

## **Chapter 1**

### **Robert**

This is not the beginning of the story. This story began long ago, before anyone can remember, and after everyone else forgot.

But for this chapter, it began with Robert.

Robert McWerein was twenty-five and trembling as he stood in the cool-autumn dimness of the Vault. Darkish-sand hair curled damply around mildly obtrusive ears, and eyes narrow and grey opened too wide as he stared at the scrolls. Soft hands attached to bony wrists opened and closed nervous fingers. He wet his lips with his tongue, swallowing the fluttering in his stomach. He could do this.

It was not as damp or as musty in the Vault as Robert had imagined. The huge underground archive, part cave, part construct, was bricked and tiled, and the air was fresh and dry and smelled strongly of leather and thick, old paper. The chamber was wide and tall, the

rows upon rows of bookshelves dwindling off in all directions, becoming part of the shadows. The only light came from round glass lamps along the tops of the shelves and at the bottom of the staircase Robert had just walked from. Gold and silver writing on the spines of the innumerable books followed Robert when he moved, like eyes of somber owls written in a foreign script. And there were the scrolls. All thirteen, lined up in black granite cylinders embellished with golden caps. Each cap came to a needle-sharp point, and each scroll balanced impossibly on one of those points. They stood silent and immobile atop basalt pillars, illuminated by an indeterminate ambient light. Beneath each scroll was the name of its author, one of the Poet Laureates.

The silence became almost too heavy to breathe, and Robert found himself gasping heavily against the queasiness rising in his throat. He could do it, yes. He had to. But he could wait a moment longer. The work it had taken Robert to be in this very position was measured in years not months, and he wanted to savor his victory.

Once, very long ago, the ancestors of the same Poets who now called the Guild their home, were respected and powerful. They had wielded a force so great, so dreadful, that they chose to stop practicing it. Something that had been a marvelous art was now all but lost.

When Robert first discovered he had the Poet's gift, his master, Yosoki, explained gently that Poets no longer write and read their Poems. "It will drive you to madness..." Robert remembered his master's dark face, eyes deep and sad, "there is not a one of us who dares to read them anymore. Since the Laureates left, our power has slowly faded into that of the insane." He told Robert the life of the modern Poet was that of the humble scholar, and to take pride in his purpose.

Robert had taken pride, and secretly, in the forest outside the city, he learned to read the old Poems. Five years ago, Robert started small, simple lines of crude words. At the coaxing of his voice, a clamshell shuttered, cracked, became a silver rose blossom, before withering into ashes. The Sunday paper unfolded into a swarm of butterflies, the headlines looping across their surprised new wings. The dead, the non-living, Robert had given them new souls. And now, he was going to read a scroll, a real scroll, and no one in the Guild would doubt him again.

A deep, raw emotion tightened in Robert's chest. Here, today, he, a lowly student of the Guild of Poets, was going to read one of the Thirteen Ambrosia Scrolls. Several times his fingers crept towards one scroll or another, but he didn't take one. He wanted this to be perfect, he wanted to enjoy this moment for as long as he could, but if he waited much longer, he feared he might lose his nerve.

The words of his oath whispered faintly out of the darkness. "I swear, upon my life and by my death, to protect the ancient knowledge beneath these floors..." Protect. Protect. When he swore that oath of service and fidelity to the Guild, he had understood them to signify protection from outsiders, people who would use them to terrible ends. Now he understood that protection of an ancient art also meant preservation and understanding, something the Poets didn't seem to want to accept.

But still, every time his fingertips brushed a cylinder, the sweat on his palms gathered into beads. The hands that wrote those scrolls belonged to being who might as well be gods. The world is only limited by the imagination of its author, that's what was said about the Laureates. Robert was doing his duty...he wasn't stealing...just borrowing a scroll. Just one. And he was going to make history.

Had minutes passed? Hours? In the Vault, time did not matter. There was no sun, no moon, no people but himself and the memories left behind in ink and illumination. At last, he chose the scroll he wanted to read. Of the Thirteen, most were not well known among the Guild. If he was going to do this, really do it, he needed to do it right. Why select one of the lesser-known scrolls, like Number VII or Number XI? If he was going to read one of the Ambrosia Scrolls, he needed to read one the Guild would never forget.

Reaching out, Robert suppressed a shudder as his hands closed around the cold black cylinder. Removing it slowly, he wondered at how light the granite was, how glassy smooth. The soft, ambient glow dimmed where the scroll no longer stood. As long as his forearm, and not much thicker, the cylinder was so plain, it almost brought a pang of disappointment.

Rolling the tube in his hands, Robert read the surface with his fingers, finding the small carved seal which read; Ambrosia Number XIII. This cylinder was just like the others in every detail, except this one had not been signed with the Laureate's elegantly carved name. Instead, bold, blood-red letters painted in a jagged hand read GARTH. No first name, no last name, just GARTH. Who, or maybe what, Garth had been, Robert didn't really know, only that the Poets of the Guild spoke of him in pinched sentences, hushed voices, and eyes darting warily. Apparently, when the other twelve Laureates went back to wherever they came from, Garth stayed behind. He was a shadow in history, and a leering face in the nightmares of younger Poets, Robert was tired of fearing him. If Garth was still alive, he would be proud someone sought to preserve the Poet's art, would smile upon Robert's courageousness. That's what Robert told himself.

The scroll slid almost too easily into Robert's book bag. All thirteen flights of stairs out of the Vault and into the basement of the Guild were easier than they should have been. On the ground floor of the Guild, civilians milled about the bookshelves or spread lethargically across

leather couches, reading. Poets in their dark purple and gold coats fanned their faces against the warm June day and heavy clothing. They smiled at Robert as he walked by, and he smiled back. Swinging through the glass-windowed double doors, Robert took in a deep breath of the warm, ocean-air Wednesday, soaking in the bustle of Dale Port's streets. Robert walked at a mellow pace down Garden Street, taking in the smells and sounds, and countless colors of the biweekly market. Venders beneath canvas roofs called out their wares; fresh fish from the bay, blood oranges from the east, apples, pears, clothing, perfume, jewelry, tourist knickknacks, and small, exotic pets. Usually the clamor from the market and the resulting traffic put Robert in a stale mood, but today he bought three oranges from a fat, ugly man with half a smile, and a cup of microbrew mead from a woman with dark skin and a bright face.

Robert knew where he wanted to read. The fluttering in his stomach had become more pleasant than nauseating, and the walk to Lighthouse Point, a usual destination of Robert's, was ripe with purpose. He took his time, waiting for large families and people with canes and walkers to cross the street before he did. He looked up at the gaudy architecture of the city, buttressed arches and high, multi-paned windows. Ugly gargoyles seemed almost to smile, and the chirps of swallows sounded oddly musical. Trolleys rambled colorfully up and down the busy cobbled streets, and every so often, a street performer presented some trick. Rooting in his pants pocket, as he was not wearing his Poet's coat today, Robert handed a few coins to a juggler.

Over the trestle and along the cliffs, Robert stood in the shadow of the lighthouse almost too soon. Lighthouse Point, an actual point, was the northernmost tip of Cheshire Bay, on clear days giving a sweeping view of the long, crescent shores. Today the blue sea opened up, and in the distance, Robert could just make out a twinkling of sun on windows in Sortello across the bay. Gulls wailed, ships spread egg-shell white sails, and the warm wind pulled on the curls of

Robert's hair with sensual fingers. The crisp smell of kelp and salt cleared his mind, and a smile turned up the corners of his lips.

"Oh Gauntland," Robert said into the constant growl of the waves, "have I got a gift for you."

Behind him the dark trees of the forest dipped their feet into the edges of Dale Port, and before him, the world opened water-blue arms, welcoming the future Robert was making. Right here, right now, on the sandstone cliffs above the white-crested waves, Robert McWerein was going to change the world.

As soon as the scroll was out of the book bag, Robert's mouth grew dry and his palms moist. No people strolled along the cliff's edge, but he looked around for them anyway. He thought there were voices, but it must have been the wind. Hands quivering with a little fear, a little elation, Robert unscrewed the golden cap, setting it by his feet. Using two fingers to reach into the cylinder, he removed the scroll as if it were made of dried flowers. He was surprised to learn it was painted on silk, not paper, in metallic golden ink. No illumination, no embellishments of any kind, just thirteen lines of plain, less-than-neat writing.

Robert took a long, deep breath, let it out, cleared his throat, and looked directly at the scroll. He read the first line out loud, relishing the taste it left in his mouth, the thrill it excited through his body. It was like giving birth to the world, like the world breathing new life into him. The next line was just as sweet, and by the third he could feel the meter, hear the resonance in the rhyme. On the sixth line, sweat broke out on his forehead as he began to realize what he was reading. The words stuck in his throat as the sonnet's purpose became clear. The words glittered sweetly up at him. Cold fingers wrapped around his head, unseen claws peeling back bone and flesh, sinking talons deep into his mind, and he couldn't scream, couldn't breathe...

A calm voice whispered in his ear, gentle, in an unfamiliar accent. *What have you done, my dear Robert? Oh, look what you have done!*”

He wanted to look away, to hurl the scroll over the cliff and run before it was too late...but he couldn't make his body obey. A quiet sob slurred the words of the next line.

*Go on*, he could hear the voice in his ear lick its lips, *finish it. Read my scroll.*

## Chapter 2

### The Girl from Bridgemark

In the forest, over the mountains to the East of Dale Port, stood the city of Bridgemark. A proud construction of grey brick and expressionless windows, the vast settlement sprawled out for thousands of acres of treeless farmland and busy inner city, a sterile cancer in the middle of deep forest. There was a wall around the city of Bridgemark, thirty feet high and wide enough to let two riflemen walk abreast. The wall was said to keep the demons in the forest out, but it also served to keep the people in. Only one dirt wagon road, long since overgrown by sweet-broom and foxtails, came near to the city. The postal service left on horseback to and from Dale Port once each month, and never more. All telegraph wires stayed within the wall. Nobody came to visit the people in Bridgemark, and if they did, they often did not leave. If they did leave, they never came back.

In the center of the city stood a four-sided tower, over eighteen stories, bland and square, jutting like an insistent finger into the wide open sky. The tower was their temple to the god



Rosquar, and the city was the holy ground upon which the people of Bridgemark practiced and propagated their faith. Several hundred years ago, the first settlers from the northern country of Brindale, asked for religious sanctuary in Gauntland. The Master Knight, a man of good heart and a mind for equality granted them asylum, and they dug their greedy roots deep. The settlement became a town and the town unraveled into a city, and the cult of Rosquar became a religion. When the wall went up and all trade with Dale Port halted, the Master Knight came to negotiate. Bridgemark repaid his hospitality by assassinating him.

Gauntland could have razed the city. They had the militia, they had the explosives. But Bridgemark pleaded innocence, lay low, and pulled farther and farther away from the world until the younger generations never learned to place it on a map. That was just what Bridgemark wanted.

Today was an ordinary Wednesday in the Killkenney Finishing School for Girls. The stuffy schoolhouse sat on the far side of several farming estates, close to the western side of the wall. Through the windows, the forest loomed vast and dark.

Laurien Shartruce sat at her desk, pen in hand, mind outside. Beyond the thin, wavy glass window, the city was bright, men in coats too long and dark for the summer's day strolled the cobbled streets. Now and then a woman walked stiffly by, buttoned up chin-to-ankle, head overshadowed by an enormous, oftentimes plumed, hat. Laurien watched mouths move in silent conversation, hands flicking to the fronts of shops, the passing streetcars, mustaches bobbing, eyes crinkled up in soundless laughter. Over the wall, the woods looked still and cool. And Laurien was stuck here.

Laurien was more woman than girl at sixteen, her purple, blue, and black uniform doing little to hide the shape her body was taking. Chestnut hair was pulled into a too-tight bun on the

back of her head, but a few strands dangled in front of light brown eyes. Her skin, a mellow olive, would turn a deep gold if she could just get out into the summer sun.

Her pen made an unpleasant scratch against her notebook. Today was just like any other day, for everyone but Laurien. Today, her mother delivered Laurien's death sentence to her over breakfast, in the form of a formal, richly decorated letter. Laurien was to be married this September, to a man she had never met. *For her own good*. Laurien didn't know how many more decisions made on her behalf she could handle.

Daniel had been the second, the stable boy from the farm next to her family's estate. They had grown up together, she and her brother Eugene, and Daniel. Two years ago, Laurien and Daniel shared their first kiss, early this spring they spent their first night together, along in the hayfields, the stars the only eyes watching. A month and a half ago, Laurien's mother, Helena, discovered the relationship, and the next day, no one could tell her where Daniel went. Her mother claimed she'd had him sent to Santamaurice, which was better than dead, but either way, he was gone.

The first had been Eugene. One August night, the cicadas humming in the rafters of their mansion, Laurien's brother came home, with something unreadable in his eyes and a newspaper in his hand. Laurien had been still quite young, and to this day, couldn't fully recall what happened. Eugene had shouted and pointed at the paper, and then cried and swore. Laurien remembered him talking about the Master Knight of Gauntland, though in what context, she didn't know, and could still hear his deep voice hissing the words *murder, useless, and in the name of your heathen fucking god*. Laurien remembered crying because Eugene was unhappy, and him putting a firm hand on her shoulder. He told her something, something about being strong and seeing lies, and when their father told him he was putting wicked thoughts into his

daughter's head, and that he need repent, needed to be cleansed by the High Priest before his wild ideas could hurt Laurien, he left. But not before hiding a sword under Laurien's mattress with the note: *when you grow up, come find me.*

The pen made a frail plea as Laurien tried to coax more ink from the nib than it held. She stuck it in the ink well and left it there, watching it grow indistinct as her eyes filled with tears.

Around the classroom, Madam Gloucester paced slowly, peering past the tops of books, hooked nose reaching over shoulders to make certain none of the girls was straying from the assignment. Today that assignment was an article in *The Etiquette of the Modern Woman*, a discourse on pleasing a husband while caring for a brood of children. Laurien blinked, forcing her eyes to look at the page, but all she read was the same line, over and over and over. "...and in the event the husband begins to look elsewhere for pleasures, it is evident the woman is failing to perform her duties as wife, and must..."

Madam Gloucester refused to open the windows or doors, and the air was moist and stagnant. Sweat gathered on Laurien's upper lip, down her back, and along her brown fingers, smudging the ink in her notebook. Picking up the pen again, Laurien let it continue writing. What, exactly, it was writing, Laurien wasn't sure, but it wasn't notes. *I Hate you!* Laurien thought at the book, *I Hate you! Maybe husbands wouldn't fuck the milk maids if his wife actually loved him, but that's not gonna happen, is it, Bridgemark? Oh no, you chose who we marry. You chose who we can't love. And you're the only reason this stupid book was ever written, and the reason I have to read it!* An empty smile turned up the corners of Laurien's mouth. She bit her lip to keep it steady. She'd had it with Bridgemark. It was finally time for her to leave, too.

Front to back, the red-walled room was filled with girls her own age, all dressed in the same uniform, rough, itchy skirts, stockings thick and clinging, hair pulled up too tight. Not a single one resented Killkenney, they loved it, ate it up, boasted about it to one another as if sharing the experience would somehow make it more noble. They spoke to Laurien too, at night before bed, over communal meals. Wasn't she excited to have the opportunity to graduate from such an esteemed school? No. Laurien could see something her classmates, the closest things she had to friends, could not. These girls, each and every one of them was growing up, getting married, and in a few short years be the same perfect, respectable, and tyrannical woman as Laurien's mother. And, when they were old, and could have no more children, they would become Gloucesters. Shrewd, rigidly respected, and without souls.

"Why, Miss Shartruce, are you not taking your notes?" Laurien snapped her head around at Gloucester's sharp voice. She could feel the woman inflating behind her.

Laurien's lips became dry and her pen still. "I am."

The notebook was snatched from her desk. "It sure doesn't look like it!"

Laurien could feel Madam Gloucester's squinty eyes bulging, hear the stretch of cotton thread as buttons strained against an expanding coat.

*Crack!* Laurien sucked in her breath as Gloucester brought her crop down on the edge of her desk.

"You are not engaging the text! How do you expect to learn if you don't take notes?"

Laurien looked deeply into the swirling shapes of the wood grain across the top of her desk. "I don't."

"Begging your pardon?"

"I don't."

“Excuse me?” Heat rose in Madam Gloucester’s voice.

“I said I don’t want to learn!”

The crop whizzed against the stagnant air, raising a hot welt across the back of Laurien’s shoulder. Scrambling out of her seat, Laurien found herself backed against the windows, tears running down her face, a sob in her throat.

“Your mother was right,” the madam fondled her crop calmly, “you really are a filthy whore. How she expects us to break you of your twisted ways is beyond me.”

Every pair of eyes in the room were focused on Laurien. The looks in those eyes hurt. Something in the way they shifted away from her face, focused on her trembling hands, made her feel like she was on trial, like she would be the next one to burn on the pyre in the middle of the city. She felt their separation from her like hot breath on her face. The tears poured steadily now, turning Gloucester and the room into drab patterns.

“You have nowhere else to go,” said the madam in a measured tone, “if you get expelled from this school, I doubt your family will take you back, and I wouldn’t blame them for an instant. Now, to the chancellor’s office. I’ll deal with you after the lesson.”

Laurien stared at the door. Madam Gloucester stood between it and her, crop still raised. *You have nowhere else to go.* But she did. Beyond the window, outside the city’s wall, there was a whole world she could run to. A world that somewhere hid Eugene, and maybe even Daniel.

“I said, get to the chancellor’s office!”

Laurien’s hands slid across the oak desk closest to her, one lacking a student. She felt the cool, smooth redwood beneath her fingers, she soft bite of shallow carvings. She threw the whole thing through the window. Or rather, the desk hit the window, and bounced. The crash was impressive, the glass arching outward with drama, almost enough to crack, but not quite. The

desk, legs jutting out in fright, toppled off the protruding windowsill and smashed into Kristina Shenger's head. Kristina slumped to the floor, clutching at her own bright blood with open-mouthed amazement, while the desk careened to a halt, knocking into more than one shin in the process.

Laurien pressed her hand to her mouth. There was a beautiful pause in which the only sound was the blinking of astonished eyes and a meek whimper from Kristina. Gloucester was the first to make a move, advancing on Laurien without comment. The look in her small, mirthless eyes could have curdled water. The crop moved in slow motion. Laurien didn't mean to, but as the crop swung down, her hand came up, fingers wrapping around the handle. In a moment she would never really remember, she twisted the crop free of Gloucester's vice-like grip, holding it safely out of reach.

"Don't touch me," she panted, voice weak and hoarse, "don't fucking touch me!"

Madam Gloucester didn't move for a moment, then she grasped Laurien's upper arm in a bony hand, pulling her out of the classroom.

"Go home," Gloucester pointed a long finger to the doors, "don't come back."

Laurien left, but she did not go home. Warm, fresh air hit her like a blow to the face as she swung through the doors. The sob that had been waiting just beneath her skin broke free, but she choked it back, fighting the tears back in her eyes. Just beyond the wall, she could see the forest.

If Laurien had taken a moment to collect her thoughts, she might have snuck back to her family's mansion, packed her belongings, and vanished into the night. But, she did not take that moment, and before she really realized what was happening, guards were shouting in confusion as she sprinted through the city gates.

The dark shadows of the forest fell around her as the trees closed off the blue sky. Her heart pounded in her ears as her hard shoes raced over the unfamiliar ground. Ahead, the road turned, and beyond that turn, there could be anything.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Girl from Terrebeth**

It was Wednesday morning, and it was dark. The sun had not yet reached the village of Terrebeth, deeply nestled along the crease between two mountains. The redwoods and tan oak swayed gently in the early light, deep autumn colors of brown and smoky greens. Oddly sized houses built of stone and timber seemed to grow from the trees, smoke unraveling like dark yarn from every few chimneys. If Bridgemark was the city no one spoke of, Terrebeth was the village that did not exist. No roads wandered within miles of the village, only game trails came close. Periodically, inquisitives from Dale Port or elsewhere got the whim to find Terrebeth, but no records indicated anyone had ever been successful. It was said travelers could walk right through the center of the town and never see it, that it could only be entered at dawn or sunset, or at the rising of the full moon. Local myths blanketed Terrebeth like a web of lichen, but little was really known. As the stories go, there were seven bridges that had to be crossed in order to find



the village, and only the first three were mapped. Maybe there were only three, and some needed to be crossed more than once, in the right order. Among most academic sources, it was agreed Terrebeth was likely once a native settlement, which dwindled away and became more folk tale than fact. Superstitions, children's stories. A reason to not enter the forest alone. For in many of the legends, the people of Terrebeth were not human.

Atoña Birgendi watched as men and women hurried deliberately around the village, head tilted to one side, dark blue eyes steady and slow to blink. Atoña would turn seventeen this fall, and over the winter and long spring she had grown up and leaned out, leaving behind a round-cheeked girl for a sinewy woman with a sharp nose, high cheekbones, and lips almost too red for her fair skin. At the first hot day of spring, she took her knife and cut off her child's braid, and now her bronze hair coiled around muscled shoulders, braided with beads and black feathers. She wore a long black shirt over short black pants, and a rusted old key hung on a chain from her neck.

When the weather was fair, which it most often was in the temperate Tosaga Mountains, Atoña spent most of her time trooping about the woods, learning the deer trails. She knew the songs of all the birds, and on hot summer nights sat out on the sandstone ridges and sang with the coyotes. When she wasn't outside, Atoña liked to study, telling anyone who would listen that soon she would leave the village and go to University to become a scientist. "How lovely for you," was the common response, as no one believed she could do it. But Atoña knew she would, sooner or later, and then the village would have to eat its words.

Seated on the edge of a sandstone boulder, Atoña balanced the tip of a bow on top of her suede shoe, methodically pulling a chunk of beeswax along the string. Trackers wandered around the center of town, heads bent down, fingers brushing a little at the tree dander, a myriad of

different colored and textured hair hanging in their faces. A monster had been seen in the village of Terrebeth that morning, though what sort of monster, there was no straight story. Someone said it was a mountain lion, not exactly a monster, while someone else said it had talons and a stinging tail. One boy thought it had scales, while another swore it had wings. Whatever it was, it sounded interesting.

Burnishing the string between her fingers, Atoña tested the bow's pull before strapping a quiver of black-feathered arrows over her shoulder. Yes, chasing a monster would be very interesting. Once she set foot over the Seven Bridges, there was no telling where the trail might lead her. A smile turned up her lips and narrowed her eyes. Her elongated ears lay back against her hair, quivering. A monster was a great excuse to venture out into the world. What with Bridgemark's poachers on the prowl, it felt like years since her mother and father took her to any of the human towns or cities, and there was something in the bizarre electric letters and horseless carriages that fascinated Atoña. For the most part, the Alduna Sidhe of Terrebeth remained ghosts to the common folk, and Atoña found it pretty dull.

Adjusting the quiver until it fit snug, Atoña trotted nimbly through the village proper. Houses built from wood and river rocks clung to the sides of huge trees, lanterns dangling from upper branches. Several chimneys emitted coils of smoke rich with the sweat smell of corn bread and venison. Around the outdoor meeting hall, where councils gathered every now and again, dried gourds leered into the woods with wicked, carved faces, illuminated from within by tiny green flames. Winding around clusters of uneasy sidhe, Atoña jogged down the short path to the riverbank, where she was supposed to meet her friends Qeo, Fable, and Demereian.

Demereian was the only one there, and Atoña took a breath and let it out before he noticed her. Demereian Mohoggoney was a little bit sad, in Atoña's opinion. Not an unpleasant

person by any means, but, well, sad. Or rather, pitiable. Almost three years her junior, Demereian was small and stringy with too many freckles, an obnoxiously orange mop of hair, and a nose too big for his face. And he fancied her, though he vehemently denied it. He was the meddling little kid who strove to impress, and all the adults thought it was cute. Atoña thought it ridiculous.

He was awkward and without sense, and Atoña cared deeply for him, though she would never admit it. She hated hearing the story, as it always made her feel predestined for frailness, but there had been complications during her birth, and it had been Demereian's father who fetched a human midwife. If not for him, there would be no Atoña Birgendi. Demereian's father was the man all others strove to be, strong and humble, and Atoña loved him like a second father, and he treated her like one of his own children. But her memory of him was blurred, like paintings that have gotten wet, as he was murdered when Atoña was very young. Shot in the back by a heathen from Bridgemark. Demereian was welcomed into a the world a few months later by a devastated mother and a strange little girl who saw the father in the child's eyes. Atoña's parents took the boy and his mother under their wings whenever needed, and he became the little brother Atoña never wanted.

"What are you doing?" Demereian lifted one carrot colored brow into his messy bangs. Atoña noticed he was holding his saber by the bladed end.

"You're supposed to hold it by the hilt," Atoña took the blade without asking, and pointed at the dulled edge, "the blade goes in the bad guy. Honestly. Is Owlwing *really* letting you go hunting, or did you just tell me that in hopes I might take you with me?"

Demereian's face crinkled up, "Master Owlwing isn't *letting* me, thank you," he none-too-gently took back his saber, "*I'm* going with *her* because she's the best hunter there is!" He folded his arms, "And I do too know how to hold my sword!"

“Sure.” Atoña didn’t say what she was thinking. Scanning the riverbank, a pattern in the sand drew her attention. Demereian said something she didn’t hear.

“It’s not like I need to be going out with anyone.” he was getting into one of his boastful moods, “If I went with you, you’d just hold me...”

“Shh!” Atoña waved him quiet. “Do you see what I see?”

“No,” Demereian gave his saber a flourish, to which Atoña scowled and took a step back. “But like I was saying...”

“They’re going the wrong way.”

“What?” He gave her a look that said she was being dumb.

“The trackers. I saw them earlier go off into the mountains, but they’re following the tracks the wrong way.”

“What?”

“Look,” Atoña took Demereian’s chin between her fingers, to which he swatted at her hand, directing his gaze at the trail. Big, feline tracks, too long to be a mountain lion’s, stood out distinctly along the bank, leading down the river. Demereian’s tracks only marred a few.

“Huh,” Demereian pulled her hand off his face, giving her his vilest eyes. “Well. Aren’t *you* smart!”

“The monster couldn’t have gone far,” Atoña smoothed her bangs behind her ears, “If it stayed by the river, the cliffs get pretty steep, and it wouldn’t have many places to go.”

Demereian held his sword at arm’s length, closing one eye to look down the blade.

“Yeah, so?”

“So,” Atoña inspected her three-fingered glove, “I’m going to chase it.”

“What?” Demereian slid the sword into its sheath, tilting his head. “You can’t go after it alone!”

Atoña closed her eyes. “Why not? It’s no big deal. I mean, it’s probably just a lion. I just want to see it.”

Demereian shorted, “Great, you go wondering out alone monster hunting and get eaten by a dragon. Real smart for someone who can’t even use magic.”

A red lip curled over Atoña’s teeth, and her long ears lay back. “I don’t need magic! I’m as good a tracker there is, and I know these woods like the inside of my house. And I’m not afraid of a monster. If it even *is* one.”

“But,” Demereian looked concerned? No. “What if it gets you?”

“What if it gets me? I have a bow.”

“That you’re not very good with.”

“Hell of a lot better than you!”

“Yeah right!” Demereian kicked a piece of stone and bit his lip when it turned out to be the top of a rock. “Fine! Get eaten!”

“You too.”

Atoña let out a long breath. “Look, if I don’t get back tonight, I’ll send word with the Huntsman as to where I’m going and what I’m doing.”

“Oh joy, the Huntsmen.” Demereian rolled his eyes.

Atoña smiled. She cherished the memory of Demereian as a little boy crying as the Wild Hunt rode through the village.

“Wait,” Demereian tilted his head the other way, “what do you mean if you’re not back tonight. You’re *leaving, aren’t* you?”

Atoña shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Demereian deflated a little. “Will you come back?”

“Of course I’ll come back, don’t be stupid.” She patted him on the head, to which he batted her hands away again.

“Wish me luck.” Giving the boy a wink, Atoña turned and sprinted down the river into the dark forest. Demereian watched her go. Sitting on the coarse river sand he rested his chin on his knees, imagining the monster out there in the forest. He pulled his coat a little closer, though the morning was not cold.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Captain of the Guard**

“I’ve told you five times if I’ve told you once. Now, shut your mouth and pay attention. The Thirteenth Ambrosia Scroll has been stolen!”

“Yes, Winston. I heard you the first time,” Jeffery Scottston looked longingly out the window, “I understand a scroll has been stolen from the Poet’s Guild. I don’t understand what ambrosia has to do with any of it.”

Jeffery Scottston ran a hand through his russet hair, feeling a few exasperated strands come free of his scalp. He was a well-built man of about forty-one, bright-eyed, youthful, and squinting against the unwelcome call to his office. It was six fifteen Thursday morning at the

Station, and the Captain of the Dale Port Guard really resented having to get out of bed and put on his uniform for some misplaced documents.

Winston, somewhere around eighty, all bones and knobby joints save for a round balloon of a belly, looked appalled, all but bursting the fine golden stitching on his Poet's coat.

"The *Ambrosia* Scrolls! Good god in the heavens Jeffery, I would think a man in your position, of your *educational* background, would show a little more concern in the face of such ill news!"

Jeffery let his face sink into his calloused palm. He had no idea what Winston was talking about and hadn't heard of anything called ambrosia that couldn't be served up at a cocktail party. Winston was old, very old. Jeffery, on occasion, visited the Guild and was familiar with the chemicals used by the Poets to clean and preserve ancient documents. Too many years of breathing the fumes hadn't been kind to Winston's mind.

"Alright Winston, calm down. I'm sure it's not as bad as it seems. Someone stole a scroll. This is not the first time this has happened. Can I telegraph the Gauntland Press Syndicate and request a replacement from the Capital Archives?"

Jeffery must have said something wrong. He thought Winston might be having a heart attack.

"The *Ambrosia* Scrolls!" Winston moved his mouth like a hungry carp, "Have you any idea how powerful they are?" His jowls quivered in distress, "They cannot be replaced. They cannot be rewritten. Do you have any idea what they are?"

"No, Winston," Jeffery nudged the tip of a pencil across his desk until it was parallel to the edge of the desk, "I have never heard of the *Ambrosia* Scrolls, or anything that might sound similar. They sound like one of your secret fraternity Poet conspiracies to me." The Captain



rested his chin on his knuckles. “If you wouldn’t mind having a seat and joining me in a cup of coffee, perhaps you could enlighten me.”

Winston blustered for a moment, then sank in a deflating manner into the offered chair. The chair of rich burgundy leather, high-backed and deep seated, seemed to swallow the old man.

“Yes,” said Winston after a prolonged pause in which Jeffery retrieved a cup and poured him a lukewarm helping of coffee. “I will do the best I can, give me a moment, if you please.”

Taking his seat once more, the Captain folded his hands on the desk. His eyes meandered around the office as Winston gathered his thoughts. His office, on the second floor of the Guard station, was spacious and imbued with a comforting, homey quality by the small stove against one wall, the cathedral-topped bookshelf, and framed black and white photos of the Captain’s wife. A broad, three-paned window of fine smooth glass offered a panorama of Dale Port and the Tosaga Mountains, just over Winston’s head. Jeffery knew very little about the Poets and their Guild, for as he might call Winston a friend, he found much of their dealings a little too close to superstitions. They were scholars who knew things, or pretended they knew things, that no one else was privileged to, and Jeffery found it exasperating.

Winston fidgeted with his knobby fingers. Jeffery cleared his throat and the Poet looked up abruptly.

“Right, right. The Ambrosia Scrolls.” He paused.

Jeffery picked up the pencil and tapped it against the edge of a leather-bound legal dictionary. “Well, are you going to tell me or not? I would like to have an idea of what I’m dealing with before I send my men out on a scavenger hunt.”

Winston had gone a little pale, a shade close to over-boiled oatmeal. He was slow in answering, and when he did, his voice hollowed.

“It’s funny, the things we take for granted,” the skin around his eyes crinkled, but he did not smile, “the sun rising in the morning, the rivers running down to the coast, the plants, the wind, the animals...” His voice trailed away before his eyes snapped back to the Captain’s, wide and glossy. “If I were to tell you the story of the Ambrosia Scrolls, we would still be here come the morning after next. But, I will tell you this. Ambrosia is not one of our fanciful Poems.” He blinked slowly, running his tongue over thin dry lips, “Ambrosia is ancient, very ancient. Older than our time has numbers to measure. It was written, as the story goes, by thirteen, you might call them gods, in a time when the Earth was...” Winston seemed on the verge of saying something which greatly disturbed him, “well, there was something wrong with the world, that’s it. The original Poets, or Laureates, as we now call them, came from somewhere far away. They were not human nor fey, if you believe in the sidhe, that is, and when the world had been...fixed...the Twelve lesser Laureates went back to wherever they came from.”

Jeffery didn’t miss the uneasy look that crossed Winston’s face, “Twelve? What about the last one?”

“Ah. Him. Garth.”

Now Garth, Jeffery had heard of. Apparently some sort of sage or magician, Garth roamed the lands of past centuries, erecting bizarre artistic structures around the globe. Jeffery had seen the Floating Lock in Santamaurice and the Endless Hedge Maze on the other side of the Aviar Mountains, and could not deny they defied all logic, both of hard and eldritch sciences. There were paintings of the late Lord Nothelenor, Master Knight of Gauntland, with Garth

standing behind him, easy to miss, just a boy in a crowd, strange golden eyes affixed on the viewer.

“Garth,” Winston continued in measured tones, “was said to be their leader, the grand Poet or Master Laureate or whatever you want to call him. His scroll is the one that made all the others work. He stayed behind...no one really knows why... for eons. People forgot who he was, and when Poets, people like me, began to be born, he showed the first of us how to use our craft. We were not like him. Nothing like him. We were born to protect the history of the world: the maps, carvings, pottery, literature, art, all the little things that make up the evolution of human civilization was ours to preserve. But above all, we were to protect the Ambrosia Scrolls. Garth built us the Vault for this purpose, centuries before there was a Dale Port.

