tossing on his mat. “What if Unleha really storms ahead? Right after Verlem says that a shinn has turned the demon a real?” He turned around to Amalai. “Wouldn’t she be walking straight to her death?” His eyes were troubled. “We can’t let that happen, can we?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Even if she says she wants it that way.”

Lahoon got up and began to pace up and down the bedchamber in a few worried, harried steps. “Is that right? To respect a person’s free will to the point where they actually kill themselves, out of their own misperception?” He clasped his arms around his chest, hugging himself tightly. “It seems to me that we ought to save her, even if she does not see any danger.” Lahoon halted. “Precisely because she does not see the danger. We should stop her by force.” He tilted his head. “Or shouldn’t we?”

A gentle breeze came in through the window. Amalai pushed herself up on her elbow. “We can’t stop her anyway, can we?”

“Well, we can.” Lahoon hesitated. “Verlem can. He could take one look at her and send her to sleep. And you and I pull her unconscious body to shelter.” Lahoon shrugged in a tense, anxious shiver. “It could be done. But should it? Is that right?” He raised his hand in an uncertain gesture. “Is that wrong?”

* * *

In the early morning light, Verlem looked as pale and ethereal as the wraiths of mist that were drifting away over the meadows. Only his coarse black robes seemed to hold him in place, anchored to the winding paths of the herbary.

Amalai turned a questioning gaze to him. “Unleha would be walking to her death. Wouldn’t she?”

Verlem squatted down beside the flourishing mint, gently touching a finger to the leaves. “We do not know.” He raised his face to Amalai. “Unleha will be a part of the reality that calls and shapes the shinn at that instant. And even though the shinn always respond to the whole, and not only to one person, Unleha will be one important aspect of that whole the

moment she meets the demon. It will change things, and change the shinn. In some way." Verlem's gaze wandered out across the verdancy of the garden. "This may save her. And everyone. Or it may not."

Amalai's voice was distant, dreamy, and her lips held a wistful, lopsided smile. "Unleha is so utterly sure that fay beings don't exist. Sometimes I feel her conviction is so strong she might even convince a shinn. To not be. Or at least, to not be right there."

* * *

Clouds of lead and iron hung low in the afternoon sky, an enormous dark mass gathering over the garrison. The highest towers of the castle held out against them with a broad-shouldered build, strong and sturdy. Halfway down, defensively huddled up against the imposing walls, the outer turret faced the forest with heavy embattlements.

Rebonya leaned against the gray slabs of a merlon, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. Narrow black arrow slits stared down at her from the heights of the main tower as she turned around toward Gureev.

"I cannot have this," Rebonya hissed. "I cannot." An irritated wind picked up, throwing impatient gusts at Rebonya, whipping her hair across her brow. "Having to accept the existence of Verlem was bad enough. I've barely found a way to accommodate that. But now you come here telling me that everything might be a changeling? A jinn, a shinn? Every tree, every child, every horse might look perfectly normal, but in fact be a fake, a ghost?"

Rebonya's fists clenched. "You are asking me to disbelieve the whole world? To see a specter in everything, and trust no one to really be themselves?" She shook her head. "That is too much." She turned away. "I can not take it."

The forest lay before her, a massive darkness crouched against the foot of the mountains. The crowns of ancient trees swayed in the wind, groaning and creaking, hiding secret life underneath their canopy, in the depth of fragrant soils, in the thicket of undergrowth. A cloud of black birds rose up, an ambiguous shape-shifting murmururation taking on fleeting forms of ghost and dragon.

Rebonya shivered. "If I went for that tale, I would go crazy. I would end up like Kortid." She rubbed her face. "And I can't have that." She paused. "I'd much rather end up like Unleha."

She turned around to address Gureev. "I have lived very well, so far, without any thoughts of shinn. So have all the people around me. It seems to work just fine." The embattlement stood firm behind her. "So why not continue this way."

Rebonya ran a hand over the slabs of stone. "I do not mean to lie to myself." She hesitated. "But I do not wish to obsess. I could not bear to live like that, permanently suspecting everything in my hand, every person I meet, might be a ghost. I cannot live in constant horror. And that is how I would feel. What it would mean to me. I can't take it."

Her eyes met Gureev's, intently, honestly. "I need to live in a world where things are real and people are people." There was a rumbling of thunder behind her. "So for now, I guess I will simply ignore your suggestion. That there might be ghosts impersonating anyone or anything. And act as if that kind of thing just did not exist."

Rebonya walked up to Gureev and pulled him with her into the alcove that harbored the winding staircase leading down into the castle, to halls on solid ground, to chambers and pantries.

"Just stay away from me with that tale, will you?"

The ponderous clouds, holding a hundred shades of twilight in their swollen bags, burst open to let the water fall down, an outpour without restraint, without limit. Rebonya briefly pressed against Gureev as she moved past. Her foot was already on the first step. "Leave it be. Then I will just forget about it, and live my life as if nothing had happened. As if I can trust the world to be real."

* * *

Lahoon was soaked to the skin. The deluge had caught him halfway across town and drowned him and everything around him with full gusto. After a first impulse to run, Lahoon had given in, raising his arms to the sky, splashing naked toes in the puddles, and letting fate take its course unimpededly.

Lahoon walked into the bath palace dripping a trail of water onto the tiles. His pearly blouse, half-transparent with wetness, clung to his chest, letting hues of ocean waves shine through. Hugging his shapely thighs, the drenched lungi tugged at his legs with every step.

"I see thee, beauty of the tides, undine of the sea," Amalai recited, giving it all the solemnity of ancient lore as she ambled out toward him from behind her stall.

Lahoon promptly met her with his deepest water nymph gaze, an irresistible smile of seduction, and the most alluring siren song. "Come, follow, follow me," he cooed. "Into the waters, the bathtub, with me."

They snuggled into a small private room, with only one bathtub and a large, long window coming down almost to the floor. Outside, the crown of an old magnolia waved its branches against the panes, making it seem as if the bathtub sat right inside a little tree house.

The walls were mostly wood, anyway. In between small patches of yolk-colored plaster, purposefully crooked shelves of pine and chestnut undulated in the flowing lines of natural branches, holding neatly folded towels in one alcove, earthenware pots full of herbs and dried flower petals in another. Along one board, an array of ornate glass vials glinted, some clear as teardrops, others painted with sunset or a deep midnight blue. Wires of gold and silver threaded around them, playfully circling wide, round bellies and slender necks, even the pointed tips of tiny temple turrets or closed buds of glass. Amalai ran a hand along the collection of perfumes and ointments, scented oils and soaps. She chose one.

Amalai dropped her gown, looking very much like a wood nymph herself with her full round body and the soft glow of her mahogany-colored skin. She let herself glide down into the water.

The bathtub, laid into the floor in an oddly bulging shape like the natural stone pool of a geyser, showed hues of beige and ocher, gentle lines of sediment in rock. Lahoon turned the massive brass wheel behind a creature of the sea spewing cold water from its gaping mouth, easing down the flow, and then the one behind a mermaid pouring steamy hot springs from a conch in her arms. He leaned back against Amalai with a satisfied sigh, letting the subtle waves lap against his chest. "I love our creek bathtub. I really do. And the rains. But there is something to be said for hot water, too. Even in summer, sometimes."

Amalai nodded. "There is something to be said for soap, too, sometimes. Even in summer."

Lahoon grinned while Amalai softly rubbed foamy bubbles into his hair, delightedly following their leisurely paths as tiny renegade clouds sloped down his butterfly skin, licking wet trails of white over his velvety blue neck.

Lahoon closed his eyes, his head tilted back against her shoulder. He moaned happily, almost inaudibly. Amalai poured a moss green tincture from her vial, and tendrils of color drifted around the pool as Lahoon moved his long legs. An aromatic scent rose up.

Lahoon half woke from his blissful dreams. He blinked up at Amalai from beneath black lashes. "What is it like to be a shinn?" he murmured, wondering.

Amalai rained a handful of rosy petals onto the turquoise waters.

Lahoon moved his limbs, slowly, aimlessly, like a sea anemone. The silky ships rocked gently on the waves. He let his susurrations float along with them. "To be a shinn." He raised a hand to watch sparkling drops fall from his fingers. "To have hardly any continuity at all. No steady,

independent form of existence. To become whatever the situation calls you to be. To respond to everything, to everyone around you, and embody what is."

