

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
and a list of characters
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 still streaked with gold, but under the canopy of ancient trees, shadows reined. Amalai let a velvety blossom fall into her palm. Crouched among the ferns, she breathed in moist forest air and the cloying scent of 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 teased 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, and how to coax their disturbing essence into a vial. She sighed contentedly as another colorless blossom fell into her hand. Just one or two more, she thought. The rest she would leave.

But then a distant rustle made her ears prick up. She ducked into the ferns as heavy footsteps drew near, crunching leaves and twigs beneath them. Amalai's eyes narrowed, and between the black trunks she could just make out three figures breaking carelessly through the undergrowth.

Silently, she crept forward.

They were cadets, holding on to some kind of barrow as they hurried back to the Diamondtip garrison. They quickly reached the edge of the forest, where a meadow led down to the back of the fortress. As the cadets approached, a door in the wall of the courtyard opened, and two guards came out across the bridge to meet them. Soon, another soldier followed from inside, and another. An agitated little group had formed by the time Amalai decided to walk up 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 averted her face. But she did not leave.

The soldiers surrounding the stretcher mumbled. Some growled and cursed under their breaths, some kept pushing the cadets with their questions. Until one of them lost it.

“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 demon! It killed him, pinning him down, drinking his blood dry!”

Kortid's face was unnaturally pale, even for one as light-skinned as he, and beads of sweat formed on his brow. Some of the soldiers fell into an awkward silence. But others still tried to soothe Kortid like a sick child.

“Then check his neck! Check his neck!” Kortid screamed.

The soldiers exchanged glances, until one of them pulled back the blanket with a 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, nor slit, nor marred by any other sign of injury. The only thing visible on the snowy skin were two small red dots, right above the artery.

The soldier jerked 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 as a full-grown rumor, a tale, a suspicion. A denial and a question. Heads were shaking in the middle of deep conversations when a sudden shout came from the garrison gate. All the soldiers snapped to attention immediately.

They carried the stretcher inside.

The gate fell shut with a thump.

“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 told and retold his story of the terrible shadow he had seen in the forest. Several cadets listened with pinched faces. Others kicked the wall or cried quietly, heads in their hands. Heated arguments had broken out in various corners.

“Demons are just a fairy tale from the feudal ages!” Rebonya shook her head vigorously, sending her short black hair flying. “We’re not going to fall for that! Illusions conjured up to make people afraid and, once afraid, easy to control. Honestly!” 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 killed him!” She pointed an accusatory finger in the direction of the main fortress. “That one! The spirit of sending people into danger for no reason, calling that ‘correction’.” Rebonya’s hand clenched into a fist. “It’s just a way to hurt and humiliate people, making them ready to do onto others what they have suffered themselves.”

The other cadet drew back a notch, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at Rebonya with narrowed eyes.

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

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

* * *

“A demon.” Berqar took a few strides to the window, looking out between iron bars. The fortress lay cold and stern beneath the gathering darkness.

“A demon has appeared in the forest. And it has killed Hun.” That 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. It was a call. Berqar felt it. But she could not yet spell it out.

She looked up into the dusky sky, at streaks of crimson hanging over the towers. Slowly, meaning began to come to her.

She saw the fiendish menace hovering over the soft, helpless town of Behrlem. An inhuman darkness, a force that would kill without mercy or reprieve. An enemy like they had never seen before.

A red-hot energy rose up in Berqar. This was it. Her quest was clear, and its power pulsed through her veins like magma. She turned around, a gleam in her eye that had not been there for a long, long time. But it was back now, ready to set a world on fire.

* * *

Amalai leaned against the wall of her rooftop terrace, pulling the warm body of her lover closer to her chest. Lahoon eased into her arms. His torso was bare, leaving his butterfly skin to shimmer in hues of blue and turquoise. He looked for all the world like a fey lost in the terrene realm, but as far as any of them knew, he was as much a human as the rest of them. Yet the yearning for the otherworld ran deep within his soul, making him ready to clutch at straws. And that was how he had heard Amalai's tale.

Lahoon tilted his head back, meeting her eyes with a feverish gaze. "This may be the time. Maybe, just maybe, this is my chance to reach Fey." His voice was raw. "I will go into the forest tonight and call for the ghost, for the shadow, for whoever may be there."

His eyes were out on the horizon, where the forest lay beneath a starry sky. "I have called so often. Prayed and waited, beckoned and lured. The fey 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. "But you and I have always believed in living gently, but audaciously." The plants of the terrace rustled beside her in the language of leaves.

Amalai leaned into their comfort and squeezed Lahoon's hand. "I trust you will know how to call to that shadow in the woods. Your love for the fey 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 black trunks. There was movement all around, stirrings of wings and feet and branches, shiny eyes and twitching nostrils.

A magic 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, and to offer. So Lahoon sent his borrowed light out into the darkness without regrets. He even wanted to do more.

He listened closely. 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. Trampled grass surrounded torn branches and traces of loads pulled across the ground. Witnesses to past agitation, they all lay silent now in the black of the night. Only the muted glow of Lahoon's lantern spilled over the 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 the breath leave his body, mingling with smells of wood and sap and forest soil.

The breeze whispered in the wilting leaves around his head. Lahoon began to respond, to join in with his own rasping breath, with the sounds his own wind made as it moved through the leaves and cords in his throat. A gentle hum vibrated out, growing into a lament, a mourning that wove around the mystery of death and into the looming shadow of the fey.

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 fey he could not see. "Who are you? What is this?"

Tendrils of death still swirled over the scene. Lahoon could feel them. He leaned into their remains as he sang to the fey 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 hand 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 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 a beetle ate a leaf. Lahoon could see the leaf dying, transforming into beetle. The delicate green cells dissolved and their complex structure evaporated.

But all of the life-force remained, rearranging itself, turning itself into cells of a beetle, becoming dark eyes and shiny carapace. The beetle sniffed the air with delicate antennae and took off into the night, vim from a leaf flowing through tiny muscles that knew 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 and 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 her death. The small, furry body lay sprawled on the ground. 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 and life-force passed from one to the other. If death was the portal that allowed the fey 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 fey? "No," Lahoon whispered. "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 or 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 shimmers came together like a lintel, like the edge of a blanket Lahoon had lifted, leaving a gaping hole underneath. 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 and 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

Clad in gilded armor, Rebonya stood perfectly still beside Hun's body as his 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 his body was big as a bed and 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 all stood 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 in a low voice, but even her whisper could be heard in the utter silence of the hall. "An unimaginable peril towers 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 as we have never seen before. An evil full of bloodlust, devoid of mercy!" She let her gaze roam 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 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 crowd, 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 we will look like if we 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.

Slowly, the soldiers began to join in, as they were meant to, picking up her shouts, adding their own power until the ancient walls reverberated with furious fervor. The echo stirred up ghosts in the dungeons.

“War!! War!! War!!”

* * *

Lahoon woke. His head ached. Dreams and shadows danced across the back of his eyes. He groaned. And was answered by voices chirping, 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 danced through the treetops. With effort, Lahoon pushed himself up on one elbow. His body was stiff and sore. But Lahoon had no doubt. Despite all the images in his mind, all the pain in his weary body: He knew he had woken up in the same old forest, firmly and securely rooted in the terrene realm.

He was not in Fey. 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 roof terrace. The first rays of sun reached the neighboring bath palace, giving all its colors a soft, warm hue. Lahoon regarded the golden yolk of the walls, the muted red of tile roofs proudly tilting upward at the corners. He placed a kiss on Amalai’s curls and sighed. “It was powerful. It was magical. But it wasn’t fey.” He rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes. “Unless I have forgotten, lost consciousness.” The wind caressed his brow. “Or unless the meaning of fey is precisely this. All these wonders I do remember. Perhaps fey truly is nothing other than the magic of the terrene realm, 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, and I always have. If you feel the fey 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 distant clouds. Lahoon raked a hand through his hair. "Last night, it felt close. So close! But, no."

Amalai shifted slightly. "Well. Maybe there never was a fey in this. No demon, either. Yes, 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. His hand tightened into a fist. "That boy died. He truly died, while felling a tree under dangerous conditions, because those were his orders. His 'corrections'." Lahoon swallowed. "They risked his life like that in the garrison." His lips were pale. "Really. What kind of a place is that?"

Lahoon pushed himself up in a jerky move, pulling Amalai along onto the narrow balcony that ran around their house. He stopped where they could best see over the garrison wall into the courtyard. It was 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. His eyes grew unfocused as they wandered out into a place far beyond the fortress. Lahoon raised the flute around his neck to his lips and let out a plaintive song. 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 the balustrade. "It is not true! There is a way out. There was an exit, and we have gone through. We are out! Aren't we? The Transition has happened! How come these remnants of old spirit are still here?" He gestured angrily. "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 pointed to the west wing of the fortress. It was empty. So were many of the stables and 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 had been enormous and all courtyards full of shouting and commotion. When Diamondtip had dominated 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 and no presence in town. You and I and all citizens live 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 fortress and was suddenly seized by nausea. He felt the trouble coming out of the garrison like a thick black liquid, leaking out under doorways, running down windows, rising up like a cloud of soot 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. "I guess so." He took a deep breath. "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, flowery meadows 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 can’t 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. 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 carefully laid down a heavy tome he had been holding to his chest.

Rebonya got up to have a look. “What’s that?”

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

“Hand it in? To whom?”

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

Rebonya let out a low whistle. “Berqar is giving you private lessons. On strategy.” She put her hands on her hips. “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 thick 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 growled. “Huh. Never hope. She’ll use 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 imperious. He held her gaze. Then he swung around and picked up his book. He did not open it though, just held it in his hand, with his back turned. “You do not believe in anything,” Gureev finally said, cold reprobation in his tone.

Rebonya stiffened.

Gureev set the tome down with deliberation and came to face Rebonya. “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. "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."

All that about her parents 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 waved 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 held a strange, lifeless kind of silence as Berqar rode into an empty courtyard overgrown with thistles. The blackened walls of the farmhouse seemed like a memorial, or like a wordless accusation. 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 and 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 blew 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 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 pure power, a mage in flowing robes stepped out into the open.

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

*

His long, gnarled staff in his hand, Pramus stood in the burnt hall like in a royal antechamber. “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 resting on the charred remains of a 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 those loyal to the Restitution! Weaving the ties, tying the knots, 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! People will crouch in reverence, as they should. With the force of staff and sword unleashed, power will once again lie where it belongs!”

Pramus turned with a flourish, making the embroidered beasts on his robes shiver. “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 offered amiably.

Kortid shot him a grateful look. “Thank you.” He took a step into the corridor. “It is not much. It’s just . . .”

Gureev nodded. “I know.”

Kortid turned and led the way 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 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 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 shifted in 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 since the night he had found Hun’s body in the 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, his voice vehement. “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 they were all 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, any time. Like this very moment, when you leave the inn to 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 at his favorite place, shifted uncomfortably.

The sun had set, leaving the summer air soft and warm, full of memories and promises. Amalai ambled across the roof terrace of her home, sipping a glass of dark, aromatic juice.

In the neighboring bath gardens, lanterns of all colors hung on lines between swing seats and blooming bushes, their reflections floating gaily on the waters. They filled the 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 with birdsong and rustling leaves. Then a soft thread of music began to weave into the mellow air. Amalai smiled.

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 against the wall and let herself drift away, carried along by the harmonies flowing through the air, companions 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 toward the balustrade. There it was, no doubt. Someone crouched in her herbary, a black shadow between the bushes, hiding from the light. A noiseless, inscrutable presence, suddenly darting forward in furtive moves, flying from darkness to darkness, from cover to cover. Disappearing into the night.

Amalai kept on staring. But she saw no more.

* * *

The garrison courtyard lay still and empty. Gureev walked to the forsaken west wing and sat down on a cornerstone. Long shadows fell from the walls of the garrison, stern and implacable in the dying light. A torch was lit somewhere far away beneath the portcullis, and the walls of the fortress drew together around it like a 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. He still saw the wild, panicked eyes.

Gureev bit his lip. Images from his childhood rose in his mind. An old 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. He saw 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, he was 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 fortress, Gureev could see the image gleaming like a vision. 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. Gureev gaped. In the dust between the hooves lay Hun's dead body.

4

In the pale light of morning, the silhouettes of two fighters charged. Their bodies locked, drew apart, met again, their moves deft and forceful, their swords flashing. In restless pursuit of each other, they lunged and danced, thrust and withdrew, in a vigorous, driven encounter. Sweat ran down their chests as they crouched, muscles tensed, bodies poised, ready to lunge.

Then one sword fell to the ground. A shallow cloud of dust enveloped it as it hit the sand. The fighter's arm came up in surrender. "Enough already," Gureev panted. He leaned against the wall of the courtyard. A forest breeze 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 with the bit of breath left to him. "We need to be the best fighters we possibly can. Perfect our skill, train our mettle. And when the demon comes, we'll give it all we have." Kortid bit his lip. "And hope that it is 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. The red beams of a timber frame shone between tidy white inlays, some of them decorated with lacquered woodwork. A wide porch ran all around, 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, at least for Ojorsven. In all the decades he had been a Behrlem scribe, he had felt very much at home in the

county house. Despite the rapid changes 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, his colleague, was here. But she was on leave with her family in the countryside.

Ojorsven sighed. He took off his 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. But he still 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 illusions from the mages. The central office in Varoonya would certainly hear none of this. And yet. People were upset. And seemed to believe that he should be doing something about it?

Ojorsven had no idea what, though. He heaved a heavy sigh. But anyway, he did not need to know. He was only the scribe, here to implement the wishes of the townspeople, not to decide or divine what those wishes 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 just a small thing. And as long as no one had any suggestions to make, Ojorsven would let the matter rest.

Nodding to himself and ignoring the uneasy feeling that remained in his stomach, Ojorsven brushed over the surface of his desk and pulled up papers from a stack beside him. Some other business. Business he 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 the battle. “Behrlem is in danger! There’s a demon! We must defend the town! It is a matter of life or death!” Her eyes were aflame. “I know the county house has no means to fight such a threat. 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 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 Diamondtip fortress rose up cold and unforgiving. Its stone was old as the mountains, but no longer wild and free. It was 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 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 over the centuries 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.”

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 battlements a defiantly triumphant smile. "They walked 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 queen that the monarchy was abolished and all Feudals 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 fortress. 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 is only the institution that stayed the same for centuries. The people in it 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 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.

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 defensively. “Upset. There was a real frenzy last night at the inn, I am telling you. So something had to be done quickly.”

Unleha shook her head with a vigor that sent her many short braids flying. “I don’t know what happened last night at the inn, 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 must adhere to some basic standards and not 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. “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 as soon as the moon is new again.”

“It’s outrageous!”

*

They walked down a quiet, peaceful lane, and the sun bathed Unleha’s black face in golden hues and gentle 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.

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, only a cadet. 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, calling that glory.”

Amalai snorted. “Come, now.” But she had to concede. “I admit that Berqar may be a Restitutionist at heart. And that it’s 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, for now. But she doesn't stand a chance overall. Society is a long-term thing. You can't change it with just one single act. 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."

* * *

Deep in the dungeons, Berqar was down on one knee before the mage. Blood-red lightning flickered around her as she held her head up high, her sword upright before her, in the pose of the eternal warrior. She stayed perfectly still, even when the thunder 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!"

Flickering torchlight licked up into the darkness. Berqar's eyes caught its spark. "Soldiers have a presence in town. Like they have not had in ages." Her shoulders straightened. "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 triumphantly.

But she had more. "Some citizens will complain, resist, or 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 we will let that tremor ripple out into society."

Berqar still held the sword in her hand. "All the soldiers know the danger. They 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. "Very good. But move carefully. Our first sally was victorious. Now we will lay siege and 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."

* * *

At midday, a sun sail shaded part of the roof terrace. Stretched out languidly between empty dishes, Amalai let the last delicious rice ball disappear into her mouth. A satisfied sigh escaped her. “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 won’t 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 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, and memories of luminous colors and night gardens came back to her. Suddenly, she remembered.

“Lahoon.” She turned to face him. “There was something in our garden last night. Someone. I saw it from the terrace. A dark figure darting from cover to cover, disappearing into the night.” Amalai shifted. “What do you think that was? Who could possibly be lurking in my herbary?”

Lahoon tilted his head, his hands busy with the 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 quickly and 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 clouds, a shadow moved through the herbarium. Hiding, darting forward, hiding again. There was noise and agitation all around. The wind tore at the bushes in angry gusts, making leaves shake and shutters rattle against window frames. Grasses bent down low to the ground, yielding to the onslaught. A shingle, torn loose from a barn roof, was hurtled along by the storm, 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. His heart was raw. He tried to go back to his dream, to the forest, to the portal. To the fey who had called to him from beyond, who had danced her magic, who had summoned flames of moonlight.

Lahoon stayed quiet for a while. Then he got up. 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 floor, pulling up a cushion to the low table. In the soft glow of a lantern, he got lost in his drawing until stripes of rose and amber began to fill the sky.

A creaking floorboard made Lahoon look up. Amalai came up to him on quiet, naked feet. He smiled, leaning a tired head against her hip.

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

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 fey realm exists. 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 round body, feeling her breathe, feeling her belly rise and fall. Lahoon gently moved his cheek over her skin.

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 so excited to go to the capital, and ‘the Academy of Magical Arts’ for sure sounded promising. Like the right place. But, no.” He scowled derisively. “At the academy, they would not notice a unicorn walking down their corridors, nor a ghost sitting on their lectern. They have no perception, no knowledge, no interest. No tolerance, either. They are firmly of the opinion that fey 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 fey along with the old mages, saying it was all fraud and illusion.”

A deep sigh escaped Lahoon. He pushed away from Amalai and stood up. “I must find another way. I can feel the fey 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 unlikely, or ugly. 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.”

Amalai’s shoulders tensed. The silence between them stretched.

Lahoon stared down at his fingers. “I know this is awkward. He is a mage, even now. After centuries of oppression, of people cowering before demons and their masters.” He swallowed. “It is a grim heritage. Who would still want to walk in that tradition today?” Lahoon’s knuckles turned pale as his grip on the easel tightened. “What path would I take, asking to be apprenticed? Who would I become?”

He raised his head, his eyes wild. “But what if Pramus truly can find demons? What if this is my only chance to see at least one kind of fey?” 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 must try.”

* * *

Berqar pulled a torch from a sconce and advanced deeper into the gloom of the old armory. Swords glinted along the wall like 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 at the back, two halberds crossed in silent salute. Beneath them, an oil painting darkened with age still held a few muted colors. Berqar stepped up to it, raising her torch.

A windswept plain surrounded by mountains lay before her. The storm tore the last leaves off the trees and sent clouds scurrying across a crimson sky. The ground was strewn with the bodies of unknown soldiers who had fallen by the thousands, their limbs distorted, their blood soaking the dirt.

In their midst, a glorious general let his steed rear up high. His cloak billowing in the wind, 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 broke 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 up high, the gleam in her eye much, much deeper than a mere reflection of flaming torches.

* * *

Unleha crouched among the ferns. Along the far side of the bath gardens, a huge copper tube hid in the greenery like a snaking dragon. Where it met the creek, it rose up in a tower of coils, its aged skin spotted with dust and lichen. Only a few patches of metal still lay bare and gleamed as gloriously as sunset.

Half buried among the bracken, a squat dome hunched at the tower's foot. Unleha bent over it, listening in deep concentration to the low thumping sound coming from within, a drum that was deep and regular like a heartbeat. Magic was pumping the waters up into the spirals, as it should.

Unleha pulled out her wand. As an artificer, she was the type of specialized magician who could handle such traptions, as well as the countless others the bath used for all its needs and purposes, from heating the waters to illuminating the gardens. She carefully took the lid off the pumping traption before her. The late evening light caught in a gossamer web of spun glass, fine as a spider's threads, an intricate design connecting precisely marked points on the dome. In between, pure crystals glinted.

Unleha held her palm out before the delicate wonder, offering a crystal. Her lips began to move and dark vowels rolled off her tongue, ending in a grating lisp, the perfect pronunciation of an ancient rune. At the touch of her wand, the stones began to dance. 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 mid-motion, on swirls of upward and downward and roundabout flows in its insides. But the new stone had already drifted in among the arabesque crisscross, never touching, never disturbing any of the fragile 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 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?”

Unleha whipped around. A girl with straight hair and eager eyes stood 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 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 here. 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 light faded from the sky, just leaving an inkling of deep blue on the horizon and a last stroke of purple on a cloud. The air grew soft and mellow. Amalai idled 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 shadow. A dark shape darting forward, hiding between the bushes, flying on. Without thinking, Amalai stepped right into its path. And collided. Violently stumbling backward, she grasped for a hold, and 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, but that made something slip from her grip and hit the ground with a thud. A book, Amalai saw. Like a hawk, the girl swooped down and picked it up. “Don’t tell!” she hissed menacingly. Then she turned and ran. No more than a fleeting shadow, she bounded across the garden into the night. A few more crushing, rustling sounds, and she was gone.

Amalai looked after her. Then she followed, with slow, uncertain steps. When she reached the hedge that hid the garrison wall, Amalai brushed a questioning hand against the leaves. Then she slipped through. Edging along the other side, she felt twigs scratch her back while the rough stone chafed her probing hand.

Until her fingers caught.

