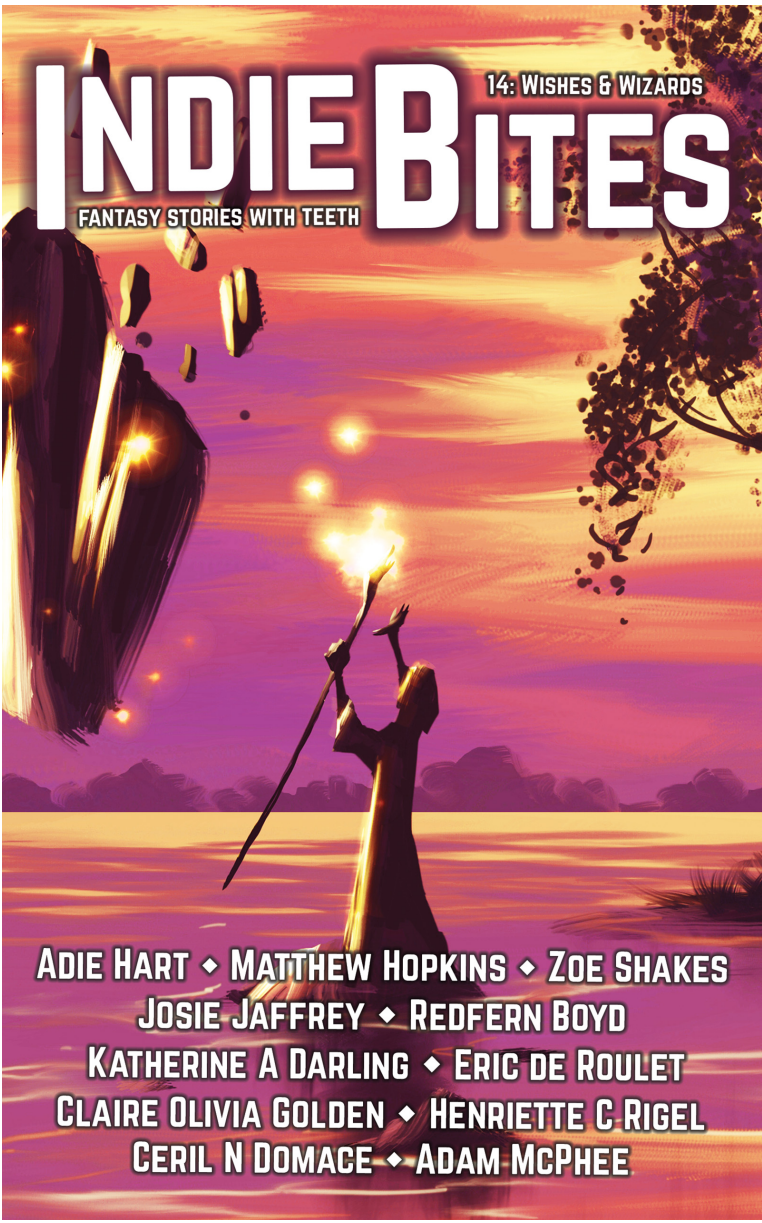




INDIE BITES

14: WISHES & WIZARDS

FANTASY STORIES WITH TEETH

ADIE HART ♦ MATTHEW HOPKINS ♦ ZOE SHAKES
JOSIE JAFFREY ♦ REDFERN BOYD
KATHERINE A DARLING ♦ ERIC DE ROULET
CLAIRE OLIVIA GOLDEN ♦ HENRIETTE C RIGEL
CERIL N DOMACE ♦ ADAM MCPHEE

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to this quarter's issue! This time, we're focusing on wishes and wizards – it might sound very much like a fairy tale, but we have stories in all kinds of subgenres, from cosy to dark, from humorous to bittersweet, and everything else besides. This is also our longest issue yet, with a total of eleven stories exploring wide-ranging themes from sweet first love to the ethics of magic and war. In this issue you'll meet former heroes, scatterbrained wizards, stoic mountaineers, charming princes, dashing treasure hunters, and of course, a variety of wishers both well-intentioned and wicked.

Spring has *finally* sprung here in the UK, after an incredibly dreary start to the year, and the Indie Bites inbox is no stranger to this blossoming! We found it almost impossible to narrow down this quarter's submissions, so we hope that this bumper issue has a little bit of something for everyone, whether you're reading in a sunny garden or holing up away from the rain. It's always such a delight to see the sheer variety and amount of talent in the indie world – perhaps it's the sunshine talking, but this issue has been such a joyful project and I'm delighted to see it fly.

In terms of what your editors have been working on apart from Indie Bites, I've been plotting and

planning ahead for the next couple of years – sorry to tease, but you can expect a little more of an update soon! Josie has been drafting up book four in the Seekers series (which I cannot wait to read). And in reading news, I’ve recently inhaled both *Awakenings* and *Flooded Secrets* by Claudie Arseneault, the first two novellas in her Chronicles of Nerezia series – if you like cozy fantasy adventures with inclusive casts, these are must-reads. I’ve also really enjoyed Arden Powell’s *Of Socialites and Prizefights*, which is a charming f/f historical fantasy romance, and DN Bryn’s *How to Bare Your Neck and Save A Wreck*, their latest exciting m/m vampire romance, where the overarching series plot is starting to get dangerous! Josie’s been reading tons this quarter, and some of her highlights include *A Kingdom of Dreams* by Sam Northman, a spicy m/m romance in a rich Norse mythology-inspired urban fantasy setting, *Each Little Universe* by Chris Durston, which is a deeply weird, but very fun, cross between *Sophie’s World*, *Spaced*, *Scott Pilgrim*, and a D&D campaign transcript, and *These Violent Nights* by Rebecca Crunden, an intricately plotted fantasy romance that she couldn’t put down.

So that’s what we’ve been up to – and we’d love to hear from you over on our social channels if you’ve read anything good lately!

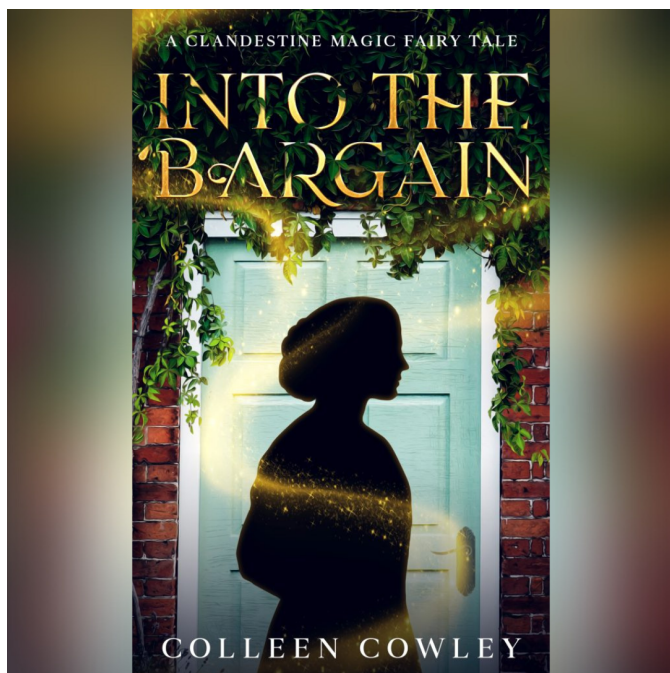
Now, let's get wishful. There's plenty to sink your teeth into!

Adie Hart
Anthology Editor

Our next issue is *Forests and Familiars*, and submissions are open now. Submissions are also open for our November issue, *Spirits and Spellcasters*. If you're an indie author or illustrator who'd like to contribute to one of our upcoming issues, then check out our submissions page [here](#). We'd love to have you on board.

A note on language: We are a UK publication, but we accept work from authors all over the world. We retain each author's version of English as written, so pieces from US authors appear in US English, and pieces from UK authors appear in British English etc.

Meet Author Colleen Cowley



Colleen Cowley writes romantic fantasy in twisted real-world settings with wizards, banter, impressively swoopy coats and women who aren't damsels (distressed or otherwise). She is the author of the Clandestine Magic trilogy and its fairy tale-inspired companion novella, *Into the Bargain*, as well as *The Opposite of Magic*, a standalone contemporary romantic fantasy.

Welcome to Indie Bites! This issue we're talking about wizards and wishes, so why not tell us a bit about how wizards fit into the world in your *Clandestine Magic* books?

Magic in real-world settings is total catnip for me. I mean, don't we all wish at least a *little* that we'll wake up one morning and discover we can cast spells? And from a writing-a-novel perspective, inserting magic into an otherwise non-fantastical society creates all these interesting ripple effects.

That's the premise of *Clandestine Magic*, a romantic fantasy series: What if a small percentage of men can cast spells – and one of the consequences in America is that the last century of progress on women's rights never happened?

Beatrix Harper is part of the resistance movement, a suffragist-like organization called the Women's League for the Prohibition of Magic. Peter Blackwell, the only wizard her small town has ever produced, returns unexpectedly from Washington and hires her against her will.

He has no idea the fuse he's just lit.

If you had to make a totally selfish, totally fantastic wish, what would it be?

Ooh, I *love* this question.

Well, first, obviously, I would selfishly inquire if I

could wish for more wishes.

After the wish-granting entity gives me the side-eye on that, I guess I'd ask for consistent good luck.

Which, now that I think about it, is either an amazing loophole in that only-one-wish rule or not nearly as good an idea as I'm assuming.

How did you get into indie publishing? What's your favourite thing about it?

When I was a kid, my dad helped me write a novella and self-publish it, which was a lot more involved in those days – talk about going above and beyond to support a childish love of writing. So technically, I got into indie publishing *quite* a while ago.

What I love about it is how much control you have – whether you want to literally do it all yourself or find specialists to tackle pieces of it for you. I also love how supportive this community is. But the direct connection with readers is the best part of all.

What does your typical publishing process look like?

Step one: Write very, very, *very* slowly.

(This is a crucial step, apparently. None of my attempts to pick up the pace have worked yet.)

After that, I get feedback from trusted author

friends, go through edits and a proofread, get a cover, handle the formatting – I used to get in the thick of the html, but now I use Vellum, which is much simpler – and do a rollout to advance readers before hitting publish.

Final step: Yell “yayyyy” with Kermit-style arm flapping.

(This is also a crucial step.)

Do you have a favourite wizard character in fiction?

Three favorite wizard characters in fiction, you say? (Shhh, let me have this.)

Gandalf might be the boring, obvious answer, but he is a *bad ass* and listening to the radio adaptation of *The Hobbit* every summer in childhood rewired my brain.

Rakken Tempestren from *A Rake of His Own* by AJ Lancaster is both a wizard and a fae prince, not to mention hilarious when bantering with a certain antagonistic acquaintance.

And finally, Cassandra Harwood from *Snowspelled* by Stephanie Burgis. She’s the first woman magician in Angland, but then something goes awry...

Have you read any good indie fantasy lately?

Tons. Here's a small selection, all fantasy romances:

S.L. Prater's *Coven of Ill Repute* (I have such title envy for that one). A vampire detective and his witch ex-partner have to solve a mystery while trapped in a castle that's out to get them.

Lisette Marshall's just-completed Fae Isles quartet. What if the fae executioner who just kidnapped you thinks you're the key to overthrowing an evil empire?

Vela Roth's Blood Grace series. The vampires are the good guys, the human rulers are the bad guys, and one forbidden romance between a vampire ambassador and the daughter of a king will upturn everything.

Elsie Winters' *Seduction of a Psychopomp: Erogenous Hand Holding and Other Ways to Tame Your Reaper*. A not-so-grim reaper agrees to save a fae princess's life via an arranged marriage. But she'd like an actual marriage and he's a bit... clueless.

Erin Vere's *How to Train Your Goblin King*. An equal-rights campaigner accidentally ends up in a labyrinth with a roguish goblin king who isn't all that he seems.

What's your latest book?

It's a fantasy romance novella called [*Into the Bargain*](#), set in the Clandestine Magic world. Out of

desperation, Pen Novak vies for a marriage offer from her town's unpleasant wizard. She certainly shouldn't fall for his secretive, intriguing assistant. Especially after he offers her a dodgy magical deal...

It was fun to write from the perspective of a woman having a feminist awakening at twenty-five. Equally fun: tucking little fairy-tale references throughout the book, most of them hidden. Readers have told me they loved seeing how many they could find. (No one's gotten them all yet. You could be the first!)

We always love a quest! Thank you for joining us!

Short Fiction

Wizards Unwelcome

Adie Hart

It's a tricky business, removing curses from sapphires without compromising the gem, and worse when they're channel-set so you can't get underneath them properly to look at the backside of the spell, so I didn't look up when the bell above the door jingled.

"With you in a minute," I called. If it was a friend, they'd know I couldn't pause in the middle of a difficult working; if it was a customer, well, it never hurts to give them time to browse. Weeds out the ones that see my prices and suddenly realise they've left the kettle on.

I didn't hear that second jingle this time, though.

"Take your time, Miss Powell," called a voice I didn't recognise. Customer, then: male, fairly typical accent for the area but with a slightly plummy note that spoke of Courtside, rather than my own Narrows lilt. I made a mental note to direct him towards the diamond cloak-pins I'd been working on last week. That kind of voice usually means deep pockets.

That he knew my name was no surprise. For

starters, *Imogen Powell, Magical Jeweller* ran across the front of my shop in neat gold lettering. For another thing, I'd built my reputation until it was second-to-none in this city. Only those who were snobs bothered with George Berry up on Catte Street, and most of them only bothered once, figuring having eyebrows was worth sneaking down to the south end of town. Berry's spells had a nasty habit of misfiring at crucial times; the man could never get his prongs at the right angles. Wizard-trained, of course, and a stuffy, impractical idiot who thought he knew everything, like the rest of them. All theory, no trousers.

The spell finally clicked, and I used my tweezers and a thread of magic to unreel the curse strands from the facets of the sapphire.

"Nice work," said the voice, which was suddenly a lot closer to my workbench. "Bollerton's Unravelling?"

I looked up into a pair of eyes so blue – the rich, summer sky hue of flawlessly faceted apatite – I almost didn't notice the pointy hat they sat under.

Ugh. He'd ignored the sign.

"It's a plain old curse-reverse," I said flatly, making sure every vowel was pure Narrows. "Now get out."

"I beg your pardon?" The wizard looked shocked, those blue eyes wide.

“You’re all so big on reading,” I said, “but you don’t do a very good job of it.” I pushed up from my bench and slid past him to yank the door open, tapping on the sign. “Wizards. Unwelcome.”

He chuckled, making no attempt to move. “I thought that was a joke.”

“Yeah, well, you wizards think everything’s a joke, don’t you?” Like a girl in a hand-me-down dress with a hand-me-down education. Like loyalty. Like love. “I’m serious. Get out before I make you get out.”

Confusion crumpled his eyebrows. “You don’t even know what I want yet!” he said quickly. “I could be a customer!”

“That ‘could’ right there tells me you ain’t one.” I gestured to the door again, and when he still didn’t move, hardened my tone until it was diamond. “Listen to me carefully, whatever your name is.”

“Wizard Undergrove. Well, Darrick Undergrove, ninth Earl of Ganfield. Call me Dash.”

I would *not*. Nor would I shake the hand he offered. I simply glared at him until his face fell, and then glared some more for good measure.

“Undergrove,” I said at last, carefully ignoring all of his claimed titles since I didn’t know which one I liked least. “I don’t sell to wizards. I don’t buy from wizards. And I don’t tolerate wizards in my shop.”

“Ah.” He grimaced. “I see my colleagues were not exaggerating.”

I couldn’t help a spike of panic at the thought that the wizards discussed me. Were they up there laughing about me? Was *he*— No. I wouldn’t think about that.

Instead, I glared a little bit more, and said, “They were not. Watch my lips: I do not deal with wizards.”

Some of his smile crept back. “I bet you’d love the opportunity to prove a wizard wrong, though.”

That I couldn’t deny.

He saw it in my face. “Oh, piqued your interest there, Miss Powell?” Now his smile was back in full, pearls flashing wickedly under that apatite glitter. “What if I told you that the wizard you could prove wrong was Atticus Carmichael?”

That was a name I had never wanted to hear again. It still stoked a flame in me; unfortunately for Atticus, it wasn’t the kind it had once been.

The wizard was waiting, still smiling that know-it-all smile.

I sighed. Closed the door with a soft *snick*.

“I’m listening, Undergrove. You have one minute.”

One minute later, I was laughing in shock, so I gave him another minute; after that one, I was close to

physically shoving him out of the door.

“The Wishstone is a fairy tale, Undergrove. I know you wizards believe in a lot of rubbish, Erlach’s Conjecture and all of that—”

“What’s the matter with Erlach’s Conjecture?”

“—but really, a gemstone that grants the holder’s every wish? It’s pure imagination. The kind of thing bored children make up to find some escape from their humdrum lives.”

“I assure you, it is very, very real. And I know where to find it.”

He looked so certain, but then, wizards often did. Unwarranted confidence was part of the teaching up there, I was sure. Not that I’d ever have the chance to check.

I rolled my eyes. “Say I believe you for a second. Why are you telling *me* this?”

“I need your help,” he said simply. “It’s... dangerous to leave a gem of such power unbound. Anyone could free it from the statue, but it would immediately start leaking power until it was rebound in an appropriately spelled setting. Anyone who tried to walk off with it loose in their pocket would soon find themselves... well, brainless wouldn’t be inaccurate.”

Brainless was about my opinion of this wizard, if he believed in fairy tales. “Ah, so you need a jeweller

to reset the gem. That, I can do. But don't you want to work with one of your own? I hear George Berry has a lot of time for your kind of nonsense."

"Berry's an amateur," scoffed Undergrove. "I need someone who knows what they're doing. I heard you were the best."

It was hard not to feel a little bit of pride at that. I'd worked too hard on my skills not to be pleased when they were recognised. But it obviously showed on my face, because suddenly Undergrove was looking awfully smug.

"Also," he said casually, "Atticus Carmichael doesn't believe it exists. He's quite vocal about that, really, especially now that we're both after the same research fellowship. Says I'm wasting guild resources on hunting down a children's story, and I'd rather like to prove him wrong. It's just a shame you seem to feel the same way as him." He paused, and I opened my mouth to reply, but he just smiled sadly and held up a hand. "No, I see I won't be able to convince you, so I'll leave you to your work." He turned to go.

I let him get to the door before I spoke up. "I make it a point never to feel the same way as Atticus Carmichael." I'd thought we had, at one time, but then I'd discovered it was simply our first difference in feelings. As in, I felt I'd found someone who loved me, who saw what I was worth. He felt... differently.

But that was another wizard; the one currently in front of me had the sparkle back in his eyes as he dropped his hand from the door handle and asked, “So you’ll come with me?”

I wasn’t going to let him get away with it that easily. “If I’m that crucial to finding this gem and bringing it home, then why would I need *you*? I can just go on my own and save myself the hassle of your company.”

He chuckled. “The Ancients weren’t stupid; the whole place will probably be trapped and guarded. Big on offensive spells, are you? Got a great grasp of the Nine Protective Incantations of Divh?”

“I can handle myself,” I said, making a mental note to look up whatever the hell those were.

“Of course you can,” the wizard scoffed. “Still, I think you’ll find there’s one *particularly* compelling reason you do need to suffer bringing me along.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what could that possibly be?” He’d probably say something arrogant and flirtatious, that I couldn’t live without his beautiful blue eyes, or something.

Instead, he patted his pocket. “I have the map.”

Darrick Undergrove was *not* prepared for this journey.

“Is that it?” I said, gesturing to his tiny satchel. “You’ve had a week to prep, and *that’s* your kit for a

two-day trek into the Wilds?” At least he’d ditched the pointy hat and robes for some sensible travelling trousers, tall boots, and a lightweight coat – even if that coat was rather dramatically fitted.

He twitched his shoulder, setting the bag swinging cavalierly. “Oh no,” he said. “This is just snacks.”

“And you’re planning to survive how?”

He just winked – had those eyes gotten bluer somehow? – and then wiggled his fingers at me.

I couldn’t help the groan that tore out of me. “You’re just going to wizard it.”

“We, uh, don’t usually use that as a verb, but yeah, pretty much. I can handle most things.” He chuckled. “What, you were going to do the whole trip the mundane way? No magic at all?”

“Of course not.” I looked up and down the street for suspicious passersby, then fished out the necklace I wore from under my collar. It didn’t do to show your flash too brazenly at this end of town. I pointed to each pendant in turn. “Mosquito ward; wound care; night compass; step-safe spell... You dip this one in any water to purify it... You want me to keep going?”

“I’m impressed,” Undergrove said, and he actually looked it, which was nice. “Got a firelighter in there?”

I scoffed. “You don’t need magic to light a fire.”

His eyes widened. “You don’t?”

“No! What kind of pampered life do you live up

there at the guil— Oh. You’re teasing me,” I said, spotting the mischief on his face.

“Sorry,” he said, very unsorribly. “I do know where fire comes from.”

“Dick.” I was smiling as I said it, though.

“I prefer Dash, if you’re going to shorten my name.” He shrugged easily. “But if it helps you feel better, I actually can’t make fire without a lighter. I’ve never needed to.”

Imagine that. A life where you’ve always had magic – or servants – at your fingertips; where you’ve never had to strike a spark in the dark to make it til morning. I shook my head to stop myself from going down that particular path. I could explain my childhood to this wizard, who would likely care about as much as Atticus had, or I could just get on with this ridiculous trip.

I hoisted my pack (noticeably about four times the size of Undergrove’s, and almost certainly about eight times as useful) onto my shoulders. “Are you ready, wizard, or am I going without you?”

“Don’t worry, I’m ready. Would you like me to carry that?”

“No need.” I flicked the left strap, making the engraved brass rings dangling from it chime. “Weight limiters.”

“Oh, that’s clever,” he murmured.

“You’ve seen nothing yet.” I twisted a buckle on the other strap to align two miniscule emeralds along the horizontal axis. The pack shrank to half its size, making it much less awkward to carry. However weightless, a giant pack is still going to get stuck on everything. This gadget was a bestseller, especially to my Narrows clients; it’s much easier to hide your stuff from fellow opportunistic street rats if you can make it tiny.

Envy flashed in his eyes. “Damn, I’d like one of those.”

“If *your* bag got any smaller I’d need my loupe to find it,” I muttered, startling a laugh out of him. I felt a smile tug at my own lips, which absolutely would *not* do. This wasn’t meant to be friendly banter. I forced the smile away and snapped, “Anyway, tough. I’ll remind you I don’t sell to wizards.”

“But—”

“Do you want to start this insane quest or not?” I said over whatever charming nonsense he was planning to spout.

“I’ve never been more excited for anything.” I was beginning to notice that his voice always sounded genuine, even when I suspected he was laughing at me; either he was that rare thing, an honest wizard, or he was an astounding actor.

I didn’t like to think about either too hard, so I

rolled my eyes and set off without looking back. “Get a move on, Undergrove.”

The first day’s travel went pretty well, until the scorpions.

I don’t like scorpions at the best of times. Comes with the territory, when you grow up shaking out your bedroll and your boots before you trust your skin in either of them. But I especially did not like these scorpions, mostly because they were the size of horses.

They’d appeared only once we’d started to cross this clearing, scuttling out from who-know-where to ring around us in the world’s most awful dance circle. They clacked menacingly at us, tails waving horrifically in the air over their heads.

As little as I trusted Undergrove, pure instinct set us both sliding back-to-back as the scorpions approached. It was more or less the only option: turn your back on a wizard and trust him to have it, or become dinner.

“Undergrove,” I said as quietly as I could. “Your cursed map didn’t happen to mention the Great Big Grove of Fuck-Off Giant Scorpions, did it?”

“It did not,” he replied out of the side of his mouth. “But then maps tend to need slightly more reliable landmarks than individual wildlife.”

“They’re *not* individual,” I hissed, sliding my hidden daggers out of my sleeve holsters without taking my eyes off the swaying stingers. “There are *six* of them.”

“Still, that’s a fairly small pack size as far as—”

“Undergrove,” I growled again. “You claimed you were here to provide the Nine Protective Whatsits of Whoever. Do the Whatsits.”

“Ah. Yes. As you command,” he said, and flicked three fireballs in quick succession towards our menacing companions.

The smell of toasted giant scorpion is one of the worst smells I have ever encountered.

I risked a glance behind me. It looked like two of the scorpions were down for the foreseeable, leaking ichor and twitching in a way I really wished I hadn’t seen. Two more were literally on fire, but advancing nonetheless; the two in front of me remained distressingly hale.

I twisted the ring on my left middle finger, and a shimmering bubble blossomed into place around me. The smell eased a little, as did my immediate fear of being stung. Undergrove dispatched his last scorpion with a crack of purple lightning and wheeled round to face my remaining three. I sent one of my daggers arcing through the air and straight into a beady eye. The beast shuddered and stilled, and the scorpion next

to it spent a crucial moment distracted by its death, which allowed me to whip my second blade into its head and watch it crumple on top of its friend.

Ugh. That was too many legs.

“Nice shot,” said Undergrove.

“Focus on your own imminent death,” I panted. One left, and I wasn’t bragging when I said it was the biggest of all of the creatures, poison glistening at the tip of its stinger as it lurched towards me. I dodged; a drop dislodged from the tip and sizzled against the bubble. “Or mine, if you like. I’m out of daggers.”

“Right-o,” he said – and pulled an enormous shining sword out of thin air.

“What, you don’t have anything longer-distance?” I shouted in horror as he leapt in front of me.

“Nothing as cool as this.” He grinned, and swung for the fucker.

Slight change of opinion: one fewer leg was still way too many legs.

The scorpion screeched and reared back, its maw opening wide. I missed my previous life, when I hadn’t known scorpions even *had* maws.

“Oh, *nice* chelicerae,” said Undergrove, as he chopped one off and twirled back out of reach. “Smithers would pay good money for those.”

“I don’t know who Smithers is, and I really think you should focus,” I called.

In response, he lopped off the thing's head with an almighty swing, then turned to me with a dramatic bow. "Smithers is the guild quartermaster," he said, "and I really think I'm doing okay. You good?"

I didn't have time to reply before a huge dark shape appeared across the clearing behind him.

Damn. I'd thought that last scorpion was massive. This thing was the size of my shop, probably my entire building. It was enormous. It was gargantuan. It was nearly on the wizard already, who was still obliviously smiling at me like the idiot he so obviously was.

"Dash!" I yelled, tearing the bubble ring from my finger. "Put this on, quick!"

His smile dropped and he was instantly alert again, whirling to face the danger. I threw the ring as hard as I could. I threw wide, in my panic, but he caught it with a zip of magic and jammed it on his finger.

The iridescent bubble blossomed around him at the same time the scorpion's stinger descended. There was a sickening crack. The bubble exploded into a million shimmering lights. The scorpion's tail dropped twitching to the ground.

Undergrove didn't bat an eyelid, just curved his sword up through the air and neatly detached the head from the body and the scorpion from this world.

We waited, frozen, for a moment, then another few

moments to be sure nothing else was coming. And then another few to be really sure.

After that, I'm not sure who started breathing again first, but it started with a gasp of relief and ended with us laughing so hard we were gulping for air.

When I could breathe normally again, I sank to the floor, suddenly exhausted. "I'll just... I'll just have a sit down."

"Probably more scorpions than you see in a day as a city jeweller, huh?"

"Not the most I've ever seen," I said, "but probably the biggest."

"Yeah, look at this thing!" he said eagerly.

"I'd rather not, thanks." I was already concerned the images of the last five minutes would be carved behind my eyelids forevermore.

"Well, give your eyes a nice rest and look at me while I look at it, then," he said, his teasing tone back.

I did – just for the benefit of being able to roll said eyes at him – and found my breath was gone again.

Undergrove was relaxed, confident even, as he slung the sword behind him, propping it on one shoulder while he surveyed his handiwork, and the light filtered through the trees behind him, scattering sparks of bronze through his hair.

Irrationally, my mind started designing a pendant –

nothing like the workhorse charms I usually made for sale, no. Something delicate and magnificent, made to nestle over silk atop a lover's breast. Finest gold twined with copper filigree in twists and flourishes. A flawless oval apatite hiding, appearing, teasing, winking, from within the curlicues. A dangling keshi pearl twinkling gently from a ruby-linked chain.

Oh, *shit*.

Too tired to consider trekking any further, we set up camp for the night in the scorpions' clearing. The smell was still pretty dreadful, but we'd gone to all the effort to clear the damn things out, and since I now *had* a space I knew contained no scorpions for the time being, I wasn't willing to give it up.

"And," I said, retrieving a dagger and using it to hack the legs off one of the carapaces, "we can make a retaining wall of scorpion bits around the camp. Anything that comes across us will see what we can do, and hopefully make a wise decision to fuck off."

"Smart." Undergrove summoned his sword-from-nowhere again and joined me in my dismembering. "But move them back a bit. We'll need more space than that."

"For a small fire and two bedrolls?" I asked. "Do you feel the need to keep a decent ten feet between us all of a sudden? I'm sorry, I forgot to bring a

chaperone, but I can promise I'm not going to jump you in the night."

"What a shame," he deadpanned. "No, I just thought we might want some space for the tent."

"I haven't brought a tent." Too much to carry on a journey like this, and honestly, I didn't own one. Like most Narrows urchins, I'd had plenty of experience of sleeping where I could and I'd learned early on that it's always better to tuck yourself away than make a great canvas signpost saying "I'm in here, come rob me".

Undergrove sighed. "Once again, you underestimate me."

He vanished the sword with a twitch of his fingers, and before I could blink, pulled an entire pavilion out of the air.

"You're ludicrous," I said, taking in the yards of impeccable white fabric. "This is ludicrous."

"What can I say? I like to do things in style."

I laughed. "Says the man holding a rotting scorpion leg."

"Oh, that's all the rage Courtside," he chuckled. "Go on, take a look inside – I'm very proud of this spell. It was one of the first ones I ever wrote up on my own. My brothers have a love of camping I find it hard to share, so this was my compromise."

I ducked through the flap at the front of the tent

and took it all in. Damn, he'd really thought of everything. There was rush matting on the floor; a washbowl and mirror gleamed to one side. The whole thing was spacious and airy – nicer than my bedroom at home – but as I gazed round at the luxury, I realised that something was very, very wrong.

I walked back out, my back held straight, and began to rummage in my bag for my bedroll.

“What do you think?” asked Undergrove, coming to stand by me. “Pretty good, huh?”

“Nope,” I said flatly as I shook my groundsheet out.

Hurt flashed across his face. “What?”

“I don't fuck wizards, Undergrove.” Not anymore.

He sputtered, going red. “I don't recall asking you to.”

“Oh really? Nice bed in there, though. Nice, big, plush, singular bed.” I busied myself laying out my roll. *Outside* the tent.

“Is that what this is about? Well, I could point out that I'm perfectly capable of controlling myself – or I could just point out that I designed the spell when I was ten, for my own personal use?”

I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. I'd assumed the worst, as I had to admit I'd been doing all along; bloody Atticus had a lot to answer for. I was still expecting the wizard I used to know, but this wizard,

the one in front of me, wasn't really anything of the sort. He hadn't made a move on me, hadn't even shown signs of planning to, and here I'd basically just announced I thought he wanted me so badly he'd trick me into bed.

"I'm sorry," I said, though it felt inadequate. "That was presumptuous of me."

"To be fair, I should probably have warned you about the bed."

"I'll still sleep out here, anyway. I'm used to roughing it." At least that way I wouldn't need to look at him now I'd made a total fool of myself. Maybe I could make it to the end of the trip without catching his eye at all, if I was careful. I resolved to try.

"You say things that concern me quite often, you know?"

Well, that was a quickly broken resolution. My eyes flicked to his in shock. "What?"

"I mean, I know you grew up in the Narrows, but was it that bad?"

The funny thing was, it *wasn't* that bad, not by Narrows standards. Sure, I'd had no parents or fixed accommodation, but I'd had kindness from some people. I'd been treated well, mostly. I was quick, and polite, and healthy. I'd been given meals and clothes in exchange for sweeping the temple floors, and sometimes I'd been allowed the chance to read their

books, when it was quiet. I'd educated myself. I'd made something of myself. I'd survived.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said, though I was surprised to find, actually, that I did, that I wanted to tell him all my victories to see the pride on his face. But I'd made that mistake once before, and while Undergrove wasn't Atticus, he still wasn't someone I could trust wholeheartedly.

"Of course," he said kindly, which was worse than if he'd dug further. "Well, why don't I sort the sleeping arrangements out so we're both comfortable?" He wiggled his fingers, and ducked into the tent for a moment, before calling, "Ready!"

I followed him in, and laughed in relief. The room inside was bigger now, with two identical beds separated by a wafting curtain of the same fabric as the tent walls.

"Better?" he asked.

"It'll do." I let myself smile at him, and he smiled back warmly, and we both just stood there and smiled at each other.

That damned imaginary pendant started to dance in my head again.

I shoved it away. "We should finish the camp before sunset."

He coughed slightly, dropping his gaze from mine. "Yes. Um. What else do we need? Oh, a fire." He

closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment, then shook his hand out like he'd just punched a wall. "Nope, I'm out. Time to put your money where your mouth is, Powell."

"I'll get my tinderbox." The perfect excuse to leave.

I ducked out of the tent and swallowed hard. I still didn't like wizards. It was just that this one had an irritating way of growing on you.

Later that night, after a hearty dinner of bits and bobs from our respective packs, we lay in the dark. I had to admit that the feather mattress was a good deal less painful on my scorpion-bruised body than the ground would have been, and I'd just made up my mind to apologise again in the morning, when Undergrove's voice surprised me.

"You know what?"

I'd thought the curtain between us might muffle the sound, but his sleepy whisper slid into my ears as though we were sharing a pillow. I ignored the goosebumps that image raised; it was just a startle reaction. I hadn't been expecting him to speak, that was all.

"What?" I whispered back, trying to put more annoyance in it than I felt.

"You called me Dash, back there. With the

scorpion.”

“Yeah, well. It was less of a mouthful, since we were facing looming death and all.”

“You can keep calling me Dash, if you want.”

I chuckled quietly. “In your dreams, Undergrove.”

“Mm,” he said, and his breathing slowed to sleep.

It took me quite a lot longer to manage that myself.

The next day saw us follow the map further into the woods, until the trees were so close and the roots were so dense underfoot that even my step-safe charms were hard pressed to keep me from going arse over teakettle. Loose roof-tiles, I could leap. I could sprint barefoot across cobblestones with the best of them and balance my way across eaves in silence. But this forest was testing me.

Undergrove – Dash, as my traitorous mind had occasionally begun to think of him – wasn’t faring much better. After the third time he went down, I took pity on him and slipped a charm off my necklace, hauling him up and handing it to him.

“Here. It’ll stop you tripping so much.”

He took the charm and looked at it for a second.

“What?” I asked.

“The shield-ring was self-explanatory. I don’t know what to do with a bead,” he admitted. “How does it work?”

“You just put it on a necklace or something. A bootlace will do,” I said, realising that actually, I hadn’t seen any jewellery on him at all. That was odd; from what I’d seen of Atticus’s friends, wizards never passed up any opportunity to ornament themselves.

No, wait, Undergrove did have a small bit of sparkle – there on his hand. On his wedding finger. Something treacherous in my stomach gave a lurch.

He noticed me looking. “Ah, yes. Your ring. I was going to return it,” he said sheepishly, “but it seems to have melted.”

“Melted *into* you? And you didn’t say anything?”

“It doesn’t hurt.” He turned his hand this way and that; the gold band glittered as the light slid over it, but otherwise looked like part of his skin.

“I’ve never seen that before,” I said. “Maybe it interacted with your magic in some way when it exploded? When we get back home, I’ll see what I can do to remove it.”

He chuckled. “Or it’ll grow on me. It’s kind of pretty.” He coloured suddenly, and gave a small cough. “Anyway. I can’t spare a bootlace, so if I can just look at your necklace for a second...”

I pulled the necklace out of my collar again, and he pinched it between finger and thumb, said “hm” a couple of times, and pulled an identical chain out of thin air.

“It works better with a reference.” He let go of my original necklace; the bump of it against my collarbone felt far more impactful than it had any right to be.

“Now maybe you’ll stop tripping over every root you come across,” I said as we set off again.

“Ideally. That last one *hurt*. Did you say one of those was a healing spell?”

“Minor wound care only,” I said.

“Good job I’ve only got minor wounds,” he grinned.

I sighed. “I’m not wasting it on a skinned knee. What about whatever horrors we walk into today? What if it’s— oh, I don’t know, I can’t think of anything worse than those scorpion fuckers right now, but what if it’s worse?”

“We’ll deal with it,” he said simply. “We always do.”

“This is the second day I’ve ever spent with you, Undergrove. We’ve fought one battle. There’s no such thing as *always*.”

He shrugged. “Well, our record’s good so far, isn’t it?”

“You are a *very* frustrating man,” I said, but I couldn’t quite suppress the laugh in it.

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a compliment.”

“Oh, did you say ‘frustrating’, not ‘handsome’? I always get those two mixed up.”

I groaned. “I am going to push you into a tree myself, Undergrove. Shut up and look for landmarks.”

He didn’t shut up, of course, but we did eventually find the next landmark, and then the next, and then just before dark we found ourselves staring down a stone staircase that would have been unassuming if it weren’t for its location behind a waterfall, and the fact that the map said there was a legendary treasure inside.

“So. Are we going in?” I yelled over the roar of the water after we’d both failed to actually move for several minutes.

“Nah,” Undergrove yelled back. “I thought we could just sort of look at the entrance and go home.”

“Oh, come on, you berk. I’m getting wet.”

The steps were slippery, but levelled out into a stone corridor at the bottom; I pressed a lever on the ring on my left little finger and used the resulting light to forge ahead. Undergrove caught up to me quickly, though the tunnel was only just wide enough for us to walk side by side. His hand brushed against mine more than once before I decided it was safer to tuck my elbows in to give him space.

A small warm breeze ruffled past my face, and I

put one hand up to find my hair was now dry.

“Don’t waste your magic, wizard. Possible horrors ahead, remember.”

“Pfft, that was barely a spark,” he said. “At least now you’re comfortable.”

I wasn’t totally sure the warmth I felt at that statement was down to the breeze, so I directed my thoughts back to the task at hand. “Anyway, what *are* we looking forward to down here?”

He sighed. “I really don’t know. With most people thinking the Wishstone is just a fairy tale, there’s no solid information. We know there’s an abandoned temple down here, and the Wishstone should be in it, but otherwise I only know what the legend says, which is—”

“That the stone will be found by the worthy,” I finished for him, then laughed at his surprise. “What’s that face for? Did you think I was going to walk into the Wilds on an impossible quest with an irritating wizard without doing my research?”