Iridescent bubbles drifted over their private turquoise ocean, shimmering soap letting rainbow colors roll by. Lahoon lifted one of the pearls up carefully, holding an inland sea in his cupped hands. "At first it seemed incredibly frightening to me," he marveled. "Like being no one at all. An empty shell. With no personality, no independence. No identity." He let the sheltered bay return to the ocean. "But then, maybe it is quite wonderful. If looked at another way. Because the shinn are full of everything. The whole world flows into them, and they can hold it. It must be marvelous to be able to feel the entirety of what is present, the sum total of a moment. The nature of the universe as it is unfolding at one particular junction of its existence. And then another. And another. Unbelievable. It is a form of deep immersion into presence. Or, more than immersion, really. Embodiment."

Amalai ran a hand over his waist, his chest. Lahoon looked more ocean sprite than ever, his skin shining in teal and cerulean hues beneath the turquoise waters. Lahoon leaned back, gently pressing against Amalai's body with his back. His eyes drifted closed again. But his dreamy voice flowed on. "So. Maybe this is what it is. To be a shinn. To be everything, the essence of reality, at any given time. To be the full richness of the moment, over and over again." He tilted his head to squint up at Amalai, his voice warm and pleading. "Will we get to meet a shinn? One of these days?"

Amalai looked down into the face at her shoulder. She saw the spark in Lahoon's eye, the dreams and wonders dancing across his soul.

"You always see beauty, don't you," she whispered. "Beauty and connection. Even where others feel only danger."

She embraced Lahoon's lips with her own, a tender caress, a token of belonging. Her words played against his mouth, rubbing softly over his skin, breathing truth into his ear.

"I love you."

* * *

"Oh gods," Kortid moaned, sinking back onto his cushion with a sigh of relish and relief. "One of these days I will do this just for pleasure. I will ask you for a trance of trust, and then simply lie there, for hours and hours, savoring the feeling. Or walk around town, loving everybody."

He sat up.

"But not tonight. Tonight, I still have things I wish to ask you."

Verlem was crouched by the edge of the mat, his knee pulled up to his chest, his gaze on Kortid's face.

Kortid's jaw tightened in a grim line. "I wish to know, but may have a hard time posing the question. Or hearing the answer."

The sky lay deep and dark over the castle, weighing the world down with an enormous cloak of heavy clouds. But the cloth was old and worn, with ragged tatters falling off and drifting away. Through the holes and tears, the light of a dying sun fell in, in fleeting spells of purple.

"May I?" Kortid's voice was more cautious now, hesitant.

Verlem gave him a small nod.

Kortid took a deep breath, and held on to Gureev's arm, just to be sure. "You are fay." He caught Verlem's eye. "And I believe that you know a lot more about demons than I do."

Verlem waited for him to continue.

"Can you tell me?" Kortid wavered. "About the demon that has come to Behrlem?"

The sounds and the silence of the forest at night drifted toward them. Unseen but close, just behind the wall, just over the edge of the creek, it made itself known as their neighbor, one much older, much larger than even the castle they dwelled in.

Verlem's voice eased its way into the woodland communion, as another being that belonged there, quietly, naturally sharing in their presence. "It is not one demon." An owl hooted in the distance. "Who you have seen in the forest, and what you have seen at the bath palace. What you are searching for in the shadows. They are not the same. Not one."

Darkness was hiding in the crevices of old stones, creeping along the walls of the garrison chamber. Verlem's black robes melted into the twilight. "What you are seeing in the shadows is your own fear." His hand touched the slabs. "What you saw outside the bath was an illusion." Verlem halted. "Probably."

The clouds tore open and the cloak disintegrated, revealing a last shimmer of dusk among the drifting shreds. Quiet lakes on the sandy plains of the courtyard were filled with images, reflections of purple twilight, of shifting shapes of obscurity.

Verlem's voice grew very low. "What you saw in the forest is the only thing that I am absolutely sure about. I am sure, because I was there. I know. What you saw in the forest was no demon." The enormity of the ageless woods hung in the air. "It was me."

Kortid did not breathe. His eyes were riveted on Verlem's face.

Beyond the last vanishing clouds, the universe loomed large and black

and endless over the earth. A few soft, pale stars shone back down, from infinite distance, telling of the existence of space, and of light, even there, beyond the horizon of travel or imagination.

Verlem held Kortid's gaze with his own. "I am sorry I caused you such a fright. I was never a danger to you. I did not mean to harm. I am sorry."

Kortid's grip on Gureev's arm was tight, so tight the arm was beginning to grow numb. Kortid stared at Verlem wordlessly.

"Hun was dying when I found him," Verlem's voice carried on. "He was in great pain. So I sent him to sleep with a look. To end his distress." Verlem hesitated. "And I did drink his blood."

From within the blackness of night, a wildcat called, an eerie, plaintive lament floating out of the forest, winding around the roofs and towers of the sleepy castle.

"Because of me, Hun died a few hours earlier than he would have otherwise. But he died in peace."

Kortid gave a choked sound.

He turned his face away. "So here is my angel." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

He looked back at Verlem. "The angel of death."

The black outline of the castle stood firm against a sky sprinkled with stars. Kortid leaned back against the wall. Words drifted out of his mouth, a breath of a prayer. "Killing mercifully. To deliver us from our suffering." Kortid had his eyes closed. "An angel of death, drinking our essence, so it will live on in him. When our own life has come to an end."

Kortid was walking through the forest, Verlem and Gureev in his wake. The trees were dripping a muted patter over soft and soggy ground after the rain. Mists drifted in between the dark trunks, and shadows were beginning to grow long and numerous. Only a few leaves here and there still lit up as a tired sun came out from behind the clouds.

They trekked along, high ferns brushing wetly against their knees as they passed, old dead branches meeting their feet with a groan and a crack.

"It is right there, a bit farther down." Kortid pointed, his voice agitated and shaky. "Ah." He caught Verlem's gaze and averted his eyes. "Of course, you know where it is." Turning back toward the shrouded green, he marched on. At the bottom of a shallow decline, Kortid came to a halt.

A large trunk of gray and brown lay fallen on the ground, resting on a bed of rotting plants. The mighty crown held a huge assembly of ghostly leaves, pale, dry things, almost transparent, but still green, and still holding on, as if they could not yet find the courage to let go, to move on to the otherworld. Ants were scurrying over the rough landscape of bark, finding the trails of their companions as always, moving along the straight trunk, along the bow of a thick branch coming off to one side.

It was that branch that had caught Hun. The tree had died here, and Hun had died with it.

Kortid stood, his body rigid, his face taut. He stared down at the ground.

There was no blood to be seen. No footsteps. No trampled grass, no signs of a body having been hauled out, a stretcher pulled in underneath. It had been weeks. Moons, even. There had been rain and wind and sunshine. Traces had washed away, the grass had grown up around them, covering them in verdancy.

Kortid took a deep breath. He stepped closer gingerly.

He looked down at the place where the body had been. Where his friend had died.

"No." Kortid turned around. "I don't want to do it here."

He shook himself. "It feels wrong." Kortid took a deep breath and exhaled unsteadily, raggedly.

His voice took on an angry tone. "Hun did die here. He truly did. Even if it wasn't your fault." He looked up at Verlem. "Or any demon's. But he did die. And not by chance. They risked his life. Needlessly. Carelessly. Berqar caused his death with her orders, and she thinks nothing of it."

His face was pale. He kicked his foot against the trunk. "This is it." He looked up at Gureev. "I will leave. I will not be a soldier anymore," he hissed angrily. "What are we doing in that garrison? What are they doing there, with us?"

There was an ardent gleam in his eye. "Berqar got Hun killed. She has exploited my panic, my nightmares. Fanned them, fed them. She has used me, to have fear breed fear. To have a whole town give in to a lie." Kortid looked straight at Gureev. "What is this? What am I doing here? Why would I lend myself to any of this?"

Without another word, he turned and stalked away into the forest.

*

Kortid had taken several turns, circling through the woods. Verlem and Gureev had followed quietly, at a distance, before finally settling down and waiting until Kortid returned. And he did.

"You are still here," Kortid said. "Thank you. For being patient with me, yet again. For staying with me on my journeys." Verlem and Gureev nodded back at him. Neither had ever had a doubt.

"So." Kortid crossed his arms over his chest and slightly rocked back on his heels. He glanced over at Verlem. "Do you still wish to do it?"