“Garth,” the word sounded like it should be something much worse, “I never met him, but my master, God rest his soul, said his master did. He did not speak of him much, out of respect or fear, my master didn’t know, but what he did say was that Garth was soft-spoken, polite, and when he walked into a room, you could feel that he could make the walls crumble away if he wanted to.” Taking a long drink from his mug, Winston blinked heavily. “No one, and this is not a lie, Jeffery, knows for certain what the Ambrosia Scrolls do, or what will happen if they are read. However, I believe it cannot be good. Garth has not been seen or heard from in nigh a hundred years, and there is not a common Poet alive who has the skill to read them properly. I hate to admit it, but in the last few hundred years, too many good Poets have lost their minds on much lesser things than those scrolls, and we have become quite...cautious.”

Jeffery stared into his coffee, wishing he had something stronger to lace it with. “Alright. So it is powerful and old, and very valuable, at least to you Poets. How did someone steal it? Don’t you guard that Vault place pretty well?”

“Oh yes, yes,” Winston waved off his concern with nervous hands, “very well protected. By rights, no one should have been able to take it.” Jeffery was listening now, mildly interested through his early-morning apathy. “But Robert did just that.”

“Who?” Now Jeffery was a little more awake, “You know who stole it?”

“Robert McWerein.”

Grabbing a pad of paper Jeffery scribbled down the name. “Can you describe him, by chance?”

“Certainly,” this activity seemed more pleasant to Winston, who provided plenty of details. “He’s twenty-five, well-kept, looks a little younger than he is. Curly darkish brown hair, tan skin, but not as dark as most Gauntlanders, grey eyes, a little squinty. About five-foot-seven, one-hundred-forty-five pounds, maybe fifty. Slight accent, he moved here twelve years ago from Trippany. Usually he wears casual street clothes, at least he was yesterday.”

Jeffery’s pen slowed, his rust colored mustache prickling to one side. “You sure seem to know a great deal about this Robert fellow. An acquaintance, perhaps?”

Winston swallowed, eyes bulging a little. “Yes, Jeffery, in fact he was. A friend, actually. Robert McWerein is a Poet.”

A silence stretched between the two men. Out the window, swallows cheeped and warbled under the eaves.

“He just walked in the front door after lunch, let himself into the Vault, took the scroll, and walked out. Nobody thought to stop him.”

Jeffery tapped the end of a stack of paperwork on his desk until they were all aligned. “And what, theoretically, will happen if McWerein reads attempts to read said scroll?”

Winston shrugged. It was an awkward, pained motion and creaking of joints.

“Theoretically, three things could happen, the most likely of which would be the scroll would just kill him. Garth was not the forgiving type, by all accounts.” He made a tight chuckle. “It is possible, his mind might be broken in the process...Poetry is like that...very serious stuff, not to be trifled with. Yes, that is highly probable.” Winston dabbed at his face with the edge of the chair doily.

“And the third?”

The expression on Winston’s face made the skin on Jeffery’s arms gather into cold pimples. “Everything we know will be undone.”

## Chapter 5

### The World is a...

The sky held no color, the weak sun no warmth. Thin, sickly fog rolled along the water's edge, leaching away the deep green of the bay, the tan shimmer of the sand, and the intricately gilded hauls of the ships at dock. Thursday morning on the Cheshire Bay whined with the mournful calling of gulls and the slow, melancholy lapping of half-hearted waves. The Dale Port municipal wharf poked out into the dull water like an accusing finger, supported into the depths by huge tree-trunk pylons peppered with barnacles and kelp. Amidst the wash of muted browns and grey, a starfish or two added a pin prick of color.

Robert lay on his back shivering. His mouth felt like it was filled with dust and his stomach ached with hunger, but he couldn't bring himself to move. He lay as far up under the wharf as he could crawl, face inches from the salt washed wood. The smell of old tide burned up his nose with each breath, but he hardly smelled it anymore. Overhead, foot-falls of shoppers and fishermen clomped along. Voices spoke in indiscernible conversation, and the occasional whiff of fried fish drifted down to Robert's level. Robert knew all of this in excruciating detail. If he rolled over and looked out at the picturesque shore, he would see it, and hear it, and smell it, but

he would also read it... *and now the waves wash against the sand with a gentle sound, children in ugly swimming suits bound in and out of the surf, their laughter is like...*

Robert dug his fingers into his scalp, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. His head ached, a slow rhythmic throb in his left temple that has haunted him through the night. He needed to get up from his hiding place, he needed to buy food and water and go home... Home? A cold lump welled up in Robert's throat and he squeezed his eyes shut against painful tears. The apartment on Lark Avenue, looking over Garden Street, had been his home for four years since he moved out of the Guild residence. A desire to go there, to lie on his own couch and drink his home-made ice tea made the tears dribble down his cheeks. If he went home now, it wouldn't be home anymore. Nothing was what it used to be a day before. Nothing. Robert McWerein had changed the world, oh yes, but only, it seemed for himself. Everything, all the tiny impossible details of the world were written, readable, like the whole universe were just a...

Robert sat up, forcing his eyes open. Crawling slowly into the sun-drenched sand he dug his fingers deeply into the warmth, ignoring the narrative inspired by his actions. *He feels the tiny grains clinging to his finger tips, the cool gust off the water tousles his hair...*

Staggering to his feet, Robert inhaled deeply, humming under his breath to drown out the calm voice in his head. Shaking off layers of sand, he climbed shakily up to the boardwalk perpendicular to the wharf. It wasn't really a voice, he conceded, favoring his right leg, which had fallen asleep, he just knew what things were. The city blurred and Robert staggered into a young man in a winter coat carrying a tea pot.

"Sorry, excuse me," Robert shook his head against the weird dizziness. For a moment, it felt like the world really was tilting, like it was moving sideways and he was standing still. Then his head cleared.

“Curious morning, isn’t it?” The young man replied, tilting his hat. The sun shone golden in his eyes before he turned away from Robert, just another body on the boardwalk. Robert got a block away before anything unusual about the man occurred to him, and by then, he was long gone. Wiping his eyes on the sides of his fingers, Robert approached Morvolio’s Sandwich Shoppe.

Cafés and novelty stores lined the boardwalk for nearly a quarter mile, peppered randomly by one-room gambling casinos and mystics who could tell a man his fortune for half the cash in his wallet. Letting himself into Morvolio’s Robert quickly purchased a liverwurst sandwich and coffee. It took him another block to realize he was eating liverwurst and toss the remaining quarter-sandwich in a trash bin. By the time Robert reached the end of Garden Street, the opposite end than the Guild, he remembered he left his book bag under the wharf. Exhaling a heavy breath, he turned and walked all the way back to the water. By now trolleys were wandering along the beach road and back into town, shuffling tourists from hotels to the beachfront and back. Robert quickened his pace. Teenagers were playing with a ball, dashing in and out of the wharf’s pylons, laughing and kicking sand at each other. Hopping off the boardwalk Robert crawled back under the dark wood, groping around until his hand found the denim strap of his bag. Pulling it out, he shimmied back into the sunlight, sliding the strap over his shoulder. Something hit the sand with a soft *thump*. In the sand, so black in made the tan grains appear white, lay the scroll. Robert felt a deep cold grip him by the back of the neck as he quickly bent to retrieve it. Shoving it in his bag, he looked up and almost screamed. Not more than a yard away sat the young man in the winter coat, feet dangling off the edge of the boardwalk. The teapot rested in his lap like a cat.



It was hard for Robert to guess the man's age, for his face seemed both mature and youthful. Possibly eighteen, no, twenty-four, no, sixteen. The coat and paper-boy had reminded Robert of a beggar, but the cleanliness of his clothes, the well kept sheen of his too-big boots, said otherwise. As did the long gentle curls of light brown hair coiling perfectly over his shoulders. But it was his eyes that made Robert feel uneasy, the way the shadow of the boy's hat hid their color, made them feel somehow unreal.

"Can I help you?" Robert fumbled to close the book bag, praying fervently to any god who might care to listen that he hadn't seen the scroll.

The boy tilted his head. "No." his voice was soft, slightly accented. "Would you join me for tea?"

Robert took a step back, blinking. Around the boy, words danced around, describing everything in his perception, but the boy remained an odd blur of nothing. "What? Why? I don't think so."

"You might want to reconsider." The boy steepled long pale fingers. "The Captain of the Guard is looking for you," a detached smile turned up the corners of the boy's red, girlish lips, "*Robert.*"

The world tilted again and Robert pressed his fingers into his temples as the ocean morning swam and wavered in a bizarre dance of color, sound, smells, and words. He wanted to run, to hide himself someplace cool and dark, but he felt a hand take his arm and steer him across the beach and up the steps to the boardwalk. Soon the sun hid behind a wall of building, and as Robert's head cleared he realized he was in the back of an ally, in a part of town he'd never visited. Looking frantically around, he found himself alone. Panic sent chill claws up his back.

“My, my, you do look a fright.” The boy was suddenly back next to him. “Please Robert,” he held out a hand toward a mildew covered milk crate, “join me for tea.” The weird eyes gleamed.

The strength gone from his legs, Robert sank onto the offered crate, letting his face fall into his hands.

Taking the opposite crate across a makeshift table of an old shipping box, the boy watched him without speaking. Setting the teapot of the table, he rubbed a hand across the pink floral print until steam issued from the spout.

## Chapter 6

### The Manticore and the Monster

The bright Wednesday morning slowly unfolded into a bright Wednesday afternoon, and Laurien was beginning to grow tired of walking. What started as a carriage road narrowed down over several winding miles until it was little more than a path overgrown by an overcrowding of sweet broom. Hot and sticky, leaves kept falling into Laurien's hair, and burs clung desperately to the hem of her skirt. Thick yellow dust hung in the air around the oak trees, soaking into the sweat on Laurien's face, neck, and hands and itching terribly. Whatever the dust was, Laurien hated it and the tree it came from. If the sun and the dust were not unpleasant enough, it was apparent that despite the trail leading to Dale Port, it was taking her up rather than down.

All around Laurien redwood trees grew up out of the sorrel, enormous pillars, bigger than she imagined men could build, such a rich red-brown their shadows were almost purple. Where the bark stood out thickest, in gnarled bands so large and lattice-like Laurien wondered if she could climb them, were scars of black soot, maybe from a fire long ago. High above her, branches reached out like hands with too many fingers, catching the hot summer sun. but they didn't catch enough. The deep shade was decadent and dark, but the light that did reach the ground made the air shimmer and twist. The wool of Laurien's uniform hugged her skin like

paste. Several miles back, her scratchy stockings and garters were orphaned on the side of the road, but now her black shoes rubbed against her toes. A strand of hair came loose from its bun, dangling sweatily in Laurien's eyes. She attacked it with a grown until it stayed behind her ear. She had no idea where she was, or how to get anywhere, but she was not going back to Bridgemark.

She recognized her error in not gathering some belongings and supplies, but wasn't ready to admit that fact to herself. Her mouth was getting a little dry, but she did a pretty good job of ignoring it.

Laurien had been to the forest before, once on a pilgrimage to Melithnion Temple on a some distant ridge top, and the woods had been quiet and still. Now, the trees were filled with a high, static buzzing like the telegraph station. Birds warbled smartly back and forth around in the branches, and every so often a squirrel screamed at Laurien as she walked by. One bird, which she couldn't get a glimpse of, kept making a pesky whistle from over her shoulder like it was following her.

It occurred to Laurien that her friends would miss her, but it also occurred to her she didn't really have any friends. Not ones who would cry when she never came home, that is. There was Marie, the small, pale creature she sometimes ate lunch with, but she was three years younger than Laurien, and the adopted daughter of the High Priest, so they had never gotten very close. They'd crawled around in the dungeon beneath the governor's manor until Laurien got too big to squeeze under the iron door. But distance remained between them, and Laurien doubted Marie would miss her for long. As for her parents, Laurien couldn't give the ugly side of a frog's ass what they thought.

She kicked at a pebble and her toe smarted. Laurien swore. She would find Eugene in Dale Port, and they could pick up where her parents ended their relationship. She pictured his straight dark hair, the swarthy lines of his smile. He had to be there. Eugene was the only chance she had. The thought of not being able to find him haunted the back of her mind, but, like her lack of preparation, she shoved it into a corner for later. Instead of dwelling on how to get to Dale Port, and what to do when she got there, Laurien thought of Daniel.

If she let her mind go lax in the thick heat, Laurien could almost smell the sharp scent of his sweat after a day in the stables, feel the press of his arms around her shoulders, his breath in her hair.

Laurien's heart skipped painfully and she jumped. The odd sound came again, a rustling in the brush too big to be a squirrel. Up ahead the road pressed up against an embankment overflowing with yellow sweet broom blossoms. Pebbles crunched and rolled down the embankment into the path. Laurien took a slow step back as the bushes moved. Something was inside them.

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Sweat shone on Atoña's light skin and slid into her eyes. She jogged slowly, bow loose in her hand, hair and feathers bouncing on her shoulders. Before filling her quiver that morning she had wrapped a cloth around her arrows, so they moved together quietly. Panting shallowly Atoña let her long legs carry her down a deeply V-ed ravine. Water ran here during damper weather, but now the canyon was dry oak and madrone leaves layered over thirsty tree roots.

Atoña forgot her watch, but guessed the time around two in the afternoon, when the day began to bake the normally temperate forest in summer's oven. She had chased the monster's tracks all the way down the river valley until the river branched off into three new streams. The

tracks followed the smallest creek for another mile or so before taking off into the mountains. At this point, Atoña couldn't prove she was following anything, but she had a wallet full of Gauntland welky in her quiver, and figured she might as well take herself to a town. She was already this far, sooner or later her path would cross the Old Tanner Road from Bridgemark to Dale Port, and she planned to take it at least as far as Tosaga, the first human town on Deer River. Next came Cambren and over the adjacent hill, its sister town Larker Valley. From there it was only an hour's run to Dale Port. Atoña smiled.

The ravine turned sharply to the right and Atoña bounced from wall to wall, running out onto a dead oak wedged between some boulders and crouched down. The ravine came to an abrupt end as a road cut through it. Sweet broom crowded along the top of the embankment, showing only snatches of the road below as pools of sandy brown amidst green leaves. Atoña slunk closer, keeping low to the ground and using her hands for support. Something was walking loudly up the road, disturbing stones and crushing leaves with abandon. Atoña lay on her belly, using the tips of her fingers to part the grass in front of her face.

Up the narrow road walked a girl. A human girl, there was no doubt, about her own age but dressed in a horrible long-sleeved, thick-skirted outfit of an odd blue black and purple plaid. She had a dark complexion compared to Atoña, a medium olive close to Owlwing, and coppery chestnut hair. As far as Atoña was concerned, the girl was rather fat, filling out her ridiculous woolen clothes a little too fully. Atoña craned her neck. A riding crop was stuck through the belt of the girl's skirt. *What the hell?*

The girl walked awkwardly past, wobbling over pebbles in unforgiving shoes, mumbling and cursing to herself. Atoña followed her with her eyes until she was a dozen yards ahead, then

crept after her. Smirking, Atoña whistled to see if the girl would notice. When no reaction was given, she whistled again. The girl looked around distractedly and kept walking.

Getting to her feet, Atoña trotted quietly along the embankment, trying to place the girl's clothes. They looked like some sort of uniform, but not anything that came out of any of the local schools. No one in a healthy frame of mind would dress in full wool in the dregs of summer. Her feet slowed. Of course. How obvious. She was from Bridgemark.

The corner of one lip curled over Atoña's teeth. Her breathing became deep and controlled as her left hand reached back for an arrow. Bridgemark had grown brazen if they were sending their young into the forest. Atoña's hand stopped. Maybe the girl was bait! Maybe there was an ambush! Laying her ears back, Atoña darted along the edge of the sweet broom away from the girl, avoiding the dry leaf covered hill. Scouting around, she found no sign of more people. A normal hunting party would have no qualms about lurking off trail and climbing up trees, and it was to Atoña's great advantage the people of Bridgemark were highly superstitious and wouldn't easily leave a marked road. They believed the forest was filled with demons. Atoña's brows lowered and her ears quivered in glee. They were right. Cunning, clever demons who did not like them and their perverse ways. Atoña's tongue traced the insides of her lips. She ran quickly back the other way until she found the Bridgemark girl still hobbling and grumbling, and fell into step along with her. A black arrow rested on the string of her bow, but she wanted to learn what the creature was up to before she put it out of its misery.

Bridgemark was capable of anything. Demereian's father had been their friend for long decades, offering them political assistance and support where there was no gratitude. Atoña still remembered the day Onedish, Demereian's mother, a delicate, moth-like woman, lay on the shoulders of Atoña's own parents and wailed until the woods were full of the sound. Sometimes,

late at night, Atoña would wake up, still able to hear the anguish in the trees. How many Alduna Sidhe had lost something at the hands of Bridgemark? Children vanished from their play, some to never return, some to be found days later, scalps shorn off, ears cut, and the seal of the Black Sun shoved between their teeth. Atoña's cousin Qeo once had two older sisters. Avangeli was alive and in love, while seven years ago Mirnet's mate found her naked and mangled by the side of a creek, all the opalescent scales on her hands and feet cut out with knives. Mirnet's mate left Terrebeth not long after, and no one had heard from her since. Terrebeth had loved her, but Bridgemark left a stain so dark it could never be washed clean.

If Bridgemark showed brutality towards their Good Neighbors, it was nothing to how they treated their own children. Atoña shuddered. For whatever reason, their priests thought their devil-god took pleasure in cutting pieces out of babies and leaving them at the edge of the woods for the coyotes. No, Bridgemark was not a place to be trifled with. If one of their women, even a young one had entered the sidhe's forest, she was not to be ignored.

As Atoña watched her, the Bridgemark girl stopped, looking with wide eyes to the sweet broom seven yards in front of Atoña. Atoña's muscles tensed as she sensed movement in the brush. A faint, citrus scent tickled her nose. Pebbles bounced down the embankment and the Bridgemark girl backed away, stumbling over tree roots.

Out of the brush and onto the road leapt an animal, low and tawny, and the Bridgemark girl screamed.

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Out of the brush and onto the road leapt an animal, low and tawny, and Laurien screamed.



The creature batted the ground with a clawed paw and made a loud, whining sound, somewhere between a door creaking and a cat. Laurien stumbled back, tripped and fell hard on her backside. The animal made its noise again, patting its paw eagerly on the road. It was like nothing Laurien recognized. The closest thing she had seen was a dead cougar the hunters brought back, and this was no cougar. Though it was about the same size, with cat-like paws, and a cat-like face. But the face was elongated, more like a dog's, and the ears were more upright like a horse's. The eyes were big and bright green, and a mane of dark, almost burgundy, red grew from its head and neck down between muscled haunches. The fronts of all four legs were plated in dark, insect-like scales, and the long narrow tail ended in a six-inch barb. Laurien screamed again. The monster made a growling sound and lay down on its belly, stretching out its paws and clawing up clods of dirt. It looked up at Laurien from a head cocked half sideways. A long purplish tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth.

Laurien crawled like a crab until her back pressed against the trunk of a tree and twigs poked at her from all angles. Fear held her by the throat and despite her efforts to appear threatening, as she was told to do when faced by a wild cat, tears blurred her vision and sobs choked off her next attempts to cry out. Distantly, snatches of warnings flitted in her mind, things about demons and monsters in the forest, and she prayed, for the first time in years, for Rosquar to spare her.

The bushes rustled again and a second creature leapt down to the road. Laurien drew in a sharp breath. It was a boy dressed in black, and he had a bow. He was very tall and skinny, and his pants were very, very short, and his shirt had no sleeves, but he was strong-looking and he had a bow! But it was a strange, short bow that bent oddly back at the tips, and his arrows were

fledged in what looked like raven feathers. Jumping closer to Laurien, the boy held up his bow and shook it, kicking dirt at the monster in the road.

Laurien ogled at him, why wasn't he drawing that bow? Why didn't he shoot that *thing*? the thing in question rose into a hissing arch and bounded off up the road and into a thicket of trees. Laurien ogled some more. The boy's hips were wrong somehow, his legs not quite the right shape. He was lanky and sinewy like the boys training to guard the city, but his waist was too narrow, and the tight fit of his shirt clung to the outline of small breasts. He was a *girl*. Laurien backed harder against the tree. Girls didn't dress like that, not in Bridgemark... but weird or not, she just saved Laurien's life.

"Hi," Laurien tried to say, but her voice didn't work. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "Hi."

There was an arrow on the string of the strange girl's bow, and in one flawless motion the bow was drawn and that arrow leveled on Laurien's nose. Laurien floundered and tried to get her hands over her face.

"Stand up!" The girl with the bow ordered, stepping closer, "Stand up, *now!*"

Her accent was so heavy Laurien hardly knew what the girl was saying, but she recognized the motion made by the drawn bow, and climbed weakly onto jelly knees.

"Up, on your feet and turn around!" The girl's chest heaved and her voice sounded a little too high, but the bow remained steady.

Clumsy with fear, Laurien put her feet under herself and stood up. She hated turning her back on that razor-blade arrowhead, but hated what the girl might do if she didn't more. The string creaked as the bow was let down, and Laurien made a small cry as the girl ran her hands

over her back and around her skirt. “What are you doing?” Laurien forced some indignation into her trembling voice.

“Checking you for knives or explosives.” The girl poked a finger into the top of both Laurien’s shoes. Apparently satisfied Laurien was unarmed, the girl walked around her and stood several yards away, bow down but arrow knocked and fingers ready to draw. She glared at Laurien for a long moment.

Laurien’s breathing slowed a bit. The girl stared at her and she stared right back. She was not from Bridgemark, there could be no doubt. Her skin was very light, her hair a peculiar shade of light brown, braided with feathers and beads. Her eyes were big and dark blue with black makeup around them. A few freckles dotted her face and neck, and her features were lean, angular, and strong. Laurien wasn’t sure if she was pretty or not, but she was very unusual.

“What are you doing in my forest, Bridgemark creature?” The girl tilted her head sharply, hair falling over her eyes.

Laurien took several breaths, swallowing the frantic fluttering of her heart. “Running away.”

“From home.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, from home.”

“What is your name?”

Laurien stuttered, “Laurien Shartruce.”

“Why are you running away?”

Laurien’s brows came together, “Because I’m sick of Bridgemark, that’s why.”

The girl’s hands relaxed on her bow a little, and the sharpness of her face softened. “Oh.” She tilted her head, “Then where are you going?”

Laurien relaxed a little too. “I’m going to Dale Port to find my brother, Eugene. He ran away years ago, and I’m going to go live with him.” As an afterthought, and because she figured the weird girl might approve, she added, “Bridgemark is an awful place and I hate it. I’m never going back. Ever.”

The girl blinked slowly, letting dark lashes cover her eyes for a moment. “And you are not afraid of the monsters in this forest?”

Laurien twisted her fingers between each other. “What was that thing you scared off?”

“That was just a little manticore,” the word manticore didn’t have anything friendly about it, “I wouldn’t worry about him. There are much worse things in this forest than manticores.” The girl tilted her head the other way, smiling darkly. “You Bridgemark people have stories don’t you? About the demons?”

Laurien nodded, then felt the color drain from her own face. The girl with the bow had long, sharp ears tilted out and back off her head, maybe four inches long. They quivered slightly as the girl watched her. She was not human. She saw Laurien’s fear and her grin broadened, exposing white teeth that looked a little too sharp.

“Yes, little human child,” the girl who was a monster hissed, “I’m a *seth neshkte*! You know what that is, don’t you?”

Yes, Laurien did know that that was. She heard that name every Friday evening in the Temple. The *seth neshkte*, the demons who lived in the wild lands, the creeping things who snuck in five-story windows and through the cracks beneath doors and stole away children, and whisper perverse thoughts into sleeping people’s dreams. The idea of meeting one face to face was so absurd it never seemed like a possibility. A manticore and a *seth neshkte* in one afternoon. What odds.

Backing up, Laurien stumbled again but caught herself on a tree branch. She was breathless, her voice catching in her throat. “P-please leave me alone!”

The demon girl didn’t draw her bow or move closer, so Laurien backed farther away.

“Get out of here.”

Laurien backed away faster.

“Get out of this forest!”

Gathering up her skirts, Laurien turned and scuttled down the trail, keeping the demon in her sight.

“Run!”

Laurien ran. She wasn’t fast, and soon she was winded and gasping, but she didn’t slow until her legs gave out and she fell. Clawing her way back up she trotted along, breath coming in forced gasps, hair fraying wildly out of its bun and into her face. After what must have been miles, Laurien sank down into the soft redwood dander, sprawling out on her side while her lungs heaved and sweat poured down her face and chest.

“Please help me, Rosquar.” Laurien whispered, “Please, please help me make it out of this forest alive!”

Looking around and back down the road, the demon girl was nowhere to be seen. Getting wearily to her feet, Laurien straightened her skirt, pulled the pins from her hair and began to slowly walk again. In the aftermath, her stomach began to growl, and her mouth felt like parchment. The thought of turning around, going home, and begging forgiveness for a moment sounded tempting. But she balled her hands into fists and thought of Daniel and kept walking. She wouldn’t give up and go home. There was nothing left for her there. But whether there was anything for her up this long and empty trail into the belly of the dark forest, she had no idea.

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Atoña waited until the Laurien creature got far enough of a lead to think she was safe. Sliding the arrow back into her quiver, she hopped up onto the embankment and trotted along after her. The thing from the village that morning was just a young manticore. How or why a manticore was in the Tosaga mountains was anyone's guess, but the Bridgemark girl was much more interesting. Atoña felt a deep pang of guilt for having scared her so badly, but shook it off. She was from Bridgemark, a little scare was the least Atoña could give her. She reminded herself of this as she caught up with the girl a quarter mile up the road gasping, on the verge of sobbing, and hardly able to walk. *She's from Bridgemark, she's from Bridgemark. She's a monster.*

Atoña followed her the rest of the day until the light began to fade away into an amber twilight and the first crickets set their wings to their fiddles. The road split at this point, one trail taking an immediate left and down, eventually winding back around to the Melithnion Temple, while the other kept a slow and steady climb. That one, Atoña knew, was a two mile walk to Tosaga and a hot dinner. The Laurien creature, stumbling periodically from fatigue and blisters, took the downhill.

Atoña watched her go. She wondered if the girl would make it through the night, then snorted to herself. Of course she would. It was warm and dry, and the worst she was likely to see would be a coyote. The forest wasn't half as dangerous as its reputation, or the sidhe who gave it that reputation. A night in the wild would do a cringing little puppet from Bridgemark no end of good.

Satisfied, Atoña hopped down from her hiding place, watching a cluster of bats flutter over. She smiled and took a deep breath of the fresh, dry-leaves darkness, and walked slowly up to Tosaga for the night.

## Chapter 7

### The Duchess

Duchess Helena Shartruce sat on a divan by a tall, paneled window on the second floor of the Shartruce Manner. In one hand she held a cream filled pastry, in the other, a pair of opera glasses. Across several manicured lawns so green they looked almost artificial, Mrs. Bristol Alagain conversed with Mr. Hoffman, the horse trainer. As the Alagain's two-story barn was on the other side of their estate, and there were no horses in sight, Helena felt it almost her duty to keep an eye on the situation. After all, this wasn't just any common trainer talking up dumpy little Bristol, this was *the* Mr. Hoffman, father of one Daniel Hoffman, who up until very recently, had been sleeping with her daughter. Helena's teeth sank deeply into the pastry, cream bursting helplessly from the other end. *Like father like son*, Helena's mouth tightened into an unforgiving line. What was Bridgemark coming to?

Helena Shartruce was a handsome woman. Breasts and hips full and well-rounded even after four children, age-defiant olive skin, and copper-black hair, she drew eyes to her wherever

she went, and she knew it. Her face was soft, and would have been kind, even warm, if she smiled. But Helena did not smile, and when she did, it was an expression of necessity.

Lowering the opera glasses, Helena slid the rest of the pastry into her mouth, running her tongue over glossed lips. She knew what Bristol was up to, and didn't care as much as she usually did. So, the hussy wanted to fuck the stable man. Who didn't? He was tall and dark and cut divinely from the cloth of masculinity, and showed all his white teeth when he smiled. Bristol's husband, Mr. Lawrence Alagain, was ruddy and round, and got food caught in his mustache when he ate, and all of their six children looked just like him. Helena really couldn't begrudge Bristol for wanting a piece of Mr. Hoffman. But she could begrudge Mr. Hoffman for having a son brazen enough to seduce her daughter. Helena turned the opera glasses slowly in her hands, watching the shifting colors in the mother-of-pearl plating. Or maybe she should be taking her frustration out on Laurien, who was dumb enough to be seduced.

Who did that girl think she was? Helena's nails bit into the glass lenses with a small squeal. Helena knew very well who Laurien was, she was *her* daughter. Laurien would thank her one day, when she had some perspective. Helena's face became stiff and mask like. She would be grateful for the life she was given.

A knock at the door roused her from her thoughts. "Come in."

"Begging your pardon, Madam," Marshal, the gangly servant bowed politely, "your husband requests your presence in the dining hall immediately." He cringed slightly at the expression she gave, and backed out of the room.

*Requests?* Helena stood sharply, pulling the high collar of her dress away from her neck for a moment. *Demands would be more appropriate.* Snatching her shawl off the back of the



divan, Helena wound it around her head until the rich brocade fabric concealed her hair. She wasn't going to bother with a hat. If she wasn't going into town, she didn't care who saw her.

The snapping sound of her shoes on the floor followed her out of the room and into the dimly illuminated hallway. "What does he want this time?" she inspected her gloves and she passed Marshal.

"I don't know, Madam," Marshal hurried meekly along in the wake of her gown, "but he said it was about Miss Laurien."

Helena's back stiffened, but she kept walking. Was she really surprised?

On the ground floor of the Shartruce Manner, sunlight poured in rows of dark-framed windows, staining the light green walls and polished pine furniture in thick summer colors. The heavy air stank like the breath of too many people, even though the manner was nearly empty. The ancestral home of the Shartruce House was not built on humility and usefulness. Three extended families could have lived in the place, each on a separate floor, and never seen a need to notice each other. Chandeliers of fine smoky quartz hung at intervals along the hallway, accented by brass oil lamp fixtures and portraits of fat men in small suits looking poor-humored and smug. Rounding a corner, Helena allowed Marshal to open the carved pine door to the dining hall for her.

Floor to ceiling windows looked out into rose gardens peppered by lilac and rhododendron, all trimmed and twisted into geometric patterns. Even from the middle of the hall, Helena could see the headless stems where imperfect flowers had been cut away. Above the windows, high rafters vaulted up into deep shadows, and around the full bar, amber-tinted lamps cast a deceptively homey ambiance. Next to every window and guarding all the doors, polished

suits of full armor watched people come and go with blank expressions. They were for display purposed only, as none of the men Helena knew could squeeze their bulk into them.

By the bar, William Shartruce, her husband, brandished his hand deliberately in the air, spitting none-too-delicate words with Sheriff Harold and four of his men. Harold looked pained, averting his eyes down the bar and over the tall amber bottles rather than look at William.

Helena stopped a few yards away and folded her arms. Harold nodded politely at her, but William persisted his ranting. When he didn't notice her, Helena stamped her laced up shoe against the hardwood floor. "Will you stop pissing all over the sheriff and tell me what's going on?" She propped a wrist against her hip.

"Why aren't you wearing your hat?" William's face drew up tighter, "We have visitors!"

"Because I am not entertaining, I personally know Sheriff Harold, and I don't feel it's necessary to dress for town every time you see fit to talk to me, William."

William's small eyes rounded. He opened his mouth at a jagged angle, but Helena cut him off.

"What has Laurien done now? Has she been suspended? Did she break one of Killkenney's Holy Relics?" Helena dropped her voice low, "She isn't *pregnant*, is she?" Almost two months had gone by since she caught the girl sleeping with Daniel, and there were no men permitted on the Killkenney campus. But there were surely gardeners. There were always gardeners.

William harrumphed, twirling his whiskers between pink slug fingers. He wasn't very tall, shorter than Helena in her low heels, but made up for it with an impressive, conical beard. He fluttered a crumpled telegram in his wife's direction.

"The little bitch ran away!"

Helena put her other hand on the opposite hip. “Run away?” she scoffed, “What do you mean she’s run away? Run away to where? With whom?” She gestured around in a loose circle, “I mean, where all could she go, William? We’re walled in!”

“Isn’t that the fifty-thousand welsky question?” William folded his arms over his paunch, “Why do you think I’ve called Harold here? The school’s had his men searching the city all night.”

Harold cleared his throat, “If I may,” He paused. William and Helena stared.

“Yes, yes, go on!” William took a deep swig from his tumbler.

“A wall guard came forward this morning... He claims to have seen your daughter leaving the city by the western gate. I questioned Madam Gloucester earlier. Laurien apparently became distressed and hysteric. Madam Gloucester told her to go home and calm down, and soon after the guard saw her leave Bridgemark. No one has entered the city since.”

“Blessing if you ask me,” William swirled ice around his glass, “little whore’s been nothing but a filthy blemish on the proud Shartruce name. Her and that Eugene.” He said the name like it was profane.

A tightness caught the breath in Helena’s throat and she pulled the telegram from William’s fingers. “Don’t say that about our Laurien!” She read over the telegram to make sure William hadn’t missed anything. Helena didn’t always trust her husband to handle the finer things in life. Like reading. “She has plenty of potential and you know it!”

“Not if she misses her wedding, she doesn’t! Don’t you forget the dowry I forked over in order to get the Cranes to accept!” William was of a lighter complexion than his wife, and his skin was neck was flushing an ugly radish color. “They expect her to be fit for marriage come the end of October! You sent her to that school to keep her in line, and what does she do? Has a

tantrum and runs off into that goddamn forest! Knowing her, she's probably selling her body to the *seth neshkte!*”

Helena, Harold, and his four deputies tapped fingers to their lips and covered their eyes in a quick blessing.