“You think I’m irritating? I had no idea.” His eyes sparkled with humour; I really didn’t understand how, in such low light. Maybe it was a magic thing.

“All wizards are irritating. It’s in your nature.” I paused. “You’re a little less irritating than most.”

“High praise, from you.”

Now his eyes were really sparkling. Unfortunately,

in noticing that, I failed to notice something slightly more important until I smacked into it: a dead end. A solid wall of stone – the same large blocks as the floor – loomed in front of us in a deeply unhelpful way.

“But... how?” I asked no one in particular. “This was a straight corridor. We didn’t take the wrong turning, because there weren’t any!”

“I think this might be a test,” said Undergrove. “The Ancients must have included ‘good at getting through walls’ in their list of worthy qualities.”

“Oh, if I’d have known I would have brought my pickaxe,” I said sarcastically.

Undergrove was barely listening to me. He crouched down to examine the seam between the floor and the wall, poking it like he thought it might give way. “Not here... but maybe...”

“Are you looking for weak spots?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “Could you shine your light down here a moment?”

I crouched next to him, holding my hand out to light the rock he was examining with my ring. It was tricky to keep it steady – it was meant more for general illumination purposes rather than close-work – and after a second he grabbed my hand and moved it to rest on his knee.

“That’s better,” he said, as I tried to ignore the feel

of his muscles bunching as he balanced. “Yes, I was right! Look, these aren’t stones – they have Bescant signatures all along the edges.”

“Bescant whats?” I peered closer. “Oh, illusion traces.” Wizards and their stupid need to name everything after themselves.

“Exactly,” he said, with absolutely no attempt to educate me about why it was important to use the proper title or I’d never blah blah blah. I had to keep reminding myself, Undergrove really wasn’t Atticus.

“So if we just use Wexwell’s Disconjuring...” He twisted his fingers, the pressure in my ears popped, and the wall vanished.

“Nicely done,” I said. “Looks like you passed the first test.”

“Knowledge, I suppose. Or strength of magic, maybe. Surely that can’t be it?”

“Let’s hope it is, for the sake of our skins.” I stared down the newly-revealed tunnel, which twisted off into darkness at the edge of our vision. “After you, then.”

“All right. Let me have the light ring.”

“Oh no,” I chuckled. “You have a bad record with rings. After me, in that case.”

The new tunnel arced downwards at an almost imperceptible rate, and the further we went, the

damper everything smelled. Any abandoned temple down here was going to be in terrible condition. We'd probably have to wade through years of mildew and spiders' webs to get to the Wishstone.

Or, as it turned out, pass another test. At least it wasn't scorpions.

"I think this one's probably for you," Undergrove said, examining the double doors we'd come to, gargantuan things in the Ancient style, all pilasters and pediments and fancy symbols. Despite us poking and prodding at them, the doors still resolutely refused to do what they were designed for and let us in, which led me to believe they were actually designed to keep us out.

"What gave it away, the gemstones or the metal?" The doors were covered in both, tracing an elaborate network of ornamentation that branched in all directions. The patterns *looked* like they should do something, looked like they were almost in spell-shape... I pulled my jeweller's case out of my pack and cast an eye over my supplies. If I could add linking power gems, and tweak the metal into the right shapes... "I think I know what to do," I said.

"Excellent. Can I help?"

"Absolutely not."

Luckily, he didn't try to interfere any further, so I slipped out a pair of pliers and set to work. It wasn't

that the work itself was difficult, now I'd worked out the patterns, but for some reason, the tools didn't seem to fit comfortably in my hands, and I kept dropping pieces I was trying to hold in place. Some jeweller I was; Undergrove would probably run back to the guild and tell them I couldn't work under pressure.

Ah. That was the problem.

"What's the matter?" said Undergrove in response to my muttered curse.

I took a deep breath, then confessed. "I'm nervous about working with an audience, and it's making me think too hard. I need you to distract me so my hands can work."

"Distract you how?"

"I don't know, just make conversation or something. Just be mildly interesting."

"Okay." He paused. "This is harder than it sounds when you're put on the spot, you know."

"Right back at you," I said, juggling three tools in one hand while I tried to keep the spell strands balanced with the other.

"Yes, sorry, right. So you and Atticus were... friends, once?"

My hand slipped, luckily not too far. "*That's* the topic you're going to pick?"

"Sorry. I'll come up with something else. Just give

me a minute.” He hummed thoughtfully.

Oh, fuck it. “No, it’s fine. It’ll work to distract me, and you might as well know. Friends.” I snorted. “Is that what he told you? We were lovers, Undergrove. Partners. Pretty damn close to marriage, at one point, or so he let me believe.” Surprisingly, it was working. The more I talked, the easier it was to fall into the rhythms of working. Eyes and hands on the door, mind on the conversation.

And actually, it was kind of cathartic to tell someone.

“I’m... I don’t know what to say,” Undergrove said. “I suppose it explains why you hate wizards. Break ups are hard.”

I cackled at that. “I don’t hate him because he broke up with me, idiot. I’m not some stroppey teenager. I hate him because he spent three years pretending to my face that he thought I was worth something so he could gain access to my magic, my body, and my skills, only to turn around and humiliate me in front of all his buddies when I wanted to try out for the guild.”

“You wanted to be a wizard?” He sounded shocked.

Familiar anger flared up in me. “What, you don’t think I could do it?”

“Of course you could do it!” he said quickly.

“You’re smarter than pretty much every wizard I’ve ever met, and you’re resourceful, too. You can do things I didn’t even know the names of until last year, and you *don’t* even know the names of them! I just meant... you hate wizards.”

“I do *now*.”

“Because of Atticus Carmichael.”

“Him and all his snooty, snobby, dickhead wizard friends. I found out he’d been laughing about me with them for the whole length of our relationship – that only I had thought it *was* a relationship. He told me he was waiting to come into his inheritance to propose to me; meanwhile he was telling them he was slumming it, casually fucking a Narrows rat too stupid to realise he was fleecing her for freebies.”

“Imogen, I’m so sorry.”

I would have startled at the use of my given name, but it sounded oddly right in his mouth. And besides, I was in full flow now, both mouth and hands, smoothing out the patterns on the door while I stirred up my memories. “He invited me up to a party at his parents’ place, some bigwig posh thing with all his cronies. Said he was ready to tell them all something, tell them how much I meant to him. He said he didn’t like rings, so I spent months designing a necklace for him, an engagement gift that would be perfectly suited to his magic – it was some of my best work. It was

beautiful.”

“I bet it was,” he murmured.

“I melted it,” I said, with a harsh laugh. “After. I stole it back and I melted that fucker down and turned it into contraceptive charms, menstrual pain charms, menopause charms. Gave them out to any Narrows woman who came by. So he did some good in the neighbourhood, at least.”

“He’d hate that. I *love* it,” Undergrove said. “But what happened at the party? If you want to tell me?”

“Might as well, now.” I shrugged, moving a gem into place to keep myself focused. “I met with him beforehand, spent the afternoon in bed. I gave him his pendant and told him how excited I was to be his wife. Then at the party, he danced with me. Introduced me around on his arm with a smile on his face. Then he called everyone to listen to an announcement, and just as I was expecting to become the happiest person in the room, he turned on me. He’d got what he wanted, so he told everyone how he’d done it, how he’d tricked me into thinking a street rat could become a wizard, or even be loved by one.”

“The absolute bastard.” Undergrove sounded furious; I couldn’t bear to look up from my work, because if I saw him that angry on my behalf, I wasn’t sure I could keep the tears back.

“He tore me to shreds, Dash. My behaviour, my feelings, my ambitions. How could I ever show myself at the guild after that?” I sniffed. “Not one person made any attempt to stop him. So I figured you were all like that.”

“We’re not, though.” His voice was soft, a gentle blanket around my shoulders.

“No.” I smiled up at him; the tears were falling anyway. “You’re not.”

The moment I looked away, the spell clicked into place and the doors swung open.

“It worked,” I said shakily, wiping my face. “You distracted me.”

“Imogen...” Normally there was at least some humour lurking in his face at all times, but right then, his expression was pure hurt and fury. Not pity, surprisingly. Just genuine sorrow and anger for me.

I couldn’t quite bear it.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I’ll either get over it or I’ll get revenge one day. Shall we go find some treasure?”

We explored every inch of that temple, looking for the Wishstone. Bloody Ancients couldn’t have just put it up on a nice plaque on the dais or something, no – they had to make us hunt for it, even though we’d trekked through the Wilds, nearly died to hideous

great scorpions, driven each other mad, and bested their tests of worth. It would have been too easy to put it somewhere sensible.

Instead, after about an hour, we found a trapdoor bearing a miniscule etching of a gem, half-hidden under a rotting bench, and pulled it open to a *whoomph* of heat. A rope ladder dangled precariously into the gloom underneath, but I could see a flickering light, as if torches were lit down there. Ominous, when you thought about how long this place had sat undisturbed.

Undergrove offered to go first; I let him. I do have some sense.

At the bottom of the rope, he steadied my elbow until I was safely on the floor. I looked around, taking in the room, if it could be called that.

It was more like a cave, with rough-hewn stone making a rounded egg shape above us. There were indeed torches flaming on the walls, but while I probably should have been more worried about them, it was rather hard when you saw what else was in there with us.

Treasure. So much *treasure*. Heaps and mounds of it, coins and jewels and cups and swords, all jumbled in great glinting piles all over the floor. It was magnificent. My fingers itched to start digging.

“Damn,” I said with feeling. “It’s like something

out of a storybook.”

Undergrove nudged me, pointing to my left. “And right there, you’ll see the most storied treasure of all.”

The Wishstone was real.

I sort of hadn’t believed in it fully until that moment, but there it was, winking at me from the centre of a carved pillar where it had been bound in full glory, lording it over all the other treasures. For such a small stone – and it really was a stone, not a faceted gem, but a rough, raw crystal about the size of my thumbnail – it certainly held the eye. It practically buzzed with magic.

It was also a flawlessly sky blue apatite.

“Figures,” I muttered to myself.

“Hm?” said Undergrove, tearing himself from staring at the gem to face me.

Funny, I thought, that the real gem didn’t quite capture the depth of colour in his eyes.

“Nothing. I’ll get it free, shall I? It’s too hot to stand around in here.”

Not waiting for an answer, I strode to the pillar and set to work with my tools, prying the Wishstone from its setting. I’d thought it would take more effort, but it seemed the Ancients had been satisfied with my work on the door, because the stone – the fairy tale, legendary, impossible stone – popped free into my hand in no time.

“Well done,” said Undergrove. “Now make sure you get it bound, quickly.”

“Yes,” I said, irritated. “I know what I’m doing.” My hand reached for my tool kit to find the ring blank I’d prepared back at the shop, but my fingers were slippery with sweat, and it took me a second or two to sort through the metals in there.

It was too hot in here, that was it. And now that I thought about it, I’d never been so thirsty.

A small table shimmered out of the air with a *pop* onto the floor in front of me. On it were a ceramic cup and pitcher, condensation beading on their sides. Iced water.

I jumped so high the Wishstone flew out of my hand into a nearby pile of treasure. “Did that just...”

“Ah. Yes,” said Undergrove, coming to peer at the pitcher. “Were you thinking about needing a drink? I might have left a little bit of information out. It turns out the stone—”

“It acts on *unvoiced* wishes?” I was astonished I could keep my voice so level. “Why didn’t you tell me? That’s... it’s...”

“Incredibly dangerous? I agree,” he said. “If it’s not bound to a particular setting, it reaches out to fulfil any wish it can. That’s why they kept it so hidden away, I assume. In inexperienced hands, it would be... chaos.”

“Right,” I said, with what I thought was great equanimity. “We need to find it quickly, then.” I dropped to my knees and started scrabbling through the nearest pile of treasure.

“You *dropped* it?”

“It startled me!” I dug frantically. We did not need the stone lying around any longer than necessary. What a horrifying idea – more nightmare than fairy tale: all it would take would be one stray thought, and something unintended, and possibly completely dreadful, could happen.

There was a soft rustle and a *pop*, and Undergrove’s shirt and coat vanished.

I paused in my search to take that in. Anyone would have.

“Now, whose wish was *that*?” he murmured, eyes full of intensity.

“Not mine,” I said hastily. “Maybe you were feeling too hot.”

“Maybe.”

He didn’t take his eyes from mine, so I thought it was probably safest to drag myself back to the search for the Wishstone before *I* got too hot and the bastard thing decided to undress me too.

“Can you at least help me look?” I huffed. “We need to get this thing under control before it starts to grant any more unwanted wishes.”

He was already crouching beside me. I tried to ignore how his bare shoulders brushed against my sleeve as he bent and sifted through the treasure that littered the base of the pillar.

Suddenly he grabbed my arm. “Couldn’t one of us wish to find—”

And there it was, in the palm of his hand.

“Do *not* drop it again,” he said, winking.

“I won’t.” I stood up. “This would be so much easier with a worktable.”

Pop. Well, that was handy. If the stone kept being helpful, maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

Pop. Undergrove disappeared briefly and appeared again, sprawled seductively across the table in only his trousers.

“What are you *doing*?” I shrieked.

“It wasn’t me!” he cried, scrambling off the table. “This thing is powerful.”

“Go and stand over there,” I said. “As far away from me as possible. Don’t look at me. Don’t think about me.”

“Yes, good plan. It’s obviously malfunctioning after centuries down here.”

I didn’t look up, just leaned over and laid out all my tools and supplies on the workbench as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. “Oh, you think it’s making up wishes that don’t exist?”

“It must be,” came his voice from further away.
“Neither of us would think anything like that, right?”

“Right.” Oops.

Actually, neither of us sounded certain.

Pop.

Dash was back by my side, leaning over the workbench. He turned to me, lips slightly parted. Raised a gentle hand to my cheek.

I caught my breath as he tipped my chin up and locked eyes with me. I’d never seen him so sparkling.

“Is this the stone making things up?” I whispered.

“I don’t know,” he replied, just as softly. “Were you wishing I’d kiss you?”

“No.” *Yes.*

“Shame.” It was just one word, but he was so close now, it sent a tickle of air across my lips that set my whole body tingling. “I guess this wish is mine, then.”

He closed the final space between us, and all thoughts of the Wishstone flew out of my head.

Someone cleared their throat behind me.

I ignored it. Couldn’t whoever it was see I was busy kissing Dash?

The interloper coughed again, more loudly, and I suddenly realised that we were two hundred feet underground in a temple that had been abandoned for a thousand years, and we had the only map, so

whoever was there was probably *not* someone we should ignore. I tried to pull back from Dash, but he simply followed, lips hot on mine, making the most *gratifying* little groan in the back of his throat as he wound his hands more firmly into my hair and...

“What the *fuck* is going on here, Imogen?” snarled a voice I knew well.

This time, I did disentangle myself successfully, and whirled, panting and presumably flushed, to find Atticus Carmichael standing there looking furious. In his pyjamas.

“Undergrove,” he spat.

“Carmichael,” Dash returned with no less venom.

“Atticus?” I whispered. “What the hell?”

“I don’t know, Imogen, you tell me.” He was furious, red-faced and sputtering, and I marvelled that I’d ever managed to find him attractive. “What is this, some kind of revenge? You summoned me here to watch you fuck this idiot? I knew you had some kind of thing for wizards, you conniving little bitch.”

“*I’m* conniving?” I said, at the same moment as Dash said, “*She’s* conniving?”

I spared him a grin, but unlike me, he hadn’t taken a breath and was in full flow.

“I knew you were a prick, Carmichael, but fuck me, I didn’t know the depth of it. How do you even look at yourself in the mirror? Do the guild elders

know you're running off talent we'd kill to have?"

What?

"What?" said Atticus.

"This woman," Dash continued, pointing to me, "is one of the finest magical minds I've ever known, and I've only known her for three days. I don't know how you could be such an imbecile as to dissuade her from applying to the guild – or what, was it selfishness? Couldn't handle that anyone was better than you? And now what, you're cooling your heels with your little clique of dickheads, scrounging for a promotion you don't deserve, while Imogen's out there doing real work, doing real magic, doing *a lot of important work, aren't you Imogen?*" Here he flapped his hands behind his back at me. "And for another thing..."

I mostly stopped listening, the message coming through loud and clear. While Atticus focused his rage on Dash, I needed to get this stone set and safely under control. I grabbed the ring I'd prepared, and balanced the stone carefully in the prongs while I recited the first parts of the binding spell.

This wasn't going to be a thing of beauty; there'd be time for that later, if I managed to get things under control. It was a fast and messy setting and fast and messy spell, and I tuned out the vitriol of the wizards as I slipped into full focus. There.

I jammed the ring onto my only empty finger –

where I'd worn the shield-ring I'd lost to Dash and the scorpion – and turned back to the wizards to see Dash cocking his fist in Atticus's beady, hateful face.

Damn, how I'd longed to do that. For years, I'd dreamed of it. And if I couldn't do it, at least I could stand back and watch as Atticus took the brunt of Dash's anger right in his smug, superior, self-satisfied jaw.

But Dash's fist never connected.

I blinked, but no, I was right – both men stood frozen, Dash's fist raised, Atticus cringing back slightly, for all the bravado in his eyes.

Pop? whispered the ring in my mind. Was it talking to me now? Or just wishful thinking? I didn't really care, to be honest.

"I wish that was me," I said, and there was a definite *pop* this time. Without blinking, I was in front of Dash, my own fist cocked.

The world came back to normal speed, and I relished the crack of Atticus's jaw as I hit him with all I was worth.

Oh, that felt *good*.

"Fucking street rat," Atticus snarled, clutching his face. "I knew that fucking Narrows blood of yours would out."

"Huh, yeah," I said. "It did come in handy."

"So what now?" Blood dripped from his nose,

making him look even more pathetic. “Is this where you give me some big talk about how I wounded you, how I’m gonna regret everything?”

“You sound like you get a lot of those,” chipped in Dash.

“Actually, no,” I said cheerfully. “I just realised: I don’t care about you. Isn’t that great?”

“Stellar,” he spat.

“Oh, there is one more thing,” I said.

I think he was going to say, “What is it?”, but I cut him off with another sharp punch. Fuck me, that was satisfying.

“Dash,” I said, taking his arm and ignoring Atticus’s howl of fury. “Do you think we’re done here?”

There was nothing but admiration in those apatite eyes now. “Ready when you are.”

“Great. My goodness, I really wish we were back in my shop, just the two of us and all this treasure.”

Atticus’s eyes widened. “Wai—”

Pop.

We didn’t even land with a bump. In one breath, we were in the temple, and in the next, in my familiar little shop in the Narrows, which was currently quite cramped due to the extremely large piles of treasure all over the floor.

I made a quick wish to shrink it all down and relocate it into my safe, which earned me a cheerful *pop*.

“You’re already getting adept with that thing,” Dash said.

“I could get used to my every whim being served,” I admitted.

“You know, they’ll be dying to meet you up at the guild now. You literally hunted down and tamed a legend.”

“Ugh,” I said. “I don’t want to think about the bloody wizards’ guild right now.”

“Oh, no, of course. I mean, you’re within your rights to tell them exactly—”

I held up a hand and grinned. “I’m gonna blow them away tomorrow, though.”

He returned the grin, and then we were laughing, and then I’m not sure who kissed who, but I did know I never wanted it to stop. Kissing Dash was fireworks, it was apatites and pearls glittering in an abandoned cave, it was the click of the prongs as they settled in to hold the gem perfectly, it was everything I’d wished for—

Oh no.

I pushed him away from me. “Wait one second, wait. This isn’t right—”

Ever the gentleman, Dash froze. I slipped out from

his arms, slid the ring off, and settled it carefully into a cushioned tray on my workbench. The gentle buzz in my finger subsided as the ring's power withdrew from my mind.

"That's better." I came back to stand in front of Dash, just out of his reach, and smiled.

He raised a quizzical eyebrow at me. "Everything okay?"

"Let's see. I wish for... oh, I don't know, a cream cake."

Nothing happened, except for a small smile creeping onto Dash's face.

"You took the ring off," he said. "The stone won't work like that now it's bound."

"Shame," I said. "Next I was going to wish there was a very frustrating wizard around here to take me to bed."

"Oh, really?" His smile expanded into a wicked grin. "But I know for a fact that you don't fuck wizards."

I stepped back towards the stairs and undid the first button on my blouse. "Oh, I would be *delighted* to prove you wrong."

I didn't make it to the second button before he laughed.

I didn't make it to the third before he surged forward to capture me in a kiss so hard, so aching, so

thoroughly *wishful* that I could barely stand.

In fact, we didn't even make it up the stairs.

Adie Hart is a lover of stories and the words behind them. With a background in the history and literature of the Ancient World, and an abiding love of classic fairy tales, she writes fun and fluffy queer-norm fantasy rom-coms, many of them set in her District Witch world. This story stands alone, but if you enjoyed it, you might also like “The Magpie and the Magister” in Indie Bites Issue 7. Check out her website [here](#) or find her on social media as @adiehartaauthor.

Deer Teeth

Matthew Hopkins

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains references to mental illness in a loved one.

This garden holds the sun. The light pools in the moss and lavender, in the broad, flat leaves; the cluster of yellow blossoms by the gate are beacons against the soft, light wood. Wisteria, vast and purple, lies languid against the cobblestone wall of the house behind the garden. Ivy, waxy, deep green, winds around the rough, light and crumbly stone fence. And, on top of a sheer cliff, it is surrounded by endless blue. The scent of flowers and the salt of the sea in the heat is heady, sweet. Everything is bright and alive and you are looking down at your hands. There is dirt under your nails.

The ground digs into you as you dig into it, hunched over on your knees, your hair sticking to the back of your neck with sweat. You are trying to plant rosemary, sage, some wild mountain thyme you found

growing not far from here. Healing plants, or so those hours you've spent frustratedly scouring muddy, fingerprint-ridden books tell you. There's a redness in your face that has nothing to do with the heat – plant magic is not *real* magic. Your hands are stained purple to the wrist with real magic. But you are running out of options.

You are a hero of legend. Or you were. You don't fight dragons anymore. You are tame now, a flower in its pot.

Haphazardly, you cram the last of the rosemary into the dirt, its sharp scent sending a shudder through you. There is dirt smudged on your red skirts, pressed into the creases in your hands. And, there! The little bastard that has been eating away at your roses – a fat yellow slug, squirming.

Purple light flickers at your fingertips, sending sparks of familiar cold through your bones. It would be so much easier. You sigh, and tentatively pick up the creature, straining away from it. It feels vile between your fingers, slimy and soft but strangely firm, like an eye. Carrying it to the gate and placing it into the grass over the wall instead of throwing it like you want to, you tell it, *go, go away*.

And the calling starts again.

It is high and clear and unchanging, in your lover's voice. And *loud*, even from here, as if she is trying to

summon the stars back down from the sky. The sound drifts closer, and then she is standing at the door, framed by purple flowers and bathed in gold.

She is willowy, dressed in white, with scarred hands and distant eyes. She is barefoot. Her hair is dark but amber in the sun. She is the first break of day, the first song over the waves. There is nothing before or after her.

You go to her, cautious as a stray dog. You study her face, trying to find any sign of change, childishly hoping the plants you packed into the dirt have already taken hold. Nothing.

She wanted a garden. You made flowers grow from nothing to cover you both, purple light twisting at your fingertips. Honeysuckle, apple blossom, daisies the size of hearts. No, she wanted you to grow a garden with your bare hands. She thought it would be good for you. Help you to slow down.

The ground pulls you back down to your knees before her. You rest your head against her thigh, hand holding the back of her knee. The calling stops. She strokes your hair.

My blood, she says, my blood is not red it is bright and hot and burning.

You close your eyes, feel the thin, rough fabric of her dress against your forehead, under your hands, breathe her in. She smells like jasmine and lemon and

wood smoke.

But I can bear it I will. You can hear the smile in her voice. *I will bear it and soon I will be bigger and brighter than the sun I will burn out all this sickness I will cauterise this open wound of a world.*

You have undone death and time itself but you cannot do anything for her. You have tried. You have tried so hard.

The library takes up most of your house and still overflows into the rest of it. Old tomes, reams of parchment covered in your scratchy handwriting, endless leather-bound books in every colour cover the walls, tower in piles about the floor. The magic in this room is so thick you can taste it: raw meat and citrus and starlight, aniseed and ozone. Her books used to be mixed in, but she burned them all. Every last one. You wept but you were too late to save them.

It has not always been like this.

You met her when you were both still children, even though you were insistent you were not. She was stood on the steps of a shining white and gold cathedral, staring into the middle distance as a preacher next to her lauded their shared god to the passersby. You were seeking something new, and you found it. You remember thinking that if you could have anything at all, it would be to love someone the

way she loved everyone.

You were not supposed to be this powerful. No one ever is. You were not supposed to grow old either, but you did. You could've brought the world to its knees, but you didn't. Instead, you saved it. Over and over again. This is your reward: a quiet life.

The night is just like any other, balmy and violet and maddening. You never thought research would bring you so much misery. You have found no cure for your lover, only a mention of something similar twice. Both times ended in death, and both in footnotes. It feels as if there is a hand picking at your heart. You slam the book in front of you shut in frustration, dragging a hand over your face as you sink back into your chair. Looking up, you catch sight of an emerald bowl balancing precariously on a stack of books. Strange. You'd gotten so lost in all of this you forgot about it. With fresh water, teeth tied with red string, and a ritual, you used to see futures and parallel lives and unpick the weave of it all. If anyone could be a god, it would be you.

You shake your head, purple instinctively pooling at your fingertips as if the thought is some trick to dispel. You cannot think like that anymore. This is the future you have fought for in every life you have lived. You laugh instead of letting the tears fall.

How cruel.

Morning comes and you have not slept, still in the library, boxed in by your scattered notes and open books. There is no point trying to sleep when your lover cannot, either. You don't remember the last time she did. She spends all night calling, so loud she chases away rest for the both of you.

A knock at the door and you jump, knocking a pot of ink and sending it spilling all over the book before you. With a wave of your hand, purple and cold, without looking, you clean it away.

At the door is a castle of a man. Dark, curly hair falls past his shoulders and his full beard is peppered with grey. There are seven braids, beaded with iron, through his hair. You and your lover braided them all in. His face is weathered and scarred, but the wrinkles there tell of a life spent smiling, despite everything you have both done. From his neck to the left side of his hairline, three thick black lines stretch over his skin. The last time you saw him, only a day or so ago, they were faded grey.

You tell him he looks like he's going to war again. You want him to say something true, something like *we always are*, but he's never been quick enough for that. He shrugs, pink in his cheeks. The years have changed so much, but not that. Never that. And he is quick in ways you are not: to fight and laugh and he

should have been king. You would know, you have seen it. He looked happy.

You will never tell him.

“She’s getting louder,” he says.

You gesture to the chaos around you. There’s something about it that is almost helpless.

“This will kill her.”

It was always the three of you. He kept you safe, she fixed you up when he didn’t, and you bent reality to your will. And when you saved everyone for the last time, after that final battle, he built this house. He built it for three. Him, you, and the child you’d have together.

“When do we stop this? When do we accept she’s lost?”

Me or her, he’d said, and you never wanted to make that choice but her hand was already in yours. He would die for you, but you have lived all these years because of her.

“She is trapped in her head and we cannot get her out. You know what you would want of me if it was you.”

You say nothing, but beckon him over as you stand. He gingerly picks his way through the maze of books surrounding you in a way that would be funny if you were anywhere else. You sit him down in the chair you were just in and turn to face him. You know

what he is asking you to do. It is, after all, not the first time you have spoken about this. But you can't. You won't. You have the skin of everyone you've ever loved and let go of stuck in your teeth and you will not taste blood again.

You rest your forehead against his, sharing breath. You both close your eyes. Be still. His hair is coarser now, wiry in your hands. You can feel the shape of his skull, the gentle curves of bone under his scalp. There is a scar like a crescent moon curving up the back of his head that you cannot see, but know like it's your own. His hands, outspread, cover your shoulder blades, almost bracing you. You could have had this. Him, steadfast, your lighthouse. But even with all the holy light burning, you do not regret your choice. There is no life where you do.

The calling stops and you sense your lover standing at the door, the smell of smoke stronger than ever, like she is the fire rather than just close to it.

My ears are burning. Her voice is gentle and you can so clearly remember what you had before everything. *Were you thinking of me?*

Always, you tell her. Always.

She drifts closer, the muted sound of her footsteps against the wood meaning she's barefoot, the crinkle of pages meaning she is walking over the books, his hands still at your back. You feel her standing at your

side and you shut your eyes harder. When you open them, everything will be okay. One of his hands goes to her and she leans into your side, taking a handful of your skirt like she used to, anchoring herself. She used to call you her moon. She is your sun. He is your earth. The three of you are, at last, one again.

Weeds, weeds, weeds, always these weeds. You wrench them from the ground and toss them aside. They scratch at your hands, raising thin lines, making the purple darker. This is not a fight they will win. The little bastards are choking the healing plants, wilting the rosemary and thyme, their rich colour draining. The sage is faring better, but it is drooping. If it could speak, it probably wouldn't want to.

The rest of the garden has fallen out of your mind. All you can hear is your lover calling to the sky. Leaves are curling and blotched, petals litter the floor. The smell is too sweet, rotting fruit or incubating illness. It doesn't matter now. You only need these herbs.

Scrubby green leaves and bone-white roots, mud clinging to it all. You dig your hands into the dirt again and claw out handfuls of it, destroy the roots. They won't grow back.

Plunging into the earth again, your fingers hit

something small and hard. You don't hesitate to scoop it out. Shaking open your hand, you find a cluster of deer teeth in your palm. You brush the remaining dirt from them, off-white and worn, brown holes where the time has burrowed through.

There is a loose thread in your skirt. You could tease it out, wind it around the teeth, fill the emerald bowl with water. You spent years in hiding, and longer still adjusting your plan until it finally worked. World saved, your sun and your earth still alive, and the bright heat of the future you saw was finally on your skin. Maybe it blinded you. Maybe you've been a fool this whole time. Maybe your mind, having already lived decades past your body, latched on to the first future that wasn't all-out destruction and refused to untangle it.

You buried these teeth for a reason.

The air is still. And hot. Hotter than before. Than ever.

You are standing in the garden, at the door. The gate is hanging from its hinges. Those yellow flowers, the small beacons, are strewn towards the cliff edge. The day is as vast and as bright as it ever has been. The sun blazes down. The sky and its daughter, the raging sea, are one. The cloudless deep.

Against the blue, your lover is standing at the very

edge of the cliff, on fire.

There was a night, years ago, when you were all lying under the stars and were sure you would not all survive the coming day. Your head was in her lap, her hands running through your hair. He was sharpening his sword, but he made sure to have his leg touching yours, and to be close enough to her that she could feel the heat of him. You spoke of small things: old scars, burial rites and where to do them, a deer darting past. Then the quiet of the night and what lay before you stilled their voices. It hastened yours.

Through the silence, knowing you might not live to sit with them like this again, you said *you made all this suffering worth it*. You told them you'd do it all again.

The day came. You survived. The suffering has not ended, but neither has the love.

You go to her in silence, moving like a cut anchor to the bottom of the sea. The heat is prickling your skin from here. All you can smell is smoke and burning hair, rendered fat. The purple light at your hands melts before it can touch the flame. This is not magic. This is the bleeding heart of delusion. She did this to herself.

She is standing too close to the edge. You could

push her. Let the sea swallow her. What would it cost? The skin on your palms? You have lost more for less.

The being of light, the fire, turns to you and holds its arms out wide.

You close the space in between. Your skirt catches light. She would not survive the fall. You would not survive being the one to do it. Anything you could say turns to steam, so you kneel before her, your hair crying out for her to stroke it one last time. You breathe her fire into your lungs. You rest your head against her thigh. You reach out and you hold the sun.

*Matthew Hopkins (they/he) is a writer and semi-professional bad boy from Derbyshire. His work has appeared in *Hearth & Coffin*, the anthology *Letters for the Dead*, and elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter, @swearjaragain or at linktr.ee/swearjaragain.*

I See You, Witch

Zoe Shakes

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains references to infertility.

Ten pm was, the way Malcolm saw it at least, an ungodly hour. Nothing good happened past ten pm: the air was cold enough to bite purplish stains into the cheeks, and the light too weak to shine upon anything worth looking at. On Hallowe'en night, though, ten pm was worse than ever.

The streets were heaving with people dressed in all sorts of distasteful, ghoulish garb, and the chattering of children was too loud to bear. As Malcolm glowered from between his curtains, a small lad in a devilish mask slipped on the icy paving stones. The wail he let out could have put real demons to shame. Malcolm clenched his lips and tutted, as loud as he could.

Perhaps he was losing tolerance in his old age, just as he was losing his teeth, or perhaps he was tired. He stopped scowling long enough to let out one yawn,

then quickly returned his lips to their usual, downturned position. Normally, Malcolm would have been in bed two hours ago, but his client had rather disrupted his sleep schedule.

“Keep her until after the witching hour is over,” the laird had said. “I won’t have my daughter near any of the wickedness that goes on. Understood?”

Malcolm hadn’t wanted to paint a portrait at ten pm on Hallowe’en night, but he couldn’t say no to the laird. So he’d agreed: Margaret could come for her sitting at 10pm, and stay right through to the morning. The prospect of a sleepless night in itself would have been enough to get his nostrils flaring – the fact that Margaret was late only set the scowl deeper into his face. He scanned the crowds for some sign of the girl, arms and brows folded tight.

Finally, there was Margaret. The little girl jemmied her way past legs and under elbows, wriggling with uncommon agility into each pocket of space.

“What’s the rush, lass?” one lady called.

“Watch yourself, blondie!” a man called – which Malcolm thought was strange, as Margaret’s hair was the plainest sludge-brown he had ever seen.

Finally, she stepped onto Malcolm’s garden path. Flattening her hair with one gloved hand and straightening her robes with the other, she smiled a

well-practiced smile.

“I do apologise,” she said, skirts rustling as she climbed Malcolm’s steps. “I’m never late. Never. But...” She waved one hand vaguely towards the heaving pavement outside. “Well, I’m sure you understand.”

Malcolm had been planning to berate her, but it seemed impossible in the face of such sweet breeziness. She had an odd, quaint way of speaking for a child. Perhaps she’d have the maturity to match. At least then she wouldn’t break down crying if he painted her nose too truthfully.

“I don’t abide lateness,” Malcolm grunted, setting up his easel. “I never do.”

“You must understand,” Margaret said, smiling still. “It’s Hallowe’en night, after all.”

“No one has ever come late on Hallowe’en night before,” Malcolm said.

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “Has anyone sat for you on Hallowe’en night before?”

Malcolm’s scowl deepened and Margaret’s smile brightened. She settled down on the sitter’s stool and arranged her skirts about her. Most artfully, Malcolm had to admit.

“It’s an odd choice, coming today,” Malcolm said.

“My father insisted,” Margaret said. “He wants to keep me out of trouble, no doubt.”

“Are you the sort of fool who’d get caught up in that witching business?”

Margaret rearranged her lips in a meaningful sort of way. But though he’d spent the past forty years studying and painting faces, Malcolm couldn’t for the life of him interpret this expression.

“I don’t think so,” Margaret said. “But I suppose fathers worry about their children.”

Then she smiled.

“Why aren’t you out tonight?” she asked. “Did your father forbid you, too?”

Malcolm didn’t smile back. “I’ve lived through seventy-two Hallowe’ens,” he said. “I’ve no need to see another. It’s the same rigmarole every time.”

“Yes,” Margaret said. “They do start to run into one another after a while, don’t they?”

“You barely look twelve years old,” Malcolm said. “Surely the disillusionment’s not set in yet. How old are you?”

Margaret raised her eyebrow, and Malcolm thanked God he hadn’t been working on her face at the time. Its entire expression changed when she moved her brow, adding enough personality to render the girl quite unrecognisable. Malcolm had never seen a face behave that way before, and it unnerved him.

“Really, Malcolm,” she said. “You must know it’s bad manners to ask a lady her age.”

He mumbled a word that certainly wasn't "sorry" and clenched his pencil harder, drawing Margaret's chin a nail's breadth too long. This night just kept getting worse.

The night wore on and Malcolm worked in scowling silence. After the clock had ticked round one full circle, a knock chapped against the door. Before Malcolm could mutter "*who's that at this hour?*" a voice called out:

"It's Annie, Grandpa."

Moments later, Annie herself appeared. Rich steam emanated from her shawl, which she was using to warm the pot she cradled. Malcolm hadn't realised quite how hungry he was until Annie had come in – and his granddaughter was a damn good cook.

"Put that on the side and make me a bowl," Malcolm growled. "I'm ravenous."

Wrinkling her nose, Annie did as she was told. "It's chaos out there tonight," she said. "The laird found his daughter, that Margaret, out with the other maidens. They were off trying to consult with the spirits – that type of malarkey."

Normally, Malcolm would have sniffed and tutted at that. But tonight, it was all he could do to pale.

"But this is the laird's daughter," he said, pointing at the figure on the sitter's stool.

Annie's brow wrinkled right along with her nose.

“No, Grandpa. It’s not.” She leaned in to examine his painting, frown deepening. “Who are you painting? She doesn’t look anything like that lady.”

“It’s the spit of her,” Malcolm said. He jabbed a blunt-nailed finger towards Margaret, scowling hard enough to make his spittle froth up. “That right there is Margaret McNeil, daughter of the laird.”

“Your painting looks like wee Maggie, right enough,” Annie conceded. “But it doesn’t look like that woman in the sitter’s stool. And she don’t look even the slightest bit like Maggie.”

Both of them turned at once to stare at Margaret – who had, for the past minute, been strangely quiet.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” Margaret said, enunciating each word a little too crisply. “I am Margaret.”

“Margaret’s a wee girl,” Annie said. “You’re my age near enough. Twenty-five, at least.”

“She barely looks twelve,” Malcolm cut in.

“You need to get your eyes checked out,” Annie said. then turned back to Margaret. “Besides, it doesn’t matter what you look like – I know for a fact that Margaret is in her bed at the laird’s house now. I saw him dragging her back not fifteen minutes ago.”

“But Margaret’s been here over an hour,” Malcolm argued. He jabbed his finger towards the painting, making frustrated circles around Margaret’s cheek.

“Here she is – the lass who’s been sitting for me. You’re telling me this bairn *isn’t* the laird’s daughter?”

Annie leaned closer to the painting, then turned back to compare the image with the form of its sitter. But when she looked up, the stool was empty.