Verlem's look was calm, quiet. "This is about you, not me."

Kortid gave a faint nod. "Yes. I know."

He faced Verlem squarely. "I do. I want it. If you will help me, I will face my nightmares. I will walk through them and come out on the other side." Kortid's jaw hardened. "Hopefully," he pressed out.

Kortid took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He walked over to one side, then back again, looking for a good spot. He finally chose one a bit removed from Hun's fallen tree, but still in clear view of it. Kortid bade Gureev sit down at the foot of a strong old pine, leaning against the trunk, ready to cradle Kortid's back in his embrace as he came to join him. Kortid's body was rigid now, but his face held a look of fierce determination.

Verlem came down on his knees beside Kortid. Grayish-green lichen spread an ancient pattern of lace over the roots at his feet. Verlem let his long, quiet gaze rest on Kortid. Then he bowed down until his face nearly

touched the crook of the elbow resting in his lap, open and unprotected. He remained there, sensing, listening. Verlem's words came out softly as he raised his head again. "I swear I will not harm you."

Kortid was shaking, his face pale.

Verlem waited. "Do you want me to drink your blood?"

Kortid pressed against Gureev's warm chest at his back. He clenched his teeth.

Kortid nodded, a shaky shiver of his head. Verlem did not move. He kept motionless, his eyes on Kortid's face. Kortid cleared his throat, a rough, croaky sound. His voice was still raw, rasping, when he spoke. "Yes." He cleared his throat again. "If you make sure you do not hurt me. Not harm me in any way. Then yes. Drink of my blood. Just a little." His body shivered involuntarily, and Kortid gave a choked sound, a drowned, aborted laugh trying to come out. Kortid shook his head and took a deep breath. He looked into Verlem's eyes, holding his gaze. "Yes," he said firmly. "Please do."

Verlem lowered his face to touch his lips against the hollow of the elbow before him. He breathed over the soft, delicate skin. Then he moved quickly, imperceptibly, and through two tiny cuts of precision the dark, warm stream of life pulsed out into his mouth.

*

Kortid leaned back against Gureev and the pine, his hand still lying loosely in Verlem's lap. His eyes were out in the forest, unfocused, dreamy.

"There never was a demon." Kortid's voice drifted out among the trees. "There never was a demon." Kortid turned slightly toward Verlem. "It has always been you. And you never were a danger." He touched the soft, tender skin of his inner arm, his elbow. "You do drink blood. And this is what it looks like." He ran a finger over two tiny red dots on his skin. "These are the wounds you cut." He looked up. "There is no harm in this at all."

Kortid's gaze drifted out into the forest again, into the shadows creeping up from all sides. "There never was a need to fear any of this. The shadows have always been harmless." He shifted, pushing back slightly against Gureev behind him. "We could always have walked home alone from the tavern. We could always have gone into the woods at night." He took a deep breath. "There never was a demon. There never was a danger." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Then a crooked smile stole onto his lips. "And the best part of it is: There is no danger still." He opened his eyes and looked out into the growing darkness before him. The outlines of trunks and branches stood before

his eyes in inky blackness, the ferns between them waving slightly, in the uncertain patterns of faces of the night. Some unseen animal rustled in the undergrowth. In between the crowns of trees, a tiny piece of sky could be seen, here and there, and in it, a first star.

“That is the bit I have truly come here to realize.” Kortid’s voice floated out into that forest of night. “There is no demon here waiting for me now. No danger. I am safe. I can go and meet the shadows, anywhere, and they will be companions to me, not enemies.”

A slim sickle of silver was drifting through the hazy blues of a brightening sky. In the subtle gleam of dawn, the dried rose petals in Amalai's craft room looked pale, almost ethereal. Amalai carefully pushed them over to one side and laid down the sheet of paper Gureev had given her. His schedule for the next three days. When and where he would be standing guard.

Gureev looked down at the ground. "Only one more night. Then the demon will appear." He hesitated. His voice was brittle. "What if a shinn gets drawn in? What if the demon turns real? What shall I do then?"

Vials shone on the wooden shelves, blinking their magic eyes of sunset red or murky brown at Gureev.

Amalai put a hand on his arm.

"There will be no way out for you." Her eyes were dark, full of worry. "Are you willing to go at all?"

A soft draft of air made the dry petals shiver, the shadows flicker around the lantern. Bushels of herbs whispered in the rafters above them. The silence filled up with question, with agitation.

"If you decide to go to your station, to do your watch duty, then you will be right in front of the demon. You cannot hide. It will be too late."

Amalai licked her lips. "The demon will be coming straight at you, and the best you can do, shinn or no shinn, is to bring out your beam of light and dance. If you, deep in your heart, believe yourself to be part of a ritual, maybe a shinn will manifest as just that. A liturgy, a performance. With no harm done. But if you dart for cover, fearing death and destruction, you might break that spell. And you will not be able to find cover from a truly lethal demon, not anywhere."

Amalai gave Gureev's arm a light squeeze. "So you had better stay. Dance, with your blade of light, and pray and trust that the demon will dance with you. That it will be a play of night and fire, of sword and sorcery, of a glimmering monster and a fearless hero. With its destined glorious conclusion."

The old horse market of Behrlem held almost no horses anymore. One corner was still dedicated to that purpose, and many of the inns surrounding the place had livery stables. But mostly, the square now held booths of various kinds, offering fruit and cloth, debates and skillsharings. It was full of people bustling about in a cloud of shouts and laughter, of smells and colors.

Unleha, Amalai and Lahoon wove their way through the crowd, dodging carts and spontaneous choirs until they reached the middle of the open square, with a good view of the buildings on all sides. Most were the timber-framed houses typical of Behrlem, their tiled roofs tipped up on the edges. But one clearly stood out among all the others. On the high end of the sloping square, right at the center, a mansion of bright white stone shone down at them. With towers on both sides, a roof terrace in the middle, and innumerable turrets and balconies and winding staircases all over, it resembled the playful, elaborate styles of Varoonya, the distant capital, much more than the comfy homes of Behrlem.

Unleha took one look and stopped. "That's it." Her voice held no doubt as she turned to face her companions, her eyes fierce and determined. "We're here. This is where it will be. If Gureev is stationed atop that roof, we know our place."

They regarded the mansion. It was not particularly big, not much larger than other buildings around it. But the style was extraordinary. There was not one spot on the facade that did not hold an ornamental carving, a tiny alcove, a gargoyle or a flowerpot. Vines and roses climbed up the base, and dark green leaves waved down at them from the rooftop garden. In the middle of that terrace, a huge old statue stood saluting the sky, or perhaps the crowd in the place below. For all its pompousness, the whole mansion mostly seemed coy, coltish, flirtatious. Laughing at its own lavish ornaments, its useless frills and arabesques, while adoring them with sincere fervor at the same time.

Lahoon's eyes were on the roof terrace. "So how are we going to get into position?" His gaze roved around searchingly. "We want to be on that roof, after all, rather than just down here looking up."

One side of the mansion held a little garden, with a delicate staircase winding up from it, climbing along the walls together with the flowery vines that clung to the stone and framed the windows. It curved around to the front of the house, meeting balconies and galleries, leading up all the way to the roof terrace.

"Now that seems almost ideal," Lahoon ventured. He tugged at the strings of the lute he had brought along.

Amalai wagged her head. "Ideal for being seen by a hundred people."

Indeed. The filigreed balusters were certainly not going to give much cover. They were not meant to conceal. Instead, they were meant to reveal, to display. The whole purpose of the staircase seemed to be to proudly present whoever would dance up and down the playful curves, rest in ornamental bays, wave down from tiny balconies. Looking out over a square full of people looking back up at you.

Unleha sighed.

"We could wait for the rain," Lahoon suggested tentatively. "No one will see us in the blur, even if anyone should stay out in the square during the downpour."

Unleha shook her head, the beads of her braids clicking softly. "That may be too late."

Lahoon and Amalai both looked at her.

"I guess Pramus will need to be somewhere close by to be able to cast his illusion. He will need a clear view of the scene. And if he has to cross the terrace to get to his vantage point, he will do so before Gureev arrives. For Pramus has not made the chosen hero privy to his secrets yet."

Amalai ran a hand over her black curls. "Gureev will come as soon as the rain stops. Pramus will arrive before Gureev."