“Don't talk about them,” Harold whispered, “they *know* when you talk about them.”

“Oh give it up, Harold,” William set his glass down with a click and spray of amber droplets, “they can't hear us!”

“They can...” Harold glanced around and blessed himself again, “they listen. They know things. I've seen their priest woman. She caught me on an errand to Dale Port, and she told me things...things she shouldn't have known...”

Helena looked quickly out the windows. No one unusual.

“And I talked to the High Priest just the other day, and he thinks they've been hanging around...his woodsman, Devon, said he's seen one slinking around the barns at night.”

William tossed back the rest of his drink and poured himself another. “Listen to yourself, Harold. Those demons have got you right where they want you. Scared shitless. How else do you think they keep us out of the woods?”

William was blustering and Helena knew it. He was all talk, but the second he was asked to leave the city walls, William became quiet and filled with excuses.

“Enough about demons and witches and whatever else,” Helena folded her hands in front of her, “we need figure out what to do about Laurien.”

“If I could get my money back from the Cranes, I'd say let her go. The things in the forest can have her for all I care. If I'm not mistaken, it was you, Helena, who sent her to that school in the first place.”

“Don’t you point the blame at me!” Helena curled her lip a bit, “You were the one who threatened to hand her over to the High Priest if she ever went near that Daniel boy again!”

“All that money!” William slammed a fist into the polished counter, “All that money on an ungrateful brat...”

*You can spare it*, Helena thought, but kept her mouth shut. *Greedy pig*.

Harold shrugged conversationally, “Well, you know, money spent is money under the bridge, they say.”

“*Water* under the bridge,” Harold tapped his glass against the table to loosen up a block of ice that had refrozen.

Harold grunted. “Money, water, what have you. Now look, neither of you happened to have let slip to your daughter that she’s getting married, did you?”

Helena looked at her nails.

“If you did, you hardly couldn’t have anticipated something like this.”

“It’s her duty!” William said into his glass.

“*Water* under the bridge,” Helena cleared her throat. “Laurien’s run away into the forest. This we know. The wedding isn’t until October. We have almost four months to find her.”

“Why do you think I called in Harold?” William drained his glass again.

“We’ll ride out of the city within the hour,” Harold stepped up next to his deputies, who had been hovering uncomfortably by the door.

“Ride the road to Tosaga and then to Dale Port. It’s likely she’s headed for the coast.”

Helena pointed in the direction of the road, “put posters up in every town. She couldn’t have gone very far.”

Harold nodded, adjusting the black band around the arm of his dark blue uniform, And how steep should the reward be?"

William made a spitting sound into his glass.

"Twelve-hundred."

"She isn't worth that much," said William quietly.

The room grew quiet.

"Madam," Harold and his men bowed to Helena and William in turn before filing out of the hall.

Helena pulled up a stool, resting her chin on one hand. "That's two now William. Two we've lost." Pulling Williams glass out of his puffy hand she took a long drink. "Why does Rosquar see fit to grant us with such bad luck?"

William took back his drink and said nothing.

First Eugene and now Laurien. Helena had four children, but Laurien was her only daughter. She was the only chance the Shartruce house had of marrying into the affluent and Crane family, who had no daughters of their own. Helena used one finger nail to peel a sliver of blue paint off another. Laurien, her little Laurien. It felt like only last week the girl was tumbling in from the garden on the heels of Eugene, all smiles and mud, and flowers stuck to her clothes. And she remembered how William scolded her for letting the filthy earth get into her fine clothing, and how his voice stung Helena more than the child. Late at night, when Helena sat alone in her bed, cold under the down covers, Laurien let herself in and crawled up next to her mother, and they'd talk about princes and castles, and kingdoms across the ocean, and handsome sheiks and treasure until they fell asleep. But when Eugene left, so did that happy little girl.

Eugene had been leaving the city and coming back, something William hated, and Eugene refused to stop. He spoke of a government beyond Bridgemark, and quietly, to Helena, when no one else was listening, mentioned that in Gauntland, there was no Rosquar to answer to. And then one day the Master Knight of that other world visited their secret city. So tall and broad-shouldered atop his war horse, he made Mr. Hoffman seem meek. Helena remembered the golden gloss of his skin, the dark sea green of his eyes, and the deep, blood-red shine of his long hair. But most of all, she remembered his voice, deep and reassuring, full of soft-spoken truth. He was a man who did not lie, who did not hide things, and if he did, she did not care. She remembered the women of Bridgemark fleeing from the street, shuttering their windows as he rode past, and she remembered him kissing her hand when she couldn't bring herself to behave as was expected of her. And she remembered Alfred Crane, the second oldest son, lowering the crossbow used to kill the Master Knight. The image of a man so big, so untouchable, laying on his back on the cobbled street, red hair fanned gently around his face, blood dripping slowly from the corner of his mouth, could never be washed from her mind. No matter how hard she prayed, how many days she spend on her knees in the temple, asking Rosquar to make her hate that Lord Nothelenor, she could not rewrite the fact she cried at his death.

Father Sulvester, the High Priest praised young Alfred, calling him a martyr when Gauntland officials executed him. The Master Knight was a trickster in the guise of a man, he said, hands clasp above the alter, face humble and serene, a sympathizer to the demonic heathenry living in the forest, a servant of Eganzal, the God of Sin, sent to undermine their fine city, and his death should be welcomed with rejoicing.

It was upon the death of the Master Knight of Gauntland that Eugene left. He cursed Bridgemark for its twisted ways, he cursed Alfred Crane for killing the man who gave them that city, he cursed his family, his name, his heritage, and his birthright as firstborn. And he left.

“If we do get her back,” William had his back to Helena, pouring himself a mixture of alcohols, “and she foils this marriage,” the bottle met the counter with a hollow sound, “ she will have damaged the Shartruce name too greatly, and I will give her to the High Priest.” Helena could hear him swallowing his concoction. “And then Rosquar pity her.”

“I suppose it’s all we can do.” Helena flinched as the corner of her fingernail snagged. She watched the soft skin around the quick turn pink and moist. *Run, my little Laurien*, Helena squeezed her finger in a fold of her dress, *run as far as you can and when you can run no farther, hide.*



## Chapter 8

### The Letter

*Dear Winston F. E. Sailsword of the Poet's Guild,*

*It has inevitably fallen into Our notice that you have been appointed by members of your organization as Chief Liaison with the Dale Port Guard in the apprehension of one Robert T. McWerein. Let it be known to you then, the importance and responsibility this assignment entails: first and foremost of which being the immeasurable potential for calamity unique to these circumstances. Mr. McWerein, as We hope your people have not neglected to disclose to the Guard, is an adept practitioner of the Poetic Theory, far surpassing the skill set of the contemporary Poet, and in-so-forth is a most ill-suited candidate to have apprehended one of the Thirteen Ambrosia Scrolls. The Ambrosia Scrolls, as you Poets may or may not have forgotten, represent the Natural Laws this Earth obeys. If you, Mr. Sailsword, have any background in Physics, which We are confident your schooling has seen to, than it is not beyond your abilities*

*to envision, if you would, what said Earth would soon become if those Laws were suddenly repealed. Mr. McWerein may be capable of using that scroll to such an end.*

*With that to keep your mind at ease, Mr. Sailsword, it is of great import that you are also aware that We have striven to make contact with the Poet Laureate Garth, and have, as of this hour, failed. He is, after all, the only living Poet with the adequate capability needed to overrule any problems Mr. McWerein might cause. Since no word from him has been received, and his lack of correspondence over the last century may indicate he had decided to rejoin the other Laureates, it is then of even greater importance that the Guard apprehend Mr. McWerein before he is tempted to initiate a courtship with the Powers of Chaos.*

*As the world is not apparently unraveling, it is safe to assume, for the present, that the above mentioned scenarios have not yet transpired. In an effort to ensure they do not, We suggest you consider closing the shipping lanes and posting guards at all points of transit from the city of Dale Port. Be warned: as a Poet, Mr. McWerein is beyond the influence of traditional magic, and thus spells of location on your part will be in vain.*

*Almost two days have passed. Two days is forty-eight hours. That allows for the disposal of two-thousand-eight-hundred-eighty minutes. It only takes one of those minutes to read a scroll, Mr. Sailsword. They continue to tick by, even as you read this. Do not tarry in your actions.*

*Sic transit Gloria mundi.*

*Let it all not end so soon.*

*--The Alchemist*

Jeffery handed the letter back to Winston. "Who is the Alchemist?"

Winston fingered the edges of his coat. “He’s a man. A wizard of sorcerer or something like that. Lives up in the Aviar Mountains. They say he’s been there since before Gauntland was an Empire.”

Jeffery turned his ink well until the quill lined up with the window frame behind it. “This sounds like a joke to me, Winston.”

“Joke or no joke, he’s right, we need to take immediate action.”

It was Thursday evening, and already Jeffery’s men were on the patrol. That seemed like plenty of action as far as he was concerned.

“I’m going to have to get the King’s approval to close down the shipping lanes, you know that?”

“Yes, yes,” Winston folded the letter from the Alchemist person, slipping it back inside his coat, “do what you must.” Reaching into the other side of his coat, he handed Jeffery a bank note. “Reward incentive. Put up wanted posters. Offer one hundred welsky for any knowledge that might lead to capture, and fifty-thousand paid in full to anyone who can bring in Robert or the scroll. Preferably both.”

Jeffery looked at the bank note for a long time before filing it in the appropriate cabinet.

“This is more than the property the Guild is built on is worth.”

Winston waved him off. “Money is no object where those scrolls are concerned.” After a brief exchange of formalities, Winston left Jeffery alone to stare out his window at the deepening sunset. This day was too long.

After sending a telegram to King Inez all the way across the continent in Gauntland’s summer capital, the Hallowed Marches, the Captain spent several creeping hours clicking messages back and forth with the Knight’s Steward, until her was finally granted a radio

conference with the King himself. King Inez didn't seem to know much about the Ambrosia Scrolls, but became quite distraught at the mention of the Alchemist. Within the hour official documents allowing Jeffery full control over the Dale Port shipping lanes materialized by telegraph.

At one in the morning, Jeffery woke up with his face stuck to his work desk. Standing stiffly he heard every joint crack in the quiet of his office. Letting himself out and locking the door, he wandered slowly down stairs to the tiny chamber he used as a bedroom while on duty. Under the rough blankets he lay awake, watching imagined bugs devour each other across the wall. He thought about his wife back home in their lodge in Cambren. As he finally felt the first tides of sleep rolling over him, Jeffery offered up a silent prayer that the world would wait to end until he was back home.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Melithnion Temple**

As the first morning blush of sun poured color over the horizon Thursday morning, Laurien sprawled out, lengthwise on a patch of redwood dander, and closed her eyes. Her breathing was sharp and shallow, punctuated by weak sobs. Eyes red and gritty squeezed tight against frustrated tears. But before Laurien could indulge in another cry, fatigue overcame her and she fell asleep.

All night long Laurien stayed awake, listening to things around her moved in the darkness. At first it hadn't been so bad. Finding a redwood with a large indent big enough for her to fit her back into, Laurien watched bats chase bugs across the Milky Way, listening to them chirp, and owls call back and forth. Then things started screaming. She was situated on a gentle rise with an overview of a small bowl of trees, and the first thing screamed from far away. But the second thing was in the tree above Laurien, and when it screeched back to the first Laurien put her fingers in her mouth and bit down to keep from screaming too.

Scuffling came from the brush nearby, and glowing orbs winked out of the blacker shadows. They moved closer and Laurien couldn't move back, then the moonlight fell on them, and they were only deer. For a long time, Laurien sat still, breathing as quietly as she could, listening to the movement of the deer.

Then the moon went down.

Then the real *things* came out. Dark things, things so horrible Laurien had never dreamed of worse. She got her first glimpse of them across the small valley, and mistook them for riders from Bridgemark. There must have been twenty, maybe twenty-five people on horseback, carrying torches that left the ground dappled through the branches. But there was something wrong with the light. It was too dim to be torch fire, and in the complete darkness Laurien would swear it was green. Moving out of the trees, the strange riders looped around and around the small valley, and Laurien began to hear snatches of voices, somehow inhuman, chanting and singing in a language she had never heard.

To Laurien's horror, the leader of the riders shook his green torch in the air and turned the riders up and onto the opposite ridge. Right at where Laurien was sitting. For a moment, she lost sight of them, but their sound proceeded. Whoops, howls, snarling voices, parts of words, a chaos of noises on top of something rhythmic, like a song or chant. Something about battle and blood.

The band of riders crested the ridge about thirty feet to the right of where Laurien sat, flying up and over the rise on horses who defied gravity, who could not have been real horses. Laurien tried not to look, but was afraid that if she closed her eyes, the monsters would sneak up without her hearing, would somehow be closer if she could not see them. The horses were not horses. They were too long through the neck and tail, the legs just a little wrong, more like the

legs of hounds than horses, flexible and swift. And in the place of hooves, the long legs ended in three-toes with blunt claws, and a claw on the heel which bit into the ground, kicking up leaves and tree duff. Black and glossy as beetle shells and glowing in the green torches, the beasts soared over the rise with grotesque elegance, tossing long heads against leather bridals and bugling out a musical, screeching call.

By themselves, the horse-like animals might have been a spectacle to watch, almost beautiful in an unnatural way, but with their riders, they were creeping things from the dregs of fevered dreams. In the saddles sat people, or things that might once have been people, dressed in leather armor adorned with bones and feathers. Some were men, some were women, near naked bodies of writhing muscle balancing with their mounts' strange gaits, hair whipping out and around in the green light. Every single rider was made of things besides human flesh. Many had animal pelts grown into their near naked skins, or eagles claws instead of hands. Some had moss and leaves for hair, or knotted wood in place of legs and shoulders. But the wood moved, to Laurien's horror, the wooden knee could bend, could flex like muscle, the wooden hand could flex and grasp the reins. Most of their faces were puzzle-pieces of human and animal and plant; one human eye, one eagle, one coyote's ear, a jaw made of madrone wood. One woman, a body of elegant lines and sculpted terra cotta brown flesh would have been perfect, save that where her neck met the base of her skull, her head was that of a fox. In proper proportion to her body, but muzzled, long-eared, canine, teeth bared in a gleaming, dog's smile.

All of them carried weapons, some in hands, some tied across the backs of saddles. Knives, swords, cleavers, spears, even the glimmer of flint in a rifle caught Laurien's eye.

The leader of the riders, a giant man with a chest like a tree trunk, guided his mount with a thick wooden arm, tossing a head covered by moss and leaves. At first Laurien thought his

close-fitting helmet was adorned with antlers, but as he rode past her hiding place, the helmet shifted, and the antlers did not.

The riders passed in a matter of moments, thundering along the ridge and down the other side, but for Laurien, time became sluggish, and she watched their every freakish movement in molasses motion, seeing details she wished she could have missed. Hot, nauseous terror rose up from her belly, filling her throat, and freezing her limbs. If one of the riders noticed her, she would not be able to run. But they did not notice her, just rode along, voices spiced with laughter, a manic drunkenness to their song. Over the rise they went, the leader blasting deep notes from a bull's horn slung across his back.

Laurien heard that hunting horn long after the riders vanished in a green smudge over the next ridge. She heard it when the night grew quiet, and when dawn began to push its way up from the east. Even when exhaustion finally overcame her, and sleep folded her up in morning light, she heard that hunting horn. Long, deep, like a far away flute, only sad.

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When Laurien began to wake up, she thought she was sick. Sweat clung to her skin and clothing, her face was hot, and her mouth was dry. Every joint in her legs and back ached when she shifted her weight, and she felt weak and frail.

“Marshal,” she tried to call, hoping he’d bring her a glass of water, but her voice was little more than a whisper. Rolling over, she winced as her toes rubbed on the insides of her shoes, irritating raw blisters. Shoes? Laurien blinked several times until her eyes focused. Shoes, school uniform, cuts and bug bites up and down her legs, dirty hands. Redwood tree, ridge top, open sky and blaring sun. No socks.



“Shit!” Laurien rasped, scrambling to her feet and leaning heavily against the tree for support. Madam Gloucester’s crop slipped out of her belt, rolling a few feet away. Laurien stared at it for a moment before squatting to retrieve it. Standing up, she found herself panting, her heart thumping in her ears. The sun poured heat and light over the sandstone ridge, making everything too bright. Even the shadow from the lone redwood was too bright. By the sun’s position, Laurien guessed it was already after noon, and she was light-headed from hunger.

Slipping the crop back into her belt, a heavy trophy, Laurien turned a slow circle, trying to get a feeling for where she was and where she should go. The road from yesterday, which had started going mercifully down, turned back up and snaked along the dry ridgeback. On either side of the ridge, rolling valleys and hills, seemingly endless seas of trees reached out to the edges of the scorching blue sky. To the left of the road, in the distance, grey fog hugged the corner of the trees between two mountains. Laurien didn’t know what the fog meant, but wished it would come find her.

Luckily, Laurien knew enough to find her own track so as not to walk back the way she came. With heavy feet, she started walking down the road. Limping down the road. Her feet smarted sharply with each step, and she was afraid to take off her tight little shoes for fear of what she might find.

The road went down for a time, plunging Laurien into shade that was not a relief from the baking, sticky heat, then climbed back up to the chalk-bright mountain spines of creamy stone, woven through by bands of orange and tan. Looking across the endless mountains, Laurien saw other sandstone ridges, like the mountains had once been higher, but died, and now their crumbling bones were poking through a thick flesh molding with trees. All along the path, snarly looking bushes of blackened bark and small glossy leaves bent under the weight of clustered red

berries. Laurien's stomach gnawed on itself, shooting little pains through her ribs, and she tried not to look at the berries. She had no idea what they are and assumed if they were in this forest, they must be poison. Squirrels chattered and scolded her from oak trees, and Laurien wondered if they'd be tasty. But, she had no weapons, and even if she did, wouldn't know how to use them, let alone make a cooking fire.

The day lasted much longer than it should have. By the time the sun began to turn orange, Laurien got her wish, and the fog rolled in. It was unnerving how fast it moved, pushing up the ravines and gullies, filling up the valleys like fluffy grey water. Laurien was hot, her clothes soaked with sweat, and the first breath of fog coaxed a little hope out of her withered resolve. Then she got cold.

Limping slowly, Laurien watched her foot press into the ground in front of the other, the pain from her blisters numbed by the chill in the air. She put the next foot down, and stumbled over a rock. Half sitting half falling into the dirt, Laurien gritted her teeth as small sobs pushed their way up from her chest. Tears came, hot and frustrated and defeated.

*I'm an idiot.* Laurien thought, breathing deeply through a sob, *I'm such a stupid idiot!* Pulling her sleeves over her hands, she covered her face in shame, whispering timidly for Rosquar to hear her pleas and lead her to safety. She doubted that he would. If there really was a Rosquar, he knew she had betrayed him by leaving Bridgemark, and he would not help her. And, she had nothing to offer him in payment for a favor. Curling her legs up against her stomach, Laurien cried softly, unwilling to admit she had run to her freedom, at the cost of her life. But that was the rule of Rosquar, wasn't it? Everything at a cost. Be it a ration of money or food, a plot of land, a severed limb, or a life, Anything outside of Bridgemark someone wanted, was not free.

For a moment, Laurien thought about her mother combing her hair, plaiting it and rolling it up into a tight bun that hurt her head. Would she miss her? Maybe at one time, but not anymore, not since Daniel. Her father, he would not miss her at all. He had two good sons, that was all he needed.

Rubbing her eyes on her sleeve and shivering, Laurien looked out into the mountains. If someone told her she was on the same ridge top as the night before, she would have believed them. Not knowing how to find water, or even if there was water out here, Laurien knew she would not make it much longer. Already her insides cramped up and felt burnt and fevered. Maybe the hunting party from last night would come and take her away, cut off half her face and make her one of them. She entertained the image of plunging through the darkness on a monster horse, waving a green torch. Not likely. They would just eat her.

Spreading out on her side, Laurien pulled the back of her shirt over her ears for a little warmth, watching the sun let through the fog. Night was falling fast, but the orange flames danced and bounced against the trees and marble pillars of Melithnion Temple.

The Temple! Laurien sat up, expecting the image to vanish. It didn't. still a mile or so off, but very much real was Melithnion Temple, and there were fires burning, which meant people were there! Forgetting she was dying, Laurien pushed herself to her feet, hobbling as fast as she could along the path to the Temple.

She had only been to Melithnion Temple once, when she was much younger, and it had been in a wagon, but Laurien remembered coming to it by a different road. Probably from the other side. She wasn't quite sure what the Temple was for, but it was very important to the devout and the clergy . Something in the history spoke about it being the last outpost against the *seth neshkte* when the Rosquarians first settled in Bridgemark. The woods were once holy, she

remembered the High Priest's words, and we had many holy places. But the children of Eganzal slowly spread their filth until only this one place outside the city remained sacred. It was custom in Bridgemark to visit the forest Temple at least once a year, different families at different times, and pray for four days to keep the it free of demons. Laurien knew as long as prayer was offered in the Temple, nothing unholy could enter it. That meant no crazy hunting party, no screaming things in the darkness, and no devil girl with a bow.

The walk took forever, but finally, only the last steep climb remained. Picking her way up the craggy stone, no longer sandstone, Laurien sucked in the beauty of the Temple as if it were water. The Priest said it had not been made by human hands, and she believed it. An enormous dome of mottled marble, a shape like the top half of a goose egg, stood supported on eight tree-thick pillar, more than fifty feet high. Beneath the dome, a tiered basin offered steps to sit on, and pits in which to build sacrificial fires. Scenes of feasts and grand hunts shone out of the stone in bass-relief.

Staggering to the edge of the Temple, Laurien let out a soft cry of gratitude. Five people sat around a crackling fire, roasting what looked like a lamb on a spit. Packs lay about the steps, some untied and spread out into bed rolls and wooden bowls of fruit, roasted vegetables, and squares of yellow bread Laurien didn't recognize. The person closest to Laurien, a thin woman, was bending over a bowl of water with a cup, and stared at her with wide eyes from that position.

"Please," Laurien's voice was almost all breath. She sank against a pillar, chest heaving, wheezing hoarsely.

Still wide-eyes, the woman with the cup dipped it back into the bowl to fill it fuller, than approached Laurien. When Laurien held up a hand for the cup, the woman gave it to her. Water never tasted so sweet. When she drained the cup, the woman silently refilled it for her. When it

was again empty, it was refilled and returned along with a plate of hot, smoky meat, roasted apples, and that coarse yellow bread.

Laurien didn't see them leave, but she noticed when two of the people returned to the Temple, and sat back down. She didn't care where they went or what they did. All she cared about was she was drinking water and eating not just food, but delicious food, and sitting near to a warm fire.

The woman who gave Laurien the food stepped lightly over to one of the packs, and returned with a blanket. Draping it over Laurien's shoulders, she knelt down in front of her. In the flickering orange light, color was hard to determine, but Laurien took comfort in the olive hue of the woman's skin, and the black hair hanging from under the hood of her coat. Her face was thin, like her body, and her fingers were long and strong looking. Laurien thought her high cheekbones and long nose made her look foreign, exotic, and beautiful. Whoever she was, Laurien had never met her in the city. Looking around the circle, she saw the others were dressed in similar thin leather coats with the hoods drawn. Another woman sat next to one of the far pillars, and a young man tended the fire, an apple suspended half way to his open mouth. Part way up the steps sat a girl possibly Laurien's age and a younger boy. Both of them stared at her with open astonishment. The boy took a deep breath, his voice pitching up to a nervous squeak, but the woman near Laurien held up a hand and he shut his mouth.

"Do you feel better now?" The woman ask quietly.

"Yes, thank you," Laurien sank a little deeper under the blanket.

"How long have you been out here?" The woman had an accent, Laurien hardly noticed, it sounded very pleasant, refined.

"Since yesterday morning."

“Without food or water?”

“Yeah.” Laurien took a deep breath, words backing up in her throat. “I left the city, I’m sorry, I just—I mean, I got so upset, I didn’t know what to do, and I saw this creature, a man-manticore... there was a manticore in the forest. Like a cat thing. And then...” she noticed the woman giving her an odd look, not like she was crazy, but like she believed her. “And there are *people* out here. People on horses. Have you seen them? And, and,” she couldn’t bring herself to say *seth neskte*, “demons.” She made a sound not quite a word. “I was so stupid. I could have died. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Rosquar forgive me.”

Taking her empty plate, the woman set it aside. The boy and the girl whispered frantically into each other’s hoods, and the woman snapped her fingers at them. They shut up. The boy folded his arms, setting one hand on the hilt of a sword and scowled.

“The forest really isn’t as bad as all that.” The woman’s face was soft, a smile turning up the corner of one full lip. But you were lucky to come to Melithnion Temple. Lucky we were here.” She gestured mildly at the roasting animal and other food. “And so well prepared.”

“I can’t thank you enough.” Laurien felt suddenly ashamed, her cheeks growing hot, “When we go home,” the word *home* tasted bitter, “I will repay the favor. Are you here on a pilgrimage?”

“That won’t be necessary.” The woman’s eyes flitted to the side, where the children were hissing again. “And no, not a pilgrimage.”

This puzzled Laurien, but her relief kept her from dwelling. “It’s safe here though, right? The hunter people can’t come here, right?” Her lip started to tremble and she bit it.

The woman said nothing. Then after a pause she took Laurien's arm and coaxed her to stand. "Why don't you come closer to the fire, and calm down. You're very cold and need to drink more water. You are very fortunate a mountain lion didn't pick you off in that state."

Following, Laurien settled her wobbly legs out in front of her, curling the blanket around herself. She began to feel the stairs. Four pairs of eyes glared at her with such force they almost stung. A knot began to tighten in her chest as she found it difficult to recognize the dress style of her hosts. Leather, cloth, cut in fashions Bridgemark did not use. Suede boots, knives hung on belts. The women wore tight-fitting pants. Along the outer rim of the Temple, three small, oddly bent bows lay neatly on a folded blanket.

Breath coming too fast, Laurien spoke in almost a whine. "You're, you're not from Bridgemark, are you?"

The woman shook her head. The eyes behind her narrowed, the woman leaning against the pillar ran a finger along the edge of a long, glass-bright knife.

"Who," Laurien felt faint, "who are you people?" as soon as she ask, she wished she hadn't. She didn't want to know the answer.

The woman looked mildly concerned, and made to speak and stopped. Reaching up, she tossed back her hood. As one, the others followed her action. Five pairs of eyes framed by long, slanted ears regarded her.

Laurien sucked in a breath of campfire air and choked on it. She was in Melithnion Temple, a place of sanctuary, with five *seth neshkte*. One had been bad enough, but *five*. The boy, whose shoulder length hair shone hot ember orange by the firelight, slowly slid his blade half out of its sheath.

“*Demereian!*” The demon woman spat the word at him, and he cringed away from her. Tears gleamed on his cheeks, and to Laurien’s confusion, his breath came in shallow, shaky gasps. “Demereian,” the woman said more gently, “put the sword away before you hurt yourself and sit down.”

Bottom lip clamped between sharp, coyote teeth, the boy shoved his sword into its sheath with a loud snap and walked purposefully out of the temple. In a moment, he was part of the night.

“So volatile.” The demon woman set a hand on her narrow hip. “He’ll be alright.”

Laurien made a strangling sound, unable to claw her way out of the blanket.

“How about you? Are you going to calm down too?” The woman tilted her head.

“What are you talking to it for, Owlwing?” The woman demon with the knife took a step closer, long ears laid back. Her hair was silver, streaked with dark lines of brownish purple. Her eyes flashed like mirrors. “Are you forgetting it’s from Bridgemark? Bridgemark! It’s a *monster!*”

“*She* is not a monster,” the one called Owlwing spoke slowly, “she’s tired, lost, and cold, and she’s only a child. Look at her.”

“But she’s from Bridgemark!” the young man, a blonde haired creature with studs all the way up his ears shouted, “*Fuck!* she’s brainwashed! She’s their *tool!*”

“Look at me,” the Owlwing thing grabbed Laurien by the shoulders. Laurien tried to twist away and found those thin olive fingers too strong. Up close, Laurien could see white, fan shaped feathers in her black hair. They were part of her hair, growing out of her head. And her big eyes were yellow. “Why did you leave Bridgemark?”

Laurien struggled some more, but Owlwing held fast.



“Why?” Her voice was firm, but not harsh.

The Temple spun around her, and Laurien felt herself growing limp. “I hated it...” she squeezed the words out at last, “I hated it. Father sent my friend... my boyfriend away...he could be dead. And they wanted me to marry...marry...and the school...” her voice cracked and she curled up, swatting at the demon’s hands. Owlwing held fast. “Leave me alone! Please leave me alone! I’ll get out of your forest, I’m sorry I ever came here! Please don’t kill me!”

Owlwing let go of her at last and straightened up. “What’s your name?”

“Laurien Shartruce.” It hurt to say her own name. So much filth now clung to it.

“Well, Laurien, if we were to leave you alone, you would have gone without food and water for at least another two days. It is possible, unless the Hunt picked you up, you may have died.”

Laurien mouthed helplessly at her.

“You are not in our debt, so don’t worry. We won’t curse you or take your soul or any such bullshit those priests have been feeding you. But we will offer you a place to stay for the night where the lions and hungry bugs can’t get you.”

“What,” Laurien had trouble talking and breathing, “how did you get in here? In the Temple?”

Owlwing looked around, shrugged. “Walked.”

“But...but...nothing un...”

“Unholy?” The silver haired demon finished for her. “Nothing unholy can get in?”

Owlwing smiled, showing her sharp eye-teeth. “That’s right. If only that were true. If it was, your priests never couldn’t keep coming back.”

The silver haired one, a little more relaxed looking, held out her hands, signifying the Temple. “Melithnion Temple. *We* built it. Our people.”

“I was there,” Owlwing pushed a lock of hair behind a long ear, “I remember when the Rosquarians were our friends.”

“But...” Laurien regretted what she said next, “you’re *seth neshkte*. You’re evil.”

The three remaining demons besides Owlwing reacted with scoffs or cold laughs. Owlwing, too calm and commanding for a woman and one as young as she looked, tilted an eyebrow in their direction, and they stopped.

“Laurien,” she sat down next to her, draping a leg over her knee. Her eyes glowed like tiny suns in the fire light. “That is a very pretty name. Did you know the root comes from Vendimirren, our ancestral language? Laurienth means ‘to break or devide.’ Your parents wouldn’t have known this of course.” Owlwing twisted a twig between her fingers. She looked over at Laurien, and Laurien shied away from her eyes. “Laurien, I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer truthfully.”

Laurien blinked, digging her nails into her palms.

“Laurien, do you believe in Rosquar?”

This startled Laurien and she looked up abruptly. “Of course I do!”

Owlwing blinked slowly. “Then why did you leave his city? Are you telling me you loved your mate more?”

Laurien balked at this, chest suddenly tight again. “I, I didn’t want to marry the man my family picked out for me...”

Owlwing cut her off, “You disobeyed their wishes to pursue your own interests. This is a sin in the Rosquarian faith, it is not?”

Laurien stared at the toe of her shoe, watching it become blurred with moisture. “Yes.”

“And Rosquar’s forgiveness does not come easily. You knew this when you left the city, and yet you went forward.” She nodded to herself, “you knew you never wanted to go back.”

Fighting not to let a fresh sob bubble up her throat, Laurien gave a short nod.

“Tell me again, Laurien, do you love Rosquar?”

Now Laurien did cry, let the tears grow hot in the warmth of the fire. “No,”

“When you were lost, did you pray to him?”

“Yes,”

“And he sent you to us.” Owlwing’s lips looked like they were trying not to smile. “Do you believe that he loves you?”

“No.”

“Laurien, if I tell you something, will you listen?”

“Yes.”

“Outside of Bridgemark, there is a whole world. You know this. Your people know this. And yet they do not often leave that city. Outside of Bridgemark, my people are not called *seth neshkte*. We are not demons or the children of a dark god. We call ourselves the Alduna Sidhe, and outside of Bridgemark, we are not evil. People might still be afraid of us, but we are not monsters. We are very few, and we are different than you, but not so different as either of us, you or me, needs fear the other. We trade with humans, make friends with them, and are, as you would call it, married. Though, this is uncommon, as humans cannot have young by us.

“ In Dale Port, and the smaller towns in the Tosaga Mountains, there are no *seth neshkte*, and there is no Rosquar. If you decide to leave Bridgemark, to leave it behind, Rosquar will not be able to follow.”

Laurien didn't reply. She felt herself growing weak at the seams.

Owlwing got up and tossed a log into the fire. "It is late, Laurien, and you are weary. Let us offer you a place to stay for the night. In the morning, if you wish to return to Bridgemark, I will point you in the right direction. If not, we are headed near Dale Port."

The blonde man looked confused. "I thought we were hunting the monster?"

"We were." Owlwing smiled. "but according to Laurien, it's a day's walk the other way, and it's only a manticore. Not the worst of things." She turned to back to Laurien. "You mentioned a demon girl, what did she look like?"

Laurien thought, "She was tall and really stringy like a boy, and had a bow."

"Was she wearing a key on a chain?"

"Yes,"

Owlwing smiled at the blonde man, "You see, Ambreck? Atoña's got the right trail after all! Demereian will be unhappy when he finds out she was right."

"Do you think we should try and catch up with her?" Ambrack looked worried, "you know she's no good at spells."

Owlwing waved him off. "She's a tough thing, and you know it. You also know none of us save maybe you Qeo, even has a chance of chasing her down." She shook her head. "That one can run."

The young girl, who sort or resembled the skinny girl with the bow, in smaller, more feathery way, shook her head. "I can't keep up with her."

"Let her be," Owlwing began nudging her bed roll with her foot, spreading it out and smoothing the corners, "she needs to do what she needs to do, and doesn't need us sitting on her

shoulder.” Finishing up her bed, she looked expectantly up at Laurien. “Well, Laurien, are you spending the night with us, or would you like to sleep in the woods?”