Amalai bent down. Right before her was a hole in the wall, just large enough for a person to squeeze through. And in its middle, crumpled into a messy ball, lay the loose cloak the girl had been wearing.

*

Rebonya cursed 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 moved 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. "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." Angry lines ran down his brow. "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, more 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 small step toward Gureev. "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 and ask questions."

Rebonya dropped her gaze again. Her voice softened. “So. I am not a danger to anyone.”

Gureev assessed her with a glance. “I believe you,” he ruled with a gracious nod. “I trust that you have been out studying for the academy. And that this is where you wish your life to go.” He paused, arching an eyebrow. “I am glad you have something in your life that you find worthwhile. Something you do in fact 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 rules. 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 worried hand through her hair. “Well,” she muttered uncertainly. “In fact, that is one of the few rules that I agree with myself. In principle.” She cleared her throat. “However, I was not strutting around town as a soldier. I went out discreetly, in civilian garb, going directly to my studies and straight back.” Images of the collision in the herbarium came 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, to some horrible task, like Hun.” She crossed her shaky arms over her chest.

Gureev had gone silent. He turned away.

Rebonya took another tiny step toward him, her arms loosening. “Gureev. I will be more careful. I can see it was too risky this way.” She clasped her hands in front of her. “But I do want to go on studying. I need to.”

She looked up at Gureev, her eyes 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 an appraising look, his head held high, his body poised. Then his posture eased. He graciously inclined his head. 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 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, 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 have ever learned in my years at Diamondtip.”

“Strategy and tactics.” Berqar paced the officer room while she lectured. 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 listened.

Berqar relished his 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 a warrior to reach glory, it takes more than sheer force and brutality. 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 the iron pikes as if to a source of inspiration. Her voice grew 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, to be sly, to be ruthless. To do whatever it takes.”

* * *

Dawn rose in misty pastels, framing Diamondtip’s stern dark towers. Inside the cadets’ chamber, Gureev rolled up his mat conscientiously, never casting so much as a reproachful glance at the sloppy heap of a bed Rebonya sat on as she buttoned up her shirt.

But Rebonya had comments of her own and was not holding back. “The right ruler!”

Gureev had given a very limited account of last night’s lesson with Berqar. Nevertheless, Rebonya’s eyes had narrowed to angry slits. “Do we have rulers? In this time and age?”

Gureev paused. Then he straightened up, turning away. “No.” His ears burned. “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. She did not mean anything by it.”

* * *

“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 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 of Toan 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 Fey.”

*

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 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 whiff of 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 flourish, pointed them to a rift down the mountainside. "Right there!"

They left the horses by a copse of shrubbery and carefully approached the edge of the ravine. It was full of scrawny bushes with dark leaves and long, thin needles of thorn. Amalai reached out to one that had managed to crawl up over the edge and picked a berry, black as night. As she squeezed it, she felt the juice run over her fingers and a rich, pungent scent sting her nostrils. She jerked back. 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.

"They are. We should certainly not eat these berries. But they can give enormous power to certain potions, if used 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."

"Hmm. 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.

It was not exactly comfortable. They climbed over rocks and boulders, scratching their knees, squeezing in between the thorny deewelarque. They moved on, farther back into the ravine. Sheer cliffs rose up on both sides, and the towering mountain plunged everything into gloomy twilight. The humans turned 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 let herself be lured on, ever more deeply into the realm of shadows until she came up against the cliff.

At Amalai's feet, the grass spread out into an inviting carpet. Cautiously, she knelt down, parting the long blades before the rock.

Crystal-clear water bubbled out, running over her fingers with the cold freshness of glaciers. “A well!” Amalai turned around to beam at her companions.

But she froze mid-motion.

A dark shadow lurked in the bushes behind Precetlan, coming closer in ominous silence.

Precetlan looked over his shoulder and jerked back.

The dark shape emerged from the deewelarques 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 stopped moving when he saw the shocked faces, but said nothing.

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

The man inclined his head 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 on the side of the cliff, a little stone house pressed into 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 lame 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, entirely at ease now. “My name is Naleewa,” she offered, “and these are my friends Precetlan and Amalai.”

“Verlem.” His fragile body bowed a fraction. “Will you follow me?” He held Amalai’s 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 that 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, 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 burning, her breath ragged. She hurried on blindly and was surprised she even found the way out. Scrambling over the last rocks, she made it through.

Once on the open grassland, she charged on, then threw herself down behind a lone boulder. Her pulse raced, and her whole body throbbed painfully while a whirlwind raged in her soul. Amalai closed her eyes to let the storm inside of her blow out. She stayed where she was, sprawled on the ground in complete 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 bad, how could she possibly have left them there? 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.

What should she do? Amalai clutched her hands. Then she turned and embraced 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 movement by the entrance of the ravine. A shadow, a human, drawing close. Two humans. Naleewa and Precetlan were coming toward her.

Amalai slumped onto the ground and exhaled.

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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 does, you begin to trust him. You trust him so deeply, so unquestioningly, that there isn’t anything else anymore. It is too much. It is not 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 and 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, or 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 trust him. What do you think he wants 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, climbing back to where they had left their horses. They were all still there, unharmed. Amalai was relieved and instantly felt ridiculous for it. What had she expected? 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. Then she turned her horse and let him lead the way back home under a rising sickle moon.

‘Myths and fairy tales,’ Amalai’s inner voice said, ‘tell of more than one kind of magic that can irresistibly attract people to another. There may be spells and potions, but there’s also 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 quiet tone, in an inexorable manner. ‘And then there also are legends of the fey. 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.’

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. Time for a break, Amalai thought.

She walked up the path into town, stopping only briefly at a nearby house 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 scarf over her unruly curls as she turned the corner into a busy street, but even with her hands in motion about her head and colorful cloth ends dangling before her eyes, 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 again, and Amalai knew instantly. That was the girl. The one she had caught in her garden. A cadet, apparently.

The girl realized that 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 suspiciously, but with a shimmer of hope. 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 last step toward them, Amalai also drew the attention of the second soldier, a black-skinned youth who stood poised and upright, looking very proper. 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 fear. "No, they were not!" she responded a little hotly. She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "But there is an exceptionally good reason for this change of rules, as you may know," Rebonya said 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, and 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 straight ahead with an expressionless face.

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

Rebonya gave her a knowing look from beneath 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."

Gureev had waited until Amalai was well out of sight before making his remark. In contrast to his measured tones, Rebonya practically stomped her foot. “But demons don’t even exist! All they ever were is an illusion meant to make people cower in fear! 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 said. 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 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 crept 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, holding him back. Gnarled faces hid in the bark of old trees and watched Kortid with inscrutable expressions. On thin silvery threads, spiders climbed above Kortid’s head, looking down at him from the heights of ancient crowns.

Kortid stumbled over a root. He caught himself, scratching his hand on a rough trunk. He moved on, urgently but 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, however, with a thousand murmurs and rustlings, with gray waving fingers and darting shadows 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 it, 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 and covered in blood. A demon pressed down on him, devouring his life. At Kortid's piercing cry, the demon cringed, transformed into a flag and blew away into the night.

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

Kortid woke with a gasp, his hands tangled in the sheets with 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 in his mind without pity or reprieve.

* * *

Amalai roamed 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 filled Amalai's basket, together with roots and shoots. She even had the mushrooms she needed for one particular ointment the bath had requested. A good harvest. Amalai could have turned back and gone 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. The ground began to rise up before her. If she continued 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 until the trees and bushes were barely holding on to the sheer fall between the protruding rocks. With difficulty, Amalai scrambled on, taking hold of a root here, a stem there.

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 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, 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 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 clothes, 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 and closed her eyes. She listened, 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, whispering, 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. She returned to the softness and the quiet. The peace of companionship with the rustling leaves and the whispering grass. She remained there for 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 into the highlands on all sides. A pale moon had grown well beyond a sickle.

Amalai turned slowly. She walked in a few hesitant steps at first, then more firmly, until she moved with a clear, steady stride toward home. She had to get back while there was still light enough to let her make the steep, unfamiliar climb down.

At the edge of the forest, she stopped and looked over her shoulder. The entrance to the ravine lay quiet. 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 kinky hair. “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. 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 a 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 seen any of their friends again, nor 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 lanterns gave a soft golden sheen to an old coat of arms here, the curved lid of a trunk there. At the back wall, two cadets sat hunched over their writing, enveloped in an amber glow beneath the black square of a window. Other than that, there was only Gureev, his gaze firmly locked onto the page of his book.

Rebonya walked up beside him. She regarded the tomes on the shelf, 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.

* * *

Mellow light slanted in through the 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 mists of dust and sunlight, suffused with pale gold and a quiet sacredness. Lahoon wished he was 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 shifted to the treasures she carried.

"Thank you!" Lahoon gratefully 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 first painted slip, sinking down into ancient tales and deep absorption.

Hours later, the sunlight had faded and only the muted glow of lanterns shone between the shadows. Lahoon had noticed none of it. He was buried 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 unfinished quests to lie until morning. He grabbed his bag and hurried to the Summerstar, the oldest 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 cottage lay hidden among the bushes, its tiled roof 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 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 workbench, looking down at a scroll covered in intricate lines. All around her, the disarray of magic piled up: heaps of glass thread and crystals, half-opened wooden cases and metallic instruments with ticking cogwheels crowded together between more scrolls and papers.

"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 case of polished wood that was 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 crystals glowing pale green and deep purple. “What will it do?” she asked.

“Don’t tell, don’t tell!” Veertan begged Unleha. “I’ll show her!” She grabbed Rebonya’s elbow and pulled her out of the cabin. Lights were growing dim, with trees blending into one black outline before a lavender sky. Veertan waded a few steps through knee-deep weeds until, among the vines and the bracken, she found an open patch of moss and sat the traption down.

Rebonya squatted beside the girl, leaning forward in anticipation.

“Watch this,” Veertan whispered. At her touch, a column of blue light shot from the wooden case, a clear, incandescent beam cutting through the dusk. Amid the waving fern and the fading evening sky, the 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 gaze 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, the one about 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 ask how it could possibly have happened that one of the youths got killed.” There was a wicked gleam in Unleha’s eyes. “And whether perhaps anything needs to change 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 to parry an invisible enemy, then lunge for another. Straw puppets winced as the sharp point touched them, withdrew and came again. Sweat ran down Kortid's face, but his eyes were fierce and 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 deftly sheathed his weapon. "Tomorrow the magic swords will arrive." He pressed his final words out through clenched teeth. "We can only pray that we will survive another night."

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

"Shut up!" Kortid spun around. "Don't you 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—"

"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 now, and every muscle in his body hard as steel. Images of night came unbidden to his mind, of a dark forest and a mangled body. Hun's lifeless face stared at him.

Kortid's breath had grown ragged. His eyes were feverish, fixing Rebonya. "Don't you dare!"

Dark clouds hung over the town square of Behrlem, making the late afternoon seem tired and gloomy. Every now and then a ray of light fell through the cracks and a silver brightness flared up dramatically, tracing the outlines of billowing clouds. But it soon got swallowed up again by mountains of rainy gray that plunged the whole town into shadow.

The soldiers stood in formation at the far side of the plaza. A small, orderly squad occupied the center. Around them, individual soldiers formed a wider circle with plenty of space between them. A very loose boundary, but still a boundary that no one dared to cross. Townsfolk kept away as they stood watching.

Within this theater's arena, one soldier after the other stepped out of the squad, solemnly approaching Berqar at the front. Each received a polished wooden case, 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 the circle, leaving the soldiers to drown in darkness. But then a stream of sparks began to pour in. The shimmer filled the circle and 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 returning twilight, a mage with a long, gnarled staff stood in the fading glimmer of gold, his blue robes swirling.

Pramus.

Imperiously, he raised his staff.

All the soldiers went down on one knee. They held out their wooden cases before them like sacred offerings. 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, but it was not natural. Lights of purple and crimson formed in the darkness above, deepening, gathering into a spinning vortex right above their heads. As the thunder grew almost intolerable, the whirlwind began to descend. 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. The thunder became deafening, and as the swirl touched the soldiers' heads, it exploded into the roar of a dragon. 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 from a white-hot flame back to gentle blue.

The soldiers still knelt. Speechless, they remained in a pose of reverence and awe. For a moment, 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 and 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 mage can bring forth real, earth-shattering power. Making swords 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 to be 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 it’s 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 back!”

* * *

Kortid posed the wooden case gingerly beside his mat. He let his hand glide over it, feeling the smoothness. He took a deep breath and pressed down. Light flared up. The ghost of a smile came to Kortid’s lips as he regarded the bright blue beam. He leaned back, cautiously releasing his hold on the sheath.

Kortid slid in under 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. When the demon struck again, it would be in the darkness. Which was why there must be no darkness. They must have light at all times, and the swords out and ready. The soldiers could never be defenseless, not for a moment. Especially not at night. Not a night like this, when the full moon was swallowed up by 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 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.

The light 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 sleep with the lights off.

'Fools,' Kortid thought. 'Risking their lives without a thought! Closing their eyes, even if to never open them 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. She 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 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.

* * *

Through the dense green of the forest, Amalai walked 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 fey.

Amalai approached the entrance of the ravine very slowly, very cautiously, and never directly. She changed her path a little, drifting over just a bit to one 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. There they remained, exchanging furtive glances until it was time for the rabbit to go home.

Amalai felt the air move around her, sensed it drift in and out of the ravine. She came to know the particular smell it carried of the atmosphere within, of that 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. She allowed them to show her the pace at which time passed for them and stayed in their presence, feeling 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 saw 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 speak to her. He was just there. He sat on one

of the boulders in the opening. He stood 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 grass and nodding wildflowers, toward the forest down below.

Verlem sat 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 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. 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, very quietly. Verlem was so quiet himself. She felt any kind of noise or rash movement might tear some invisible 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 in the Teapot to break open an envelope that revealed a disorderly flurry of loose sheets, filled with dense scribbings and the most intricate drawings. These contained the secrets of the newest and most extravagant traptions people had come up with, things you might have dreamed of, but that were now birthed halfway into reality, needing only one last good idea to make it all happen. Creatures of ingenuity and cooperation, the traptions beckoned to be fed and nourished, copied and multiplied, improved and added to.

And so the usual suspects huddled together, 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 back room for such occasions. The Teapot often hosted conversations and book circles, or theater groups, wisdom discernments and skillsharings. And of course, healers and farmers and various craftspeople each had their own coven meetings, much like the artificers, to pore over the latest ideas and practices in their fields. The Teapot was, the owners prided themselves, the 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. She regarded the chiseled brass around artful tea glasses and the colorful cushions inviting you to lounge on the broad clay kang along the wall. 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 banter with friends in the growing crowd, she knew no more complaints.

* * *

Amalai had edged closer to Verlem bit by bit. She was so near him now that she could have reached over to touch his shoulder.

The sun was low in the sky. A few clouds drifted up above, 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 still carried the remnants of heat and the scent of sunbathed flowers.

Amalai lay back on the grass to feel the firmness of earth beneath her, the timelessness of rock supporting her body. Long blades swayed softly around her. She whispered to them in an inaudible voice. And then, very cautiously, she stretched out an arm toward Verlem.

She did not touch him. She reached out for him, but still left a little distance, allowing her hand to rest just behind his back.

Verlem did not move. He sat very still. Amalai had felt him tense, all alert, when she had brought up her hand, but 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.

Amalai held her palm behind Verlem's spine. She could feel him, more strongly than ever, radiating out like a star. It was not the just body heat, but the intensity of his being that glowed beyond her hand. She did not need to move closer to feel it. Just as a star in the night, the presence was clear and powerful. 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 flow 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 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 and 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 revealed 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 sat on the meadow in just the same way he had always been there, quiet, allowing Amalai 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. In the ambiguous ways of oracles, the deep conversations 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 again, feeling for that sense of starlight, of him, radiating out. It was still there, just the same. 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 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.

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 weathered shapes of the boulders. The darkness between the slim, rustling leaves of the deewelarque. And Amalai.

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

Amalai said nothing.

She tried again after a while. “You . . . You are not human, are you? Not an animal of the terrene realm?”

“No.”

“Are you a vampire?” Amalai slightly averted her face.

Verlem’s answer came hesitantly, drifting toward Amalai like a wisp of mist. “I cannot say. I do not know what a vampire is, to you.”

Amalai rubbed her cheek. “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 evening. A hawk circled high above, a tiny dark spot in the sky.

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

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

Verlem seemed to pause, to search inside himself. His gaze was out over the darkening forest, with the hazy clouds, the shifting light. Then he turned to Amalai.

“Yes.”

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. So I sent him to sleep with a look, to let him go softly.”

He hesitated. “While he slept, I drank his blood. I came to him because he was calling. I saw him, and I loved 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.”

* * *

Pooton, the county scrutinizer for learning pavilions, stood with her back to the wall. “The death of a youth is certainly reason enough to have an official scrutiny. Especially if that death 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 town! And they are proud to do so. 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 bureaucrat. You have come to the wrong place! Diamondtip is not part of your mandate! You are responsible for learning pavilions, not garrisons!”

Pooton’s eyes narrowed. “The Diamondtip School of Cadets is, legally speaking, a learning pavilion, and falls under the stewardship 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’s forceful gesture swept that notion away. “The laws of Yurvania have done nothing to keep that demon away! And they will not do so in the future. It is us, the soldiers and mages, who have the courage and the power to stand up to that threat. A youth has died in the forest, and it is us who will prevent any such thing from happening ever again. We will be there, braving the danger!”

Berqar’s neck bent forward as if she was a bull about to charge. “So don’t you come here pointing to rules and regulations. It’s all dust and ink stains to me! The real world is out there, and it holds demons! But we are soldiers, and we’ll face the danger! 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 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 brooded over a 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 air and stifling heat with them. Pulling and 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 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 away, reluctantly, but shining with excitement as she looked into Lahoon's eyes. "Listen. I need to tell you."

Lahoon's brows rose.

Amalai ran on. "I have found someone. Up in the mountains. He has come. 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 fey? They have come? Have they?" He grabbed 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 faded 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 sang loudly to the miracle that was about to break upon the world. Dawn was as glorious 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 Fey.

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

Amalai took Lahoon along the best path she had found. There was still a steep climb in it, but nothing like the cumbersome crawl she had gone through on her very first visit. Soon, they were up over the crest.

When they stepped out onto the highlands, sunrise lay in the air. Golden clouds drifted on pale blue seas, rosy hues touched the cliffs of far-off mountains, and snow glinted frostily from the tops.

Lahoon's eyes were fixed on the crags rising up on the slope to their left. That must be it. The ravine. His fingers twitched.

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 know you will return."

Lahoon laughed, but it was a rough and ragged sound. With an effort, he turned his back to the cliffs 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. He knows that you come from me. That is enough. From now on, you should go 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 shadows of peacock green, making him look more fey than ever. Amalai kissed his cheek. "Fare well, my love. We will be together again soon."

She left.

Lahoon watched her go.

Finally, he turned and walked 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 stopped, 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 and scraggy bush. To probe, ever so gently, for a whisper of fey. 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 both offering and receiving. The wind ruffled his hair and breathed into his ear. Stems of grass glinted green and golden at his feet, bending in the breeze, dancing back and forth to the tune of the air. Higher up, they grew sparse, not quite venturing into the shadow of the cliffs.

Lahoon let his senses roam over the entrance of the ravine, into the darkness. He could not find Verlem. His eyes wandered over to the deewelarques, to their gnarled skeletons full of slim leaves and spiky thorns. He took one step toward them. And another, until the first deewelarque reached out to Lahoon with flat green fingers. Cautiously, Lahoon let his own fingers intertwine with hers. Then he reached in more deeply, running the back of his hand over the rough, furrowed skin of the branches. A black berry dropped into his upturned palm.

Lahoon withdrew his arm. Rolling the lush pearl between his fingers, he felt the skin crack and a droplet run down.

He raised his hand to breathe in the aroma. It was sweet, raw, and intense. Alluring and enticing. Dangerous and unknown. Lahoon kissed his fingertips. He sensed 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.

With dark treasures in his palm, Lahoon went back to the grassland and began to lay out a pattern. A pentacle, each point marked by one of his marbles, by a fruit brimming with the juice of life.

Lahoon had begun to hum to himself, a low, monotonous sound he made without realizing. The vibration grew 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 that burst open under his touch. Then he slid his hand over the branches, caressing a long, thin thorn. With deliberate slowness, he let the needle scratch the tender skin of his inner arm, and pressed down. A tear of ruby fell onto the burst berry, the juices mingling.

Lahoon moved back to his grassland temple with unseeing eyes, the hymn in his chest growing louder, urging 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 now showed as glowing threads of silver on the ground. A strong wind rose up. Lahoon stood outside the sign, his arms open to the sky.

The chant broke from his lungs deeply and fully, an ancient raga of sounds old as the mountains. A sudden gust bent the grass down low around him. The deewelarque whispered, moaned, and shuffled. The sky turned crimson. Purple clouds scurried across it, haunted and 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. The world had disappeared. In the utter stillness of the void, Lahoon's voice carried out into the temple 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, wraiths of glimmer and unearthly beauty. Beings from the infinite space of stars danced an ethereal presence into the nothingness, bringing a universe back into being.

They swirled in circles, a slow, inexorable vortex of shimmering color spinning around the 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 coalesced and became solid. Nothingness turned into being.