"And we will arrive before Pramus," Lahoon finished grimly.

*

They moved swiftly and calmly, with natural ease, with leisurely poise, following the winding stairs beneath their feet as if they had always been a part of them. As if no one could possibly question their right to be there.

People in the throng of the market were bustling around noisily, shoving back and forth, pursuing their business with zest and purpose. Lovers were whispering into each other's ears. A cart drawn by two oxen was trying to pull through. A small child was chasing after a cat beneath the stall of a fruit merchant. Who, in this whirl of hundreds of lives and happenings, would wonder about three people, gardeners perhaps, making their way up to a roof terrace? Who?

As soon as Lahoon reached the roof, he ducked down into the greenery, Unleha and Amalai straight at his heels. Panting, tense, the three intruders crouched behind their covers and waited to see if anyone would show up to accost them.

Wind rustled lightly in the dark, shiny leaves of potted trees. The rich scent of blossoms wafted across the terrace. Lahoon leaned back against the wall and exhaled, looking up into the verdancy above him, and the bits of cloudy sky shining through.

Finally, Unleha crept out. "This seems to have worked," Unleha murmured. "Well done." She gave Lahoon a hearty clap on the back.

"So now what?"

Plants were all around them, basking in the heat, letting a thin veil of moisture evaporate into the air. Marble figurines idled between the leaves and a few white chairs of elaborately wrought iron.

Unleha and Amalai walked up to the huge statue in the center of the terrace, allowing themselves to be dwarfed by its imposing enormity. A ferocious warrior king, his face drawn and his stance imperious, raised a threatening sword into the sky. His whole posture invited cowering at his feet, looking up in admiration of strength or of raw brutality. One of the many statues that had once dominated the squares of Yurvania and been dismantled after the Transition. Whatever the reason why this one had ended up in a private garden rather than a museum or, indeed, a cauldron, here it was: an oversized king, a larger-than-life statue from the olden days.

The brass had gone green with age. Lahoon ran a hesitant hand over it as he stepped up from behind. "His cloak has been patched," he murmured. "Very skillfully. It has lasted him through the centuries like that."

"Patched?" Unleha came up beside him. Lahoon pointed. Among the folds falling down the king's back to the ground, a large extra rectangle of metal had been put in, maybe to repair a broken spot. Or maybe not to repair a broken spot.

Unleha stepped up close. She carefully ran a hand over the edges. "It's not welded fast," she murmured. "Not really." She began to gently pull and tug at the extra piece. A hollow sound rang out as she tentatively rapped against it. Unleha looked up and down the length of the patch. She ran her fingernails underneath the rim. And found the latch.

With a clank, the metal piece fell to the ground at Unleha's feet. She froze. Nobody spoke. They all stared into the hollow darkness that opened before them, inside the looming statue, under the cover of the king's age-old cloak.

Lahoon poked his head in. "Uuuhaaho," he sang, softly at first. His question echoed inside the empty king, frightening spiders, stirring up dust. Musty air moved around unwillingly, sending defiant wafts of staleness toward the intruder.

"Hugheehee," Lahoon amended, but the echo gave him no welcome. Instead, it sent him a reproach. A threat. A warning.

An eerie feeling took hold of Lahoon.

He quickly withdrew his head. "You are long dead!" he scoffed up at the brazen king defiantly. But, nevertheless, he backed away with his shoulders drawn. His eyes were stormy, unsettled. Lahoon shuffled his feet as he turned around to face his companions. "This is a perfect hiding place," he muttered reluctantly. "There even are little chinks and holes here and there, to let you look out." Lahoon crossed his arms over his chest. "But I still don't think we should go in there. Not even one of us."

"No, indeed we should not." Unleha had a triumphant look on her face. "And there is a very clear reason why."

*

Unleha, Amalai and Lahoon were lying in a tight squeeze behind a line of flowery bushes, their bodies pressed up against each other in the narrow gap between large terra-cotta planters and the far wall of the terrace. It was way too hot for comfort, huddled up like that on the sunbaked roof, but it could not be helped. At least they were lying down, and that was one reason why they had chosen this spot. They would be able to stay there for hours on end without their feet giving in. Without showing even the slightest little bit of a waver that might give their presence away.

Sweat was running down in brilliant pearls over their skin, binding them together like glistening summer glue. If the being that was to come for them had any proper sense of smell, Lahoon thought laconically, they could not have announced their position more clearly.

But it was only a human they were hiding from. For now, at least.

A scraping sound came from across the terrace, and they all froze, their bodies going rigid as one. They listened intently. The sound came again and turned into something recognizable. Footsteps. Moving across the terrace, halting, moving on. Halting again.

Behind the row of bushes, three people were holding their breaths. Packed in tightly, they waited, tense and alert.

A short, hard click sounded. And then a scraping of metal against metal. Scrambling, clanking. A muttered oath, with a hollow echo. And metal scraping back over metal, again. Then silence.

Three tensed lungs breathed out as one. Three bodies relaxed. Only Unleha's large brown eyes spoke. 'Told you so!' they said, rolling with emphasis and smug satisfaction. 'Of course he would go in there. Pramus the Magnificent. He would go into an oversized, empty statue of a king. Into a hollow symbol of pride based on violence. No place more suitable, more like him.'

* * *

Rebonya surveilled the growing crowd around her, temporarily dropping out of the conversation. The street corner where she and Kortid were standing guard was not a particularly busy one. A minor town square, with children running around and a few people singing in the shade of a tree. Neighbors sitting on the porch, having a chat while carving spoons or peeling beans. A few folks on their way to the cobbler's or the bakery. There was a bit of commotion all the time. A small comfy crowd coming and going. But it was nothing like the plaza. Or the horse market.

At first Rebonya had been terribly upset about being stationed in such a remote corner, endlessly far removed from Gureev's spot, destined to miss it all. No chance of even catching a glimpse, sneaking over for a bit, or maybe joining in at the crucial moment when it would all come to an end, explode or implode.

Rebonya wanted to be there, very much. She shifted restlessly on her feet. But then again. Her gaze roamed over the people before her. Maybe, just maybe, she had in fact ended up where it was all happening tonight. Kortid was making a good job of it.

"There never was a demon in the forest," Kortid repeated. "I was mistaken. And I am sorry. But I spoke in good faith, and I had reason to believe, at the time."

A few people had stopped at first, to talk to him and to hear his story. Then the sight of the small group of listeners had caused others to come over, to see what was happening. People on the fringes began explaining to the newcomers in low voices. Conversations budded out of this like blossoming offshoots, tender sprouts branching off the main storytelling to one side or the other. People were moving out to talk, or farther in to hear.

"I found Hun's dead body in the forest," Kortid was saying. "And there really was a shadow crouching over him in the darkness. But I know now who that was. I have met the man. He lives alone, in the mountains. He was there, and he slunk away, but he did not kill Hun. And he is not a demon. He never was a danger."

A stout man sidled away from the group and went over to the bench under the trees, with a tale to tell his neighbors.

"I have no idea," Kortid replied to a question, "why that dark creature showed up at the bath palace. Like the continuation of a story that had never truly begun in the first place."

This had been going on for quite a while. And was growing and growing, with no sign of slowing down. New people were coming in at

a slow but steady pace. Joining, moving on, telling others. Which brought in yet another round of curious onlookers. Causing Kortid to repeat his story. Their little crowd held its corner, calmly but animatedly.

“You know there’s a vote being held on this right now?” Kortid asked. “Tomorrow is the last day.”

Rebonya looked around, trying to think of a way to make it a little less obvious what was happening. She could not think of anything. It was quite conspicuous. Which was the secret of their success, in a way. It also meant that, by the morrow if not before, Berqar would know.

50

Rain was pouring down over Behrlem, drenching the town, flooding the lanes. Washing over a fancy mansion in the old horse market, and over three bodies pressed up closely against each other by the hind wall of the rooftop garden.

They let the water soak their clothes, run down their bodies, mingle with the sweat and the dust on their skin. They felt cool puddles form underneath their chests, little trickles of water flow across the ground by their chins.

They blinked. They breathed. They never made another move, never a sound to betray their presence.

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When the rain had passed, the world was restored to new. Evening lights were glowing softly in a wide, open sky, with golden streaks of cloud dressed ceremoniously over dove gray and lavender.