Wobbling to her blistered feet, Laurien limped over to the offered bed and sat down. She was dead in the woods anyway, she rationalized, at least if these demon people decided to kill her in her sleep, she’d be warm and well-fed when she died. It was, she hated to admit, the better of two bad options. “Thank you.” She avoided the staring eyes. She said thank you to a *seth neshkte*. It felt awful, but in the circumstances, was better than being rude.

“Please forgive me Laurien,” Owlwing shook her head, “I have horrid manners. My name is Owlwing, you know this. That’s Ambreck,” the blonde man nodded, unrolling his own bed roll, “He’s a sculptor. He sells sculpted clay in a gallery in Dale Port. This is Qeo,” The younger girl waved a little shyly, looking about as comfortable with Laurien as she was with her, “this is her third hunt. Last time she brought back her first deer. This is Tyber, my mate,” the silver-haired woman smiled, and Laurien realized she was very young and attractive, despite being a demon. “And the boy who ran off is Demereian. Who someone should go find.”

“I’ll go get him,” Tyber slid her glossy knife into her belt and jogged easily out of the temple.

“Why,” Laurien felt painfully self-conscious, “I mean, did I do something...?”

Owlwing took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “It has nothing to do with you,” she didn’t meet Laurien’s eyes, “but everything to do with your people. Don’t worry, he’s a little flammable. Redheaded and all.” She smiled.

Laurien had never seen anyone with red hair, and didn’t know why this might be funny.

Qeo and Ambreck already stretched out on their bed rolls, blankets draped over them like dead leaves. If Laurien didn't look too closely, they looked just like sleeping people. The fire burnt down to embers.

A minute later, Tyber returned with the redheaded boy in tow. His eyebrows were lowered and his ears were back. Stomping over to his own bed roll, he scooped it up, almost tripping on the dragging blanket, and hauled it as far away from Laurien as possible. Curling up in the blanket, he rolled his back to Laurien and covered his head.

Owlwing rolled her eyes skyward. "Good night, Laurien,"

Laurien sat up until her back ached. It felt almost too good to lay down on something besides dirt. She vowed to stay awake all night. Laying on her side she watched Owlwing and the silver-haired Tyber sit on the edge of the Temple, backs to the fire, speaking in voices too quiet to hear. Laurien blinked and the two demon women lay across the weak embers from her, breathing slow and evenly. Owlwing's olive-brown arm draped protectively over Tyber's shoulder, whose strange ears twitched in her sleep.

They were all asleep! Laurien looked around to make sure. Even the little boy was sprawled on his back, mouth open and blanket kicked off his feet. Maybe she should sneak off, wait out the night like before and sneak back to Bridgemark. An image of the High Priest appeared in her mind, his blue eyes smiling at her, and as cold as the ocean fog. A deep chill crawled under her skin that the embers could not reach and the blanket could not shield. She had seen what happened to people who were found guilty of cavorting with demons. People guilty of far less than she eventually cracked and confessed, and gave themselves over to Father Sulvester. There was a tall metal pole in the center of Bridgemark, to which these sinners were tied, and the cobbled street around it was a dull brownish red. No matter how many times the servants

scrubbed it clean, the blood refused to come off. Rolling over, Laurien pulled the blanket over her head. Shame threatened to take hold of her, but her bed was too soft, the embers made too gentle a crackling, and out in the fog an owl hooted calmly. She wanted to feel so many things, but instead she gave up and fell asleep.

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Author**

“You look cold, Robert.” The boy set his teacup to his lips, coils of steam making his eyes seem blurry.

Sweat pooled in tiny droplets on Robert’s face and trickled into his eyes. A chill clung to the dank walls of the forgotten warehouses, and Robert shivered periodically. The tips of his fingers grew pale and slightly blue. A dull ache thumped rhythmically at his right temple, and the thought of food made his stomach squirm uncomfortably. In the back of his mind, he saw the descriptions of the alley he sat in, felt the weird tug of someone else’s words in his thoughts, but they were faded from before. With the pain in his head, and the strange sense of vertigo, it occurred to Robert he might be having a migraine, which would explain away the hallucinations. This would not explain, however, why the meandering description of setting and place said nothing about the boy and his tea.

“I said you look cold,” the boy said again, nudging a second steaming cup against Robert’s clasped fingers.



“Thanks,” Robert took a cautious sip, letting the hot, rose flavored tea roll over his tongue and teeth, “so, the Captain of the Guard is after me.”

Across the old crate, the young man balanced his cup between long fingers. “I am afraid he is. At the Guild’s urging of course.” His paper boy hat tilted over his eyes at a jaunty angle. Only seeing the bottom half of his face, clean-shaven and smooth, and the wavy coils of rich brown hair, Robert thought he looked like a girl. Delicate, androgynous, the boy seemed soft-spoken and unthreatening. Someone Robert could trust. “you knew if you stole something, especially something like that,” the boy flicked a finger at Robert’s book bag, “the law would come after you. So, why did you do it?”

“I don’t know,” Robert tried to focus on a street lamp over the boy’s shoulder, but found the dim light too bright.

“Yes you do.” The boy poured them both more tea. “you were obviously displeased with the way the Guild has been conducting business of late, and you took a course of action you felt was necessary. Am I right?”

Robert nodded. “Yes.”

“And you decided that course of action was to read one of the Ambrosia Scrolls? Fascinating.”

Robert followed a beetle with his eyes as it crawled up the side of the crate he was sitting on. He didn’t feel very inclined to be hiding from the Guard, especially not here. The Guard leaned toward the gentry, and would have to be hard pressed to venture this far into the city’s low-rent districts. Robert let a long breath out, watching it make more steam furl off his tea.

“Did you know a Poet hasn’t read a major scroll in over one hundred years?”

“I did know that. In fact, most of the people in that Guild have never done any more work in Poetics than was necessary to identify them as Poets.” He smiled gleefully, “It’s quite sad.”

“It just drove me nuts.” Robert took a puzzled sip of tea, not sure why now it tasted like blueberries. “It’s our art, you know? Here the Poets demand respect from the layperson, when they have nothing to back it anymore. I read the Poets used to be feared magicians. If Gauntland fell under attack right now, I bet the Guild would belly up and die.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the boy saw the beetle trooping along and picked it up. Setting it on his palm, he held it close to his face, watching it carefully. “Not at all. You do know what the Ambrosia Scrolls are, don’t you?”

Robert felt a little more unsettled. “I, I think so. I think I do now.” He looked at where the wall met the pavement. There were no cobble stones here.

“Do you really? Tell me.”

Robert shrugged. The pain in his head intensified uncomfortably, making him squint his right eye. “They keep the world together. Something bad happened long ago, and the Poet Laureates wrote the scrolls to fix it.”

Throwing back his head, the boy laughed gleefully. It was a rather frightful sound. Too happy. “Oh my, Robert! You are not very close at all! You know better, I know you do.” He leaned forward, resting his chin on his knuckles, “But seeing as you haven’t gotten it all sorted out in the crazy head of yours, I’ll tell you.”

A bead of sweat stung Robert’s eye. Suddenly his heart felt like it was working too hard. He didn’t want to hear what the boy was going to tell him.

“You don’t want to hear it, Robert, but here it is anyway. The Ambrosia Scrolls *are* your world. You are realizing it even now. This world, everything in it, is part of a story. It was a different story, very long ago, and that story ended, not it is a new one.”

Robert’s head swam dizzily. “So this isn’t real.”

“Oh no, Robert! It’s very, very real! For you anyway.” Standing up, the boy held out his arms. “This is the real world Robert. You know this. But you can see it now, can’t you? You can see the words! The world is a book, and you, my dear sad little Robert, are the inciting incident!” He pressed his fingers over his lips, surpassing another laugh. “It’s wonderful! Just wonderful! The Ambrosia Scrolls are the manuscript of your entire universe, a representation anyway, and you thought you’d just pick one up and give it a whirl. Oh, mercy!” He put his face in the crook of his arm and made choked sounds of mirth.

Robert’s eyes pooled with tears. Soon his shoulders were shaking and as the boy laughed, he began to sob. “I’m sorry! They were right! All the Poets were right! If I had only known...”

The boy’s head snapped up and he regarded Robert somberly. “They tried to tell you.”

“If I had listened...”

“To someone other than your ego...”

“Why...why couldn’t I stop reading it once I started?”

The young man was quiet for a moment. He set down his tea cup. “Because you are part of this world, this story, and the writer of that scroll is not. To read one’s own story, that is something you were never meant to do. Tell me something, Robert, are you confused?”

Glancing around, Robert looked down at his palm to see the beetle crawling there. It moved its little legs slowly, unconcerned by the human hand. “What?” He shook the beetle off.

“You aren’t even wondering who I am, Are you? You confessed your crime to me in complete trust, and you don’t even know my name. Does this not disturb you, Robert?”

Robert looked at the boy for what felt like a long time. The coppery tinge along the edges of his coiled hair, the black upturn of his coat collar, the oval of his face, his long eyelashes, everything about him screamed out that Robert should know him, should know him very well, and yet he did not. the harder he tried to put a name to that face, the worse his head throbbed until he had to squint to look at the boy.

“You can read the words Robert,” The boy licked his lips hungrily, “and yet you cannot read me. what does that tell you?” he hilted his head, and the dim light shone weirdly in his eyes, eyes that should have been blue. But were gold.

Robert sucked in his breath. “You...it’s *you!* The, the, Poet Laureate...” his voice croaked horribly, “*Garth...!*”

“Very good, Robert!” the boy laughed, “Yes, That is what you may call me, for I am that Poet. I have been other people, you know, but Garth will do nicely.”

Stumbling over the crate, Robert tried to back away from the boy’s eyes, which fixed upon his, shining faintly with an otherworldly golden light that made his skin crawl as if worms squirmed beneath it. “Please,” he gasped, fumbling the scroll in its black tube out of his pack, “please help me... oh god, I’m so sorry, please...help me. I’m sorry!” Dropping the scroll at the young man’s boots, Robert’s legs gave out, and he sank against the wall, pressing his hands painfully into his face. All around him, he could feel the story moving, progressing, changing. He read the scroll and now he understood. “I just want it to stop! I can’t live like this, please make it go away!”

Garth smiled sweetly. He looked like the sort of boy mothers of other children would want to hug. “I’m sorry, Robert. I cannot.

Robert choked, felt sick, “W-why? It’s your scroll...you can fix me!”

“You are not broken, Robert. You just understand things a little better now, that’s all. Of course, there are going to be other repercussions, but I don’t think you are going to be around long enough to see them come to fruition. Or maybe you will. I don’t know yet.”

“No, no please, help me!”

Garth tilted his head over to one shoulder. A curl of his lovely hair fell in front of his eyes, and he twirled it between his fingers. His smile widened and he chuckled softly.

Almost sprawled on the ground now, Robert cowered below the Poet Laureate, twisting in pain as claws poked into his head. “I didn’t mean to do this!” he whimpered, clutching his head, “I didn’t think...I didn’t want...”

“Oh, but you did, Robert. You stole one of the Ambrosia Scrolls. You stole *my* scroll.” Garth’s chuckle became a high, mirthless laugh. He wiped an invisible tear from the corner of one terrible eye. “That’s why this is so funny! I am truly the only person in this universe who *could* help you!” he laughed harder until the alley walls crackled with it. “But, *and I am truly sorry about this part*, I’ve been dead for over a hundred years now.” He fluttered his fingers gleefully, “For now I am not here. Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be back when I’m ready, but for now, the only reason you are talking to me is because, well, every artist is part of their art, and you have gotten yourself pretty acquainted with my work of art, haven’t you?” Garth leaned back against the opposite wall. “My, what an awful mess you’ve gotten yourself into. I credit you, I didn’t even see this coming. You know a character is good when they surprise you.” Picking up his cup, he took a long gulp before continuing. “This story, your world, is such a fragile, tangled mess of

a tapestry. All clinging and bound up in itself like a cookoo's nest...but cut one thread..." he made a snipping motion with two fingers. His golden eyes tugged at Robert's thoughts until he openly sobbed. "You've been reading Poetry you have no business trying to understand. You've been teething on lightning, my dear Robert, and it has bitten you. Yes, things are different now, for you, and soon enough, the rest of the story. The plot has changed, and no, I cannot help you. Not now. Not here. You've read your own story, Robert. There is no power in your heaven, your earth, or in the pits of this silly story's hell that can save you." Garth threw back his head and laughed and laughed, and when Robert reached out a hand and grasped the front of his coat, he became nothing more than golden dust falling through his fingers.

"I'm not really here." Garth's voice whispered from the back of his mind. The tea cup still sat on the crate, but the tea pot was gone. Looking at it, Robert found the thing filled with rain water. To his left, a barrel stood, catching droplets from the warehouse's eaves. A memory of using that cup to scoop water out of the bucket surfaced in his mind, and he threw the cup down the corridor. It broke with a distant, and somehow pointless crash. Sitting up against the wall, he listened to his own heart in his ears, and the quiet voice tell him all about himself. How he had failed his mentor, betrayed the Guild, and how he could never go back there. It told him how his world was slowly shaking, breaking, coming apart...because of him.

Exhausted, too disturbed to cry, Robert curled up on the cold stone, and prayed silently that he would die.

"It's too late for that," Garth's voice sang distantly in his half-dreams, "too late to die. You poor bastard."

## Chapter 11

### The City by the Sea

Crunching gravel did nothing to diminish the twittering of birds and the gentle roar of wind through the valley as Atoña walked along the railroad tracks. The trains hauled cargo and passengers along the coast and from Dale Port up into the mountains to Cambren. There was a wagon and coach road that connected all the towns and the city, but Atoña always liked following the tracks. If she was lucky, she might see a train. Atoña Birgendi loved trains.

Morning just now began to shift into a warmer noon, the sun filtering through the tall redwoods and shorter, star-leafed maples, and already Atoña had walked from Tosaga to Cambren, and was well on her way to Dale Port. To her right, a hill rose up, up which she periodically heard the clomping of horses from coaches, and down to her left, the river gambles over sun brightened boulders, glinting gold and blue and green from river plants. Breathing deeply, Atoña filled herself with the warm air of soft scents, and the coolness of shadows. It was a perfect day.

Coming to a trestle, a big metal ribcage of some unnamed monster, Atońa put her ear to a track. Hearing no rumbling of an approaching train, she hopped up on the rail and hurried across.

This was what life was all about; a new day, new possibilities, and a whole world of opportunities just waiting for someone to run up and snatch them before they wilted away into lost chances. Terrebeth, the beautiful village out of time and place, was the place people usually wanted to get to, the treasure at the end of the long journey, but for Atońa, it was a stability she needed to walk away from. In Terrebeth, in her forest, she would be happy and live long, but she would never know the potential for life she might have if she set foot into the rest of Gauntland. Of course, she didn't expect too much too soon, but she had a plan. Becoming something took time, and Atońa was willing to dedicate that time.

Soon the tracks sank closer to the river, then veered away from the water. The trees shortened into bays and eucalyptus, and the smells harshened into the warm musk of sun on oiled streets and smoke from the steam ships. Atońa quickened her pace to a slow jog, the feathers on her arrows rustling. Blue sky opened up overhead and the sun warmed. Up ahead warehouses took the place of woodlands, and streets crissed and crossed the tracks.

Still partly in the trees, Atońa stopped and pulled a black and purple bandana from the pouch on the front of her quiver. Before closing the pouch she brushed the pads of her fingers across a folded piece of expensive paper next to her wallet. Today was the day. Atońa shook out the bandana, tying it over her hair and ears so it bounced stylishly against the back of her head. Unlike Bridgemark, Dale Port, most of it anyway, was more or less aware of people who weren't quite human. It had been Atońa's experience that a good number of people recognized her as an 'elf' or 'faery' and initiated a lot of strange questions. Most of the Alduna Sidhe used glamour to look human when traveling through cities and interacting with humans, but Atońa didn't know



how to use glamour. On her however, with her plain brown hair and slate-blue eyes, a bandana was all it took to look human. An uncomfortable tightness swelled in her throat, and she ran a few dozen yards along one rail to make herself feel better. She'd learn how to use magic soon enough, and everything would be okay.

Looking humanish was well and good, but eventually, if Atoña was going to follow through with her plan, her piers would just have to get used to having a sidhe in their midst.

The warehouse district passed by quickly followed by hardware stores and shipping despots, and in a few blocks Atoña was at the east end of Garden Street. It had been far too long since she'd been down town, and the last time it had been raining. Today the sun crisped the edges of the green-leafed box gardens, and melted the ice in the iced tea vendors booth. A handsome clock tower stood across the lane from Garden, and Atoña stood in its shadow. Across from her, a tall, off-white flat iron building loomed over the lesser bank and post office, marble pillars and bronze flourished embellishing an elegant yet practical work of architectural beauty. Over the large oak double doors depressed letters flecked with gold leaf read The Poet's Guild Archive and Library. Below that, red cautionary rope snaked all over the doors and paved pavilion. Men in the black and red of Gauntland Guards milled about with swords on hips and rifles over shoulders, seemingly unimpressed by the number of purple Poets fussing and gibbering back and forth.

Atoña tilted her head. Something was going poorly. Oh well, she shrugged it off and trotted around the Guild. No fire, no explosion, no point of interest.

Next to the Guild, mounted proudly atop a basalt pillar sat a large-as-life statue of Lord Nothelenor. In the saddle of his warhorse, sword strapped across his back, banner in hand, the Master Knight looked over the city with bold sightless eyes, hair lifted in an invisible wind.

Beneath the hooves of his stallion, a plaque said a lot of things about valor and bravery, and some dates things had happened. But at the very bottom, in bold letters, the Knight's motto read; "Peace Before Adversity." Atoña looked at his face briefly, shook off her unease again, and walked on. She knew he was watching her.

Stopping at a café, Atoña bought herself a lunch of bread and soup, and when finished, stood on the corner of Garden and Willow for the trolley. Hopping aboard, Atoña sat with her bow across her lap, not meeting the eyes of the other passengers. Someone said something to his girlfriend about the bow and pointed at her bandana. Atoña pretended to play with her hair in the reflection, looking primly down the bridge of her long nose with half lidded eyes. The girl in the reflection looked unimpressively back.

Minutes ticked away and the trolley finally reached the top of the long slope of Willow Street. Atoña's heart picked up its pace and she filled her lungs with big gulps of air. Turning forty-five degrees, the trolley stopped on the corner of University Avenue and let off all passengers but Atoña.

Leaning to the side, the conductor waved at Atoña. "Excuse me Miss, are you going up?"

"Yes," Atoña held her head up, "can you drop me at the office of the Registrar?"

Pulling the trolley away from the curb, the conductor nodded. "Sure enough."

The trolley passed through a gate. Next to the gate stood a huge wooden sign with words carved deeply into its thick flesh. "Dale Port University of Science and the Arts, Distinguished Quality and Excellence."

"You know someone there?" the conductor watched Atoña in his mirror.

"No,"

"Is there an event there?"

“No. I’m submitting my application.”

Quiet. The trolley rattled over some uneven paving. “You’ve got to have amazing scores on the Gauntland Scientific Exams to get a foot in that door. My niece has applied seven times.” He shook his head. “No Scientists or Professors in my family.”

Atoña watched trees and sweeping fields drift by. “None in mine either.”

Slowing for milling students, the trolley turned into a parking area in the hulking shadow of a redwood lodge that looked more like a palace than anything that should have been at a school. Students ranging from Atoña’s age to late twenties lounged around on redwood-log benches, faces in books or pens in hand. They dressed casually, but with a formal flare; vests over shirts, ironed pants, styled hair, clean shoes. Atoña rubbed a muddy spot on her shoe against her seat.

“Here you go, Miss.”

Standing, Atoña pulled some welsky from her pocket and handed it to the conductor. He was a stale looking man about forty with a bored face and rumpled bowtie. But he smiled nicely at her. “Say Miss,” he called as she hopped down the steps and trotted away, “forgive me for asking, but you aren’t one of those forest pixies, are you?” immediately, he looked embarrassed.

A smile turned up Atoña’s lips. “Goblin, actually. The scary kind that eat children if they get lost.”

The conductor smiled back. “Well, good luck at the University, Miss.”

“Thank you. Bye.”

The trolley clattered off and Atoña walked up the wide steps of the redwood fortress. Students looked up, looked down at her bow, and looked confused. She kept her smile inside, but felt a weird satisfaction at their big eyes.

Knowing where she needed to go, Atoña climbed three flights of dark-walled stairs with burning oil lamps and walked down a long corridor with windows overlooking the bay. A door on her right read Office of the Registrar, and she let herself in. A nice looking woman in a classy grey dress sat behind a desk and in front of a dozen rows of shelves packed with records. She looked up at Atoña and smiled. “Can I help you?” The smile faltered as it landed on the bow.

“Yes,” Atoña set her bow across two chairs and unbuckled her quiver. Fishing into the front pouch, she pulled out the fancy paper, unfolding it reverently, and handed it to the woman who’s name tag read Brenda. “My name is Atoña Birgendi. I visited this office four months ago and opened an application account. All of my information should be there. This is my score sheet from the GSE.”

Taking the paper, the woman slid on a pair of glasses. “You can take a seat, Miss Burgundy, this will take a few minutes.”

Not bothering to correct the slight mispronunciation, Atoña sat next to her bow and stared at the fliers posted on the wall. Job opportunities. Internships. Apprenticeships with wizards. Her palms grew sweaty.

Brenda got up and picked through files for a long time before finding the one she wanted. Once she had it, she spent an even longer time flipping through the piles of paper and cross-referencing against a big leather-bound book.

Atoña’s excitement ebbed until she almost fell asleep.

“Miss Burgundy?”

Atoña started. Brenda motioned for her come over to the desk. Heart jumping into full speed, she got shakily to her feet and walked over.

Folding her fingers together, Brenda looked sternly at Atoña then down at the papers scattered around her desk.

“Atonna, is it?”

“Atonnya,” Atoña pronounced her name slowly.

“Atoña,” Brenda looked down at the spelling. A frown creased her brows slightly. “The records show you have been completing this application for quite a long time.”

“Yes,” Atoña rubbed one foot against the back of her calf, “I currently live a long way from here and don’t have regular access to a telegraph station.”

Brows furrowing a little deeper, Brenda flipped over the folded paper Atoña had provided. “Your entrance essay seems to have scored favorably by the Dean, and your GSE results are...” she looked again, “excellent.”

Atoña dipped her chin demurely. “Thank you.”

“I have no idea where Terrebeth is, but you will need to find lodging on or close to campus, which shouldn’t be too difficult.”

Atoña’s heart jumped painfully and she had trouble taking her next breath.

Smiling, Brenda held out her hand. “Congratulations Atoña, and welcome to University. It will take a few months to fully process your information and to review your class requests, but you be able to take your first semester this fall.”

A little dizzy, Atoña pumped her hand up and down. “Thank you,” she choked then laughed, “thank you!”

“No, thank you, Miss Burgundy.” Her smile became a little smug, “just between you and the wall, I never thought I’d see an elf apply for out school.”

Atoña took a deep breath. “Well, there has to be a first for everything, right?”

“True enough.”

Picking up her bow and quiver, Atoña said good bye and thank you again before leaving. Outside, the students watched her pass, equally as puzzled as when she'd entered. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep her lips out of a smile. Deciding not to wait for a trolley, Atoña bounced along the road out of campus, singing off-key to herself. It was a good day.

## Chapter 12

### Matches

Birds chirping and the soft brush of cold wind pulled Laurien from her deep sleep. Panic stole the breath from her lips in a sudden jolt at the strangeness of her surroundings, then sank quickly into a dull nervous fear as she remembered the night before. She was at Melithnion Temple with a whole flock of demons. Ah happy day.

She couldn't remember off the top of her head which demon was which, save for Owlwing, who sat only two yards away, cutting off slices of smoked meat from the lamb over the old coals.

"Good morning," said Owlwing, setting the meat on a plate with some cornbread and sliced fruit. Was it plums? "Please have some breakfast. We weren't really ready to haul a pack of meat around when Qeo shot that buck. It's quite lucky you came along to help us eat it."

Taking the plate, Laurien used her fingers to pick up each item. It was just as good as the night before.

“This is deer?”

“Good isn’t it?” Owlwing hopped up and settled next to Laurien. Her big yellow eyes glowed like a coyote’s and the feathers in her hair gleamed. Laurien felt uneasy by her proximity, but was more hungry than worried. No one had killed her yet. The other demons milled about outside the Temple or around the meal area, all but the red headed boy, who seemed to have vacated camp, bed roll and all. They spoke and laughed like normal people might. It seemed weird.

Unlike yesterday’s dreadful morning, today the light was soft and grey, muted by high clouds. Moisture clung to the outsides of the pillars of the Temple, and a chill fresh scent made Laurien’s nose smart.

“It looks like it might rain, doesn’t it?” Owlwing tilted her head toward the clouds. “That would be beautiful.”

Laurien wasn’t sure if those would be her thoughts if she were a demon running around the woods with only a coat and a sword.

Owlwing looked sideways at Laurien, and it struck Laurien as odd that something so terrible sure looked young and pretty. Maybe not by Bridgemark standards, as Owlwing was on the muscular side of skinny, tendons flexing beneath copper-skinned forearms, but her face had attractive lines and her figure was comprised of humanly pleasing shapes.

“Have you decided yet where you are going today?” Owlwing ask politely, but Laurien got the odd feeling it was rhetorical.



Laurien looked at the plate in her hands. It was made from a shaped and sanded piece of wood, and the food on it tasted fresh, clean, and unpretentious. She chewed slowly.

“A wedding is a big deal,” another voice chimed in as Tyber slunk over and draped an arm over Owlwing’s shoulders, “perhaps you don’t want to miss it?” Her eyes shimmered, lips twisting in to a not-very-concerned smile.

Laurien would have spat out the retort on her tongue, but thought better of it. Aside from still being a little afraid of these people, she had the weird desire to be civil with them, to not work at offending their sensibilities like she so often did to the clergy.

“My brother went to Dale Port,” she watched a dark bird create a jagged shadow against the bright grey clouds. “That’s where I’m going. I have no reason to ever go back to Bridgemark.” A snag of emotion tightened in her chest. She thought of Daniel and Eugene, even little Marie’s face flickered through her thoughts. She remembered her mother cradling her after she fell off a horse, speaking kindly to her in a voice that had no words. But a moment later, the image of her father’s face, twisted and burning, loomed inside her mind, followed by the gentle, smiling face of the High Priest, a blood drenched flog in his white gloves. “I’m never going Back.” She took a deep breath. “I really have no idea who you people are, but I think I get the point that you aren’t monsters. For some reason I always thought you would be...that everyone out here would be...” she lifted her chin, “Eugene knew something I didn’t. I’m ready to see what else Bridgemark has been wrong about.”

“You are made of strong stuff,” Owlwing nodded, mouth forming a line of approval. “We have nowhere else to be for a few days.” Looking around, she met the gazes of Ambreck, Qeo, and Tyber, “I see no reason why we couldn’t show you some of what is to see out here and share a few secrets about not dying.”

“Rule number one,” Ambreck spoke up, “water is downhill. Walk down anywhere around here and you will eventually find a stream. Follow said stream and you will find a bigger one. From this temple, if you walk down in any direction, you will be at the ocean in no more than two days, and there are towns all up and down the coast.” He looked satisfied. “Easiest way to stay alive.”

Laurien didn't mention that she had thought all water must come from wells.

“We can show you where to find things that are good to eat,” Qeo pointed out of the Temple.

“And how to not die if it gets too cold at night,” Ambreck added.

“Before we do anything exciting, I think Laurien here could use a change of clothes and new shoes.” Owlwing walked over to a leather pack, untying a thin rope from around it. “By some crazy chance, I just so happen to have both. Usually I don't plan this far ahead, but we were hunting a monster after all. Can never be too prepared.” Fishing several thin pieces of fabric out of her bag, Owlwing offered them to Laurien. “Some of these will be a little small, but the shirt laces up the sides, so you can adjust it.”

Laurien took them hesitantly. They didn't weigh very much and felt like raw silk.

“Go ahead and step out of the temple to those bushes over there and change,” Owlwing pointed.

Laurien hobbled slowly up the steps to the rim of the Temple. For being overcast, the light from the hidden sun cast a stark glare over the sweeping forest. Thick mist hung softly to the air. Laurien blinked and squinted. Stepping down and wincing, Laurien walked until she was good and certain she was deep enough into the brush to not be seen before stopping. Sitting down, she unlaced her shoes. They peeled slowly away from her stockings, angering blisters on

their way off. Next she delicately pulled at each stocking, grimacing at the tormented swellings on her toes and ankles. Feeling suddenly dirty and confined, able to smell her own body, Laurien stripped off the rest of her clothes, tossing them away where they caught on bramble. Naked, she held up her new clothes. She looked down at her thighs and waist and breasts and felt unusually thick. No, the demon people or sidhe or whatever they called themselves were skinny. A little flustered, she sorted through the offered garments, trying to figure out what went on first. Underwear she recognized, though they were immodestly short in the legs and crawled up her backside when she put them on. But, they did not itch. Bonus.

She knew what pants were, but had never worn them. Apparently, outside of Bridgemark, women didn't have to do the modesty show-not-the-shape-of-your-hips thing. The women she'd grown up with insisted a woman's hips and thighs were lewd. Laurien couldn't understand how pants were lewd. Men wore them, didn't they? And most men had something in their pants. The pants fit a little oddly, coming up to an inch below Laurien's navel and hugging to her thighs. But, like the underwear, they were comfortable and did not itch.

The shirt Laurien understood, but the strappy, cup-thing with the tiny hooks had her baffled. She hadn't seen any of the other sidhe wearing something like it, and almost called out for Owlwing to come help her. Her face reddened. No, can't do that. She might just die if she had to ask a demon woman to dress her. Holding the article in front of herself, she moved it around over herself. She fit a cup over one breast. Right shape. It must function the same way as a bodice, only much, much less. Slipping it on, she hooked it, pulling the straps over her arms. It worked. She bounced up and down. It worked nicely. Pulling the brown shirt over her head, she adjusted it until it fit like Owlwings; tight, but not too tight. Last, Laurien sat down again, gently coaxing thin socks over her feet and lacing them into soft suede shoes. Nothing had ever felt so

good to walk in. It was like walking with nothing on her feet at all. Wishing for a mirror, she gave herself a once over. She felt a little self-conscious about showing her whole arms and her ankles, but figured if the others were doing it, why would it matter if she did too? Who would tell her not to? The shirt came down over the tops of her breasts, and she could see their shape as she looked down. Madam Gloucester would be appalled. Laurien grinned.

The grin as short lived as she wondered back over to the encampment. Suddenly the Melithnion Temple loomed very tall above her. The sky looked darker than before, and she wondered if behind the clouds the sun was turning black. “The things that live in that forest do not know love. All they live for is depravity.” Father Sulvester’s delicate voice floated out of some memory. “Do not be fooled by their cunning and clever words. They will stop at nothing to bend you beneath their twisted ways.”

Laurien looked down at herself. She was bent alright, and couldn’t find it in herself to feel guilty. These people, for she decided they were in fact, people, were her ticket out of the confines of Bridgemark, and at least her first step on the road that would lead her closer to finding Eugene and maybe, just maybe, Daniel.

“They suit you very well,” Owlwing smiled approvingly as Laurien climbed back into the Temple, “you looks like a normal person now. A good bath, maybe a trim to your hair, and you will look like you’ve been living in Dale Port your whole life. With a smile like that, no one will ever think you ever came from Bridgemark.”

Packing up camp took much less time than Laurien thought it might, and soon she was fitted with a small pack of her own. “This is only a purse really,” Owlwing explained, “but it will do until you can get something better.”

They left no sign they had ever been there, even the fire pit denied having burned. Assembled out in the open, Tyber began to walk briskly down a slope, immediately veering off onto a tiny path in the bramble. Laurien followed between Ambreck and Qeo who avoided looking at her. Owlwing didn't follow at first, but appeared some time later with the red-headed boy. He looked like someone had spit in his oatmeal.

“Laurien,” Owlwing held out a hand for her to stop, “as you know, this is Demereian. Demereian, Laurien.” If eyes could throw sparks, the whole bramble patch would be going down in flames. The corner of the boy's lip edged over one sharp canine tooth. “Demereian is going to be your guide as we travel. He is going to tell you about these mountains, what to eat, what not to eat, where to find water and shelter, and about the natural predators. I also expect him to give you the basics on tracking.” She smiled fondly at him.

“WHAT?” Demereian did nothing to imply subtlety. “I am *not* helping *that!*”

“You, Mr. Mohoggoney, will do exactly as I tell you.”

“But, but”

“No. I am not going to tolerate any shit from you.” She looked at Laurien, “I think you understand quite well I don't expect any shit from you either.”

Not sure what to do, Laurien nodded.

“Good. Demereian, you and Laurien are going to be our scouts. Take the forward position and keep an eye out for things out of the ordinary.”

“The Bridgemark girl is too loud!” Demereian's eyes were very big and his face was a little pale, “She'll attract mountain lions, or wolves, or, or, maybe the Bridgemark things are after her!” He looked around frantically, his lip quivering slightly, “she'll lead them right to us!”

Owlwing took a deep breath and let it out in a huff. “First off, lions and wolves are not out to get us, they are frightened of loud noises, and second, the only loud thing out here for the next twenty miles is you. So why don’t you embrace a little bit of your masculinity and show the girl how to scout.”

Demereian gave Owlwing a face that suggested he might just fall over and die if she didn’t see reason, and when she walked away, deflated into a skinny little boy with messy orange hair all over his face and the expression of a kicked puppy. Slowly, he turned to Laurien, avoiding her eyes. “You heard her. Come on.” Thrusting his rather large nose into the air he stalked off. Laurien followed. As they passed the others, Ambreck pressed his lips together, and Tyber looked like she was choking on a sock. When sever bushes of Manzanita separated their groups, Laurien caught the tail end of a snicker.