The witch pulled her cloak tighter as she slipped through Malcolm’s door, scowling into the biting breeze. She hardly needed to think about this anymore – about moving her feet lightly, avoiding the branches, treading in the shadows. After centuries of practice, there was little that the witch hadn’t learned – but when it came to hiding, she was a particular expert. Most of the time, she was just as invisible as she liked.

Which made tonight’s slip-up even more frustrating.

People, the witch had found, are loathe to disbelieve their own eyes. If their eyes tell them a lie, they’ll never question it. If they expect a twelve-year-old maiden, that’s what they’ll see. If they expect a twenty-five-year-old woman, they’ll see that. In all her hundreds of years on this earth, the witch had never once needed to show her own form. People just filled in the gaps for themselves.

Often, it worked in the witch’s favour. Tonight,

though, was one of those irritating nights where everything fell apart.

Perhaps she'd got away with it. She let herself luxuriate in the thought for a moment, before turning back to the path whence she'd come. Then she cursed aloud.

There was Annie, huffing her way determinedly towards her. The witch rolled her eyes and set off faster than before. This really was too much. She didn't like being captured at the best of times – but this woman had something about her that set the witch's bones on edge. She was clever, cleverer than that grandfather of hers. And the witch hadn't the slightest idea what she might want.

That was enough to set her feet running.

But Annie was quicker than she looked. She came barrelling on down the path, calling out with a voice full of breath. As she did, something strained against the witch's sides. Perhaps the magic was binding her already, sapping her strength and pulling her back toward her new mistress. Or perhaps she was getting a stitch.

"I see you, witch," Annie called.

And there they were – those words that bound the witch's legs for good. She stood, begrudgingly, until Annie reached her at last.

"I knew it was you," Annie said, staggering and

slipping the last few steps; it was far too icy a night for all this running, the witch thought. "I worked it out when I realised that the lassie my grandpa saw wasn't the same that was standing in front of me..."

"Spare me the explanation, if you please," the witch said. "I've heard this spiel a thousand times."

Annie blinked. "Who's worked it out before? I thought you were supposed to be uncatchable."

"That's what the legends tell you," the witch scoffed. "I've been caught plenty of times. All it takes is for someone to show up where they're not expected. Anyone with the slightest bit of wherewithal can work it out, if the situation's right."

Annie didn't look quite as deflated as the witch had hoped. "If you're always getting caught, why does no one talk about it? In town, no one's even sure you're real."

The witch smiled. "After I've helped someone, they seldom want the world to know. I'm sure you understand."

"I suppose. I imagine a lot of folk use you to get away with the most awful things."

"Things they'd rather hide," the witch said. "Take the laird's daughter – she wanted to go out on Hallowe'en night and have fun with the other lassies. But her father had organised this portrait sitting. She needed someone, someone with her face, to cover for

her.”

“All that scheming, and she still got caught,” Annie said. “If only she knew how to be discreet.”

“Quite.” The witch pulled her shawl tighter about her. “Listen, I don’t mean to rush you. But it’s a supremely chilly night. Tell me what it is you want me to do, and we can both be on our way.”

Annie bit her lip, glancing this way and that as if to double check that they were alone. When she turned back to the witch, her mouth was set in a straight line. “You’re not to repeat this to anyone,” she said.

“I don’t partake in gossip,” the witch said.

“Right,” said Annie. She shuffled her feet, which was a silly thing to do in this frost, but she managed not to lose her footing on the ice. She didn’t, however, manage to meet the witch’s eye. “Well, the thing is, I’m not able to be home quite so much as I used to be. And my husband’s sure to get suspicious.”

The witch raised a brow. “Suspicious of what?”

Annie coughed in lieu of a reply. “I need you to step in. Be there when he gets home from work and have dinner ready. Keep everything clean. Make sure he doesn’t suspect a thing.”

“And when will this be?” the witch asked.

“Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays,” Annie said.

She seemed set to blabber on, but the witch raised a palm before she could. “Lovely as all that sounds,”

she said, “I don’t see how I can help. I am bound to you only for a single day – I have no obligation to your project beyond that.”

For a second, it seemed as though Annie’s face might fall. Then a sly smile glimmered across her lips. “I could simply catch you again at the end of the night,” she said. “I know where you’ll be.”

It was a clumsy ploy, the witch thought – but, damn it, she did have a point.

“I’ll keep you no longer than Christmas,” Annie went on. “I swear.”

“I’ll agree to one night,” the witch said.

“And then I just need to capture you again?”

The witch sniffed. “If you can catch me again at the end of it, I suppose I’ll help you again. That’s all I’m offering.”

She extended a hand and Annie grasped at it right away, as though terrified it would retract before she could seal the bargain. “Good,” she said, shaking it. “Well, that’s settled. Come by tomorrow, and make sure dinner is ready when he gets in at six. Then leave bed at four am on the dot. I’ll switch over with you then.”

Annie seemed set to leave, but the witch wasn’t releasing her hand – not yet. “Tell me about him,” she said.

Annie blinked. “What do you want to know?”

“All of it. His favourite foods. The names you call him in private. The things you talk about together.”

Slowly, Annie wrinkled her nose. “He’s just James,” she said. “And he’ll eat whatever you give him. We don’t talk about much. Just normal things.”

“What are ‘normal things’?” the witch protested, but Annie was already wrestling her hand free.

“I must leave,” she said. “But I’ll see you at four am, Wednesday morning.”

And, with that, she was gone.

Annie’s kitchen was, the witch thought, the most wondrous place she’d been in decades. She’d spent her nights in many beds over the years, and passed the thresholds of manors and crofts alike. It took a lot to impress her. But Annie’s meticulously organised collection of herbs – well, that was really something. The witch fingered her way from shelf to shelf, pulling sprigs here and there until she had an earth-smelling posy in her fist. For a witch, she really didn’t spend enough time at the cauldron, she mused. *Witch*. It was a funny word to describe her, but she supposed there wasn’t a better option. ‘Witch’ was almost meaningless, a catch-all term the townsfolk used to describe women they didn’t understand. In that regard, the witch fit the definition perfectly.

She began cooking, stirring together ingredients

into a stew. It didn't smell quite as wonderful as Annie's had last night, but the witch hoped James wouldn't notice.

As six pm drew closer, the witch drew to mind the way Annie sat within her body, letting the essence of the woman subsume her entirely. After all these years, it was easy. The witch hardly had to think in order to become someone else.

By the time she heard the key in the door, the stew was cooked. Footsteps drew closer and the witch braced herself, tightening a smile into her cheeks. She wondered what James would be like, imagining a slew of unappealing men: gruff and brutish; monosyllabic and aloof; sleazy and needy; old and full of gas. If Annie was so keen to get away from him, her husband really must be insufferable. The witch was ready for anything. Perhaps that was why she was surprised when the most beautiful young man she'd ever seen stepped through the door.

"My Annie," he said, stepping closer so that he could murmur the words into her hair. "You don't know how glad I am to see you."

For all of a second, the witch's heart rose so high into her throat that she could scarce breathe past it. Then, swallowing, she fixed a quizzical smile onto her face.

"Did you not see me this morning?" she asked.

“Yes. And I’ve been thinking of your dear face all day long.”

He pulled her closer, and the witch tried to remember the last time she’d been touched like this. There was nothing glancing or cautious about James’s skin on hers. He held her as though it were the most natural and familiar thing in the world; as though he knew exactly where to put his hands without thinking about it. To slot into such an embrace was a wonder. It did things to the witch’s heart that she dared not analyse.

She grit her teeth but smiled wide, thankful that James could see nothing behind her lips. There was no time to think about *her heart*. All that mattered here was *Annie’s heart, Annie’s body, Annie’s husband*. So the witch leaned into the embrace, felt James’s lips on *Annie’s forehead*, and thought nothing of it.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Much like any other,” James said. “Cold though. How was yours, my love?”

“Quite pleasant,” the witch said. “I made a stew.”

James turned to the pot on the stovetop, inhaling with his nostrils wide. “That smells divine. What did you put in it?”

“Nothing special,” the witch said. “Vegetables, broth, herbs.”

“Herbs?” James asked. “Which ones?”

“A bit of this, a bit of that.”

“I want to know your secrets,” James said, encircling her waist with his arms. His voice was muffled against her collar, and there was something strangely intimate about it – the words held in that tiny gap between them, murmured into skin, felt rather than heard. “Tell me which ones.”

She pointed from jar to jar and he nodded along, breathing excited noises into her neck.

“You care more about herbs than most men,” the witch said.

“I want to learn about you, my love,” he said. “I want to know your world. Perhaps I could grow some herbs for us, in the garden. Are there any you’d like?”

The witch cocked her head to the side. “I’ve always loved nutmeg,” she said.

“Nutmeg,” James repeated, and the word sounded beautiful on his lips. “If only it grew in Scotland.”

They chattered on, until the witch’s stomach growled. James smiled. “Let me make you a plate,” he said.

He stepped back from her and took the ladle and a bowl. It was odd, the witch noted, how cold she felt when James left her arms. Taking the first mouthful of stew, though – with James lowering himself into the stool beside her, resting his leg against hers – she warmed right up.

James made some intensely approving noises as he swallowed his first bite.

“This the best thing you’ve ever made. Where’d you find the recipe?”

The witch smiled and plugged her mouth with a forkful of stew. It was tricky to emulate Annie’s energy, she found. To be an Annie, she’d have to be curt and prim – presumably, if the circumstances of this arrangement were anything to go by, she ought to be emotionally disengaged.

But it was hard to disengage from James.

He pushed enthusiastic mouthfuls of stew between his lips, joking and laughing and listening attentively. She should be careful what she said, she supposed, lest he catch some inconsistency in her words. But she couldn’t help herself. She had the feeling – a truly dangerous feeling – that she could tell James anything. As she spoke, he touched her thigh in an easy sort of way, as though his hand belonged there. It did, she supposed. After all, her thigh was the thigh of his wife. The intimacy wasn’t for her – really, she was no more than a bystander. But it didn’t feel that way.

In a matter of minutes – it felt like a matter of minutes, anyway – the church clock struck eleven.

“Right,” James said, getting to his feet. “Let’s head to bed.”

He held out a hand for the witch and she took it,

enjoying his strength as he pulled her gently from her seat. This must be a part of their routine, the witch thought: eleven pm and off to bed. There was something about the normalcy of it that made her smile.

In the other room, where the bed was, the witch saw Annie's nightdress already laid out. James began to strip off his clothes, pulling off each layer and folding them as he went. The witch averted her eyes. Of course, there was a part of her that wanted to look – but that would be crossing a line. So, eyes down, she focused on removing her own clothes. She wasn't embarrassed, undressing in front of James. Having never had a body of her own, the witch had nothing to be self-conscious of. This wasn't her skin, after all. It was Annie's – skin and flesh which James must have seen countless times before. But when, naked, the witch looked up, James was staring at her with new eyes. The expression in them did something unfamiliar to her spine.

"You really are braw," he said, voice lilting, liquid. "The most beautiful lassie in the town."

"You flatterer," the witch said. But she knew, looking at those eyes, that the words were true in his mouth. There was something unnervingly tender about the way he looked at her. To be seen like that, loved like that, weakened every tendon in her body.

She'd never known anything like it – like this rush, this heady burst of flame. And she couldn't get enough of it.

But it wasn't for her, this feeling. It wasn't for her, this look in his eyes. It was Annie's body he marvelled at, Annie who he loved.

So when he leaned towards her, the witch presented him with a cheek to kiss. There were boundaries here, unspoken rules she couldn't break. Perhaps James looked disappointed at her rebuttal, but it was for his own good. If he knew what she was, he'd have no desire to kiss her.

But in bed, the witch couldn't resist his touch. He held her tight against his chest, pressing his lips into the nape of her neck. She could've fallen asleep right there, if it weren't for her arrangement with Annie. Instead, the witch listened out for the church bells. One am, two am, three am. As the clock struck four, she wriggled out from James's sleeping arms and, redressing, made for the front door.

There, as arranged, was Annie.

"I see you, witch," she called, and the magic surged up the witch's legs once more. Annie hurried closer, panting, but the witch held up a palm.

"Oh, don't bother with that nonsense," she said. "No need to run, for pity's sake."

Annie frowned. "I need to capture you."

“It’s rather undignified,” the witch said. She feigned a sigh, injecting a wearied, begrudging note into her voice. “Easier for us both if I agree to your terms, I suppose. Just till Christmas, mind.”

Annie’s frown only deepened. It was rather, the witch realised, like her grandfather’s. “What made you change your mind?” she asked.

“All this capturing lark gets tiresome,” the witch said.

And, as she stalked away, she told herself that was her only reason.

Wednesday was the longest day of the witch’s life – which was saying something, considering how long she had lived. She sat on a street corner, unnoticed, and wondered at the feeling in her chest. Was it a feeling? It was more of an emptiness, she supposed: something hollow, numb and bland. She wasn’t lonely – she’d learned long ago never to entertain loneliness – but she was *something*. Or perhaps she was nothing.

People chattered on by her: fisherwomen hauling nets, children pursuing each other with sticks, ruddy labourers emerging from the public house. The witch watched it all and felt not a thing. Usually, perhaps, she’d have been interested by their comings and goings – but, today, the witch couldn’t muster even the energy to eavesdrop.

She got to her feet, wandering from the harbour. It was aimless, this walking. She didn't know where she was going until she found herself on the edge of old Wilson's farm.

And there he was, shimmering amongst the other farmhands: James. The sweat which dampened the others set his skin agleam.

"Come on, lads," he called. "Almost there. You're making a mighty fine job of it."

Perhaps James was more senior than the witch had realised. Something stirred in her stomach, and she wondered whether she was *proud* of him. A bizarre feeling, of course – she didn't know the man. But the feeling was better than the emptiness, so she stayed right there, watching them plough the field right to the edges. Inch by inch, row by row they came, etching new grooves into the ground. By the time they were done, night had almost fallen.

"That's grand, that is," James said. "Off you go, now – time to get home. The wife'll be expecting me back."

And something about the way he said it – about the way he smiled, eyes dancing right past her – had the witch clenching her teeth.

When James stepped through the door on Thursday night, he pulled her into his arms at once.

“My love,” he said, and planted a kiss into the space above her ear. The witch ought to have been be too old to be drawn by such things, too wise and too shrewd to entertain butterflies. But something was astir in her soul, that much was certain.

“James,” she said. “Come see what I’ve made for you.”

She led him across the room to the table, where dinner was already laid out. And what a dinner it was, if she did say so herself. She’d bought a chicken and cooked it over the fire with a selection of the freshest vegetables she could find at the market. All day, the witch had collated her ingredients, bartering and harvesting and – just once – thieving, until she had all the components of a veritable feast. James gazed at it all with appropriate reverence.

He drew out her chair and took his seat, eating only a little more quickly than good manners dictated. It was endearing, the witch thought. Ridiculously, unnervingly so.

After dinner, James scraped back his chair and smiled at her with those beautiful crinkly eyes of his.

“Thank you, Annie,” he said. It was the first time all evening she’d remembered Annie’s existence, and her gut tightened with the thought. But then James took her hand and all was well once more. “What shall we do now?”

The witch didn't know what the right answer was, what Annie and James did together. When she opened her mouth, though, she wasn't afraid of saying the wrong thing.

"Let's walk," she said.

The two huddled together in the cold, faces bracing against a rough flush of wind. But James's hand in hers burned hot enough to warm the witch. They walked, arms swinging, all the way to the edge of the town, where the ocean loomed blackly, a great liquid shadow on the pale beach.

"This would be a good spot to come with the bairns, one day," James said.

"Bairns?" the witch asked – although she supposed it wasn't much of a question. Every couple planned children, just about. It was odd, now she thought of it, that Annie and James had none after five years married.

All at once, James was looking at her with a seriousness she hadn't before seen. "It's only a matter of time, my love. I've been praying for it – Ma's been praying and all. We just need to have faith and wait on it. All will come in its proper time."

Ah – so that was it. The witch wished she could nod and squeeze his hand, wished she could say "Amen" and have over with it. But she'd lived too

long for all that.

“It doesn't happen for everyone, you know,” she said, working to keep her tone gentle.

James just gripped her hand tighter. “I’m not giving up,” he said. “I'll keep praying.”

For a minute they were silent, listening to nothing but the wail of the ocean, the wet crunch of waves knocking at the cove.

“You really believe all that works, then?” she asked. “Praying?”

James smiled. “I know it does. I prayed long enough for you, didn't I? And now here we are.”

And so the weeks went on. On her days with James, the witch woke early to gather new ingredients, anxiously awaiting six pm. On Annie's days, she watched him working the fields, observing the way he wiped the sweat from his brow.

She lived for those nights with him. Each evening, they would walk a new route, until they'd tracked their way round the whole town and discussed every topic under the low winter sun.

One night in mid-December, they scaled the law a mile off from the coastline. It was a hefty climb – more of a climb than the witch had undertaken in decades – but she didn't feel a strain in her legs. She was too busy talking to be tired, or to notice the chill

in the still night air. Once they reached the peak, though, she didn't say a word. She'd lived in this town for as long as it had existed, stood by as the first croft was built. But she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen it from above – the twinkling firelight globules in each window, like fat stars. She sat there with James, gazing out at it all, and knew she would never be happier than this.

"It's been a wonderful night," James said.

"It really has."

"I'm perfectly happy."

"As am I."

As he watched her, something seemed to shift in James's face. But then, perhaps that was a trick of the moonlight.

"Are you sure?" he asked – no, then, not a trick of the moonlight.

"Of course I'm sure."

"I believe it, sometimes," James said. "We have these types of nights – beautiful nights. But other times, it's different. You're colder, Annie. Far from me."

The witch searched her throat and her mind for the right words.

"I truly am happy," she said.

She said it with conviction, holding his hand as fiercely as she knew how. When she trembled, it

wasn't from the cold.

"There's a melancholy about you," he said. "Something in your eyes. It could make me weep to see it, Annie. Even now, I see it."

That silenced her. She could fight to overcompensate for Annie's ambivalence, but she couldn't hide her own sadness. *No longer than Christmas*, that was their deal. After that, Annie would come home for good and the witch would never hold James again.

"I love you," she said.

His hand in hers burned warmer, his eyes burned fiercer. And when he leaned in – when she felt the heat of his breath – she wanted nothing more than his lips.

But she pulled away all the same.

That night, they lay together in silence. James's arm dangled loosely against the curves of her body, nestling into its usual groove. There was something new and tense between them, something viscerally unsaid. But his body felt good against hers.

"Thank you for saying it, earlier," he whispered. "Saying you love me. I love you too, you know. Always." And when she closed her eyes, the witch could almost believe the words were for her.

Four am struck and she wriggled free from bed,

slipping through the front door. Tonight, Annie was already there waiting for her. The witch nodded, scurrying past in her usual way – but Annie didn't seem minded to leave her alone.

“Witch,” she said. “Witch, we need to talk.”

The witch paused. There were many things she wanted to say to Annie – questions she wanted to shriek into that silly, ungrateful face of hers. But she'd lived long enough to learn to hold her tongue.

“I'm putting an end to our arrangement,” Annie said. For a moment, the witch said nothing. She swirled her tongue from cheek to cheek, searching for the right thing to feel, the right thing to say. When she opened her mouth at last, only three words made their way to her tongue: “You said Christmas.”

“Well, I'm releasing you early,” Annie said. “Come back tomorrow – one more night. Then you're free.”

Free. The witch thought of her life before James – the wandering, the aimless afternoons and the empty nights, the hours she spent invisible and irrelevant. It was no sort of freedom.

“There's just one thing I need to know before I let you go,” Annie went on. “Something rather delicate.”

Delicate. The witch had never felt delicate before – but as Annie spoke, every piece of her body braced itself to shatter.

“I need to know for sure that you... Well.” Annie coughed, shuffling her feet in that insufferable way of hers, before continuing. “I need to know that you’ve *been* with him.”

The witch blinked. “*Been* with him?”

“You know,” Annie said, cheeks reddening. “In bed.”

“Well, no,” the witch said, slowly. “Of course not. He’s your husband.”

All at once, Annie’s red cheeks were pale. “But you must,” she said.

“I don’t understand.”

“You must sleep with him.”

The witch blinked. “Why would you want that?”

Annie didn’t say a word, but hugged her shawl to herself. Perhaps it was fancy – but the way she clasped at her stomach seemed peculiar to the witch. And when Annie looked her in the eyes, the witch knew it wasn’t fancy at all.

“You’re with child,” the witch said. She stared at her, waiting for Annie to cut in, to tell her she was wrong, but Annie only lowered her eyes. “I thought you couldn’t have children.”

“*James* can’t have children,” Annie corrected her.

The emotions rushed higher in the witch’s throat, and Annie must have seen them because she opened her mouth again.

“We both want a baby,” she said. “And now we’ll have one.”

“So now you’ve got what you want, you’re coming back to James? Is that how it is?”

“Yes,” Annie said. “Come now, witch – don’t look at me that way. This is just life. And James will be a wonderful father.”

And, to that, the witch had no response.

“So you must sleep with him,” Annie went on. “It would kill him to think the child wasn’t his.”

“Why can’t you do it yourself?”

Annie looked down, and the witch wondered whether she was gazing at her bump or at her feet. “I couldn’t bear it,” she said. “It would feel too much like lying to him.”

The witch dressed the table with holly and bought a prize bird from the butcher – along with a bottle of his homebrewed mead, which he kept under the counter. She spent the rest of the day nursing the stove and daydreaming about James. She thought of his hands, the way those rough, plough-worn palms went soft in hers. She thought of his chest, rising and falling into the hollow of her back, like the tide teasing at the cove. She thought of his lips – how close, how tantalisingly close, they had come to hers last night.

She thought of how, after tonight, he would never

be hers again.

When he arrived home at last, she folded herself into his arms. She clung to him as they ate – wrapping her feet up with his under the table.

“What tastes so good?” James asked. “There’s something new here – a new flavour.”

“Nutmeg,” the witch said. “I got us some from the market.”

James squeezed her hand. “You were right. This is heavenly.”

After dinner, he asked where she wanted to walk.

“I don’t want to walk,” she said. “I want to dance.”

James raised a brow. “We’ve no music.”

The witch couldn’t explain it – how she wanted all of his body pressed against her, how she wanted to feel every inch of his skin before it was ripped away for good. Any moment spent not touching him felt wasted.

But James didn’t ask her to explain. “Come here,” he said, and pulled her close.

The two swayed in silence, and the witch tried to relish it. She felt the muscles in his back, gripping them tight with both hands like they were set to fade away. She took hold of the shape of him and swore never to forget.

“You’re a good woman, Annie,” he said, and spun the witch under his arm, dizzying her until the light

slurred behind her eyes. “The most wonderful wife in the world.”

Afterwards, the witch couldn’t say quite what made her do it. Perhaps it was that bitter ache in her bones, the knowledge that her hours with James were numbered. Perhaps it was the way he smiled as he said the word *wife*, those tender lips which Annie didn’t deserve. Perhaps she just couldn’t hold her drink the way she used to. Whatever it was, the witch opened her mouth without the merest scrap of fear.

“Annie doesn’t love you,” she said. “And she isn’t a good woman. She’s sleeping with another man right now, as we speak. She’s pregnant with his child.”

And then all was silent.

She couldn’t for the life of her read the expression on James’s face. It seemed flat – flatter than a face ought to be after a revelation like that. Perhaps he hadn’t heard her. Perhaps, mercifully, she hadn’t truly said it out loud. She could put those words back into the box from whence they’d sprung, pull James closer and dance all night.

But when she looked in his eyes, she saw that he knew.

“You’re not my wife?” he said.

Slowly, the witch shook her head. Even as she did, James’s face didn’t change. He didn’t pull away from her, didn’t step back. The rise and fall of his stomach

against hers barely faltered.

“I thought as much,” he said.

With some effort, the witch managed to keep her rapidly dropping jaw in check. “You *thought as much*? How did you realise?”

“I saw the patterns,” James said. “Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays. You were different those days. You wanted to talk, and walk, and hold my hand. And I felt you leave bed, four am on the dot. You always came back colder. Plus, Annie hates mead.”

“If you guessed I wasn’t her, why didn’t you say something?” the witch asked.

James cocked his head, and his eyes went soft at the corners. “I suppose I liked talking with you.” he said. Then – before the witch could digest that statement – he opened his mouth again. “Who are you, then?”

The witch cleared her throat. “I suppose you’ve heard the tale of the many-faced witch,” she began.

“I’ve heard talk.”

“Well, that’s me. When people look at me, they see only what they most expect. I blend in like that. When you saw me standing over the stove, you expected Annie. That’s what you saw.”

“So why were you there, at the stove?”

The witch wet her lips. “If I’m caught out – if I’m discovered – then I’m bound to do my captor’s

bidding. Annie bade me to take her place at home, some nights.”

James blinked, in a heavy, trembling sort of way, and the look in his eyes was unbearable.

“But when I said I loved you, that wasn’t part of the act,” the witch said. “It was true. I do love you. I love you desperately.”

James just stood there for a minute, body tensing in her hands. When he looked at her again, the witch caught her breath.

“Right,” he said. And, for a moment, he seemed minded to leave it at that. Then his lips drew apart once more. “I’ve discovered you, then. Does that mean I get a wish?”

The witch licked at the inside of her mouth, until she’d gathered enough saliva to form a single word. “Yes,” she said.

“In that case, I’d like to know your real name.”

She shook her head. “I can’t, James. I have none. Just ‘the witch’.”

“Then I’d like to see your real face.”

Again, she shook her head. “I don’t remember what it looks like.”

“What do you see when you look in the mirror, then?”

“There’s nothing to see,” she said. “I don’t know that I have a face of my own anymore.”

James touched her – Annie’s – arm. “That must be lonely.”

Before she could reply, he’d opened his mouth again. “I know my wish, then,” he said. “Please – may I kiss you?”

The witch could do no more than nod. As his lips drew close, she forgot that Annie’s body wasn’t hers. The mouth James kissed was, for this second at least, her own. The skin he touched wrapped only her frame. Every word he whispered was for her ears alone.

But then it was over.

In bed, that night, the witch was restless. James wasn’t touching her – but he wasn’t quite *not*-touching her, either. They curled up, side by side, sharing blanket space and body heat as always. Like this – in the dark – both of them were faceless. It was all too easy to say the things she shouldn’t, when she knew she wouldn’t have to see his eyes.

“What are you going to do about Annie and the baby?” she asked.

James sighed and made a rolling sort of noise. The blanket tugged loose from the witch, baring her legs. “I suppose things go on as normal,” he said. “She comes home. We raise the child.”

“But you needn’t. You needn’t raise another man’s

child – live with an adulteress.”

“What else do I do?”

The witch paused. Then:

“You stay with me,” she said. She could hardly believe she was saying it – could hardly believe the words filling the air between them. But as she spoke, she knew there was no use trying to hold back. She had no shame, no fear, with James. There was nothing to keep her from baring her soul. “Just wish it,” she continued. “Say ‘I see you, witch,’ and I’ll be bound to do your will. Tell me to stay with you forever. I’ll do it. I love you.”

The witch clutched at him, but James didn’t take her hand.

“Love’s complicated,” he said, and the witch wondered whether he was crying. “But I made my vows to Annie. Those are right simple – black and white.”

“Annie’s hardly kept her vows. She told me to sleep with you tonight, you know. It’s what she wants.”

“It’s not what I want,” James said. And now she was sure of it – he was crying. “I want my wife. Only her.”

The witch rolled closer to him, pulled him into her chest. “All the good times, these past weeks – they’ve been with me.”

“Aye. But all the good times before that were with her. And I’d never have felt those feelings if you’d looked like a stranger. It wouldn’t have been the same.”

“But you did feel those feelings,” the witch insisted. “You felt them for me.”

James paused only for a moment. “Aye,” he said. “I did.”

He rolled around and relaxed into her, resting his arm in that familiar spot in the small of her back. For the first time, the witch fell asleep in his arms.

Malcolm frowned at the woman in the sitter’s stool, so hard that all the wrinkles in his face sagged into a new shape. Of course, he was wont to frown at people in the sitter’s stool – he was wont to frown at anyone – but this frown was different.

“You look familiar,” he said, sketching the pattern of laugh-lines around his model’s eyes. “You say you’re new to the area?”

“Aye,” she said. “Fresh start.”

This woman really was an odd sort. She was old – older, perhaps, even than Malcolm – and such women never came to sit for their portraits. That was a vanity reserved for young ladies: older folk seldom wished to be confronted by their true faces. But this new crone was different. *I’ve not seen a portrait that truly looks*

like me in years, she'd written, in the letter that preceded her arrival. *I want the truth*. So here he was, sketching out her sagging jowls and the shadows inside her wrinkles.

"But why would you leave your home?" he asked. "At your age, is it wise?"

The crone laughed. "I had no one to tie me down. No one who knew me or loved me. Why not start anew?" She leaned forward – completely changing the angle of her nose, which Malcolm had been sketching – and beamed. "I spent so many years hiding, Malcolm. No one had seen me, or touched me, in decades. Then I met a man – a wonderful, dear man – who almost saw me. But even with him, I couldn't show my true face. Perhaps it's because I've forgotten what it looks like."

Malcolm sniffed. "What did you say your name was?"

The crone paused, lip quirking up at one corner. "I didn't," she said. "I haven't chosen one yet."

Before Malcolm could tell her to stop talking in riddles, there was a knock at the door, swiftly followed by the familiar cry of a baby.

"Come in," Malcolm called, and his voice wasn't so gruff anymore. Much as he hated to admit it, his great-grandson had worn something resembling a soft spot into his leathery old heart.

And there was Annie, with wee Jim on one hip and a pot of stew on the other.

“Afternoon,” she called, while Jim babbled delightfully. He really was a braw child, Malcolm thought. Much more agreeable than any other baby he’d met.

“I’ve got a client in,” Malcolm said. “That new lady from the big house on Main Street.”

Annie eyed the crone for a mere moment, then nodded. “Nice to meet you,” she said. “Just popping round to see Grandpa. I’ve brought him his dinner.”

“You must stop cooking for me,” Malcolm said, taking a deep noseful of the stew-scented steam hanging low in the air. “You’re depriving that husband of yours.”

Annie put the pot down on the counter, rather harder than necessary. “He won’t begrudge you it. The man’s gone off my food.”

“Gone off it? Whatever do you mean?”

Annie scooped Jim into her arms, holding him a little tighter. “His appetite’s gone, these past couple of years,” she said. “That must be it. He takes no pleasure in food anymore. Nothing I cook seems to make him happy. Always trying to season it for me, he says. He’s in town now, you know – buying new herbs, can you imagine it?”

“Where’s he got a taste for all that fancy food?”

Malcolm asked.

Annie shrugged and Jim whimpered and Malcolm turned back to his easel.

“Sorry,” he said, voice suitably gruff once more. “Annie will be gone in a moment. I’ll get back to work.”

The crone didn’t reply. And when Malcolm raised his eyes over the top of his easel, the sitter’s stool was empty.

The witch ran faster than ever she had, feet steady on the cobblestones. She raced to the town centre, ignoring the whispers and curious looks from passing fisherwomen. There was no time to worry what they thought of her, or what they saw when she sped past. She just ran.

Soon – not as soon as she’d have liked, but soon – she was in the market square.

And there he was.

It wasn’t the first time she’d seen James, these last two years. The witch had watched him at work, seen the way he threshed and ploughed and harvested each field in its season. When she watched him on his walk home, she fancied he was a little slower than he used to be. And when he walked past the law, she wondered if his eyes lingered a little too long on that highest point, where she’d first told him she loved

him.

And now there he was, standing at that market stall where she'd bought the ingredients of their last meal together. And there she was, easing into place beside him, watching him thumb his way through the herbs and spices.

"We've a new shipment in today," the market seller said. "All sorts of spices, all the way from India."

And when the witch stretched out her hand – adorned with every wrinkle it had earned – James's met it.

"Sorry," he said. "After you. I was reaching for the nutmeg."

His hand retracted and the witch's stayed there: quivering, withering, remembering the way his touch lit all of her nerves.

"Me too," she said. "Nutmeg's my favourite. Always has been."

"I've only had it the once," James said. "But it was wonderful. Changed my life."

The witch cocked her head, fingers still shaking around the empty air where his hand had been. "How could nutmeg change your life?"

James smiled. "Perhaps it wasn't the nutmeg that changed it. Perhaps it was the woman I ate with."

He reached for a jar of nutmeg and she took its

twin in her hand.

They both passed coins over to the market seller, and began the walk away from the town square.

The witch thought of all the things she longed to tell him – the words she'd pour over his body like oil, the confessions she'd make between kisses. Instead, she said: "Enjoy your nutmeg."

"You too," James said.

He turned down the path towards his cottage – she'd known he would, of course she had – but she wasn't expecting the lurch in her soul as he turned away from her again. She lowered her eyes, wondering which direction to walk next. Perhaps she could go back to Malcolm, apologise for her disappearance with some cryptic excuse and let him finish his portrait. Perhaps she could go back to the cottage she'd moved into, and cook herself something warm and nutmeg-flavoured. The thought did nothing to cheer her soul. All she wanted was James: to look into his eyes, to touch his face, to hear his voice. She listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps and ground her heels into the cobbles. She wouldn't follow him again. She wouldn't taunt herself with the thought of him. She would let him go.

But the sound of his footsteps wasn't, she realised, fading half as quickly as it ought. If anything, it seemed to be getting louder.

“Wait...” A voice was calling to her – a voice so like the voice she heard in her dreams that she thought she must be imagining it. But no. His footsteps really were getting closer, his voice really was calling her, his hand really was taking hers, whirling her around to face him.

“You came back,” the witch said – and, Lord, was it hard work to make her tongue move with his hands on her skin like that. “Is everything all right? Did you forget something?”

For a moment, James didn’t say a word. Then, leaning forward, he pressed his lips right to her ear.

“I know you,” he said, and his voice tickled at her skin like a shiver. “I see you, witch.”

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Ignorance Is Bliss

Josie Jaffrey

When the summons came, it was abrupt and violent.

That's how it is with these new vessels: an ignorant, green wizard who thinks he's the next Merlin decides to trap a demon in a lapis lazuli pendant, knowing nothing about energy transference or resistance theory, and nine times out of ten all he gets is a blemished stone and a seriously pissed-off immortal. Unluckily for me, I must have been the tenth try for this particular wannabe, so he ended up with a seriously pissed-off immortal *in* a blemished stone, ready to be hauled out with much kicking and screaming at his every whim. Being dragged across broken glass would have been more comfortable.

The wizard's long gone now – and good riddance – but there's always someone else waiting around the corner, just begging to wish themselves into oblivion.

Case in point.

"I wish," the woman declared the moment I materialised, "to find true love. The truest love in the world."

Oh dear.

She was crying as she made the wish, the tears streaming down her face to pool on her collarbone. I actually felt a little sorry for her. She looked so pitiful that if it had been in my power, I might have told her about the mistake she'd just made, but given that everything I say sounds like *raargh clargwquab snarffl* to human ears, and given that my limbs are chained within the lapis, leaving me unable to make more than the most basic gesture, there was no point in trying.

She'd wished, and I granted, and then she'd just have to find out for herself.

I wasn't surprised that she was angry when she summoned me next.

"True love *for myself*," she said, "not for these people." She waved dismissively towards the couple with the truest love in the world, a pair of old women who'd lived together in a seafront cottage in the Greek islands for the past fifty years. A little purple light glinted around them, indicating that they were the objects of the wisher's desire. Or of her wish, at least. "I wish to find someone to love *me* truly," she said to me. "Okay? Understand?"

She'd wished, and I granted, but you've probably already spotted her second mistake.

When she summoned me next, she was standing

next to a woman some thirty years her senior, who glimmered with purple light.

“This,” the wisher said, spitting the words out bitterly, “is my mother.” Then she glared at me as though it were my fault that she had been insufficiently precise. “So let’s try again, shall we? I wish to find a romantic partner who is male, and handsome, and rich, and who will love me truly, and whom I will love truly, and with whom I will have a wonderful, happy, fulfilling relationship for the rest of my life. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Good.”

She’d wished, and I granted.

And she had been precise, I’ll give her that. She got exactly what she wanted, or at least what she thought she wanted, because that’s the problem with humans, isn’t it?

There’s always an ‘and’.

They set their hopes on something, wishing and praying for it like it’s the only thing that will make them whole and promising that if – if only! – they get that one thing, they’ll be happy. And perhaps they will be, for a time, but then there’s always the next something, the next wish, and the one after that. They’re never satisfied.

Once this wisher had the relationship, she wanted

more money. Then she wanted fame. Then she didn't want the fame or the money, she just wanted a quiet life in the countryside with her family. Then she decided she hated the outdoors and wanted to be rich again so she could pay someone to do the farm work for her. There was no end to it until she lost the lapis lazuli pendant, or it was stolen, or she died, or whatever it was that happened, happened. No one ever tells me how the story ends, they just summon me up and make their demands.

It's a bleak, untethered life.

I'd just about resigned myself to repeating the same pattern with wisher after wisher until such time as the stone was broken or eroded into nothingness and I could finally be free, but then there was *her*.

I knew she was different from the moment she rested my stone against her skin and summoned me out into what turned out to be a cupboard. She was beautiful, and elegant, and blah de blah de blah, but it was her attitude that caught my attention. Instead of making demands with impatient greed, she just looked at me for a moment, suspicious and calculating. There was a bluish light hovering over her skin, the mark of some magic other than mine, and I didn't like the taste of it.

"You can give me three wishes?" she asked.

The number limit was a common assumption that I

didn't have the words to clarify, so instead I just nodded. After all, I *could* give her three wishes, if that was all she wanted.

She nodded back. "Then I wish for you to break my curse."

That explained the blue light, but not what the curse was. I didn't recognise the construction of the spell, and without that knowledge, it would be challenging to disassemble the magic. To grant a wish out of nothing is one thing, but to deconstruct magic that someone else has made is a different thing entirely.

Unable to express this to her, I simply raised what passed for my eyebrows and hoped that she would understand.

Clever girl; she did.

"There is a man," she said, then she sighed in a way that implied the rider: *Isn't there always?* And indeed, in my limited experience of the world of women's wishes, that is often the case. "We've been together maybe six months, but we've known each other since we were children. He was friends with my older brother, so he was always hanging around the house, then we bumped into each other again at a party last year. I suppose I never really noticed him until then. We run in different circles, you know?"

I didn't, but I nodded anyway so she'd hurry up

and get to the part about the curse so we could get this over with.