Gureev stood guard atop the mansion, his body poised, his strides measured as he walked up and down the length of the balustrade. His eyes swept over the ambling crowd down on the square, then back up to the potted trees of the terrace, to the dark leaves and sweetly scented blossoms. To the lifeless king towering above him. Gureev's heart was beating a low, steady rhythm, strained with anticipation. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword as he turned another round of the terrace, took up position one more time at the end of the balustrade.

And then it came.

A wind, a hush. An eerie sound.

Everyone froze. The square lay silent, paralyzed. Then all heads turned toward the roof of the mansion, where a huge flame of dark purple shot up with a sizzle. At its base, shadowy figures emerged and obscured the flame as their smoky presence grew ever stronger, ever denser. Finally, all the figures drew together and fell inward, bowing down before a huge shape that emerged in the middle of the flame. That black creature reared up with a deafening roar, tilting its head back to bear fangs of fire, sharp and enormous.

But people were ready this time. "Illusion! Illusion!" was the happy refrain that rang through the square. Almost everybody seemed to have joined in, a huge mass of people swaying together in defiance and derision, in a melody of mockery.

But then lightning struck. From the heights of the heavens, a searing crack split open the ether to bear down right into the heart of the apparition. The demon flared up in excruciating brightness, rising to twice its size, a white flame, a vicious fiend screaming rage like a hell-born avenger. Flickering heat now making up all of its body, the demon reached down into the ring of flames at its feet and threw a blazing ball of fire down into the square. And another, and another, hurtling hell and destruction out into the world, onto the singing crowd.

People shouted and ducked, fleeing the impact of the blazing balls as they rolled down the sloping square. Then a fireball hit one of the market stalls and exploded. The wooden hut went up in flames. Real flames.

People screamed. They ran. They frantically searched for loved ones, pulled the injured to safety, fought the fire. They stared up to the roof terrace in horror and dread, fearful of what might come next. No one was singing "Illusion!" anymore.

Gureev clenched his teeth. Beads of sweat had formed on his brow. But there was no way out now. The demon towered above him, bright, huge, flaming.

Gureev bowed. In a solemn and respectful gesture, as one opponent before another in an ancient ritual of combat, Gureev inclined his head. Then he raised his sword in that one familiar move, the only choreography they had ever practiced with their swords of light. The changing of the guard.

A live statue of molten iron, white at its core, smoldering red in its body, the demon loomed like a leviathan, like an invincible colossus rising over the city. Gureev stood, a tiny black figure at its feet. But the bright blue beam of the sword rose up high, a beacon reaching straight for the power of the heavens.

Tilting back its head, the demon gave an ear-splitting roar. It spread huge bat-like wings and made to descend toward the square just as Gureev brought around his sword, blocking its path. The demon staggered back. Its howl subsided into a rumbling growl before it rose up again with added fury, a thunderous cry of attack. Wings folded back, the demon bore down headfirst at the small shape of Gureev.

Gureev stood on the edge of the terrace, clearly visible in the glow of the demon's fire. His graceful body moved without hesitation, his black

skin gleaming with the red-gold of flames, his strong arms wielding the sword of light. A deep force flowed through him as he turned his sword, inviting the demon to step into the space Gureev had opened up by his side. And it did. As a fang of white-hot iron hit the terrace beside him, Gureev whirled around and swung his blade back in a low, wide bow. The demon rose, floating above the cut for a moment, before it bore down again. In a seamless sequence of attack and retreat, the apparition moved straight into whatever opening Gureev left unguarded, withdrew before his blade, came back after his parries.

As if in a dream, Gureev followed the learned ritual, the hero's ballet of the fearless guard, leading into a dance with the fiendish fire. And he survived.

But then he came to the end of his liturgy. Drawing up his sword in the final salute, the terminal gesture of his ritual, he halted. And in the fleeting moment of hesitation while Gureev sought his way back to the beginning, the end came.

A shadow appeared beside Gureev, way outside the demon's circle. It enveloped Gureev in darkness, and vanished again in a heartbeat. But Gureev was no longer the same.

He lowered his sword, let it fall to the ground.

And then, his head held high, his arms open wide, he walked toward the towering demon.

People gasped. The whole square seemed frozen in horror, in disbelief.

The demon roared and raged, his scream deafening, hungry claws drawing sparks over the ground.

Gureev strode on like a dreamer, an entranced pilgrim, a sacrificial offering.

His graceful figure stood outlined against the ring of fire at the demon's feet.

Flames licked up over Gureev's body.

Then they swallowed him whole.

Instantly, the light became brilliant, blinding. A radiant sun enveloped the rooftop, warm and glorious, spreading its unbearable brightness over the scene.

People in the square shielded their eyes, arms raised protectively.

When they were able to squint out again, the demon had gone. The statue of the old king shone like a guiding star. And before it, staff raised high and robes billowing, the mage hovered in a globe of fading sunlight, an apparition of power and glory.

Utter silence reigned.

In the last gleam of embers, Gureev became visible, erect, graceful. Unharmd. He had walked into the demon and survived.

Slowly, the mage advanced toward Gureev, with the poise of an old master come to judge his disciple. Or a king ready to knight the hero. With regal solemnity, Pramus raised a hand and brought it down on Gureev's brow, in an acquittal, a benediction.

However, behind the mage's back, something else happened.

Pramus did not see.

But he was the only one.

The whole square was looking up to the terrace, where a black figure rose in the last glow of hellfire. And then another, and another. Right in the heart of the dying inferno, of the vanquished demon, stood three ordinary people, present, alive, vibrant in a space where no human should have been able to exist. An impossible presence. A miracle of undoing.

"We stand tall, amidst lights and glimmer! The fireballs were real, but the demon never was!" Unleha shouted over the rim of a small traption as she leaned out over the balustrade. Her voice carried as loudly and clearly as only magic would allow. Everybody heard her.

Including Pramus.

He spun around.

In an instant, the demon was back, pitch and fire hiding Unleha from view, and deafening thunder smothering all sounds in the square.

People ducked and covered their ears. Their eyes were fixed on the fiery fiend above them, on the flames that had swallowed up Unleha.

But the spell was broken. The moment had been too strong to be undone. After Gureev's unscathed survival, this had topped it off. Songs of "Illusion! Illusion!" were rising up again, even under the cover of thunder.

Then, in the midst of the raging demon, rays of light appeared, so strong they could be seen even through the smoke and fire. Bright blue swords, merrily waving back and forth across the demon's body, reaching from its feet right up into its head, straight through the heart. Having no effect whatsoever.

The blue beam turned to light up Unleha's grinning face, her waving arm.

Belatedly, the demon gave an anguished cry. It cringed beneath the swords, writhing and distorting in agony. With an ear-splitting scream, it drifted away in a wisp of smoky remains.

But it was too late. People in the square were already laughing and booing. Singing, more and more fervently. Pointing fingers at the

vanquished would-be demon, and at Unleha waving down at them with her blue light beam. At the mage in the background, briefly caught in another spotlight as Amalai stepped up to talk to him.

People on the square found their power again. Songs of "Illusion! Illusion!" pulsed on through the night, strong and rhythmical, like a heartbeat. Their chant went on loud and clear, proclaiming its certainty, its outrage, its force. And finally, its knowing, its relief.

As the voices eased and the fervor died down, the gentle sound of a lute began to weave itself into their melody. It played along for a while, grateful and gracious. Then Lahoon spoke, in a soft voice, briefly telling of the vote being held tomorrow.

And then he burst into song again, a tune so well known that many in the crowd joined in right away. It was one of the big hymns of the Transition: "The Ballad of the Soldier Boy." Who had grown weary and doubtful. Distrustful of a system that had claimed merit his dedication but has only used and abused him. The soldier boy who did not believe in war anymore. Who was longing for home, and a life. And so, when the call to arms came, he just walked away.

"He just walked away." A hundred voices echoed Lahoon's refrain as people in the square laughed and cried, shaking their heads and hugging, filled with the energy of inexorable resolution, with triumphant clarity.

It was the last day. When the rain had ceased and the lights were fading in an evening sky, the county house closed and counted the votes. It took a while. But they did not recount, this time. It was not close. It was very clear.

The soldiers were out.

Unleha tilted her head back and whooped to make the place rock.