Trampling fiercely through the brush, Demereian kept his back to her, his small shoulders bunched up and freckly. An oak branch obstructed his path and he kicked at it and squealed when it rebounded at him.

Laurien limped along after him. A blister had rubbed open despite her soft shoes, and it smarted every time her foot came down. Her legs ached dully and her breathing was already on the verge of panting, but she didn’t dare voice a complaint. The Demereian boy was already agitated. She doubted he would try anything with the prospect of facing Owlwing’s disapproval, but all the same, he had a sword and possibly hexes and witchcraft and whatnot. Laurien took her suffering in stride. This was a whole hell of a lot better than staggering around in the dark wondering what nasty thing out in the woods was going to kill her first. If the choice was die or endure a temperamental pre-teen drama show, she’d take the show.

“Don’t you get any ideas.” Demereian hissed over his shoulder as he ducked beneath another branch, “I know what you are. If you try anything, I’ll put my sword through your belly before you even know it left its sheath.”

Laurien furrowed her brow. “What would I try?”

Stopping so suddenly, Laurien almost ran into him, Demereian looked up at her, eyes all but glowing with what he likely thought was menace. “Don’t test my patience, Bridgemark girl.” He pointed a threateningly gloved finger at her, “I know where you come from. I know what you’re capable of.” He blew on his bangs as they fell over his eyes. With a satisfied nod, he turned and continued his reckless plunge into the woods.

“You know,” Laurien thought about choosing her words more carefully and thought better of it, “you remind me of my little brother.”

Demereian didn’t stop this time, but she could feel the heat radiating from his fitted black clothes.

“Begging your pardon?” his voice was quiet, a hiss.

“I said you remind me of my little brother.” Salt dripped into Laurien’s eyes and she rubbed her face with a hand. “Something’s bothering you and the only way you know how to deal with it is to be mean to someone.” She could have stopped there. “and bitch. He likes to bitch too. You might get along.”

Stopping again, Demereian turned around very slowly, his mouth partly open and his eyes huge and blinking. He didn’t say anything, just gave her that expression.

Laurien looked right back at him. He wasn’t very old, maybe twelve at the most, and just at the awkward stage where soft, rounded features began to harden into those of a man. he was small and skinny, but already his jaw had started to square to match the slightly disproportionate

nose. Even having never met him before and having no idea who his parents were, Laurien could see him growing up into someone tall, rugged, lean but built, and even, she could see a hint of it even now, handsome. But, he wasn't there yet. Right now, sidhe or not, he was a fussy little boy with some sort of damage to his ego.

Demereian looked at Laurien, and she looked right back. after a moment, he kept walking, and they said nothing to each other for a long time.

Gradually, the two of them, and presumably the rest of the group, descended into a valley of dark shade and cool air. An odd rushing sound picked up and presently, they came to a shallow stream. Laurien had never seen naturally running water before, and leaned over to look at her own reflection. Ripples gathered like bunched fabric, but aside from the shape, the water was as clear as air. Underneath it were sand, pebbles, and dark, snake-like branches. Laurien watched Demereian take off his shoes and socks and roll up his pants. Doing the same, she followed behind him.

The water was so cold she felt it reach up her legs even though it only came to her ankles. She hurried across as quickly as she could. On the far side, she rubbed the bottoms of her feet against her pant legs to help them dry faster. Having worn pants for the better part of a morning, Laurien decided she might never go back to skirts and dresses. In a dress, once any sort of sweating started, her thighs began chaffing. Sure, they were still sore from the last few days, but at least they weren't getting any more so.

Demereian scrambled up the embankment and vanished into the deep green light. Here the trees were tall and the sun was kept far away. Not wanting to let him sneak off or something, Laurien hurried after him. If not for the orange color of his hair shining out of the dimness he



might have gotten away. However, she caught up to him rather quickly, falling into silent step behind him once more.

And it was silent. Laurien listened. Hardly a bird or bug made a sound, and the water grew farther away with each minute passing, and she marveled at how loud her own foot falls were. After almost a half hour of arguing with herself, she took a deep breath and said, “you know, Demereian, you do walk very quietly.” She noticed one of his long, sharp ears rotated slightly in her direction, somewhat like that of a horse. Weird. “Can you show m how?”

Demereian didn't respond for just long enough Laurien thought he might not at all. “It's not that hard, really.” He spoke to the ground in front of him. “The trick is to not step on the crunchy leaves. The things that make the most noise are madrone leaves. The ones that are sort of oblong and all yellow and orange. They crunch real loud.”

Laurien watched his feet. Sure enough, he walked deftly around all crunchy looking leaves. She tried it. It took a lot of focus.

“The other trick is to walk more on your toes. If you put your toe down first, you can roll your weight forward. It keeps you from stomping around like an idiot.” Without looking back, he demonstrated, emphasizing his motions dramatically for her benefit. “you don't really have to worry about that here though. We're on a hard game trail. If you start dancing around you will look like an idiot anyway.” He snorted. “Worrying about your weight and stuff is more for like walking or running on tree dander and stuff. I don't know,” he added an exasperated huff that sounded a bit staged, “just run around in the woods a while. You'll get used to it.”

“Thanks.” Laurien gave it a few minutes before asking a new question. She didn't want to push him too hard too fast. She saw some dark orange things growing on the underside of a log. “Are those berries? Are they good to eat?”

“Those?” Demereian clarified, “Those are fungus. A good rule of thumb, just leave fungus alone. Sure, there are plenty of mushrooms that are fine to eat, but there are also a whole load of them that look just like the good ones that will kill you.” He stretched out the work kill as far as it would go. “If you’re looking for something to eat while your hiking, this time of year you can find huckleberries and blackberries in some places, but the real treat is finding some strawberries. Have you ever had a strawberry?” small pause, “Of course you haven’t. There is nothing better than a summer strawberry...” and he didn’t shut up after that. Laurien let him talk, periodically tossing a question in as bait. He told her all about what sorts of berries she could eat (but not what they looked like), what sorts of things to watch out for during the day (mostly rattlesnakes and hornets), and how the orange and red madrone tree with its peeling, droopy skin was always cool to touch.

The trail meandered along and dropped them onto another wagon road, giving them enough room to walk side by side. By this point, Demereian had gotten himself onto the topic of sword play, and had incorporated enormous hand gestures and unnecessary footwork into the conversation.

Laurien watched him as he talked and flounced his skills, stepping back more than once when he saw fit to pull his actual blade out. His eyes reflected the gleam of the steel, and his face split into a grin as he told her all about it. All she caught from the sword dissertation was that that particular blade was called a saber and it was rather quick to make.

“It’s quick and light, and you can wield it one hand or two. See, it’s got a blade on one side, so you block with the other like this,” he demonstrated.

The more Laurien watched him, the more normal he became. Long ears, bright hair, and sharp teeth aside, he was just a boy looking for an excuse to talk someone's ear off. He seemed very human.

"This is probably the type of sword I'll use when I'm older," Demereian slid it back into its sheath, "But an *aderact*, not a saber. *Aderacts* are works of art. You have to earn them." He looked at something only he could see for a moment. "My father carried a broadsword taller than I am now." He looked back at his feet. "I probably won't ever be strong enough to do that."

Laurien noticed the past tense. "What was he like, your father?"

Demereian shrugged, not convincing her it didn't matter. "I don't know," he looked away, "I never met him. He was killed before I was born." He swallowed. "What is your family like?" He regarded her with his green eyes. All nastiness gone from them. *Yep*, Laurien thought, *he's a boy alright*.

Laurien told him about her greedy father, her sneaky, less-than-truthful mother, and her two annoying younger brothers.

"That sounds horrible." Demereian inserted his nose firmly into the air, "Bridgemark is simply awful."

"Have you ever been there before?"

"Well, no, but it's still awful."

"Can't argue with you there."

She then told him about Eugene and Daniel, making sure to include a lot of details about her brother leaving Bridgemark, and about the fun memories they had made before he left. "He even gave me a sword once." Laurien pressed her lips together a little. "It's under my bed still."

“You have a sword?” Demereian was suddenly very interested, “What kind? How old? Do you know who made it?”

Laurien didn’t know any of that, only that it was a little bit like his. “Only more fancy.”

“Ah geeze,” Demereian paced across the trail as he walked, “you know you’re going back for it, right?”

“I am not,” but even as she said it, Laurien felt a pang somewhere close to her heart. That sword was a gift from Eugene, her Eugene, and it could never be replaced. The thought of leaving it felt oddly like abandonment.

“But, it’s your sword!” Demereian looked distraught. “You don’t just let a bunch of evil people have it!”

“Can I ask you a question without you getting mad?”

Demereian blinked at her. “Sure,”

“I know why I don’t like Bridgemark, but why do your people seem to hate it so much? I mean, as far as I know, the city people hardly ever leave.”

Another long silence. Demereian took a long breath and cleared his throat in a mature way. “Well, the city’s a cult, you know. They have some weird religion that hates all things,” he made quotes with his fingers, “magical. We live in this forest too, and their hunters and priests kill us. Sometimes they steal our children...we don’t know what happens to them. Sometimes...” he swallowed, “we find them. The priests cut them up...say the devils need to burn...” his breath quickened, “My father was their friend for a long time...and,” he cleared his throat again, “and do you know what they do to their children they don’t want?” he fixed his eyes on Laurien. “Do you?”

Laurien thought about her neighbor, Hilde Dranico, who had a baby boy two years ago with only one arm. She had cared for him until Father Sulvester came and took him away. After that, everyone acted like there had never been a baby at all, and the next year, she had had a healthy son.

“No.” Laurien said, a sick feeling growing in her stomach, “what do they do?”

“I don’t really know.” Demereian said, voice flat, “Owlwing wouldn’t give me any details. Just that the priest cuts pieces off of them, almost kills them, and leaves them in the forest to die slowly.” He swallowed again, a little green under his orange hair. “Owlwing doesn’t have kids, you know, but she finds the babies left by Bridgemark and...” he scrunched up his face, looking for a way to describe something, “puts them back together as best she can. She’s got a whole bunch. They roam around the forest now. It’s kind of creepy.”

“Only a little,” Laurien felt ill. Why was she not having difficulty believing this? Maybe it was the look in Father Sulvester’s pretty blue eyes when his hands were dripping with blood, the gentle, kind ring of his laugh as he folded the cat o’ nine tails over his arm and walked away as a young sinner bled to death in the center of the city. Tied to that pole.

“Demeran,” Laurien’s voice wavered a little.

“dem MEER ian, actually,”

“Sorry, Demereian, do, do they do stuff like whip people to death out here, out of the city?”

Demereian looked only mildly appalled, “No. and if they do they are not supposed to. You never been out of it before?”

“No.”

“Then you are in for some shocks. Things are a lot different out here.” He smiled at her, the first one meant for her, “I think you’ll like it.”

“I thought I was going to die before you guys found me.”

He shrugged, “you might have. You won’t now though. You know how to find water.”

“Walk down?”

“Walk down.”

The conversation lightened again as Demereian pointed out plants and small animals, providing Laurien with a million names she doubted she would ever remember. When the sun was high, they stopped and ate lunch, and by the time the sun was lowering into the horizon they were deep into a new kind of forest. The trees were pale-fleshed and peeling, but were not orange like the madrone, and their leaves were star-shaped and turning to shades of yellow.

Laurien was listening about some ‘amazing’ thing Demereian had done with some sort of weapon when the road entered a cave-like clearing in the trees. In the fading light and the fallen leaves, the lighting looked reddish, autumn.

“Now that you’re friends don’t make the girl hate you.”

Laurien started as Owlwing stepped away from a tree she was blending into. Past her, Laurien could see a camp already set up, Qeo carrying an armful of sticks for the fire.

“How did you beat us here?” Demereian’s voice cracked. “We, we covered so much ground! Even thunder-foot Laurien walked fast enough you c shouldn’t have been able to get ahead of us!”

Laurien let the nick name slide.

“We took the shorter trail.” Owlwing looked smug. “I figured some bonding time would be good for the both of you. Besides, a little extra walking never hurt anyone.

Laurien begged to differ, but kept it to herself.

“Come on, Laurien,” Owlwing walked briskly away, time for you to learn how to build a fire, and better yet, how to light it. Demereian, help Qeo gather more wood.”

For the next forty-five minutes, Owlwing hovered like a pretty vulture as Laurien struggled over her pile of branches and twigs. First the sidhe woman made her clear a patch of earth of debris, then showed her how to stack the wood and dry leaves so that it would burn. She then gave Laurien a stone and a jagged piece of metal to scrape across it. “This is your striker, go like this...” and Laurien was still at it. The other four sat around on a fallen tree, chewing on cold smoked meat and staring distractingly.

“Someday you might have to start a fire without even a striker,” Owlwing said with infuriating patience, “but this is a good place to learn the basics. Remember to blow gently when the spark takes.”

A few minute passed before a spark took to a leaf, and Laurien blew on it cautiously until smoke wafted up in a weak, hair thin spiral. The spark glowed orange and died. Laurien bit the gown of frustration before it got past her teeth.

“Very good,” Owlwing nodded approvingly, “that’s plenty for tonight. It’s getting dark, and sure you want some warm dinner before bed.” Handing Laurien the striker she smiled. “This is yours to keep. Practice with it when you have some time in the woods, but remember to clear the ground first. A wild fire is no fun for anyone.” Reaching into her pocket, Owlwing pulled out a box of matches and lit the fire on the first try. She grinned up at the disgusted look on Laurien’s face. “Learn the basics, Laurien. You need to be able to get by then someone,” her eyes made a quick flick to Demereian, “uses up all your matches.”

While Owlwing, Tyber, and Ambreck heated leftovers and brewed what Laurien guessed was tea, Laurien set up her borrowed bed roll and stretched out on her back. her joints popped, and she felt like the muscles were separating from the bones in her legs, but she felt oddly calm. Peaceful? Maybe not quite peaceful, but certainly relaxed. The sidhe people were become more just people, and having nothing to compare against, were not very odd looking any more. They were people, like her, only a lot more relaxed than the uptight, high-collared propriety she was used to dealing with. Having not spent much time with Qeo, Ambreck or Tyber, she wasn't sure what they were like, but she certainly had no problem thinking very highly of Owlwing, and was growing a soft spot for Demereian. He would be more fun when he was older and less stuck on himself.

When dinner was ready, she got up, and stiff all over again, wondered over to the circle around the fire. Demereian and Tyber scooted apart to make room for her. Tyber patted the ground for her to sit and smiled. It occurred to Laurien that none of the girls from Killkenney ever showed such simple courtesy unless someone was watching.

Dinner was simple, reheated roast venison, bread, and berries some had picked. But Laurien ate all she was given, washing it down with the offered sweet and mild tea. Conversations wandered around the small circle, mostly reporting back on the day, but sometimes brining up personal events in their history, and often involving the village of Terrebeth. Laurien wondered about Terrebeth. Wherever it was, she was sure it was a lovely place.

“You know, Laurien,” Owlwing drew her attention, “I am very glad you decided to come with us. I am not one to be superstitious, but I do believe it was a little bit more than fate that led you to that Temple on the one night we were there.”



Murmuring followed the comment, and Ambreck nodded. “Yes, a little more than coincidence, I think.”

Laurien paused half way through a gulp of tea, a little confused. “What do you mean?” she thought about her prayer to Rosquar prior to seeing the Temple, and felt a twinge of shame.

“You have been to the Melithnion Temple before, haven’t you?” Owlwing looked at Laurien.

“Yes, once. For a pilgrimage with my parent.”

“Yes. Bridgemark still goes there.” She smiled, like this was some sort of a joke.

“Our people build that temple, very long ago.”

Laurien recalled her saying something like that.

“Did your priest tell you why the Temple is there?”

Laurien thought about how to word what she said next, “He said the Melithnion Temple was built when Bridgemark was bigger, before it needed a wall to keep the demons out. We, I mean, people from Bridgemark journey to it to remind themselves that the dark things in the forest are getting closer every day.” She looked deep into her cup, feeling uneasy.

“Well, that’s a lovely story,” Tyber rolled her eyes, a little less-than-good-naturedly and Owlwing silenced her with a raised eyebrow.

“At least I can still see a glimmer of the truth in it,” Owlwing folded her hands over her knees. “Laurien, the Rosquarians came and settled in Gauntland, Gauntland is the land we are in, it is made of seventeen countries, several hundred years ago. Those people were from the northern country of Brindale, and were unused to living in our forest. They struggled, and many died before one of our scouts found them.

“To make a long history short enough to listen to, we taught them how to grow crops in out soil, how to make houses without cutting more trees than was necessary, and how to live in peace with the natural world here. I was very young then. They were peaceful and friendly with us for a very long time.”

“Wait,” Laurien cut in, “how *old* are you?”

Owlwing looked coy, “Old enough to have met your twelfth-great grandmother, which, is possible, if you are descended from the first settlers.” She said it like it was no big affair, ignoring Laurien’s face, which must have been impressively incredulous.

“Back to the story. So, the peace lasted for more than one generation. The Rosquarians then were nothing like what they are now. As our village was far from their settlement, we built the Melithnion Temple halfway between the two. It became tradition for us to share our crops and surplus goods with them, even after they were established and thriving. In time, they even began giving gifts to us. They were good people. Perhaps a little misguided at times, but good, and kind.

“They lived happily in their small city, coming and going, many went to Dale Port and started up what is now a thriving textile industry, which is still there under a new name. but one spring, a new priest arrived by boat in Dale Port, sent to Bridgemark by the Lord Scion of Brindale himself. The priest brought an apprentice, and soon, soon being maybe a decade in this case, the children of Bridgemark stopped wondering into our woods to play with our children. The change was gradual for the humans, but for us it was quick, and wicked.

“I remember wandering down that way on a hunt and seeing the foundation for the wall. Once the wall went up, Bridgemark slowly quickly became the city it is today. It ate itself alive from the inside, feasting on weakness and prejudice, and bathing in loathing and fear until all the

goodness of it died. There are good people there, do not think I hate the individual. But that city, that city is evil.” Owlwing looked down at her hands. “Any people that will torture its own small children is a people that do not need to keep living.” Her hands clenched into fists, raising tendons on her forearms. “Today the Temple is a reminder for us of a better Bridgemark, and a tool to breed fear for the city. I find it ironic that after centuries of waiting at that Temple for Bridgemark to send a messenger in peace, that last night, that one night, you came to us. A girl from Bridgemark, and you came in peace.”

Laurien watched the fire play quickly in the wind. Her eyes were wet, and she wasn't sure why.

“Maybe,” Owlwing spoke in a soft voice, “it was pure coincidence that a Bridgemark runaway just so happened to find our camp. Or maybe, just maybe this is the beginning of something. Something new.” She chuckled, a sound like water over hollow wood. “Or maybe I am insane and in love with the romantic. Whatever the case, the day had been long, and we could all use a night's rest.”

In her bed while the others slept, Laurien stared at the stars and wondered if they were really stars at all. She wasn't sure any more.

## Chapter 14

### *Narwhal*

Jeffery watched the wind move the surface of the water. He watched it do this for a long time, over a lot of water. Except for a small fleet of patrol vessels, the Cheshire Bay stood empty. Jeffery could see all the way across the grey stretch of sea to the mountains on the other side without a sail obstructing his view. It was beautiful, pristine, and made Jeffery's hair prickle with a quiet dread.

All unsolicited boat activity halted that morning with King Inez's blessing and royal stamp. Already dozens of protesters were gathering in front of the County Headquarters in protest. Many of them were fishermen who made their living out on that bay. They had wives and husbands and families to feed, and right now Jeffery was the man responsible for their

income taking a cut. He felt power, power he had never before gotten his hands around in all his years in the Guard, and it filled him with disgust.

Robert McWerein may be deranged, maybe even dangerous, but what Jeffery was doing, what he was doing until either Robert was caught or another plan was formed, was evil.

Guardsmen rode every train leaving the city, and stood sentinel on six-hour shifts at all main roads in and out of Dale Port. Wanted posters with Robert's young face stared mutely from every pole and building face across the city.

That morning, Jeffery met Rustaford J. Mayweather on the municipal wharf. Mayweather was a pleasant, jolly-faced man with a round belly and full, graying beard. He captained the battleship *Narwhal*, and his crew called him Rusty. Jeffery had long called him a friend, and despite of his position as Captain of the Guard, often found himself looking for Rusty's advice. Especially now.

Rustaford's job was not necessarily one that went hand and hand with Jeffery's. *Narwhal* was owned by Dale Port, and Rusty piloted her under the Golden Phoenix of Gauntland, but he did not make his living this way. Tradesmen, big ships filled with valuable cargo hired Rusty and his crew to travel with them on the trade route down the coast to Mygra. It was Rusty's job to sink pirate ships, and that was what he was good at. Rusty was a smart, fair, even gentle man, but behind *Narwhal*'s helm, a great five-masted, two paddle-wheeled, armored and fortified beast named for the twenty-foot long metal spike submerged at the bow, he became a hunter. Cool, collected, and able to get the job done. Sometimes, his jobs did not overlay perfectly with what Jeffery oversaw, as some of the ships he protected were questionable, but Jeffery generally gave him the courtesy of looking the other way. And it took both hands for Jeffery to count the number of men Rusty had helped him catch over the years.

Over coffee, Jeffery explained the situation. Rusty listened and nodded, and when he was finished, to Jeffery's surprise, agreed to the plan.

"I'm not a dumb sailor," rusty always spoke in good Gailslendic when not conversing with his crew, and his teeth were white when he smiled. "I know what those Poets are. My mother went to that University, and she used to tell me stories about that Garth that would grow your toenails. I know it's ugly, Jeff, but sometimes you have to get ugly in order to catch the guy who's more ugly."

Jeffery knew he was right, but seeing the empty bay still felt wrong. How many days could he keep the bay clear before the fishermen became violent? To what extent could his men patrol the lives of this city? If it came down to taking away the personal freedoms of Dale Port, the King would have to take the train down here himself and do it. As Captain of the Dale Port Guard, Jeffery had his boundaries. Long ago now, he swore an oath to protect the City of Dale Port, and part of that oath spoke of protecting it from laws that were meant to help, but all too often got dangerously out of hand.

Seven years ago, a drug problem got a little out of hand in Dale Port, and the governor in Santamaurice demanded an eleven o'clock curfew. Soon enough, people who worked night shifts were being arrested. That governor's decree lasted a whole four days before Jeffery got Inez to overturn it.

As for the ships, Jeffery would give it a week. No more. If Robert wasn't captured, or the situation changed, he was opening the bay again, and the Poets could just smolder in their pretty Guild. Jeffery couldn't remember the last time he saw any one of the Poets doing an ounce of work to earn their keep, and these fishermen were the people who put food on his table.

Stewing, Jeffery paced back and forth on the end of the wharf in his black coat with its handsome double breast and red piping. The wind lifted his russet hair. All they were doing was trying to keep one man from leaving the city before they caught him. If Robert had been of sound mind after swiping the scroll, was there any reason he wasn't already long gone? No. A tourist vessel bound for Lebrythia left port Wednesday afternoon. Jeffery let out a long breath, stopping his pacing to watch the bay, all big and glass-like, salted and peppered with the white specks of gulls and black pin-pricks of floating cormorants. Out where the bay became open, untamed ocean, a black ship waited, casting a black shadow. Even from the wharf Jeffery could see the tiny silver lines that were cannons on the deck.

One week. Jeffery would wait one week. And during that week, Rusty would make certain no ships left the Cheshire Bay without permission.

## Chapter 15

### Improvisational River

Bricks wobbled on the edge of the structure, a warehouse, floating one by one away from the wall and settling slowly, without a sound against the ground.

Robert watched them move. Watched a building slowly dismantle itself. His eyes drifted shut, and he jerked awake. The sun was in a different place than a moment ago, and the building was intact. Robert wished he could still feel the thrill of panic, but it was long gone, smothered by lack of sleep, and a dull aching in his mind as the world revealed too many secrets.

He walked the streets, falling in and out of alleys, a waking dream that was just a little too real. His own face looked blankly out at him from telegraph poles and windows, and he wondered why it was no body recognized him. He saw other people, and they took a good look before averting their eyes. A father walking home with a bag of groceries and two little boys



scooted the children past, shooting Robert a nasty look over his shoulder. Robert heard him say the word “drugs,” before letting his pulling his boys around a corner.

The sky overheard, still mercifully above him like it was supposed to be, moved in odd patterns as Robert lay on his back in the sands of a garbage strewn beach. It pulled together towards points, falling in upon itself as if falling though a drain. Robert felt a soft tug of wind on his face, and wondered if he jumped high enough, the sky might swallow him too. He tried. Nothing happened.

Feeling the world tilt and shutter, Robert continued walking. He kept calm enough to buy food and water from time to time, keeping to the low districts. Somewhere, buried deeply beneath all the confusion and delirious visions and sounds of words, the Robert who still thought and rationalized nagged at him to return to the Guild, give up the scroll, and at times, he almost did.

But something, something small, like a spark of tinder in the back of his mind held him back whenever the chance to go home presented itself. Right now, Robert knew he was not alright. He hurt, felt sick, and restless, but he caught glimpses, fleeting images of something else. There was an order to his chaos, and if he could just figure it out...just line a few things up...

As evening day dipped into a fiery orange evening, Robert wondered a neighborhood, singing softly some old rhyme his mother, imagine, his mother, used to sing. “Remember the valley, the green sweeping valley, over the veils and down by the sea. Listen the river, the deep running river, no matter how strong can’t take you from me...”

And he heard it. The river. Here, in the middle of the neighborhood. The sound came from all around, a hard, focused pounding of water against stone and metal. Looking around,

frantic, Robert realized where he was, and for a moment, just a moment, felt that glimmer of...was it power? No, something much greater.

“The river runs swiftly,” he sang quietly, not wanting to draw attention. His palms grew sweaty. “down from the mountains and out to the sea. The river, grand river, great river, is precious to me...” he felt it shift, the power of the water stir. It was beneath him. Underneath the cobbled street. It bucked, and the ground rumbled.

“Where the river meets the sea, and the ocean kissed by sun, up come the rain clouds, and the storm is begun...” And up the river came, throwing Robert across the street and into a white picket fence. The cobbles shattered and heaved, rolling away from each other in a panic of granite and chert, being lifted and flung as a mountain of water rose up, up, and out of the street, bubbling and gushing, turning the street into its new bed and pouring greedily into open windows and into unsealed basements. The water lifted Robert, like loving hands, as wave after wave of sleep and fatigue washed over him. The river wrapped tight around his body and carried him away. Far away to a valley where the sycamore trees leaned over him, and on the distant shore, just a little too far to swim to, a boy sat in the shadows of green and ferns, drinking a cup of tea and smiling.

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Jeffery stared at the street.

“I just got a message from the water plant,” Tibalt, a busy young lieutenant with overgrown eyebrows shook his hand held radio at the Captain, “Someone at the plant shut off the wrong valve or something, and the pressure got too high.” He looked at the street, “and the emergency overflow was jammed.” He snapped the radio back to his belt. “Lucky no one was hurt. Damage is minimal.”

“Could have been a lot worse.” Jeffery agreed.

“Yeah,” Tibalt rubbed his hands together, a little too eagerly, “all the water that goes through those pipes could have flooded the whole street. Turned it into a river.”

Jeffery ran his fingers carefully across all the items on his belt, making sure they were all perfectly parallel to each other. Pedestrians, mostly people who lived on Magnolia Boulevard, stood in lawns and on sidewalks, thankfully on the observations side of the red caution ribbon, gossiping like a bunch of hens with fleas. In the middle of the street, a small black fissure, no wider than Jeffery’s thumb, and only maybe two feet long, split the cobbling. A thin spray of mist issued from it, an emasculate geyser. The water to the pipe was now shut off, but when Jeffery first arrived on scene, the spray was still little more than the discharge of a sink. Still, a long trickle of water formed a black snake down the street, and a small, inch deep puddle pushed languidly toward the rain gutters.

“No evidence of suspicious people or odd events...” Jeffery looked through his note pad. It was rhetorical. He had personally questioned everyone on the street, whether they wanted to be or not. No one saw anyone on the street prior to the ruptured pipe. One woman with a towel tied around a frizzy bird nest of hair described the loud bang the pipe made when it exploded.

“...and I was just doing the laundry when I hear this loud *crack*. My father used to have one of those blunderbuss’s, and I’m telling you, that sounded just like one. *Boom!*”

“I thought it was raining,” a middle-aged man with glasses to rival the bottoms of beer bottles bugged out his eyes. “I thought some wizard might be messing with the weather.”

Chad Ny, the Guard’s resident wizard and magical scholar, “Chemistry Boy,” as he was fondly referred to as, ran the appropriate tests of the area and reported no unusual amount of magical energy or residue that could suggest potions, explosives, or charged items.

“The only unusual amount of magic in a quarter mile’s coming from the bathroom of number 1467.” He pointed to an unassuming cream colored house with a nice looking plutonic family in the yard. Upon inspection, all the Guard found were eight potted marijuana plants and a hookah. The magical energy radiated from the several flameless orbs used to light up the bathroom.

“Whatever.” Jeffery waved Ny aside as he waved a meek little fern in his face, “I really couldn’t give a damn why they were keeping it in the bathroom. Maybe it likes the humidity. Put it back and leave them be.”

Ny looked disappointed but did as he was told. The housewife looked harried, explaining over and over to no one in particular that the plants belonged to her older son who was at the University.

Tibalt and Ny began taking down the red ribbon.

“Is the water plant sending someone to repair the damage?” Jeffery ask as Tibalt wound ribbon onto big wooden spools.

“First thing in the morning. Until then, this street is going to have to get by without flushing their toilets.”

“Fantastic,” Jeffery said without enthusiasm. Water pipes didn’t usually rupture, at least not in a manner that burst open the street. Usually. Apparently, it could and did happen. Though Ny swore no magic was at play, and no evidence of strange people in the area presented itself, Jeffery couldn’t shake the feeling something here was not quite right. The pipes weren’t exactly set in cement. They had space around them, and any escaping water should be diverted through tunnels to the nearby creek. Even at its peak, the amount of water and the pressure backing it shouldn’t have been enough force to open the street. Not when the pipe was four feet down. The

whole thing just felt wrong. Wrong in a way Jeffery didn't know how to vocalize or write on his legal pad.

“Pretty weird, huh?” Chad Ny took the words out of Jeffery's thoughts. “I mean, seriously.”

Jeffery nodded. “Yes it is, Chad, yes it is.”

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With evening fast on the approach, Atoña decided it might be a good time to hike herself back up the tracks to Cambren for the night. Lodging was cheaper than in Dale Port, and she liked the chicken and corn soup served at Mae's Café.

Earlier, Atoña treated herself to a caramel covered apple from one of the shops down by the beach. She told the store keeper about getting accepted, and the older woman who sat next to her on the store's patio, and several other people she had the occasion to engage in conversation. As she walked up the train tracks, at the edge of the forest where the early evening light became dark and grey, she wished she had someone to run home to and tell. Maybe Demereian, she thought, maybe. If an event didn't involve him, it was hard to keep his interest. Her parents would be happy and supportive, but going to the University meant very little to them. They lived in the woods, went about their work, and that was that.

Atoña kicked at pebbles as she went, watching them ricochet off the iron train tracks. Atoña froze, foot off the ground in mid-step. For a moment, she stood without moving, breath held in, ears listening to the evening forest sounds. What was it? Her neck grew cold as the hair stood up. Everything around her became more clear, more focused, like she could see more details for just a moment. Her heart thumped in her chest with something she thought might be fear, but wasn't certain.

Turning cautiously, her eyes fixed on a point back in Dale Port, off toward the lower district. She couldn't hear anything, though she strained her ears to try, but she could feel it. Up through her feet, in her finger tips, like an unreal wind it passed through her. The air almost shook with it, a concussive force that could not be felt by the five normal senses. Something happened. Atoña had no idea what, but she knew it happened. And she knew it was not supposed to.

The moment ended. It had only been long enough for to let out her breath. The odd feeling passed, and in another moment, Atoña had trouble recalling what the feeling had been like. Shrugging, she continued walking, and soon forgot the event entirely.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Different City**

“This, Laurien, is Dale Port.” Owlwing held out a hand in a sweeping gesture, “The city by the sea.”

The six of them stood under the branches of eucalyptus trees, looking out over the city. To say Laurien had never seen anything like it would be an understatement. The first thing that popped out at her was how many colors the city, even from a distance, had. Green plants, red brick, white marble, blue shops, yellow signs. This city was Bridgemark painted, no longer monochromatic. And there was no wall. No walls to be seen, and those things that might have been walls Laurien was sure she could climb over.

“Different, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Laurien didn’t look at Owlwing, “it’s very different.”

“Do you think your brother is in there somewhere?”

Not recognizing the voice at first Laurien started and noticed Qeo looking a question at her.

“I sure hope he is.” As she said it, she doubted she would find him. The thought hurt a little, but not as much as staying in Bridgemark and getting married would have.

“We’ll take you into the city, there is a nice inn there where you can spend a few nights,” Owlwing signaled the others to follow her as she began the meandering path down from their overlook to the city itself. “I am not poor, and will give you enough welsky to get your feet on the ground. However, you will need to begin looking for a job if you are going to live with other people.”

Laurien felt suddenly cornered. “What? What do you mean a job?”

Owlwing gave her a raised eye brow and half smile. “Here in the real world, people have to work make a living. This is not like Bridgemark. If you are going to be a free, independent woman, which I can see you already are, or at least will be soon enough, you will have to earn your keep. No one puts a roof over your head, no one feeds you, clothes you, or takes care of you in any way. However, no one tells you what to do, as long as you stay more or less in line.”

Laurien was suddenly just as scared as when she was lost in the woods.

“Don’t look like that,” Owlwing laughed, “you will be mistaken for a deer and someone will shoot you!”

“Bang!” Demereian made like he was holding a rifle.

“What,” Laurien stuttered, “what will I do?”

“Well,” Owlwing glanced at her over her shoulder as she walked, “you could do just about anything. You’ll find something, I’m quite certain of it.”