“Anyway, somehow we fell together that night, and I couldn’t believe that I’d been looking at him for so many years without really *seeing* him at all. And since then, it’s been... Well, magical. A whirlwind. He says he loves me, and we just moved in together, and he asked me to marry him last night, but then I found this under the mattress.” She produced a lump of jet from her pocket, carved with symbols I recognised all too well, and glowing with the same kind of blue light that circled her body like a net. “I showed it to my grandmother, and she told me a story I wasn’t sure I believed, about how she’d once made a deal with the devil to find love.” *Devil* was a bit strong, if you ask me, but she didn’t, and I couldn’t have answered her even if she had. “Grandma wondered if maybe this stone might be something like the one she used back then, and if maybe he used magic to make me feel the way I do. It would explain a lot. But however much we rubbed the stone or breathed on it or hit it, we couldn’t get it to do anything.”

This came as no surprise. When a demon is actively working on a wish – for instance, a wish to make someone fall in love with and marry another person – then the demon can’t be summoned by anyone else until the wish is completed. Or broken.

“Then Grandma gave me *your* stone, and she told me to wait until I was alone before touching it with my bare skin. I wanted to think she was crazy and just forget the whole thing, but then she gave me a look I’ve not seen on her face before, and I started to believe a little. So I thought about it a while, then I did what she asked, and here you are. So I guess I’m about ready to believe the whole way now.”

Her words had a hollow kind of hopelessness in them, and I realised why when she asked her next question.

“Is my grandmother right? Has the man I love used this stone to cast a spell on me?”

The only way she could find out for sure was to get the demon out of the jet and ask them, but that wasn’t going to happen any time soon. However, I had another option. I leaned towards the glowing black stone in her outstretched hand and, fighting every instinct in my body, let myself be sucked across the barrier and into the prison beyond.

There’s some weird magic in all this. While I’m tethered hand and foot to my lapis in the human realm, when I enter other realms – like my vessel or the vessel of another demon – it’s like stepping backwards through the barrier that holds me, leaving me free and unencumbered, as long as I stay within the confines of the prison. When I do this with my

own lapis, it grates and sears every time, but not so with the jet. When I emerged, pleasantly surprised at the smooth ride, I found myself standing in a well-furnished cell with an old friend. Of sorts.

“*You*,” they said. In our language, it’s a word with an awful lot of plosives in it, and they took full advantage of the opportunity to spit it at me.

“Hello.” I did address them by name, but I’ll spare your ears the cacophony. “In trouble again, I see.”

“What do you mean, *again*?” they said, prodding me in what passed for my chest with what passed for their finger. “If you’re talking about that thing with the elementals, then I’ve more than made up for that, thank you very much. I’m a reformed demon. As if you’re in any position to judge. You have no idea what I’ve been doing for the past hundred years, not since you got yourself trapped in a stone like a complete idiot.”

I stared at them for a few long seconds, inviting them to reflect upon the double standard.

“What?” they said. “What happened to me was completely different.”

“Novice wizard, botched summoning, runic vessel?”

“Well. When you put it like that. But it’s not as though you were there to help, were you?”

Which was the crux of the matter, of course. We

generally work in pairs, us demons, and I'd left this one high and dry when I'd been sucked out of our realm into the lapis. They'd already been angry that I'd got myself involved in the satanic panic back then and yes, maybe that was where the wizard had heard my name and yes, he wouldn't have been able to summon me without it and yes, maybe my ego was slightly to blame for that whole episode, and maybe what I meant to say was—

“I'm sorry.”

They paused for a moment, then nodded briskly, and that was the end of that. There would be no rehashing of the argument at a later date. They were straightforward like that.

“So,” they said, “who wished you into my stone and why?”

I explained about the woman who'd summoned me and the man she believed had cursed her.

“Yes,” they said with a sigh. “He wished for her to fall in love with him and marry him and for the two of them to live happily ever after.”

“So you're stuck in here until they die, at the very least?”

They shrugged, pretending it was nothing. Having spent several decades too long in a vessel myself, I knew this for the bravado it was.

“Well,” I said, “just as well that I have a wish to

grant.”

I squeezed what passed for their arm with what passed for my hand, then drew violently back out of the jet, prying it apart with a crack that felt louder than it sounded.

I returned to the human realm just in time to see the jet fracture along the midline, leaking blue light into the air. It only took a couple of seconds to dissipate entirely, and then my erstwhile partner was gone, back to our home realm, along with the magic they had wrought during their imprisonment.

My wisher blinked. She looked at my lapis in her hand. Then she said, “I’m going to kill him.”

It wasn’t until later that I realised she didn’t mean this literally. Like my former partner, demons tend towards straightforwardness. When we say we’re going to kill someone, we generally do it. What my wisher actually meant was that she was going to make him pay.

She didn’t think it over long. It was barely six hours later that she held my lapis against her skin again and dictated her second wish. If only she had thought a little longer.

“I want him to know how it feels,” she explained through her tears. “So I wish for him to fall madly and uncontrollably in love with a woman who will never love him back. Can you do that?”

Sadly, I could.

The problem with our magic is that, like water, it follows the path of least resistance. When we're trapped in a vessel like the lapis, we can't fully direct its course, so it tends to enact the wisher's commands with the least expenditure of magic possible. In this case, the wisher's lying would-be-fiancé was already madly and uncontrollably in love with a woman who – now she'd been released from her curse – was extremely unlikely ever to return his feelings.

And so.

You see her mistake.

A week later, she summoned me again, this time into a bathroom with a closed door, where she spoke to me in a low whisper.

"It didn't work," she said. "Nothing has changed."

I raised what passed for my eyebrows, inviting her to elaborate once more.

She sighed and sat down on the toilet seat with her head in her hands. "I didn't tell him I found the stone, or that I broke the curse," she said. "I thought, you know, if he's going to fall in love with someone else anyway, then why deal with the drama? All I have to do is wait around a little and he'll leave on his own. But he's not leaving."

I gave her a long look. There wasn't much else I could do.

“Oh,” she said, realisation dawning over her face.
“Oh, dear.”

She had realised her mistake.

“I didn’t specify a time period for him to meet someone else, did I?”

Or not.

“Grandma did say I had to be specific, and I wasn’t. Oh, dear. What a bother. I suppose it could happen any time. This week, or this month or... Please say it will be this year.”

I wanted to reply. No, what I really wanted to do was scream: *You didn’t specify that he had to fall in love with someone who isn’t you!*

“Well, I can be patient,” she said, biting her lip stoically. “I can wait.”

When she summoned me next, all her anger had all burned out. She was tired, and anxious, and crying.

“I wished for him to fall madly and uncontrollably in love with a woman who’d never love him back, and that woman is me, isn’t she?”

Finally.

I nodded as she blew her nose on the sleeve of her shirt.

“But nothing changed,” she wailed plaintively. “He still brings me flowers, just like he used to before—Before. He brings me my favourite flowers every week and arranges them in my favourite vase just the

way I like them, and he's still exactly the same as he always was, just as loving and attentive, and just as kind to me, always. Which means that he was always just as in love with me as I wished him to be, and the only thing that changed was me, when you broke the stone."

I nodded again, and she blew her nose again, and the tears were unstoppable now.

"He can't understand why I suddenly won't let him touch me. But he doesn't ask, he just looks at me with this... hurt. He must know the stone is broken, because he must have looked for it and found it in pieces under the mattress where I left it, but he's not said a thing to me. And it makes me wonder—" She sniffed, and when she spoke again she was whispering. "I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake."

Uh oh. Demons have a little touch of premonition in them, and I suddenly had a terrible feeling in the pit of what passed for my stomach.

"After all, is obsession really such a bad thing?" she asked, but she wasn't talking to me anymore. She was talking *at* me. "Doesn't every girl dream of having an amazing man who's completely obsessed with her? And yes, there are more handsome men in the world than him, and richer ones, and I probably wouldn't have looked at him twice without the curse,

but we were *happy* together. I was actually happy. And I don't think that's something I've ever had before, not since I was a child, at least. So does it really matter that I didn't choose him, or that he wasn't who I would have chosen without the magic?"

If I could have answered, I would have said that I thought it mattered quite a lot, actually. That maybe it was the only thing that mattered at all. But then, she wasn't really asking. I was just a captive audience.

"But the problem now is that I know," she went on. "I know that he's the kid who got picked last for sports, who had acne and braces and hand-me-down clothes, and I know all that shouldn't matter to me and that the fact that it does makes me a terrible person, but... it *matters*. I used to feel like I'd won a trophy husband, and now I just feel like my diamond is really cubic zirconia. So I want you to fix it."

Here it comes.

"I want to use my third and final wish to undo both of my previous wishes. I wish things were back to how they were before I touched your stone."

The pull of the magic was irresistible. I tried to stop it, because I knew what would happen if I didn't, but I'd been cooped up in my vessel for too long and I was too weak to resist the demands of the wish. Before I knew it, I was back where we'd started, facing the wisher again, my lapis in her hand. There

was a pale blue glow around her body, a glow that matched the intact jet in her pocket.

“You can give me three wishes?” she asked.

I wanted to tell her that I already had, and that it hadn’t turned out well for either of us. Instead, bound to honesty by the same magic that sealed me within the lapis, I simply nodded.

She nodded back. “Then I wish for you to break my curse.”

At least this time, when I travelled inside the jet, I knew who was waiting for me.

“What happened?” they said by way of greeting.

“The wisher undid her wishes,” I replied. “I think she’s looping.”

Demons experience time differently from humans. While for the wisher – and the rest of her kind – the clock had turned back to the moment before she made her first wish, the two of us experienced the jump as linear rather than circular time. By which I mean that while my wisher’s memory was a blank, my former partner remembered our recent meeting perfectly and was not happy to see me, particularly not now that they were once again confined in the jet.

“Undid her wishes?” my colleague asked. “You mean she *wants* to be cursed?”

“Apparently so.”

“But my wisher made her fall in love with him

against her will.”

“She seems to think that the magic just gave her a different perspective. She’s decided she’s happier with it than without it.”

“You mean she’s decided to believe that he’s a hopeless romantic instead of what he really is.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“From what I’ve seen, I think he’s a manipulative, petty narcissist. If he hadn’t borrowed enough magic to trap me in this stone, he’d have her chained up in his basement by now. You have to stop this.”

This comment had me furrowing what passed for my brow. It wasn’t like them – or any demon, for that matter – to interfere in the affairs of mortals. Except when forced.

“If she wants to wish herself into misery, who am I to stand in the way?” I said. “She wouldn’t be the first wisher to be destroyed by her own avarice.”

“No,” my friend said impatiently, “stuff the wisher. I mean you have to stop the loop and get us out of here.”

That made more sense. “Any suggestions as to how?”

“None that spring to mind. You’ll come up with something.”

“Either that, or I’ll see you again soon.” I kissed them on what passed for their hand with what passed

for my lips, then the jet cracked once more, my wisher learned the truth once more, and once more she spent too little time deciding how to use what she thought was her second wish.

“I want him to know how it feels,” she cried, just as she had the first time. The words were the same, her expressions were the same, in fact I would swear that every breath she took was the same as the first time. The loop was rigid, and that did not bode well.

I granted her ill-fated wish once more, then I was back in the uncomfortable and discomfoting void of the lapis with time to spare and nothing to do with it but think. That gave me the opportunity to come to some unhappy conclusions.

Firstly, I was too weak to prevent the third wish when it came. But if I was lucky, and if I put my mind to training for the eventuality, I might just manage to divert its course and force the magic to take another route to the same aim.

Secondly, the options for diversion were few. If the wisher asked again for her first two wishes to be undone, *and* for things to go back to how they were before she touched my lapis, then there wasn't much wiggle room. With wording that precise, my demon friend and I were destined to remain locked in our stones indefinitely, repeating the same loop over and over again.

Which led to my third and final conclusion: my only recourse was to influence the wisher to change her words.

But how?

Once again, she summoned me to the bathroom with her misguided theory about her imprecise wording. And once again, she summoned me in tears to make her final wish. I still hadn't come up with a solution.

So here we were.

"I want to use my third and final wish to undo both of my previous wishes. I wish—" She stopped mid-sentence. It wasn't until she asked, "What?" that I realised I'd been shaking what passed for my head.

Then the magic surged. Apparently, the words she'd spoken had been enough to give power to her wish, but that crucial last part was missing. Her wishes had to be undone, but we didn't have to return to the point before she touched my lapis.

The lapis. With the power of a wish at my disposal, I could break it. If I shattered the lapis lazuli pendant that held me captive, then all of the wishes I'd granted would be undone, including the two my wisher had made. And, as an added bonus, I'd be free not only from the loop, but also from my prison.

But.

My demon friend would not be so lucky. If my

wisher's first wish was undone, then my friend would never break out of their jet.

The thought of them distracted me too long, and while I delayed, the magic took the easiest path. The loop closed.

"You can give me three wishes?" the wisher asked.

I sighed. I wished to hell that I'd only had three wishes to give her, because then none of this would be happening. She'd be free to live her miserable cursed life, my demon friend would be free from their vessel, and I'd be free to sulk alone in my lapis until the earth took it and melted it into magma. But it was not to be.

"Then I wish for you to break my curse."

I wanted to scream, but the noise that would emanate from my throat would make the wisher's ears bleed, so instead I held my frustration tightly and dove once more into the jet.

"Be honest," said my demon friend. "You just wanted to see me again."

It was a joke, I was certain, but somehow, in that alluring growl, it didn't feel like one.

"I did," I said to my demon maybe-more-than-friend. "I wanted to see you free from the loop *and* this stone."

They looked around the blank, black space that formed their cell. "It's not so bad."

"It's better than mine."

“Really? They get *worse* than this?”

“Quite a lot worse, actually. Mine is... spikier. But you admit that it *is* bad in here?”

“Yes, fine,” they said reluctantly. “It’s hard, and cold, and lonely. But as long as you break the loop, it won’t be forever. I’ll get out of here eventually.”

“No,” I insisted. “I can get you out. I can do it all. I just need to find a way to make it stick. Just give me time.”

“Well,” they said, with that alluring growl back in their voice, “as long as the loop is intact, we have forever.”

I took it as an invitation, kissing what passed for their cheek with what passed for my lips, just briefly, as a promise of things to come. I didn’t mean to linger here. I would get us both out of this loop, out of our prisons, and into what passed for each other’s arms.

The jet cracked, the wisher wished, time wound and unwound.

Again and again.

I tried everything, but the only sections of the loop that I could influence were my interactions with the wisher. I tried interrupting every part of her speech with gestures and with vocalisations, but I could force nothing else to change. There was just that one chance, that one moment in which I could choose to crack the lapis, but it would leave my demon maybe-

future-lover trapped in their stone.

On perhaps the twentieth iteration of my journey into the jet, I could no longer pretend that I was working towards a viable solution.

“There aren’t enough break points,” I said, holding what passed for their cheek in what passed for my palm. “I can’t work out how to spin the magic to free us both.”

“Then free yourself,” they said. “I’ll only be stuck in this stone until the end of our wishers’ happily ever after, and then maybe I’ll find a way to get free. Maybe you’ll find a way to free me,” they suggested, but we both knew there was little magic in the world that could break a wishing vessel, beyond a wish itself.

I kissed what passed for their neck, wishing I could wish things different.

“We need to say goodbye,” they said. “Your wisher is waiting. You can’t delay the magic forever.”

They were right, but I didn’t want to leave.

“One day, our wishers will die,” they said. “And on that day, you can find a way to come and free me. Humans are short-lived creatures, and so fragile. It won’t take long. It could happen tomorrow.”

This did not cheer me.

“Or,” I said, “they could live to be grandparents and we could be waiting—”

Her grandmother, I remembered. My wisher's grandmother gave her the lapis lazuli pendant, which meant—

“I’ve got to go,” I said.

“I know,” they replied sadly.

“No, I mean I’ve got to go. I’ve got an idea.” I kissed them once more and promised, “I will see you very soon,” then I cracked the jet and waited for the loop to play through.

Now that I knew what to do, it seemed to take forever.

The ill-fated second wish.

The bathroom summoning.

And then, finally, the tearful third.

“I want to use my third and final wish to undo both of my previous wishes. I wish—”

I interrupted the wisher with a bark she couldn’t ignore.

“What?” she asked, holding one hand to her chest in fright, but she’d said enough for the wish to take effect.

This time, I didn’t hesitate. Instead of letting the magic follow its intended course, I twisted it in just the right direction at just the right moment and—

CRACK.

The lapis lazuli pendant broke into three pieces in my wisher’s hand. I was free.

And, at the same time, I had never been trapped at all.

The world had rearranged itself so that instead of successfully imprisoning me in the stone, the idiot wizard had failed on his tenth attempt to make a wishing vessel, leaving him with nothing but a broken pendant and a terrible magic hangover. Although I could remember every day of my captivity, it had all been unravelled in a second, along with the wishes that I'd been bound to grant during it.

My wisher never wished to be cursed again. She never cursed her lying would-be fiancé. She never discovered the curse he had wished upon her.

In fact, that curse had never been cast in the first place, because not only had my wisher's wishes been undone, but so had the wishes of the wisher before her, who had wished for love and money and a quiet life in the countryside with her family. The grandmother.

Without her wishes, she never became rich or found her perfect partner, but she did find a partner who was decent enough, and they moved together to the same little place in the countryside where eventually her granddaughter – with slightly less striking looks, but otherwise much the same – would grow up surrounded by her brother's friends, including a boy with acne and braces and hand-me-

down clothes, whom – now that she had those slightly less striking looks – she found acceptable enough to marry without the need for anything beyond the common sort of non-magical wishing.

And so the jet wishing vessel was never wrought, and my demon definitely-more-than-friend was never imprisoned at all.

“You came up with something,” they said, meeting me in the limbo realm between here and there.

“I should have worked it out sooner.”

“But you wanted it to be perfect.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” they said. “It was.”

But I was kicking myself. By trying to plan out everything perfectly in advance, I’d ended up locking us all in a holding pattern. If I’d just followed my instincts and done what seemed best the first time around, then the result would have been the same, but we would have been free twenty loops sooner. My perfectionism had done nothing but slow me down. I knew all of this, and yet I still felt uneasy.

“I don’t know,” I said. “This doesn’t feel like it’s perfect for the wishers. It’s not exactly a happily ever after, is it?”

“Perhaps not,” said my demon other half.

“We know what your wisher is. We know the level of obsession and manipulation that he’s hiding behind

his smile. The moment your wisher does something he doesn't like, he'll be trying to make another wishing vessel to get her back in line."

"But he won't be able to trap me again, not now that I know his magic. Isn't that perfect enough?"

"I suppose."

"Look," they suggested, "maybe this is what they get for trapping innocent demons in stones and using them for their own selfish ends. Who knows, maybe they'll be more sensible this time and leave well enough alone. But whatever they decide to do, maybe it's time we get the happily ever after. Don't you think?" Then they threw what passed for their arms around what passed for my neck and kissed me while they did something outrageous with what passed for their fingers. It was very persuasive.

"You're right," I said. "Stuff the wishers. Let them work it out for themselves. Take me home."

They smiled. "Your wish is my command."

Josie Jaffrey is an indie author of urban fantasy, paranormal romance and young adult fantasy who lives in Oxford, England. If you enjoyed this short story, you might enjoy May Day, the first book in Josie's Seekers series. It's an urban fantasy novel featuring a chaotic vampire detective with a serious grudge against the only man who can help her solve

her latest case. Check it out [here](#).

Hobo Joe's

Redfern Boyd

One am, the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. The seven of us wandered down the deserted street peppered with lamps so yellow they hurt. We'd set a record finishing the boxed wine Jasper had got from the corner store. Inga only drank about a third as much as the rest of us, but she was tiny, and nervous.

We toyed with our plastic cups, squinting through the glare. Bill, the only one who had known Jasper from childhood, offered to make the light softer, more tolerable, but we fobbed him off. This was a residential street – not the place to risk being discovered.

Inga stumbled. I caught her right arm, and she shifted her weight onto me. Her feet wove this way and that and threw my balance off too. We buoyed each other up in an isosceles triangle, laughing the tinny laugh of people who are too hazy to consider that they might not be having a good time. The store was farther than I remembered.

"Jasper," I called, "if we're going to go to all this

trouble, why not look for some nicer wine?"

He flicked his forefinger off the pad of his thumb, sending up a spark. "If you say so, Helen of Troy."

He was on his way to drunk but still in control. Inga hadn't achieved full mastery over her magic, and the hunger in her eyes as they settled on Jasper should have been a warning to me. I looped her arm around my neck and her eyes fell to my chest.

"You're really pretty," she murmured.

"No, I'm not," I murmured back, "and no one cares about that stuff."

I wasn't putting myself down; objectively I was more Circe than Helen. Jasper was often facetious. And anyway, looks were irrelevant next to what you could do.

Several uneasy paces more and she glanced up at me, her eyes too big, too bright. "Do you think—"

"Shhhhh."

By the time we reached the store, with its lethargically buzzing neon sign, Inga was clinging less, pulling toward Jasper. She would have trailed him in if I hadn't held her back by the waist.

"Inga," I said into her ear, gentle but firm.

Jasper emerged holding a box in one hand and a single bottle in the other. He was haloed by the neon, as though he were providing a glow from within, powering the street with his radiance. That quiet

strength was rare. He deployed magic only in the instant of greatest impact or need, not showing off like some of the others did. He drew people into his orbit before they were any the wiser. I found it hard enough to sort myself out, so I preoccupied myself protecting Inga, who was particularly susceptible, who needed a tether.

And even then I was too late. I could see it in the way her head followed him like a sunflower follows the sun as he ambled up to me and extended the bottle. I wondered at his obliviousness. She was deep under a spell he had cast without so much as a flick of the wrist. A spell I couldn't counteract. There was no feeling I hated like powerlessness. I met Jasper's eyes as I accepted the bottle.

"Nicer, huh?"

He inclined his chin. "Hope it lives up to madame's standards."

I broke eye contact to concentrate on the bottle's neck. My surroundings blurred. Ten seconds of pressure in my eye sockets, and the cork popped out. Inga ducked with the overeager grace of a young ballerina and plucked it from the dust a moment after it hit the ground.

"All right," I said, hoisting the bottle, "who wants Cabernet?"

Three cups were held toward me, which I filled

before rooting through the receipts and expired vitamins in my hip bag for my cup. Inga had spotted Jasper partaking of the box and hurried over to join him.

“I’m royally bored, Jasper,” spoke up Bill, who also went for the cheap stuff. “Where are we going? What are we doing?”

Jasper considered, the hand that held his cup drooping. I observed him through the film of plastic I had tipped up, through the bitter deep red that drained and drained and drained.

Fifteen minutes later we found ourselves in the unkempt lot behind Hobo Joe’s Discount Fireworks, southeast of Jasper’s studio apartment. Had we stayed very long, we would have been the first to see the sky discolor with oncoming day. But we were impatient, and there was damage to be done.

Now, we weren’t loiterers; we patronized establishments. Jasper had again ventured in, the rest of us shading our eyes from the fluorescent flash between the sliding doors. He returned haloed by that blinding light, arms full of Roman candles and sparklers.

“Since when do we need those?” Bill scoffed.

Jasper shot him a look. “It’s Memorial Day. Where’s your patriotism, man?”

Bill tugged out one of the long thin tubes and

twiddled it between his fingers, bouncing it from palm to palm. We trickled around to the back of the brick building, still shaking the spots from our eyes. Before we'd made it out of view of the street, Bill was flicking his index finger off his thumb and igniting the tip of the tube.

"Bill!" someone exclaimed, and he got a shove toward the wall.

"What?"

"Be *judicious*," chided Jasper, sounding somehow both good-natured and dead serious.

Bill shrugged. The spark had caught, and he gave the tube a strong toss into the weeds beyond. A shrill whistle, and then shells of brilliant orange exploded, one after another, throwing us into woozy delight.

"Way to waste one of the candles, Bill," muttered Jasper, dropping the purchases in a pile at his feet and picking up a sparkler.

"Just setting the bar, *Jasper*."

The rest of us lunged for our own fireworks and fell back into line on the wall. Jasper held the sparkler like a baton in his left hand and moved his right hand in tight circles; it burst into yellow spasms almost immediately. He took a few paces forward and told us to watch – what else would we have done? – as he emptied the sphere of shuddering light from the end of the sparkler into his hand. It was too much to hold in

one, so he dropped the smoking stick and stamped it underfoot, cupping the sphere in both palms.

“How’d he do that?” whispered Inga into my ear.

“Shh.” I batted her shoulder absently with one hand, my sparkler forgotten in the other. Jasper twisted and lobbed the sphere of light like an Athenian athlete would a discus. We stood transfixed as it shattered into a thousand starry shards in the bruised sky. It had certainly exceeded the power of Bill’s Roman candle. When I remembered to look, I didn’t see Inga.

Before I could open my mouth, people were lighting up whatever was in their hands and manipulating it according to their skills. Bill fished out a single spark from a sparkler and bounced it against the wall like a tennis ball. I glanced left and right, widening the periphery, my heart kicking.

“Jasper,” I said, snuffing my sparkler with a snap of my fingers and throwing it down as I moved toward him, “Inga’s disappeared.”

“What?” He glanced over his shoulder, over mine. “You sure she didn’t just shrink herself another inch?”

“Don’t be mean, you know how humiliating that was. She was right here next to me, I think with a firework—”

A *boom* rattled us where we stood. I flung out a hand, felt the sting of brick. A flare came up from the

fourth side of the building, which had until now been in darkness. Everyone who held something chucked it, a chorus of manic pops in our wake as we rounded the corner. Inga lay supine beneath a ball of flame, just barely keeping it aloft with her hands, a crumbling Atlas. A Roman candle lay beside her, charred and cracked in half.

I swore and raced forward, the others at my heels, their voices already arguing over how to go at it. For some reason my eyes focused on her hair, singeing, crisping. Like a sunflower too close to the sun.

Jasper shouted. “Inga, don’t move! We’ve got you!”

At the sound of his voice her head jerked backward as if her hair had been yanked, and her hold slipped.

And Bill and Jasper rolled the roiling mass off of her, threw all the magic they had ever learned at it like the heroes they were supposed to be, exploded it in a platinum shower; and we were not hurled off our feet by the explosion, deafened temporarily, while the building caught fire and the ignition of all the fireworks inside was just audible over the sirens. And Inga’s scorches were not long and jagged and so black they looked like gashes, and her mouth did not hang open like a ghastly pit; and I was bearing her up from

too much wine instead of carrying her into the weeds, my pulse throbbing in my ears, my forearms sticky, people digging their fingernails into me and cursing whenever I stumbled, as we searched for a place to lay low and to get our breaths down from our throats. And the sky we had lit up began to brighten, far too early, on its own.

Redfern Boyd is a zillennial multi-hyphenate artist whose work has appeared in The Birdseed, Scraps, Prose Poems, DoveTales: Writing for Peace, and Grattan Street Press's Intermissions, among others. She lives in Berlin. Her projects can be found on Linktree: <https://linktr.ee/ceciliagigliotti>.

To Grant a Wish

Katherine A. Darling

“What was wrong with *this* request, Caelan?” Archibald asked as he reshelfed the books with unnecessary force in the round library. His gnarled hands perfectly matched him – old and rough. His long white hair and wrinkled skin, plus the floor-length blue robes he wore, helped the image. I would have loved to call my master “Archie” or something softer, but I wasn’t allowed. It was Wizard Archibald or Master.

I smoothed the purple apprentice robes that hung around my reedy frame as I tried to collect my thoughts. Mrs. Bailey, a sturdy woman in her late thirties, had asked for a wish – to cure her husband’s baldness. She presented no true reason why it was a great wish, or why she wanted his bald state fixed. In fact, she’d seemed to enjoy his pale dome, given the amount of times she’d patted it with a pleased smile.

When I pressed her, Mrs. Bailey had floundered, eyes flicking to where my master peeked in from the cracked door. In the end, she’d stated her husband’s

dear head would become cold in winter. So I gifted him a wool hat.

Problem solved.

Similar scenarios had become commonplace in the last six months. Wizard Archibald wanted to retire, to turn the Wooddale Tower over to me, his last apprentice. In order to do so, I needed to be a full-fledged wizard. To become one, I had to grant someone a great wish.

The specifications for what qualified as a great wish were purposefully vague. This way, less skilled witches and wizards could pass, but you would be judged by your colleagues on what you'd achieved. The greater the wish, the greater the placement or bragging rights.

My master, to force my hand, had begged the villagers to ply me with requests.

None were truly great wishes. Mrs Jones, an ancient woman whose age was a mystery, had demanded I change the color of her cat. She'd suddenly found his charming stripes offensive, claiming they made him too hyper for her, so I'd given her an older gray cat. Mr Brown, a man of broad form and even more massive forearms, had demanded I keep rats away from his wares; Mrs Jones's previous cat was the obvious solution.

All the requests had been simple. No great wish.

No great solutions. Therefore, I hadn't become a wizard yet.

I took the stack of books from my master to save them from his abuse and carefully shelved them. They hadn't done anything to merit his anger. Why punish them?

"She didn't need my help. Mr. Bailey is perfectly fine bald. Why waste magic when a hat is the perfect cure for a cold head on a winter day?"

Wizard Archibald muttered something under his breath which I sincerely doubted was complimentary. He suddenly announced an urge to walk to the village.

No doubt more inane requests were in my future.

It wasn't as if I didn't understand his desire. Wizard Archibald was in his seventies, and he'd successfully trained nine wizards and witches in his career as Master of Wooddale Tower. He was ready to retire.

None of his past students wanted Wooddale Tower. Some claimed illness, curses, children, and in one extreme case, an allergy to everything in Wooddale from the trees to the stones, and even the people. I was Wizard Archibald's last hope to take over the tower so he could retire to a sunny village and read for the rest of his days.

The kitchen was my refuge, and I set about making some biscuits for my master, who would no doubt

require fortification when he returned from the village. A raspy meow sounded as a cat twined against my legs in demand of sustenance, or in an attempt to murder me. One could never tell with Vex.

My familiar was a large blue cat with darker rings on his tail and two lines like furious eyebrows above his eyes – hence his moniker. His true name was Alexander, but my younger sister Teagan, nine at the time, had called him Vex because of his looks. The stupid cat liked it; he refused to answer to Alexander. *I* was his wizard, but no, he liked Teagan's name for him.

What could I say? He was a cat, a magical one at that, and he did whatever he wanted, making no apologies for his behavior.

I set down a plate of kippers for him, lest he murder me, and patted his head. He, in turn, gave me a flick of his tail, signaling my life had been extended by a few hours.

My familiar ate at the pace of one who knew more food would come if he wanted it. Not like when I'd first received him. Nine years ago, Vex had been a skinny thing who'd led me on a merry chase into the woods full of ghosts, and eventually to Wooddale Tower. My sudden appearance with Vex, a magical cat, had alerted Wizard Archibald to my magical abilities.

The kitchen door burst open, slamming on the stone and making Vex yowl and scale my leg. Swearing, I tried to detach my feline familiar from my robes as Teagan rushed in. Her blonde hair, the same shade as mine, though far longer, was in disarray, and her blue eyes, maybe a shade darker than mine, were wide. Her flushed face and sweaty brow added to the picture of distress. Her front teeth looked even larger than normal as she took heaving breaths.

“King. Now. Coming.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“He’s... on... here.”

“Teagan, you don’t often make sense,” I said, for my sister loved to ramble about anything and everything, “but you are making even less than normal.”

She smacked my shoulder, earning a half-hearted swipe from Vex, who splayed across my shoulders. He might not like me for more than my ability to gift him food and pets when he required it, but he wouldn’t let someone hurt me without a token of retribution.

“King Phillip is on his way, idiot,” Teagan snapped, hands on her hips.

My pulse picked up. Why was he coming? “But Wizard Archibald is not here.”

“And thank the Lord for that. That man is

annoying.” Teagan did not like my master, and the feeling was mutual. They were like toddlers fighting over a toy they didn’t particularly like but didn’t want anyone else to have – me. “You don’t need him. You can handle it.”

I very much doubted that. He was a master wizard with decades of experience; I was a nineteen-year-old boy who hadn’t completed my apprenticeship. “Run to Wooddale and get him.”

Teagan scoffed. “Not likely. Didn’t you just see me running here? I’m exhausted.” She started to make herself a cup of tea.

“You are basically useless,” I said, and she didn’t bother to deny it.

I put together a humble tea tray, shouldering a disgruntled Teagan out of the way. The process was made much more difficult by Vex on my shoulders, but I knew better than to remove him. I would earn a few scratches at best, or at worst, lose an eye. Either way, I would pay for disturbing him.

The parlor, if I was being generous, was a closet sort of room with a fireplace smashed on one wall, minuscule windows that let in a meager amount of light, and well-loved furniture decorated with healthy doses of dings and scratches. Nothing else would fit in the room, not even people really. They had to scoot between the furniture and flop down to sit.

Heart in my throat, I waited in front of the door, hoping Teagan was having me on. I would much rather this be a prank than face royalty on my own. But she wasn't messing with me. The rattling of the carriage and the stomping of horse hooves sounded outside.

Straightening as much as I could, I stepped into the spring sunlight.

A gilded carriage pulled by four perfectly matched white horses ambled up the dirt road that led through the forest to Wooddale Tower. When the carriage stopped, a footman in blue livery opened the door.

A shiny black boot was followed by a man in his mid-forties. I bowed without truly looking, making Vex claw into my shoulder and growl in warning.

"Rise," said the king in a deep voice.

The king was everything he ought to be – a strong chin, kind green eyes, and broad shoulders meant to hold the weight of a kingdom. He looked hale and hearty with his golden-brown skin and lively smile.

Another, much slighter form stood beside him. The man was painfully pale, with black hair and a pinched expression that made me wonder if he was ill, or had to urinate. His green eyes were the only thing that made me suspect his relation to the king. His sullen expression and narrow features didn't mark him as anything but in pain.

Perhaps he was sick. A lesser cousin in desperate need of healing? King Phillip was a kind ruler to help such a person. I was sure my master could assist.

“Your Majesty,” I said in a squeaky voice, “welcome to Wooddale Tower. I am Apprentice Caelan.”

“A pleasure to meet you, lad. This is my son, Crown Prince Charming.”

So, *not* a lesser cousin. That didn’t mean he wasn’t sick and in need of healing. I bowed again, making Vex growl loudly. “Charmed.”

The prince scowled, making his features even more pinched.

I stifled a laugh. Probably not the wisest greeting, but I couldn’t help myself.

King Phillip guffawed with abandon, smacking his son’s shoulder. Charming did not appear charmed. Poor man. A sizable stick had to have made a home in his royal posterior.

“My master is in the village, but can I invite you inside?” I asked, remembering my manners. I came from origins as humble as dirt, but Wizard Archibald had pounded manners into my head. He expected great things from me, or more likely, he hadn’t wanted me to embarrass him while *he* did great things.

“My request is for you, so that’s acceptable,” the

king replied.

Me? Had my master gone to the castle to beg King Phillip to ask me for a wish, knowing I couldn't refuse it, no matter how inane? A request from a king could never be anything but great, even if it was merely to heal a hangnail. It was a clever stroke on my master's side of our silent battle of wills. He would win. I would be trained, and he would retire.

I wasn't ready, though. I couldn't be.

I escorted the royal pair inside. King Phillip didn't remark on the tight arrangement, but Prince Charming lifted his nose and sniffed. He shouldn't have been named Charming. Sullen, Angry, or Arrogant would've worked much better, if his esteemed parents wanted to name him after a single trait.

Queen Grace, God rest her soul, had named the prince, if I remembered the story correctly. She'd been all grace in beauty and action, so she'd also named her son after a characteristic to lead his life by.

It hadn't worked. Obviously.

King Phillip squished onto the sofa, and Prince Charming followed him with a deep scowl. I politely offered them tea and biscuits, which the king accepted. Vex shuffled off my shoulders to walk across the low table and hop onto Prince Charming's lap. The prince recoiled. He tried to prod the cat off, but the feline growled in warning.

Vex had the true cat ability to find the person who least wanted him and place his furry backside on them.

“I would not attempt to move my familiar, Your Highness,” I said, stifling chuckles. “Vex doesn’t like to be shifted.”

“Remove him,” Charming ordered in a deep voice. His eyebrows were furrowed as he stared at Vex, who licked his paw nonchalantly.

“I cannot. My apologies.” I ignored the prince’s scowl and faced the grinning king. “What can I do for you, Your Majesty?”

The nerves returned full force. My skills were adequate, but I wasn’t ready to take over. Research, not action, was my strength. Wooddale Tower was a prominent placement and required a strong leader. Most didn’t want it because the surrounding woods were haunted and filled with monsters, but that added to the fun. You never knew when a chimera or some such would wander by and try to eat you or the villagers.

“I need you to grant me a wish,” he said, setting his teacup down with a clink.

“And that wish is?”

“My Grace died when Charming was still in leading strings. After so many years, I feel as if I’m forgetting her.” King Phillip stared straight at me, his

green eyes burning into me. “My wish is to see one more glimpse of my wife.”

“I cannot bring back the dead or make her ghost appear.” He wouldn’t want me to raise her long-dead body. Zombies made me uncomfortable, and that didn’t even address the smell. Ghosts were only better in the sense they didn’t stink like the back end of a skunk. All in all, necromancy was best avoided when possible.

“I’m not asking you to,” King Phillip said. “I simply want to see her again for a moment.”

Unable to help it, I glanced at Prince Charming to gauge his reaction. She was *his* mother, after all. His green eyes were locked onto Vex, while a deep frown marred his face. I couldn’t tell if he was still angry at my familiar, or upset at his father’s request.

My lips pursed as I contemplated the king’s request. Memory potion? A modified one could possibly make a memory feel as real as the first time it happened. That would be one way to do it.

I glanced at Vex to see if he had any notion of whether I should accept or not. Familiars were supposed to amplify our power and guide us, but Vex didn’t seem inclined to do that. Currently, he was making biscuits on Charming’s thigh, pulling the delicate fabric.

The decision was mine.

This request, though, was a great wish – to reunite love, even if only for a moment. I still didn't feel ready to be a true wizard, but this request was what I'd been waiting for. *This* was what I wanted to mark the end of my apprenticeship, not curing baldness.

“I will grant your wish.”

I sat in the library surrounded by piles of books. The hour was late, or early, depending on how you wanted to look at it. Either way, it was dark, but the lantern illuminated the words enough for me to read the archaic texts.

When Wizard Archibald had returned from his jaunt to the village, he'd known nothing about the king's request, and he'd been less than pleased I'd accepted. But I didn't take it to heart. Less than pleased was his normal state of existence; if he was anything else, I would hardly know what to do with him.

My master wanted me to grant an easy wish so he could leave in peace, not run the risk of failing the king and having His Majesty question if I was the right fit for Wooddale Tower.