A column of thunder towered over Lahoon, a demonic shadow reaching for the sky. Or a force of darkness descending upon earth, a god of night mating with the depth of the mountains.

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 core of his soul. It became softer, pleading and alluring, as the black volcano calmed down, as the goddess sat down to rest, as the dragon coalesced into a shape of more human proportions. The darkness sank in on itself, its force metamorphosing.

The night of the world turned to ash and twilight, and then to hues of purple and gold. As the glimmering auroras transformed into the flaring colors of sunrise, the center of the star sign filled with the hesitant light of morning. Only one black figure was left, right 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 and surrender. Power and light ran through his arms as he opened them before the spirit 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.

Verlem.

The lines on the ground disappeared. The light of an earthly day shone calmly upon the grassland. The air was quiet.

Lahoon's chant had ended. Touching a hand to his heart, he 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 and unprotected.

Verlem stood quietly, in his shy, humble pose, the wind playing softly in his hair. He took a small step toward Lahoon, then paused, as if in question. Lahoon answered him without hesitation. He touched his fingertips to his lips, then let them come down on the ground, laying his kiss at Verlem's feet.

Verlem moved closer. Lahoon stayed still, letting him come, opening himself up to that sense of otherness, of alien presence.

Verlem sank 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 in. Eyes closed, he sensed the subtle song of starlight pulsing in Verlem. 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 kissed him.

“I know we are meant to radiate tension and alarm, like warriors in the face of danger.” Rebonya looked around the Behrlem town square, where people were strolling between the stalls or idling under shady trees, making music with a friend or having a chat. Over on one side, old women played a game of boule. Children chased dogs, each other, or small balls across the sand.

Rebonya grinned. “But really, I guess most of us rather enjoy this. 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 quote from an old script. “The serenity of the common people corrodes 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. 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 and 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 twitched. “I will continue feeling grateful, and even letting it show.”

The 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 the feel of a golden hour, even late at night when the hall was lit by nothing more than 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. Amalai 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 whenever they took one of Amalai's confections. 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. "Yes, 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 asked, 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. I don't think we 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 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 is strange that things could ever have gotten this far. But never mind. It'll be over soon."

And they both believed it when they said it.

* * *

The sun was on its way down when Lahoon woke. Dazed, he looked at the mountain slope, the swaying grass, the dark deewelarque. He ran a hand over his face. He must have fallen asleep outside the ravine. Lahoon let his lids close again so he could see the memories in his mind.

Verlem had disappeared. Right before Lahoon's eyes, he had morphed into shadow and emptiness. Lahoon had remained right where he was, on his knees at the edge of the faded pentacle. He had whispered Verlem's name, called out with his heart, had waited and waited. And finally, he must have fallen asleep.

Lahoon sat up and took in his surroundings. The high grass bended softly in the breeze, speaking to him in shimmering waves, in the language of its body. Telling tales of the highlands, of rain, of life as blades and roots. Strong and ageless, the boulders rested heavily on the earth. The deewelarque bushes crouched around them, holding back before the open meadow. Darkness lingered in the ravine.

Lahoon got up and took a few steps toward the entrance. He paused at a respectful distance and stayed quiet, feeling the slow, steady beat of his heart. Listening to the whispering breeze, to the silence of the stones.

Verlem was there.

He stood in the shadow, his eyes on Lahoon. Lahoon blushed, then bowed shyly.

Verlem walked away between the deewelarque. Just before he disappeared into the ravine, he turned, his dark eyes looking back at Lahoon.

Lahoon followed. He could not see Verlem anymore, but he felt no doubt. He had been invited, called in.

* * *

When Kortid approached the garrison from the dusky streets of Behrlem, the black outline of the fortress seemed like a welcome sign of home, of refuge, of safety.

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

Kortid crossed his arms over his chest. No one could fight off a demon this way. They were all just laying themselves at the monster'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 into the darkness.

*

Kortid saluted. Berqar did not seem to notice. Eventually, she did look up from her desk to acknowledge his presence. "Speak!"

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

Lahoon walked up to the cottage in the ravine. It was made of L unhewn stone, the same as the cliff it nestled into. Half overgrown with moss and lichen, it looked old and comfortable, and very small. Lahoon ran his hand over the low wooden door. He stepped in.

The room inside was dim and filled with a stale smell. The whole place did not feel lived in. It seemed more like a painting, a theater scenery stored in an attic. Lahoon ran his finger over a sideboard, feeling the dryness of dust, smelling the age. The floorboards creaked under his step. He strained his eyes to penetrate the gloom. There was no sign of Verlem.

Lahoon turned to walk the short distance across the room. The fireplace held no fire, and no ash either. Lahoon sat down on a narrow bed by the wall. The mat felt hard and lumpy. He ran a hand over the covers, half expecting them to crumble to dust under his touch. They did not. Lahoon looked up.

Verlem was there. His eyes were on Lahoon.

Lahoon licked his lips. He stood up uncertainly, in reverence, in anticipation. His heart beat against his chest, a steady pounding that urged his whole body into a state of attention and aliveness. Lahoon's breath grew shallow. He regarded Verlem silently across the room. Then he began to walk toward him, with shy, tentative steps, all the while 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 an old yearning, a pent-up desire, and came to a halt only when he was so near their clothes almost touched. He remained there, motionless.

Verlem let his breath fall into Lahoon's hair. His whisper rode on the subtle waves of air like a foamy crown. "You have come to me."

“Yes.” Lahoon’s answer rolled out without hesitation. It was a confession, and a pledge.

Verlem touched a finger to Lahoon’s cheek, caressing the tender velvet, the shimmering hues of blue and green. He breathed in the scent of Lahoon’s body, 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. “I will not harm you. I only take what you can easily spare.”

Lahoon moved back a pace and leaned against the wall behind him. He rested his head on the stone, feeling its unwavering solidity, 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.” He touched the bend of Lahoon’s arm, and Lahoon felt the shiver in his bones. “I need this to survive. But it is for pleasure too. And sometimes, for love.”

Lahoon let his gaze rest upon Verlem, who stood in his shy, unobtrusive pose, his slender form showing beneath his loose black robes. With the slightest of moves, Verlem came to lean against the rough rock of the wall, just beside Lahoon. Their shoulders touched. Lahoon closed his eyes. His skin tingled. His blood tingled. His whole being basked in the alien aura that surrounded him.

Lahoon felt magic run through his veins like soft golden fire, filling the marrow of his bones with its glow. His breathing grew unsteady. He was taken in by a cloud of longing, a sense of power, of unspeakable otherness. His whole being yearned for it, craved it, stretched toward it. Lahoon could sense the realm of Fey calling out to him, with a deep, hoarse sound as well as 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 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 and leaned toward Verlem, easing into the mounds of rock and body beside him.

“Yes,” Lahoon murmured. “Yes. I will give myself to you, in every way I possibly can. I want to.”

Lahoon stepped back and pulled the tunic over his head, the play of muscles beneath his skin just visible as his arms rose and his torso stretched. In the twilight, his butterfly skin shimmered in dark blues.

He turned, letting his gaze roam over Verlem's still face, the lines of his cheekbones, the hair drawn back over his temples. The slim, fragile bones of his shoulders beneath the robe. The fastenings running down his chest.

Lahoon stared. Then he sought Verlem's gaze. He raised a hand to let his finger touch the first clasp, the one right beneath Verlem's neck. Verlem did not move.

Lahoon swallowed. With restrained, deliberate motions, he opened the first of the robe's fastenings. Verlem stood quietly. Cautiously, Lahoon opened another. His heart hammered 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, drinking in the fragrance. His face was right beside Verlem's now, but never touching. He opened yet another hook, and another, without any other contact, any other move. Finally, he 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 slid his hand in underneath. 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. Moving his hand up, he shifted the cloth aside, over one delicate shoulder. It fell halfway down Verlem's back. Lahoon freed the second shoulder. Verlem moved now, just a little. He shrugged the robe off, letting the fabric pool around his feet. He stood naked. There, still as quiet, as shy as always. And it tugged at Lahoon's heart as much as it ever had. In the dusky light, Lahoon's eyes moved over Verlem's smooth body, finding no nipples, no navel. Between his thighs, his belly curved in smooth and round, without interruption. Just white, tender skin. Lahoon's bewildered eyes met Verlem's.

"I am not animal," Verlem said softly. "I am not born and do not give birth. I do not eat and drink the way you do." He breathed into Lahoon's ear. "But I do feel, with all of my body, and all of my soul."

The air rasped in Lahoon's lungs. Verlem shone pale as a seashell before him. Slowly, Lahoon closed the last distance between them, letting the naked skin of their bodies touch.

He wrapped his arms around Verlem, holding him gingerly. Lahoon sighed, a half moan, as a wave of excitement swept him away. His hand roamed across Verlem's back almost of its own volition. Lahoon rested his temple against Verlem's head, eyes closed. He could feel Verlem's smile, Verlem's pleasure, like his own. Or perhaps it was his own. Lahoon could not distinguish anymore. Nor did he want to. He touched his lips against Verlem's cheek. The 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 graze up Verlem's neck, round his jaw, traverse his cheek. There he paused. Their lips barely touched, but their breaths mingled. Lahoon licked up that precious mist, savoring Verlem's taste. Then his tongue slid over a sharp, thin fang. Lahoon felt the sting, and a slight taste of blood. Cautiously, he deepened the kiss.

But Verlem pulled back. He took a small step away from Lahoon and disappeared, dissolving into shadow. A cry of loss and longing broke from Lahoon's throat. But Verlem came back right away. Only an arm's length away, he seemed an apparition made of fog and stardust. His skin shimmered softly. 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 fey appearing and disappearing before his eyes, the forms of shadow and mist leading him on across the room, onto the dusty bed.

Lahoon lay down on the worn sheets, stretching out beside the thin white form of Verlem, only to see him dissolve into nothingness once again. And then, to feel him coalesce right on top of him, 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 the 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 trail of sparkles wherever they went.

Lahoon's body stretched, one arm up behind the head, enthralled by the touch, begging for more. Lahoon's breath 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. Then his fingers found the bow of Lahoon's trousers and pulled them open. With deliberate slowness, 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 with it on the journey. Lahoon lay naked, his inky hair in disarray around his head, his 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 writhed, arching 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 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. On the fine, almost translucent skin of the elbow's crook, where blue veins formed a shimmering current in the ocean of Lahoon's 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 pulse of his life-force gushing out with 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. It washed Lahoon away into the depths 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**

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

Unleha let the sheet sink down and looked at 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 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 her disdain could not have been more obvious. 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.”

Unleha’s cabin was as crammed with magical implements as usual, just short of the point where the chaos would make it completely unusable. Rebonya picked up a long, shiny wand of brass. “The scrutinizer talked 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 very 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 speak and act as if they despise those notes. Public spitting is encouraged.”

Rebonya lunged into a 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. “Do not follow orders’. ‘Judge for yourself if an order given is all right’. ‘Help others to not follow orders.’” She wriggled in her seat, the laughter bubbling up irrepressibly. “It was priceless! I could have been rolling on the floor during that whole speech!”

* * *

In the still, dark hours before dawn, Kortid stood guard in Diamondtip’s east wing. Like a warrior’s cathedral, the vaults of the great staircase rose up before him, vast and empty. His steps left a hollow echo. A torch flickered at the bottom, licking up at the darkness, its glint catching only in the breastplates and ancient halberds lining the walls. Shadows lived behind them, slithering silently along the wall. The ghosts of ages past had settled into discomfort here, haunting the fortress.

Kortid turned. In the hallway, he passed one door after the other, 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 gave him a glimpse of the moon, its pale remains waning to a sickle. Before him, the corridor lay silent. Magical lanterns were placed at great distances along the wall, their paltry glow only accentuating the darkness in between. The night loomed in the passage like a fathomless ocean, hiding unknown creatures in its depths. The frail, distant shine from some far-off lighthouse would do nothing to deter them.

Kortid tightened his hold on the magic sword. He lowered the blade, letting the blue beam pierce the obscurity and reveal all alien presence within the waves of gloom. There was none. Only the walls. A closet. A narrow wooden bench. Kortid spun around. Behind him, only stone. Kortid released a breath. He walked on.

But when he turned the bend in the corridor, he froze. A dark mangled mass lay on the ground, limbs distorted, belly torn open. Kortid stepped forward, drawn by inexorable horror, by a vision of Hun’s death mask.

Kortid’s feet grew unsteady. His head was swimming. He crouched 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 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, and gauntlets pointed into the void. All around the lifeless body parts, tools and wire lay about in random disorder, as if those working their craft to restore a vanished knight to his erstwhile form had been spirited away in mid-motion.

Kortid exhaled. He slumped against the wall, listening to the feeble, irregular beat of his heart. He stared at bare slabs of stone, 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 fortress, determined to brave the demons of the night and of his own heart.

The first light filtered down into the ravine, filling the world with colors. Lahoon lay in the grass near the well, watching the thin moon pale into morning. He reached out a hand toward Verlem. "I do not wish to leave you," he murmured. "I have only just found you. And a whole world with it, one I have always yearned for."

Verlem leaned in 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 before. I do not know what I can do. Or what it will do to me." His eyes were dark. "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 the cosmos."

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. I want to feel as you feel, see as you see."

Behind him, the slim leaves of deewelarque rustled softly in the breeze. A beetle crawled along a dead twig, tiny sharp feet holding on to the bark, making his way between thin air and a web of narrow wooden footholds.

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

* * *

Amalai lit a lantern. The soft glow made the hazel sheen of her skin come out and her black curls glint with embers.

Lahoon regarded her. He had come to the end of his tale in a rambling fashion, giving Amalai a jumble of dazzling images from his journey with Verlem.

She had cradled him in her arms and listened as only she knew how. Lahoon reached out to her now, touching her hand. His voice was still dreamy. "I hope you do not mind that I love him so very much? You are not afraid?"

"Do I have reason to be afraid?" Amalai ran a thumb over his cheek.

Lahoon swallowed down an instant reply. Instead, he leaned in, touching his brow to her temple, giving himself time to feel. He wanted to be as deeply honest as he possibly could, to himself as well as to her. "Do you?" he repeated the question in a low voice. "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 reason." He shook his head slightly. "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 traced a thoughtful line along her chin. "Your presence is rooted so deeply in my life. We are good together, very good. I cannot possibly imagine I would want to let go of that." He drew her close, as if to ward off the danger of her drifting away.

"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 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." He cocked his head, needing reassurance. "Don't we?"

"We do," Amalai murmured 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. "We do not have to lose each other when we go to Verlem. We can both go, together." Her spine straightened slightly. "Or, we can be together, and both go. Even if we go on different routes, each in our own way."

Amalai laughed, a low, bubbling sound. "I am almost glad I got 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 hand with his own. “There may be a little trouble, though,” Lahoon added hesitantly. “Because at the moment, I am indeed overwhelmed. Maybe all my dreams and actions will indeed revolve around Verlem for some time. This is all so new and so elating. I may be lost, obsessed, one-pointed in my attentions for a while. Even though, underneath, your presence in my life is as important as it has ever been, and my love for you just as strong.” There was worry in his voice now. “Will it be all right? You will not suffer? Will we both feel the strength of our bond and be reassured?”

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

She ran a 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 a community of life, and every root holds wonders enough for me.” Amalai’s gaze roamed over the shelf on the wall, where earthenware pots hid the secrets of a thousand seeds. “And I have my own love for Verlem too. Even if it is a quiet, patient kind of love, a gentle companionship. It may look slim and tender, as all seedlings do, but within them is the greatest force of all: life itself. In its steady ways, that force can grow a mighty tree and even a whole forest. 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.”

Lahoon laughed, a low, happy chuckle. “No, you’re not. You rarely are.” He drew a deep breath, savoring Amalai’s smell, and licked a trace of sweat and garden off her neck. As she pulled him to her chest, he gave himself over to the blessings of coming home to her embrace, and to her warm, round, earthly body.

The night of the new moon crept up on the square before the bath palace, oozing out of shadowy corners and narrow alleyways. Thick clouds drifted across the sky, heavy and sullen beneath the darkening sky. But a good number of people were still out and about.

Gureev stood guard by the entrance like a natural part of the bath palace ensemble, another statue with graceful limbs and endless patience. Kortid beside him was shifty and uneasy. He looked haggard, like a knight-errant suffering through an endless quest, having crossed 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 while Kortid guided townsfolk to safety. If it ever came to that. So far, on all these evenings they had been out in town, the only events they had observed were people coming up to tell them that 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 went 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, 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.

Gureev took a deep breath and straightened up a bit more, his gaze roaming the place before him. People sauntered 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 the lanes. In the houses, one window after the other began to glow with the 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.

Then dust devils rose up in raging vortexes, whining in thin, high wails, in bodiless whimpers. From the undergrowth, darkness seeped out and poured across the ground like rivers of pitch, gathering on the square in a bubbling quagmire.

People stared at the growing nightmare. A shadow rose up from 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 woman before him and shoved her 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 advanced, flowing slowly across the sand toward the bath palace.

A sword of light blocked its way.

Gureev stood poised and ready, his eyes narrowed. Alone on the empty square, the two figures faced each other like in a duel. No thoughts were left in Gureev’s mind, and all he knew now was the figure of darkness before him and the well-trained moves of his own body. He stepped forward, his arms raised, his blade of magic aglow.

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

Darkness flowed from the being like tendrils reaching hungrily into the air. Shifting slyly to one side, the creature made for the palace doors in a half circle. But Gureev matched it every step, in perfect synchronicity. He kept himself and his sword in a flawless line between the demon and the bath. 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. The black shape collapsed. Rivers of ink flowed 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 huddling on the edge 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. His eyes were wild.

People stared at him, mesmerized by the sheer terror emanating from him. A cold cloud drifting over to them, a freezing mist settling into their bones like the curse of a demon. A chill that was there to stay.

The third day of voting had come to an end. In the fading light of the evening, one last man gave his voice to end 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 happen?” 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 open window in slow, unperturbed moves. A bird sang to the coming of night, sweetly and melodiously, as if nothing in the world 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?” The knight of his vision made no response.

Gureev raised one arm in entreaty. “I thought it was a demon, a lethal danger. But what if it was just a being very different from myself? Did it actually mean to attack? Or was I just scared of the wind, the screech, the darkness? It all looked like danger to me; but to another, that may just be their nature. 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 walked 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 grass. "Are you there? Are you all right?"

* * *

Berqar strutted 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 placed 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. Twilight filled the ravine beneath the towering mountain, casting the world into uncertainty. Shadows crouched behind bushes and boulders.

And yet Lahoon noticed the one shadow that was different, that was out of place. 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 inhaled deeply. He had reached the end of his tale, and the beginning of his question. "That shadow flowed out of the darkness, then 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. His voice was calm, as low as Lahoon's. "No."

Verlem sat still, hesitating. "How you first saw me," he said, "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, wildflowers, a beetle.

Then the air over the ground began to dim. A shadow hung over it, a darkness growing deep and black, with a shimmer of starlight in its midst. It drew together, the air of night closing up around the silvery gleam, manifesting as life.

Verlem had materialized. He sat there in his shy, unobtrusive pose, seeking out Lahoon 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, 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. He touched 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 mists of the well drifted around Lahoon, caressing him with cool, wispy fingers as he lay on the grass. He stayed still for a long time, feeling the ground beneath his limbs, and Verlem by his side. But eventually, his 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 uncertainly, "then who?"

Verlem let his gaze wander out across the ravine, over thorns and dark leaves, over boulders clothed in shadow. A green snake poked out a 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 behind the artificer's cabin gently brushed against the yolk-colored wall as they swayed in the evening breeze. A single firefly rose up, a soft fairy glow 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, 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 cabin and into 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 Unleha.

"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 been heard. 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 got horrified at the bath palace or 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 a staged 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 right on. "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 whatever you want 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 far 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."

He wore 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 at least one ally. They are moving purposefully and 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 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 it all 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 show up 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 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 clenched 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 rules about this. 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 family. You’ve not 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 or not, I will keep on trying.” She turned 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 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?"

In the back of the ravine, a boulder lay half buried in the ground like a sunken altar, its even surface only dented by a slight depression. A deewelarque spread her old, gnarled branches over it.

Lahoon stood facing Verlem across the shrine. As he sat his wooden bowl down, the clear spring water within gave a subtle wave. Then it grew still. Lahoon felt thorns scratch his shoulder as he sank to his knees, following Verlem's move.

Verlem raised his arms in prayer, then reached into the branches of deewelarque. When his hand came back out, a lush black berry lay in his palm. He squeezed it gently. A fragrance both sweet and pungent rose up just before the broken pearl fell into the bowl and inky trails drifted through the water like the signs of an oracle. Verlem's finger was soaked in dark juice. He raised it to paint a symbol onto Lahoon's brow, the same as on his own. Lahoon took a deep breath. The mark burned on his skin. Now, it was up to him.

Reverently, he laid his fingertips on Verlem's temple, that fragile, delicate portal of skull. He leaned in until their brows touched and they gazed down into the water that lay clear and still beneath them, now perfectly transparent again. On its surface, light and shadow danced. The sky was in the bowl, and so were the haughty cliffs and the dancing leaves of deewelarque. The tiny crystal lake saw them all, held them all, and held nothing.