Laurien wasn't certain at all. "Can I, I mean, can I come with you guys?"

Owlwing considered Laurien for a long moment.

"It's because I come from that awful Bridgemark, isn't it?" Laurien said to her suede shoes.

"It has absolutely nothing to do with where you come from," Owlwing looked troubled, "you have never been out of your home before now, and this is the rest of the world. A small piece, mind you, but a piece non the less. I think you should see it for yourself for a little while, without so many of my opinions to get in your way."

Laurien was not convinced, but she kept her peace about it.

Soon enough, they set foot on what Laurien recognized as cobbled streets, but the rock used for cobbles was much more attractive than whatever Bridgemark used, and it made the roads look rich, almost like candy. Here on the outskirts of the city, the buildings, mostly what Laurien guessed to be houses and shops, were small and simple, but she could see, further in, buildings that reached many stories into the vast blue sky.

Men in fitted, attractive black coats with red trim hovered around the sides of the road, leaning against buildings. Some held glasses of water or half eaten sandwiches. All of them had swords at their belts and a few draped rifles over their shoulders. To Laurien, they looked like soldiers, or at least something official. An edge of worry snuck into her thoughts. Did her parents know she was missing? Would they send people after her? She really hoped not.

One of the men waved at Owlwing and she waved back. This put Laurien more at ease.

"Wait to you see the ocean," Demereian nudged her in the ribs, "if you thought a river was neat, you're going to faint when you see the Cheshire Bay."

Laurien felt like she might just faint now. Seven or eight Bridgemarks could fit in Dale Port, and she hadn't seen end to end yet. The trees from the lookout obscured much of the view, but she guessed the city kept on going.

They hadn't been in the city limits long before Owlwing pointed to a white, two story building with green-trimmed gables and cookie cutter like wooden trim around the windows. Doors lined both levels, seven on each floor, and the building looked like it wrapped around in a half-horseshoe out of view. The sign above the right-hand corner, and largest, door, read, "Sea Mist Inn."

"I would get you a room in the Lucky Starfish down the road," Owlwing put her hands on her hips, "but that might be a little much for your first nights in the city."

Laurien stared open mouthed at Owlwing, then the others in turn. They were all human. Where moments before, five faeries, or sidhe or whatever they were, were walking down the street with her, and now, there was not a mark on any of them to indicate they had ever not been perfectly acceptable human beings. Except Demereian's hair. There wasn't much helping that.

All their long, sharply tapered ears were now round and demure, and their smug smirks revealed no pointed canines. Owlwing stood out the most, her feathery hair now just long and black, her yellow eyes a mellow, unassuming brown.

"You look surprised." Owlwing tilted her head, long plain hair draping over copper shoulders.

"How," Laurien waved a confused finger.

"Glamour." Owlwing looked at the others, pleased. "Even though Dale Port is more aware of the Alduna Sidhe than some other places, blending in avoids a lot of unnecessary questions. Especially when there are other places to be."

Laurien's confusion must have shown.

"Last night," Owlwing's smug smile became all seriousness, "while the rest of you were sleeping, I wondered up to the closest ridge and contacted Briorn and the Hunt." Her serious face took a downward tilt around the edges of her lips. "There is unrest in Bridgemark. It would seem Svelneth has been captured."

Assuming Svelneth was also an Alduna Sidhe, Laurien felt a pang of guilt.

"Sven?" Ambreck spoke up, "Wait, her sister's there, right?"

"She never knew if Sh'shaiden was still alive or not," Owlwing said pensively, looking at something past Laurien's shoulder, "but she hoped. She always had hope."

"What are you talking about?" Laurien felt an odd sort of panic. Like, something was happening, something she should have known more about, but didn't. Like finding out her parents had another child she never knew existed.

"Owlwing used a hand to gently guide Laurien past the inn and on down the road.

"Almost fourteen years ago, when Svelneth, was young and her sister, Sh'shaiden, was an infant, their family was traveling up the coast when they were attacked by hunters from Bridgemark. Sven's mother and father were killed, but Sven managed to escape." She sighed, "she has always believed the hunters took her baby sister back to the city alive. Sven is cool-headed and I taught her how to win her fights. If her sister is still alive, Sven will be the one to get her back." She looked at Laurien, "Do you know anything about this?"

Laurien shook her head, "No, I would think if there had been a 'demon child' brought into the city, people would have had a lot to say about it."

"Ah," Owlwing's voice dropped in volume, "therein lies the trick. If a sidhe child were brought into the city, it would be given to the High Priest. Over the years, the priests have been

known for collecting sidhe specimens... pieces of them anyway. They want to learn more about us, see how we can be broken.”

“Wait,” Laurien felt a little cold, “Father Sulvester has a daughter...” she trailed off, “her name’s Marie. She’s thirteen and is not his own child... he claims he found her on his doorstep.” Laurien could see Marie’s face, wan and pale, her long white fingers, straight dark hair, and big, storm grey eyes... “She said she got sick when she was a baby...” Laurien felt a little weak, “she has scars on her ears where... where...”

“They cut them off?” Demereian looked a little sick.

“She came from outside of Bridgemark,” Laurien spoke to the cobble stones, “that was all she knew.”

“Thank the Seven Bridges,” Owlwing took several shallow breaths, steadying herself, “she is still alive. Laurien.”

Laurien looked into her wrong-colored eyes.

“Thank you.” They were walking quickly, the city and all its possibilities flashing by in shapes, colors, sounds, and the smells of fresh baking. “We will take you to see the ocean. You need to see it. Then I will make sure you are provided for at least for the next weeks.” Owlwing spoke as if she were making tally marks in her mind. “Then we must leave. It is doubtful the village will pose a raid of Bridgemark...it would be most unwise...their numbers exceed ours ten to one... but should the city decide to send hunters into the forest, I would very much like to be there.”

“Bridgemark would steal sidhe children?” Laurien didn’t know why she asked that.

“Yes, Laurien,” Owlwing confirmed, that city is far more wicked than the individuals you call family and friends. Far, far, more wicked.”

Laurien didn't see Dale Port as they crossed it, but she did see the first snatch of something vast and blue and shining between the buildings as they hurried along.

"Don't worry about Bridgemark now, Laurien," Owlwing said in a voice more gentle than her demeanor would suggest, "for now, worry about who you are and where you are going. And for the love of whatever god or gods you love, look at that bay."

Laurien looked and it was all she did for a long time. The water was not clear as the river had been. It was as blue, with clouds, a mirror of the sky, but shimmering and quivering, unable to hold its surface still for all the power held at bay beneath the surface. A constant roar like mild, almost pleasant thunder came up from the water, carrying a sharp, clean smell of salt and warm sand, and a dozen other things Laurien did not recognize. She had to squint her eyes, for even as the blue of the water was dark, it threw light into her face. Across the water, at an indeterminable distance, Laurien could make out the shapes of slopes and mountains, faded like a washed out painting, and glimmering with odd slivers of silver.

"See across the bay?" Qeo surprised her by speaking, "all those shiny things are windows."

"It's so big." Laurien knew how stupid she sounded. Where the painted mountains ended, the water continued, coming to a line against the far away sky.

The six of them stood in a respectful silence for a few minutes before Demereian put his hands on his hips.

"Where are all the boats?"

Ambreck made a small noise as if to shush the younger boy, but thought better of it.

"Yeah," he looked a little disturbed, "where *are* all the boats?"

It was Owlwing's turn to give the bay a searching look. "It would seem," she said carefully, "that something had gone awry in the city by the sea." She pointed to a black shape in the water, a looming monster waiting where the crescent shaped bay became open ocean. "See that? That's a *sea wasp* class vessel, the coast police. It I am not too behind on my local gossip, Dale Port keeps only one of those at dock, and I believe she is called *Narwhal*." She ran a hand through her long hair, detangling the ends. "Yes, I would guess something is not as it should be in Dale Port."

*Wonderful*, thought Laurien.

"Do keep an extra sharp eye out for trouble," Owlwing said to Laurien.

Laurien wasn't sure she was pleased by the turn events were taking. Of all the times she picked to run away, she had to chose the week with crazy mutant hunting monsters, ridiculous heat, freezing fog, and a whole load of shit going down in her new, if temporary home. How lovely.

"Come on," Owlwing said, a little dull, "you could use a rest after so many adventures, I am sure, and a nice shower."

The walk back to the Sea Mist Inn was no more revealing of the city. Laurien spent most of the time watching her feet trundle clumsily along the road, and shivering as a fresh wave of fog rolled over the city.

At the inn, the group waited outside as Owlwing took Laurien in and let her watch how to make a reservation at the front desk. The man behind the counter, even darker in complexion than Laurien was used to, gave them both odd looks, lingering on Owlwing's sword and the V made by her shirt. The woman cocked out one hip, revealing just how shapely her lithe body

really was, and gave the man a look that said she would eat him if he made a pass at her. Laurien wasn't sure why she liked this.

After an exchange of money, the man handed Owlwing a key with the number 83 engraved in the handle. When they went back outside to find the room, Demereian attached himself to their group.

Room 83 was on the second story and had its own gable. Owlwing gave Laurien the key and she let them in. One bed with clean, simple blue covers sat unassumingly against the west wall, a dresser across from it. A small desk with an oil lamp stood next to the bed, and an open door revealed a peek of an unadorned but perfectly up-kept bathroom. There was one small closet and a bouquet of shockingly yellow daffodils on the desk.

“Fancy smancy,” Demereian tossed his whole body onto Laurien’s new bed and rolled around, leaving behind tiny bits of tree dander on the blue comforter. “Yummmm!” He pressed his face into her pillow, “Smells like real soap!”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Owlwing held her hands up, appalled, “get off her bed! Go wait outside if you have to be a cretin. Out!”

With a yelp, Demereian rolled and floundered his way off the bed and out the door.

“I don’t know what gets into that boy,” Owlwing shook her head, “he must have a thing for you.”

“Huh.”

“Here,” Owlwing pulled a wallet from her pants pocket, thumbing out several paper bills, “this is two hundred welsky. A night here is twenty, and they provide small uninteresting meals twice a day. However, I suggest going out, checking out the area, and thinking about what you are going to be doing with yourself for the rest of your life.” Thrusting the money into Laurien’s

hand, Owlwing surprised her by grabbing her by the shoulders and pulling her into a sudden and tight hug. “You’re a good girl, Laurien. A good woman. You’ll be just fine.” Letting go, Owlwing crossed to the door and let herself out. “We will meet again, I am willing to make that promise, so I will say goodbye until then.”

“Bye,” Laurien felt emptiness opening up around her.

The door swung almost all the way closed when it flew back open and Demereian stuck his orange head back in. “Hey, Thunderfoot,” he hissed, smiling in a cat-like way, “don’t forget to go back for that sword!” his head vanished and the door came closed with a sharp snap.

The bed sunk under Laurien as she sat on it. Across from her, the floor to ceiling mirror reflected a girl that must be her. A little thinner and a lot dirtier, the Laurien in the mirror had smudges on her face and leaves in the folds of her clothes. Aside from the tight but unraveling bun in her chestnut hair, there was nothing to indicate she had ever been in Bridgemark. The Laurien in the mirror was alone, and afraid, and the Laurien on the bed would not trade her for the old Laurien for a moment.

Taking off all her clothes, Laurien washed them in the sink and hung them up to dry on the edge of the bath tub. She took a long and indulgent bath, soaking away the fatigue and the grime, and pulling soap and oils through her hair until no crimps revealed the shape of her uniform bun.

Clean and fresh, Laurien lay out on her bed, and for a long time, did nothing but watch the sky turn from blue to orange to purple over the bay out her window. She fell asleep and dreamed of trees so tall their tops could not be seen, and rivers of glass instead of water.

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This time, Laurien paid attention to where she was and what it was like. At nine in the morning, just one street of Dale Port came already bustled and jangled with more life than Bridgemark had at a witch burning. And that was saying something. Bridgemark loved its witch burnings. When she left her room, hair blowing around her face and money in her pocket, the first thing she saw was an ornately decorated red and wood-sided cart, propelled forward under its own power and puffing out steam. People of all different colors and clothing styles pressed tightly into the clattering, steaming cart like paper dolls, brief-cases and umbrella handles sticking out the open sides and wooden-barred windows. Several individuals pressed news papers to their faces in vain as they were squashed and jostled. Laurien caught the first few words of the headline: Dangerous Poet.

*What?* Laurien almost laughed and stopped herself. Back in Bridgemark, poets were the stable hands and maid service who got lucky enough to perform silly songs and rhymes for the big houses. For all she knew, here they could be fire-breathing pirates riding exploding pigs down the streets. As the carriage clattered away, she read the sign on the back. "Dale Port Trolley Service, 7:00-21:00. 4 Welsky For All Day Pass."

A transportation service? Now they were speaking Laurien's language. Laurien followed the trolley down the street, Maple Way, which she made good and certain she memorized before diverting onto a new road. Very quickly the streets grew wider and traffic like she had never expected traveled both directions. More trolleys trundled along accompanied by a menagerie of horse and mule drawn carriages. Store-fronts and restaurants lined the streets offering everything from haircuts and nail painting to house buying and funeral arrangements. Upraised walkways a yard wide lined both sides of the street, and Laurien observed people walking along them. Deciding to blend in, she did likewise, trying not to look conspicuous in her scruffy clothes when

everyone around her looked much more put together. Men in what must be this cities version of business attire, women in skirts and pants, teenagers her own age in corset vests, dangerously short pant, and ragged, leggings Laurien guessed were torn up on purpose.

Laurien didn't realize she had stopped walking when she realized her trolley was already eaten by the endless parade of other traveling vehicles. Laurien made note of her street before turning down one called Arboretum. This street was smaller, darker, the shops with green gabled windows with the yellow cast of oil lamps behind them. The street was dark, Laurien could see as she walked into the shadows, due to the five-story buildings on either side of the street.

The first sign she got close enough to read proudly announced the store behind it sold Ladies Working and Hiking Boots: Be Tough and Still Look Your Best! Under the sign, ankle to knee length leather boots lined up, all colors from black to white. Laurien couldn't help herself, and opened the door. Half an hour later, she flounced out in a pair of flattering, almost-knee-length brown leather hiking boots with stylish buckles across the foot and up at the top. Just for flare, they laced up the inside. In her pack, she also carried seven pairs of bamboo fiber socks. Whatever bamboo was.

At the end of Arboretum, the street sunned back up into a three-way intersection. On her corner, a large brick and marble clock tower loomed overhead. Across the street, a handsome, pompous structure with white pillars and gold leaf around the windows announced itself blaringly "Poet's Guild Archive and Library." Red ribbons printed with black letters laced all over the windows and doors intoning Caution! Caution! Caution! So, maybe poets in this place really were strange.

Laurien waited for the number of carts and trolleys to lower before crossing. Next to the Poet's Guild was a box garden of equally pompous flowers, and next to that was a stature of a

man on horseback. Looking up at him, Laurien squinted and tilted her head, trying to figure out why he seemed vaguely familiar. He was huge, larger than life, with a strong, cut jaw, large proud nose, and flowing locks of discolored metal hair. Blank eyes stared over the city. The plaque on his black rock base said his name was Lord Nothelenor, Master Knight of Gauntland. Laurien looked up at him again, eyes following the lines of his muscled chest down to where his coat buckled closed. A massive, small-man-sized sword rested diagonally across his back and Laurien thought about Demereian. He was right. She should go back and get her sword. It was the only real, tangible memento she had of Eugene. Under her bed, it must be so lonely. Crap, now she was thinking like that boy.

Continuing down the street, which the sign said was Garden Street, Laurien wandered into a pastry shop and bought herself something big and gooey and a strong bitter drink called coffee. Watching other patron, she learned quickly to ass cream to the coffee, and dip the gooey pastry into it. From her booth, Laurien followed several teenagers with her eyes, taking into consideration what they were wearing. Everyone looked so bizarre, it was difficult to keep up with what was the norm. maybe if she just bought the first thing she saw in every store and put it on, she'd fit right in.

After breakfast, Laurien continued her walk down Garden until she found a clothing boutique with fashions she judged suitable for women her age. Inside a short man with a shiny bald patch on top of his head busied himself by hanging garments in rows and hissing snide comments at the woman behind the counter.

“Hello,” Laurien said by way of introduction. The man turned and looked at her. She could see the comment on the tip of his tongue as he took in her current outfit, but too his credit, he kept it to himself.

“Hello,” Laurien repeated, channeling her proper Killkenney heiress, “I’m not from around here, and I would like to purchase a few outfits that are in tune with the current fashion. Do you think you can help me?”

“Sweetie,” the man looked pained as he felt the hem of her shirt with two hesitant fingers, “you sure came to the right place, but I must say, even the thrift store down the street could help *you* out. Where did you get these?” he plucked at the rolled cuff of her pants, “From elves?”

“Sure did,” Laurien half way hoped he thought she was serious. The man just shook his head and took her arm.

“Come on in, we’ll fix you up like a human being.”

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Laurien ate lunch on a patio café overlooking the bay. Holding her glass of beer, leaned back in her chair, she felt, for lack of a better word, fabulous. Olive green pants with lots of pockets on the legs and some snaps tucked into her boots. Her shirt now consisted of a stretchy brown fabric with slim, barely there sleeves with a black, fitted, completely Killkenney inappropriate black denim jacket. Long chestnut brown hair, simple and pious had been hacked artfully into something with not much of anything up the back and face framing bangs streaked with blonde and black. In lieu of her travel pack she now carried a canvas backpack with the words “Die Angry” stitched into the front pocket. Laurien had no idea what “Die Angry” might imply, but assumed it was a reference to something everyone else would understand.

After dinner, Laurien headed back to the Sea Mist Inn. She had been mulling over how to go about finding her brother, when she reached the end of Garden Street. A flock of weird looking people in purple and gold coats hovered in front of the Poet’s Guild along with four of the men in black and red coats. One of the men, lighter skinned with a russet brown mustache,

scribbled notes on a pad of yellow paper as another man in uniform, who was not very tall and had narrow, dark eyes spoke animatedly to him. The shorter man waved his arms around a little and the man with the pad of paper bristled his mustache to one side. Laurien made note that his coat was double-breasted while the other three had buttons only up the left side. His coat was also lined in red while theirs were not, and his pants were red with black stripes on the sides. He must be more important than the others.

Deciding he was the one to ask about Eugene, Laurien approached him, waiting longer than she expected for him to acknowledge her.

“Can I help you?” The man let his pad of paper slap against his leg. Laurien paused. He did not look particularly joyful. A little silver bar on his breast pocket read Cpt. Scottston.

“Yes, Captain Scottston, is it?”

The Captain lifted a bushy eye brow. “That’s me.”

“Yes, Captain Scottston,” Laurien folded her hands like she had been taught, “I’m new to Dale Port and I’m looking for my brother. He left home several years ago, but I think he might still be living here. His name is Eugene Shartruce. Do you know how I might find him?”

The Captain’s brows came together over his eyes and he gave her a long, uncomfortable look. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Laurien lifted her chin a little, “I am very serious. I mean to find him, and you look like someone who can help me.”

“Unfortunately,” The Captain looked back at his paper, “there is only one person in this whole city I want to find right now, and that is not Eugene Shartruce.”

“Well,” Laurien blurted before the Captain could wonder off, “don’t you have archives of who lives in the city? Are they kept in there?” She pointed at the Guild, “Can I go look?”

Closing his eyes, the Captain let out a breath through his nose. He looked like a nice man. he also looked harassed. “Yes, the city of Dale Port has records of who lives in the city, but you cannot get access to them as they are private. No, they are not in the Poet’s Guild, which is currently the scene of a crime, and if you go snooping in there, my men will have to arrest you. Sorry kid,” he wondered away to signify the conversation was done.

“Captain Scottston!” Laurien hurried after him, “isn’t it your job as a public servant to help people when they need something?” That’s what they did in Bridgemark, anyway.

Turning back to her, the Captain actually laughed. “Did you say you were from Bridgemark?”

Laurien froze, “N-no.”

“Well, that’s the only place I know of where residential records are public and police have to take orders from civilians.” He chuckled a little.

The sudden and painful despair that fell into Laurien’s chest must have shown, for the Captain’s face grew more gentle. “Look, kid, I understand you want to find your brother, but Dale Port is a big city,” his eyes drifted to the paper, “a very big city in fact. I can’t help you, and personally, there are must bigger problems right now than looking for a person who may or may not be here. Now, do you have some place to go for the night?”

“Yes,” Laurien felt like a bale of hay was on top of her.

Captain Scottston went back to his paperwork and the other man resumed speaking.

Ignored, Laurien made her way drearily back to the inn, spending most of the way watching her feet instead of the sunset. Dale Port was big, the Captain had a point. The idea of reuniting with Eugene kept getting more and more abstract. Soon she feared the possibility would become more fantasy than reality. Hugging herself in her new jacket, Laurien fought off

the overwhelming sense of alones threatening to wash up and over her like the strange white waves on the beach just a walk away.

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Jeffery finished scratching down the last of Ny's report and closed his legal pad. Dinner time was already underway, and he was not thrilled to be standing next to the Poet's Guild still.

"Alright men, pack it up," the other Guards happily complied.

Walking back to the station, Tibalt fell in step next to him with a curious expression.

"Say, Jeff, who did that girl she was looking for, Shartruce? Eugene Shartruce?"

"Yeah, that was it," Jeffery confirmed, "and no, we don't have the time or the resources to offer her any help. Besides," he added, more for his own benefit than Tibalt's, "it's not our job to find lost people."

"Isn't that what we're doing right now?" Chad hooked his fingers in his belt loops.

Jeffery started to explain the obvious difference but was cut off by Tibalt.

"You too know who Eugene Shartruce is. He joined the Guard four years ago and worked down at the station in the Cedar District. You where there when they swore him in." Tibalt looked far too pleased with himself.

"Oh god damn it all to hell!" Jeffery stopped in front of Tibalt. "You could have reminded me. She was just a little girl, I probably made her cry."

"I didn't really think about it until just now," Tibalt looked past Jeffery, "besides, he left the area last year. He got a transfer to the Hallowed Marches I think."

"I remember him too!" Chad cut in, "but I remember his friends just called him Gean. He was a runaway from that Bridgemark place."

Jeffery tried not to show that he felt anything. Now he remembered Eugene, if vaguely. They hadn't really been close. Mostly though, he thought of Bridgemark. He'd been to the wall once, when he first got sworn into the Guard, when Lord Nothelenor was assassinated. He hadn't been inside, and never wished to remedy that. Bridgemark was filled to the spilling point with all manner of hinky shit, and if that girl ran away from there, he sure as hell couldn't blame her. He just wished he hadn't been quite so brusque with her.

But he pushed all this from his mind. Right this minute, the only thing that mattered was Robert. Robert and his god dammed dooms day scroll.

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At the desk of the Sea Mist Inn, Laurien opened her new Die Angry pack and handed the receptionist a bill for twenty Welsky for another night. Back in her room, she flopped over on her bed, looking at the even weirder face who stared out of the mirror now.

After all this, she probably would never find Eugene. She pondered how much this upset her. Some, but not enough to go back home to Bridgemark. No, not home. Bridgemark was no longer her home. Really, aside from the obvious, family, church, quasi friends, it had never been her home. She didn't know where home might be, but a part of her hoped she'd find it sooner rather than later.

Sitting up, she dumped out her pack and folded up her new clothes. Madam Glauchester's crop sat against the wall next to her mirror, and she stuck it in the pack for safe keeping, along with Owlwing's striker. Her leather pack and shoes she rolled up carefully, stuffing them at the bottom of her backpack. Finishing, she opened the front pouch to see how many more nights she could buy before her money ran out. A week should be enough to get the hunt-for-Eugene-bug



out of her system. In the pouch, she found a crinkled five-welsky bill and two silver colored coins.

“What?” Laurien’s voice cracked a bit, “No, no, no...” there had to be more, taking everything back out of the backpack, she searched every fold and pocket, but to no avail. She was broke. She could buy food for another day, or she could get some traveling supplies for maybe a few. “Fuck my life,” Laurien lay back against her pillows and watched the blank ceiling do nothing.

Back in her room in the Shartruce Manor, she had shelves and drawers bubbling with jewelry and fancy gowns and other useless crap she didn’t care if she had or not. Useless crap that was probably worth a good sum of money.

It was looking like Laurien would be going to retrieve her sword sooner than planned.

## **Chapter 17**

### **Coming Apart**

“I think I’m beginning to get a handle on it. Yes, yes. Soon enough.” Down in the lower district of Dale Port, many of the once full warehouses stand empty, and Robert wheedled his way into one. He sat in a corner with a lantern a chair and the scroll, contemplating his new world. The ancient river he had pulled from the earth brought him here for a reason. Slowly, agonizingly, he was beginning to make sense of the scrambled words, the words that made up reality, and he was learning to edit in his own. Even just a little. He was a Poet after all. It would be such a shame not to use his powers. He would make the others see, and they wouldn’t laugh at him anymore, anymore, ha, ha. A giggle escaped his lips. “Ssh!” he told himself. “The last

thing I want it them finding me. Not yet..." his eyes studied the black cylinder. He liked to look at it, but couldn't force himself to open it again.

In the shadows, a small table stood against the wall, and on it sat the day's newspaper, the Dale Port Report. So clever. His face looked very silly on the front page, hair all sticking out. Having spent the better part of the day fiddling around with small words and nursery type rhymes, he decided it might be a nice change of pace to read the paper. He might even read about himself. Picking up the paper in his left hand, he leaned on the back of the table's chair with the other. He squinted. The words on the paper weren't quite clear. Leaning forward didn't seem to help. Robert tilted the paper sideways and the words all fell off. They made little pinging noises as they bounced off the cement. Some hit the legs of his pants, leaving black ink stains.

Flailing back with a choked cry, Robert dropped the paper. It lay limp and grey and lifeless in a pool of spreading ink. Panting and trembling, Robert watched it to make sure it wasn't going to move and bite him, or something. His nose itched and he scratched it. Or, he tried to scratch it. For some reason, his hand wasn't touching his face like it was supposed to. Perturbed, he looked at his hand. It wasn't there. His arm moved around, perfectly normal, but at the elbow, it stopped. The sleeve of his shirt dangled over the stump, swinging as he moved his arm. Frantic, he looked around the room, spotting the lower half of his arm still at the table. His hand rested comfortably on the back of the chair, the forearm sticking up at an angle, the tendons flexed in a way that suggested it was still working to support his weight. Where the arm should have met the elbow joint, it stopped. Unscarred skin formed a natural looking dome of flesh where the bone ended, natural as if the arm simply existed on its own.

Afraid of the sound building in his throat, Robert put his left hand in his mouth and bit down on his fingers until they bled.

“Well, hello Robert.” A light, familiar voice drifted out of the far end of the warehouse. “My. Are you ever having a difficult time keeping yourself together. Tisk. Tisk.” Garth toiled his way over to the one-armed Robert and his ink puddle, put one hand on his skinny hip and waggled a finger with the other. “Now, now, didn’t your mother ever tell you it was rude to leave body parts at the dinner table?”

“H-help me...” Robert’s voice came out with the intonation of a squeezed sparrow. “What’s going on? What’s happening?”

“Oh, nothing terribly exciting.” Garth examined the hand and forearm, giving it an experimental poke. “I’d look again if I were you.”

Robert looked. There was nothing on the chair anymore. Looking down, he found his arm whole and fully functional. “What?”

“Do try to keep your delusions in your head, please,” Garth stooped and picked up the naked paper with two fingers.

“The words,” Robert tried to explain, “they, they *fell off*...I can’t keep them on the paper...”

Garth gave him a pained look. “No, Robert they are my words. *My* words. You can’t keep *my* words on the paper. And do you know why that is?”

Robert shook his head.

“Because you’re not enough of a Poet to really understand what’s happening to you, Robert.” Flicking the paper, Garth held it out to him. “Try today’s paper.”

“This is today’s paper.” Robert took it.

“No,” Garth drug the O out for three beats, “that was two-days-ago’s paper. Try to keep up with the chapters.”

The cover of the paper now showed a full-color image of men in Guard uniforms standing around a tiny fountain spurting out of the middle of the street. The headline read: Leak in Water Main Causes Neighborhood Scare. Captain Scottston of the Guard Assures Public McWerein is Not Involved. Robert looked at it, wondering why the scene should seem familiar.

“I have to give you a compliment, Robert,” Garth smiled charmingly over the cup of tea he didn’t have a second ago, “you go insane so elegantly. What a character study. I never thought you would be one to stir up so much action and plot development.” He gave a rather feminine sigh. “Such a gem.”

“You know,” Robert tossed the paper back onto the table, “for a Poet Laureate you sure know how to be a bother.”

“Oh?” Garth lifted one pretty brow, “and you expected something different? Tell me, Robert, what comes to mind when you think of the Laureates? Be honest. I can tell if you’re lying.”

“Well, I,” Robert didn’t know how to approach this answer, but figured since Garth wasn’t real, he couldn’t really hurt him if something Robert said made him angry. “I guess someone more refined, someone with more dignity.”

“You don’t think I’m refined?” Garth stuck out his pinky finger and made a show of sipping his tea. Now, he also held a teapot. “And, you don’t think I have dignity?” he drained his cup. “You know, Robert, I do believe that is your clever little way of hedging your true thoughts. Let me help you. First of all. You think I am too young to be a Laureate. Because of this story and the rules of its setting, you associate wisdom with age. It doesn’t matter that I am older than this universe, I still remind you of a little boy. Which I might add, is funny because you yourself are quite young and fancy yourself a master of your craft. Fascinating.”

Robert averted his eyes. Yes, that was definitely one of his sentiments.

“Furthermore, you have misgivings as to where my sympathies lie, and worry I might have something up my sleeve.”

“It’s just,” Robert fumbled for an explanation, “you wrote that scroll that did something good for the world,” exactly what, he didn’t really know, “and you seem to be a good person..”

“Oh Robert,” Garth squeezed the teacup delightedly, “you think I’m the bad guy, don’t you?”

“Well,” Robert looked at his feet. A hole was wearing in one of his shoes. “Yes. Yes I do.”

Garth giggled in a horrible way. “I love it! I love it! Well, I hate to disappoint you, Robert, but I am not the bad guy.” He swirled his tea cup to make sure it was empty. Holding the cup sideways and level with his ear, he propped the teapot against his opposite hip, pouring tea out toward the floor. “Neither am I the good guy. You see, or maybe you don’t, I function a little bit outside the narrative standards of black and white, good and evil.”

Robert watched his reality bend until the tea, still seeming to fall down, somehow, impossibly, ended up filling the tilted cup. Once full, the surface of the tea wavered and became still and level, and diagonal to the floor.

“No, Robert,” Garth turned the teacup all the way upside down. Steam coiled lazily from the dark liquid, drifting first down, then back up and over Garth’s hand. “I am something much worse.”

## **Chapter 18**

### **Found in the Woods**

Green light, filtered through star-shaped leaves and branches so high up the shapes of their leaves were impossible to distinguish, settled around the road like a cave of moss. Warm, still, and peaceful in a green, earthy sort of way. It was not what Laurien would call a beautiful day. Despite the pleasantness of the early afternoon and the rich environment, she was out of money, and once again walking. This time, there were no sidhe or whatever they were, and despite her desire to be leery of them, the walking without them, even Demereian, was burdensome and dry.

That morning, or rather, a few hours ago, Laurien took the last of her welsky to Garden Street. To show for it now, she had a canteen full of water, a map of the province, whatever a province was, but it contained both Dale Port and Bridgemark, and a whole backpack full of different flavored bags of granola. The market she visited insisted granola was excellent travel food. To Laurien, it looked like oatmeal with bits of nuts and dried up bit of something's that might once have been tasty. But, she could afford a whole pack full, and so that was what she had.

In her pack also she had rolled up the pack she had started with, and made certain she had Owlwing's striker. However, with her last few coins she purchased a box of matches. She would rather not have to spend her evenings flustered over a pile of leaves and sparks if she did not have to.

The road traveled by slower than it had a right to. Laurien followed the map in such a way she retraced Owlwing's rout rather than the one she and Demereian had taken, but despite this, it felt like the road was ten times longer. Birds twittered and flies of innumerable shapes and sizes chased and tumbled around in motes of sunlight. Butterflies opened and closed wings with eyes on the trunks of trees, giving the trees faces that watched Laurien wander slowly past. Squirrels chattered and a small stream gurgled. It was a perfectly lovely day, and Laurien was bored out of her mind.

She was thankful for not having hair to get sweaty and tangle or hang in her face, and her new clothes and boots made walking much easier than when she started. Why did people in Bridgemark dress in such awful things? She had never had anything to compare to, but now that she did, she puzzled herself through their logic to no avail. There could be only one answer. They were mad. More than once, when Laurien realized her feet were not causing her pain. She



started to whisper a prayer of thanks to Rosquar and caught herself. The image of the dark god frowning upon her from his cosmic lair seemed ludicrous. It would have been nice to thank someone, but she didn't really think that someone was the god of Bridgemark.

The day went by at a slug's crawl, and when the sun finally began to dip down toward the western edge of the world, Laurien was hot, hungry, and desperately wishing she was back at the Sea Mist Inn so she could take a nice cool bath. But she was not, and so no bath was to be had. Figures.

Or was it? Presently, as she continued up into the mountains, the sound of water grew more persistent until Laurien found herself at the edge of a small and shady canyon overlooking a river. It must have been the same one she and Demereian had crossed, only higher up stream where the water pooled in hollowed out troughs of sandstone and fell over the edges with a feral crash against the stones below.

Laurien looked around and didn't see anyone. She looked at the map and followed the river with her finger until she located what she assumed was her location. There were no towns within five miles or so. The road she was using was labeled as "alternative rout." Climbing down the embankment, Laurien shrugged off her pack and unlaced her boots, setting them on the small course-sand beach by the water's edge. She stuck a toe in the water. Freezing. She wiped a hand across her dripping forehead. Too hot. Shrugging, she stripped off her clothes, oddly giddy about being naked outside of a building, and waded in.