* * *

Unleha's family homestead was humming with the spirit of celebration. The low, steady sounds of contentment and relaxation, of animated conversation, jokes and clinking glasses filled the air. The moon had returned, a slim silver sickle in the sky, with a few clouds shuffling decoratively before it, playing coy games of hide-and-seek with the shifting light. Lahoon had stretched out in a hammock, talking to Unleha's mother. A burst of laughter drifted over to them from somewhere near the buffet. The evening flowed on easily, like a gentle, natural release, a homey, unaffected communion.

But as improvised as the party was overall, there were some structured parts to it. Some planned surprises.

Rebonya watched intently as Konelle crouched down in a corner outside her trabarn and readied the polished wooden case of a traption, a crystal-tipped wand in her hand and an intense gleam in her eyes. At her touch, the case jerked, and a sizzle ran through the air, like a little crackle of lightning, a beginning, a forbearance. And then the wonder broke loose spectacularly, in all the colors of magic. Bright stars filled the sky, swirled and danced in jubilation before softly drifting down in fading rivers of light.

Only a gentle glow of gold remained, and it descended like a luminous cloud over just one person, one woman standing halfway across the courtyard. Unleha.

The assembled crowd began to cheer. Unleha looked perplexed. Then she caught on, and joined in the game. Still enveloped in the angelic aura,

she climbed onto a chair and, her face raised up high, her eyes out in the distance, let her arm point to the moon, or toward the impending golden future, as any good freedom fighter would. Her black skin was shining in the unreal light, her voice compelling, visionary, imperative. The sound of triumph, of righteousness. The people's voice.

"Friends and comrades! The road was long, but the race is run. Goodness has won, as fate decreed. Behrlem is a civil town! Behrlem is free!! And will remain so, forever and ever!!" Unleha's call rang out loud and clear, duly echoed, as it must be, by the exuberant jubilation of the crowd.

At this point Unleha's boisterous horde of lovers and family took over. With loud cries of "Viva! Viva!" they hoisted Unleha onto their shoulders, a thickly packed throng of adults, plus children unable to reach up that high but contributing all the more enthusiastic energy to the adventure. They carried Unleha around on bumpy and uncertain rounds until they sank down into a disorderly heap of arms and legs on the garden's meadow. Excitedly, all the remaining children ran up and threw themselves atop that mound. Kissing and laughing and wriggling and shouting, the human hill bubbled like a live volcano, or like a chocolate pudding about to boil. Finally, it began to ease out, to spill into pairs and threesomes on one side or the other, into people finding their breath and their own hands and feet again. Unleha lay in the middle, gasping and beaming, her limbs still entangled in her lovers', her body covered with children. "You maniacs," she wheezed. "I love you. I love you. And I love living here. I really do."

* * *

The silver moon had waxed into a full round disc that stood all alone over the dark outline of the mountains. Lahoon smacked his lips at the taste of the creamy melon liqueur Unleha had brought over and leaned back luxuriously against the cushions and the terrace wall, his skin shimmering an inviting midnight blue.

"Did you know that Dorarin, the heart of the recourses, and a deliberator arrived in the square right away that night, even before the demon had vanished? They will have examined the traces the fireballs left. And will give all they found to the conciliators. Or the court of deliberation, should it ever come to that."

Amalai dipped the edge of a melon cube into her liqueur and licked it dry with unabashed pleasure, biting into the juicy fruit at the very end. "Do you think it will?"

Lahoon shrugged. "It might. People have been injured. It is a serious

matter. Pramus has truly been taking chances with people's lives. And he is not doing well at conciliation meetings."

Unleha scoffed. "No. He says it was all a demon, true and for real. And he himself is the martyr hero, stoned by the very people he has saved. The powerful mage, wronged by petty fools. The lone wise one, understanding ancient powers, understood by no one."

Lahoon snorted. "Pramus even tells his stories in the face of the people who got burned." Lahoon shook his head. "Some have already refused to meet him."

"Yes, but others meet him anyway. Because it creates space for them to give Pramus a piece of their mind. And to get it off their chests that way." Amalai poured the rest of her melon liquor over a scoop of white and creamy dessert. "Still, conciliation is meant for people willing to take some responsibility for their actions. So I guess Pramus will be called to a court of deliberators in the end. Where decisions can be made even without his consent."

Lahoon swirled the drink in his glass, nodding slowly. "So that's Pramus. And Tenatetlan is gone. Seeing as how she's a peddler, bound to roam the countryside to sell her wares." His jaw tightened. "But what about Berqar?"

Unleha raised her eyebrows. "Berqar has nothing to do with it. What makes you think she might? She was not up there on the roof, after all, was she? She is not involved in anything to do with a demon or a fire."

Lahoon locked eyes with Unleha for a long moment. Then he dropped his gaze. His hair fell into his face as he hung his head, leaning heavily onto his thighs.

"Do not despair," Amalai said, resting her head against his shoulder. "Berqar will have consequences to bear. And, even better, the whole garrison will. The legitimacy of the entire system is at as low a point as it has ever been. Both with the citizens and with the soldiers themselves. There will be ramifications."

Lahoon shook his head in a slow, sorrowful motion. "Berqar has not even lost her position."

"No. But she has lost power. You'll see. She should lose her position, of course, but as long as someone else comes to fill it again, there is no real change. Now, however, the system will wither away from underneath her. People will withdraw their faith and walk away. And then any position is just an empty shell."

"The scrutinizer for learning pavilions is coming to the garrison again." Rebonya's brows went up in surprise as she read the notice. "To inform cadets about the procedures for signing up to another learning pavilion."

Kortid stepped up behind her. "Yes. I asked her to."

Rebonya spun around, her eyes widening even more. "You did?"

Kortid nodded. "Through the box beside the kitchen. You know. Where we were supposed to leave messages on anything abusive or irregular. Dangerous types of correction. That kind of thing."

Kortid ran a hand through his hair. "I figured we could use it to request other things, too. And I felt we needed this. Information."

Leaning lightly against the wall with one shoulder, Kortid began to draw questioning half circles into the air with his other arm. "At the moment, no one knows how to leave, exactly. How to find a place in another pavilion. Are there any? Would that be in Behrlem? Or elsewhere? And where would we live? We sleep in the garrison, after all. In order to leave here, we need not only another learning pavilion, but also a place to stay. A home. So. It all seems rather daunting. And unclear. Who to ask? How to go about it?"

Kortid turned toward Rebonya again. "So I asked the scrutinizer to come and explain it to us. To everyone. And once people know that it is possible to leave here, how to do it and where to go—well. They can make their own decision."

By now the grin on Rebonya's face had reached both her ears. "Brilliant!" She slapped Kortid on the back. "Just brilliant." She looked at him approvingly. "You can be really good, I have to say."

She rubbed her hands together. "Information is one thing. Seeing half of your friends getting ready to leave is yet another. So here, one thing will come to another, at a time when people have just been disappointed by the system to the point of losing faith completely."

Rebonya rocked back on her heels slightly. "You've found the sweet spot, Kortid. For change, we do not just need dissatisfaction. It's when we see an alternative that we begin to move." Rebonya pursed her lips. "There might be quite a change between this year and next, in the famous old Diamondtip School of Cadets. A place to go to is what brings forth the path! And the spirit of travel."

* * *

"Yes. Oh yes!" A smile began to creep into Kortid's eyes, slowly lighting up his whole face until he positively beamed at Gureev and Rebonya, happily and still somewhat timidly. "I would love to! Going to Varoonya

with both of you is much, much better than anything I expected. Or dared dream of.”

They were walking along the little stream behind the garrison grounds, where it formed the border between Behrlem town and the realm of forests and mountains. Above their heads, the huge copper pipe rose up high, like a giant snake arching her body to let three little pilgrims pass, journeying from one world to another. Kortid felt somewhat dwarfed. But he stepped through bravely, his mind on the future.

“You will go to the Academy of Magical Arts?”

“Yes.” Rebonya nodded. Then she fretted, squinting back over hunched shoulders toward the walls they had left behind, the dark garrison towers. “If Berqar does not expel me at the last minute, to make sure I don’t have the seal I need for admission to the academy. I just hope she does not hit on the idea, even while she is looking around for someone to vent her anger on.”

Rebonya faced forward again, wrapping her arms firmly around her chest and adding an extra spring to her step.

Kortid linked arms with Gureev. “And you?”

Gureev’s free hand came up before his chest in a lithe, elegant move, an open question. “I do not know, really. I feel somewhat disoriented. After everything.”