With breaths deep and even, their bodies poised in a prayer of magic, a human and a fey 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 through crowns of ancient trees, and restless branches creaked in agitation. In the middle of a narrow dirt track, the body of a woman lay sprawled on the ground. Her skin was deathly pale. A few splatters of blood had spilled 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. A feeling of lack, an aching pain. So he went out to hunt. It was easy, usually, quick and quiet. And soon he sank into the solace of nourishment again, the pleasure of feeling life-force flow back into his being.

But there was a cost.

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 a door open, a sliver of light fall 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 reeled with relief. He sank down into utter absorption.

And did not hear it coming.

Suddenly, flaming torches were all around, too close, moving too 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 straightened up, his eyes unfocused.

Lahoon's breath came raggedly. He was slow to regain a sense of his surroundings. Erratically, images of the ravine shaped again in his mind. The dark deewelarque bush, the sheer wall of the cliff. The cool, moist air. He breathed in deeply.

By now, Verlem had recovered enough to be able to hold Lagoon's gaze.

"What was that?" Lagoon rasped, his voice broken. "Is this what happened?"

Verlem sat down on his knees. He laid a hand on the altar. "It is what happened," he whispered. "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. The herbs on the terrace nodded in acknowledgment and mingled their own minds and scents into that fragrant breath of the highlands.

Lahoon wordlessly elbowed the mending basket over, and Rebonya picked out a random sock.

“But we should be taking over the plaza!” Unleha slapped her thigh. “We need to mobilize people properly this time, so that a whole crowd turns up for the sounding!”

Amalai wagged her head. “Maybe.” She squinted into the blue sky. “But whatever we do, it needs to be done in a new spirit. Not simply another round of fear or anger.”

Unleha huffed. “Like what, then? Do you want us to joke around a little?”

Amalai winked. “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 have 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 really learn something here. I am beginning to like it.”

Rebonya flashed him a mischievous grin.

But Unleha was not going to get sidetracked. Impatiently, she drew her thread tight. “We must 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. “A party. 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 shone 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 it. That and a few smaller fun things to do. Then loads of people will turn up. All idling around, having lots of time to quickly 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 fortress. He moved through the dusky lanes of Behrlem with a stride both swift and furtive, his lips pressed into 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 the gloom gathered 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 in archways like cowering strangers.

Unbidden, a memory rose up in Kortid’s mind, of a dark forest, of shady undergrowth. And of a demon sucking 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 toward a streetlight, a gleam ran up and down the sharp edge like a promise, a spark of hope.

Kortid inhaled deeply. His body poised, 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 first 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 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, rising up slowly and gracefully, 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 now, every night. The changing of the guard. A ritual, freshly invented, yet carrying a ring of tradition and an air of magic. It held the promise of a presence; the promise, or the dire, unspoken threat.

*

Lahoon and Amalai walked home in silence through the falling night. The bulky houses around them settled comfortably into the darkness, seeming even 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. Those of a plaza filled with soldiers, filled with magic.

"It was beautiful," Lahoon finally said in a tone of reproach and disdain. His arms raised, he offered an elegant flourish, a half turn, a dancing 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 on Lahoon’s torso as he pulled the blouse over his head. “We see Pramus now, blessing the soldiers. He’s clearly in league with Berqar. And for all we know, he might well have conjured 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.”

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 teaching and practice sessions 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 lay a hand on Unleha’s shoulder. “But that’s just what I mean! You go ahead and do your own thing, your way! It is all right to woo and 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 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 burning house.”

In the stillness of the ravine, Lahoon was on his knees before the stone altar, his hand cupped around a bowl of water. Deewelarque leaves rustled by his shoulder, whispering their liturgy for the familiar ritual.

Lahoon felt the mark of dark, fragrant juice burn on his brow. Slowly, he leaned in until Verlem's head came to rest 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 in the soul of a fey.

}}}} 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. Gray fish lingered 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 glinting 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. Spindly beings walked 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 precisely to 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 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 soul? His dark pair of pupils, this unfailing sign of animal presence—what did it mean to her?

Had she meant to attack him? Or to test him? If he had been one to possess a long, sticky tongue that came hurtling out, this would have meant death to her. 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 and 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 her carapace, to drink him in. To touch him, and have her fine, small body meet this heavy giant.

"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, or 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 space, after all. Her world. 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.”

With a brisk stride, Unleha overtook the oxen plowing a field by 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 bank to the other, an old bridge rose 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 with his head 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. Now that she trains with the recourses' youth, I get to hear tales of your legendary skills at least once a week." She looked down at the bridge. "And I admit, seeing you fly around here I can understand why. If training with you makes one able to move like that . . ." She trailed off into a low whistle.

Dorarin, who held the position of heart of the recourses as well as that of town 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 fresh 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, 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. "Of course it would be us. If ever the use of physical force were considered. But there is no need for it here." He ran his hand lightly over the railing. "People being afraid of ghosts, and voting soldiers into town . . ." He raised his brows. "That is worrying, to my mind. But it is their town, and their decision. 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 fence does indeed get repaired, or that sheep returned, or whatever it was the deliberators decided." Dorarin tilted his head. "Or, of course, to separate people who turn 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 could 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 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 just 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 look 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 guess we might.” 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. “The use of force is a terrible thing, and we never even considered it until all else has been tried. And perhaps not even then. Because that all else has failed does not mean that use of force won’t fail too. Sometimes there just is no solution. We have no right to use violence if it only makes things worse.”

Dorarin tore his eyes from the horizon and let them return to Unleha. “Anyway: With respect to either soldiers or demons, the recursors have no mandate. We will stay clear.”

Unleha held his gaze. “Yes.” Her voice was low. “I knew. And I agree. But I love to hear you say it, you, as the heart of the recursors.”

A fresh breeze blew over the highlands, meeting the warm day with whiffs of snowy peaks and sky-filled horizons. Amalai walked 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 sat 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. Amalai came up quietly and sat down on the grass beside him, mirroring his pose.

Two birds circled underneath hazy clouds, black outlines dancing elegantly to the tunes of the wind. Behind Amalai, the deewelarque breathed out moist green air, rich and nourishing. She let it fill her lungs, then 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 the sap drawn up from dark soil.

Amalai turned to feel into Verlem's presence, to sense his fragile body, his calm, tranquil energy. She smiled, then moved up the hillside a sliver, just enough to sit halfway behind him. He allowed her to come that close. Through the stillness of his body, of his mind, he showed her his welcome.

Amalai's open knees almost touched his shoulders. With her arms resting on her knees, all her limbs half cradled Verlem in a loose embrace, not touching anywhere, but sensing him everywhere. His rays of starlight were subtle and strong. Distant, and fully present.

In a move as sinuous as that of the bending grasses, 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.

Amalai reached out and laid her arm down 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 wish to give 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.

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 leaned in just a fraction, 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 a little in his ethereal hold. Ever so lightly, he touched his forehead to Amalai's warm skin. He let its smoothness glide over over his cheeks, over his closed eyelids. Verlem turned her arm over gently, bringing up the soft inner side, his lips roaming the tender spot, feeling the sweet, strong beat of her pulse. He rested his head in the bend of her elbow, his face turned sideways toward Amalai.

He held her gaze. There was nothing but trust and welcome in it.

Verlem cut down in one swift 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 with 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 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 air. Long after Verlem had ceased to drink, had closed up the wound with a lick or a kiss or some fey magic of his own, Verlem still remained with her, his head resting on her arm, his gaze following hers out into the valley. Amalai felt Verlem's presence, his calm. His gentle glow of starlight and night. The deep peace within him, within her. The warm wind, the rays of sun, the aroma of wildflowers in the air, Verlem in her arms. Her own joy and the shapes of the world 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 gaze wandered out into the distance. "I never dreamed this might be possible. People come to me. 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 shone between the twigs of the deewelarque, between the hard, thin needles of thorn. Two tiny birds of amber and vermilion picked at it with a careful beaks.

Verlem whispered to them. "This was a battlefield once, and it seemed eternal. I used to kill people. They fought me, I fought them. I had 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 ones.

Verlem let his cheek glide over Amalai's skin, feeling her silky softness. "My world has turned. It was a war zone before. 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?"

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 stacks to take a discreet peek into the adjoining tearoom. 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. They were idling in corners, lounging on the kang, talking in little groups. 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 and relaxed now. He thoughtfully stroked the rim of his glass while listening to Amalai.

All around them, a gentle hum filled the room. Some people leaned back in contemplative silence, sipping contentedly from their steaming cups. Others gathered around small tables full of tempting food, talking in those soft, muted tones people often had after speaking from the heart 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 extremely foolish not to."

Kortid clenched his fist. "The force of demons is unfathomable. We've never faced an enemy like this, never seen such danger. In our blindness, our overwhelm, how are we to meet the unknown? We are in need of divine protection!" Kortid gripped Gureev's arm. "Will you come?"

*

Gureev met Kortid in the light of a pale half-moon. Dust devils at their heels, they scurried across the courtyard until they reached a low, half-hidden door in the west wing. An embrasure stared at them coldly as Kortid knocked. For a long, silent moment, nothing happened.

But then the door opened. Blindfolds were fastened over their eyes, and then 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.

Finally, 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 and calmed, and yet became honed and alert even as his body began to ache from endlessly holding out in a pose of submission. But the end was near. The priest's voice sounded out from an alcove hidden beyond sight, hollow reflections of his words haunting the stone columns.

"I solemnly swear," he intoned.

The crowd echoed, all the voices uniting into one. "I solemnly swear."

"Darkness will remain darkness, silence remain silence. Never will I tell what my soul partook of."

They repeated after him, faithfully and obediently. They yielded, believed, and surrendered. They followed into ever-increasing fervor and passion, into yearning and hunger, into the ardent need for an overpowering wave to come and sweep them away.

*

The columns of the crypt reached up into endless heights. Curls of incense rose up like wraiths, cringing before the flickering torches, then getting lost in the darkness of the vaults. Kortid swam in the stifling air where sacred scents mingled with the hot breaths of humans. He vaguely recognized the baker among the townsfolk who had knelt in another antechamber before joining the soldiers in their devotion, thronging the underground chapel.

A hundred feet stomped the same rhythm, stirring up echoes of a primordial trance. Kortid's voice dissolved into a chant, feeling its way toward strength in numbers and a way of getting lost, of melting into something much, much bigger than one small self. A mass so huge, so loud it carried him away like the torrent of a river, like an ocean tide, like a 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 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 and the teeth of a dragon. The chanting grew urgent and one-pointed. All awareness homed in on the image of Vineehah the Warrior, the Rage, the Destroyer.

With a bolt of lightning the god burst into flame, and as Vineehah bared his fangs to roar, a hundred voices boomed along with him, the crypt on fire. The stone itself vibrated.

Slowly, the divine apparition faded, 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 in Kortid's ears, the deafness in the wake of an earthquake.

Berqar rose. She came to stand beside Pramus, who turned to the crowd, his arms still raised, the gesture carrying 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, and 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. The shadows hid behind them.

Kortid drew his dagger and stepped forward, his muscles tense, his senses alert, filled with the unbearable power of ritual.

Soldiers poured in around him, gleaming blades in their hands. They moved slowly, cautiously, their bodies poised, knives at the ready. Mystery hid in the corners, unseen.

Then all hell broke loose. A being shot out of the darkness in sudden onslaught, bolted sideways and disappeared. 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, a frenzied hunt, a chase to the death. The creature escaped, 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 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 sinking sun bathed Lahoon's cheek in a glow of ocean blue. 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 worldviews, of how we go about our own private lives. But if we are going into town, rallying people, making proclamations—that's a different matter. We need to be explicit, and honest with one another." He cleared his throat. "I could not go to the plaza announcing something that I do not believe myself. Or that, in fact, I know to be untrue."

Lahoon searched Unleha's face. "I cannot say about demons," he ventured, "but I do know that there are beings in this world that are not human, not animal. We have met one. A fey."

*

The magical lantern softly illuminated the faces in the circle, and threw questioning shadows up to the rafters and the bushels of dry herbs dancing in between.

Rebonya stared down into her tea.

"Lahoon," Unleha said, her voice wavering between her own alarm and an attempt to calm Lahoon down. Trying to indulge him, yet make him see reason. "I know you have always dreamed about a fey 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 understand. You do whatever seems right to you, and to him. 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 mostly for you and Amalai. It’s still not my business.”

Her 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, do it after the vote, not before.” She got up with a harsh, angry move and turned to leave, her back rigid, her fists clenched.

*

“What’s the matter?” Gureev asked after one look at Rebonya.

“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 face with her arm. “You would like this,” she muttered. “I bet you would. It gives you such a nice chance to say, ‘Told you so!’”

*

Gureev sat on his mat silently, thoughtfully. He stroked the covers in a gentle move, smoothing the surface. “So Unleha did not believe,” he said. He raised his gaze to Rebonya. “But you? Did you? Do you?”

Rebonya squirmed. She pressed her hands over her eyes, her face pinched. “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 fingers still wrapped around the warm 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 his occultist group and nodded sadly. Then he thought of Berqar and gritted his teeth. At that moment, the door opened and two people stumbled 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 hands twitching. "I hope it is all right." She looked up into Amalai's face again. "He wants to know. To ask you." Rebonya took hold of 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. Moonlight cloaked the fortress in feeble white and ashen gray. In the darkness of a chamber, a ghost began to stir in the corner, shifting and 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, 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 and stern. He could feel the two humans, the rise and fall of their chests, the drowsy sounds of their sleep. Their scent filled the air, an aroma of life amidst all the towering stone.

Noiselessly, Verlem stepped up to one of the mats. A beautiful youth lay on it, his skin black, his breath slow and even. Verlem 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 waist. The wide sleeve of her nightshirt had fallen back from her wrist. Verlem's hand closed around her arm, pushing upward until the fabric pooled beneath 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 moonlight. And ripped the skin open.

Verlem felt the pulse beat and her essence run into him, fresh, hot, and delicious. With his lips pressed against her arm, he melted into the relief, the pleasure, the life-giving power.

The round belly of a lute lay in Lahoon's lap. He sang lullabies to the world, sounds 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 clam, rest, and contentment. Lahoon had not lit a lantern, so they stayed out beneath the darkening sky and its purple-gray clouds. Magic colors glowed in the bath gardens, and lanterns twinkled back at themselves in the pools.

Amalai leaned against Lahoon's back and felt the movement of his lungs as he sang. Her gaze drifted into the sky, to the first pale stars, and then over to Verlem who stood by the door. 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 presence full of natural ease and taciturn beauty.

Amalai's heart swelled. She rose to stand beside Verlem, to breathe in his presence like the spicy fragrance of an unknown flower. She brushed a kiss onto his cheek. Feeling his tender skin on her mouth, his strange, alien scent in her nose, 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. Burrowing his face in the disarray of Amalai's hair, he whispered happiness into her ear, nibbled playfulness over the lobe.

Lahoon emerged from 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. He has heard about you, from us."

Lahoon rested his chin on Amalai's round shoulder while he sought Verlem's gaze. "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 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 hidden passages within the wall to bask in the memory of sun enshrined in the stones. A tiny ornament of green and gold, the lizard sat perfectly still, then disappeared like a minute flash of lightning striking a secret place somewhere out of sight.

Verlem touched the wall in search of reassurance. "But I can meet humans. As I have met you, one at a time." He looked into Lahoon's eyes. "It depends. On who it is. How it is."

Lahoon nodded. "His name is Gureev. He lives in the fortress. 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 visions and memories. "Yes," his low voice floated back to them. "I have seen him. 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. "I will come to him, if he wants me."

* * *

Gureev tugged 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 and 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, 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.

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 the endless nothingness gaping unseen over the earth in the hours before dawn. Then a slight glimmer of silver appeared, giving the infinite universe a center, a heart, and a purpose. A small, pale gleam of light, 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. 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 or 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 stood by the window, his back half turned to Verlem. He looked out beyond the iron bars, his eyes unfocused. "Do I want you to drink my blood?" Gureev's voice was low and deep. "No." A mere whisper. "I can't say I want that." He turned around to Verlem, not quite facing him. "It feels wrong. 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 survive." 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 his head. "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 holy temple, 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. Where you thought you would die as soon as you stopped fighting. And yet you turned around.”

Gureev came to a halt, as if having reached the sanctum of his 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 in an open gesture, both an offering and a closure. “So, yes. I am willing.” He swallowed. “I will allow you to drink my blood, as much of it as I can easily spare.” He looked down at the ground. “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.”

The sound of ancient bells slowly faded and the purple glow 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 darkening lane.

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 tucked her arm under Unleha's and grinned. "I guess it was all right. After all, when it comes to ruining 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." 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 for 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. First the parade of soldiers, to draw attention and gather an audience. Then Berqar's speech, increasingly fervent, ever more dramatic—and finally a display of grandiose magic, lightning and thunder from a mage who can vanquish all evil." Amalai held on to Lahoon's hand more tightly. "It was 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. 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 their 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 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 tilted her head. “The bath demon was a dramatic act. It had people under its spell for a day. But I believe that after the first frenzy, they will begin to wonder if it wasn’t just a staged illusion. After all, that is what we are all told as kids. That demons never existed, except as magical illusions. So it is probable people will remember that tale, and revert to that belief.” Amalai clapped her hands. “They will vote the soldiers out.”

A streetlight came on with a magical glow, hovering in the dark for a moment like a giant golden firefly. “Illusion, illusion.” Lahoon hummed and clicked and swayed gently as he walked. His eyes unfocused, he skipped a little, trying another rhythm, a slower melody as he sang on softly to himself and to the falling night.

* * *

Amalai had the kitchen window open to let in the afternoon breeze. Lahoon arrived and poured the last of his bounty onto the table, which was already an overflowing cornucopia. Small purple berries 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 many of these treasures, had come from their own garden.

Amalai was carving away at a root, half of its body already soaking 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 these." She pointed to 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 web of all being. "I take their life-force into me. As Verlem takes mine."

Lahoon came to embrace Amalai from behind, placing a kiss on her hair.

She half turned, leaning her cheek against his belly. "I wonder. Am I feeding on others in a 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 that saw 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 tossed feverishly on his mat. His teeth were clenched in his sleep, his brow covered in sweat.

}}}} Darkness encroached upon him from all sides. Shapes and shadows hovered between the black trunks. Kortid stumbled on, unseeing, unfeeling, over uneven ground, between snares and entrapments. An eerie wind whined through the forest. It smelled like a crypt.

Kortid hurried. Twigs or ghosts slapped his face and 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 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 column, his whole body got ready for combat. A black creature shot out of nowhere, charging straight at him. Kortid screamed and threw himself at it. His scream turned alien, shrill, filling the whole world. A monster's scream. Kortid stabbed at the 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. The sheets were drenched, and his stomach 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. But only 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 where he was alone in his chamber with the gloom and the ghosts.

* * *

The soft glow of lanterns illuminated the tavern, brought out warm hues in the wooden floor and made spoons and glasses wink at each other with a golden glint. A few soldiers came in after long hours of standing guard and settled 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 peals of laughter. A boisterous group celebrated on the table right behind him, their bright robes shining in the muted light like patches of color in the careful composition of an oil 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, deary!” A young woman shouted over the voice of her friend. “Not after dusk! The monster might come and get you. There are deeeemons afoot!” The whole group roared with laughter.

Something in 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. His soul was 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 doom.

“Don’t you dare.” His words came out in a toneless voice, vacant and ghostly. “Don’t you dare make fun of this.”

The youngsters stared up at him. Gaunt and haggard, a lifeless mask glared down at them.

By now the other soldiers had stood up as well, following Kortid uncertainly and forming a line in his back. 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 jerky moves of an undead body, he left.

The soldiers 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 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 nooks and crannies, together with the fear and the shadows.

Kortid let his back slide down 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 help me 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. "I do not know what to do. I am scared." His voice was monotonous. "I am about to go mad with exhaustion." Kortid closed his eyes. His face was taut and 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. 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 fortress as well. He hesitated. "You know," he said uncertainly, "there may be someone who can 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 don't 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 his hands. “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. It is artificially induced, and it is focused on him as a person. But it is there, 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. Whatever gets me out of this state. It is unbearable.” He squared his shoulders. “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 contact him for you. To ask if he would be willing to help, and if he thinks this could possibly work. Then I’ll come back to tell you what he said.”

Kortid took hold of Gureev’s arm, pressing it tightly. “Thank you,” he whispered, his eyes feverish. “I hope you’ll bring him here soon.” He saw the look on Gureev’s face and almost laughed, a hoarse, helpless sound. “No pressure, of course. You are only saving my life.”

* * *

Lahoon’s peacock skin shimmered in the light of the lantern as he set it down gently on the floor between Amalai and Verlem. But his attention 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 rubbed his neck, glancing over at Verlem. “Would you be willing to do this? 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 alien presence drawing near. Verlem held Gureev’s gaze with his own dark eyes. “It would work. And I am willing.” Verlem paused. “But whether it is the right thing to do, I have no idea.”

Amalai touched Verlem's sleeve lightly. "It would mean that we lead you to him. You, of all people. When it is you who scares him senseless, who haunts him in nightmares and dark corners." 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 terrified of. You are not his demon. Not at all."

"No." Verlem's voice drifted across the room like a cobweb on a breeze. The darkness beyond the lantern's glow swallowed it up.