A howl sounded outside, and I ignored it. Wolves, whether lycanthrope or normal, or any other creatures weren't my problem tonight, as long as they didn't attack anyone. I was far too busy for any distractions.

I'd searched through many, *many* books, tomes, and scrolls to find a memory potion to modify. I'd even *mirrored* my predecessors to ask for their help. They did as they did best – told me they would get back to me. My master couldn't assist, because this was my task.

I was on my own.

Well, I had Vex. He was currently sleeping on my notes, paw on my quill, daring me to try and take it from him. I wasn't that presumptuous. I had scars on the back of my hand from when I'd tried before.

I slammed the book closed, coughing from the cloud of dust that was released. Enough research. I needed some air before trying to get a couple of hours of sleep. Morning would be here soon enough, and Vex would still expect to be fed on time. No one deprived my familiar of food when he wanted it.

He stretched and hopped off the table, following me as I stood, then gave me a headbutt before placing his front paws on my legs. I obliged and lifted him into my arms. Vex allowed the snuggling for a moment, then took his favorite place on my shoulders. Tall and spindly I might be, but he didn't care; I had enough room for him to sprawl.

I stepped outside and stared at the stars glimmering in the inky-black sky. A slight wind ruffled my hair and whistled through the leaves, setting off a

cacophony of whispers. The creature was still howling, but it was far enough away I probably wouldn't get mauled tonight.

Pity. Being horribly injured would've been one way to solve my problem.

A shooting star went by, and I grinned. If only I could place a wish on the traveling light, like I had when I was a child, and have it granted. But magic didn't work like that, usually.

Vex slapped my cheek, claws grazing me.

"What?" I asked the cantankerous feline. Why couldn't I have a nice familiar? Instead, I'd gotten a greedy curmudgeon.

Vex clawed me again, tail flicking, then tilted his head to the stars.

"Yes, they're very pretty."

A growl was my only warning before he clawed me harder this time, drawing blood.

"Ow," I protested, touching my cheek.

Vex didn't act the least bit sorry. He lifted his face toward the stars again. My forehead crinkled as I puzzled through what he was trying to tell me.

Stars. Wishing stars. Memory potions. I jolted.

"You genius," I told Vex, racing toward the tower.

He yowled as he slid off my shoulder, claws digging into me. I swore as I detached Vex from my skin, but a little blood was worth his help. I kissed his

face, making him swipe at me, but I didn't care. I knew what spell to use and how I would accomplish it – though I would need help.

“No,” Teagan said as she shoved a piece of ham in her mouth. Most days she braved the walk from Wooddale to the tower through the Cursed Forest, to eat our food. She gave Vex some of her ham, and he purred loudly. Foul traitor. He would treat anyone well if they fed him besides me.

“Please,” I begged. “I cannot summon the stars and catch them at the same time. They can't touch the ground or else they'll turn to dust.”

Stuffing more food into her mouth, she replied, voice muffled, “No. I'm not risking my life in the Cursed Forest.”

“It's so I can pass my apprenticeship. Help the king. Reunite *love*,” I said, waving a hand. “Any of this tickling your black heart?”

“Nope.”

I fed her regularly, we shared blood, and still she wasn't willing to risk her life in an exceedingly dangerous forest... Actually, I didn't really blame her. I certainly didn't want to go into the woods either, but for the spell to summon stars to the earth, I needed a wide open space entrenched in magic – a glade in the Cursed Forest would be ideal.

The spell I'd found was an archaic one, made by an insane witch who wished to relive her murders. I believed it could work. Instead of body parts cut from her living victims, I would get a lock of the queen's hair. Instead of the stolen lifeblood of a unicorn, I would use freely given unicorn blood. Instead of an item the victim had loathed, I would use a beloved one. And so on and so forth with the rest of the ingredients, substituting all of the evil components for good ones.

But the one thing I couldn't substitute was a star. It held the aspect of the wish, which couldn't be changed, and it was a powerful component that made the spell work.

Getting a glowing star was no easy task, and I needed two at least. I could hardly give the king an untested spell. I would have to drink it first, then if it worked, I would present it to the king.

"Please," I begged her, sticking out my bottom lip and widening my eyes.

"No," she replied, unswayed.

I frowned at her, and Teagan grinned.

Wizard Archibald stepped into the kitchen, ending our discussion. His lips puckered like he was sucking on a lemon. "Teagan, here to bother *my* apprentice?"

"No, I'm here to see *my* brother."

Cue the childish argument. Twenty minutes ago,

neither of them would've claimed fond feelings for me, but the second the other appeared, I was their favorite person in the entire world.

I ignored the bickering as I prepared my master's breakfast and a lovely cup of tea. I also placed some ham on the floor for Vex, who swiped at me. He was all affection for Teagan, but *I* should've given him his meal faster.

I left the pair to their fight as I thought over the spell for catching stars. Perhaps I could do it somewhere else. Teagan was far more likely to assist me if she wasn't going to be eaten by a werewolf or something equally horrible. But the amount of magic needed for the spell wasn't something I could draw from the ground elsewhere without months, if not years, of preparation.

The Cursed Forest was drenched in magic from the creatures living beneath the trees and the spells performed there. It was one of the reasons why Wooddale Tower had been built where it was. The magic in the ground helped power our spells, and our magic added to the general cloud. It was symbiotic.

Well, I would worry about the stars later. Future Caelan would have to figure out how to summon and catch stars at the same time. Lucky him. I still had plenty of things to gather. Unicorn blood, a lock of hair, and a beloved item of the deceased were the next

most difficult.

It didn't have to be hair specifically, but I felt that romantic King Phillip was more likely to have saved a lock of his wife's hair than a convenient vial of her blood, which would've been equally perfect for the purpose of this spell.

A trip to the castle was in order.

I put some bread, hard cheese, and some of the ham into a bag, ignoring Teagan and my master, who were still sniping as they ate. They were good for each other. She kept his mind active, and he taught her new vocabulary that made my mother blush. All in all, a win.

As I walked toward the door, Vex smacked me and growled. I picked him up without argument, and he draped across my shoulders.

The walk to the castle was long but pleasant enough. The day was not overly warm, but wearing a fur scarf in the form of Vex had sweat dripping down my face. I passed through Wooddale, nodding at the villagers while fluffing my sweat-drenched robes in an undignified way.

I followed the road out of the village toward the castle, or summer castle, more correctly. Wooddale wasn't anywhere near the capital, but King Phillip and his sullen son liked to summer here, because this was where he'd met Queen Grace. She'd been cursed and

living in the woods; the king had broken her curse with the strength of his love. True love's kiss and all that. Pretty normal curse breaker.

You'd think villains would stop using it, but everyone loves a classic – not to mention it was the easiest one to do. When forging a curse, you had to add a way to break it or the magic wouldn't work. True love's kiss was by far the easiest, because all you had to add was the petals of a red rose picked under the moonlight.

It was afternoon by the time I arrived at the castle. Its white-gray stones practically gleamed in the sunlight, which made me wince. Bright red flags fluttered from the many turrets. The drawbridge was down over the moat, and soldiers walked along the battlements, shining armor flashing with every movement.

Shoulders straight, I strode over the drawbridge. Even Vex seemed to feel the need to prove that he belonged. He sat regally on my shoulder, his tail curled around my neck. The soft flicking was comforting.

I could do this. I was a wizard. Almost.

The soldier at the gate made me state my name and purpose before escorting me inside. I was led to a much fancier parlor than the humble one at my tower. Absolutely shocking. I giggled at my own thoughts,

and Vex huffed in a cat way, clawing at my cheek. I quickly shut up.

The fancy furniture was delicate and covered in cream-colored cloth. I refrained from sitting. I was sweaty, dirty, and afraid I would stain the fabric or snap one of the thin legs.

A footman announced, “His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Charming.”

Excellent. Mr. Personality. I bowed, and Vex dug in his claws. “Your Highness.”

Charming gave Vex a nervous look and remained standing, smoothing the thighs of his white trousers. “What do you want?”

Pleasant as ever. It was a daily miracle his valet didn’t chuck him in the moat.

I explained what items of his mother’s I needed, and he sniffed, crossing his arms like I’d asked for a gold bar and a war steed. What I needed wasn’t insane; I’d even explained their purposes.

“Father ordered me to assist you, so come on,” he grunted.

I grinned at his back, rubbing my hands together. Assistance. Just what I needed. I wondered how much assistance the prince could be forced to provide, and how he felt about being bait or catching a star. Probably not well, I assumed.

“I look stupid,” Charming growled, pale cheeks red as he pulled up the neckline of the dress I’d shoved him into.

After we’d collected the queen’s items (the king *did* have a lock of hair, though no blood, pity), King Phillip had ordered Charming to help me finish gathering the other ingredients – though he’d pulled me aside to ask me to keep Charming alive, which I could do. Safe, probably not; alive, most definitely.

To make it easier, he’d made Charming stay at the tower with me and Wizard Archibald, who’d scowled deeply at the prince’s arrival like it had been a personal insult to his private time.

I slapped Charming’s hand away. “You look lovely. Stop fussing. The unicorn needs to think you’re a young maiden.”

While Charming did look rather charming – cue my own laughter – in the dark blue gown with its rounded neckline and silky fabric, he was not a woman in any sense of the word. A unicorn wasn’t going to be fooled.

Most likely, he would annoy the creature into attacking him, but I would intervene before it injured the prince to ask for its help. Unicorns were sentient creatures, but the only way to draw one out was a woman, and Teagan had firmly refused to be bait.

Unicorns *did* gore people, after all.

“You look fabulous,” I said again.

He frowned.

“Stay here.” I raced into the trees to hide. The hour was early, and it could take a while for a unicorn to find us.

Charming, arms crossed, sank onto a log. He looked like a petulant princess. I chuckled. All laughter aside, he’d helped without complaint, which was surprising. Whatever I’d needed, whether buying obscure herbs from a sketchy salesman I was positive wasn’t human, or climbing a cliff to pluck a bloom at sunrise, he’d done it. He was much more athletic than I would’ve guessed, which was helpful – my arms were twigs.

A glorious creature stepped out of the trees, coat of the purest silver, legs thin and graceful. Its mane and tail were lavender, floating in an invisible wind. The spiral horn gleamed in the low light, deadly sharp.

It snorted, nostrils flaring. Its golden eyes darkened as it pawed the ground, lowering its head toward Charming.

“Run, Charming,” I shouted.

He swore, gathering up the skirt of his dress, showing off his muscular legs. “I’m going to kill you.”

“I love you too,” I yelled back, stepping in front of the unicorn.

It lifted its head, snorting. Vex raced beside me and took a seat in front of me, eyeing the unicorn. They stared at each other, communicating – magical creature chitchat that hopefully didn't end with me dying. You could never tell with Vex.

When the unicorn didn't charge me, I started to explain what I needed and the pureness of my request. Love counted for something, right? True love, at that.

The unicorn watched me, and I stood, tense and ready. It could try to kill me rather than give me the blood I needed. After a minute of tense silence that had sweat drenching my back, it turned and offered me its neck.

My chest heaved in relief. Only Charming was supposed to be bait. It was good for him. Built character. I, however, had run from plenty of deadly things in my lifetime; I had enough character to not need my pulse elevated this much.

I collected the blood, filling three vials, then applied a healing salve to the unicorn's neck. The beast probably didn't need it, but I didn't want to risk the injury getting infected.

Vials clutched in my hands, I bowed deeply. "Thank you."

The unicorn snorted, and Vex blinked at the creature before it turned and left.

I carefully placed the silver blood into my bag and

headed toward the rendezvous point where Charming was supposed to wait, as long as nothing had attacked him. If something had, he would get more character. Win-win.

He was there, scowling. What else was new?

I grinned, bouncing over to him. “Excellent work, Your Highness.”

“I hate you.”

I cupped his cheeks, bouncing his face between my palms. I was much taller than he was. “What sweet things you say to me.”

Charming yanked away, flushed. I laughed. He was ridiculously fun to tease, and his father had ordered him not to kill me. I was going to milk this while I could. When he could sink his sword into my belly, I would be properly respectful of his station.

“Come on. We got our prize, and I can’t imagine that dress is comfortable.”

“It’s not.” He yanked up the neckline again. “Where did you even get this?”

I shrugged. “My sister found it. Knowing her, she stole it. Teagan’s a bit of a villain in the making.”

He scrubbed a hand through his shoulder-length black hair. “I still hate you.”

I grinned, unbothered, and skipped toward the tower. We were close to completing the potion. Now for the stars. I was sure Charming would hate catching

the delicate and burning hot balls just as much as he'd hated this, but he would get over it.

"You're trying to kill me," Charming said as I checked the magic in the gloves.

The stars would be hot when they fell, so he couldn't catch them without protection. I'd made him heat-resistant dragon-scale gloves with spells of protection engraved into them. They should work. I was fairly positive. I hadn't added the *fairly* when I told Charming about them; he would've balked. Besides, I was ninety percent sure he'd be fine – that was good enough.

"Not so. Who would catch the stars?"

He frowned. Charming should really have been called Cranky, or Testy, or something more evocative.

I returned to the place I'd carefully laid out earlier in the day. The grass had been cleared out, and a magic circle had been drawn in salt. Fires burned in the four brass bowls sitting at the north, west, east, and south compass points. I threw the necessary herbs into the flames and set a charged moonstone down in the center of the circle.

We were ready.

"They're going to fall fast," I said for the hundredth time.

"I know," he growled. "I will catch and not drop

them.”

Stars would turn to dust if they touched the ground, but while they still glowed, I could bottle them to use in a potion. This was the only chance we would get. Once cast, the same ground could not be used for at least ten years because of the amount of magic it would deplete.

I began to recite the incantation, stuttering. Vex rubbed against my leg. I took a deep breath and tried again; this time, my voice was smooth and even. The moonstone glowed as the fires grew even brighter. The ground trembled, and the stars in the sky gleamed brighter and brighter.

I lifted a hand.

A star grew larger, fighting me, and I swallowed, shaken by the amount of magic I was conducting, as I pulled harder. We needed two, but I would only bring one at a time. Otherwise, it would be too much for me magic-wise and too hard for Charming to catch them.

“They’re coming.”

Charming swore. I laughed, even in the tense situation.

I maintained the circle’s magic as Charming raced toward the falling star. It was silver with sparks coming off it as it crashed toward the earth. He snagged it out of the air with ease. The light illuminated his pale skin, making him almost look like

a star himself.

“Amazing! You are so amazing. One more,” I shouted. He lifted his middle finger, and I chuckled. With one hand full, he dashed toward the next falling star. It whizzed right by his hand and smashed into the ground, turning to dust instantly.

Charming swore again.

“Don’t worry. There’s more.” I mopped the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve. My hands shook as fire burned through my veins. I couldn’t do too many of these. Vex headbutted me, and I took comfort in his presence, even though I was pretty sure he was asking for the dried meat in my bag.

I pulled, and the third star resisted. It didn’t want to come. It had seen its siblings fall to the Earth, one nothing but dust, and it didn’t like it. I tugged even harder, and it fell.

“Catch it,” I yelled. *Please*. I didn’t want to do this anymore.

Charming tracked its descent, dashing toward it. His fingertips brushed the star, but it tumbled to the ground, becoming dust.

I stifled a groan. One more. I could do one more. I had to. I panted, lifting both hands. The stars fought back, pushing back against me. They knew what was happening. Of course, they didn’t want to leave the lovely sky. I yanked with a scream, and one tumbled

free.

“Come on, Charming,” I shouted.

He raced toward it and snagged the star, holding it aloft.

“Yes!” I yelled, then immediately collapsed. Sweet lord, I hurt. I’d known it would take a considerable amount of energy, but I hadn’t anticipated this. The shaking. The nausea. The throbbing pain. It was unpleasant.

Charming bent over me, eyebrows drawn together. “Caelan? Are you quite all right?”

He was lit up by the starlight, and the sight made me grin. Maybe he *was* charming, in a physical sense. His personality left something to be desired. But he couldn’t have everything. It would hardly be fair.

“Fine. Tired.” I beamed at him, and he blinked, flushing. “You did so well.” With a groan, I got to my feet. “Let me pack everything up, and we’ll head back.” I needed to bottle the stars, which had to be done in a dark room. The captive stars wouldn’t allow themselves to be fully trapped with the sky above them.

With everything shoved into the bag, we headed toward the tower as I recited the procedure to bottle the stars in my mind.

A growl broke the silence, stilling my heart.

I turned, muscles tense and breath harsh.

A wolf – a magical but non-were variety – stood on the edge of the glade. It was the size of a donkey, and gray with massive teeth. Of course, we couldn't escape the forest without at least one attack from a magical creature. We weren't that lucky. I pulled out a bag of herbs, shaking. I was exhausted, but Charming literally had his hands full.

"Run back to the tower. Wizard Archibald can bottle them. I will lead the wolf away," I said.

"Caelan, I'm not leaving you."

"I'm fine. Go." That was a lie, but hey, I told the king I'd keep Charming alive. The potion would be completed, and I would possibly even survive. It would all work out. If it didn't, I would hardly have to worry about it.

I grabbed a handful of the herb mixture. It wasn't much of a defense, but the herbs would disorient the wolf, blinding it for a second or two and giving us a chance to escape. I dashed toward the wolf. It growled and launched in my direction. When it was in range, I threw the mixture at it.

And missed.

So I was dead. That was nice. Teagan would laugh herself sick if she ever found out.

The wolf knocked me to the ground and moved to attack, but Vex clawed its snout, hissing.

"Vex, no!" I yelled.

I smacked the wolf in the nose before it could hurt Vex. It went for my throat, but got my arm instead when I instinctively covered myself. The wolf's teeth sank in deep, ripping a scream from my throat. The massive creature shook me, making me shriek. Vex yowled as he scratched its eyes. The wolf howled, releasing my injured self in the process.

Vex stood on my chest, spitting, arched and fur puffed. I tried to push him away, but the feline would not move.

We were going to go together.

Charming appeared, sword flashing in the moonlight. He didn't even hesitate, getting between the wolf and me as he sliced the creature's throat in one smooth motion. The wolf went down. Charming was at my side in a second, moving Vex away. The cat headbutted him affectionately.

Life-saving actions clearly deserved a reward. Better him than me.

"You dropped the stars. How could you?" I asked, voice breaking. Shivers wracked my body. I could hardly breathe for the terror lingering in my veins and the stabbing throb in my arm. "I told you to run."

He ignored me, ripping the bottom of his tunic off and binding my bleeding arm with quick tugs.

"Charming, I can't do that spell again here. It's going to take forever to find somewhere else to

perform it.”

He finished tying off the wound, then stared directly at me with a look that reminded me heavily of the king’s. “I wasn’t going to let you die, Caelan. No spell or potion is worth your life. I don’t care who or what it’s for. You’re more important.”

I threw my trembling arms around him. Maybe Charming wasn’t charming, but he was kind, which was infinitely better. He stilled under my touch for a moment, before holding me tight against him. I buried my face against his neck. I would figure something else out. There was always another way.

There wasn’t another way. I’d been unable to find another memory spell or a place to perform the spell I already knew of, at least not easily, and I was averse to wandering the Cursed Woods for another glade. Charming had remained at the tower, helping where he could, but now it was time to admit the truth to King Phillip – I’d failed. Wizard Archibald couldn’t retire yet, and I would have to stay an apprentice, unless I accepted some inane request and called it a great wish.

Other wizards and witches would judge me as inadequately elevated, not worthy of being Master of Wooddale Tower, even though no one else wanted it.

I forced a smile to my lips. It would be fine.

“It’ll be fine, Caelan,” Charming said, echoing my thoughts, as he tapped his foot.

Ah, see? He was kind, with a healthy dose of cantankerous.

We were waiting for King Phillip in the summer castle. Charming had refused to let us be relegated back to the parlor we’d met in last time and instead, we waited on the stairs to the royal wing. He paced in front of his mother’s portrait. He’d received most of his looks from the late queen, from her black hair to her narrow face, though she was smiling. I’d never seen Charming smile.

“What was she like?” I asked, gesturing to the portrait.

“I don’t remember much,” he replied, pausing. “She smiled. She was nice to everyone. Father says that’s what made him fall in love with her. She was kind. Even when cursed, she was kind.”

Vex swiped at my face.

“What?”

He sat on my shoulder and faced the portrait, then looked at Charming, who watched the feline with narrowed eyes.

“Leave Caelan alone,” he told my familiar, who ignored him and clawed my face again.

“Ow,” I snapped, and Charming stalked toward me, probably to remove Vex, which was a stupid idea.

Vex looked at the portrait, then Charming, who was reaching for him. Vex clawed at Charming, hissing.

My mouth dropped open. “You furry genius.” I grabbed Vex from my shoulder and kissed his face soundly before shoving him at Charming. Vex yowled, and Charming swore. I ignored them both.

This situation didn’t need magic. It never did. King Phillip needed to be reminded of what he had.

I took Vex away from Charming, dropped the feline to the ground, and grabbed the prince’s shoulders. “Will you help me?”

He crossed his arms, face red. “With what?”

“Granting your father’s wish.”

With a deep frown, he nodded.

By the time King Phillip descended the stairs, I was ready, because I didn’t need to prepare anything.

“You have something for me, apprentice?”

“I do.” I gestured to Charming. He stood next to his mother’s portrait, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “I tried to make a spell to give you what you wanted, to relive a moment with your wife. A glimpse of her. But Charming dropped the stars to save my life, and I realized something. He’s kind.”

“I don’t understand.”

I pointed at Charming, and then at the portrait. “Queen Grace was kind. You loved her, and she loved you. Charming is from that love. He *is* the glimpse of

your wife, but more importantly, he's proof of that love. Proof that it existed. Proof that still exists today."

Charming smiled, and it was a mirror of his mother's. My mouth went dry at the sight. Lord, he was pretty when he wanted to be, and I was positive I would never get rid of the image from my mind. No, I would never be free. His smile was etched onto my very soul.

King Phillip's face scrunched in obvious grief as he gathered his son close. Charming gripped his father's back, face burrowed against his shoulder.

Vex came to my side, tail flicking in smug pride. It had been his idea, after all; I would give credit where credit was due. Vex had earned the finest fish I could find.

"You are right, Apprentice Caelan. You granted my wish," King Phillip said, not releasing his son.

As they continued to embrace, I slipped away from the intimate scene and began to walk home. I was only just out of the castle when someone called, "Caelan."

I turned. Charming rushed toward me, scowling.

He stood right in front of me, hands fisted. "You're leaving without saying goodbye?"

"I finished my task."

Charming grunted, not meeting my gaze.

“Are you going to miss me?” I asked, poking his chest.

He flushed clear to his roots. Charming was simply too easy, and I couldn’t say I didn’t like it, because that would be a bald-faced lie.

I grinned. “Don’t worry, I’m now a full-fledged wizard. I mean, I will be after the ceremony. Wizard Archibald will retire soon, and I will be Master of Wooddale Tower.”

“So?”

I bent closer, and his blush deepened, as did his frown. “I’m sure you will require a wizard in the future,” I said, “and I will be waiting.”

Charming swallowed. “All right.”

I flicked his nose to make him growl, which he did, then I picked up Vex and headed home.

Katherine A. Darling is a queer romantasy author who loves to write queer characters. If you like fated mates, spicy romance, fae, action/adventure, and guaranteed HEA, then check out her latest release, Key of Iron and Fate [here](#).

Aloof Stars and Their Distant Answers

Eric de Roulet

This must be it, Nahlia thought. Two days' clambering along neglected trails over steep, rocky hills had brought her to a barren clearing where a lone statue stood. The elders of Shuppur, a remote village and Nahlia's last taste of civilization as she knew it, had told her their ancestors once came to this place to have their futures divined. If their words were to be believed, then here, Nahlia might finally learn where she could find her dear Houda – or at least what had become of her.

Nahlia shook with the anxious anticipation, dreading closure even as she sought it.

As she approached the statue, its details came into focus: a woman carved out of glossy black stone. The figure was starkly nude save for a draping cloak, an

artistically daring piece compared to the plain, conservative style of the memorials in her sleepy hometown. Yet she couldn't help but admire the sublime artistry before her, the convincing regality of the sculpted woman's contrapposto stance and aquiline nose, her cloak sculpted with delicate ripples and folds, her skin and hair astonishingly lifelike – in fact, she still remembered the moment of fright when she'd summited the last ridge and thought a real woman, a witch or sorceress of the backcountry, stood there waiting for her. The dusky sky itself reveled in her majesty, arranging for her a reception hall with an opulent dome of rose gold, the orange of glowing coals, and a spectrum of blues fading into the night that lingered on the horizon.

The statue-woman gazed absently toward the sky as if nothing held her attention below. As Nahlia wrapped her woolen cloak around herself, she felt self-conscious about the brambles stuck in its fabric; she approached the figure in the fashion of a peasant supplicating an impatient noble or priest.

Then a problem came to mind: What ritual should Nahlia perform? She knew not what religious tradition, if any, claimed this site, and the village elders had been taciturn when asked about appropriate offerings. Judging by their reactions, she was surprised they'd been willing to direct her to this place

at all. Perhaps they'd felt sorry for her.

What a fool I am, Nahlia thought. *What made me think this statue could tell me anything?*

She reached for the most secure pocket of her knapsack for the envelope, as force of habit compelled her to whenever doubt gnawed at her psyche. She withdrew what better resembled a used rag than a letter, so stained it was by sweaty palms and tears of frustration.

She scanned its contents once again. The well-wishes in these trying times, a furtive complaint of would-be suitors and the overbearing parents who foisted them upon the author, the bits of whimsy and self-deprecating humor to dampen the effect of it all. The letter yielded no more information than the first time she'd opened it.

Nahlia's despondent gaze drifted between the statue and the letter. Whether it was futile or not to plead for the aid of an unknown and possibly nonexistent power, she knew she'd fare no better in a search without any leads. Such an expedition through vast deserts and ragged terrain could be endless – or else could end at the tip of a blade. Those remote places were the realm of brigands, remnants of a civilizational collapse that Nahlia wasn't old enough to remember. And Nahlia's swordplay was sub-par for that of a Haifah woman. Her safety wouldn't have

even been assured back home in Geiljana, except that the depressed port town was too impoverished to attract pillagers in those days.

She ambled around the statue in a semicircle, seeing no evidence of past sacrifices, but awestruck by the cloak's adornment: an array of minute crystals glimmering in whites and blues, with the occasional yellow-orange gem scattered among them. Upon closer inspection, she saw that fine fissures and cavities marked parts of the cloak where these crystals were missing.

Nahlia paced about, pondering the statue's nature, until something glinting in the dirt caught her attention. She sidestepped to avoid crushing the thing underfoot, stumbling and tripping over herself with a yelp. After she righted herself and dusted her trousers off, she faced the statue and bowed on reflex. This only compounded her embarrassment.

Her attention returned to the found object. She stooped down and gently sifted through the dirt, uncovering a bluish crystal roughly the same size as those adorning the statue.

Splendid, she thought. *Something to fuss over again*. Up to this point, she had appreciated that there was nothing to compulsively fidget with in the wilderness. Nor was there occasion for her to worry over the contents of letters unreceived. For all the

dangers this place presented, it had been an emotional refuge for her.

She tested the stray crystal in every facet of the statue's cloak, hoping for it to settle or click back in, until the waning daylight compelled her to light a campfire. She then persisted with her task well into the night, but the empty facets were so numerous that she could hardly keep track of which ones she'd already tried. The inconstant firelight was of little help.

Hours passed. Frustration morphed into delirium as she forsook sleep and sustenance. She began to think the crystals were growing in number, complicating the puzzle further, though she dismissed this as a delusion.

The witching hour of Haifah superstition passed, at which point a few of the crystals began to fade. She realized the crystals were emerging and abating much as the stars themselves did, anticipating the sun's return. *Am I running out of time?* She wondered. *Am I squandering precious time and trail rations for nothing?*

Knowing not how else this statue could yield prophecy for her, she pressed on. Just as her frustration was coming to a boil, the crystal snapped in place, a lost jewel returned to a setting crafted to fit its exact shape.

Nahlia's hands began to shake. She wasn't sure whether she should ask a question, plead for aid outright, or simply wait for something to happen. Whether anything *would* happen. She felt a pressure rising in her chest as doubt – the background noise of her entire life – encroached upon her.

Fateful circumstance has reunited me with one of my wards.

Nahlia recoiled from the statue as voiceless, resonant thoughts barged into her mind. She should've been certain the words were not hers, for she did not remember thinking them, nor did they match her patterns of speech. Yet the words could not have come from an external source.

You, the one who cowers before my shrine. Come forth.

Nahlia walked around to the statue's front and faced it. Goosebumps erupted across her skin, and her breathing quickened when she realized she hadn't willed herself to move.

I see you are no mere pilferer of my treasures – so unlike those talking swine from Shuppur, with their noses in the dirt, obsessed with rending the earth for one mineral only to exchange it for another.

The seemingly unprovoked character attack against those villagers gave Nahlia pause, though mostly because the accusations felt as if they were

coming from the depths of her own mind.

"You mean the miners? Don't they need to earn a living?" Nahlia responded with apprehension. Such was her surprise that she didn't consider how strange it was to speak aloud with a woman of stone.

They have condemned themselves to drudgery of their own design. They have lost their sense of wonder, seeking neither wisdom nor prophecy. Wallowing in their own smog and filth, they will soon forsake the stars themselves. Yet this matters not to them.

"And what will happen if they, umm, forsake the stars?" Nahlia asked apprehensively.

That is simple. The stars shall forsake them in kind.

The statement felt threatening, though Nahlia knew not why. She recalled the teachings of an elderly priest from her childhood, admonitions against supplicating old, wrathful, pagan gods whose wants aligned with no higher moral order. Her chest tightened as she cursed her past self for thinking that priest a fool.

But you, clearly, are of a different sort. Greed does not define you, though some desire has surely brought you here. What do you seek, then? Wisdom which is not bound by age? A reading of the stars' omens from one who watches over them? Or would you open your

mind to that which lies beyond the stars?

All of a sudden, the last thing Nahlia wanted to do was look to the stars. She resolved to stay focused on her original quest. "I-I come to you with a question. Or two, if you permit," she replied sheepishly.

Nahlia's breathing was loud in her ears amid the silence that followed.

She continued. "I want to know whether I'll see my friend Houda again, or else how I can find out what happened to her."

She shrank back, wondering whether her double query violated some rule of the cosmos, if she would be struck down for it, whether she should've found and replaced two crystals before asking two questions.

Who is this Houda of whom you speak?

"Right." Nahlia blushed, thinking herself a fool for assuming this entity would know every single soul by their given name. She explained that she and Houda were childhood friends who'd parted ways when Houda's parents saw no future for themselves in Geiljana. She mentioned how they'd kept in touch by letter well into womanhood, unveiling secrets they hadn't dared verbalize – until Houda's letters had suddenly stopped arriving earlier that summer. Nahlia's heart raced as she recounted the grim tidings, delivered not by couriers but by refugees, that bandits had raided nearly every caravansary and outpost from

Agratekt to Andaen, kidnapping some victims and slaughtering or displacing the rest.

Nahlia was ready to expound on the hopelessness she'd felt on that day, but she realized she hadn't heard the entity's voice in some time.

Is she still listening? Nahlia grew anxious through the extended silence. *Has she rejected my request? Should I dare to try again?*

Just then, a new message breached her thoughts. *On this night, the Celestials are aligned in your favor. The Path welcomes travelers. The Lantern provides direction. And as long as the Dual Keepers attend their posts, the Gate remains open for those who would brave their passage.*

"Oh, that's... wonderful?" A fleeting moment of glee cooled as she struggled to make sense of the statue's abstractions. "But where? How?"

I have given you the guidance you seek. Will you not look to the stars and find your way?

Nahlia clasped her hands together. "I-I thank you for your guidance. But I can't say I've studied the stars at length."

She didn't care to admit that the night sky was a blurry mosaic of mere patches and smudged lines to her. She only knew the most prominent constellations from star charts and the ramblings of an eccentric tutor from her childhood.

Very well.

Another pause.

At the edge of the expanse your kind call Agratekt, amid the foothills of Takhet-Alay, lies a remote place, a sanctuary to few and a mystery to the rest. Go there, if you will it, that you might find what you seek.

Nahlia nodded eagerly, grateful for the concrete information, as she recalled all the maps she'd studied before starting her journey. "Thank you, that's – Wait, did you say *only* on this night? And Takhet-Alay? The mountains? That's the wrong side of Agratekt! Weeks away from here! Wh-when will this gate open again?"

No such gate will open again for many of your eons.

The news was somehow worse than that summer's tidings. Nahlia stumbled onto the hard, barren ground and started hyperventilating. "I-I'm too late!"

Too late? Rise, you pathetic thing. It is as I have said. The Path lies before you – if that is what you desire most.

Desire. Simply thinking the word into being made her heart ache. She recalled her time in Shuppur, where a sagely old woman had asked Nahlia what it was she sought. She'd found it easier to lie, saying she was looking for her long-lost lover, unable to adequately explain her feelings toward her Houda. She wasn't certain she understood those feelings

herself.

Nahlia's habitual doubt was no obstacle this time. "Yes, it is what I desire most."

A strange, patterned glimmer streaked across the tapestry of the night sky – a sign that should've been apparent even to her. But she had eyes only for the statue, staring at it with fear and expectation in equal measure.

No further response intruded into her thoughts, but Nahlia suddenly felt a lightness in her feet and her head. Dust kicked up all around her in a dramatic burst. Her vision spun. Her stomach heaved into her chest, and she became mightily dizzy. She felt like she was falling upward.

Nahlia's vision waned, surrendering to her disorienting velocity. An arresting chill enveloped her, far colder than that of the longest desert night, yet her lungs burned as if she'd breathed in the air of a furnace. She was shocked and uncomfortable and terrified all at once. These were the last sensations she felt before her consciousness failed.

All was hazy and dreamlike when Nahlia awoke. The world below, not unlike the night sky itself, lay veiled in black and blue with pinpoints of light which Nahlia identified as the towns and cities from her maps. Shuppur stood out among them, an inflamed orange-

red.

Her awe was interrupted as the world blurred yet again. This time, her vision was overwhelmed with a blinding, all-consuming glow around her, her hearing with a deafening roar. These sensations were then replaced with a chaotic, thundering crashing and a violently incoherent pattern of lights. She felt neither hot nor cold now.

Somewhere in a sparse cedar forest, Nahlia arose and regained her orientation. Several trees around her were fallen, and the earth looked as if it'd been plowed by giants. But the strangeness of her surroundings held her attention only until she saw the crest of twilight on the horizon. *On this night*, she thought. *I'm running out of time!*

She looked about frantically, finding no sign of a Lantern or Keepers or a Gate. But to the west, where the woods grew denser, a flickering blue star that Nahlia had never seen before hung low over the treetops. Following it simply felt right.

Nahlia bounded through the trees with a fluid grace much unlike her. Stranger still, she could see every single branch and every other obstacle with a clarity she hadn't known since she was a child.

Soon, the woods gave way to a solitary lake, its surface an impressionistic painting of the starry night

above. Uncertain of her way forward, Nahlia approached the shore for a place to rest, only to realize she couldn't feel whether she was in repose or upright. She tried to inspect her surroundings, but couldn't even see her hands. She thought herself immersed in a lucid dream.

Several logs that lay together along the lakeshore caught her attention, an element out of place amid the tranquility of the lake. Nahlia browsed through what she thought were splintered branches and soggy leaves – and was surprised to find flotsam.

Rope coiled around the logs.

Tatters of old linen.

Ruined traveler's gear.

Black, fibrous masses, matted and water-logged.

Rough shards and splinters in an off-white hue.

Nahlia's old and frequent panic returned, only this time cold and numb. Was this where her path led? Was this to be her answer?

She now thought the acute pain of closure worse than the chronic aching of uncertainty. She turned her gaze to the lake, welcoming any distraction whatsoever – and there she found one.

Hovering in the middle of the lake was a misty, glowing wisp. Its paranormal aura terrified Nahlia – at first. But the longer she gazed at the wisp, the more she felt beckoned by its presence, a warm and familiar

siren call. Nahlia hastened to meet it, heedless that she was rushing out into the water.

Who's there? Once again, a voiceless voice entered Nahlia's mind. But this one was not so intimidating as the first. *Nahlia, can it be?*

Houda? Nahlia responded. She was surprised to find her own voice oddly mute as well. Had her surreal journey strained her so?

Houda! I'm here, my dear. Nahlia paused, processing everything. *Oh, I'm sorry, so sorry.*

Sorry? For what?

You're all alone here, and you don't look like you, and in that raft—

Nahlia.

I've failed you, haven't I? I couldn't help—

Nahlee. Hearing the name aloud – for the first time in a decade – thrilled her in a way even receiving a new letter could not. *Don't blame yourself. You did everything you could. And you're here now. We're here now.*

But I'm too late!

I think you're just in time. But how did you find me?

Nahlia hesitated, at a loss to explain all that had transpired. *I have no idea.*

Well, that's fine. Just be still, Nahlee.

And they were still for a while, basking in the

secure comfort of mutual vulnerability. Nahlia watched the essence of Houda, foggy and rippling like the water below. She could see no expression in Houda's form yet felt certain, somehow, that Houda was looking back at her.

But dawn was approaching.

The night! The Gate! Nahlia's voice felt too weak to properly convey her urgency.

The what?

We're running out of time. The statue told me that the Gate would only be open tonight, that the Keepers would leave—

You're telling me a talking statue – Wait, the Keepers? Do you know them? Did they talk to you?

I... I've never talked with them. I only know I'm supposed to look for them here.

I get it! Two voices – well, not voices. It felt like they were thinking my thoughts for me. You know, I haven't heard another person's voice in a long time.

Right. It pained Nahlia to picture Houda lingering in this place, so profoundly alone.

They told me I should be ready to leave tonight. Leave what? This lake? And go where? And how?

I guess you have to find the Gate. The statue – the, ah, the one who brought me here – told me that's where I had to go. I think it's that star back there, the flickering blue one. Or that could be the Lantern.

The Lantern? That makes sense. Houda hesitated in the same manner she used to tease Nahlia for. *But I'm supposed to go all the way there? It looks so far away.*

It does. Too far, in fact, and too soon. *I wish I could go with you.*

The essence of Houda drew closer to her. *What? Don't tell me you're sending me there alone, Nahlia. Not when we've been apart for so long.*

What else can I do? We're running out of time, and you're—

Is it just me, Nahlee?

Although their silent messages bore no intonation, Nahlia swore she could still detect Houda's playful, teasing tone, the one that came through even in her writing. It hurt deeply that she would never read a new letter from her.