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Atoña popped the last of her sandwich in her mouth and dusted her hands on her shorts. She sat cross-legged on a diagonally tilted tree trunk, canteen of water propped against her thigh, bow and quiver on the ground where the bark would not scratch the bow's rich maple

construction. That bow, which she named Orion, had been made by a human bowyer for her father, Eranoth. It was of very fine construction, a laminated recurve, which meant it could be of a much shorter length and still retain its power, and since the bowyer had died, could not be replaced. Orion had been Atoña's since she was a small child, and she had grown into it nicely. She took good care of it, polishing the wood and waxing the string, and she could tell a story for every scratch and nick in the dark wood finish.

Regretfully, Atoña packed up her things and hopped her way back to the road. It seemed like such a shame to be heading back to Terrebeth. For the last few days Atoña spent her time poking around Cambren looking for a place to live while at University. The thought of living on campus with all those other young people and noise and alcohol was not pleasant, neither was living in the Dale Port apartments. Cambren was only seven miles away from campus, and a train left to Dale Port every morning at seven, which offered rides to commuters. Atoña found several parcels of land for sale and a few with houses while checking the local real estate listings, and discovered that everything was exponentially beyond her price range. Since she lived in Terrebeth, Atoña did not have a need to pay for room and board, and what money she did make was on odd jobs in Tosaga and Cambren, and the occasional sold piece of artwork or craftsmanship. Atoña doubted that even if she sold four paintings and twelve bowstrings every single day, it would be enough to ever pay for a piece of land. She needed a job, a good job, but all of the work worth having was offered to University graduates, which she was not yet. Atoña let out a sharp breath, running a hand through her hair. One of the black feathers came out and she flicked it away. Things would work out. She would find a way. For now though, she figured it might be tactful to meander herself back to Terrebeth and tell her family her plans. Owlwing

would likely have some pointers for getting started, and she figured it would be in good taste to say goodbye to Demereian. It would break his little boy heart if she did not.

Wandering along the road, possibly the most roundabout way to get back to Terrebeth, Atoña marveled at the still, hotness the day was yielding. The normally cool shadows and quiet shade clung too tightly, stiflingly moist and exasperating. Deciding she absolutely did not have to be anywhere right then, Atoña kept following the road instead of taking the trail that would lead her to the village. There was a river a mile or so up with a swimming hole, and that swimming hole had Atoña Birgendi written all over it.

Atoña hummed to herself as she walked along, but stopped abruptly as she caught a glimpse of something in the distance. Ducking into the ferns along the road, Atoña peeked out, narrowing her eyes to try and see what was approaching. The swimming hole was maybe a hundred yards down the road, and fifty more the road curved sharply uphill. Down that hill came five men on horseback. Five men in metal plate armor, dark uniforms underneath the metal plates, and even from this distance, Atoña could distinguish the black sun insignia engraved into the breast-plates. Bridgemark.

Atoña narrowed her eyes even more. There were only five of them. The one in the front had a rifle strapped to the back of his saddle, and the others carried simple short swords. As they drew closer, Atoña did not miss the frazzled state of their dark hair, or the unkempt aspects of their uniforms. They looked hot, tired, and not like they were having very much fun.

A smile turned Atoña's face into something sharper, more wicked. Her fingers itched and moved toward her quiver. No. she would wait to see what they were up to.

The men from Bridgemark drew to a halt, pointing and speaking in quiet voices at the water hole. Atoña's water hole. They stood around for almost five minutes before dismounting and tethering their horses to trees with the rains.

Idiots. Atoña thought. Who ties their horses by the rains? Idiots, that's who. People who did not care if the horse hurt its mouth.

When the last of the five disappeared down the embankment heading for the river, Atoña slunk from her hiding place. On quiet feet, bow at the ready, she jogged down the road. Atoña was ready for a little fun.

So absorbed in the moment, Atoña did not hear a rustle of bushes from over her shoulder, or the quiet, velvety padding of paws following her down the road.

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Lying on her back, Laurien made shapes out of the waving, high-up branches and meager wisps of clouds trailing along in a wind so distant not even a breath of it reached the ground. A slab of water-polished sandstone jutted out of the river, bone dry and sun warmed, and Laurien sprawled out on it, now and then flicking an arm or leg to chase off a nosy fly. She wasn't sure if she fell asleep or if her thoughts were just very loud, but periodically, she thought maybe she heard voices. Whispers drifting in and out of the gushing river, played with her imagination, until she had ships sailing through the tree tops, crewed by the tiny needle-thin leaves of the tall red barked trees.

"Miss Laurien, is that you?"

Laurien jumped, floundered, overbalanced. She caught sight of men standing only a few yards away, men in armor. Men in Bridgemark armor. She had time to suck in the breath needed to scream before rolling off the side of the sandstone slab and into the river. Water closed over

her head, frigid and surreal, and a moment of terror sent Laurien fighting frantically against the mild current. Her feet brushed against silt covered river bed, and she staggered up in the waist deep water, gasping. Once more seeing the men, she flung herself behind the slab of sandstone. Her mind raced. That was Harold, one of the Bridgemark sheriffs. He had four of his deputies with him on what she assumed was a hunt to capture her. However, Harold just asked if the naked girl on the rock was Laurien, which meant, he wasn't sure. The pack on the beach had none of her original belongings, and thanks to a haircut and some weird procedure known as bleaching, Laurien hoped she could play off being someone else. At least, it was worth a try.

She put on her highest, most scared voice. It wasn't hard to achieve. "Go away! I'm naked!"

"Laurien?" Harold repeated, "Laurien Shartruce?"

Laurien paused, ran a tongue over dry lips. "No..."

The sheriff paused in turn. Over the water, she could hear him talking with his men. "you are not Laurien Shartruce from Bridgemark?"

"No!" Laurien squealed, adding a healthy dose of indignation, "my name is Jane! Jane Mohoggoney!" Her hands shook. Lovely. Now she was related to Demereian.

"She sounds like Laurien," one of the deputies pointed out to Harold.

"Leave me alone!" Laurien called back.

"I'm coming over there!" Harold called to her, stepping gingerly into the water in his thick boots. She saw his face contort as cold water made it over the tops of his boots and up his pants. "If you are not Laurien Shartruce, please accept my sincere apologies. My men and I are charged with returning her to her parents. Shit!" Harold swore as his boot slipped on an algae covered stone.

*Shit.* Laurien thought, pressing farther back against her rock and sitting down in the freezing water to hide her bare chest. This was not going as well as she hoped it might. The hill behind her was steep, covered in sticks and red-leafed vines. If it came down to it, she could run up it, but without clothes and shoes, the idea struck her as rather terrible. Peeking around the other side of the boulder, she saw the other men standing on the shore. One of them was bent double, examining her pack. She saw his mouth make the words “die angry,” and he shrugged. The others shrugged too.

“Hey!” the deputy who read the pack called, “Let her alone, I don’t think it’s anyone from the City.”

“Just a minute!” Harold’s voice called back, uncomfortably close. “Just want to make sure...”

*No*, Laurien thought darkly, you just want a peek at some naked wet titties. That’s all this amounts to. Her attention was snagged as she noticed five horses tethered across the river and up the hill. Or, they had been tethered, now they were free and bolting down the road as someone chased them, waving a stick over his or her head. Laurien watched the person dive artfully down the embankment and into the ferns without the men so much as turning a head to the side. Laurien’s heart quickened. Someone let the horses go, and that someone was well-adept at running around the woods. Laurien almost smiled. No one was as adept at running around the woods as the sidhe. She couldn’t get lucky enough for it to be Owlwing. She would sure show Harold and his merry band of idiots a thing or two.

“I knew it!”

Laurien started as she heard Harold’s voice right behind her. Spinning, she covered her breasts with her hands.

“I don’t know what you’ve done to yourself,” Harold grunted, trying to wedge his armored mass around the point of the boulder, but you are Laurien Shartruce all right. You look just like your mother.”

On an impulse, Laurien snatched a thick stick off the shore, holding it out in front of her. “You keep away from me!” she voice wavered a little.

Harold laughed, pulling a short sword from his belt. “Well, what sort of devil has possessed you?” swinging the sword, the blade connected with the stick with enough force to make Laurien’s hand go numb. She dropped it, scrambling back into the open river.

“Men!” Harold called, “Get your ropes ready, this one’s gone a little loony.”

Laurien looked over at the men on the opposite bank. Their eyes bugged out in unison, and they pointed stupidly in the direction of her chest.

“I said get rope!” Harold yelled, slipping again And almost going down.

Laurien wasn’t paying him much attention, or his men. Her focus was on something crouched on the limb of an oak tree over the heads of the deputies. Stealthy as a bat, the person swung over the branch, landing on a rock behind the men, and hopping down to the sand. Flicking an arrow onto the string of a short, oddly bent bow, the person, who Laurien could tell by the long ears was indeed a sidhe, put some tension on the string, planted its feet and yelled at the top of its lungs at the four men.

Laurien had never seen a cluster of full grown men panic and lose control of their bodies. Until then.

In unison, they tried to turn to see what had made the sudden noise, armor collided with armor, and limb with limb. The man farthest to the left saw the stranger first, sucked in his breath, and tripped over the man next to him as he tried to scramble away. The man he fell over

in turn lost his balance, and the two of them crashed into the others with resounding clangs of metal on metal.

Stepping out of the tree shadows, the sidhe made a nasty face at the men, pulling her lips over her teeth and snarling like a wild cat. The men redoubled their panic, flopping and kicking, pieces of armor catching on each other. The girl stuck out her tongue at them, gave one of them a hardy kick on the backside, and ran to the edge of the river.

Harold was shouting something incoherently, arms waving and eyes bugged out, as the girl ran right for him. Bounding swiftly from boulder to boulder across the river, the girl with the bow landed delicately on the boulder Laurien cowered behind, shifted her weight to her right foot in a move like that of someone dancing, and drove the full force of her left foot into Harold's shoulder. He went down into the river with a grunt and a splash.

"Watch out!" Laurien waved frantically at the sidhe who leapt across to the bank and crouched next to her as an unseen dart hissed over head.

"Shit!" The girl spat, realizing one of the deputies was reloading a small crossbow.

Laurien watched, mortified, as the girl drew back her bow, hooking the hand with the string under her jaw bone, first finger at her lip, everything moved so slowly she could see everything. The slight inhale the girl took as the bow bent to its fullest, the miniscule expansion of her chest, and the subtle jolt as suddenly the arrow was no longer held. The arrow, a black shadow, closed the distance in less than half a heartbeat, taking the crossbow from the man's hands and throwing it to the sand. The string on the crossbow snapped.

Laurien wanted to be afraid, to cower further down, but the smile pulling her lips apart was too much to fight.

"Don't move,"



Laurien went numb. The sidhe went ridged, turning her head slowly until she could see Harold. In the confusion, the sheriff had gotten back around and behind the two of them, and he too held a small crossbow, the dart trained on the girl with the bow. She watched him with eyes that burned with a light too fierce to be from the sun, something golden and terrible.

“Let the human child go.” Said the sidhe quietly, “leave her be.”

“Do not speak to me, demon,” Harold panted, fingers clenching nervously on the grip of his weapon, “this girl belongs to House Shartruce of Bridgemark, and it is my duty to return her.” He took a deep breath, “it is also my duty, under the command of High Priest Sulvester to kill any *seth neshkte* we might see.”

Laurien lined up her foot, and before she had time to think her actions through, drove it home into Harold’s backside.

Giving a yelp of surprise, Harold jerked his hand, and the bolt released, sailing harmlessly across the river and out of sight.

In the moment it took him to reach for another bolt at his belt, the girl drew down on him, black-feathered arrows gleaming darkly.

“You will be doing no such thing.” her blue eyes narrowed to dark lines and her lip pulled back over one sharp tooth.

One heartbeat passed.

A shriek that poured ice water down Laurien’s back split the scene, freezing all present. On the embankment, jogging easily toward the river came a creature. A dark, tawny, armored, maimed, stinging tailed creature with shining eyes. It picked its ears forward and made that chilling scream again. Lowering its head, the manticore batted the ground with its front paw, growling and yipping horrifyingly.

Laurien forgot to be scared. The four men on the shore scrambled away from the manticore as if it were a burning fuse, back to where no horses waited for them. Seeing a chance, Harold ducked past Laurien, fleeing after his men and floundering through the water. When he reached the bank, the manticore bounded up to him, swishing its tail menacingly through the air. Hollering wordlessly, face white and blotchy, Harold sprinted past the creature and up the hill, clanking and dripping as he went. Upon finding his horse long gone, the sheriff proceeded to curse vehemently and dash crazily after his men down the road.

Laurien melted down into the cold water, trembling, her fingers blue. Whether from the cold or adrenalin, she wasn't sure.

The sidhe looked down at her. "*You,*" her eyes got larger than they were naturally.

For lack of better things to say, Laurien crawled limply out of the river, "Hi."

The girl started to say something several times, but her voice caught. Laurien realized she was shaking, the bow wobbling in her grasp, face pale and wan. "What are you still doing out here?" her voice squeaked. "What did you do to yourself?"

"Got a haircut," Laurien drew her knees up to her chin, suddenly very cold. Her teeth chattered in her mouth.

The sidhe didn't respond for a long time, still watching the road where the men had gone. She snapped her face back to Laurien. "You did run away, didn't you?" she sounded surprised.

"Yes," Laurien confirmed, "and I have no intention of ever going back." her forehead fell to knees. "Shit. I never dreamed they'd send the sheriff to bring me back..."

"You must be important,"

"Not really, no."

"How did you get a haircut?" What a question.

Laurien closed her eyes, tired. “Owlwing found me at Melithnion temple, and took me to Dale Port. I got the haircut there.”

“Owlwing?” The girl spun to face Laurien, giving her shocked eyes. “Owlwing? You traveled with her?”

“Yes,” Laurien confirmed, “she saved my life.”

“Oh.” The sidhe was quiet for a long moment, looking everywhere except at Laurien. “I guess I don’t need to chase you out of the forest then.”

“Not really.” Laurien thought as hard as she could, trying to recall the name Owlwing put to the girl. “Are you Atonna?”

“Atoña, actually,” the girl confirmed. She looked like one shoe didn’t fit right, face all pinched.

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(this here is a reiteration of some of the above action)

“Well?” the sidhe girl gave Laurien a befuddled look, “why aren’t you running?”

Laurien stared at her. “Huh?”

“run!” the girl shouted, waving her arms, “run before the monster gets you!”

“You mean the manticore?”

The girl backed off a step. “How did you know that?”

“I’ve seen it,” Laurien narrowed her eyes, “you were there too.”

Wide eyes were given. The girl stared. “You’re the runaway from Bridgemark!” she pointed awkwardly at Laurien, “You!”

“The very same,” Laurien tramped through the river to her dismantled pile of clothes. The sidhe girl didn’t even seem to have noticed her nakedness, but it was starting to embarrass Laurien. Seeing all these skinny faerie things running around, she was beginning to feel pudgy.

“What did you do to yourself?” The girl didn’t sound very polite.

“Well,” Laurien pulled up her panties and fastened the whatever her breast-catcher was called, “I met Owlwing at Melithnion Temple, and her group took me to Dale Port.”

“You met Owlwing?” she astonishment was almost visible, “And she let you live?”

“She was very kind.”

“No, no, no,” the girl with the black feathers bobbing in her hair inserted herself in front of Laurien, “you don’t understand. Owlwing made Briorn and the Wild Hunt from children the Bridgemark Priests sacrificed...she hates that place,” she focused her dark blue eyes on Laurien’s “and she hates those people.”

Fully dressed, Laurien looked at the thick, sable leather of the girl’s quiver, the curved elegance of her bow. She had nothing to argue. Bridgemark was every bit as awful as everyone thought it was, and like it or not, she was branded with its mark.

“I left Bridgemark,” Laurien slid her Die Angry pack over her shoulders, “and I left everything that goes with it. I know I can’t erase where I come from, but I hope it doesn’t always have to ruin where I’m going.”

In a breath, the sidhe lost her malice, deflating somewhat. Her long ears drooped down next to her jaw. Laurien wasn’t sure if she was a pretty girl or not, but she had the sort of well-featured face that you can’t forget no matter how hard you try.

“Owlwing is very wise,” she nudged a pebbled around in the dirt with her toe, “if she thinks you are okay, maybe you are.”

“I would like to think that. What is your name? Atonna?”

The girl lifted one eyebrow way up, “Atoña. You say it a-Ton-yah.”

“Hello, I’m Laurien. Thank you for not shooting me a few days ago, by the way.”

Atoña narrowed her eyes. “you got lucky. Bridgemark people are not welcome in our forest.”

Laurien watched the pebble move around in misshapen circles. “I am not from Bridgemark anymore. It’s not my home, I don’t belong to it.”

“Hmm.” Atoña’s eyes almost stung, their gaze was so sharp, “we will see.” Adjusting her quiver, she kicked a few droplets from her shoe and headed at a leisurely walk up the embankment to the road.

“Where are you going?” Laurien hurried after her.

“Into the deepest darkest part of the woods,” Atoña looked over her shoulder. “You probably don’t want to follow me.”

Laurien thought about prodding her a little but thought better of it. Atoña was not wise Owlwing, but neither was she young and bratty little Demereian, either. There was something behind her dark eyes that flashed in the afternoon sun that made the skin on Laurien’s neck prickle. She could not put a name to that apprehension, but she knew she did not want to explore it further at this time.

“Wherever you’re going,” Atoña turned halfway around to face her, “try not to let goons sneak up behind you again. You never know, someone might not be around to save you next time. You might think you’ve got things figured out, but the plot can change.” Turning her back on Laurien, Atoña walked slowly away.

Laurien watched for the few seconds it took her to become part of the forest, a brown and black switch of willow swaying into the river shadows until there was nothing left.

Sitting down, Laurien unfolded her map. She had two long days of walking before she got herself back to Bridgemark. She didn't really have a plan for sneaking back in, but hoped those two days would be enough time to plot something out.

Only as she sat there did she begin to shiver. She was not cold, even though she was still damp, but she couldn't shake the horrible feeling that she was losing control. Of what, she couldn't say. But sooner or later, the sheriff from Bridgemark was going to catch up to her again, and then what? Would she fight him? Not likely. Especially not without a weapon.

That settled it. Well, settled it again. She needed her sword. Besides, a smile began to work its way past her uneasiness, Bridgemark would be the last place on the map Harold and his merry band of idiots would think to look for her. Maybe things were falling into place after all.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Pile it On**

Dear Captain Scottston, you are by far the worst Captain of the Guard Dale Port has ever seen, in just the last four days, my shipping business has suffered...

Dear Captain Asshole, I don't give a fuck who the hell stole what from whom, closing the bay is completely out of line. I'm sending a complaint to King Inez...

Dear Mr. Jeffery, thank you for taking all the ugly ships out of the bay. I've been painting it for years, and have never been able to capture the natural beauty of the Cheshire Bay with all those blasted boats, I can't begin to tell you what a thrill it is...

"I hate this job," Jeffery tossed the last letter onto a pile of countless others. The edges of different colored paper poked around each other at odd, scattered angles, and it made Jeffery uncomfortable to look at them. Getting up, he scooped the whole mound into his arms and

shoved them in the waste basket. Out of sight...no, he couldn't get the blasted things out of his mind, try as he might.

A knock sounded sharply at his door, and Jeffery rolled his eyes. "Come in."

Tibalt opened the door. "I'm sorry to bother you sir," the younger man looked at the floor rather than the Captain, "I know you said not to disturb you, sir, but you seem to have gotten more mail since this morning..." he looked sheepish, "The telegraph station called to have me pick them up."

"Oh hell," Jeffery paced in front of his window, afraid to look out it. Would someone be waiting in the street below with a rifle ready to shoot him in the head? It would be no surprise.

"Sir, I have a whole box here..."

"Just leave them in the hall...I'll go through them later."

"But sir," the urgency was almost darling. Tibalt was rather new at this. Soon he wouldn't give a shit either. "some of them are labeled as very important," he rifled through his pockets, "this one is from the King."

"Really," Jeffery held out his hand for the telegram, not sure if he was interested or not. at this point, probably not. but, maybe it was the King giving him the go-ahead to reopen the bay.

Or not.

After reading the message, Jeffery carefully folded the letter into sixths, delicately creasing the edges between his finger and thumbnail.

"Well?" Tibalt had the face of a dog who knew it might soon get a scrap of meat, "is it good news?"

Jeffery gave him what he hoped was a caustic look. Tibalt swallowed and glanced around the room. "No, Tibalt, it is not good news." Opening the second drawer down on the right hand



side of his desk, Jeffery set the note atop a pile of similar looking pieces of paper. “Inez is giving us the order to keep shipping lanes closed until progress on the McWerein case has been made. He also wants us to close down the University.”

Tibalt looked like someone slapped him in a painful place. “What? Why the University? That’s the biggest draw to Dale Port next to the fishing and trade industry!”

“You don’t say,” Jeffery took all the pencils out of his pencil jar, putting them all back in point up at a slight diagonal. They looked like a bouquet of bayonets. “He wants it closed because the school has the highest concentration of scientists and magicians in this half of Gauntland. If McWerein is planning anything drastic, like the Guild thinks he is, that will be the first place he goes.”

“But, he’s a Poet, doesn’t the King know Poets can’t do magic?”

Jeffery stared at him. “What was that? What do you know about Poets?”

Tibalt tapped his index fingers together. “I thought everyone knew that.”

“Obviously the Poets neglected to inform me. go on.”

“Well,” Tibalt cleared his throat, obviously enjoying his new found usefulness, “Poets are not magic users. Magic users can be trained, you know? Poets are just born that way. They can do weird stuff. They can’t do any magic at all. In fact, I’ve read somewhere that direct contact with a spell will neutralize the enchantment.”

“Shit,” Jeffery pulled out his yellow legal pad and began flipping furiously through it. “Than we’ve been going about this whole thing all wrong! Chemistry Boy has been wasting his time poking around for spells and magical signatures if McWereian can’t use magic... Tell me, Tibs, where does a Poet get his powers from?”

“That I don’t know,” Tibalt admitted, “they’ll tell you some stuff about it being the power of the universe and all sorts of other stuff. Most of the people who study that kind of stuff just think they use a different type of magic. Like electricity and stuff.”

“Where the hell did you learn all this?”

“I graduated from the University with a degree in Magical Sciences. One of my classes was about Poetic Theory. I joined the Guard because I really didn’t want to be a professor.”

“Why the hell did I not know this?”

“You never ask, and I don’t talk about it. I didn’t want to be another Chemistry Boy.”

Jeffery thought about this for a moment before covertly rolling his eyes.

“I don’t know for sure,” Tibalt ran a hand over his dark face, darker eyes watching the window. “Supposedly, the Poets leave no magical signature. All living things have some amount of magical energy in their bodies, but Poets claim to not...”

“Are you sure that’s true?” Jeffery picked a black pencil out of his jar and tapped the butt end against his desk rhythmically, “That sounds a little bit too weird to believe.”

“I don’t know,” Tibalt rubbed his thumb between two fingers, “it’s just what I learned. Maybe Ny can run some scans on the Poets or something.”

“Huh,” Jeffery rested his chin on his knuckles.

Tibalt took up awkward space in the doorway for a minute.

“Is that all, Tibalt?”

“Yes, I think so,” Turning to go, the younger man faltered, pulling another envelope from his pocket. “Wait, there’s this letter. It’s from Bridgemark regarding a missing person...”

“Pitch it,”

“Done sir.”

Tibalt left. Jeffery watched swallows busy themselves above his window. They cheeped and chirped, tiny mouths opening and closing as muted sound filtered through the glass. This Robert McWerein was becoming, what Jeffery considered, too much bother. Running a hand through his scalp, Jeffery flicked a few hairs into the waste basket with distaste. If they ever did catch McWerein, he wouldn't have to worry about standing trial or facing persecution by the Guild. Jeffery himself would strangle him.

## **Chapter 20**

### **Wild Hunt**

On the second night in the vast forest that seemed to stretch on forever without end, the moon did not rise. Silver pin prick stars shone a weak light across the blue-black dome of the sky, and the jagged edges of the trees stood out against them like holes of nothing cut into the universe. Night birds called shrilly back and forth in the dark, and unseen creature fluttered on almost soundless wings.

Almost soundless. Laurien huddled against the bare face of sandstone he was using as shelter, feeding twigs into a meek orange fire. The quiet things, no bigger than rats, flitted in and out of the glow, somewhere between birds and shadows. She thought they might be bats, but had read bats didn't live outside the wall. Maybe it was time to take everything she thought she knew

and throw it over her shoulder. That's what Eugene did, she realized. He left Bridgemark, all of it, behind. *Even me*, she thought, pulling her knees into her chest.

The thought had begun plaguing her these last two days, a creeping spider's web at the edges of her thoughts. Eugene could have taken her with him when he left. If he knew what the outside world was like, and she assumed he did, and recognized Bridgemark for what it was, why had he not included her in his plans? Logical explanations regarding her young age at the time presented themselves, but in the dark, along, with no one to talk to, logic is not always the easiest thing to see.

The last flame in the fire pit hiccupped and vanished, leaving behind bright red coals. Laurien closed her eyes, resting her chin on her bent knees. Eugene was long gone, off somewhere in the middle of his own life. A life that did not include Laurien. Daniel was also gone, but for some reason, out here in the world, losing her first crush did not seem quite so terrible. He was out of the city as well. He would find a way to get by. But Eugene leaving her, as selfish as she knew it was, was beginning to feel like abandonment.

The hood of her jacket lay on her shoulders, and Laurien pulled it over her ears. The fog crept up in the distance, and the cold ocean air proceeded it like incense bearers before a priest.

The High Priest. He was someone Laurien thanked whatever was listening that she would never have to see again. Her classmates, one and all had loved Father Alonso Sulvester with his pale blonde hair and sky blue eyes. They melted against each other at the soft sweetness in his smile, and hung like rabbit skins from his kind and knowing voice. The high Priest was young, handsome, and Laurien had trusted him until she watched him tie a woman to the pole in the center of Bridgemark. Hands bound above her head, the woman, naked to the waist sobbed into her tangled hair and begged to be forgiven. Her crime was leaving the city and entering the

woods where she had, without doubt, cavorted with dark spirits. Father Sulvester flogged her until her olive skin dangled in slimy red ribbons from her back, shoulders, and breasts. Laurien could still see the beautiful smile on Sulvester's equally beautiful face. Laurien almost choked on the memory. Bridgemark loved its own cruelty. Lusted after it. Some part of Laurien had known this all along, and it seemed so strange that it had taken her until this week to realize it. Eugene must have learned it early.

Shrugging the jacket closer around her shoulders, Laurien curled up on her side on the sleeping mat Owlwing had given her. Pulling the blanket over her head, she watched the embers dim, reminding herself that the noises in the dark would not hurt her.

City streets, bright and draped in colorful fabrics, opened up beneath Laurien's feet as she walked. A sky almost too blue with clouds too perfect domed the sky. People without faces hurried up and down the streets, hopping on trolleys and disappearing around corners. Laurien hurried to catch up with them, but no matter who she chased, she could never catch them. The air tasted salty, and she knew she was in Dale Port. Up ahead, back to her, Laurien recognized the bronze curl of hair and black feathers as the sidhe, Atoña. It became very important to Laurien to speak to her, and she once more broke into an agonizingly slow jog to catch up before Atoña could get away. People moved in front of her as she tried to run, and each time she caught sight of Atoña, the girl's outfit changed. The black feathers vanished, and her hair grew out in to full, elegant ringlets over shoulders in a black jacket.

"Atoña," Laurien's voice came out quiet, "Atoña!" she yelled in a whisper. Frustrated, Laurien plunged through the crowded people, who clung to her like thick mud. She needed to tell Atoña something...something important. She wanted to apologize for being from Bridgemark.

Hoof beats sounded out of nowhere, rapidly gaining on Laurien. Looking over her shoulder she saw Harold and his men, dressed in uniforms and armor, pushing through the river of bodies that fell away like water droplets before them.

“Atoña!” Laurien screamed, falling to her belly as the cobble stones became slick with what looked like multi-colored mud, “Atoña! I’m sorry, please help me!” In a moment of adrenalin fueled force of will, Laurien crawled beneath the last of the people between herself and the girl, grabbing Atoña by the shoulder. Laurien shuddered. Under her hand, the girl, now dressed all in clothing that was long and black, was cold as window glass laced with frost.

Atoña turned slowly around and looked into Laurien’s face with eyes that were not Atoña’s. Laurien sucked in her breath and screamed, but no sound came out. The hoof beats on stone became the only noise in a void of calm. The stranger who looked like Atoña, but was not, held up a long, sheathed sword. On it was tied a note in Eugene’s handwriting. Holding it out to Laurien, she, or he, Laurien could no longer tell, tilted its head to one side, face splitting into a wide, sleepy-eyed grin. Behind half-closed lids, eyes glowed with a terrible metallic light.

“How interesting.”

The hoof bests became thunder.

Laurien sat up, and now her scream was real. Pulling more air into her lungs she wailed in thoughtless terror as countless riders ran circles around her on beasts that were almost horses. Riders, twisted and grotesque, part human, part creature or thing, hooted and shook green-flamed torches over their heads, their mounts kicking the remains of embers up into the air in showers of orange stars.

Laurien could not stop screaming. She didn't know if actual sound came out, but she was aware of inhaling and forcing air through a tightly constricted throat. That was all she could focus on.

Pulling in their horse monsters, the riders pointed mismatched fingers at Laurien and laughed. A half-baked thought of fleeing flitted through Laurien's mind, but vanished as something dark was yanked over her head and she was lifted off her feet as easily as if she were a doll. All the air left her lungs as she was dropped on her stomach across what must have been a saddle. A shape she recognized as a hand pressed into the small of her back, holding her down as the horse-thing beneath her surged away with surreal speed.

Laurien bounced and flopped, trying to get her hands around something. Finding what she guessed was a cinch for the saddle, Laurien clawed her fingers into it, straining her arms to try and get herself out of the rider's grip. Laughing, in a voice not quite the right pitch to be a person, the rider hooked thick fingers into the back of her pants, dragging her firmly back across the saddle.

Helpless and afraid, Laurien sobbed into her elbows, kicking her feet until she grew exhausted. How long she flopped and floundered against that saddle, she couldn't be sure, but suddenly, with a gruff tug on her pants, she found herself tumbling across the ground. She shook so badly, her hands wouldn't work to get the bag off her head. She kicked and flailed her legs, but couldn't coordinate them under herself to stand. Giving up, Laurien curled herself into a feeble ball and cried in heavy gasps. This was it, she was going to die.

"And what, Briorn, have you brought me tonight?" a sharp voice cut through the clutter of sound; stomping hoof-like feet, creaking leather, wild voices.



“A monster, Lord Master,” a deep, rich voice with a hearty trill on the ‘r’ sounds responded, “a little she-beast who stinks of the Dark City.” Other voices chimed in, something between cheers and the yipping of feral dogs.

“Did you hurt it?” the sharp voice again. Laurien fervently realized it belonged to a woman.

“No, Lord Master.”

Light flickered on the other side of the cloth bag. Shadows played across the fabric and voices whispered, voices that sounded too human to be the huntsmen.

“Very well. I’ll see what you brought.”

Crunch, crunch, footfalls approached, along with the musical chime of a long knife or a sword being pulled from a sheath. Hands took hold of Laurien’s shoulders, sitting her up.

“P-please,” Laurien’s voice came out hoarse and thready, “please don’t hurt me.”

Fingers pulled at the bag where it tightened around her neck, and a second later she was blinking against a daze of green, blue, and normal orange torches. Riders on their freaky horse monsters flitted about, too quietly, and countless people on foot walked in and out of shadows carrying bows and quivers full of arrows.

“Oh,” said the woman who had removed the bag over her head, “it’s you, Laurien.”

Laurien took three short breaths, staring at the woman’s face. The top half of it was black with white circles around the eyes, and red lined slanted away from the corner’s of her lips like streaks of blood. Laurien realized it was face paint, and recognized the big yellow eyes looking out at her.

“Owlwing!” Laurien could hardly get the word out. Her relief was so powerful she went limp and Owlwing had to steady her.

“Briorn,” Owlwing stood up, looking way up into the face of the huge, antlered rider, “she is alright. You could have let her be.”

The enormous, bearded man shrugged, standing out the thick muscles on his barrel chest. “The she-beast smelled like the Dark City.” He turned bright eyes that somehow did not seem quite alive, to look at Laurien, “cannot be too careful, Lord Master.”

By this time, many people that Laurien recognized as sidhe were circling over, tall, fierce-looking men and women, faces painted lavishly or hidden behind masks. All of them dressed in similar fashions of tight black clothing with various levels of dark leather armor. All of them carried short, recurved bows, except a few like Owlwing, who held swords or wore them belted or across their backs.

“What,” Laurien glanced around, trying to make sense of where she was and what was happening, “what’s going on?” the forest was thick here, the trees closely packed, but right down the easily sloping hill they stopped all together, opening up into a sweeping field. In the distance, something long and dark, like a line of black fog stretched into the night in both directions.

Owlwing moistened her darkly painted lips with her tongue. It looked far too pink against the paint. “It have been better if you were still in Dale Port. What are you doing back in the forest so soon?”

“I ran out of money.” Laurien hoped that didn’t sound as stupid to Owlwing as it did to here. “I was coming back to get my belongings to sell. And,” she felt meek under the scrutiny of so many sharp, inhuman eyes, “to get my sword.”

“What nonsense is this?” a sidhe woman with hair that looked like lichen gave Owlwing an accusatory push to the shoulder. “Is this girl from Bridgemark?”

Owlwing stood up to her full height, muscles gleaming along her bare arms. She was not impressively tall, but the other woman took a step back anyway. “This is not a matter that concerns you right this moment, Winter. I will explain it to you when the night is over.”

Glaring at Laurien, long ears back and quivering, the woman called Winter backed off a few steps. “I will defer to your judgment.”