Gureev cleared his throat. "Kortid does not know your nature. I did not say, because right now, everything is already too much for him already." He shifted uneasily. "But we do need to tell him, the moment we can."

Gureev 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. 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 escape again."

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. Already, Kortid is doing harm with 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 wandered between Amalai, Lahoon and Verlem, needing reassurance.

They all looked back at him. They did not know.

Silence hung in the air, drifted across the floor and curled up in their laps. The vials on the shelves glinted in the lantern light, and dried bushels on 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 in a unique form of magic." Amalai faced Gureev squarely. "Kortid can choose consciously. The offer is honest. It is real, and it is what it says." She bit her lip. "And from what you were telling us, Kortid may need this as much as anything."

Gureev clasped his hands tightly. "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.

Verlem inclined his head.

Gureev closed his eyes. "I only hope that this will work. That it will not backfire."

The tavern hummed with conversations, scraping chairs and clinking glasses. Every now and then, a peal of laughter or a burst of excitement rose above the general buzz. 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 demons are just a trick to scare people into submission!"

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! The Transition has won, and we are not under the thumb of either Feudals or soldiers!"

The soldiers at the counter half turned toward her, sensing the burst of aggression. Still unclear 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 stand on street corners, which is bad enough. But you

showing up in 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.

A few 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 came up real close to one of the soldiers, pushing her chin up aggressively, her whole stance a 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, and he stumbled 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 shouldered past Unleha so forcefully that Unleha stumbled and bumped into the soldier beside her. The soldier shoved back so hard that Unleha fell to the floor.

Tenatetlan screamed.

The kettle boiled over.

* * *

In the fading light of evening, Kortid squatted 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.

“I have found him. The healer,” Gureev began.

Kortid’s head spun around. “And?” There was a gleam in his eye.

“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 fey. That is his magic."

Kortid began to wave a hand dismissively, then stopped mid motion. He stared. "He is fey?" His voice was thin, wavery.

Gureev held his gaze. "Yes."

Kortid's face grew 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 fey. 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 fey powers."

Kortid turned his face away, staring straight ahead over the sand. A shiver ran through him. His hands were clasped tightly.

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 be there when he comes? Will you stay with me?"

"Yes." Gureev's voice was deep, and a little raw. "I promise."

* * *

A sky of lavender and ocean blue arched over the plaza, with a few streaks of gold outlining errant clouds. In the growing darkness, the magic swords shone brightly, beams of radiant hope and power meeting in a dance. The changing of the guard had begun.

Rebonya wielded her blade skillfully, moving with strength and precision. She met the soldier before her in an elegant pas de deux, turning full circle while bringing her sword down, 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 evening air, accompanying the knightly performance.

Even though no one in the garrison had planned it that way.

Lahoon sat on a wooden box and played, the melodies rising from his lute as graceful as the dancing guards. His black hair greeted the night and his butterfly skin offered hues of cerulean and ash to the dusk. But his voice called out to the amber rays of light in the sky. In Lahoon's rich baritone, the refrain of a song carried across the square strongly and clearly. "Illusion! Illusion!"

A small crowd had gathered around him, 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, changing its power and its meaning.

"Illusion! Illusion!"

A creed, an appeal, a proclamation danced across the square in the shimmering cloak of a song.

Amalai's craft room had temporarily taken on the air of an infirmary. A number of people poured in from the tavern for ointments to clean their wounds and keep them from festering. Lahoon had come home by now and served 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 bloodstain over her ear. She wore it like a pledge, a warrior's oath.

"This is it!" Tenatetlan's eyes smoldered. "They have crossed a line! This is too much, and there is no going back now!"

People murmured, shifting on their cushions. Tenatetlan leaned forward, her body tense, ready to spring. "First they come into town, manning the corners like they own the place. And they do not stop there! They now try to rule the taverns! And tell us what to say. They want to control our thoughts! We must strike back, with all our might! For our homes and 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 toward Tenatetlan. "We may be playing right into Berqar's hands if we do too much of that." Her voice was even. But Tenatetlan exploded. "You and your cowering! You always keep your head down, hoping for acts of goodwill. But we can see where that 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 up to Unleha, closing ranks with her. Tenatetlan snarled up at Amalai. "You may sit 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. "We will do battle! We will drive the soldiers out!"

In the back of the ravine, Verlem knelt before the stone altar. The water in the bowl lay still and clear, reflecting the light of the sky, the cliffs, and the branches of deewelarque.

Lahoon watched as a broken berry sank down into the crystal depths, releasing a swirl of dreamy black tendrils that danced in ever-changing shapes within the water's perfect clarity. They slowly dissolved.

The magical mark burned on his brow. Lahoon leaned forward, his fingertips on Verlem's temple, his gaze down in the lucidity of the water, ready to receive whatever image its emptiness might hold.

}} He walked along a large, deep furrow in a barren field. There was a well-trodden path beneath his feet, and he made 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 and glum. Dreary twilight covered the endless expanse of the field. A wasteland.

He felt 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 on 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 no foothold to push back out. It kept him prisoner. Using all the weight of his body, he leaned backward, freeing his feet as he fell onto the spot he had started out from.

Breathing heavily, he stared at the mound before him.

And went at it again. This time, he lay down flat on 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 as before, and nowhere else.

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. The inkling of a possibility.

All his clothes and 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 now he knew how.

He rolled over one crest after another, laboriously making his way. Leaving marks in his wake, a faint memory of deviance, the idea of a different path.

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 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 took 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 eyes wide and the wind in his hair, he saw the whole landscape around him shift and change. Water gathered into a creek, then a river. Trenches 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, filling his heart, finally bursting out in a sound of helpless overwhelm, of recognition and surrender, of awe and happiness. {{{

The vision faded. Lahoon drew back slowly, releasing Verlem. His eyes were still vague and dreamy, and his voice came out in tumbling whispers. “Was that in the realm of Fey?”

Verlem knelt beside the stony altar. “It was inside of me.” The deewelarque held out a protective branch above his head.

“When I did not want to kill anymore, I knew what to do. It was simple. Clear. But it was so hard.”

Beneath the rustling leaves, a small chrysalis cracked. Two thin antennae appeared, and a delicate black head. The being struggled with its prison, with 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 easy. But it was the toughest part, becoming someone else. Seeing and doing things in a way different from how 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 embodied memory. “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 becomes deeper. It leaves 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. 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 odds with everything already there.”

Verlem opened his hand to the world. “So many others have helped me, with the walks of their own lives. It is impossible to go alone.”

A thin black beauty crawled out of the chrysalis. Raw and fragile, her wings still crumpled, she ducked against the age-old trunk of the deewelarque, catching her breath, getting ready to live as someone new, in a world that would never look the same again.

Verlem turned back to the shrine, dipping a finger into the crystal-clear water of the bowl. Bringing up a sparkling drop, he washed the mark off his brow and Lahoon’s.

Then he turned to the old deewelarque, inclining his head, and held the bowl up like a sacrifice. He sang his prayer in tones so high they were almost inaudible. The leaves of the deewelarque stirred and breathed their moist fragrance back at him. Verlem opened his eyes. He let another single 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 meet Lahoon's gaze. "I believe it is deep magic. That power to reshape the furrows of reality in our souls, in our lives."

The clarion call reverberated high and clear through Gureev's dreams. He stretched.

On the other mat, Rebonya turned to the wall with a grunt.

Gureev smiled. He did not know whether Rebonya was really grumpy and unwilling to wake up every single morning, or whether she was just kind enough to give him a bit of time to himself, knowing how much he cherished it.

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 his head back.

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 herself.

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

and her friends.” His hands touched with lithe precision, then came down gracefully beside his bending knee. “You were quite right about it. None of them has locked me in, restrained 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.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “Like an equal among equals,” he said, quoting the solemn oath of the Transition, and slid back into the contemplative flow of his moves.

* * *

Kortid paced across his chamber. Thin morning light filtered in through the window, and with it the yawns and muted conversations of comrades leaving for the early shift.

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 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, as if waiting to be admitted. His eyes were 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 feverish. “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 magic gift 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 pushed against the wall, staring at Verlem.

Verlem caught his gaze. He got up instantly and moved a few steps back.

Kortid's breath returned. But his fists still clenched 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 stood a few feet away, in a pose of listening, of feeling into the air around him. Thin, shy, and 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 warmed, melting the ice around it, feeling freed and alive and able to beat a strong, steady rhythm. Kortid's hands released the sheets. His expression softened as he raised his gaze to Verlem. "Please come back."

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 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. 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 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 turned to face Verlem. “Yes,” he breathed. “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 rose over the slope between the forest and the bath palace, a swirling dance of ethereal wraiths. A huge 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, and 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 bog flowers 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.

A half moon slowly faded into the morning sky as Amalai made her way back down between the pools. When she reached the bottom, she ran into another early bird, one bent over the controls of an intricate system of weirs and dams and watersheds. Of course, Amalai soon found herself deep in conversation with Unleha.

"She did not mean we should wage a war," Unleha insisted, 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 stand up to the soldiers head on. 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 shiny promise of healing. “As well as treating each other with respect. With kindness even, if possible.” Amalai slipped the tiny flask into her pocket. “I fear that what Tenatetlan suggests would be counterproductive.”

“How so?”

Amalai tilted her head. “Violence breeds violence. Fear breeds fear.” She raised a hand. “In a quiet country town with lots of competent and 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. The demon was the first pretext Berqar gave. The next one is supposed to come from us.” Her fist closed tightly. “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 usually are, anyway. People 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.”

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 an 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 to it. Seeing how things went just now.”

"I am certainly not going to apologize to a soldier!" Invisible hairs rose at Unleha's neck as she suppressed an angry growl. Arms crossed, she stood by the lowest basin, where the copper pipes prepared to lead clean water back to the bath palace. The top of a coiling tower gleamed red-gold in the morning light. But where Unleha leaned against the base, the tubes wore a muted coat of lichen. The undergrowth rustled in her back as some large animal drew near.

"Not all soldiers are evil," Amalai said in measured tones, her eyes on the twitching branches. Unleha turned around, following Amalai's gaze. Rebonya had emerged from the greenery, shooting Unleha a quizzical look from her almond eyes.

"Rebonya is not a soldier," Unleha scoffed, turning back around and waving impatiently at Rebonya 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 the capital," 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.

*

"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 water within, the pumping thud of the traption like a low, steady heartbeat.

"You should have heard Berqar talk this morning," Rebonya continued, pushing back her fringe. "She was all aflame. So 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 people 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 shouted, arms spread wide. She shook her head, her hands falling to her sides. “Honestly.”

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, then easing back into place.

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 matched Gureev’s step as they walked toward the plaza, their assigned guard station for this shift. The sky was still full of light, but blue shadows hovered in corners and birds sang of the coming night. A good number of people were out on evening walks, visiting friends, or finishing business.

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 in his voice. Hope might come back. Hope burnt and battered, gray with the ashes of past devastation, but hope, nevertheless. Kortid’s soul skipped along the lane in a shaky 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, where the high stone arch sheltered them from view. Kortid’s body was rigid. Then he inclined his head wordlessly, and a torrent of exhaustion and gratitude gushed through the air around him. Verlem breathed in the swirls.

Kortid raised his gaze. “Will you come again?” he rasped.

Verlem’s voice was just as low. “Yes. As often as you need me. As often as you wish.”

Kortid sank back against the wall. His eyes closed. “Thank you.”

The information Rebonya had given Unleha turned out to be correct. Two guards stood at the wool market, and one of them was the soldier from the tavern. Unleha recognized him instantly. A short, broad-shouldered man. Johalen, Rebonya had said. Unleha sighed. She clenched her fists by her side and moved up to him with uncertain, hesitant steps.

“Um, hello.” Her voice was strained. 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 crossed her arms in front of the chest and rocked 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.”

“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 said, keeping her voice deliberately slow and 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 sorry any of that happened. It never should have.”

Unleha clasped her hands tightly, her shoulders tense. “So. That is what I have come to say. 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 briefly met his gaze. 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 held 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.

Unleha stopped. And looked at him. He met her gaze, and she came up to his 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 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 lane toward the bath palace, a broad grin spread all over her face as she stubbornly resisted an urge to skip along, or to sing out loud.

* * *

The rising sun peered into the world through a narrow gap between the horizon and a large gray bank of clouds. That was enough to give a silver lining to the sky and a touch of gold to the reeds.

Verlem sat on the shore with Lahoon, nestled in the roots of an ancient tree. Half the lake had already emerged from the shadows,

and when tiny ripples caught sparks of sunlight here and there, they delightedly threw them back up into the air.

“I will be with Kortid often.” Verlem’s voice drifted out over the water. “And I need to dissipate afterward.” The reeds 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 that eased 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.

Lahoon 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 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.

Lahoon leaned back against the rough bark of the tree. He closed his eyes. His hand, unobserved, stole over to Verlem. His fingers reached coarse black cloth, and fine, dry skin over delicate wrists. The contact sent a shiver through Lahoon’s blood, a glimmering stream of yearning. His head turned involuntarily, his eyes wide open again, dark and vulnerable.

Verlem’s fingers came to cover the hand on his wrist.

Lahoon held on to him tightly. Then he leaned back again. He took a deep, shaky breath. “Kortid needs you.”

“Yes.”

Lahoon’s voice was almost inaudible, a rasping whisper. “I need you too. Even if in a different way.” His gaze traveled out over the waters. Beyond the reeds, a crane stood on one leg, in quiet solitude. Lahoon bit his lip. “I could not bear to lose you. But I will not. Will I?”

“No. You will not. I want your love, as much as ever. I will stay.” Verlem raised their joined hands to his cheek.

Lahoon 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 toward Verlem. “Kortid will get better, we hope. He may not always need you as much as he does now.”

The crown above their heads rustled in a low murmur. Verlem blended into the tree’s presence as if his legs were gnarled roots too, and his voice kin to the leaves. “I will be with you, even now. But I cannot let you travel into my soul through magic anymore. And we cannot search for your portal into Fey. 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 birds skimming the surface. “There is so much for me here. So much that is new, wonderful, and 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. I am the one who is elated, frightened, and drawn irresistibly.”

Verlem’s fingers reverently moved over Lahoon’s hand. “There is such awe-inspiring richness here, such overpowering intensity. I can hardly bear it.” He raised his gaze. “I cannot do anything else right now.”

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 Fey.” 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 realm, letting myself be overwhelmed by its wonders.”

The door opened and closed quietly as Gureev and Verlem swiftly stepped through. Kortid turned around in anticipation. Gureev settled into his corner again, and Verlem followed Kortid to the mat.

Verlem carefully came down on the edge. "May I ask?"

Kortid nodded.

"I stepped through the door very quickly," Verlem began, "to make sure no one saw me. But there would be an easier way for me to come. I would not need to walk through the fortress at all."

Kortid's brow furrowed as he tilted his head. Verlem held his gaze. "I am fey, as you know. Would it frighten you to see proof of that? Or would it be all right?"

Kortid shifted, drawing back a little toward the wall. "What proof?"

"I can dissipate, become waves of pure energy." Verlem halted. "And I can reappear out of thin air in a dark corner." His voice softened. "That is how I could come to you directly. But I will not do it if it scares 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 shoulder. Kortid's eyes met his with no more than a hasty flicker, a dark scowl under furrowed brows. But he leaned in a sliver, and Gureev put his arm around Kortid's back.

"You knew this," Kortid said in an accusatory tone.

"I did."

Kortid shook free of his friend's arm. "Is there anything else you have not told me?" His eyes darted feverishly between Gureev and Verlem.

"Yes," Gureev said. "There is. Lots, even. It may take quite a while to get to know Verlem, to truly understand everything he is."

Gureev inclined his head. "I cannot say that I have, yet." He 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 down his skin. His eyes were still wild. But he took hold of Gureev's arm and pressed it tightly. Kortid cleared his throat. He gave Verlem a small, jerky nod. "Show me."

* * *

The day had grown hot and heavy. The burning sun summoned a haze into the sky and glistening pearls of sweat onto Amalai's skin. She straightened up and wiped her brow.

Amalai scanned the horizon. There was no sign of the rains yet. She laid down her tools and set off toward the back 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 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 dark shadow falling over the water 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.

The water murmured softly 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 wells bubbling out into sunlight. Of metamorphosis, of being 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.

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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 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 at Unleha even while she pulled her sarong down into the water and began to rub and rinse.

“I have been to the county house,” Unleha began. “To put up our placard, as we discussed. Calling for a sounding in a dozen days, and then, if the sounding resonates, to have a vote after another dozen days and 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 and leaned forward. “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 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 hand through the water. “Interpreted, at any given moment in time, to mean exactly what Berqar wants it to mean.”

Lahoon followed Amalai through the fields and found a battered orange 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. “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 fruit in a nervous rhythm. “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. If there is no way around, we’ll take the way right through the middle. But at high speed.”

* * *

The sword’s light shot out, searing the gloom. 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 to the blue beam.

Gureev heard his heart pound in his ears.

Verlem gingerly stretched out his hand and let it hover above the sword, with just a sliver of distance. He closed his eyes. His hand slid up and down the blade, feeling for the gleam, for the magic. Then it stayed still. With a sudden jerk, Verlem’s hand cut right through the sword.

He opened his eyes. “Light,” Verlem said. He walked across the sword, letting the blue beam catch on his robes, his chest. “This 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 it, in a way. We knew 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 fey. Still the soldiers in the streets can be a protection. They may see things, like any sentinel would."

"They did not see me," Verlem ventured. All eyes turned to 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. I coalesce in people's chambers at night, and 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 aftertaste behind as they faded. It began to prick and bite Rebonya's throat, an irritation she could not name yet, but one she needed to cough out before it choked her.

Sudden realization shot through her. She jerked around. "Have you ever crept up on me like that?" She was a hissing menace now, her body leaning forward to Verlem and recoiling at the same time. "Have you ever drunk my blood at night? 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! 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. 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 and 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 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."

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. You don’t see it coming, don’t feel it when he is there, don’t remember afterward. You’re just completely helpless and exposed. To that creepy, intangible ghost.” Her voice broke. “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.

* * *

Lahoon lounged on the roof terrace, watching the windows of the bath palace turn from mellow gold to the black of night. A wry smile tugged at his lips. “So I have always had a secret lover. Secret to myself, even.”

Amalai laughed and placed a kiss on his hair. “Clearly, some people are delighted to find that a fey has come to them at night to drink their essence.” She shook her head as she sat down beside Verlem. “But others are horrified. As we have seen.”

A soft breeze whispered to the leaves and they responded in a dance of shifting moonlight and small blue shadows. Amalai watched in silence, her senses charmed by the subtle conversations of the world.

“I never thought anyone would object so violently,” Verlem said, half to Lahoon and Amalai, half to the flowers 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, tracing the thoughtful expression it held. “No,” she said slowly. “I think not. Although it might have saved us a lot of trouble. 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 do not always show that kind of respect themselves. Many of us still feed on other animals without a care. Using their land, using them, killing them even though we know they want to live, want it very much. Just as much as we do.”

A few monkeys chattered sleepily in the trees. 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.” On the meadow, a rabbit nibbled at wildflowers in the shifting light. Suddenly, he perked up and fled to safety, disappearing into his burrow.

“I wonder . . .” Verlem’s voice floated out into the night. “Will many people feel like Rebonya? 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?”

Lahoon sneaked a finger over to Verlem’s sleeve. “Ideally, we would have enough people who willingly offer. Then you could be nourished without the need to go to anyone who has not agreed.” He tugged at the sleeve. “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 mirror image of the moon. “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. “Perhaps one a day. Or three every three days.”

“One a day!” Amalai gasped. “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 dazed. Slowly, her mind began to wrap itself around this. "But that means we would need a hundred people in all."

"Yes."

The waxing moon hid behind the clouds.

"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 lightly brushed against it. "But this would have to grow naturally. It cannot be rushed."

Verlem's hand looked fragile, almost transparent, like a wisp of foam on the ocean of Lahoon's skin. Their fingers intertwined. "I cannot make friends with a hundred people. And not quickly." Verlem squeezed ever so softly. "I am still surprised I can make friends with people at all. Surprised, and a little overwhelmed."

"It is overwhelming for everyone." Lahoon's eyes were warm as they rested on Verlem. "No one here has ever met a fey before. You bring a whole realm with you when you come. It is breathtaking. Your mere presence shifts 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 hummed. "So you cannot declare yourself, not to so many people at once. It would be too much." A bat fluttered across the terrace, and Amalai politely ducked out of the way. "But some people will not mind if you go to them in secret. When the revelation comes to them later, they will greet it with acceptance. But others would be horrified." The bat crossed the moon, then disappeared into the night. Amalai's words followed her, with a question the sky had no answer for. "But, who? How can we find those who are willing? What oracle will we ask?"

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, arabesques winding around each other in floral patterns of infinity and self-identity. One of the fractal sculptures had even been set in motion 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, stood by a grid on the wall. It had the names of days running down one side, those of rooms the other. "Please come forward now!" the woman called. 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 get through all the offers, of which there are many, I am happy to see."

Indeed. Amalai let her gaze 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.

Clearly, people in Behrlem felt there was a crisis brewing and so many of them moved 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. So they all 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 large resounds in the small, so the small always echoes in the large, in an endless conversation.” He reached out to touch the unfurling root fractal. “We need to hold in our hearts what we wish 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, please do. We meet by the Green Temple at sunrise, beneath the ancient tree.”