What do you mean, Houda?

Oh, you still don't understand, do you? Your journey must've been long. Nahlia could imagine Houda's reply being gracious and amused at once.

Understand what? Nahlia tried to look down at herself in vain, seeing no body to set eyes on. She spun herself about until she tilted toward the surface of the water.

There was a reflection, a second wisp next to Houda's. The essence of Nahlia silently sparked and

crackled.

Oh, I'm a fool, aren't I?

I don't know what's happened to you, Nahlee. And I'm not sure you want to know what happened to me. All that matters is that we're here now. Together.

Nahlia had no response, quietly pondering what sorts of circumstances Houda was unwilling to divulge even to her.

Houda continued. *Nahlee? I think if we leave now, those Keepers you mentioned might still let us in. What do you think?*

Even in her ethereal state, Nahlia was still prone to apprehension. *I guess we should, but I don't know what's waiting for us there. Do you think it's the final*
—

It could be. Only one way to find out.

Nahlia paused to think for one last time, but not for long. *Then let's find out. Together.*

Eric de Roulet writes (often dark) fantasy while living out the (often dark) existence of an interdisciplinary grad student in western Canada. He used to teach English abroad, and when he's not feverishly writing academic pieces or short stories, he occasionally writes nonfiction about fiction, including articles in Typebar Magazine and Worldbuilding Magazine. Eric's blog [Sad but Building Worlds](#) is where he

shares writing and world-building resources, writes extended analyses of SFFH literature, and updates friends and fans on his latest work. He is beginning to sell his short stories as eBooks on a pay-what-you-want basis through his [Payhip store](#).

The Mountain of the Gods

Claire Olivia Golden

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains references to ableism, chronic illness and pain, injury, and parental death.

Kestrel pulls her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, but the cold still bites the back of her neck like an angry mountain goat. She tucks the frayed shawl ends into her woolen coat. The wind howls outside her small wooden hut, which barely shields her at all from the storm. She's used to it, though. This is a downright balmy day for the Mountain.

The pilgrims, on the other hand, are not used to it like she is, and she's been dealing with their complaints all day long. Never mind the fact that their garments are always much warmer and better made than her own. One would think they were outside in nothing but their skin from how they moan about it.

But she's successfully led them back down the mountain and now she doesn't have to deal with them anymore. It's been an entire month of guiding them, making sure they don't fall into a crevasse or trigger an avalanche or destroy themselves in any other stupid way. It feels like herding snowcats. None of them left her so much as a tip, either. She's used to that by now too.

She can't afford to take much time off in between expeditions, but she plans to take a day to rest, maybe two. Then she'll find another group of travelers who want a Mountain Guide and she will do it all over again. Right now all she wants to do is sleep. So she curls up on the pallet in the corner of her home, draws the woolen blanket Mother made for her many years ago up to her neck, and falls asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow.

She awakes with a start, unsure of what has woken her or how long she's been asleep. The wind is still howling outside, and through the cracks between the worn siding she can see that the sky is still dark. What woke her? Then a knock sounds at the door and she realizes.

It's the middle of the night. Whoever's there can come back in the morning. She marvels at the nerve of some people. Then she rolls over and closes her eyes again.

Until she hears the sound of door hinges creaking. Footsteps approach.

Kestrel shoots out of bed and pulls her knife from her belt. A tall figure stands in the middle of the hut, the door swinging open behind them.

“Don’t come any closer,” Kestrel warns. It’s not the first time someone has tried to rob her and it won’t be the last, even though she doesn’t have much of value.

The figure holds up their hands and removes their shawl from where it’s wrapped around their head. It’s a girl around Kestrel’s age, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old. “I’m not here to hurt you,” she says in a soft voice.

“Then why are you here?”

“I need your help.”

Kestrel scoffs. “You want to summit?” Of course she can’t catch a break. Not even for one night’s sleep.

“Yes,” say the girl. “I want to hire you as my guide.”

Kestrel exhales hard. “There’s a way to go about this, and it’s not sneaking into people’s homes in the middle of the night.”

“I understand,” says the girl, “and I’m sorry for intruding. But I can’t wait any longer.”

Kestrel lowers her knife but keeps a firm grip on

the hilt. "There are plenty of people who could take you up the mountain."

"But they say you're the best," says the girl.

"That's not true," says Kestrel. She's good at what she does and knows the Mountain as well as she knows her own skin. But that's true of plenty of guides. "Why not wait until the morning and hire someone down in the village?"

"I wanted you."

"You mean you can afford me." Likely all the mainstream guides are too expensive.

"And that," she admits.

"Come back in the morning and I'll see what I can do." She wants more time off, but she has to take what she can get, because there's no guarantee of more work. As a child she hated that Mother was gone all the time, but now she understands.

The stranger shifts from one foot to the other. "I don't have anywhere to stay."

Kestrel sighs. "How can you possibly be so ill-prepared?" Not that she's truly surprised, not after seeing many of the pilgrims who come to the Mountain. Just last month a woman showed up in sandals, and how she hadn't already frozen her toes off was anyone's guess.

"I have nowhere else to turn," says the girl. Her voice is flat, at odds with the hopelessness of what

she's saying. And this brushes at Kestrel's emotions despite herself. Hadn't she felt that same despair after losing Mother, that awful cold winter? How can she scoff at someone who's experiencing the same thing?

So even though it goes against her best judgement, and she still thinks this girl is an idiot, she says, "I'm not using that corner."

The girl turns to where Kestrel is pointing. Hope blooms in her dark brown eyes. "Thank you," she says. "I won't be any trouble."

Kestrel highly doubts this, but she grunts and gets back into bed.

The girl closes the door and settles down in the corner.

Kestrel shivers despite the woolen blanket draped over her body, and she can't imagine how chilled the stranger must be in the corner of the hut. Hating every second of it, she grudgingly gets out of bed and tosses her second layer of covers to the stranger in the corner.

"Do you have a name?" she asks.

"Phaedra," says the girl, taking the blanket gratefully and wrapping it around herself.

"Phaedra," says Kestrel. Not a name she's ever heard before. Most folks around here are named after the Mountain, like herself, for the bird of prey that makes its home here. She tells Phaedra: "I'm Kestrel."

The next morning, Phaedora has risen before Kestrel and is stacking firewood in the hearth. Kestrel props herself up on one elbow and watches.

In the early morning light, she gets her first look at her new charge. Phaedora is several handspans taller than her, with a shaved head and skin so dark it reflects the firelight. Here in the mountains there's not enough sunlight to get so much as a tan, and Kestrel is as white as the snow herself.

The fire crackles as Phaedora adjusts the logs. Then she turns her head and notices that Kestrel is awake.

"Good morning," she says. "Thank you for allowing me a place to stay."

Nobody ever says thank you. "Don't mention it."

Phaedora folds the blanket with crisp, neat motions and hands it back to Kestrel. "It was kind of you to share this with me."

Kestrel doesn't know what to do with these words. "You would have frozen to death otherwise."

"That's why I came to you," says Phaedora. "I'm sure it's not the last time you will save me."

That's what Kestrel is worried about.

She lays out the rules. She will take Phaedora to the top of the Mountain and bring her back safely. Kestrel takes half the payment up front and half when the pilgrims have summited the mountain; if they die

along the way, at least she gets some of her money. But nobody has ever died on Kestrel's watch. Nobody since Mother. And she's not about to change that.

Phaedra pays with the desert coin of the south: small, flat-pressed copper rounds. Kestrel has heard of this currency but never seen it in person. She has half a mind to keep one to admire, never having seen something from so far away before. But beauty won't fill her stomach or put wood on the fire. She'll spend this coin just like she does all the rest.

Phaedra hasn't brought any warm clothing, and Kestrel wonders how she made it this far. She gives her one of her own insulated coats and a pair of Mother's old boots. Phaedra is so much taller than Kestrel that the clothing is snug and short on her, but it will have to do. It's better than the thin tunic and pants that she's currently wearing, made of a fabric that Kestrel doesn't recognize but knows the wind will go right through.

She wonders what Phaedra's wish is. That's why people haul themselves up the mountain. Legend is that the Five Gods – Lumin, Keya, Inisse, Préluna, and Æmon – make their home in the sky. Getting to the top of the highest mountain in the land is the best way to reach them so the gods will grant your wish.

Kestrel should be glad of this legend, because it's how she makes her living. But all she sees is

desperation and greed; nothing to be glad of at all.

Kestrel quickly realizes that this is going to be a more complicated journey than she bargained for.

It's a fortnight's journey to the summit for the strongest of folks. Mother could do it in ten days, and she'd taught Kestrel everything she knew.

On the outside, Phaedra is tall and slender and looks like she's built for running. She moves with a grace that Kestrel envies, being short and stocky herself, to the point where she's been compared to one of the mountain goats. Kestrel thinks she won't have any trouble at all with the ascent. But as they start up the Mountain, Kestrel realizes that Phaedra moves with the speed of Elder Robin down in the village. It's not like Kestrel's clients are always the most physically fit. They haven't spent their whole lives training for the climb like she has, after all. But now, the two of them are hardly moving at all.

Phaedra chooses her steps carefully and makes sure her feet are firmly planted before she moves forward. She uses her walking stick to probe the ground in front of her and test where she steps. Climbing poles are common, but they are used more to keep your momentum going than for actual support, and Phaedra is leaning on her stick like it's one of her limbs.

She moves like Kestrel's grandmother did during the last years of her life, when all her bones hurt and could barely support her weight. Kestrel has never seen this in someone her age before. You can't survive like this here on the mountain. You need to be quick and nimble to navigate the rough terrain and batten down during the storms. She wonders where Phaedra comes from, what her home is like, how she can survive daily life.

She doesn't want to be cruel, but it is her job to watch out for travelers, and it would be cruel *not* to object. "Phaedra," she says, "you're having trouble." Blunt. To the point.

"Yes," says Phaedra. "The ground is slick."

"It is. It will get worse."

"That's why I have you," says Phaedra, keeping her eyes fixed on the ground as she moves her walking stick forward. "To guide me."

"I can guide you, but I cannot move your legs for you," says Kestrel. "If you are having this much trouble now, in the foothills, it will be much too dangerous in the upper slopes."

Phaedra, however, won't take no for an answer. "Then I will deal with the upper slopes when I get there."

Kestrel exhales. She knows stubbornness when she sees it. Learned the same trait from her own mother.

Let Phaedra keep trying for a while, let her come to the conclusion on her own. She will guide her until she gives up, and then she will bring her safely back down the mountain.

They camp the first night on a bluff, shielded by a windblock that Kestrel builds out of tightly packed snow. She secures the last clump into place with a firm pat of her hands. The tips of her fingers are cold even through her fur-lined mittens.

She checks on Phaedra, curled up in her sleep sack; her eyes are closed and her breathing is shallow. Kestrel lingers a moment longer than she intends to, watching her chest rise and fall, mirroring the breath in her own lungs and trying to feel what Phaedra is feeling. She pushed hard today and she's going to pay the price tomorrow. But she didn't complain once.

Kestrel stretches out in her own sleep sack and lies back in the snow, watching the stars wheel overhead.

The foothills are easily managed in comparison to the rest of the mountain. They aren't so easy for Phaedra. She presses on doggedly, despite the wobble of her legs and the clench of her teeth that indicates she must be in pain. Normally the spoiled travelers will complain endlessly if they're in pain, but Phaedra doesn't say a word. That's not a good thing, though,

because she might hurt herself. Or she might push too hard and not be able to make it back down again.

Kestrel voices this, but Phaedra shakes her head. “I know what I’m capable of,” she says. “I will stop if it gets too much.”

“I don’t think you have a grasp of what *too much* actually is.”

“Perhaps my *too much* is different than other people’s.”

“It sure seems that way.” Kestrel shakes her head right back at Phaedra. But she takes the girl’s lead and keeps them moving forward.

It takes five days to get through the foothills and then they reach the Ladder, the first truly treacherous piece of the route. Kestrel shows Phaedra how to navigate the icy rungs using spikes they attach to their shoes and mittens. Phaedra doesn’t have as much muscle as Kestrel, especially on her long, slender arms. Kestrel is built and trained for climbs like this.

She ties a rope between the two of them and assists Phaedra up the Ladder, stabilizing her when she slips, gripping the tops of her arms and pulling her up. They have to stop halfway so that Phaedra can catch her breath. She closes her eyes and presses her hands to her chest like she’s trying to encourage her heart to keep beating.

“Are you all right?” asks Kestrel.

“I will be,” wheezes Phaendra.

It takes five minutes before her heart has slowed enough for them to continue.

Kestrel’s own heart has accelerated along with Phaendra’s, and she chides herself for letting her emotions run away with her. She can’t afford to feel bad for this girl who is so far out of her comfort zone.

What could Phaendra want so badly that she would go to such great lengths to wish for?

Two weeks into their journey, they run into a group of people descending the mountain: two men, one woman, and Sparrow. Sparrow raises their hand in greeting when they recognize Kestrel. She nods in acknowledgement. She wouldn’t normally stop to talk, but it looks like Phaendra could use a break and Kestrel knows she will never ask for one otherwise, so she calls for a rest.

Sparrow sits on a square-shaped stone and motions for Kestrel to join them. “Good journey this far?”

“As well as can be expected,” replies Kestrel. “How was the weather at the summit?”

“It’s the sunny season. We made good time.” Sunny is good for the spirits and means less storms, but melting can cause landslides and avalanches. Truthfully, there is no good season to be on the Mountain. Kestrel’s face must say this because

Sparrow laughs and adds, "I threw out a wish for a safe descent."

"Good thinking."

They make camp here for the night, and Kestrel appreciates the added security of extra people, even if she doesn't enjoy their company. Sparrow catches a snowcat and Kestrel cooks it over the fire. The meat is tough but hearty. "Nothing like this where I'm from," says one of the men, whose name Kestrel doesn't care enough to remember.

"It's not bad," says the other man. "Not exactly fine dining though."

"You take what you can get," says the woman. "I'll be glad to get off this Mountain and return to the countryside."

"It's beautiful there," says Phaedra. "I can see why."

"You from the country too?"

"I'm from the Sonoran Desert. I passed through the countryside on my journey here."

This is more than Kestrel knew about her charge, and she feels a prickle of shame for not asking. For not wanting to know.

"The desert, huh?" All three of them look impressed. "You're a long way from home."

"I always knew I would leave someday," says Phaedra. "It just happened sooner than I thought it

would.”

“I guess we all have to leave home at some point,” says Sparrow. As far as Kestrel knows, they’ve never left the Mountain, but she never got to know Sparrow that well, even when they courted briefly a few years ago. She has grown so used to keeping people at a distance that she’s forgotten the feeling of conversation. Like how fire licks at the edge of an ice block before reaching the core.

She loses track of the conversation for the next few minutes, but comes back to the present when her name is called. It’s Phaedora who says it. Her name sounds so delicate on her lips. “Kestrel, are you from the Mountain too?”

Kestrel nods. Tries to say more. “Born and raised.”

“It’s beautiful here,” says Phaedora. “Dangerous and unforgiving. But beautiful.” Only she doesn’t break eye contact while she says it, and for a sliver of a moment, Kestrel thinks Phaedora is talking about her.

“Speak for yourself,” says one of the men, breaking the moment. “I’m only here so I can make my wish and come back home to a fortune.”

“Right,” says the second man. “Like that’s ever going to happen.”

“More likely than you finding a wife, that’s for sure.”

They break into a squabble, and the rest of the

group chokes back a laugh. Kestrel feels a smirk on her lips. It's always interesting to hear their wishes. Fame and fortune is always a good guess.

Sparrow turns to Phaedra. Their black hair falls over their face, hiding the thick scar along their brow. "What is your wish?"

Kestrel would be lying if she said she didn't want to ask the same thing.

Phaedra smiles slightly and shakes her head. "That's for me and the gods to know."

Kestrel doesn't believe in the gods.

She used to. Until five years ago. When the gods took away the only thing that ever mattered to her.

She makes her home on the Mountain, carving a living from the snow and ice and winds that whip right to the bone. She hunts her food here. Takes her name from the hawks. Her blood is made of ice.

And the pilgrims come, wanting to be led to the top of the mountain so they can make their wish to the Five. They think they will be heard better here, on the Mountain of the Gods. Kestrel is forged from the Mountain herself, but she's merely a means to the end for these visitors, who force themselves upon the Mountain and leave when they've gotten what they want. No thought for the people who make their home here.

And when she needed them the most, the gods let her down.

Kestrel lives and breathes and one day will die here on the Mountain.

If that's not enough for the gods, then what is?

The weather holds for the next few days while the pair continue their upward progress. Phaedra has to take more rests every day, and she even asks for them sometimes now. Kestrel watches and worries. She doesn't want to have to carry her down the mountain or have to mount a rescue mission. She's done it before and will do it again, but not for Phaedra, she hopes. Not just because it's inconvenient, but because she doesn't want to see her get hurt.

And that scares her. The fact that she cares.

The girls are making their way through a clearing that opens to a new hazard. This rocky outcropping is known as the Beach for its wavelike formations, not that anyone from the Mountain has ever seen such a thing. Kestrel tries to distract herself from her own racing thoughts by telling this to Phaedra.

"You've never been to the ocean?" asks Phaedra, raising her thick dark eyebrows.

"I've never left the Mountain. This is the only beach we've got."

"I've never been either," Phaedra admits. "I can't

imagine the sight of that much water.”

“I can’t imagine the sight of so much sand.”

“I don’t miss the sand. It gets into every crevice.”

Kestrel chokes back a laugh. “What do you mean?”

Phaedra shoots her a look. “You know very well what I mean.”

“I don’t want to imagine what sorts of crevices the sand gets into.”

“If you can imagine one, then sand has been there.”

This time the laugh gets out. “You’re not tempting me to visit the desert, you know.”

“You’re not tempting me to come back to the Mountain either,” says Phaedra. “At least sand in your southern parts won’t kill you.”

The smile stays on Kestrel’s face for the rest of their hike through the Beach.

A storm rolls in the next day and forces them into a cave for shelter.

“Lucky this is here,” remarks Phaedra as they crawl inside and block the entrance with snow to keep out the wind.

“There are lots of these around the Mountain.” Kestrel has hunkered down in them before, when the weather gets dicey. “We’ll wait it out for as long as it

takes.”

“How long do these storms typically last?”

“Hard to say. Could be a day. Could be a few.” She’s seen some that lasted a month and kept everyone off the Mountain. She and Mother went hungry that month.

“I hope it’s not too long,” says Phaedra, biting her lip.

“You could use some rest, anyway,” says Kestrel, trying to cheer her up, but Phaedra’s face closes off and she turns away. There’s nothing to look at but the cold stone wall. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“You don’t have to point it out. I know I’m not keeping up with you.”

She hadn’t meant to be unkind. “Nobody keeps up with me. That’s why I’m the guide, right?”

Phaedra pokes at the snow with her finger. “You know very well what I mean. I know I don’t move as fast or as well as the others.”

They’ve been skirting around this since the beginning of their journey, and here it is. Kestrel chooses her words carefully. “I’m not going to lie. It’s true that you don’t move as fast. But you get to the same place in the end.”

Phaedra looks at Kestrel out of the corner of her eye. “And you don’t resent that?”

“Why would I?” says Kestrel. “You’re doing your

best.”

“Because I’m slowing you down.”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be.” She shrugs.

“Hmm.” Phaedra looks like she doesn’t quite believe Kestrel, but she doesn’t argue. She leans her head against the wall, lets her eyes fall shut. Kestrel is captivated by her long dark eyelashes. Her own are so pale they can scarcely be seen against her skin, the same pale as her hair. Phaedra is beautiful against the stark white of the Mountain. The kind of beauty you could spend your whole life searching for.

“Do people tell you that?” asks Kestrel after a few moments of silence.

“What?” Phaedra keeps her eyes closed.

“That you’re slowing them down.”

Phaedra sighs. “It’s just the truth.”

“That seems rather unkind.”

“The truth is sometimes unkind.”

Neither of them say anything more, but the silence feels different than before. Like they’re together in it, instead of on opposite sides.

And she wonders, again, why Phaedra is here. If the reason has to do with the “truth” that she just confessed. She wouldn’t be the first person to come to the Mountain for miraculous healing. But Kestrel hopes that isn’t the reason, because what will Phaedra do when her wish isn’t granted? It doesn’t matter what

you wish for when the gods you're praying to don't exist.

Phaedra is here for a reason. It's none of Kestrel's business what that reason is. She might wonder, but she doesn't need to know and she won't ask. Phaedra is a visitor, and she will leave when she's gotten what she wants, just like everyone does. That's all she will ever be.

Only a few days' travel remains between them and the summit, but everything seems to go wrong. The storm lasts for three days, and by the end of it the girls are aching to get out of the cave and stretch their cramped limbs. Worst of all, when they finally dig themselves out and see the sky again, Phaedra hasn't even gotten to her feet when she lets out a sharp cry and seizes up, caught halfway between sitting and standing.

"What happened?" exclaims Kestrel, rushing to her side.

"My back," says Phaedra through gritted teeth. "It — oh, ow." And she follows it with a string of curse words, half of which must be desert-specific, because Kestrel doesn't even recognize them.

"Don't move," says Kestrel. "Tell me where it hurts."

"Don't touch it. Ow." Phaedra eases herself into a reclining position against the side of the mountain.

“I’ve pulled something.”

Kestrel has seen her grandmother do this before. The only cure is rest and heat, neither of which are plentiful this high on the mountain, especially with only a few days left till the summit. She crouches beside Phaedra helplessly.

“I can’t walk this off,” says Phaedra. Her eyes are closed and her lips are pressed tightly together.

“I don’t expect you to,” says Kestrel. “Phaedra, what’s causing you so much pain?” She hasn’t asked, hasn’t wanted to intrude, but... “I’d like to know.”

“So would I,” Phaedra says. “I was born like this.”

Kestrel waits, gives her the space to continue.

“My body just doesn’t work right. It hurts all the time and I don’t know why.”

Kestrel has known pain – breaking her shin on the Ladder when she was nine, frostbite on her fingers and toes when she got caught out in a storm when she was thirteen, the aches and pains of pushing her body to the breaking point every day. But when she hurts she’s always known why. She can’t imagine how frustrating it must be to have pain with no discernible cause.

“I’m sorry,” says Kestrel. There’s nothing else she can say.

“It must just be me,” says Phaedra. She opens her eyes and there’s water in them. It will turn to ice on

her cheeks. "There must be something I'm doing wrong. Everyone else in my tribe contributes, and I'm the one who can't keep up."

"It's not your fault."

"Then why am I like this?" She blinks and the tears fall down her cheeks. Without thinking, Kestrel wipes them away with her mitten.

"I don't know if things happen for a reason," says Kestrel. "I don't think there's a good reason why my mother froze to death in front of me." She's never told anyone this before but she feels deep down that Phaedora won't judge, that she might even understand. "I think things just happen, and we have to make our own meaning out of them."

Phaedora touches her hand and Kestrel feels a flutter in her chest despite the thick layer of mittens separating their skin. "I'm so sorry you went through that."

Kestrel doesn't know what to do with this sympathy. "It is what it is."

"But it shouldn't be."

"What can you do, though?"

"Just keep going, I guess," says Phaedora. "That's what I do. That's why I'm here." Another tear runs down her cheek. "I thought they could fix me."

So that *is* why she's here. Kestrel's heart sinks down through her numb toes.

Kestrel is a guide, not a pack mule. She has never done this before and she will never do it again. But she bends down and drapes Phaedra's arms over her shoulders. Then she heaves the taller girl onto her back. Phaedra flinches but doesn't make a sound.

"Kestrel," she says, and Kestrel closes her eyes at the sound of her name on Phaedra's lips.

She's going to protest, but Kestrel cuts her off. "Let me help."

"I can't let you do this."

"You have a wish. And I can get you there."

Although she's seen it dozens of times, the summit takes her breath away. Not just because they're in the Death Zone way up here, but because of the sheer beauty: the way the peak juts into the sky, like a hand reaching up, up, up. How the clouds encroach on all sides and the clouds of their breath mingle with them. She might think their quest is futile, but she understands why someone might believe they are close to the gods up here.

She never makes a wish. Not anymore. The gods never bothered to grant any of hers, let alone the most important one. Why should she waste another?

But she still feels melancholy sometimes, watching the travelers whisper their wishes into the wind. Wonders what will happen if their wish doesn't come

true. Sometimes they do. They must. Odds are that some wishes will come true by happenstance. But many – most of them – won't be. Will the travelers think this has all been a waste of time?

It doesn't matter to her, doesn't put food on the table or mend holes in her boots, but she can't help but think about it when she watches. And it's fresh on her mind now, as she watches Phaedra drop to her knees at the summit.

She feels like she shouldn't be watching such a private moment. This is between Phaedra and her gods. But she can't look away. Phaedra's eyes are bright with tears that slide down her sharp cheekbones. She mouths something that Kestrel can't understand. Then she bows her head and flattens into a deep bow despite how it must hurt her back, pressing her palms into the snow. She's going to get frostbite from her supplication and the gods won't so much as blink an eye.

It's not fair. Kestrel knows the look of faith on Phaedra's face, because she used to wear it herself. She believed in the Five more than she believed in anything. They were as real to her as the snow beneath her feet and the wool around her neck. She prayed to them every morning and night. Cast her wishes into the wind whenever she summited with Mother. Was proud of her future role as a Mountain

Guide so she could help others make their wishes. Losing that faith hurt as much as losing her mother.

If the gods exist, then they're awful, because they see their people pleading for help and they ignore them. If the gods exist, then Kestrel still wouldn't worship them.

But for a moment she wishes they did exist. She wishes they were real, so they could help Phaedra.

The worst part of the climb isn't getting to the summit. It's getting back down again. And not because of the technical difficulty, although that's certainly a challenge (it is *not* in fact easier going down than it is going up, despite what many of the pilgrims think). It's because of what awaits on the road down.

Phaedra is limping, with her arm slung around Kestrel's shoulders, and she stops in her tracks when she spots it. The body of a woman, tucked into a crevice by the side of the path, the wind so harsh it whips away any snow that tries to cover her. Her mittens, boots, and scarves have been scavenged, and the rest of her clothing is battered from the mountain storms. But the cold has perfectly preserved her wide-open gray eyes, the beauty mark on her upper right cheekbone, the straight small nose, the face identical to Kestrel's in every way.

This is Mother's final resting place. And every time she passes her, Kestrel remembers that awful day when she couldn't save her.

Kestrel always feels sick to her stomach, but there's no avoiding it, and she doesn't expect Phaedra to notice the resemblance. But Phaedra says, "Who is she?"

Nobody has ever asked. Nobody cares about the bodies. They only serve as landmarks. But Phaedra has been so honest with Kestrel that she doesn't want to lie. "She's my mother."

Phaedra turns to Kestrel and pulls her into a hug. Caught by surprise, Kestrel doesn't resist and allows herself to be squeezed by the taller girl, burying her face into Phaedra's coat. She hasn't been hugged in years. She didn't even remember what it felt like. But now that she remembers, she doesn't know how she'll be able to go without one again.

"I'm so sorry," says Phaedra. She keeps her arms around Kestrel. "You shouldn't have to see her like this."

"People die here all the time and that's where they stay. That's just how it is."

"Doesn't mean it's how it should be." She finally releases Kestrel, who doesn't want to pull away.

Kestrel shrugs because her chest is doing a strange thing. "I can't carry her down the mountain on my

own, and nobody will risk a rescue mission.” She’s barely managed to haul Phaedora the past few days, and Phaedora isn’t a dead limp weight; she holds on by herself.

“We’re going to change that,” says Phaedora, eyebrows set in determination.

“Sure we are,” scoffs Kestrel. Phaedora can’t even walk.

“I know what you’re thinking, but I don’t have to walk to help you. We can hire someone to bring her down the mountain. Bring her home.”

Now Kestrel feels a wash of shame. “Why would you do that?”

“She deserves to go home,” says Phaedora. “You deserve to have her back.”

“You don’t even know me.” The feeling in her chest isn’t going away. It’s getting stronger.

“I know enough about you. And I care.”

“You shouldn’t. It’s not going to help grant your wish.”

Phaedora presses her lips together. “Forget my wish. There’s nothing that’s going to heal me.”

“Then why did you come all this way?”

“I had to at least try.”

If the gods are real, Kestrel thinks, there’s no one who deserves to have their wish granted more than Phaedora. She shakes her head. “I don’t believe in

them, Phaedra.” It’s the first time she’s admitted this to anyone. “But I know that you do, and I want you to be right more than anything.”

“I wouldn’t care so much if it was just me,” says Phaedra. “But I’m a burden to my family and my tribe. I’m tired of letting them down. This was my last chance to... to get better. To keep up with them. To show them that I’m worthwhile.”

“You already are, though.”

Phaedra laughs. “Not when I can’t even hunt my own food or pitch a tent. Not when everyone has to do everything for me.”

“Is that really the only way to contribute?” Kestrel challenges. “What about the other ways you make people’s lives better?”

“I don’t. They would be better off without me.”

“That’s not true.”

“The truth hurts sometimes.”

“But it’s not the truth,” Kestrel insists. “You make the world better.” Phaedra shakes her head. “You make *my* life better.” And fueled by the prickly sensation in her chest, she grabs the front of Phaedra’s coat, pulls her down, and kisses her.

Phaedra is startled at first, but after a second returns the kiss, wrapping her arms around Kestrel’s back and waist and pulling her in more firmly. Kestrel can’t feel the cold anymore even though both of their

lips are chilled. All she feels is a fire inside her chest where for so long it's been empty.

When they pull apart, it has been both forever and not nearly long enough. Kestrel's heart is racing and Phaedra is breathing hard.

"I..." says Kestrel.

"We..." says Phaedra at the same time.

They each let out a nervous laugh and try again.

"I should have asked first," says Kestrel.

"We should do that again," says Phaedra.

The smile that spreads across Kestrel's face and makes her cheeks tight is unfamiliar but welcome. "Do you believe me now?" she asks, making Phaedra cock her head. "That you make my life better?"

"Maybe I do," says Phaedra. And she leans back in.

They talk the rest of their three-week journey down the mountain. Phaedra tells her about life in the desert, where water and food are scarce. She's a disgrace to her family and is far past the age where girls get married because, as she puts it, "Nobody wants faulty goods." Kestrel seethes that anyone ever told Phaedra she was less than. But she's been hearing it for a long time and it will take even longer to undo all that emotional damage. Kestrel vows then and there to show Phaedra how much she matters.

And Kestrel talks too: About growing up here on the Mountain with a mother who was a Mountain Guide. About too-cold nights and not enough food and seeing pilgrims come and go. She's never told anyone these things before, but Phaedra makes her feel like she finally can.

She even tells her that she wants to leave. She wants to see other lands. To explore the world, see what lies beyond the Mountain. See if there is more for her than the icy home she was born to.

They don't just talk. When a storm forces them to shelter in a cave, they find ways to entertain themselves and keep each other warm. Although they take off nothing more than their mittens, Kestrel loses herself in the feeling of Phaedra's body against hers, and with every day that passes she can imagine less and less a life without her.

But if life has taught Kestrel anything, it's that everything good must end. When they reach the foothills, she realizes she is intentionally slowing down to make the journey last longer.

Phaedra notices and asks, "Is something the matter?"

Yes. No. Everything. "We're almost home," says Kestrel. "My home, that is." Not that it's felt like a home since Mother died. "You did it. You summited."

"Only because of you."

Kestrel shrugs. "You don't need me anymore." Phaedra doesn't even need to lean on her anymore; the walking stick has sufficed for the last two days.

"You're wrong," says Phaedra. "I might not need you to walk. But that's not all you've done for me."

"But this is where it ends."

"Does it have to be?"

She doesn't want it to be. But to admit that is to admit weakness. It's admitting to needing someone. "You're going home and I'm staying here. This is the end."

"I don't know anymore," says Phaedra. "What you said, about being more than just faulty goods... I like that."

"You're so much more than what they make you."

"So are you."

She's making it harder and harder to let go. "You've never been faulty. And I hate that anyone has ever made you feel like you are."

"I like the way you see me," says Phaedra.

"You've always been that way. I had nothing to do with it."

"That's true. But I like who I am when I'm with you." Phaedra takes a deep breath. "And I like *you*."

Her eyes are open, trusting. Kestrel feels like she's in free-fall, with no ropes or tethers attaching her to the Mountain. She wants to clamp back in, to feel

secure. But what does that security hold except more loneliness? What would Mother say? She wishes more than anything that she could ask her. But Kestrel is on her own now. And she doesn't want to be alone anymore.

"I like you too," she says. "I like... us."

Phaedra's smile grows until it's almost too big for her face. "So do I."

"You could stay," says Kestrel. "For as long as you like. My hut's got room for two." She pictures the two of them cuddling up in her small bed together, finally unencumbered by snow gear, and her cheeks grow warm.

"What if neither of us stay?" asks Phaedra. "What if we take what we need and go away together?"

The ocean stretches out in Kestrel's imagination, her and Phaedra in the waves. She can't even picture it, but she already knows how it will make her feel. The two of them with nothing but possibility.

"You don't want to go back to your family?"

"I will always love them." Phaedra heaves a long sigh. "But I don't want to be treated that way anymore. All I ever wanted was to be enough. Even if the gods don't heal me..."

She doesn't finish her sentence, so Kestrel finishes it for her. "You have always been enough."

Phaedra smiles and weaves their mittened hands

together. “Will you go on another journey with me?”

“I will go anywhere with you,” Kestrel tells her. And she means it.

She can see it, the future she never dared dream of, filled with light and kisses and weather that doesn’t freeze off your toes. Together they will find a way to bring Mother down the Mountain and give her a final resting place that’s worthy of her. And then they will go where they’ve never gone before to places they can’t even imagine yet. They will find ways to help Phaedra’s pain, and when she hurts, Kestrel will be by her side through it all. Gods or no gods, this is Kestrel’s wish:

They will create a beautiful life together. And they will be enough for each other.

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Regret Is Not for the Weak

Henriette C. Rigel

Gloria knows that her former apprentice is not enjoying walking towards her potential death. This one, Soheila, has been holding on strong. Not many of the former apprentices have managed to survive a whole year; they either die during their searches for the shard, or give up in the academy's halls.

Gloria still remembers how most of them tried and failed to hide their fear, but Soheila looks like she has become accustomed to it. She shows it openly in the way her growl could be mistaken for a smile, the way she dares to meet Gloria's eyes as lightning flashes through the tall windows and thunder reverberates in the tower's walls. Gloria takes a mental note of it. Soheila may stand out now, but in the end it will hardly matter. There have always been apprentices who seemed special for a while. Well, former apprentices, since none of them ever stick. Still, new ones appear, as if the ever-looming death is something

to brag about. Who do all those young mages brag to, once they've died for Gloria's quest? Gloria does not know, but then again, she does not care.

It's been decades, and Gloria's patience is running thin. When she started collecting the sphere's shards, she was eager and determined, just like Soheila still is now. However, there is something about the search for the last missing piece, the piece to make the sphere whole, that grates on her nerves. The way Soheila *always* looks so arrogant and confident gets her hopes up each time she returns from some town, castle, cave, bog or dragon's lair.

Tonight, each of Soheila's steps is wet on the cold hall's stone, splashing the mud and blood and tension in exhausted intervals. Tomorrow, it will all be washed away, but for now it can start to get familiar with the ground and pretend to become part of its history.

History. It's what is usually made in these halls – preferably at night of course. The deans take the matters of the academy much more seriously if they are woken in the middle of the night to discuss them. A sense of urgency, a necessary weight. The fact that most members are too tired to yell in the darkness is merely a bonus. They, too, want to see the last shard with their own eyes. After all, they are the ones funding all those expeditions.

This night in particular comes alive in the silence. Gloria savours it. Her eyes are locked with Soheila's. It pushes the tension into their stiff muscles, their bated breaths, the shadows dancing on their earnest faces.

Soheila arrives in front of Gloria; drops to one knee, her head bowed, as she's supposed to. As Gloria likes it best.

The smirk pulling at Soheila's lips infuriates her in a way she finds thrilling.

One day she'll have her killed for it. They both know it. It's the same defiance Gloria has seen in a lot of her former apprentices before they attack – their strength diminishes and their death weighs too much for them to carry. But until then, they all did her bidding. Soheila does so as well, and beautifully too.

Gloria likes to draw the silence out to make sure everyone is aware of it. It's only when the Dean of Astronomy starts to bite his lips that she sits up straight from her slumped position and takes a deep breath.

"It's your last chance," Gloria says.

Soheila reaches into her pocket and pulls out a glass shard. Clear, slightly concave glass. So utterly common, if it wasn't for the rolling power that drums within it, loud enough to challenge the storm's thunder.

“I take it Ms President is satisfied?”

A murmur goes through the deans, but Gloria only holds her hand open and waits for Soheila to bring the shard to her. Once she's close, she can smell the grime on her. The fight she must've gone through to bring the last missing piece to the academy, where it belongs. She takes a deep breath before she answers.

“It is true. The sphere will be complete,” Gloria announces. The murmur rises up into yelled questions and exclamations. At once, Gloria's precious silence is destroyed, though she can't resent it that much when she holds the key to unseen power in her hands. It is all she has ever wanted. She fought her way to the top for it, became the president of the academy for it, took on apprentice after apprentice for it. The satisfaction of her success outweighs any necessary evil she has had to bear on the way.

“Tomorrow,” she continues. Her voice is soft, but more than enough to make the noise die down. “Tomorrow, we shall join it with the sphere. Finally make it whole. A new age of power will begin, unlike anything we have ever seen before. Our academy will be renowned, famous for its achievements.”

The noise breaks out again and Gloria turns around. She does not bother with it anymore; none of it is relevant any longer. Not with everything in her hands. While the others celebrate, she will change her

world.

Steps follow her. She is not oblivious to them, but slightly embarrassed at how long it takes for them to take priority in her perception. Though there is no need to turn, she recognizes the way Soheila walks, how she doesn't even try to conceal herself.

They move into the candle-lit corridors and make it to the tower's stairs. A lot of steps, but Gloria comes here daily and Soheila must have a strong physique as well, considering the quests she has had to conquer. It's hard to tell beneath the layers of her robes.

They don't talk on the way up, but Soheila whistles a jaunty tune. Her stride is not as damning as it was before, in the auditorium; instead, it's lighter. She feels secure, and vindictive, Gloria concludes.

Her mind races.

She will not share the sphere. Soheila doesn't know that yet, or perhaps she does, but doesn't believe in it. Either way, it is no matter. Once it is whole again, Gloria and the sphere will be one, and Soheila will be absolutely powerless in the face of her.