Rebonya glanced over at him, a crooked smile in the corner of her mouth. “Well, at least you have found your calling.”

Gureev turned to her, wide-eyed. “I have?”

“You haven’t noticed? Don’t tell me.” Rebonya winked at him. “All right, let’s say one of your callings. You may be a man of many talents, who knows.” Her eyes twinkled. “But with everything that has happened, with you and me and Kortid and the demon, it has certainly become clear that you are extremely good at being a friend. Able to listen, and even able to hear. Able to stick around, patiently, reliably. Including for people who are having a hard time, or who may not be particularly easy to get along with.”

She slapped Gureev on the back. “You’ve got good shoulders. Shoulders to lean on. Plus sensitive ears and a warm heart.” And she flung her arms around him for a long, smothering hug.

Early dawn was quiet, full of mists and mellowness. Even the birds seemed to be hushed, singing in low voices, their rare calls weaving in softly between the silent waves of fog gliding over the meadows.

Kortid had gone out the back door of the garrison yard, over the little bridge and up along the edge of the forest. White wraiths danced and disappeared gracefully between the trunks of the trees, waving bodiless fingers at Kortid, inviting him to step into their woods, into their world. All the leaves and bushes were clothed in a muted shimmer, a subdued sparkle of moisture. At Kortid's feet, tiny crystal balls glistened on the grass, drawing dim light into their bodies to wink a gentle sheen at him as he passed.

Kortid came to a halt when the meadow before him turned into a mesmerizing landscape of pools and paddies. The giant copper snake of the bath palace opened her mouth before him. But she did not spew out fragrant waters at this hour. All was quiet.

Kortid turned, and from the shadows deep within the woods a dark figure emerged, slowly coming toward him.

Kortid smiled.

*

"Will I see you again?"

Verlem stood beside the still pool, his outline reflected in the water.

"Do you still need me?"

"No." Kortid hesitated. "Yes." He looked down into the liquid mirror before him. "I do not need you anymore in the way that I did. I have been freed of my fear, of my panic. I can sleep without help, and I can live. So it is very good. And I thank you." Hazy mists drifted across the surface of the pond. "I am not suffering. And I do not need that kind of rescue anymore."

Kortid turned toward Verlem. "But I would like to see you again. You are precious to me. You will always have my gratitude." His voice was very low. "And my adoration." Blueish reeds stood straight and silent in the pool below, in worship of dawn, or in pure natural presence.

"You still are an angel to me, somehow."

The veils drew back from the sky above and light poured forth through an opening crack, a radiant brightness of whitish gold. Two or three basins lit up a gleaming silver in response. Verlem found Kortid's gaze, held it with his deep, quiet eyes.

Finally, he gave a nod, a small, almost imperceptible gesture of acquiescence. "I will travel with you when you go. I will follow you, unseen, through the paths of cosmos." Verlem stood very still, and the invisible ways of the cosmos seemed to be swirling around him in gauzy tendrils of glimmer and darkness. Kortid's breathing was shallow. Verlem's exotic scent mingled with a spicy, stinging fragrance rising from the pool, a breath rich and strange coming from unknown beings living underwater that showed only small, colorless blossoms above the surface.

Verlem's voice flowed on, kin to the enticing smells and the mysterious shreds of fog. "If you let me in, if you admit me to your home, the place will be known to my heart. It is open to me then, anytime. You will be just a breath away from me, even in Varoonya." Verlem made his promise, his offer. "I will come. At the rise and turn of one moon to another, I will be with you. If you want me."

Kortid's answer was no more than a whisper. "I do," he breathed. "I do." Kortid took a tiny step forward, his right hand firm and warm on his heart. With a slight bend of one knee, Kortid bowed before Verlem until he could reach a finger underneath Verlem's palm, causing his pale, fragile hand to rise up, to turn, to open. Inclining his head with an air of veneration, Kortid cradled his cheek in the hollow of Verlem's delicate hand. A shiver ran through Kortid's blood at the touch, a sparkling of starlight, of otherness, of wonder mingling into his gratitude and reverence.

He stepped back, straightening up.

In the pool beside him, the tiny limbs of a young frog made the softest of circles ripple out over the waters, letting muted pastels of gray and whitish blue converse and melt away.

A thought floated back into Kortid's mind. His words found Verlem among the quiet mists. "When you come . . . Gureev will be with me. We will be living together. So you could be nourished by both of us on those nights."

Verlem stood very still, not making a move. Finally, his voice came out, as thin and ethereal as the morning mists. "Nourished." His dark eyes sought Kortid's, sensing, listening. His question was a mere breath.

"Are you offering?"

Kortid looked perplexed, and then a little shy.

“Yes. Of course.” He cleared his throat cautiously, the sound unwilling to disturb the lingering hush of dawn. “Now that I know there is no harm in it, why wouldn’t I? How could I not?”

His voice was soft as he gazed down on the ground. “It will not be like last time. I am sure of it. I will be calm. Even if I may still feel a memory of fear well up. But it will bring the memory of healing with it, too. A reminder that change is possible. And that trust may be well-founded. Even more well-founded than fear.”

Kortid’s lips held a lopsided smile. “And it is quite possible I may need such reminders in my life. To have an angel come and bring that knowing back to me, whenever I fall into doubt or anxiety again. Which I suspect I might, with whatever else life is still to bring to me.”

A waft of haze touched the blades fringing the pools, causing shimmering pearls and dull tears to trickle down their sides. Kortid raised his eyes to meet Verlem’s. “So please. Do come. And find nourishment in me. I will be glad if you would. Glad both for what you will bring to me in that sharing, and for what I can give to you.”

Verlem held his gaze for a long moment. Then he inclined his head, a tiny, subdued movement, a gesture of awe, of gratitude, of acceptance.

This time, the party at Unleha's place looked a lot more organized. The trabarn gang had made a visible effort to clear the courtyard of the landscape of orange peel. As a result, imposing mountains with sheer cliffs now towered on the side of the barn, while large orange-free plains, which were not even sticky, admitted party guests to all other areas.

The place was crowded, and full of music and laughter. Kortid had revealed himself to be an enthusiastic dancer and had succeeded in teaching a whole company some absurdly complicated circle dance that involved much kicking and screaming and, at least in the beginning, much bumping and falling over. Now Kortid was allowing himself to be guided into the mysteries of couple dancing in Gureev's suave and experienced arms.

Rebonya had straight away sought shelter from all that madness behind the buffet, where, fortunately, she ran into Konelle, who was delighted to have a new eager face listen to her tales of the orange-juice trabarn. Rebonya herself was in heaven. Before long, the two of them discreetly slunk away from the party for a tour of the trabarn, plus a little demonstration and a discussion of the gang's decision-making tree. Plus one short easy task that they could quickly see to while they were out here, and another one that emerged from the first.

Seeing them emerge only halfway from the barn door, Unleha rolled her eyes and let a knowing grin spread from one ear to the other.

Then she climbed onto a soapbox and banged a ladle against a pot. All heads turned. The music eased down to a gentle hum underlining her speech. "Dearest guests! I have the honor tonight of presenting you with several happy announcements on behalf of our little community."

She raised a finger. "Firstly, despite everyone's very best efforts, the prospering orange-juice trabarn has not swallowed up our entire home yet."

The music gave a jubilant little fanfare while all the trabarn folks booed and yelled and protested. Unleha gleefully ignored them and went on.

“Secondly, one part of the still unoccupied buildings, namely that old barn over there”—she pointed—“has been dedicated to the most worthy of causes. In this time of need, it will provide shelter and refuge to any soldier ready to leave the garrison in a hurry. Unfortunately, making that barn a truly homey place will yet involve a lot of hard work, but we have—and here my good news of the evening culminates triumphantly—finally found someone who is mulish enough to take all of that on. Plus, intelligent enough to be a brilliant support to all ex-soldiers who are wondering where to find work or what to do next. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you: Johalen!!!”

Unleha announced him like the star of the year. Johalen waved and nodded modestly, but the music swelled and the little crowd put up such an exaggerated roar that Johalen finally gave in and laughed, raising his clasped hands over his head to greet left and right like some champion at a log-throwing competition.

Rebonya whistled quietly through her teeth. “My word,” she breathed, taking a step closer to Konelle. “You’ve really got it going. A lot of people in the garrison trust Johalen. He was popular, as a lieutenant. And now if there is a place to stay, and Johalen to help you move on—that is a real alternative. I am sure quite a number of soldiers will actually leave. Now that they have a place to go.”