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. “Here is the perfect way to make all your conversations go smoothly. Just a few principles and you will find that even the most difficult encounter suddenly turns into a great success. This method 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, over time, 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 that 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 rise and show strength in the face of danger! This is a 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 shifted 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 hours after midday, Amalai decided to retreat to the porch rather than labor on in the brooding heat when the air was tense and heavy. She savored the shadow of the broad eaves. Her hammock swayed softly like a boat floating lazily along the green banks of her herbarium. The occasional croaking of frogs came over from the creek, filling the listless air with their song. Amalai let her gaze drift out between the leaves. She fell asleep.

In her dreams, dark clouds drew together under a leaden sky, pressing down 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 and 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 beneath her lashes.

The herbarium 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 and 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, confirming 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 the full embrace of the goddess just as she heard a song rise up behind her. She turned. Lahoon had come out, 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, their dancing worship of Quanalua.

*

“You have known me for so long.”

Beyond the eaves, the rain kept pouring down in strong, heavy release. Lahoon tugged at the towel around his hips, making himself comfortable on the porch. But his gaze stayed with Verlem, with this frail white fey who had finally come to join him.

Lahoon’s 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 an 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 boards. “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 stole over to Verlem, touching his robes.

Verlem pulled him in, interlacing their fingers. “When you called out to Fey, 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 fey?”

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. 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 yearning. I would have fallen for almost any fey 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 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, and the sensitive leaves nodded acceptingly with the arrival of each and every one. 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 eyes grew wide. “How so?”

“Many other fey shy away from me. If I had not been near you, maybe some of them would have come.”

Lahoon watched a single pearl fall down from the eaves. “Why do other fey stay away from you? Are you a danger to them?”

“No. I am not. But they may not know that.”

Lahoon could almost sense the swelling, hear the sucking 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 for so long.”

Lahoon sat very still. “So I was lucky.”

Verlem turned, his face so close to Lahoon’s 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 is even at the heart of what we seek. Nothing more vital to bringing back the right order.”

Pramus watched her, his posture proud, his staff placed firmly on the ground.

Berqar raised her hand 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 beyond their reach!” Her eyes held an ardent gleam. “And that in the 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 had just stepped 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. On 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 part 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. I do not even remember his face. 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. "Talking to the conciliator did help. Even though she could not get hold of the soldier yet, and I might need that. I may need 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 whistle when walking across my garden, carefree and lighthearted. I want to feel at home in the world. Like I used to, all my life." She sighed. "But now that's gone."

Half hidden behind a latticework of brass, a few candles flickered, 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, immersed 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, a 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, she could already see the crumbling yolk-colored walls of the artificer's cabin and the pale half-moon standing 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 hasty friend. "About the tavern brawl. You know."

"Yes. I remember," Unleha grumbled.

"The conciliators have begun to work on that, as one might expect. But they are having trouble."

"Oh?"

A path 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 refuses 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 halfway underground. Wisps of steam protruded from 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, 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 reached up into the sturdy vaults, disappearing into shadow and mist. 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 had climbed 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 came 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 sought Verlem’s gaze. “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.” He shifted to his other foot. “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. “You do not?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Kortid straightened up. He ran a hand through his hair, then rubbed it over the back of his neck. “Well, then . . . ah . . . what can I give to you? How can I thank you?”

Verlem’s hands were folded together, his thin 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 regarded him in silence. Light fell in through the window, reflections of the sun on the puddles. Kortid's voice was soft when he spoke. "You are a true lover of humanity, then."

Verlem stood very still. Stars of golden dust danced in the light. 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 his breath, then slowly began to sink down into shadow. Verlem inclined his head. "Yes. I do love humanity. More and more."

Evening came slowly but steadily over the Diamondtip fortress. Shadows grew in courtyard and corridors, underneath tables and 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 hasty steps. "And I will sleep if you entrance me. But will I be safe? What if the demon comes, 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 magic sword. What would you do when the demon comes?"

"I do not know what I would do, since I do not know who would come." Verlem paused. "But I rather think they will not come at all. Not to me." He lowered his gaze. "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 very still. 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 fey. 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 company. Nibbling small delicacies or holding a glass in their hand, they drifted from one stall to another, discussing a book here, learning a knitting pattern there.

Amalai let the sound of music lure her through glass doors at the back into, well, not exactly a portal. But a sort of in-between place. Gradually, imperceptibly, the farther she went, 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. It became a forest at the edge of the gardens, sharing the cloying scent of blossoms and the secret lives of beings on silvery wings.

On a dais at the far end, Lahoon bent over his lute beneath a canopy of white and gold. A few gentle notes fell from his strings. The audience was hushed, spellbound. Lahoon had entranced them slowly over the course of the evening, taking them further and further into a world of magic, an enchantment of fairies, a realm of the fey.

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 Fey.

Night fell over Lahoon's song. The moon stood high in it, white as a ghost. The 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. 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 few. A danger tamed, a miracle set free.

In the darkness before dawn, when the moon stood high and white and the wind whistled through the branches, a being of beauty and grace appeared, gliding on soundless paws across the glittering snow. Fey. 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 take this solemn vow," his voice flowed out, "to give of my blood, in love and nourishment, to let a fey 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, an incongruous, otherworldly melody. With silvery ink, he painted runes of moonlight onto his arm, signs of welcome and mystery. 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 to 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 fey.

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 both dreamy and priestly. “We ourselves are the path a fey can walk to come out of the shadows.”

The woman took up a brush and dipped it into the same pale ink that adorned her arm. She signed her name, adding small, delicate letters to the arc over the abyss. Writing the spell that would read a fey 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 shadow behind the dais, half hidden amongst swaying branches and small crimson fruit, Verlem stood very still, a quiet, delicate presence himself. His dark eyes were on the ceremony, on the dedication of vows. 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 and 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 impatiently. “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.”

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 the 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 the blade. “The tinder was bright, but the blaze won’t come. And the rebel is sleeping, meeting our pokes 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. “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, and the silver threads of embroidered runes flared up. “We’ll 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 treacherous, fiendish. 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 his arms in triumphant conclusion.

Berqar looked at him in silence. She held the 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 think they will not."

"No, of course not," Pramus expounded. "There is no need. 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 and loud, very loud." 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, who keeps 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 town, our public order, and all our citizens. So we need to go on searching and fighting. With an increasing number of soldiers, and an increasingly active role for them."

Berqar regarded him with an expressionless face. "We will stage the entire rebellion with just one person?" She 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 small, ferocious 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 out, they may indeed have transformed into vicious rebels. Or, in the meantime, other people might have spoken up for them, and gotten into trouble that way. Revealing 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 breeds violence.” He raised his staff. “Unrest calls for order. And for a force of order.”

His fingers, ringed with winding dragons, carefully ran over the gnarled wood. “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 the saber up beside her face, standing poised and ready. Then she lunged, clanging her blade against the iron bars of the window. A sharp, angry furrow ran down her brow. “War is a reality of this world! But people in Behrlem have forgotten. They do not even believe in fighting anymore. All the old virtues are lost.” She withdrew her blade in one rapid 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 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! It will be ready for war. Like a knight in shining armor, it will brave any enemy!”

Her eyes gleamed with an inner 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 pawns.

We are ready to make that 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 drifted up from the ground, lingering in the fading light of the evening. Lanterns came on in one house after the other, painting a golden glow into one window here, another there. Lahoon strolled 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, nowhere near staring. He seemed to drink in the place, the smell of the neighborhood, the space and depth of the houses.

Lahoon’s lips held a secret smile. Walking the town with Verlem was special, in many ways. “Would you like to see another?”

“No. Not tonight,” Verlem replied quietly. “If it is all the same to you.” He half turned to 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 that rose from the ground filled the streets. Darkness gathered in the gardens between houses. A streetlight came on, and its muted glow caught on white shrouds drifting up with aimless grace and natural ease, wraiths from the season of rains courting the night. Lahoon breathed in their moist bodies. Walking through the dusk with Verlem, he felt himself flow along with the smooth, quiet moves of these beings of vapor, entranced in a slow, secret dance with them and with the fey by his side.

* * *

In the depth of the night the air had become crystal clear. A soft breeze flowed in through the open window, blowing the curtains into the room. A full moon sent cool light down to earth, playing with the billowing sails of thin white tissue.

Shadows danced up and down, and out across the room. On a mat by the wall, a sleeper turned with an unconscious sigh, with a question spoken in the realm of dreams.

Clouds moved in the sky, hiding the moon. They made the shadows beside the window lose their silvery edge and sink down into murky grays. The light had gone. Within the darkness left, the night whirled, growing dense and solid until it materialized into an almost human shape.

Noiselessly, the shadow left the corner and glided toward the mat. But despite the perfect silence, the sleeper sensed a presence and woke. Blinking, he tried to find the contours of a familiar room. What he found instead were two dark eyes.

“Who—”

He forgot his question and sank back onto the pillow. Meeting no resistance, oblivion closed around him like water, gently and inexorably drawing him down into the deep.

Verlem touched the man’s cheek. It was a burly fellow 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 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. 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 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 floated across the room, mingling with occasional calls from the kitchen. The Teapot was frequented by quite a number of people in the late morning, but their back corner was secluded enough to give them 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 thanks for the 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 depths of an ancient recipe. It was the Teapot Library's specialty, a pungent, aromatic concoction brewed with a reverence no magic 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 don't know what to do." Unleha put her coffee down. "She 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."

From a tapestry on the wall, a woman weaving a dragon banner looked out at Unleha. Unleha stared back angrily. “And now, Tenatetlan even goes for personal hostility. Inciting hatred against individual soldiers, and even against townsfolk 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 off track now.” She sighed. “But I think the only effect all my talking had was that she has written me off, and focuses on more amenable people in the group. There are some. Not very many. 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.” She sought Amalai’s gaze. “I just hope they won’t do anything stupid.”

* * *

It was a very different kind of concert, but Lahoon enjoyed it just as much. The seed swap was already packing up, and people now ambled around the plaza, playing games or learning how to juggle. Many strolled over to the music for a bit, all the while enjoying their drinks or bantering with friends.

There was no rapt attention here, no space for bringing up the moonwolf. Lahoon would have to save that for another day. But given the rate at which people had offered at the bath pavilion, a few such concerts would be enough anyway. So Lahoon settled into the free-floating, easygoing nature of the plaza without regrets.

He winked at his audience, and two old women began to clap a complex rhythm to his song. A lad with a sonorous bass hummed a second voice. Then a few children started to dance, luring innocent bystanders into their whirl. Lahoon sang with all his heart. He knew why he loved Behrlem.

Then, in the smothering heat of midday, the rain broke. With one definite clap of thunder, the clouds split open and flooded the

plaza. People fled from the square, holding makeshift covers over their heads, calling out to children splashing through puddles.

Lahoon grabbed his lute just in time and continued his songs under the eaves of the county house. He had drawn quite a bit of his audience with him, Unleha noted, pleasantly surprised. Those were people who would not be going anywhere soon, but had all the time in the world to briefly step inside the county house to support the sounding.

It had gone well before, with Unleha's own rounds around the plaza, with 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 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 carts full of oranges drawn in by stomping oxen, and shouting people waving them along, making a path between constantly moving boxes and barrels. From within the high barn, a regular thumping and clanking underscored the bustle, as if to drive it into its own impatient rhythm. Now that magic had come to the making of orange juice, and traptions had turned that barn into a trabarn, the buzz was unprecedented.

Unleha's home had always been teeming with life, a vibrant horde of a family with lots of kids and 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 that 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. In the shade of trees a huge hammock swayed 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 screeched gleefully, clearly proud of having discovered him.

"Hello," Lahoon replied 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, hullo 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 before long! 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'll soon put out of business. 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 herbs in her garden, and of her own way of life. But she said nothing.

Unleha picked up a curl of orange peel and let it snake around her arm, where it contrasted beautifully with her black skin, like jewelry from the shrine of artlessness. "The new traptions for treating peels will also be up anytime soon. Just a few last hiccups to be designed out. Then we'll make fodder and spices from the peels, and there won't be any more waste. This," she pointed at the rotting peels, "is a disgrace in more ways than one, after all." And with that, she abruptly returned to her original concern. "So tell me about the sounding! It has resonated?"

Lahoon nodded. "Very much. We had a lot more support than we needed." He rubbed his hands together. "It has gone extremely well. Almost suspiciously smoothly." His brow creased.

Unleha tilted her head. "What's suspicious? We did not think Berqar and Pramus would sabotage the sounding, did we?"

"No," Lahoon said gruffly. "We did not. And that is precisely why they might have succeeded if they had tried." A deep breath escaped from his lungs. "But they have not, as far as we know."

He shook his head quickly. "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 up already."

Unleha kicked at half an orange and belligerently planted her fists on her hips. "Within that half moon, or in the three days of voting that follow, Berqar and Pramus will make their move. But we will be there, ready to undo their wiles!" Unleha paused. "Whatever they are," she added, vexed.

* * *

Rebonya stood beside the shack in the herbarry, her feet planted firmly on the ground, her arms crossed over her chest. An angry line furrowed her brow.

On a stone in the grass, Verlem sat with his face averted, his eyes cast down. 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 sat motionless, with only the wind moving a strand of hair over his cheek. His 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 seemed to blend into the stone he was resting on, unable to breathe. But finally, he raised his head a fraction. "I am scared," he said in a raspy voice. "Will you hurt me?"

Rebonya snorted. "I couldn't hurt you if I tried!" she spat out.

Verlem licked his lips. They were very pale.

"Could I?" Rebonya asked. And she almost wanted to.

Verlem said nothing.

Rebonya dropped her gaze to the ground. "No," she pressed out. "I will not hurt you." She took a deep breath and exhaled, turning 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. I take my food from living beings too, as carefully as I can."

A pained twitch flitted across 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 swallowed. "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 closing ranks. "So I will not hurt you. You need not fear. I will control myself enough to keep from attacking you again." Half a sneer tugged at her lips. "I will simply go on shaking with revulsion. But never mind that. It can't be helped."

"It can be helped." With just the breath of a move, Verlem touched a fluffy seedhead by his foot. The seeds blew away between his fingers. "I could take your aversion away with a look. But you would not want that?"

"No!!" Rebonya snapped. "No way! Don't you dare work your vampire lures on me! Don't mess with my head! Stay out!" She was screaming.

Verlem kept very still. 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 discovered what you are, and hated you for it. When I accused you, attacked you. You have not done it. Even when you began 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.” She bit her lip. “And instead, you have come to talk to me.”

Rebonya fell silent. She lowered her gaze to the ground. Her hands clenched the rim of her tunic. “Verlem,” she said haltingly, “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. Which is precisely what you are doing.”

She looked at him, but quickly averted her eyes again, gazing out beyond him into the garden. “I see you are doing the best even I can think of. So I apologize. 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 dug into the ground with the tip of one shoe. “I will try to do better in the future. I will be civil, at least.” She cleared her throat. “Other than that, I guess we can just stay out of each other’s way.”

A little shiver ran over her. “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.”

As one of her irregular surprise treats, Amalai had brought a late breakfast into the bath gardens for Unleha. They snuggled comfortably into a swing seat and enjoyed sunshine and titbits together, just like the chicken who wandered through the meadow all around them. But before long, the women's conversation quickened and began to revolve around their usual topic yet again.

"It's now or never!" Unleha's voice boomed into the idyll. The swing seat trembled. "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 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 have to do it again the next day. 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 pastry and fresh 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. One 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 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. She just lowered her voice to a fervent whisper. "Trouble is all they need. Never mind, then, that the measures have nothing to do with the problem. As long as there is some emergency, harsh measures are called for! No matter which."

Gureev laid a hand on her arm and Rebonya finally did hush. Unleha had come back in. She stopped near the door, looking over to where Verlem waited beside Amalai.

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 in his usual shy, unobtrusive pose.

Unleha huffed. "All right. You can do illusions too. So?"

Verlem regarded her silently. Then he approached, just a few hesitant steps. "I am here. In my body." He offered his hand.

Unleha shrugged. But she did take it.

Verlem held her hand, and her gaze. Suddenly, the warm flesh in Unleha's grip turned to shadow and disappeared. A shiver ran over her skin as her hand closed on thin air.

Unleha spun around. Verlem was right beside her again, 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 your feats. You can work magic, no doubt, and it's a kind of magic I am not familiar with. I am an artificer, specializing in traptions. You've specialized in something else, clearly. And I am not able to explain what it is. Just as many others cannot explain how I 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 any of them." She let her arm sink. "But nothing you could do or say will convince me that you are fey."

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 the 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 over her chest and rocked back and forth on her feet. "Unleha is an artificer. Committed to observation, to proof. As opposed to doctrine and fixed ideas." 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. "I don't know." Rebonya shrugged. "I don't know."

* * *

Kortid sat on his mat, his back against the wall. He rolled a smooth stone between his fingers, tracing its age-old patterns of sediment, lines of beauty in muted colors. "A musician played in the plaza the other day. 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 has 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 enchantment 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. The whole town is under threat, 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 roses and unicorns." Kortid clenched his teeth, and his next words came out as a hiss. "But the real world is one of violence. 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 still hung low and the ground was damp and muddy, but people already streamed back out onto the plaza. And the soldiers came too, as they did every night for their half hour.

Lahoon sat in his usual space with his lute, a little crowd around him, some clapping a rhythm and humming along, all ready to join 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 magic sword with strength and precision, seamlessly matching the moves of the soldier in front of her.

But then a sudden commotion shattered the ritual. A boisterous group shouting angry slogans burst out of an alley, 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 and their urgent need for engagement. Tenatetlan was first and foremost 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, 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 on 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 the 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 into his face. Johalen politely waited for them to pass, and when they didn't, he carefully stepped around them.

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 water 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, they yelled, "Beat them into desperate rout!" The space around them, while still charged and crackling, was opening up again, and air was flowing in.

Lagoon walked over to join them, followed by his little choir. Lute and voices took up the 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. And when two of the wheeled food stalls pulled up close, the routine of social evenings in the Behrlem plaza had fully reinstated itself.

“How could you!” Berqar roared at Johalen. “You were in charge! Meant to lead, not to cower. How dare you let a gang of rowdies break the changing of the guards!”

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 confusion was palpable.

Berqar caught herself, then charged on hurriedly. “You are putting the safety of the town at risk! We can not 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 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 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 are always profiteers seeking pacts with the enemy, betraying their neighbors to their deaths. These deceivers are as dangerous as the demons themselves! A knife in our back! There must be zero tolerance!”

Johalen looked disconcerted. He opened his mouth, as if still about to speak his mind instead of showing 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 came late, later than usual, albeit with redoubled vigor and almost as a surprise. It was already getting dark when the clouds burst open suddenly, plunging the garrison into a deluge. It caught Rebonya out in the courtyard, and rather than dashing back to the east wing, she decided to seek shelter under the eaves of an abandoned stable. She would wait it out.

The waterfall before her eyes blurred her vision. She rested her head against the stable wall and let her gaze wander out into the fuzzy grayness. Until it caught. Rebonya leaned forward slightly.

What was that? Or rather, who was that? But she knew already. Never mind the broad hood drawn up around the head, and the cloak covering up silky robes. There was no doubt. It was Pramus, the mage, who hurried along the wall of the empty west wing and disappeared behind a half-hidden door.

Rebonya did not think. She slid into her routine of ducking and hiding on the run as she sped across the courtyard. Panting, she pressed her back against the fortress. She eased up to the hidden door, but her breath was so rough and ragged she felt ridiculously conspicuous. She held still for a while, allowing her lungs to calm down while she squinted at the blackness of an arrow slit beside the door. Even that slit had iron bars. Rebonya huffed.

She listened closely, but could not hear a thing over the rain. She changed her strategy. 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. She was in a small guard room with a table and two chairs. On a shelf sat a magical lantern, and mugs that seemed ghostly and gray with dust. In the back wall, steps lead down into the dark. Or, not entirely the dark. A last shimmer of golden light swayed somewhere down in the distance, growing dim.

Rebonya grabbed the lantern from the shelf and started down. She descended swiftly at first, but extinguished her light before reaching the bottom. She had no idea how she was going to do this. It was pitch dark now. Surely she could not walk across a tangle of unknown tunnels and vaults 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 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, would she ever 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. As she walked on, she began to scoop up loose stones. At each 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. 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 taste. And she always took the one that, for unknown and unquestioned reasons, felt most like Pramus to her.

Rebonya walked down endless passages and crooked hallways bending back on themselves. She came into wine cellars full of dusty bottles and enormous oak barrels. She traversed halls with vaulted ceilings, descended broad stairways and climbed iron ladders. She found little alcoves and squeezed through holes in the wall.

And suddenly, she was out.

A 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 water, 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 water, 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. She wanted to hide. The cool air sent a shiver over her bare torso. She heard a lone drop fall into the lake, echoing ominously. But then, a shimmer came through a crack, just where the teeth of the mountain bit into the wall. Rebonya sneaked forward. Almost blind, she just heard the gravel move beneath her feet, then felt the rock rub her sides as she squeezed in between stalagmites. She pressed her face against the chink. A disembodied light hovered on the other side, so close to her eye that she could barely see past. The hall that seemed to lie beyond vanished into shadow and gloom. An ominous rumble rose from the depths.