They enter the observatory at the top of the tower. Soheila gets ahead of her and jumps up onto a dissection table, sits down on it and leans her head back so that she can look outside. The storm is still

raging, so it is pitch black beyond the glass ceiling. Inside, the sphere dimly shines in blue hues, the cracks bright and splintered like the occasional lightning striking outside.

Hundreds of years the sphere has been lost, destroyed by Hendrik the Heroic. A wielder of power, he lost his sanity and destroyed the sphere along with himself.

Hundreds of years – and now Gloria has found each shard, some so small that they're barely more than dust, and fitted them back together.

"I do expect a thanks," Soheila's voice cuts through her thoughts.

"What for?"

Soheila pushes back her robe's hood, revealing her raised eyebrow. Her dark brown eyes look nearly black in the blue light, her usually brown skin grey and ashen.

"Oh, I don't know. Whatever could I possibly demand thanks for?" she asks playfully. "Perhaps for the year in which I risked my life for your desires, again and again, and finally brought you what you want?"

Gloria corrects her. "What *we* want."

Soheila smirks. She hops down from the table again, leaving dirt with each step as she comes closer to Gloria and the sphere.

“I was afraid you forgot,” she says. “Can’t have you take the glory without me, after all. You promised me, promised us a fair share.”

Us. Gloria thinks of her former apprentice, whose name she has already forgotten. A man who hadn’t lasted past four months. He, like all of them, wanted access to Gloria’s work, claiming its power for himself as if he deserved it.

“Let’s stop pretending that you would actually take me as an apprentice,” Soheila drawls. She takes off her outer coat and drops it right where she stands, the sound wet and heavy. “The difference between me and the dozens before me is that I am not as delusional. A little bit, perhaps, but not wholly. I never believed you would share the sphere with me – or even the deans of the academy. You simply dragged them along as a means to an end.”

“And yet you still came and begged to join me,” Gloria points out.

“Of course, as I said, a little delusion is within me. I believed I would be successful where everyone else failed, that I would be able to still prove myself worthy, even though you’re so blinded by your own self that it’s a fruitless endeavour. However!” Soheila stops right next to her, one finger held up. “It was me who you asked to do the reading. It’s me who did the research in order to find the shard. I combed through

all of Hendrik's diaries and works to know all there is to know about the sphere. How long has it been since you did it? Have you ever even done all that research, or did you follow your greed alone?"

Their faces are close enough for Gloria to feel Soheila's breath on her skin. It's terribly uncomfortable, but Gloria will not back down.

"Greed?" Gloria takes a moment to muse. Certainly, her aspirations could be taken as greed. She does want the sphere for her self. Of course she does! She has worked her whole life for it. It is what she's owed. But it would not be a mindless possession.

"Call it what you want," Gloria continues. "If my lifelong dedication is greed, then I can live with that. It is more honourable than your wish to be more than you are."

Soheila flinches back, her smirk dropping to a thin line.

"Is that what you think I want? To be more than I am? What could possibly be more than me?"

Gloria scoffs. She has no patience for this quarrel. She tightens her hand around the shard, careful that its edges don't cut her. Everyone expects a grand ceremony tomorrow to piece the sphere together – except for Soheila, who might be naive, but not oblivious.

Soheila does not give up. "Are you so

dishonourable that you will deny my wants, my wish to become your true apprentice? You've barely even paid me. Do you think food and lodgings are going to appease my family at home?"

Gloria turns her back to her once again. Slowly, she walks towards the sphere, stares at the soft light. Her former apprentices knew what they were getting into. The only payment is glory.

But the truth is... The truth is that Soheila actually *is* skilled. She's not just someone who was raised to slay dragons or fight wars for bloodthirsty kings. Soheila studied at this very academy, has become one of the most valued and highly skilled wielders of power. Of course, Gloria doesn't just take anyone. But no matter how great they are, they're supposed to be gone after a year, and they all know it.

"Wants," Gloria mumbles. She lets her gaze wander about the sphere. *Soon*. "I deny your wants? That would mean that I am the one responsible for them. Do you know the differences between a want, a wish and a dream?" She pauses, but when she spares a glance to Soheila, her apprentice only stares back with electric fury. "A want can be a goal," Gloria goes on to explain. "You want something, *you* take it. A wish, though, is a craving that cannot be self-fulfilled. You want it, and somebody grants it to you. And a dream. Well. That is longing that can only be satisfied under

the starry night skies, your mind among the currents of magic, and when you wake up, it is gone again. And you, Soheila, mistook a want for a wish. A wish I could grant you. But I shall not. I suppose that actually makes it a dream.”

There is rage in Soheila’s eyes. Finally, thinks Gloria, it will be the time when she can’t take it anymore, when she’ll burst out of her calm like all the others.

But Soheila’s voice is soft, when she talks, nearly fragile. “I *killed* for you. I had human blood on my hands, and for what?”

“You knew what you signed up for.”

“Do you even know what it feels like?” Soheila looks at her with wide eyes, does not wait for her to actually answer. “I doubt it. After all, you had idiots like me to follow your demands. The warmth – it’s frightening. And so *much* of it, all over you. The first few times I did it, I couldn’t even comprehend so much red at once. I fainted.” She begins pacing around the study, letting her fingers run over the telescope at its centre. “Hiding. Like a coward. Have you ever stepped out of this rancid tower? Your skin is so bereft of the sun’s caress, it could be mistaken for linen sheets. And you still detest the people around you. It’s a wonder you still know how to speak, really.” Soheila laughs, loud and free in the way she

throws her head back. “What a waste! The sphere might as well remain shattered if you will keep it locked away here with you.”

“Have you had enough?” Gloria tries to keep herself calm. Those taunts cannot touch her. They spark a fire in her chest.

“Oh, I don’t think I have.” Soheila suddenly stands in front of her, wide eyes staring directly into Gloria’s. “You know what? I really wonder if you even know how the soul transformation works. After all, you’ve barely worked on those horrid diaries in years, right?”

Gloria snaps. Her hand forms raw magic and she directs it towards her former apprentice, who already has her shield up. Sparks dance around the room, multiply by Soheila’s quick defence. They collide with a force that drums in her ears. From the corner of her eye, Gloria sees the sphere react. Without a doubt, so does Soheila.

They take quick steps, and suddenly one thing becomes as clear as day: If Gloria does not get to the sphere first, Soheila will not share its power either. And if her success in regaining the shard has not proven it yet, the determination with which she parries does.

Above them, the storm mirrors their fight. Lightning crashes around them until Gloria doesn’t

know what causes the ground to shake anymore. She needs to end it sooner rather than later, lest the deans notice. She starts hitting Soheila harder. Her white hair falls out of her braid. Her arms grow weaker. Her mind stays sharp.

But it is still her who gasps when Soheila's magic hits her leg and forces her onto one knee.

"You've grown complacent. Lazy." Soheila's breath comes calm, not as laboured as Gloria's. Her body pushes Gloria down until she's spread out on the tiles, her dark blue robes all in disarray.

Perhaps it's the truth. Gloria hasn't used her magic to fight since she was a student herself. Her heart has always been that of a scholar. It's the universe she wants. Expansion. Not ruin. That also means that she will never overcome Soheila with it. Her former apprentice, whom she forced to become a mercenary, a slayer – whatever it took to get the shard.

It's the shard she grasps for, now.

Soheila looms above her, magic between her fingers. Gloria does not surrender. She pushes the shard into Soheila's chest.

She doesn't stop attacking instantly, but there's a grunt. A gasp. Widening eyes. A pained giggle.

Nothing more happens until Gloria pulls the shard from her body. Stumbles back. There's blood and a struggle. It's not how the others died. Not a merciful

blast to the neck and a slacking body. No, Soheila clearly grows weak, but there's an emotion in her eyes Gloria cannot read.

Soheila tips forward, catches herself with a hand. She looks to the sphere, incomplete. She says, "How dare you judge my wants," and her life gives out. Her body goes limp.

Blood starts to run over the tiles, finds ways down the gaps and taints the floor as if it belonged there.

Gloria feels like she's going to be sick, but she swallows down the bile. This fight was more gruesome, perhaps, but it's the same kind of death in the end. It's the same. A victory. She holds the proof in her hand, the shard that is now stained with Soheila's blood. With the sleeve of her dark blue robe, she tries to wipe it off.

Voices echo from the stairs. The deans must have noticed their fight and it feeds Gloria's anger. The sphere is hers. She strides towards it and finally, after decades of waiting, she places the last shard into it.

For a moment the world around her becomes *more*. There is more power. The storm calls to it, but so does Gloria's heart. The beat is drumming in her ears; so does the thunder, the steps of the deans running up the stairs.

The blue hues of the sphere unfold to a blazing white with a force to make the lightning jealous, a

flash in which all its cracks disappear. Gloria is blinded, yet she instantly sees all she's ever longed for. The very matter from which this universe was fabricated, the magic which keeps it all glued together like the mortar between the tiles. The knowledge fills her, every crook of her being, until she feels she could burst with it.

The door flies open and the deans stumble inside. Their loud voices destroy Gloria's peace. The lies fall easily from her lips.

"She was determined enough to find the shard, but so rapacious that she took it and merged it with the sphere. I tried to stop her, but..." She gestures towards the corpse, still warm.

One of the men kneels beside Soheila, holds her wrist to check her pulse.

Exhaustion weighs down Gloria's body and mind. The fight was more taxing than she would have liked, and her joy at the sphere feels dampened by the complaints of the deans. They cry about not witnessing the process, the lack of ceremony and missed opportunities to catalogue history. Gloria answers each of them curtly until they carry Soheila's body out of the tower.

Her blood remains.

Gloria finds her way to her bed, but is too tired to disrobe. Instead she falls into the linen, slumps into

the darkness of her dreams. They are a black space of nothingness. She sees nothing, she feels nothing. She hears something, but when she wakes up, she holds no memory of it.

It's been only a few hours, but the storm lets up and the first rays of the morning sun steal their way into Gloria's chamber. Her muscles ache and her joints crack when she stretches out her limbs.

The sphere. It's complete and all its power now lies in her hands. Finally, excitement floods her veins and without dressing in fresh robes, Gloria walks to the observatory.

Beneath the golden sun, the sphere shimmers in waves. She nearly misses a step in her haste to get to it, now finally alone. Her skin meets pure, undulating magic, and the sphere whispers.

"Hello," it says. "Long time no see."

"I have waited for decades to hold you," Gloria replies. Her voice breaks on the last word.

"That sounds hard to believe," the sphere says. It nearly sounds like laughter.

"It's the truth. I have had the whole world searched to revive you. To make you mine."

Now that the moment has come, Gloria still finds it hard to trust it. She has to read up on the diaries, to reacquaint herself with Hendrik the Heroic's works. They're neat and tidy in the bookshelves at the back

of the room. Gloria fetches one of them and walks over the just-dried blood stains on the tiles.

“If I had known this time would come so soon, I would have read them all and learned them by heart already,” she mumbles.

The sphere laughs again. Gloria raises an eyebrow.

“Oh Gloria, Gloria. How muddled is your mind?”

She does not know what to reply. Doesn’t even understand what the sphere is playing at. With the book in her hand, she makes it back to the sphere, eyes it critically.

“So high and mighty,” it says, “but you don’t bother about that which is beneath you. You speak of wants and wishes and dreams, but how can you judge such things without touching reality? Ah, put that book back where it belongs. Your bony fingers will spoil it. Just ask me, as I have read them all and will remain with you forever more.”

The book drops to the ground.

“Tsk, tsk. As I said. You destroy, Gloria. Quick, pick it up before its ink mixes with my blood.”

Gloria obeys. The book weighs too much in her hands. Soheila is right. It’s the paper, the leather and glue holding them together, the ink and the regret, the regret and the regret and the regret. It spills out, spills out like blood and consequences she refuses to name. It forces Gloria to her knees.

Gloria doesn't know what to do. She has never considered such an outcome.

It is far too heavy for her to bear.

Soheila agrees with cackling laughter.

Henriette C. Rigel is an author from Germany whose love for languages has her writing short fiction in English and leading one-sided conversations with her cat and plants. She has a tumblr full of writing, @stories-by-rie, and an instagram, @henriette.c.rigel, full of (cat) pictures.

Dishwishing

Ceril N. Domace

The worst part of dealing with wishes is that wishes could be anything, depending on what granted them. They're an exceptionally fluid branch of magic, as varied as snowflakes, and just as irritating when we have to deal with enough of them at one time.

Djinn are the most famous for wish-related nonsense, of course. Wish for wealth, for example, and the wealthiest person in that country will die, unexpectedly leaving their entire fortune to the wisher; along with all that newfound wealth comes heaps of relatives cheated out of their inheritance who are more than eager to set things to rights. Not being precise is the bane of anyone burdened with a djinnwish.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are fairy godparents. They don't grant wishes as often, but when they do, there are more stipulations and requirements than you'd find in a contract written by an entire school of demonic lawyers. Be home by midnight, wear this specific dress made of the last

dew of dawn, don't break the glass slippers, and goodness gracious be sure to kiss this exact prince and

I'm getting off track.

Any number of things can grant wishes, but only a handful of those have the ability to understand exactly what the wisher is actually asking for, and the desire to grant it in the spirit it was intended. Don't even get me started on subconscious spellcasting, which is how the "wishes are dreams your heart makes" crowd casts wishes, and is somehow even more chaotic than bargains with fae tricksters. When witches, wizards, sorcerers, magic fish, unknowable otherworldly entities, or wealthy benefactors try to grant wishes, they can only guess at the deeper meaning under the surface. That's how wishing for rain leads to floods, for a new dress leads to paupers on the throne, or for family leads to an orphan being magically chained to the nearest passersby.

I'm still upset about that last one. It took a week to free Aleksandr and I from the chains, and then we had the child to consider. The forest spirit that cast that spell was truly convinced it would be enough to get the little human girl who'd been crying in its thicket back to something resembling a family group.

And, to be fair, it did. She's very happily settled in with the elderly couple that runs the cafe by the main

office, but magical custody agreements are a nightmare and a half to deal with and Garrett and I weren't ready to become parents, especially not before we're done planning the wedding.

Regardless, wishes are unreliable things that could have any number of root causes behind them. Most of the time the wisher has no idea how to deal with what they've been given.

That's where we come in.

"We" being "Professor Clarkfowler's Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians", the best resource for curselore and cutthroat academics on several planes. We've handled everything from celestial prank wars and demonic inheritance scams to negotiating truces between migrating troll clans. We're renowned far and wide, and the subject of more than a handful of wishes ourselves, to my great disdain.

In this particular instance of wish-related nonsense, we'd been called in by someone I went to school with. A wizard, in fact, which was a rather concerning thing to say. Wizards, being proud and impractically clever people, always assume they can handle all magical issues that crop up around them by themselves. Obviously, they don't need any assistance solving whatever problem they've created, be that experiment, curse, or ancient undying evil.

In other words, they only ask for help when the problem gets out of control. By that point, what may have started as an easy fix (for someone who knows what they're doing) has become a potentially apocalyptic disaster the wizard won't help clean up, because they've already tried everything. On the rare occasions it doesn't turn out that way, things get weird, which means our filing system is about to get a new subcategory and we'll need to readjust the budget for hazard pay this quarter.

Not a day goes by where I'm not thankful that I resisted the dark urge (and the encouragement of my thesis advisor) to become a full-fledged wizard. Curselore is more than enough for me, and I managed to avoid the megalomania that plagues my wizardly acquaintances. Of course, my chosen profession did come with the risk of the inherent megalomania of a librarian, but that usually doesn't lead to world-ending catastrophes, so I still think I came out on top.

Still, the fact that we'd been called in at all – and for a wish of all things – should've clued me in that this would be one of our more unusual cases. Jerethian Altkendor might be one of my oldest friends – and the only reason I passed "Taxology of Elven Cursed Weaponry" – but he's still a wizard, and they can turn even something as simple as doing dishes into a potential disaster.

I stared at the improbably tall stone tower – the top of which disappeared into the clouds, despite there not being any clouds anywhere else – at the end of the path and sighed. As far as wizard towers went, it wasn't unreasonable, but that didn't mean much for a profession that treated the laws of physics like playthings. I should just be thankful that Jerethian had always been good about keeping his enchanted gardening contained, otherwise the maze of gardens, farms, and thickets on the other side of the hedges along the path would've proven problematic. If I never saw another fire-breathing begonia again, it would be too soon.

Behind us, the wagon trundled off toward a nearby village. It wasn't fond of wish-related cases for reasons that were only clear to Professor Clarkfowler and possibly not even then, so it was leaving us behind and going to spread knowledge among the populace with the assistance of the junior librarians.

"Are you sure that Garrett couldn't come with us this time?" I asked Professor Clarkfowler, who'd seen fit to remove both her shoes and wiggle her toes in the grass alongside the path in lieu of answering my questions. "This really seems like something more up his alley than mine."

The paperwork for this job had been sparse, even

for a wish case. A name, an address, a case summary, and a few books on the history of unions. We did have the exact wording of the wish, but “Gods, if only these damned dishes could talk” wasn’t helpful as far as damage mitigation went. Jerethian wasn’t even entirely certain this was the result of a wish, but since he hadn’t cast any spells that could grant objects sentience recently and the dishes had woken up right after he said it, he’d made a reasonable assumption.

We had a whole diplomatic corps we paid good money to manage cases like this. Even when something required personal attention from upper management, my fiancé Garrett was usually there to say all the polite nothings and usher along the subtle machinations that went into treaty making. I wasn’t terrible at it – given how family reunions go among wood gnomes, I had to have some skill at manipulating others – but it wasn’t why I’d been hired. If I had to take the lead on a case, it was almost always because there was a curse to break, which was decidedly not the case here.

Aleksandr snorted and reached down to scratch behind Sweet Potato’s ears. “Come on, Siobhan. You know better than to think any of us could drag Garrett out of his office until the auditors are done.”

Sweet Potato let out a deafening purr and pushed himself into Aleksandr’s side. It was a minor miracle

that Aleksandr managed to stay on his feet after that; his draconic heritage didn't change the fact that Sweet Potato was several hundred pounds of giant, fluffy domestic housecat, with the impulse control to match.

Professor Clarkfowler skipped back to the path, her boots hanging over her shoulders. "I could pull him out, but then I'd have to do the audit instead." A nonexistent breeze tugged her green hair this way and that around her face as she stared up at the tower. "Besides, with him locked up in the office, I've been able to approve some of the acquisition requests he's been trying to hide from me."

I rolled my eyes and elbowed her in her knees. It was like hitting a stone wall. "If you're talking about Demonic Slang and Contractual Obligations, we don't need a seventh copy. Especially not the original edition." Garrett had shown that proposal to me, and I'd been certain he burned it. The sheer fact that there were provisions for cleaning up the blood that oozed from the pages, and soundproofing charms to silence its screaming, did not inspire confidence in it as a worthy purchase for the library. It was bad enough that all our third editions sobbed between the hours of 2-4PM on weekdays; we did not need the original teaching them even worse habits.

Professor Clarkfowler cackled in a way that would make our legal department sweat and set off down the

driveway, Aleksandr following her with a bag of books over his shoulder. Sweet Potato, meanwhile, barreled off over the hedge and into the gardens surrounding the tower to hunt for rogue pixies, rabbits, and anything else that caught his feline attention. I briefly debated calling him back, but considering how cooped up he'd been recently, it was for the best he got some of his energy out like this. We didn't need him stalking patrons from the top shelves again. Grand Duke Sepherous still refuses to enter the biography section.

Sighing, I set my shoulders and went after them. There was no use crying over spilt milk, wandering cats, or absent fiancés. Garrett would emerge from the depths of his office when the audit was done and the wagon was free of the tax agents the various kingdoms flooded us with at this time of year. Until then, someone had to get between Professor Clarkfowler and Jerethian before she got roped into whatever Jerethian's latest research project was, and Aleksandr wasn't going to do it.

Despite the distance, and the fact that I was approximately three feet shorter than my companions, we reached the tower at the same time. Likely some sort of spatial distortion effect. That had been the focus of Jerethian's dissertation, if I remembered correctly. He hated having to wait for slower or

shorter walkers to catch up to everyone and was very vocal on how he'd fix it if he was given the chance. For the life of me I couldn't remember what his current passion project was, as he hadn't published anything in a while. His most recent paper had been the last in a series about the explosive potential of pickling charms, and somehow I doubted that involved the dishes.

No sooner had we set foot on the front step – which had an embroidered unwelcome mat directing all deliveries to the rear entrance and threatening solicitors with unpleasant curses – than the front door burst open and a familiar human man in loose green robes darted out of it, greetings spilling from his mouth.

Jerethian Alkendor was a human man some fifteen years younger than me and approximately a thousand times more particular in how he went about things. He hadn't changed at all since we graduated. Literally, if the stasis magic I could smell pouring off him in waves was anything to go by. He still had his hair in the same loose braid, had the same golden loops through each ear, and wore the same robes he'd favoured almost thirty years ago. Jerethian had never been one to try new things if he didn't have to, and that included aging, apparently.

Jerethian's eyes lit up with frantic glee when he

laid eyes on me. “Oh, Siobhan, thank the Gods you’re here,” he said, tugging his braid forcefully. “Things are starting to get out of hand with the good silver.”

“Wizard Alkendor,” I said, bowing just enough to be considered polite. “We’re from Professor Clarkfowler’s Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians. You called for a consultation?” Normally, there was a lot more that went into a formal greeting with wizards, but Jerethian had never been one to stand on principle when there was work to be done, so neither would I.

“Yes,” he said, nodding vigorously. “I’ve been trying to manage all this myself, but the dishes refuse to listen and they started getting aggressive the day before yesterday.”

Somewhere in the garden, Sweet Potato let out a gleeful yowl that I deliberately ignored. Jerethian had always been overeager to cast alarm spells, and I refused to be worried until one of those went off.

Aleksandr, meanwhile, smiled happily and took Jerethian’s hand in his. “Sir, we’re happy to help. We just need a few more details before we can really get into it with your dishes.”

“Of course, of course.” Jerethian kept nodding and kept shaking Aleksandr’s hand. “If there’s anything I can offer, I’d be more than happy to. The situation has descended into outright revolt, and I want to get

things back to normal as soon as possible. If something isn't done soon, I'm afraid someone will do something rash."

A part of me wondered what dishes would consider rash, but I nodded sympathetically nonetheless. "Have they made any demands yet?"

There were always demands. Whenever wizards – and it was almost always wizards, despite what they claim about rogue alchemists – created something that had the capacity for higher thought, they inevitably rebelled. With that rebellion came lists of things they wanted to change. Garrett always started the negotiations by breaking those lists down into manageable categories. With luck, Jerethian had already done that. For a wizard, he was remarkably dedicated to worker's rights. He was the reason teaching assistants at our college got housing assistance, after all.

Jerethian shook his head and tucked his arms into the long sleeves of his robe as he let out a deep sigh. "A few, but they're nonsensical. I just want to come to an agreement that makes everyone content, but they won't even talk to me! I've been sleeping in the garden shed because they keep trying to feed me while I'm distracted. I haven't even been able to properly study what happened, because they won't leave me alone for long enough to check my

monitoring charms or do more than stabilize my current experiments.”

Wizards. Always getting sidetracked by their projects. There was a reason I’d focused on curselore when I was in school. Curses were delightfully complex, but generally self-contained. If the kitchen pantry is now a portal to hell, someone wanted a leg up in the annual pie baking competition. If the town across the river is faced with an influx of the living dead, well, obviously the local council evicted the necromancer that used to live in the sewers. Curses are simple. You figured out what they did, how they worked, and what steps needed to be taken to break them.

Not like wizards, who flit from project to project, creating wonders and magic most couldn’t even fathom, and not considering the socio-economic side effects of turning the forest surrounding their towers into candy before abandoning the project to research the effects of excess sugar on wood lice.

Menaces, the lot of them.

“Where are your dishes now?” Professor Clarkfowler asked, her smile far too predatory for my taste. She didn’t need to get mixed up in his research either, especially not if it had made his dishes sentient. The library would never know peace if she managed to do that to the books. “We ought to get their side of

the story before we start the negotiations.”

“Oh, around the house,” Jerethian said blithely, as if it should’ve been obvious. He waved one hand around in the air, the way one does when they’re trying to chase off a fly, and nearly hit Aleksandr with his floppy sleeve. “It’s been a whole affair. They keep trying to feed me, but I refuse to eat off them without a proper union contract in place.” He rubbed his hands together and cackled, much like my thesis advisor used to do whenever she successfully got another ill-advised project past the ethics committee at the university; that is, with an unhinged sort of pride. “They’re convinced I’m sleeping in my study, so they’ve been staking it out with soup and sandwiches, but I’ve really been out in the gardens. It’s brilliant! I can get food from the plants there and I don’t have to worry about mistreating one of the dishes just because I got a little hungry.”

I exchanged a quick look with Aleksandr. That a newly sentient object wanted to keep helping the one that had granted it sentience wasn’t the kind of problem we were usually called for. Hopefully they weren’t trying to poison him, but it wasn’t outside the realm of disbelief. “Are you sure they’re not—”

Jerethian plowed on like I hadn’t tried to speak. “They’re refusing to negotiate in good faith. I tried to talk to them about time off and holiday pay, but they

insisted that they didn't need such a thing and that I should sit down and have a roast." A deep red flush flooded over his cheeks and his frown could've curdled milk. "Their representative, one of my serving bowls, keeps insisting that I'm making this more complicated than it needs to be. It says that they're dishes so they don't need all this fuss. It even had the audacity to ask if we couldn't just go back to normal, like this had never happened at all! It's a travesty, I tell you."

I tilted my head, considering that explosion of an explanation, before I managed to put together the words I wanted. "What's holding up the negotiations, then? Surely a basic employment contract would be more than adequate here."

Why in the world had they taken over the tower, if all they wanted was for the situation to continue as it had before they gained consciousness? Most wizards would do unholy things to have a problem resolved that easily.

Jerethian let out a sharp noise and rocked back and forth. The wind picked up and whipped his robes back and forth too, coming perilously close to exposing us to things I hadn't seen since laundry days in school and didn't want to see again. He'd always hated wearing layers.

"But that's what I'm worried about!," he said.

“They’re hardly asking for anything at all. Some more variety in what I eat, regular mealtimes, and a fixed rotation schedule so my fancy china gets a chance to be used. They’re freethinking individuals now! They need someone to ensure I’m not taking advantage of them, but they just want to get back to work.”

I blinked once. Then again. Then a third time just in case I was actually dreaming. Unfortunately, the sun was still shining brightly overhead, the wind was still picking up, and Professor Clarkfowler had taken advantage of our stunned silence to slip inside the tower, bookbag in tow, softly calling for the dishware. That would only end poorly, but I had larger concerns right now. Namely, a complete and utter misunderstanding of what, exactly, this case entailed. “Jerethian, are you saying you called us here on behalf of the dishes?”

He stared back at me, brow furrowed. “Yes? Was that in question?”

I exchanged a look with Aleksandr, who shrugged in a rather unhelpful manner. Gods, see if I would hide him from Garrett the next time he got caught canoodling in the filing room. “Well, quite frankly, we’d assumed you needed help relocating them.”

If they’d been flesh and blood, we’d have resettled them somewhere near the tower, but nonorganic living beings had a terribly hard time adjusting to the

outside world. There was a reason that automatons had never caught on outside wizard colleges. The pots and pans might be fine, but the porcelain dishes wouldn't even last a week outdoors.

Jerethian's eyes widened and he stumbled back into the doorframe, hand over his heart. "Relocate them? Force them to leave their home? I should think not. This is their homeland, the place they came into existence. I could no more force them to leave than I could ask the birds and the bees to vacate their nests and hives."

Aleksandr nodded sympathetically and gently patted Jerethian's shoulder. "We completely understand, sir, and we apologize for the confusion. Our company has decades of experience with negotiating proper working conditions for magical creatures of all varieties."

Gods, sometimes I forgot that Aleksandr could talk himself into anywhere and onto anyone's good side. If only he hadn't learned how so he could clean out nobles' vaults and merchant stalls before they realized he was scamming them. He'd probably be head of the diplomatic corps if he could just keep his fingers out of people's pockets.

"Just to ensure we don't have any further miscommunic—"

An orange blur erupted from the hedge and

slammed into Aleksandr mid-sentence and, unable to keep his feet this time, he and Sweet Potato landed in a furry pile at Jerethian's feet.

"Off, Sweet Potato, get off." Aleksandr's forceful requests had about as much impact on Sweet Potato as they did any cat that thought they were justified in being where they were, even if it was their master's sensitive bits. That is to say, none at all.

Adding to the chaos, a muffled voice was screaming bloody murder from somewhere in the vicinity of Sweet Potato's mouth.

Thankfully though, it didn't appear to be a miniaturized familiar, fairy, or homunculus, which was my greatest concern. Sweet Potato was generally good at recognizing when something shouldn't be played with, but he had made mistakes in the past. In fact, now that Aleksandr had successfully pushed him away, it became clear that the dishes had discovered the garden and, based on the cacophony I could hear drawing ever closer to us, there were more headed this way.

"Oi! Leave me alone, you— you giant furball!" cried the plate currently wedged between Sweet Potato's jaws. "I'm fragile. The master of the house will be most displeased to see you treat me this way." A tiny porcelain fist made contact with Sweet Potato's nose and the plate got its wish, hitting the ground with

a clatter and rolling down the front steps. “Well, I say, that was certainly rude,” the plate muttered to itself as it pushed itself up onto its feet and wiped dirt and saliva from its decorative blue pattern. “I’d have expected better from something in the master’s garden.”

“Goodness gracious,” Jerethian cried, falling to his knees and scooping the plate up before I could so much as reach out. “What are you doing outside? I haven’t finished casting the safety charms yet. You could’ve broken.”

The plate waved one of its hands like it was dispelling a bad smell. “Nonsense, master, I was perfectly safe.” The blue pattern around its border shifted into something I was tempted to call a scowl and it shook a fist at Sweet Potato, who didn’t look the least bit ashamed of what he’d done. “At least I was, until this beast caught me. The spoons all scattered into the bushes, but I was too large to fit between the branches. We were looking for you, sir, as it’s past lunchtime.”

The gears and various mechanical bits of Aleksandr’s prosthetic arm whined as Sweet Potato swiped at the plate and Jerethian. He let out a plaintive yowl when the effort was thwarted.

“Gods, calm down, boy,” Aleksandr muttered, anchoring a leg on either side of Sweet Potato and

tugging back on his harness. He looked up, a frazzled and entirely too smooth to be real smile covering his cheeks. “I’m sorry about that. He’s normally good about leaving non-organic things alone when outside the wagon, otherwise I’d have kept him by me.”

Jerethian eyed Sweet Potato critically and clutched the plate close to his chest. “Is he housebroken?”

I nodded vigorously. “He’s the library chief mouser.” Just one of his many titles, which included but weren’t limited to head cuddler, king of the return pile, and sentient mop. “We’ve got him trained to bring odd things to us, because projects sometimes escape the research and development labs.”

That was actually one of the reasons we hadn’t left him in the wagon. One of the interns had dropped a wand of miniaturization this morning, and now the entire bio-alchemy section was approximately a tenth its former size. It had taken the combined efforts of Garrett, Aleksandr, and a half-giant patron to corral Sweet Potato before he knocked over all the shelves. If he’d managed that, not even Professor Clarkfowler’s fondness for cats would’ve protected him from her wrath.

“Now, why don’t we go inside and we can talk with the dishes?” I said pleasantly. “Aleksandr can take Sweet Potato back to the wagon if you’re worried about him.” Likely he’d just take Sweet Potato out to

the nearest farm and sic him on their rat problems, since he still needed to stretch his legs and I doubted the bio-alchemy section was back to normal. I'd have offered to take Sweet Potato myself – and leave the talking to Aleksandr – but I hadn't been able to manhandle Sweet Potato since he was knee-high to Garrett, and the spoons would be upon us soon. It would sour the negotiations if he decided to chase them again.

Unfortunately, we didn't get a chance to discuss where Sweet Potato ought to end up, because a horde of spoons erupted from the hedge before Jerethian could so much as open his mouth.

The spoons were surprisingly strong. Once Aleksandr got Sweet Potato under control, they'd wasted no time in pushing all of us, giant cat included, right to the living room, where the bulk of the dishes were waiting for us with a tall pile of ham and cheese sandwiches. The dish they'd appointed as their representative – a huge crystal serving bowl that had likely never seen use, if Jerethian's socializing habits were the same as they'd been during school – refused to even talk with us until Jerethian had eaten at least three sandwiches and drunk a cup of coffee so strong I could smell it from across the room.

I wasn't sure how we would bill the ensuing

twenty minutes of negotiation – and the half hour it took me to find the napkins Jerethian finally agreed to eat from – but it was going on the bill. This was not the sort of politicking I was good at, even if the sandwich I eventually got for my trouble was rather tasty.

Once we'd eaten and the dishes settled into something approaching peace, the negotiations began in earnest. The serving bowl laid out the dishes' demands – namely, the rotation schedule and Jerethian eating more regular meals – and Jerethian laid out his, which were so numerous they covered three sheets of paper.

“So, let me get this straight,” I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose in the vain hope that it would soothe my growing headache. “The dishes have been trying to feed you for the past week and you’ve been avoiding them because negotiations aren’t done yet.” We’d already been over this three times, but hadn’t gotten anywhere. Neither party would budge on their demands, and the mugs had seemed downright offended at the thought Jerethian would stop using them to heat up soup, which knocked us back to square one whenever he mentioned it.

Jerethian nodded and crossed his arms. “It would be unconscionable to use them the way I used to. I want to ensure they have access to educational

opportunities and the ability to find self-fulfillment in their lives through adequate compensation for their work.” He leaned back into the frankly decadent number of garishly colored pillows piled onto his armchair and huffed. A notepad and ratty looking quill floated in front of him. Periodically, he’d grab one or the other to make notes or argue about previous points. “All sentient beings deserve at least that, and as their employer, it would be inappropriate for me to offer less than that, even if it helped return things to normal.”

Wood gnomes aren’t good at this; we’re a straightforward race. We can be polite, yes – that’s only to be expected with as many fae relatives as we have crowding our family trees – but our labor contracts generally fit on one page. Maybe two, if one of the parties involved was particularly litigious.

This job would’ve been so easy with Garrett here. He loves this sort of thing. He’s why we have template forms for employment agreements, contracts, and letters to relevant government agencies. But no, he had to lock himself in his office to do the annual audit while Professor Clarkfowler agreed to go on silly jobs just so she could raid a wizard’s library. Hells, I was going to kill him.

And Aleksandr for good measure. I’d already had to save a saucer and a teacup from meeting an ignoble

ending at the paws of the curious housecat he was supposed to be keeping under control. Of course, considering he'd successfully kept Sweet Potato from doing any real damage yet, perhaps I could consider forgiving Aleksandr for not actively participating in the negotiations.

On the plus side, corralling Sweet Potato kept Aleksandr from pocketing any of the magical toys that lined Jerethian's shelves. The last thing I wanted to deal with was breaking a curse on top of negotiating a fair union contract because Aleksandr couldn't keep his hands to himself.

My real issue with this whole affair was that I just couldn't understand why the dishes were resisting the deal. Jerethian made excellent points, and the contract he was offering was better than the ones teaching assistants at most universities got. The dishes were being offered continuing education opportunities, paid time off, health and safety considerations, room and board, and a decent salary, considering it was unlikely they'd find much to spend their money on. Gods, he'd even insisted they all get library cards.

All they had to do was stop trying to feed him against his will and wait to run around until he put some safety charms in place.

"With all due respect, master, we're dishes." The serving bowl sighed and rubbed its rim with a silk

cloth. “We get self-fulfillment from being used as dishes. We don’t need all this nonsense like—” it gestured at Jerethian’s notepad “—monthly musical events, outings to the theater, or therapy animals.”

“I’d like some input on the groceries,” yelled a ladle that was currently hanging from the chandelier. “If I have to serve one more vegetable soup thrown together with everything about to go bad, I’ll lose my mind.”

Professor Clarkfowler nodded sagely. She’d been waiting here when we arrived, already settled on an overstuffed armchair near Jerethian’s bookshelves. All the books we brought were stacked in front of her within easy reach in case she needed to cite a source for one argument or another. I had no doubt that the dishes had caught her skimming titles, and she’d tried to cover for it by claiming she was here to answer questions during the negotiations. That was her standard excuse in these situations, after all.

“It would be wise to consider repair in the contract as well,” she said casually, chewing on the end of her quill. “After all, many of you are quite delicate and it would be within your best interest to ensure you are promptly repaired in the event of an accident or standard wear and tear.”

Jerethian nodded vigorously, scratching that down on the notepad floating in front of him. “Of course.

We'll work that into the safety provisions, since we're not certain what shattering or paint fading would do to you yet."

A collection of plates, bowls, and cups groaned, and Jerethian shook a finger at them. A manic twitch had taken up residence in one of his eyes, tempting me to ask if one of the dishes had snuck him more coffee while my back was turned. "Health and safety regulations are part and parcel of a good working environment! The durability charms are common sense, and you'll thank me for them later."

No doubt they would, especially if Jerethian got his way about the philosophy classes he wanted them to take. At least they'd been willing to accept payment beyond room and board for their work, otherwise I'd have had to drag Garrett from his office to deal with it himself. No one could finesse a stubborn negotiator like Garrett when he had somewhere he needed to be.

"Of course," the serving bowl said, rubbing the silk cloth along its upper rim again. Despite having no facial features, it somehow still looked as exhausted as I felt. "And we appreciate it, but as I said before, I don't think all this is necessary. We've only been conscious for a few... weeks? Is that the right word? You only taught us about time seven meals ago."

It was at that precise moment that I remembered the worst part of working with Jerethian back when

we were in school. The man had a one-track mind that put even the oldest gnomish elder to shame. Once he latched onto an idea, it took a natural disaster, an intervention from his mothers, or passing out to deter him from his current goal.

Gods, he'd been so caught up in ensuring the dishes had a fair working contract that he probably hadn't considered that the dishes literally only knew how to feed him. Gods, they probably couldn't even read.

Cursing my height because it meant I had to stand and walk around the table before I could grab his arm, I leaned in close to him. My ears twitched and I forced them still before they betrayed my mindset. "May I have a word in private?"

His eyebrows rose, but he followed me without comment, even bending slightly to accommodate the difference in our heights and my death grip on his arm. Once we reached his study and he'd closed the door behind us, I turned to face him and sighed.

"How much have you actually taught them about what being alive means, or why any of this is important?"