* * *

The morning air was fresh and glorious, and the birds could not have imagined a better way to start the day. They had been shouting loud approval and exhilarated welcome long before the rise of dawn, sharing their elation with Amalai when she stepped out into sunrise and glistening dewdrops in her herbary.

Engrossed in her conversations with soft tendrils and rich, fragrant soil, with fading blossoms and ripening seeds, Amalai was only pulled from the depth of her absorption when a gentle sound began to weave its way into her mind. A lute. Just a few aimless, easy sounds, floating loosely through the air, calling for her. She smiled. Brushing off her knees, she made for the house.

Lahoon was shimmering green and azure, still entangled in sheets and sleepy dreams on their mat out on the terrace, only half awake. His dark eyes opened just wide enough to shine at Amalai with pleasure and welcome as she let her gown slip off her body and came in underneath the sheets. Lahoon was warm, tousled and cozy, and gave a little grunt of surprise as her cool limbs full of garden and morning settled in beside

him. But he decided he liked it, and snuggled up more closely. He dug his face into the soft dark curls of her head.

Amalai could feel him smile, and his skin rub against hers in a gentle caress. He began to hum softly, aimless sounds playing in his throat, on his tongue.

Amalai breathed in Lahoon's presence as she had breathed in the scent of flowers and earth. His smooth limbs touched her body, caressed her skin, nourished her soul. His melodious voice washed over her like the ripples on a lake lapping quietly ashore, unhurriedly, unceasingly, their motion only deepening the peace and the calm. Contentedly, she let her lips graze over the side of his neck, the curve of his shoulder. She pulled the sheet down to his waist, allowing his velvety skin to shimmer in hues of turquoise and azure in the morning light. Her hand traced butterfly patterns over his skin, touching softly, barely, with just a breath of a caress. Her lips moved down to his chest. As her hand slid to pull the sheet off his thigh, feeling the long, smooth, tender shape of his legs, Lahoon's music began to change. Groaning with a deep sound of approval, he stretched and let his hands savor the round curves of Amalai's body, his lips meeting hers until the moans of pleasure and gasps of desire breaking forth from his throat were the only song left in the world.

Lahoon was lying sprawled on his back in the light of the morning sun, warm and spent. His hair pooled around his head in charming disarray, a riddle of confused little rivers running playfully around each other instead of straight on to the sea. Scents and fragrances came to them on a shifting breeze, carrying tales of garden herbs and mountain flowers, of a comfy home and a big wide world.

Amalai had sunk down onto Lahoon's chest, feeling him breathe, savoring the warm caress of the sun on her back. Her fingers idly traced the beauty of cerulean seas and mossy ferns on Lahoon's shoulder as she hummed softly, or purred, perhaps, almost inaudibly. Her eyes half-closed, Amalai let her gaze travel through the open door of the studio, over the warm hue of the polished floor, the fantastical beasts gazing back out at her from the canvas.

Then her eyes focused, and her smile deepened. So did the shadows between the easels. Amalai stretched out her hand. "Verlem," she murmured, her voice low and sensuous in the back of her throat. "Come."

Verlem stepped out of the darkness and approached them, in small, timid steps. He knelt down beside Lahoon, his pale skin shining like a fading silver moon in the morning sky.

Lahoon turned his head, his eyes still deep with pleasure. “Welcome,” he murmured, a slow, luscious smile in his voice. He reached for Verlem’s hand gently and brought it to his lips. Lahoon kissed the fragile fingers, then let them run over his skin in a soft, tender touch, coming to rest on his chest, where Amalai covered Verlem’s thin white hand with her own.

“My lover, my teacher,” Lahoon breathed. “Come. Come to explore the wonders of the animal world with us. The wonders of fay. The wonders of love, and of magic.”

He looked up at Verlem. “Will you, now?” he pleaded, beckoning.

Verlem gave them a secret smile, a quiet, hidden light in the depth of deep, dark eyes, shining out like a promise, like a hidden portal.

“I will.”

Lahoon’s voice spoke of fairy-tale marvels, of ethereal mysteries, of journeys beyond imagination. “So this is the beginning?”

“Yes.”

~ ~ ~ The Beginning ~ ~ ~

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The Charms of Freedom

The sky seemed to stretch endlessly overhead, a pale blue and gold over the darkening highlands.

Enim was trembling slightly.

"They are children."

His jaw was tight. The tension of the last days had been building up inside him. His voice was too loud, and too shaky.

"Why are they not in a learning pavilion?"

Kaya gave him a sidelong glance. "Why are there no healers in in Shebbetin? No pavilions for the children? No contact points to the outside world?"

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 happened forty years ago! And this is what it was all about! A good life for all, not just a few. We did it! We know it is possible. So how can it not have happened here?"

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

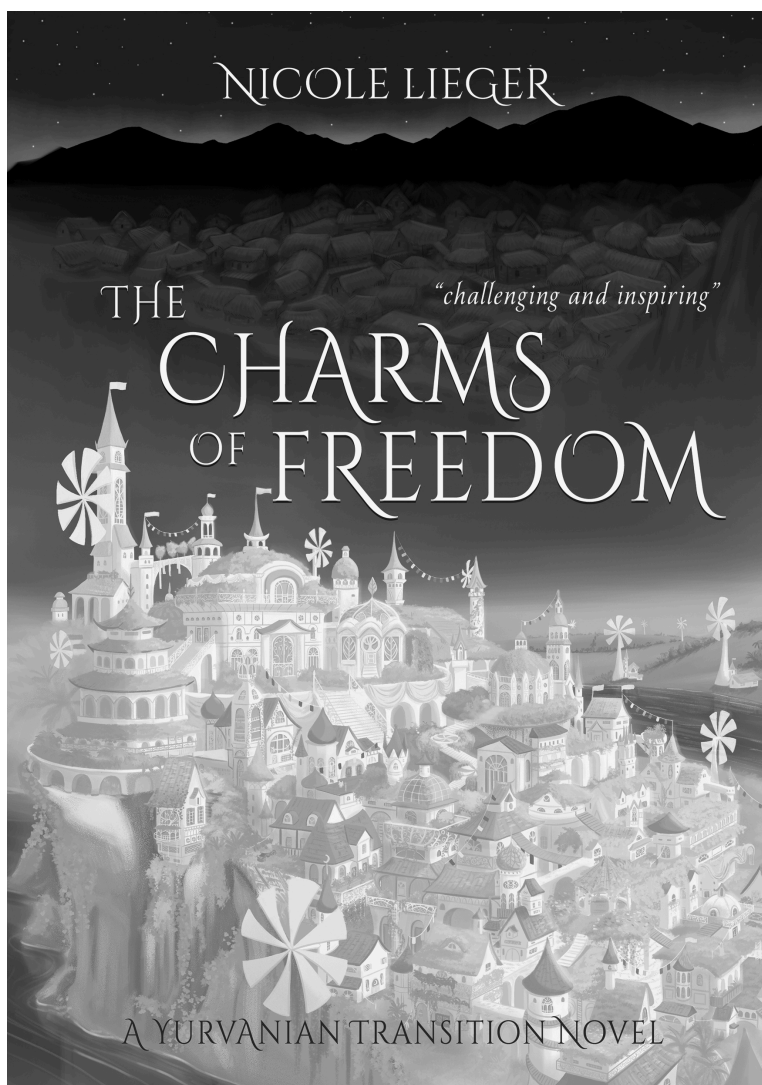
"Yes, what?" Enim screamed. He was lost in an accusatory rage by now, viciously defending the basic foundation stones of his beliefs.

"This cannot be! It is not possible that a whole area of Yurvania, with thousands of people, is not included in the Transition! 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 of this. And people and bureaus to implement them. There is no reason for not making this right. It can be done. It must be done!"

His hand clenched into a fist.

"Now."



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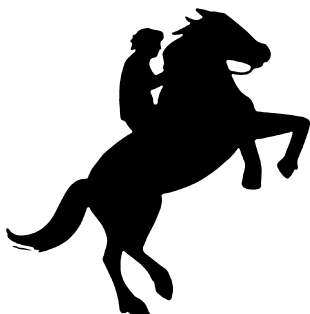
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About the Author

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.

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