Suddenly, the light flared, and Rebonya jerked back. But she quickly pressed her eye to the crevice again. The soft hovering gleam was gone, and instead a huge purple fire burned in the middle of the hall. A circle of smoky wraiths danced around it with an eerie chant. Their bodies grew stronger and stronger, until they threw themselves into the flames with a roar, and one imposing shape of blackness emerged. It spread its wings, dark and leathery, armed with enormous claws. With a roll of thunder that sounded like triumphant laughter, it tilted its head back to bare fangs of molten iron.

At that moment, a cold blue glow appeared on the other side, and with the deep chime of a gong, the figure of a mage manifested. Enveloped in a sphere of light, his robes a swirl of azure and silver, Pramus raised his staff.

His shape was dwarfed by the looming 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. Bright light gathered on the end of the staff, and finally a spidery hand of lightning broke from the tip, reaching for the demon. With angular, crackling fingers, it gripped its heart.

The demon roared. But it was paralyzed by the thin lines that clutched its core 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. It fell in on itself, burning the ground, then disappeared altogether.

Silence reigned.

The hand of lightning had faded. No sign of the demon remained. No scorch, no ash, no cleft in the earth.

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,” she 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 kneeling beside his mat.

“May I tell you?” Her eyes were intense, 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, 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 launched into her morning speech. On the plans for the day, on the mission of Diamondtip. On pride and duty. But all Gureev could think about was last night’s apparition. No mere shadow this time, but a real, full-fledged demon rising from the fire. Gureev was eager for Berqar’s orders, for her explanation. He was yearning 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 by the wall. A youth. A girl. A man in his prime. They all needed his protection.

Valiantly, the knight charged into the storm and the swirling mists. Against the backdrop of shadowed mountains, his white steed shone like a unicorn, and a golden glow hovered about his brow.

Then the monster reared up, baring ugly teeth and threatening claws. But the knight held steady. As he raised his sword, the blade shone with pure magic.

But then it crumbled to dust.

The knight reined in hard, staring at the sand running through his fingers.

As he looked up, the demon bore down on him with lethal fangs. But just as the knight braced himself in the face of death, the monster itself turned to mist. Like a mirage, it blew away.

The storm grew gusty. With one wailing howl, it tore the cover of fog off the world.

What it revealed was not the pits of hell, nor another crouching demon. It was the king, the captain, the knight's commanding officer astride his rearing horse, saber raised, a battle cry on his lips. At his feet 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 streamed down his cheeks. With one slow, sorrowful move, the knight pulled the 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 in all the dead bodies, all the passed souls.

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, he ruled 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 as a scattering of diamonds fell off the eaves outside the window, they caught a sparkle on their journey through space and night.

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. "Well done, girl!"

Unleha rubbed her hands. "So this is what Pramus and Berqar have planned. 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 shadows. Instead, they will make a demon appear, one more impressive, more terrifying than ever before." 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."

"It will?" Amalai's voice held a trace of doubt.

"Definitely," Unleha asserted. "Like last time. Panicked people rushing in 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. When the lights are dim, and enough people out to witness."

Unleha tilted her head to one side. "There is just one thing we do not know: where?" She hesitated. "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 in Behrlem 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 appears, we will sing ‘Illusion! Illusion!’?”

Unleha wagged her head. “Yes. Of course we will. Or, let’s say, people will. 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.” In an intense whisper, she began to explain.

* * *

Night had fallen over the garrison, but inside the cadet chamber the shadows retreated before the mellow gold of a lantern. “You are better now,” Verlem told 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. It would be a more natural sleep, a sleep more refreshing.”

Kortid hesitated. He looked at Verlem doubtfully. “What will it do?”

A mouse peered out from a crack, watching the giants before her with a twitching nose. Verlem spoke quietly. “I do not know what it will do, exactly. It seems to depend on the person. And I have not

yet used it often, not with people I know well and who would tell me afterward." His hand opened. "I know it will make you feel well and safe. It will make you trust me, in particular. And it will wear off over time." Verlem paused. "If that trust is 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. "While I am in that trance of trust," he hazarded, "would I do anything you ask of me?"

Verlem regarded him quietly. "Most things, probably. But I promise I will not ask you for anything."

Kortid clenched his hands. "Will I remember, after the trance? What I did or did not do? What you said and asked?"

"Yes."

With his head bowed, Kortid saw the mouse flit past and reach her hole. She had made it home.

Kortid raised his eyes 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."

As he looked up, he felt Verlem's dark eyes meeting his, and a sense of immeasurable peace and calm welled up within him. All his muscles relaxed. Warmth filled his stomach, and his heart opened to 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 wish this could be 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.

"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." He fell asleep, curled up in the warmth of an embrace.

It was fruit and salad for lunch, and lots of orange juice. No one felt like having much more in the dense heat of midday, when the air pressed down on them even on the roof terrace. All beings seemed tired, slothful, waiting while the dark clouds gathered above their heads.

Amalai picked another melon cube from her bowl as she turned a worried gaze on Unleha. “There is something else, though.” Her brow furrowed. “What about Tenatetlan? That innocent peddler. That 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 lowered her head. She shifted uneasily. “I do not wish to believe,” Unleha finally whispered, her voice raspy. “I do not. I cannot imagine.” She turned her face away.

Amalai licked her lips. “That she has been working for Berqar and Pramus all along? That everything she has ever said was only a trap, luring us off track?”

Unleha nodded wordlessly. She stared down at her plate with unseeing eyes, her expression forlorn. Amalai 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 and straightened up. “It is true, however. The more I think about it, the more I see that 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 quell it. 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 truly care about—that felt close enough.”

Unleha heaved a deep sigh. “Well,” she mumbled. “We will see. We have got time to get used to it, after all.” She rubbed her neck. “Or don’t we? Is there anything that we need to do about it right now? Anything we can do?”

Amalai raised an eyebrow. “Warn the people who are with her? That small radical group?”

Unleha clucked. “I doubt they would want to hear from us. And also, we can’t accuse Tenatetlan without spilling our secret. We certainly don’t want Pramus to know he’s been seen.”

Mosquitoes buzzed 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 in the windless air: how heavily the sky weighed down on the earth today.

“There is something, though,” Lahoon put in thoughtfully, “that might help.” He raised 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 improvised with me on 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 they will not easily think of us as enemies, or believe there’s no one in the world they could possibly relate to outside their little gang. They shouldn’t feel they need to barricade against a hostile environment on all sides.”

A slow smile spread over Amalai’s face. “Oh yes,” she hummed. “That is exactly the kind of subtle art I believe in.” Her eyes were sparkling now. “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, so they are not 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.”

A pale half-moon shone down on Amalai's garden. All the blossoms had curled up for the night, but the vibrant sap still flowed through roots and stems, feeding them sugar in the dark. Nourished by their memories of sunlight, the herbs were breathing softly, and their green limbs growing towards the sky. Amalai felt their presence in her dreams. She listened to the silence, reached into the quietness of plant life at night. And so she heard the one sound that did not belong there.

On the stairs up to the bed chamber, a floorboard creaked. Amalai's ears pricked up. Still in her sleep, she moved 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 a soft rustle. Amalai did not move or give any sign of being awake. Through slits of night-filled eyes, she squinted at the dark shape filling the doorframe, 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 voice as he scrambled to sit up. "Secret surprise visitors? If I were not so extremely tired, I would certainly think this a great adventure." 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 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. Tonight."

She launched straight into her tale. When she had finished, her face was grim. "So that is what they have done." She tapped her fingers on her thigh. "And I am sure this is part of Berqar's plan. First she created a demon, to make us afraid. Now she's fanning conflict, to have a reason to control us."

The lantern lit the contours of Unleha's face. But the gleam in her eye came from inside. "I bet Berqar will pounce on this. 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. Even though she really is the danger, nothing else." Unleha's voice grew sharp. "We need to preempt her. To act quickly and effectively!" She clenched her fist. "But how?"

A grin tugged at the corner of Lahoon's mouth. His arms spread wide, he sang like a slightly drowsy bard. "Stride out, oh, into the heart of night! Right the wrongs, my hero!"

*

The first crack of dawn widened, letting more and more pale blue flow into the inky sky. The world came back from the shadows. 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 in many places. Well, never mind. She would rub those patches again, and if traces remained after that, then they simply remained. Not everything had 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 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 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 graciously. "I am reassured."

Unleha threw a fallen flower at him and began to refill the last of Amalai's planters with the soil 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. The house would still feel welcoming and familiar to them. There would be no scene of devastation, no feel of a home violated, desecrated by marks of hatred or violence. 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 breaking in, the moment the soldiers turned their backs!"

"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. 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 went straight to the lake. The sun was up now, but the air still held a certain hush, a stillness left from the night.

Amalai undid the clasps on her clothes. She let them fall to the ground and stood as naked as all animals. Slowly, she walked down the sandy shore until she felt the coolness of the lake, the licking surface kissing her toes, her calves, her thighs. The lake gently sucked on every bit of skin that was offered. Amalai sank to her knees, immersing herself in the wet caress. The waves closed above her head, welcoming her to this alien realm of silvery fish and underwater greens.

With large strokes, Amalai dove in deep. When she resurfaced, she found herself floating in light. The gold and crimson of morning was all around her. The arching sky shone with glory, and a gentle floating mirror bathed her in colors.

Amalai raised a hand, reaching up for the endless realm of cosmos, for all its rays and wonders. A perfectly clear drop fell back toward her, touching her cheek, flowing on into reunion with the waves of amber at her chest. With a deep sigh, Amalai let go, giving herself to the sensuous world.

When Amalai returned to the shore, her hair dripping and her limbs shiny, she found Verlem waiting for her, pale and white as the half-gone moon. She lay down with him in the orchard, feeling the leafy crowns shower touches of light over their bodies. With Verlem's otherworldly scent in her lungs and in her soul, she fell asleep.

When Amalai woke hours later, Verlem was still 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.

The image of a 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 quietly between the whisper of leaves and grasses. "Berqar is protecting her furrow, the path she has walked all her life. She needs it. She has no other."

Amalai's temple rested on Verlem's shoulder. Her gaze traveled out over the lake, to the gentle waves, the blossoms floating beyond the reeds. "You understand an awful lot about humans, Verlem, for someone who says we are all new to him."

The wind lifted a strand of Verlem's hair, tentatively, then let it go. "I do understand humans. I am just not sure how to be with them. 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 seems normal. A world of monsters."

Clouds had gathered over the lake, and dark shadows moved in their bellies. Verlem spoke to them. “I left. And even though I came out in paradise, by comparison: The metamorphosis itself was terrifying. Beforehand, most of all.” His gaze followed the changing shapes in the sky. “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?”

Verlem cupped his hands as if to hold water. “The realm around us has to fit who we are. We can only ever be what the world allows. In order to be a soldier, 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 on the mirror images of trees. Calmly and softly, the waves took him in. Verlem’s words flowed along with them. “In a new world, Berqar 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 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.

Verlem licked his lips. “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.”

He reached up toward the sky. “Berqar has to recreate a world of war 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. The sky was dark, 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 a hot meal from the nearest tavern. Bread and ham squeezed on the side, 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 and the gaping hole of a door. She halted at the threshold, her breath baited, her whole body listening. Then, taking one step across, she sank down on her knees.

Her brow touched the wood of an old cupboard as she bowed reverently. It was high and narrow, and so ornately carved it seemed no less than a shrine. Tenatetlan opened its door. With careful moves, she took out an empty basket and replaced it with her own, like 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 farther into the house. 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 rustle beyond the door, a sizzle of lightning, and 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 floated in between glistening stems, white shrouds of mists playing with the dripping leaves, with the closed buds of flowers. Still sheltered by the eaves of the porch, Lahoon breathed in the moisture of a rain-soaked earth. He watched a single silver drop fall from the roof.

His voice wavered. “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, his brows raised. “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 sinuous snake slithered away into the grass. “But many beings exist in the fey 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 their hues 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, could take the shape of a demon anytime.”

Lahoon froze, staring.

✧

The sun broke through, scattering stars over the dripping garden. Verlem tried to explain. “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 hesitated. His eyes were out in the distance, searching for answers. “I do not believe that they choose. As such.” He paused. “They become. They embody. It is what happens to them. Who they are.” Verlem lay his finger on a knothole in the floor. “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 withdrew his finger. “Probably not.” A spider crawled out of the hole. “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, the soldiers ambled around the stalls of the plaza, buying drinks, telling jokes.

Gureev had fallen behind unobtrusively, halting by the doorway through which he had seen Amalai disappear. She stood half hidden in the arc now, quietly telling her story. Gureev let his body blend into the shadow while his gaze stayed out in the square. But though he listened intently, he struggled to grasp what it all meant. “So how do we make sure no real demon will appear?”

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, if it 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 demon. It’s about the fear, the anger, the clench in people’s hearts.”

“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.” She stroked a tiny flower growing out of the wall. “We need to be something else.”

A voice cut through her last words. “Gureev!!” The soldiers had finally spotted their missing comrade and waved him over imperiously. Gureev reached into the shadow to touch Amalai’s hand, ever so briefly. Then he was gone.

Lahoon lounged beside Verlem and Amalai in the shade of their orange tree. His butterfly skin murmured a conversation of subtle greens to leaves and branches.

One of the fruits had beckoned to Amalai, glowing a warm red-gold between dark leaves, and she had succumbed to its temptations. She now held it in her hand, gently pricking the skin with her thumbnail and letting the sweet scent play around her nostrils. She heard Verlem's voice mingle into the 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."

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 and know it is only smoke and glimmer—but the next instant, it could be real? Full of 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?"

"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 an 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 confirm it is nothing? Right before we approach?"

"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 townsfolk? 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 shape 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? Fail to manifest, while you are close?”

“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 washed over the Diamondtip fortress, filling the courtyard with stormy lakes that barely found their way into the ground. The sun’s light had disappeared from the earth, and only gloom filled the cadet chamber.

Kortid looked up at 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 with a gentle prickle, the knot in his stomach came undone. He sighed with relief. His face was bright and free now, his voice rich. “You sure are a wizard,” he murmured, shaking his head at Verlem. “Or an angel.” He saw the look on Verlem’s face change. “Do you mind if I call you that?”

Verlem’s thin shoulders moved under his robe. “I do not know,” he said. “It overwhelms me.” In the chamber’s twilight, Verlem’s skin shone like mist under a silver moon. “I never thought that this is who I could be. To anyone.” He hesitated. “It seems unreal. Beautiful, but frightening.” Verlem lowered his head. “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, the rain kept falling on and on, drumming a low, steady rhythm on the roof. It gurgled and murmured in the drains as a muted background to their conversation.

Kortid rose and came to Verlem with open palms. "In fact, you have given me so much that I really want to give something back. To thank you." He hesitated. "I know you cannot ask anything of me now. You promised. And I should not offer, not 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?"

The wind let raindrops tap against the window, as if wishing to be let in, or as if giving a discreet sign to meet them outside. When no one opened, they kept on murmuring their tales in subdued tones just beyond the panes.

Verlem seemed to be listening to the humming rain outside, and to the inner whispers of his soul. To the way the air moved around Kortid, to his breath and heartbeat. Finally, Verlem raised his gaze. "I will try."

Human sounds came from the corridor, voices calling, a door banging shut. Steps getting closer and echoing away into the distance. The steady beat of the rain remained.

"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. Through their sharing, they allow me to live."

Kortid looked at him, intrigued but puzzled.

Verlem turned away.

Kortid instinctively followed his move and came to stand behind him. "It sounds beautiful," Kortid offered. It also sounded intimate. He did not dare to press Verlem further. He waited.

Verlem's eyes drifted out the window. High on the fortress tower, a horned gargoyle spewed a torrent onto the earth. But no harm came to the windows beneath.

Verlem turned around. He felt for Kortid, for a taste of the subtle energy around him, and offered an embrace of his own invisible starlight. "The way they share their life-force with me," Verlem said in hushed tones, "is through their blood."

Kortid stared at him in confusion. "Through their blood?"

Verlem stood quietly as a stone figure himself, one filled with endless patience.

“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 shaky. But it did come. He could still breathe. “You drink blood.”

Verlem inclined his head imperceptibly, his eyes cast down.

Kortid looked over at Gureev. “Did you know this?”

Gureev’s nod was just as subtle. “I have offered. I give of my blood to Verlem, so that he can live.”

Kortid stared at Gureev, and then out beyond him, into empty space. A thousand drops 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 clouds drifting away weightlessly up high.

Kortid took a deep breath, steadying himself 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.” His hand moved over the rough wall, feeling the solidity of stone. “I did not know what a trance of trust could do. I never dreamed it would bring me deliverance in the way it has.” Kortid bit his lip. “I never dreamed it would bring me such truth.”

“There are no fey 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, ducking beneath the rafters of the bath’s attic.

“You see?” Unleha went on, ignoring Amalai’s interjection and 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. “Which is precisely where we will be when the day comes!”

“Yes.” Amalai tried to unobtrusively ease into Unleha’s argument. “That is the plan and I still agree. It is a very good plan, overall.” She nodded at Unleha encouragingly as she picked up another dusty box. “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,” she 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 do, I am afraid. We are trying to forge ahead, each with her 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 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 the best way, which would have been to agree. To talk and to listen, until we end up with a shared understanding.” She shook her head. “We have tried that, several times and from various angles, and it just does not seem to work. Not this time, anyway. Not on this issue.”

Far back in the attic, rafters and pillars disappeared in the shadows. Amalai moved their lantern up onto a pile of cloth. “So what do we do?” 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 an ebony crow taking flight above her head. “Perhaps we can agree to disagree? You are convinced that fey beings do not exist. You have even met Verlem, seen him dissipate, but you still do not believe. I feel certain you’ve got it wrong, but I realize that this is how you see it.”

A few gold threads blinked at Amalai from an old curtain. “And the same thing the other way around. You are sure that I am mistaken with my belief in Fey, and you will continue to be sure. But I will continue to believe. That is just how it is.” Amalai sought Unleha’s gaze. “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 treasure chest she had come for originally, and moved it closer to the door. She sat it down at the feet of brazen merman. Finally, a crooked grin stole onto Unleha’s face. She turned around. “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 it will continue to be so.”

Unleha made a face somewhere between despair and disgust, just like the 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 need to be honest with each other. And to accept the truth, even if it is unpleasant.”

“Yes.” Amalai spoke softly. “It is hard. But we might still make it. Let’s see if we can find enough common ground. 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 delicate glass of mint tea, “there may even be an upside to this.” He settled 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 no fey exist can talk to Unleha.” He pulled his own tea toward him. “And those who think the fey may be alive after all can come to me. All these people will still get the same message: that we cannot have soldiers in town. Fey or no fey, all of us need to show up and vote the soldiers out.”

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 made 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 finished her cake. She put the plate 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 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 one 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, fine. But if he comes back to say that there is terrible danger and that the demon is real, I can tell you now that I will forge ahead anyway.”

“**W**hat shall we do?” Lahoon tossed on his mat. “What if Unleha really storms ahead? Right after Verlem says that a shinn has made the demon real!” He turned around to Amalai. “Wouldn’t she be walking straight to her death? 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 the bedchamber. “Is that right? To respect a person’s free will to the point where they actually kill themselves out of their own ignorance?” He clasped his arms tightly around his chest. “Surely we must hold her back, even if she does not see the 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 one 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’s shrug came out as a tense jerk. “It could be done. But should it? Is that right?” He raised his hand uncertainly. “Is that wrong?”

* * *

In the early morning light, Verlem looked as pale and ethereal as the mists drifting over the meadows. Only his coarse black robes seemed to hold him in place, anchored to the winding paths of the herbary.

Amalai rubbed her cheek. “Unleha would be walking to her death, wouldn’t she?”

Verlem knelt down, touching his finger to a bright red blossom. “We do not know.” He traced the delicate arrangement of petals and filaments. “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 just 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 finger came away, covered in pollen that might mean the birth of another fruit. He touched the next blossom. "This may save her, and everyone. Or it may not."

Amalai's voice sounded distant, and her lips held a wistful smile. "Unleha is so utterly sure that fey 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 tower of the fortress held out against them with a broad-shouldered build, strong and sturdy. Halfway down, defensively huddled up against the imposing wall, a small outer turret faced the forest with its embattlements.

Rebonya leaned against the gray slabs, 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 to Gureev.

"I cannot have this," Rebonya hissed. "I cannot." An irritated wind picked up, whipping her hair across her brow. "Having to accept the existence of Verlem was bad enough. I've barely found a way to deal with that. But now you come here telling me that everyone might be a shinn, a changeling? Every tree, every child, every horse might look perfectly normal, but in fact be a fake?"

Rebonya's fists clenched. "You are asking me to disbelieve the whole world. To see a ghost 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 crouching at the foot of the mountains. Ancient trees swayed in the wind, groaning and creaking, hiding secret life in the whispering of crowns, in the depth of fragrant soils. A cloud of black birds rose up, an ambiguous shape-shifting murmur taking on fleeting forms of demon and dragon.

Rebonya shivered. "If I went for that tale, I would go crazy. I would end up like Kortid. And I can't have that." She paused. "I'd much rather end up like Unleha."