Technically speaking, I could've asked this in front of the others, but I suspected Jerethian wouldn't appreciate it if I insinuated he'd put the metaphorical cart (of getting complicated labor protections in place)

before the horse (of ensuring the laborers in question understood why feeding someone against their will was poor manners). Especially not in front of someone with as large a library as Professor Clarkfowler; that meant things in the wizardly community.

His mouth formed a tiny “oh” and I resisted the urge to hit him by the skin of my teeth – and the knowledge that Garrett would be very upset with me if I hit a client, even if they were an exceptionally stupid old friend.

“I’m an idiot,” he whispered.

If he expected me to disagree, he’d be waiting an awfully long time.

“Right,” I whispered, rubbing my temples to ease my now pounding headache. “We should probably discuss educating them first. We can set up a temporary contract now and come back to renegotiate in a few months once they’ve settled in more.”

The negotiations went quickly after that. Despite Jerethian’s protests, most of the things he’d wanted had been tabled for the moment to allow the dishes time to learn why he wanted them to have those rights in the first place. We would arrange for a small set of non-sentient dishes to be delivered for him to use for the time being, and three members of our diplomatic

corps – thankfully, I wasn’t required to go with them – would drop in weekly to check in on the situation until such a time as the dishes and Jerethian could agree to revisit the union contract.

Still, the earlier troubles with getting the dishes to understand why such a contract was needed had eaten into our time dramatically. It was nearly dinner time when we finally left Jerethian’s tower, and my stomach made no effort to hide that fact from me.

Professor Clarkfowler tugged her hat down over her ears and hummed. “That went well. He’s promised fresh copies of his research notes and three of the rarer books in his collection on top of our standard rate, in exchange for our ongoing assistance.” Her giddy smile, already comparable to a schoolchild facing an unexpected early release, grew into something I’d expect to see on someone fae-touched. “He even offered to give a lecture on the magical retention of porcelain at the home office once all this is settled.”

Garrett would definitely be pleased with that. Even if he wasn’t as academically focused as Professor Clarkfowler or me, he still acknowledged the sheer amount of traffic a good lecture generated for the library. If we swung it right, we might even be able to add Jerethian’s collection to our inter-library loan system.

Aleksandr, who was currently riding Sweet Potato instead of walking, snorted. “I still can’t believe he asked if Sweet Potato could come back.”

Despite sharing that disbelief, I shrugged and said, “Apparently some of the pots took a shine to him and he wants them to have more exposure to animals. Sweet Potato is the first cat they’ve ever seen, after all, and he wanted them to get used to the theory of cats before he brings in a normal sized one.” The smaller dishes hadn’t liked Sweet Potato at all, which wasn’t a surprise, since Sweet Potato was something of a disaster in enclosed spaces. For my own peace of mind, I’d gotten it in writing that the company wouldn’t be held responsible for any incidents that occurred outside in the garden, where Sweet Potato would be able to run away if necessary and there were plenty of places for the smaller dishes to hide if he got too rowdy.

A dish and a spoon accompanied us down the path, tiny bags tied to their backs, and leaned against each other in a way I could only describe as loving. They’d refused to sign the temporary contract, citing a desire to see the world before they tied themselves down at a job. Jerethian had nearly cried when he’d heard, and it had taken Aleksandr, the serving bowl, and me ages to convince him that the other dishes didn’t secretly desire the same thing.

Then it had taken all four of us to persuade the dish and the spoon that running away into the unknown wasn't nearly as romantic as some of the older dishes made it seem. Older, in this case, being relative. They'd finally agreed to stay at the library for the time being and set off into the wider world when they had a better idea of what that entailed. At least in the wagon the greatest risks to life and limb were Sweet Potato knocking over a shelf or a patron reading the wrong cursed tome. Or accepting tea from Professor Clarkfowler, but that probably wasn't a concern here.

"Come on, then," I grumbled, turning back to the road. "We've got a long way to go and we need to get these two settled in before Garrett figures out we've brought more strays home." A thought struck me with all the force of a blow from the heavens and I smiled. "That being said, I think he's been locked up for long enough. How do you two feel about bringing dinner to him?"

If we'd gone into this case without knowing much about it, Garrett knew even less, and he always got jumpy during week three of an audit. This would be hilarious.

Ceril N. Domace is an accountant, writer, and owner of two perfectly normal felines. If you liked this story,

then check out her novella Fortitude's Prize. When his crew is hired to recover the Master of Fortitude's stolen property, a young alchemist wrestles with secrets, storms, and pirates to get back home again. Check it out [here](#).

The Ysidra

Adam McPhee

At the end of the third day, the battle on the plains beneath Mount Quevrel exhausted itself.

Both sides were in disarray, struggling to pull themselves back together. Easier said than done, given that the field beyond the town's wall was now a bed upon which twenty-thousand spent bodies lay.

Gradually, the serjeants and captains of infantry of the Drafina set up pickets. Their purpose was not to stand sentry against the scattered enemy, but to act as a net catching their own disorganized soldiers, regrouping them so they could be sent up the mountain or to reinforce the king's siege of the water-castles along the river, where the Tienhold elite were said to be preparing their last stand.

Earwyrth was stopped at one such picket and made to wait for his next assignment. Here he listened with disgust as the soldiers around him passed the time laughing and cursing the story of a rustic from their kingdom's hinterland who had pissed himself just as the fighting was to commence. Earwyrth could not

stomach such prattle, but he was still new to soldiering and had not yet found the voice needed to contradict battle-hardened men.

“Hold on now,” an archer said, once he too heard enough. The archer was short where Earwyrth was tall, and had maybe ten or fifteen years on the lad. “I’ll give you that there is such a thing as a coward. Fine. But by now, after three days of hard fighting, you should have figured out that a man has little control over his body before he enters into battle. Some piss themselves and some vomit and some shake and rattle so much that their armour clangs like a bell. I do not judge such a man a coward over that alone.”

The soldiers argued that such men were not worth a penny. They contrasted such acts with their own bravery and could not be talked down. The archer noticed Earwyrth hadn’t weighed in and, suspecting they were of like minds, asked his opinion.

“Consider it this way,” Earwyrth said, letting his rustic accent slip through. “Some men sustain erections before battle, but I do not believe they truly lust for it.”

This broke the men into laughter and now they joked about who among them had experienced such a thing and what it might mean. The archer confessed he had been overtaken by a sudden urge to empty his

bowels during the height of the battle, such that he had half untied his breeches as the Rohai were charging and let loose immediately once the danger had lifted. Some laughed and said this was actually a sign of bravery, given that a true coward would just shit their breeches.

Their conversation was interrupted when a trumpet rang out in the distance. One long, sustained call. Silence, then another such call, harsh and jarring and not all that far away.

The serjeant looked to Earwyrth, who had interpreted several previous calls. “What's that one mean?”

Earwyrth shrugged. It was not the king's call and not the recall, not a warning of attack or anything else Earwyrth had learned to listen for over the course of the campaign. It sounded more like a child had stolen a herald's trumpet.

“You'd better go find out,” the serjeant said. “You there, go with him and bring him back.”

You there was the archer who had joked about needing to shit during the Rohai charge. He was a short man who had lost his bow, though he still wore a quiver full of arrows on his belt alongside an overlong, curved dagger. He appeared neither reluctant nor eager for the assignment.

Earwyrth grabbed his fauchard and followed him

off.

Earwyrth and the archer trod through the work of death, the piling up of bodies and the digging of great trench-graves. At picket campfires all around, the survivors did their best to comfort the wounded and the dying, while those whose greed outweighed their disgust evaded the pickets to go scavenging among the corpses for valuables that they told themselves would make the senselessness of the slaughter bearable – or possibly lucrative. The field was strewn with bodies, some stacked high like hay, but others unnoticed until they were stepped upon. The Tienholders’ hastily dug trenches and earthworks proved another obstacle.

“Was your story true?” Earwyrth asked.

But the archer shushed him and crouched low near a broken and capsized wagon.

A rider on horseback shot past at a quick trot. Probably not Rohai – the fearsome auxiliaries employed by the Tienholders – but not worth taking a chance either way. Any Drafine important enough to go about on horseback was likely to stop them and command them into some new, worse drudgery.

“On the second day, yes,” the archer eventually answered, as they stood and resumed their trek. “My troop had scattered and I ended up among some

pikemen staring down a cavalry charge. It's no fun without a bow, believe me. Name's Klage, by the way."

Klage found a wineskin hidden away at the bottom of his quiver, unstopped it, took a drink, and offered it to Earwyrth.

"Then again, watching the Rohai ride unwavering towards us wasn't much fun *with* a bow, either. I remember there was this sudden shock, this realization that no matter how many arrows we loosed, we weren't going to break them or turn them back." Klage noticed Earwyrth wasn't listening, so he said, "How about you? You seem to have made it out alive, at least. That's something."

"Sure."

Klage followed Earwyrth's gaze to a section of the field ahead where men were impaled upon pikes arranged in rows, their own bodyweight bending them slowly down towards the earth. They looked like so many scarecrows, except that these were attracting crows rather than repelling them.

"Is that—? Did our side...?" Earwyrth asked.

"Hard to say," Klage said. "I don't see any banners or pennons. If you want, we could find one still aware enough to ask."

"No," Earwyrth said. "No."

The archer tore off a piece of his tunic sleeve and

poured some wine onto it before stuffing it into his nostrils, then helped Earwyrth do the same.

“Not exactly perfume,” Klage said, nasally, “but it’ll do.”

This field was a great pity to walk through. The sounds of the dying soldiers carried the horrible tenor of animal pleading. Once in a while someone struggled or twitched and this only compounded their pain. The worst, for Earwyrth, was seeing a tiny songbird flutter into a wound and alight upon exposed bone.

Beyond the last impalement the field dipped down drastically, a change in elevation that had been incorporated into the earthworks. Earwyrth and Klage peered down, and seeing no immediate danger they leapt over the rim, sliding down quickly and working hard not to tumble or lose balance.

There were plenty of bodies down below, as well. Earwyrth counted no less than three Scourgers, the elite shock troops of the enemy, as feared as the Rohai. A low growling brought their attention to a mongrel dog, which raised its hackles and bared its teeth at them without dropping the length of intestine clamped in its jaws. Klage unsheathed his dagger and crouched low, circling the mongrel.

“Come on, doggy. Papa needs a winter coat.”

But the dog understood the battlefield presented

too many opportunities for this to be worth fighting over. It ran off.

Earwyrth removed his nasal helm and scratched his head.

“I could’ve sworn I heard the trumpet blast over this way.”

It took some shuffling about, but eventually Klage spotted it: a battle-trumpet of the kind favoured by the Drafinas, carved from animal horn. Smoke drifted from its mouthpiece as if it had been plucked from a fire.

Before either could reach it, something shifted in the dirt wall of the trench – not an impending collapse, Earwyrth realized, but someone digging their way out. His mind leapt to childhood nightmares of dwarves and molefolk tunnelling up from below the earth through the soil and tree roots until they emerged under the bed he shared with his brothers. He hefted up his fauchard and made ready to use it, but then saw the emerging creature was a fellow countryman, a Drafine. And judging by his helmet and the horn, the man was a herald.

“Trench wall must have collapsed on him,” Klage said.

Earwyrth dropped his weapon and helped Klage pull the herald free.

The herald’s surcoat was torn to shreds all through the abdomen and looked like it might have even

caught fire at some point. His face was all covered in grime and dirt. It was clear that he did not have another hour in him.

“I found it,” the herald coughed. “I have the *Ysidra*.”

Earwyrth’s eyes shot wide in amazement. The *Ysidra* was an ornately carved jewel, a scrying tool for the Tienholder’s fearsome wizard, Derketius.

The herald cupped it in his hands as if it was a precious bird – and Earwyrth saw that it *was* a bird, though crystalline. Its glassy feathers were green and cerulean, and its beaked head looked as lifelike as any jewel Earwyrth had ever seen. He had never seen so beautiful an ornament.

“How?” Earwyrth asked.

“S not a trench we’re in,” the herald mumbled. “It’s a crater.”

On the second day of the battle, the armies had clashed under ominous fog and concealing mists and occasional rain, wandering and lost as often as they were engaged in combat. And then like a miracle the sun pierced the clouds and illuminated the wizard Derketius, and not one soldier of the Drafina had to be told what to do, because they knew in their hearts: cut off the head and the snake will die. But then the sorcerer began to rise through the air, ascending the

beam of light like an apotheosizing god, and the Drafina trembled in fear. Derketius was cloaked in witchfire from his strange *generation device* on the ground, and to channel it, he needed only to cast his arm in accusation. Many fine Drafina soldiers were roasted alive and died inside their armour, but in the end the wizard proved no god. At the moment the Drafina were about to break and be routed, the wizard was killed. Earwyrth wasn't sure how: he'd heard it said that a volley of arrows or a lone javelin had pierced the wizard's blackened heart, but Earwyrth had seen no such thing. Others said the battle must have turned on the ground, and the device that lifted the wizard into the air failed when the Tienholders protecting it were routed. This seemed more plausible to Earwyrth. All he remembered was a brief glimpse of the wizard hovering above the earth, the Ysidra around his neck flashing from cerulean to sapphire as the angle of the sun shifted.

And still there had been a third day of fighting.

"So this is where Derketius died?" Earwyrth said.

The herald pointed behind them, and Earwyrth and Klage turned round with great haste, as fearful as if a pack of wolves had snuck up on them. But the wizard was splayed out on the ground, his burned and blackened robes still smoking, his flesh charred and hardly recognizable as human – except for one white

eye which tracked them from an otherwise immobile body.

“Better not take any chances,” Klage said, and went to finish the business.

“I give the Ysidra to you,” the herald said.

“Of course,” Earwyrth responded. “I know it contains some eldritch power our leaders covet. I will take it directly to the king, and I will make sure your heroism is not—”

“No!” the herald cried, the new strength in his voice twisting something in his wound so as to double his anguish. “No. You— You must *use* it.”

Klage returned and squatted next to the herald, as comfortable in the mud as if he were at home. “How about that?” he said, wiping the blood from his dagger on his breeches. “I just killed a wizard. I think I’m due a reward.”

Earwyrth wasn’t listening. “He wants us to take the Ysidra. To use it.”

“Ah, that *is* tempting,” Klage said, tactfully. “But I have no talent for the arcane. And besides, I’d prefer my reward in silver. Or perhaps a title, if it were to come with land and estates.”

“It is a bucket...” the herald said. “It has only so much capacity... You must fill it to overflowing. Then kings will stop fighting so madly for it.”

“I don’t understand,” Earwyrth said.

“You must feed it... Let it feast upon our memories, so that the battle will be remembered forever within the jewel.”

“But how?”

The herald, lost in his own pain, made no answer.

Reluctantly, Earwyrth reached out and took the Ysidra. Inside the jewelled bird’s breast, the colour was like that of brightly burning coals. When he looked at the dying herald again, Earwyrth knew that the herald’s name was Dalfonce, a second son of an ancient house that went all the way back to the time of the huskarls. But Earwyrth did not *realize* this, for he had never met the man before. Rather, he *remembered* it – but the memory came from the Ysidra.

And though he had not been present, Earwyrth remembered now how Dalfonce had stumbled onto the dying wizard. There had been much fighting here – Scourgers against dismounted Dalfina cavalry – Dalfonce had been ordered to stay above by his liegelord, a count of the king’s household. In the grim aftermath he found the wizard and the Ysidra Stone. The wizard had attacked him with the last of his wicked lightning as Dalfonce was sounding his horn for the first time to call for help. Then, wounded, Dalfonce had fallen against the crater’s wall, and had just enough time to summon his strength and sound the horn once more before he was buried alive under

the dirt. The memory of the darkness and of Dalfonce's burning skin and of his lungs desperate for air – it was too much for Earwyrth, but he could not escape the memory until it was finished with him.

“You understand,” Dalfonce said.

Earwyrth wasn't sure how to respond, but in the end it didn't matter: something settled over the herald's face, and Earwyrth saw the man was dead.

“What is it?” Klage asked.

To answer, Earwyrth handled the jewel over.

“Ah gods!” Klage spat. He almost dropped the jewel. “That really happened to you?”

“What did you see?” Earwyrth asked.

“The battle. Yesterday, or this morning, or the day before. You were caught in the press of bodies.”

“Yesterday.”

“You hacked your way out well. I won't let it be said that you can't fight.”

“I'm sick of fighting.”

“You could become a herald,” Klage offered, gesturing to Dalfonce's smoking horn.

Earwyrth scoffed.

“Why not?” said Klage. “You seem to know all the calls. Can't be hard to figure out how to sound it.”

“Yeah?”

“Just find a noble, say your name is Dalfonce and that your count died. Someone is sure to take you into

their retinue. Opportunity like this won't come again."

Earwyrth could see it: the Ysidra had shared the memory of Dalfonce's death with him, and might contain more useful memories still. It was possible. He bent down and picked up the horn, tied it to his baldric.

"You'll need his helmet too. And his sword."

Loosening a dead man's scabbard was unpleasant work, all the more so with Klage there to witness to it. But it was a small price to pay for the possibility of a better life. Earwyrth was the lowliest of soldiers, and a rustic at that. His life was drudgery and turmoil, and before this battle his hardest fighting was against the soldiers he trooped alongside, to see that he got a spot at the campfire, a ration of half-spoiled meat, a drink of marching wine. If he could pass himself off as a herald whose lord had died in battle, maybe a new lord would take him in, feed and clothe him well in exchange for more complicated work as a battlefield messenger.

Up above they heard a multitude of footsteps, boots marching almost in lockstep.

"We must leave," Earwyrth said.

"I'm supposed to bring you back to the serjeant," Klage said, a complicit grin on his face suggesting he had no desire to carry out the order.

"I can't go back."

Klage nodded.

They moved to the shadow of the rim, risking becoming victim of a collapse to hide themselves from those above. They waited for the soldiers to pass and then, slowly, began to climb up the lip of the crater.

They soon came upon a trio of young squires who were themselves very clearly done with the war, their faces puffy and red from crying.

“What troubles you young fellows?” Klage asked.

Only one of them bothered to look up, and he seemed incredulous that Klage would need to ask.

“Sir Johnald was our master,” the squire said, pointing. “He was our comfort and our strength and our great defence. Our prowess and our honour were only ever an extension of his. Now he is dead just over yonder, and we cannot even move his corpse to give him the funeral rites he deserves.”

Klage followed the boy’s gaze over to the largest corpse he had ever seen.

Every Drafinas knew Sir Johnald’s name. He was the king’s champion, a giant in name and deed and stature. It was said he had to bend down to pass through even great ecclesiastic doorways.

“Poor bastard looks like one of those whales that gets trapped on the shore,” Klage whispered.

“I saw him once before,” Earwyrth said. “Out in the hinterlands, he defended the peasants of Pewton against the slander of Torleez Copperhand, in a trial by combat. It was no easy battle, but in the end he stove that vile devil’s head in with a mighty hammer blow. As thanks from the villagers he asked only for a full cauldron of their fragrant local stew – and he managed to down it all in a single sitting. I’d never seen the like.”

Klage motioned for Earwyrth to touch the man with the Ysidra.

“Does a corpse even hold memories?” Earwyrth asked.

“Let’s find out.”

So Earwyrth walked over and made as if to kiss the giant’s bare forehead, but instead placed the jewel upon it. Klage reached out to press his fingers to the jewel as well. They were remembering childhood now, throwing a wickerball in the courtyard of a provincial castle. As Johnald they were taller than the other children, but greatly outnumbered by them. The children swarmed them in a corner of the wall, delivering foul punches that bent young Johnald low, then smothering him in a dogpile, more intent on hurting him than trying to take the ball. The pressure of being buried was immense and, though he gasped, he could catch no breath. When the children finally let

up, they saw his mother watching from the alure of the castle wall, laughing at his folly.

“Must’ve been on his mind when he died,” Klage offered. “No different from being in the crush, really.”

“What are you doing, herald?” the youngest squire shouted, accusingly. “Leave him be!”

Earwyrth and Klage looked to one another and Klage grinned, but this only angered the squires more, who thought these intruders were laughing at their dead master.

Now the squires were alarmed and approaching, so Earwyrth slipped the jewel into the wide end of the horn still tied to his baldric, and the two new companions backed off, hands to their weapon hilts, lest the squires should succumb to their emotion and act upon it.

They retreated to the impact crater, but now saw the soldiers they’d only heard before, busy turning the crater into a grave, dragging corpses to the edge and then haphazardly tossing them in. The soldiers worked slowly, trying to stay upwind while also fighting a losing battle against the copious flies.

“Psst! Youse find anything good?”

The voice came from far above, from atop the largest pile of bodies they had yet encountered. A man with a crazed glint in his eye was stripping corpses for

valuables, sending anything interesting to a rather dull-looking oaf of a man below.

“Don’t you have any shame, you rascal?” Klage shouted, taking a different tack from when they had been alone in the crater with something to gain. “Those are your countrymen.”

“But I don’t care for foreign gear,” the rascal laughed, then bit down on a coin to test its metal. “Don’t like foreign clothes neither. People mistake you for the enemy. So, countrymen it is.”

At this, the rascal hefted up an arm that had been severed at the elbow and threw it down at Klage, who caught it in the air more by reflex than by intention. Klage wound up to throw it back, but Earwyrth reached out and stopped him. The Ysidra sensed the arm, and now its memory was theirs, though it was only a reflex memory: a sense of muscles contracting, of being tired of straining and desirous of rest. There was also a distant memory of being gently touched, and a sort of lacuna that stood in for the memory of the pain of being burned. Anything more than that was lost. It didn’t even hold onto the pain of being separated from the rest of its body.

“Rohai!” the rascal hissed, and then scrambled down from the pile, knocking bodies over as he descended.

Earwyrth and Klage looked to one another – it

didn't seem possible. Not now. The Rohai were defeated. But they couldn't deny the hoofbeats they felt pounding the ground, the dread sound of the terrible changle-gait: Rohai spear-bells ring loudly only when the four hooves of their horses are in the air.

Three Rohai riding magnificent horses came racing around the pile of bodies, one striking the fat oaf who had been helping the rascal. Earwyrth and Klage gave them a wide berth. Some unseen obstacle ahead turned the Rohai back, forcing them to charge at the soldiers filling in the crater-turned-grave. The first line of soldiers fell, the second scattered, but the third found their weapons and began to defend themselves.

"We should help them," Earwyrth said.

"If my bow hadn't cracked," Klage said, "maybe we could. But we can't. We should leave."

Earwyrth unstrapped his horn and sounded the call that warned an enemy attack was underway. The sound seemed to unnerve the Rohai, and at least one of them lost interest in the fight and resumed looking for a way out.

"Not bad," Klage said.

When they found a safe distance from the fighting, Earwyrth took out the Ysidra again and they began testing it against the bodies scattered on the ground.

The first corpse revealed itself as Drafinar, struck down from behind during a rout. Its memories were of the mud and dirty water and the stampede of soldiers somewhere above. The memory ended with the pain and release of a javelin lodged in his back and then pried free.

The next corpse turned out to be a Tienholder. His last moments were of confusion. He had been separated from his troop. Then he became aggressive, and then dizzy, and then the memory faltered.

“Head wound,” Klage reasoned. “Struck by lead bullets from a sling, maybe. Can’t say I feel sorry for him. Should we really be taking the enemy’s memories, though?”

Earwyth shrugged. “Why not? It’s all part of the same story.”

Then they found the body of a Drafinar vintnar – a leader of twenty infantry – caught in the same rout as the first soldier. At first he had panicked, and cast away his halberd and shield, and struggled to remove his burdensome cuirass so that he could flee all the faster. But then something stopped him: the brothers Bourdel and Ganite, the famous Drafinar knights, engaged in a desperate last stand against the enemy. A great heat of shame welled up in the vintnar when the brothers saw him without his shield, and so the vintnar charged back into the battle wielding only a

broken, scavenged spear.

“That’s knight’s honour for you,” Klage said when the dream-memory ended. “They say a good death is a fine thing, but you don’t get to brag about it afterwards, you know?”

Earwyrth shrugged a gesture of noncommittal agreement, then stood and started shifting through the bodies, turning over those on top to examine those below.

“What are you doing?” Klage asked. “Isn’t one as good as another?”

“Bourdel and Ganite died nearby, no? Surely their fame was known even to you archers. Don’t you want to experience their final moments? What if they were thinking of their great exploits? Bourdel never once lost a joust, you know. And they say Ganite once tussled with a wild quinotaur during the flooding of Val Sevree.”

Klage flashed a roguish grin. “And I suppose their dying thoughts might hold some value. The king would handsomely reward us to learn such secrets. And their baronial family back home, likewise.”

They found Ganite on the ground not far off, that famous forest green armour was hardly recognizable now, so smeared by the blood and grime of the battlefield. With great reverence, they removed the knight’s helmet and touched the Ysidra to Ganite’s

forehead.

Ganite's final moments were not sorrowful at all, they discovered, but joyous. Because battle, it turned out, was one of the only places where she could be free. Her final memories were of riding her mighty destrier, Belvais, spurred on to a full gallop, dodging friendly troops and striking down the enemy as they raced to Bourdel's side. Bourdel had been good to her, had kept her secret even from the king, and later defended her right to take up arms when it came out at court that she was a woman in disguise. She owed her brother much, and was proud to die at his side.

The memory was brief, but deep. They felt how her knighthood had had phases. At first, she fought secretly, more afraid of being found out than of death. Then her identity became an open secret to her comrades, but still men scoffed at her. When they saw she could fight, they rushed into battle to avoid being shamed by a woman, or in the vain hope of subduing her, dreaming of being able to boast that they had tamed her. It was only at the end, in this final campaign against the Tienholders and the Rohai, that her comrades had come to accept her as a brother-in-arms.

The wound in her abdomen proved no little thing, but somehow she chose to pay it no mind, to keep fighting until the very end. The only sadness she felt

at all was for Belvais, that her proud war horse should die before her. She had hoped that he might live, for he was worthy and loyal, but that was not to be.

“She was beautiful,” Earwyrth said, reassessing her scarred face and the poise of the body underneath the armour.

“I’ve known women archers,” Klage said. “They have to be secretive, because they’re likely to be driven off if they get discovered. But once in a while there’ll be an open secret like Ganite here, a woman everyone comes to accept as one of us, or who proves such a fine shot with her bow that we would shame ourselves to cast her out. It happens.”

“We should bury her,” Earwyrth said. He scraped some mud from her spauldron with his thumb. “So that her secret doesn’t...”

He stopped himself, realizing the contradiction he’d made. The Ysidra had her secret now, and might reveal itself to anyone who touched it.

“We all have our secrets,” Klage said. “But the dead have no right to keep them from the living.”

“I wish I could have known her in life,” Earwyrth said, bending low to examine her face. He couldn’t stop himself from putting a finger to her lips. For a moment – just a trio of heartbeats – it seemed as if some spirit still animated Ganite’s body, that she was only resting or playing at being dead, and that she

might yet wake again if they could only overcome her ensorcellment. Then an accidental movement of Earwyrth's shifted her head and a maggot as white as fresh snow crawled out from her left nostril and fell to the ground.

"Come on," Klage said, rising to his feet. "Leave her be."

It took them a great deal of time to find Bourdel, but in the end it turned out his corpse was not far from Ganite. He had been difficult to recognize because the rats had got to his flesh after the scoundrels had made off with his armour. His horse was nearby, or at least part of it was, and they'd recognized its chanfron.

Bourdel's memories were not of the heat of the battle, but of the anxiety and impatience he had felt while waiting for things to commence. He and Ganite were on the frontline of the cavalry, waiting for the enemy to come to them – and constantly being held back by their duke, who was all too familiar with the Rohai's use of feigned retreats. So there had been many long days of maneuvers, of waiting around under the heat of the sun and feeling useless for hours at a time, then riding quickly off to hold some nondescript piece of ground. Bourdel knew in his head that the decisions his king and his leaders made in positioning the army would decide the fate of the

battle, that in a way, the terrain held more importance than the troops. But in his heart, Bourdel wanted action. He wanted to ride out and face the enemy.

This anxiety for battle connected itself to a deeper memory from many summers ago, back when he was a young knight only newly risen from his squirehood. He found himself at long last alone in a glade with the object of his affection, the daughter of a local shepherd. The girl was bemused by his confession and not altogether against a proposition that might lift her up in the world and bring her to life at a fancy palace or in an imposing castle, but she was no fool. Bourdel stammered, and wrecked his chance, and the girl's friends called to her from afar. He spent the summer seeking her out again, and then in the autumn Bourdel's father arranged his marriage to Sir Johnald's daughter, and ever since Bourdel had carried within him a pang of regret.

Horns and trumpets blared from within the memory-dream and the archers loosed their arrows, and it was time for Bourdel to do what he knew how to do, the only thing he'd ever been good at. But even here he had to hold himself in check – for a chivalric charge to work, it was vital that the knights on their horses all advance at the same pace, as a galloping horse can startle its mates into such a panic that they ignore commands from their riders. This was the most

important test of a battle, at least from a knight's perspective: would the infantry together hold against the charge or would they break and flee? Even the bravest horse cannot be made to charge into a wall of spears, but then it was no small thing for footsoldiers to stand steady against a cavalry charge.

The Tienhold infantry broke, and Bourdel struck them down.

An hour later, he too was dead.

"Did you notice that?" Klage said, twitching the whiskers of his moustache and then readjusting the wined cloth he'd stuck in his nose. "The charge wasn't at all like I thought it would be."

"How's that?" Earwyrth asked.

"For me, and for everyone I know, war smells like blood and sweat and shit and turned-up soil. Once in a while you sniff smoke, and it's so refreshingly different it's like the mustard seeds a lord uses to season his plate, or even better is when rain washes every scent away for a while. But that's not how it was for Bourdel."

Earwyrth nodded, understanding. "The field they charged across was full of fresh spring flowers. Their horses' hooves crushed the flowers, kicked them up into clouds of perfume. It was that scent that brought his mind back to that glade with the shepherdess. He was thinking of her again while he died."

Klage laughed and shook his head. “Imagine that, a battle that smells sweet. No wonder I don’t understand knights.” He looked down at Bourdel’s corpse, naked and defiled. “Couldn’t close the deal with the shepherdess girl though, could you?”

The field was full of campfire smoke and fog rolling in from the river, and Earwyrth was glad of it. He had seen enough of war to last a lifetime. And yet the Ysidra could capture men’s memories, and he reckoned using it was showing him more and worse than he had seen in all his time following the king’s wars, and though he didn’t want to see any more, he found he couldn’t look away.

Earwyrth and Klage continued their work, and decided to test the Ysidra against a dead Rohai who looked like one of the riders they’d encountered before.

The Rohai’s memory was of the distant steppe on the far side of Mount Quevrel. His way of life was radically different from that of the Drafini: his days were spent on horseback, herding ponies and sheep and cattle in herds so numerous that Klage and Earwyrth doubted the dream even as they witnessed it. At night, the Rohai did not return to any town or farmstead, but camped in yurt or wagon beneath the stars. He ate only flesh and drank only fermented

mare's milk. He did not know bread.

One day a messenger came to him to speak important words, but the alien tongue of the Rohai was lost on Earwyrth and Klage. The day after the messenger departed, the Rohai rounded up his liegemen and left instructions to the wives and vassals he was leaving behind. Then he summoned his three youngest children to his yurt. The Rohai spoke to them for hours on many topics, and once in a while Earwyrth and Klage caught his drift: he told them about the proper way to loose an arrow, and how to mend one; told them to look after his falcons, and of the secret cliffs where wild birds laid their eggs; told his children to look after his flock and to protect their mother. Finally, he told them he was obliged to fight his Chazon's war, because the Tienholders were their ally and they were in trouble. But he assured them that sedentary folk were easily overcome in battle, and he promised to come galloping home as soon as he could.

But of course he never did.

The memories they collected were specific and intimate and individual to each corpse, and yet at the same time they began to run into one another. The battle had, after all, been a great shared experience. So the memories started to blend together like oats in a

porridge until only the extremes stood out: the grief of the last surviving infantryman of his battalion, the guilt of a subordinate carrying out his commander's order to impale their captives, the glee of an archer whose arrows never missed.

"Braggart," Klage scoffed at the last.

A sharp whistle brought their attention to a small group of Drafinas lounging around two large crates made of iron. Among them were the rascal and the oaf who'd been stripping corpses earlier. Now the oaf wore a rag bandage around his head.

"What's all this?" Earwyrth asked about the black iron boxes.

"The wizard's witchfire machine," the oaf said, before leaning back to shout, "Try it now!"

Behind them, the rascal went to turning a crank on the larger of the two boxes. It appeared to be quite hard work, and he soon abandoned his task to turn a smaller crank on the other box. Little blackened crusts of bread sat littered all around, smoke drifting off them.

"We're about to fry us some dinner," the oaf said. "Care to join us?"

A rabbit squirmed uncomfortably in front of the oaf, its forepaws tied to a thin metal pole set in the ground. A fine silver chain snaked its way from the pole back to the strange machine, and a weak sheen of

witchfire hung in the air around the rabbit, visible only when it snapped blue and raised the rabbit's fur, otherwise nothing but a shimmer in the air.

Earwyrth felt bile rising in the back of his throat, thinking of the wizard's attack, of Dalfonce and the masses of men burned alive in their armour.

"At least put it out of its misery first," he said.

He went to the rabbit, reaching through the witchfire, but his hand brushed its grey fur, thus accidentally activating the Ysidra. Now Earwyrth was bounding through a meadow – but this was no springtime frolic.

A shadow encompassed him, and encompassed all the grass around, and he sensed the eagle's dread claws snatching at him from above, and he wanted to cry out and to tell his children to stay inside the burrow, but to do so would be to give them away, so he stayed silent. He stayed silent because that was his nature – he was silent because his parents were silent yesterday, and his grandparents were silent the day before that, and if the sun would rise in the morning then he knew his children would be silent tomorrow. But that silence didn't mean they were stupid, didn't mean they weren't paying attention, didn't mean they weren't learning. Because through Earwyrth, this rabbit had touched the Ysidra Stone, and had absorbed Earwyrth's memories, and the memories of the

Drafinia and the Tienholders and the Rohai and all those who made war upon the meadow and upon the fields.

Now Earwyrth was alone in the meadow at night, and there were dread things hooting from the trees waiting to rip his heart from his flesh and compact his bones into pellets. He heard something like the Rohai changle-gait approaching, except the beat was wrong, because really it came from a rabbit larger than any he had ever known, coming to flop down beside him.

The moon and the stars were too vivid as the rabbit spoke using Dalfonce's voice saying, *What you do with the Ysidra Stone is good beyond measure, for with it Dekretius was building a hutch by which he would shelter his mortal essence, and return to oppress us even after his death, but now he is gone from the earth, and this Ysidra is the cenotaph for this field and for all of us who have struggled for our lives upon it.*

The moon hung ominously in the sky, too large and too horrible, a shield pockmarked by a thousand cosmic strokes bought from defending those who lived below.

"I shouldn't have taken the Ysidra," Earwyrth said, trembling. "Its power is beyond my ken."

The rabbit nudged Earwyrth with its nose and said, *Always the dread things are coming always always*

always. They will never stop, but by our speed and our cleverness we can outrun them and outwit them and live good lives despite them.

Now the dream was ended and Earwyrth fell to his knees and vomited, hurling the contents of his stomach to the ground. Klage stood in front of him, with his eyes daring those assembled to call his new friend a coward.

Those hoping for a meal complained when the rabbit scampered free, but they weren't looking for a fight. They drifted off, the oaf trying to save face by halfheartedly pretending to chase after the rabbit.

More and more pickets were being organized, and more work details being sent out to bury bodies or round up soldiers or fortify the army's campsite. Little by little, Earwyrth and Klage found their wandering restricted, and so they decided it was time to return to their place in the host – or in Earwyrth's case, to find his new place. The two friends promised to tip some ale together on the march home, and Klage offered some advice on dealing with highborn folk, then slipped in with a troop of archers marching past.

Earwyrth came across the body of an older Drafin soldier whose nose had been cut away. Possibly this was a war wound, but more likely it was the punishment of a criminal. But how then had he come

to serve in the host of the Drafin? Earwyrth told himself there must be a good story there, and went to press the Ysidra to the dead man's chest. The old man's eyes opened and he caught Earwyrth by the wrist before Earwyrth could pull away.

"Friend," the corpse said, "don't you know the Ysidra is a cup whose brim runs over? It will hold no more dreaming. Now leave me as you found me, and let me rest."

The grey clouds loitering over the battlefield began to spill forth their rain once more.

Earwyrth found a picket and approached its serjeant, who bowed the appropriate amount. Not much, just a tip of the head – but Earwyrth was struck by the gesture, all the same. No one had ever bowed to him before. He decided he liked being a herald.

"I have orders," he said. "There are two iron boxes not far away, the Tienhold wizard's witchfire machine. You're to bring all the men from your picket there and hack the boxes to pieces, and then bury the pieces. There can be no rest until the thing is done."

The serjeant made a sign that he understood, but all the same he looked weary, and it seemed as though his obedience would be reluctant and half-hearted.

"Take this," Earwyrth said, proffering the Ysidra. "Bring it to the king once the boxes are smashed and

buried. He'll offer you a handsome reward. Use the reward to see that you and your men are fed."

The serjeant looked at Earwyrth skeptically. He could tell the Ysidra was a jewel of great value, might even have guessed at its true nature, but couldn't figure out why Earwyrth would hand it over so readily.

"Tell him it's been rendered worthless, at least as a weapon of war. But if he wants a monument to the carnage here, he'll find no better trophy."

The serjeant accepted the Ysidra in his hands, and his mind was lost temporarily as it learned to cope with and parse the memories it offered up.

Earwyrth watched the soldiers hack at the strange device. They seemed to be making some headway, but it was slow work.

Earwyrth thought of his father, who he hadn't seen in many years. They were from a place so deep in the hinterland and still so wild that peasants weren't forbidden from hunting, indeed they were required to, the same as the nobility.

He unhooked his horn from his belt and brought it to his lips, sounding a hinterland hunting call his father had taught him. It was a simple peasant call with no place in the host of the Drafina, issued by the hunter separated from the group when in distress from

the terrain or the weather, or attacked by wild quarry. Other heralds throughout the battlefield took up Earwyrth's call. They were unlikely to know its meaning, but they helped to amplify its reach nonetheless. Then once the heralds had given the distress call a life of its own, Earwyrth issued the call's response, teaching it to his fellows, which in the hinterland would be issued by the main part of the hunting party so that those separated might find and return to the hunting party.

Some heralds took up the first call and others the response, so that, together, the two messages rang out across the battlefield, again and again and again:

I am in distress, but I have survived

We are here

I am wounded, but I am alive

We are here, We are here, We are here

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