She turned around to 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 firmly 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 want to obsess either. I could not bear to live like that, permanently suspecting everything I touch, everyone I meet, might be a ghost. I cannot live in constant horror. And that is how it would feel to me. I can't do it."

Her eyes met Gureev's without wavering. "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. I'll act as if that kind of thing just did not exist."

Rebonya walked up to Gureev and pulled him with her into the alcove where a winding staircase lead down into the fortress, to halls on solid ground, to ordinary chambers and pantries. "Just stay away from me with that tale, will you?"

The ponderous clouds, holding a hundred shades of twilight in their bellies, burst open. 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 everything around him with full gusto. After a first impulse to run, Lahoon had given in, raising his arms to the sky. Splashing through puddles with naked toes, he let fate take its course.

He walked into the bath palace dripping a trail of water onto the tiles. His pearly blouse clung to his chest, half-transparent with wetness, letting hues of ocean blue 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 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 crooned. "Into the waters, the bathtub, with me."

They snuggled into a small private room, with only one bathtub and a long window that came down 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, shelves undulated in the flowing lines of natural branches, holding neatly folded towels in one alcove, earthenware pots full of herbs and dried flowers 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, and even closed buds of glass or the pointed tips of tiny temple turrets. 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 sea creature spewing cold water from its gaping mouth, and then the one behind a mermaid pouring steamy hot springs from a conch in her arms. The influx ceased. Lahoon 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 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, 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 gazed up at from beneath black lashes. "What is it like to be a shinn?" he murmured.

Amalai rained a handful of rosy petals onto the turquoise waters.

Lahoon moved his limbs with the aimless air of a sea anemone. The silky ships rocked gently on the waves. Lahoon breathed over them like a wind god whispering to the sailors. “To be a shinn . . . “

He raised a hand to watch sparkling drops fall from his fingers. “What does it mean 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 and everyone around you, and embody what is.”

Rainbow bubbles drifted over their private turquoise ocean. Lahoon lifted one of the iridescent pearls up carefully, holding an inland sea in his cupped hands. “At first it seemed incredibly frightening to me,” he confessed. “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 water. 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 means 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. “Wonder 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 relief. “One day I will do this just for pleasure. I will ask you for a trance of trust, and then simply lie there for hours on end, 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 crouched by the edge of the mat, his knee pulled up to his chest, his gaze on Kortid’s face.

Kortid’s jaw tightened. “I wish to know, but I may have a hard time posing the question. Or hearing the answer.”

The sky hung low over the fortress, weighing the world down with an enormous cloak of clouds. But the cloth was old and worn, and ragged tatters fell off and drifted away. Through the holes and tears, the light of a dying sun fell in, before even that descended into darkness.

“May I?” Kortid’s voice was more cautious now.

Verlem gave him a small nod.

Kortid took a deep breath and held on to Gureev’s arm, just to be sure. “You are fey.” 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 drifted toward them. Unseen but close, just behind the wall, it made itself known as their neighbor, one much older, much larger than even the fortress they dwelled in.

Verlem held on to that power. Listening deeply, breathing in the scents, he wrapped his answer in the wild vibrations of life and in the calm solidity of stone. His words were bathed in that magic, and in the hope that Kortid might be able to hear.

“It is not one demon. Who you have seen in the forest. Who has come to the bath palace. And what you are searching for in the shadows. They are not the same. Not one.” An owl hooted in the distance. “What you see in the shadows is your own fear. What you saw outside the bath was an illusion.” He halted. “Probably.”

Verlem’s voice grew very low. “What you saw in the forest is the only thing that I am sure about. I know, because I was there. What you met that night 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. In the sky over the fortress, the cloak of clouds tore and revealed the blackness of the universe. A few pale stars shone down from infinite distance, telling of the existence of space and 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 continued. "He was in great pain. So I sent him to sleep with a look, to end his distress." He hesitated. "And I did drink his blood."

From the forest, a wildcat called, an eerie, plaintive lament floating through the dark.

"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. "The angel of death."

The black outline of the fortress stood against a sky sprinkled with stars. Kortid held on to the wall. The breath of a prayer came from his lips. "Killing mercifully, to deliver us from our suffering." He closed his eyes. "An angel of death, drinking our essence, so it will live on in him when our own life has come to an end."

Kortid walked through the forest, Verlem and Gureev in his wake. The trees dripped a muted patter over soft and soggy ground after the rain. Mists drifted between the trunks, and shadows grew long and numerous.

“It is right there, a bit farther down.” Kortid’s voice shook slightly. “Ah.” He caught Verlem’s gaze and averted his eyes. “Of course, you know where it is.” Turning back to the shrouded green, he marched on. At the bottom of a shallow decline, Kortid came to a halt.

A fallen tree lay on the ground. All the leaves had rotted, and the once mighty crown now lay barren and empty before them. Dead twigs cracked underfoot as Kortid drew near.

On the rough landscape of bark, ants found the trails of their companions as always, scurrying over the trunk and down a thick branch coming off to one side.

It was that branch that had caught Hun. The tree had died here, taking Hun along with him.

Kortid stood in silence, his body rigid, his face taut. He stared down at the ground.

There was no blood. No trampled grass, no sign 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 and been overgrown.

Kortid took a deep breath. He stepped closer gingerly, looking 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. His voice took on an angry tone. “Hun died 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 in the garrison, without any need at all! 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 turned to Gureev. "I will leave. I will not be a soldier anymore. 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 nightmares, so she could use me to have fear breed fear. And to make a whole town give in to a lie." Kortid's fists clenched. "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 took several turns around the woods. At first Verlem and Gureev followed quietly at a distance, but then they settled down and waited for Kortid to return. 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 one had ever had a doubt.

"So." Kortid crossed his arms over his chest and rocked back on his heels. He glanced over at Verlem. "Do you still want to do it?"

Verlem tilted his head. "This is about you, not me."

Kortid gave a faint nod. "I know." He faced Verlem squarely. "I do. I want it. If you 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 sight of it. Gureev sat down at the foot of the old pine, leaning against the trunk. Kortid sat down before him, accepting the embrace in his back. But his body was rigid, and his shoulders squared.

Verlem came down on his knees. His fingers traced the delicate lichen on the ground, then traveled up Kortid's arm. He bowed down, touching his brow to the inner elbow. He remained still, sensing and 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 and nodded, a shaky jerk of his head.

Verlem did not move. He stayed where he was, his eyes on Kortid's face.

Kortid cleared his throat with a rough, croaky sound. His voice was still raw 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 bowed down low. He breathed over the soft, delicate skin before him. Then he moved quickly, imperceptibly, and through two precise cuts the stream of life pulsed out warm and strong.

*

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 and dreamy.

"There never was a demon." Kortid's voice drifted among the trees. He turned slightly toward Verlem. "It has always been you. And you never were a danger." He ran a finger over two tiny red dots on his arm. "You do drink blood. And this is what it looks like." He looked up. "There is no harm in this at all."

Kortid's gaze wandered 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. "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 danger." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Then a crooked smile stole onto his lips. "And the best part is: There is still no danger." He opened his eyes and looked out into the growing darkness around 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, 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. 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 drifted in the hazy blue of a brightening sky. In the subtle gleam of dawn, the dried petals in Amalai's craft room looked pale, almost ethereal. Amalai carefully pushed them aside to put 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 two more nights. Then the demon will appear." He hesitated. "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 amber or green at Gureev.

Amalai put a hand on his arm. "There will be no way out for you." Her face was drawn. "Are you sure you really wish to go?" A draft of air made the petals shiver and shadows flicker around the lantern.

Amalai shifted. "If you decide to stand guard at your assigned station, then you will end up right in front of the demon. You cannot hide any more. It will be too late." She 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 deep in your heart you believe you are part of a ritual, maybe even 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 bring it about. 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 if you go at all, you must stay. Dance with your blade of light, and pray 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 had booths of various kinds, offering fruit and cloth, debates and skillsharings, teas and tools. Shouts and laughter filled the air.

Unleha, Amalai and Lahoon wove their way through the crowd, dodging carts and stalls 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 others. On the high end of the sloping square, a mansion of bright white stone shone down at them. With towers on both sides, a roof terrace in the middle, and innumerable turrets, balconies and winding staircases all over, it resembled the playful, elaborate style of 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. "We're here. 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 big 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 all the same.

Lahoon fixed the roof terrace. "So how will we get into position? We want to be on that roof, after all, rather than down here looking up."

He let his gaze roam. One side of the mansion held a little garden, with a delicate staircase winding up amidst the flowery vines. The stairs curved around the front of the house, connecting balconies and galleries, leading all the way up to the roof terrace. "Now that's ideal," Lahoon ventured. He tugged at the strings of the lute he had brought along.

Amalai scowled. "Ideal for being seen by a hundred people."

Indeed. The filigreed balusters were not going to give much cover. They were not meant to conceal, but to reveal and display. The whole purpose of the staircase seemed to be to proudly present whoever would dance up and down the playful curves or wave down from tiny balconies, looking out over a square full of people looking back up.

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 will be too late.”

Lahoon and Amalai both looked at her.

Unleha raised her eyebrows. “I guess Pramus has to be somewhere close by to be able to cast his illusion. 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 through her hair. “Gureev will come as soon as the rain stops. And Pramus will arrive before Gureev.”

“But we will arrive before Pramus,” Lahoon finished grimly.

*

They moved with natural ease and 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 pushed and shoved, laughed and hollered, passionately pursuing their affairs. A cart drawn by two oxen was trying to pull through. Lovers whispered into each other’s ear. A child chased 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 making their way to a roof terrace? Who?

As soon as Lahoon reached the top, he ducked down into the greenery, Unleha and Amalai straight at his heels. Panting, 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 branches, 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?” Potted trees and flowers were all around them, basking in the heat, letting a thin veil of moisture evaporate into the air. Marble figurines idled between the plants 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 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. It was 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 lasted him through the centuries like that.”

“Patched?” Unleha came up beside him. Lahoon pointed. Among the folds falling down the king’s back, 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 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.

Lahoon poked his head in. “Uuuhaaho,” he sang, softly at first. His question echoed inside the empty king, stirring up dust and frightening spiders. 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 defiantly scoffed up at the brazen king. But he nevertheless backed away with his shoulders drawn.

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. 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 lay in a tight squeeze behind a line of flowery bushes, their bodies pressed against each other in the narrow gap between terra-cotta planters and the terrace wall. 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 ran down their skin in brilliant pearls, 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 would move into the 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, hopelessly far 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 explode or implode, tonight.

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. 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."

At first a few people had stopped to hear his story. Then the sight of that small group had caused others to come over, to see what was happening. People on the fringes began explaining to the newcomers in low voices. Conversations grew out of Kortid's group 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 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 new 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 going on. 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.

Rain poured 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 wall of the rooftop garden.

They let the water soak their clothes, run down their bodies, mingle with the sweat and 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.

*

When the rain had passed, the world was restored to new. Evening lights glowed in an 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 terrace garden, to the dark leaves and sweetly scented blossoms. To the lifeless king towering above him. Gureev's heart beat 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. All heads turned to the roof of the mansion, where a huge purple flame shot up. At its base, shadowy figures emerged and obscured the fire 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 refrain that rang through the square. Almost everybody seemed to have joined in, a huge mass of people swaying to a melody of defiance and derision.

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 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 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 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, 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. The demon towered above him, all aflame.

Gureev bowed. In a solemn gesture, as one opponent before another in ritual 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 giant of molten iron, white at its core, smoldering red in its body, the demon loomed like a leviathan. Gureev stood a tiny black figure at its feet. But the 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 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 demon. And he survived.

But then he came to the end of his liturgy. Drawing up his sword in the final salute, 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 on the square gasped.

The demon roared and raged, his scream deafening, hungry claws drawing sparks on 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 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, poised, unharmed. He had walked into the demon and survived.

Slowly, the mage advanced toward Gureev, with the air of an old master coming 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 looked up to the terrace, where a 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, and vibrant in a space where no human should have been able to exist. An impossible presence. A miracle of undoing.

"We've been sitting inside this illusion all the time! 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 had 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 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 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. Chants of “Illusion! Illusion!” pulsed on through the night, strong as a heartbeat, proclaiming their outrage and certainty. And finally, their release. As the voices eased and the fervor died down, the gentle sound of a lute began to weave into the melody. It played along for a while, grateful and gracious. Then Lahoon spoke, briefly reminding them of the vote.

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 to 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.

A hundred voices echoed Lahoon’s refrain as people in the square swayed to the tune. “He just walked away!”

51

It was the last day. When the rain had ceased and lights were fading in the 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 hummed with the spirit of celebration, with conversations, jokes, and clinking glasses. 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 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 traption, a crystal-tipped wand in her hand, an intense gleam in her eye. At her touch, the traption jerked and a sizzle ran through the air, like a small crackle of lightning, a beginning, a forbearance. And then the wonder broke loose, spectacularly, in all the colors of magic. High above the heads of the party guests, rivers of light flowed into the sky, swirling and dancing like a glowing kaleidoscope. Pure forms arose, endlessly mirrored within themselves, an infinite repetition within algorithms of beauty. They drew together, gathering all the brilliance into one small ball of fire—and exploded. A rain of golden sparks came down from the sky, glimmering and glittering as it fell, tiny shooting stars here and there getting extinguished on their journey. But some of the light remained, a gentle glow that descended over just one person standing half-way across the courtyard. Unleha.

The crowd began to cheer. Unleha looked perplexed. But 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 the impending golden future, as any good freedom fighter would. Her black skin was shiny in the unreal light, her voice compelling and visionary. 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 enthusiasm 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 pudding about to boil. Finally, it began to ease, 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 in children. "You maniacs," she wheezed. "I love you. And I love living here. I really do."

* * *

The moon had waxed into a full round disc that stood over the dark outline of the mountains. Lahoon leaned back against the terrace wall and smacked his lips at the creamy melon liqueur Unleha had brought over. His fingers shimmered a dark blue as they played with his glass. "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 must have examined the traces the fireballs left, and will give all they found to the conciliators. Or to 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 talks."

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 wise man understanding ancient powers, understood by no one."

Lahoon snorted. "Pramus even tells his stories in the face of the people who got burned." He shook his head. "Some have already refused to see 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 as low as it has ever been. Both with the citizens and with the soldiers themselves. There will be ramifications."

Lahoon shook his head. "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 would not be much 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 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, on dangerous types of correction, that kind of thing.” He 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 arm, Kortid began to draw questioning half circles into the air with the other. “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 do not only need 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 tilted his head. “That’s why 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. “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 let down by the system to the point of losing faith completely.”

Rebonya rocked back on her heels. “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 some 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 crept into Kortid’s eyes, slowly lighting up his whole face until he positively beamed at Gureev and Rebonya. “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, and 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 doesn’t 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 wagged his head. “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 and 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 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, luring him into their woods, into their world. The bushes were clothed in a muted shimmer. 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 labyrinth of pools and canals. The giant copper snake of the bath palace opened her mouth, 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?" Kortid's voice was soft, easing into the subtle world around him.

Verlem stood on the bank of a pool. "Do you still need me?"

"No." Kortid hesitated. "Yes." He looked down into the liquid mirror before him. "I have been freed of my fear. I can sleep, and I am not suffering. So it is very good. And I thank you."

Hazy mists drifted across the water. Kortid held out a hand toward them. "But I would like to see you again. You are precious to me. You will always have my gratitude, and my adoration." His finger touched the blueish reeds that stood straight and silent in the pond, in worship of dawn, or in pure natural presence. "You still are an angel to me, somehow."

The veils in the sky tore open a crack and light poured in, a radiant brightness that filled the pool with silver.

Verlem held Kortid's gaze. Finally, he gave a nod, a small, almost imperceptible gesture. "I will travel with you when you go. I will follow you, unseen, through the paths of cosmos." Verlem turned his head, and the invisible ways of the cosmos seemed to be swirling around him in gauzy tendrils of glimmer and darkness.

Kortid's breath grew shallow. Verlem's exotic scent mingled with a spicy, stinging fragrance rising from the pool, a breath rich and strange coming from underwater beings that showed only small, colorless blossoms to the air.

Verlem's voice flowed on, kin to the enticing smells and the mysterious 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, 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 and otherness.

He stepped back, straightening up.

In the pool beside him, a tiny frog sent ripples out over the water, letting muted pastels of gray and rose 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. Now that I know there is no harm in it, 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. 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 I may need such reminders in my life. It will be good 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 still holds for 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 do. 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 was 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 that 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. 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 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 over her face.

Then she climbed onto a chair 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 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 culminate 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 dawn, sharing their elation with Amalai when she stepped out into sunrise and glistening dewdrops.

Engrossed in her conversations with soft tendrils and rich, fragrant soil, with fading blossoms and ripening seeds, Amalai was only pulled from 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.

On the roof terrace, Lahoon was still entangled in sheets and sleepy dreams on their mat. His eyes opened just wide enough to

shine at Amalai in welcome as she let her gown slip off and came in underneath the sheets. Lahoon was warm, tousled and cozy, and gave a 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 her dark curls.

Amalai could feel him smile, and his skin rub against hers in a gentle caress. He hummed softly, aimless sounds playing in his throat.

She breathed in Lahoon's presence as she had breathed in the scent of flowers and soil. His smooth limbs touched her body, caressed her skin, nourished her soul. His melodious sounds 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 green and azure in the early 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 she pulled 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 lay sprawled on his back, 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 him 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 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 purred 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. Her smile deepened, and 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. His face was pale as the fading moon as he knelt down beside them.

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 and 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 Fey, of love, and of magic.” He looked up at Verlem. “Will you, now?” he pleaded.

Verlem gave them a secret smile. A subtle light shone in the depth of his eyes 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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May this book find the right people
and the right people find this book!

The Charms of Freedom

The sky stretched endlessly overhead, a pale blue and gold over the darkening highlands.

Enim's jaw was tight. "They are children." The tension of the last days had built up in 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 Shebbetin? No pavilions for the children? No contact points to the outside world?"

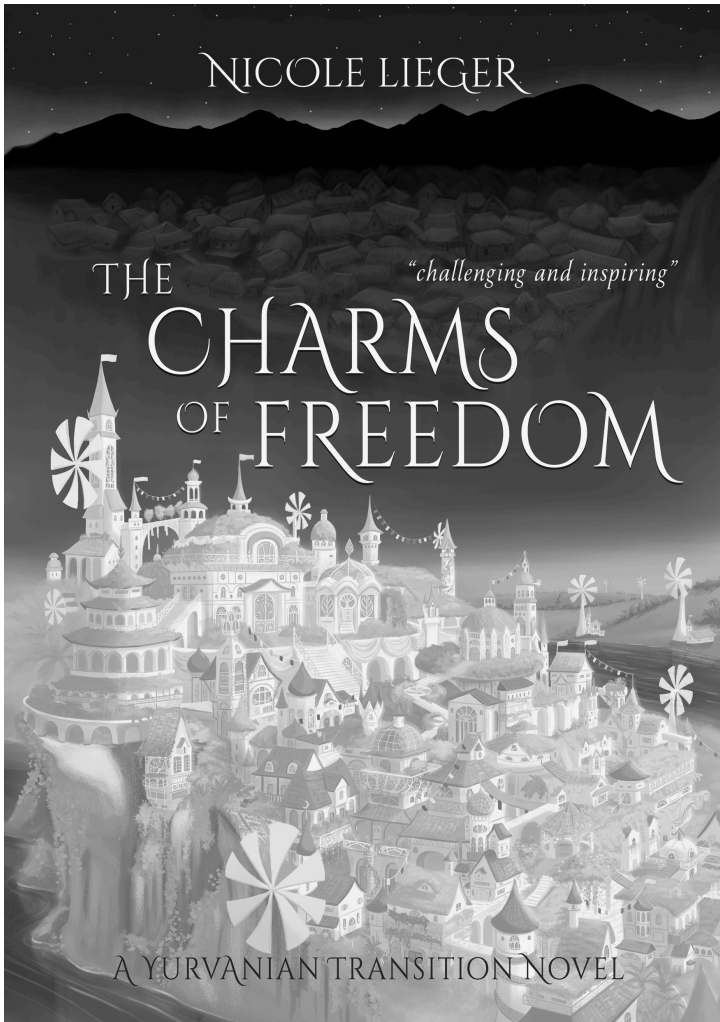
Enim's face had turned pale, as if he was pressing a lid down on a hot steam kettle with fierce determination, ignoring the pain. "Yes, why not? Why not?"

"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. "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!" His finger pointed straight at Kaya's chest, then at his own. "There is no reason for not making this right. It can be done. It must be done!" His hand clenched into a fist. "Now."



Read Now:

THE CHARMS OF FREEDOM
A YURVANIAN TRANSITION NOVEL

Jetzt lesen:

DER ZAUBER DER FREIHEIT
EIN YURVANISCHER WANDELROMAN

The Charms of Freedom

Windmills, community spirit, rooftop gardens –
that is what young magician Enim knows. But when
he travels out to the mountains, misery hits him in the face.
Before he knows it, Enim gets adopted into a found family
that is determined to take on the powerful owners,
free the miners, and bring on a good life for all.
The exact steps to saving the world are still a little unclear.
But that won't stop anyone from rushing ahead!

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their snug group of orphan kids and the inner strength
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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 passionately cultivates everyday practices of living in alignment with a breathing earth and a mind-boggling humanity.

And she's happy to hear from you – Do get in touch!