Owlwing fixed her with her yellow eyes. “Thank you.”

“What’s going on?” Laurien asked again, “where am I?”

Pulling her none-too-gently to her feet, Owlwing led Laurien by the wrist away from the gathered and heavily armed sidhe and the huntsmen.

“Who are those people on the, the,” Laurien waved a hand back to the horse monsters.

“Look around, Laurien. Do you not recognize where you are?”

“No!” Laurien tugged a little with her arm and Owlwing let go. “I have no idea where the fuck I am! Those things kidnapped me!”

“On my orders.” Owlwing’s ever patient voice picked up a harsh edge, “for that I am sorry. Now, if you would take a moment to observe your whereabouts, you would realize we are positioned approximately two-hundred yards outside the western wall of Bridgemark.”

Laurien stumbled a little in the dark. Owlwing hadn’t brought a torch. “What?”

“Remember when we last spoke? I told you about the child being held in the city and her sister’s capture. Your information has been very helpful. Tonight is the seventh night of Svelneth’s captivity, and the High Priest will be conducting the ritual sacrifice. I know Sven, and she will stop at nothing to get her sister and herself out of that city before midnight. I have no doubt she is capable of this. However, should the city decide to give chase, we will be ready.” Her eyes glowed. “Very ready.”

Laurien looked back to where the line of trees stopped. If she squinted, she could just tell the gray shape in the distance was too solid to be fog.

“If you really are going to attempt to reenter that horrid city, even after you committed what they will view as treacherous betrayal, than tonight is the night to act.”

“What?” Laurien quailed at the thought.

“I am not sending you in alone.” Owlwing folded her arms. “It’s not worth the risk. I trust you well enough, but should a guard capture you, we cannot risk our plans being exposed.”

“What?” Laurien took shallow, rapid breaths, “I can’t, I mean...”

“Yes you can, and you absolutely must!” Owlwing snapped at her. “You want your things, this is your only chance. If you try and sneak in there when the guards are posted on the wall, they will, and I mean, they will love, to kill you.”

Laurien opened her mouth to say something, but what that something was didn’t quite work its way out right.

“You need someone to go in with you...” Owlwing glanced around, fixing her eyes on the various shadows flitting through the tree trunks. “But ...who? Someone sneaky...”

“That,” the voice came from right over Laurien’s shoulder and she made a weak wail before she could catch herself, “...would be me.”

Spinning, Laurien saw, in shadowy silhouette, the figure of a young sidhe woman, skinny as a switch, with scruffy hair hanging over strong shoulders braided with feathers. Even with the black and blue war paint and neck-to-ankle black clothing, Laurien knew she was Atoña.

“Atoña Birgendi,” Owlwing confirmed, “yes. I do think you will just fine. I see you have your rope,” she indicated a coil tied to Atoña’s belt, “you will need it to get over the wall.”

“Where should we hop over?” Atoña didn’t take her dark eyes off of Laurien, and their gaze felt cold.

“Anywhere save the western gate,” Owlwing pointed in the general direction of the assembled warriors, “Sven will be making her escape through there, so people will likely be following her. Other than that, watch out for guards, but be aware that most of the city, at least, the dangerous population, is gathered in the main square for the burning.”

Laurien squirmed beneath her skin. Breaking into her own city. She never imagined she would be doing this. Then again, she never imagined she would be hanging around cavorting with a flock of *seth neshkte*, either.

“You are alright with this course of action, Atoña?” Owlwing looked up at the taller woman.

A phantom smile crossed Atoña’s full lips. “Absolutely. She will not get out of line.”

Owlwing might have rolled her eyes, but Laurien wasn’t sure. “Well then. Be off. Best of luck.” She waved a hand in the direction of the wall. “and most of all, do not get caught, and do not die.”

“Got it,” Atoña took a few steps in a southern direction, and paused.

Laurien looked at Owlwing who flicked a hand toward Atoña.

“Go!”

Shivering a little, Laurien walked up to Atoña. she could almost feel the tense energy radiating from the sidhe woman’s lean body. Atoña blinked slowly and stalked off.

“I’m surprised Demereian didn’t volunteer himself,” Laurien meant it mostly for herself, and started when Atoña gave a choked laugh.

“Him? Demereian? You met him?”

“Yeah,” Laurien jogged a little to catch up, “he was with Owlwing.”

“Demereian is thirteen,” Atoña stretched the words out slowly, “and not very...adept.”

“He’s the one who convinced me to go back to get my sword,”

“Hmm. So that’s what we’re going after. Fair enough.”

“And some of my stuff to sell...I don’t have any money.”

“Huh.”

“So,” Laurien didn’t like the silence between them. It felt thick, too easy for nasty things to creep up on them out of the night, “who are those hunters. The ones who caught me..?”

Atoña actually slowed up a little so Laurien could walk next to her, “Briorn and the wild Hunt. I don’t know how much Owlwing told you, but they were once from Bridgemark too.” Here she faltered, licking her lips with a nervous tongue, “the High Priest practices mutilation on children he considers unworthy. Owlwing saves as many as she can.”

“How,” Laurien’s voice came out frog-like, “I mean, what does she do?”

Atoña shrugged, “Only she really knows. Remakes them somehow. Out of other things. She can’t bring them back from the dead though. Once they’re gone, they’re gone. No amount of magic can bring you back.”

Laurien watched as the grey smudge ahead solidified into the enormous, looming wall. At thirty feet high, it soon reached over their heads. Laurien wanted to ask Atoña another question, but the sidhe put a finger to her lips, running the other hand along the cold, dewy stone.

“Be quiet now.” Looking up, Atoña put her face close to the wall and closed her eyes. Her nose twitched, and Laurien wondered if she was sniffing it. “Wait here,” she dashed out along the wall a dozen yards or so, then back the other way, watching the top as she went. Trotting back to Laurien’s side, she ran her fingers over the wall again, hooked them into

crevasses Laurien could not see, dug her toes into pits that might not exist, and began to climb. Laurien's eyes widened. In a matter of a minute, Atoña poked her head slowly over the wall and looked back and forth. Satisfied no one was watching, she threw a leg over so she was straddling the three foot wide brick-work. Unfastening the rope, she let one end uncoil down the wall. The end flopped in front of her face, and she picked it up tentatively. It felt greasy or waxy, and made of something like leather.

"When I get to the other side I'll give it a tug, then you can climb up." Atoña swung her other leg over and began to lower herself.

"Wait!" Laurien hissed, waving her arms.

Atoña curled an arm over the wall, and even in the dark, from thirty feet away, Laurien could see her scowl. "What?"

"I don't, I mean, how do I climb up?"

Atoña made a face that would have been very funny in another situation. "Are you an idiot?" she lowered her voice when she realized she was hissing quite loudly, "Grab it with your hands, and climb up with your feet against the wall. It's not hard."

"I've never done this before!" Laurien hopped from foot to foot, "I don't know if I can!"

Atoña visibly rolled her eyes. "Well if you can't, you might as well give up on that sword of yours."

Laurien bit down on the knuckle of her first finger.

"Come on," Atoña's face vanished, "I'll tug the rope when it's okay for you to climb."

That moment came too soon. The rope jumped in her hands. And she grasped it desperately. Bending her arms, she wrapped the rope around her hands, using the tension to prop her feet against the brick. To her astonishment, she managed to take a step. Then another. Her

arms burned with the effort, but soon she was ten feet up. Stopping, she indulged in a good panting fit before gritting her teeth and pushing up another yard. The top of the wall looked so, so, so very far away. Trying not to look at it, Laurien focused instead on her feet, working on placing each one in front of the other. Suddenly, she could see over the wall. Floundering, she hooked her arms over the top, hauling herself up until she lay panting on the top. Her denim jacket was too hot in the cool night, and her short bangs stuck uncomfortably to her forehead. For several minutes, she lay still, breathing in deep gasps of the dark night.

“Hurry up!” Atoña’s voice bounced up from the deep shadows below.

Winding up the rope, Laurien shook it a little, realizing the tension was slack. “I can’t,” she whispered back, “no one’s holding the rope on this side.”

Silence answered her, then, “Oh hell.”

Laurien heard scraping and scuffling, and a moment later, Atoña sat atop the wall beside her.

“I’ll hold it from this side,” she pointed to the outside, “so you can climb down. But,” she fixed Laurien with her sharp eyes, “don’t run off while I’m over here. Wait for me.”

Laurien eyed the bow tied across her back. Atoña noticed and smiled.

“If you do run, there is no where you can get to before I shoot you.”

Laurien let out a long breath, “I’m not running anywhere, okay?”

Atoña’s mouth stretched out in both directions, and she slitted her eyes. Without another word, she scurried down the wall, giving the rope a sharp pull when she was secure on the ground.

With a deep breath, Laurien lowered herself over the wall, using the rope to keep from falling. Going down was much easier, and in no time she sat in the shadows, sweat dripping



down her face and hands raw. Atoña settled next to her, as promised, very quickly, and Laurien did not miss the way her chest heaved as she breathed, or the slight hitch in her breath.

“When you’re ready,” Atoña slid the bow off her back, fitting an arrow to the string with a small click.

“In a second,” Laurien wiped her face on the sleeve of her jacket.

Atoña got to her feet and squinted off to her right. “Well. Shit.”

“What?” Laurien pressed her back into the wall, fearing the guards she imagined were approaching.

“Did you know there’s a gate in the wall about a hundred yards that way?”

Laurien stared after her. She couldn’t see anything. “No.”

“Huh,” Atoña shrugged, that smile tugging at her mouth again, “looks like we didn’t have to climb after all. Oh well. We’ll use it on the way out.”

Laurien wobbled on legs that felt like pudding, holding hands that might be covered with blood out from her body and shot Atoña a vengeful look.

Atoña threw up her hands. “Don’t look at me like that! I didn’t know it was there. This is your stinking city!”

*Bet me*, Laurien grumbled to herself. She would put money on Atoña planning the wall climbing. She didn’t know Atoña, but it seemed like something she would do.

The realization of where she was snagged Laurien from behind, sliding slimy hands around her throat until her breath could only be gotten by force. Haze settled over the city of Bridgemark, thick and close to the ground, and as their legs stirred it up, Laurien recognized the brackish pungency of wood smoke and incense. There was going to be a sacrifice tonight. A blood sacrifice. A strange woman and a girl Laurien knew most of her life were marked to die.

She felt a little light headed, and slowed her pace. To Atoña's credit, she did not push Laurien to go faster.

Everything seemed way too real now. Details of a childhood flitted out of the dark corners of buildings at Laurien, filling her mind with the fevered fear of nightmares. This was her home, her reality, and it was evil. Far more evil than the lurking things that used to poke fingers out from under her bed at night and the lidless yellow eyes watching her from the rafters of the barn. This city was the sick, unholy evil only human minds could conceive, and only human hands could build.

All around them, small houses waded past like lumbering beasts as they hurried through the night. The poor people lived out here, Laurien knew, and the glass of the windows was foggy and impure. Behind the windows, no lanterns burned. Several doors stood ajar. Laurien's neck prickled. She could almost hear the sirens, moaning loud and long, that called the city, young and old, rich and poor, into the center of the city. The memory of them made her feel more cold.

Atoña's feet were quiet, soft leather chirps in the gravel and grass, and Laurien noticed every crunch of her boots as loud as if she had stomped her foot into the ground. She felt awkward, but Atoña did not call her out on it. Abruptly, the cottages, made of wood and a few with white walls, gave way to sweeping, meticulous fields of mowed lawn. Here the richer estates rode their fancy horses and played their fancy games. To the east, Laurien knew, more fields of grass and golden hay grew up to the edge of the wall where sheep and cattle ran. Ahead of them, the inner city stood, a black paper cut out with candle light shining through all the snipped out little window holes. But as they drew closer, it became taller, more three dimensional, and Laurien's feet slowed until she almost came to a stop.

“No one,” Atoña muttered to herself in a singsong voice, swaying a little in a half skip, “no one, no one, in this icky city is gonna catch me...la, la. Laurien? What are you doing?”

Laurien started, electric sparks in her joints, “I, I mean,”

That not-quite-there smile again, “You’re scared, aren’t you?” Atoña kept walking, “not that I would blame you. This place would get under anybody’s skin.”

The inner city got closer and closer, and Laurien felt cold sweat cover her palms and run down her back. Her teeth clattered together, and she kept her lips pressed tightly together so Atoña couldn’t hear.

“Where are we going anyway?” Atoña’s eyes reflected the starlight in a way that looked unnatural. The stars on the moist surfaces looked brighter than the ones in the sky.

“Oh,” Laurien shook herself, “we have to go that way,” she indicated a quasi eastward direction, “The Shartruce Manor is the first estate you can see over there. The three story one...”

“Ah,” Atoña tilted her head over to one side, “and, how many people live there again?”

“Just the five of us, I mean four. And six servants, but they stay in the servant’s quarters nearby.”

“Quaint.” Atoña’s fingers ran themselves over the string of her bow, pausing on the point where the arrow attached to the string. “Come on.”

The edges of the city came up to meet them, and Laurien stumbled over the cobblestones. All the primary streets of the city were paved in straight lines, and Laurien could see orange reflections of light bouncing off the white-walled buildings. Sounds of voices, bent into indistinguishable howls and wails followed the light, and Laurien swallowed a thick knot in the back of her throat. Her stomach tightened and she felt weak, lightheaded and queasy. Atoña watched the streets as they passed with a detached curiosity bordering on sly playfulness.

Laurien envied the cool slowness with which she blinked her eyes, and the fluid liveness of her steps and motions.

They reached what must have been Main Street, and Laurien's feet cemented to the stones beneath them. Hundreds, maybe thousands of torches swayed and fluttered against a tide of frantic voices. They were singing, or chanting, or something Laurien could not make out, with the fervent passion of lovers at the brink of climax. She could see the people now, make out individual faces in the wavering body of heat and lust and fire. Dresses and lace rubbed raw against buttoned coats. Tightly pulled hair hung loose and damp. covered skin became bare and hot against the bodies pressed to close, so tight, she could not tell where one stopped and another began. The heat from the torches lifted the air in melting patterns, but even through it, Laurien could see the pyre built around the metal pole. It reached above all the heads, twice the height of a grown man, and filled with wood and oil, and the bleached flesh of bread offerings. Only one person elevated himself above the others. On a platform hidden behind heads and torches, Father Sulvester, the High Priest was speaking, unsorted words that lost their meaning by the time they reached Laurien's ears. Tall and slender, and handsome even through the smoke and the wild cries, he stood with his proud back to Laurien, arms flung out, face upturned to the heavens, sunlight blonde hair smooth and pleated against the shoulders of his long, fitted black coat. Over his shoulders draped a purple vestment embroidered with the Rosquarian image of the Black Sun. Tongues of dark fire radiated out from the edges of the eclipse, reaching in geometric patterns to the edges of the cloth. Laurien could recall the words in the holy book, the ones written in loving verse about the blood that will one day be shed. Someday, maybe far off, maybe soon, but growing sooner every passing day, the moment would come when Rosquar saw

fit to burn the demons, the unholy children of his heathen brother, from the world. That day, the sun would shine black against a purple sky.

That must be what Sulvester was speaking about, clenching his elegant hands into fists and throwing his arms into the air with fervor. He must be telling the city that tonight, with this cleansing of the demonic presence within their Good City, that they were closer to that moment when they would reconcile with the gods. In the throng, balanced on torch light, the High Priest looked as if he had arisen out of the fire. The heat licked his coat. He called out to the city of Bridgemark, and Laurien heard them answer.

“Fucked up,” Atoña said close to Laurien’s ear, “let’s go before they explode and rain burning flesh down over us.”

“Alright,” Laurien’s knees trembled as Atoña guided her behind the next row of buildings. Shops, offices. Who knew anymore what they were really used for. Again, Laurien found herself treading across grass instead of stone, and realized she was in a yard. Manicured rows of roses and pyricanthas grew in ordered areas of control. A barn stood off to the side of a large manor. Her yard.

“Which way’s the best to get in, in case someone’s inside?” Atoña directed Laurien into some shadowy jasmine vines. “We should get right into your room. Do you have a window on the outside?”

“Ah,” Laurien looked up at the house, at the three levels of windows, and over at the small horse barn. That was where she first made love with Daniel. The smell of his sweat and the musk of old hay were almost too strong to be memories. “My room is over on the side there. On the third floor.”

“That window, there on the edge?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

“Okay,” Atoña leaned easily against the house’s wall, “go and get your stuff. I’ll be lookout.”

Laurien’s eye bugged out a little, “I’m not going in there alone!”

“Why?” Atoña rested the tip of her bow against the top of her shoe, “It’s your house.”

“I don’t know who could be in there!” Laurien’s voice grew high, “what if dad posted a priest, just in case I snuck back? They have guns!”

Atoña muttered something that sounded like ‘pussy,’ and looked up at the high window.

“There used to be a trellis here,” Laurien felt the need to point out, “I could climb down it at night...”

“Obviously,” Atoña’s eyebrow lifted, “there is not one now.”

“They must have moved it when I ran away...so I couldn’t sneak in like this.”

“It follows that they wouldn’t post a goon in your room if they didn’t think you could get in,” Atoña snapped the arrow off the string and slid it back into her quiver, “right?”

Laurien faltered. “I guess. But I still can’t get in.”

Atoña gave her a long look. “Fine.” hooking her bow across the quiver, she hopped up to the first floor windowsill, took hold of the drain pipe, and using her knobby knees as leverage, shimmied all the way up to the third floor. From there she stood, chest pressed against the window glass. Reaching over one foot to the next window sill over, Atoña did a quick around the brick divide between windows, balancing precariously on the edge of Laurien’s window. Laurien saw her try the latch and find it locked, watched curiously as she felt around the window for a weakness in the cocking, wondered what she was doing when she took an arrow with an odd, rounded tip out of her quiver, and fell back with a yelp as glass tinkled down all around her.

Satisfied, Atoña slid the blunt arrow back into her quiver, reached a hand in the plate-sized hole, and popped the window open. Disappearing inside, Laurien strained her ears for any sounds, but heard nothing. Glancing around, she couldn't shake the sticky feeling that eyes were following her motions. The rope bounced off her head and she swatted it away like it was a snake.

“Don't make such a fuss!” Atoña's voice snapped down. “Climb up and get your crap!”

More rope climbing. Great.

Laurien flinched as the rope dug in to the raw and tender flesh of her palms. Gritting her teeth, she started to climb up. The house, she found, was significantly easier to ascend than the wall, and she utilized the sills, drain pipe and decorations as much as possible. At the window of her room, she pulled herself over the edge, giving a small cry of alarm as glass from the sill poked into her left hand.

“Shh!” Atoña held a finger to her lips and lowered her eyebrows.

Letting a quiet whine squeak its way out, Laurien picked the slivers out with her finger nails in the dark, watching black splotches spread over her hand. “I cut myself.”

Atoña looked over from Laurien's nightstand where she was looking behind the ornate mirror. “So?”

“It hurts!” Laurien hissed back, tearing a bit of curtain off and wrapping her hand in it.

“You're complaining,” Atoña crouched down to look under the bed, “couldn't hurt that much.”

Lips turned down, Laurien looked around her room. In the night, everything defined itself in fuzzy grey shapes, but she knew those shapes by memory. Large, rectangular, and with a handsome dormer, Laurien's room was painted a pale blue with lace curtains, dark blue bedding, and dark polished wood furnishings. Aside from the four poster bed, two dressers framed a walk-

in closet, and the vanity and mirror rested squatly next to the bed. There was no mess, no clutter. Everything was put away and sorted. Not the way Laurien left it.

“This is a very lovely room,” Atoña’s ears pricked forward.

Laurien could detect to undercurrent of a snide comment in the sidhe’s tone. She sounded genuine.

“Alright,” Atoña turned to her, “find a pack and get your stuff.”

“It’s so dark,” Laurien pulled open her closet, removing the school pack she left at Killkenney, “I need a lamp or something.” The idea of someone, likely her mother, organizing her belongings made her hands shake. Had her mother also seen fit to change the sheets? Had she found what Laurien kept between the mattress and box spring? Breathing deeply, Laurien hauled her pack out to the floor, abandoning it to pull up the mattress. Letting out a heavy sigh, she slid out a small album of photos of Daniel, Eugene and herself, tossing it at the pack. Reaching deeper, her fingers closed around a leather-wrapped hilt, and she pulled hard. Out came the sword, safe in its sheath, Eugene’s note still pinned to the belt-loop. (insert old message here)

Laurien wiped her sleeve across her eyes and it came away damp.

“That is quite a nice sword,” Atoña nodded at it.

Reverently, Laurien set it hilt first into the pack. The pack tied closed, so the extra length wouldn’t be too much of a problem.

“I could really use that lamp now,” Laurien pulled open her jewelry drawer, emptying all the contents into the pack without looking.

“It’s your house,” Atoña picked up a comb with a mother-of-pearl handle, “you should know where things are.” She weighed the comb in her hands.



“That piece of junk,” Laurien indicated the comb, “can go in the trash.” A gift from Aunt Meghan. The one who didn’t like Laurien’s face. The comb was both ugly and not intended to be a nice gift. Laurien kept it because her mother insisted she wear it when Meghan was around.

“It’s beautiful!” Atoña, closed her fingers tightly around the handle.

“It’s yours!” Laurien yanked a mound of dresses from the closet.

“You mean that?”

Laurien looked up to see Atoña’s dark eyes open very wide. “Yes, of course I mean it. It’s a piece of shit.”

“Thank you.” Atoña gave her a small bow, slipping the comb into a pouch on the front of her quiver.

“Sure,” Laurien went back to the dresses. Atoña was weird. Her eyes started to strain in the dark, and she fumbled around next to the bed for her lantern. Holding it up, she pointed to the wick. “you have a match?”

Atoña folded her arms. “Does it look like I do?”

“I don’t know,” Laurien said with well-mannered patience, “you look like someone who might take them on a raid. Never know when you might need to set someone on fire.”

Atoña opened her eyes really wide again. The ghost of a smile became a full grin. “You know, I think I might actually like you. Someday anyway. I don’t have any matches tonight.”

“I’m an idiot!” Laurien smacked herself in the forehead, biting her lip as her hand smarted, “I’ve got matches and a striker in my pack!”

Looking around, Laurien remembered her pack was back at her campsite. Where the crazy hunter people picked her up.

“Could have fooled me.”

“Shit!” Laurien kicked the post of her bed. “It’s back in the woods! Fuck!”

“Shh!” Atoña hissed again. “Stop making so much bloody noise! What the hell do you need the lamp for anyway? What else do you need to find?”

“Books!” Laurien pulled a box of them out from under the bed. “I want to bring some of them, but I can’t read the titles.”

“Oh,” Atoña, suddenly very interested, knelt down next to the box, “I love books! But, I don’t have a match.”

“Fine.” Reaching into the box, Laurien began removing volumes by feel. The ones made out of leather and fine paper were stories published in cities other than Bridgemark, and were gifts from Eugene. They weren’t as hard to pick out as she thought.

“Ow!” Laurien pressed her hand to her chest after scraping in on the edge of the box.

“God damn it!” Atoña kicked the box back under the bed, “you are the noisiest little fu— someone’s coming. Jolly for you.” And she vanished.

Blinking, Laurien stared at where Atoña had been.

“You might want to hide,” Atoña’s accent drifted out of the closet.

How did she do that? Magic? Or maybe she was just really good at sneaking.

Footsteps. Coming up the hall. Laurien stiffened, wanting nothing more than to have the freedom of her limbs necessary to dive beneath the bed. Her heart hurt it beat so hard against her chest. By the time she made up her mind to move, the door pushed open, and in walked Marshal, the servant. Laurien covered her eyes against the sudden burst of light from his lamp.

“Who’s there?” Marshal held the lantern up in a hand that shook slightly. “Who are you? What are you doing?”

Laurien said nothing. He didn’t recognize her. She smirked internally.

Marshal reached for his belt and withdrew a small crossbow. Laurien's internal smile winked out. He drew a bead on her, and she pushed away from him in what felt like falling through paste.

Marshal jerked to one side in a weird, marionette like motion of splayed arms and legs, ending in a limp pile against the wall in the hallway.

"Man slave." Atoña stepped out next to Laurien, cocking her a half smile. Her bow was held ready, but no arrow sat on the string. "Ten points."

"You," Laurien staggered over to Marshal's body. "You killed him!" The boy lay crumpled and bent, but Laurien couldn't see where the arrow hit him.

"No," Atoña stepped over the body, retrieving her blunt arrow from its resting place down the hall, "he was going to kill you. I just bumped him on the head a little." Holding up her bow, she gave the string a little pluck. It sang out a mellow note as if pleased with itself. "Orion is not too heavy for a recurve, and I only came to three-quarter's draw. And I used a blunt." She tapped the rounded tip and nodded to herself. "He'll be fine in a few days. But I bet he thinks a few seconds ahead the next time he busts up a party."

Shoving her belongings as deeply into the pack as possible, Laurien hauled it up next to herself, dismayed by how heavy it ended up. She opened her mouth to voice a complaint.

Without warning, shots, gunshots, boomed out from the city square.

"Shit!" Atoña said something else, but her voice vanished beneath a tide of rifle reports. "Time to go!" taking the pack by the handle, she heaved it out the window without ceremony, shoving Laurien out behind it. "Climb down to the second story and jump!"

Shaking, hands numbed from fear or shock, Laurien half climbed, half slid to the sill of the second floor window and fell the last few yards to the ground. Her knee popped painfully, but Atoña was already pulling her up and away from the house. “Go! Run Lari!”

Taking her aggressively by the hand, Atoña drug a stumbling Laurien at a horribly fast pace back through the field and servant’s quarters. People, likely more servants and maids, scrambled out of a few doorways, but they paid the fleeing girls no heed. More shots rang out, and bright orange light flared up from the direction of the city square.

“Oh my god!” Laurien sucked in air, trying to keep up with Atoña’s long swift legs.

“Don’t look back!” Atoña yanked her on faster, “keep running! The wall’s right up there! Can’t you run any faster?”

*I’m trying, I’m trying*, Laurien wanted to yell back, but only had half enough breath to keep from fainting. She was trying, trying harder than she remembered ever trying before. Atoña balanced most of the weight of the pack over her shoulder, leaving only the back end for Laurien, and Laurien could hear the harsh edge of Atoña’s breath as she sprinted Laurien, the pack, and herself across the open field to the dark smudge in the gray wall that was The gate.

Even without breath, Laurien mustered a yelp as a bolt from a crossbow skimmed over the grass at her feet. She pitched forward and over the pack as Atoña dropped the full weight on her. From her back, twisted in straps, the hilt of her own sword digging into her spine, she looked up Atoña’s long legs as the girl stood over her. Her lean body arched in a deliberate, almost dance-like motion as she drew her bow. She paused for a breath, hair floating, sharp face gleaming with sweat, fingers holding the string at the corner of lips that drank in the air. The arrow vanished when she released it. A heart beat later, a man’s voice grunted, followed by a thump as something heavy fell to the ground from a long way up.

“Get up!” Atoña looped Laurien’s arm over her elbow, leveraging her into a standing position. “Run, run!”

Struggling and gasping, Laurien tripped and limped in an effort to keep pace. Atoña’s pace slowed every few dozen yards, and at the gate, she almost fell against it. Grasping the enormous slab of wood that barred the two thirty-foot-high oak and metal doors, Atoña bent her knees and pushed up. Her teeth flashed and she grunted, throwing her meager weight into the bar. It lifted three inches before falling back into place with a hearty *thunk*.

“Help,” Atoña rasped, “help me get this up!”

Dazed, Laurien put her hands under the bar and lifted. Atoña lifted at the same time, and the huge bar came free of its iron holder on one door. Seeing this, Atoña put the sole of her shoe against it and shoved. The door crept out only a foot or so before she panted, “Let go,”

Laurien obliged, whimpering a little at the sudden relief. All too soon though, she was staggering off again, suddenly aware of the pain in her knee and the sticky wetness on her left palm. But then they were there, in the trees, then deeper in, and then they were lying on the ground. Laurien shook, too tired to lift her injured hand to see how badly it was bleeding. Her breath came in ragged gasps, but next to her, she could hear Atoña wheezing painfully. It was over. She snuck into Bridgemark, stole back her belongings, and made it out alive, and it was over.

Blue light burst to life in the deep sky. Hundreds of arrows trailing blue fire whizzed out of the tree line toward the wall. Rifles fired. Horses screamed. For a measure of moments, the night lit up in orange flashes and blue streaks, and then the sound of frightened voices trailed back in the direction of Bridgemark. Someone gave a hoot of triumph. Yipping and hollering followed, but was bit off quickly by sharp, unhappy cries.

Sitting up made Laurien feel hollow, like she was made out of paper of a flimsy way shell that would dent easily if touched. Her knee throbbed stretched the fabric of her pants with hot swelling. In the dim light, her left hand was black. Atoña lay on her side, breath shallow, eyes half open.

“Now that,” her voice was husky, “was *fun*.”

The unhappy voices fractured into a wail of anguish. Bile rose in Laurien’s throat at the sound. The voice belonged to a sidhe man with black hair highlighted with glints of fire red. She could see him clearly, maybe fifty feet from her, on his knees. He kept making that awful, anguished sound.

“Oh Sven, oh no, no, please...” He buried his face in something unseen in the grass, shoulders heaving with unrestrained sobs.

On her hands and knees, Laurien crawled closer. Owlwing stood at the tree line, a look so wicked pointed at Bridgemark, Laurien would not have been surprised if it lit the wall an fire. The enormous doors of the wall thundered closed in retreat, but it was no good. Bridgemark had picked a fight with something more vicious than it realized. Giving a crazed cry, the leader of the Wild Hunt pulled his horse beast into a rear, and plunged after the retreating men. His huntsmen surged after him in a tide of mismatched body parts and gleeful voices and razor sharp weapons. Laurien expected them to turn at the wall, and gasped as one after the other, the sinuous beasts the hunters rode soared up, up, and over the wall. Wails of terror echoed back. rifle reports were met by insane laughter.

Laurien felt sick. Next to the weeping man, a pale, waif of a girl, no older than Demereian, stood with wide, blank eyes. Sidhe by the dozens poured out of the darkness, fanning out around the man and the child. Murmurs were low, like wind through rushes.

“L-Laurien?” The girl looked directly at her, eyes rimmed red, tears beginning to pour down her cheeks. “Laurien? Is that you?”

“Marie,” Laurien whispered. It was her. She was one of them. She could see it, very well. Her thin little body was unhurt, but beneath that, she looked destroyed.

A sound caused Laurien to glance to the side, she to her shock, found Atoŋja in tears, her gloved hand pressed to her lips. Her long ears drooped and trembled as she wept.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen this way,” she muttered to someone only she could hear, “it was supposed to be happy...”

Someone placed an arm around Marie, the same Marie Laurien had known all her life, even played with on occasion, and lead her into the dark wood. Three more pressed close to the man, who was almost lying on the ground now.

“No,” he sobbed, “no, no, no, come back! Please come back!”

Together, the three sidhe reached into the grass, gently lifting the body of a woman into their arms. She was pale, with long dark coils of hair falling around a sharp, fiercely lovely face. She was the woman Marie would be in ten years, strong, and elegant. Her light eyes were half closed, and a river of richly red blood ran across her chest and down one long arm.

She was dead. Dead. It felt unreal. Laurien swayed, a little dizzy. She knew people died. She knew the High Priest killed them. She knew they grew old, and got hurt and sick, but this was too much. Here was a woman, a young creature filled with life, that had just had that life snatched away from her because she wanted to rescue her sister. Maybe the guard on the wall was dead too, Laurien thought, and what about Marshal? So many lives hung at such a frail point this night, it made her head spin. Both Marshal and the guard had tried to kill her. The body

being carried away could just as easily be hers. And she belonged to Bridgemark. Had. Had belonged. She would be returning to that place no more.

The woman with the long dark hair was carried reverently into the dark. Another man put his arms around what must have been the woman's lover, and he cried shamelessly into his straw colored hair. The sight brought something up in Laurien, something fragile and sore. That motivating piece of her that pined for Daniel and coveted Eugene. It told her she had it easy. Those she cared about were alive, at least as far as she knew, and were not in danger of having their lives snatched away. On the contrary, their pathways were thrown wide open to do what they wanted.

"We should go," Atoña put her hand tentatively on Laurien's shoulder, steering her into the woods along with the rest of the war party. "I just sort of figured everything would work out, you know?" Atoña walked slowly beside her, all pretense of pomp and snideness gone. "but I guess," she closed her eyes, "it could have been a lot worse. A lot more people might have died."

"Did you know her?" Laurien watched the ground, uncomfortable to look at the redness in Atoña's eyes, and the droop of her ears.

"Yes, but we were not very close. She and Lehdan, her mate, traveled away a lot. But she was always kind to me." she smiled a little, eyes looking into the far distance. "For a girl who's parents were slaughtered in front of her eyes, and who's sister was stolen, someone who cared so much about retribution, she was surprisingly gentle."

The night didn't seem as dark as it had earlier. The stars shone brilliantly in the moonless sky, and the world looked dim, but sharp and blue.

"You knew Sh'sheiden, didn't you?"



Laurien took a breath. “I called her Marie. I thought she was human. I never even imagined...”

“That’s what that Priest is after,” Atoña’s voice took on a crisp edge, “his little experiment is to see if he can make sidhe into moldable, manipulatable, humans. He thinks that with that proof, he can convince missionaries to steal our children and make them into people like them. What he doesn’t seem to realize, is we are not that different from you. Humans I mean. I mean, we walk, we talk, we eat, we make books and art and weapons. We have lovers like you, we get married, kind of like you, and we enjoy life just as much as the next person!” A cold laugh from Atoña made Laurien start. “For the gods’ sake, I’m going to the University! That’s as ‘human’ as you can get. The Bridgemark square-Earth wackos got it into their messed up little heads that faeries are demons, or some shit like that, and we’ve had to put up with it ever since. What the High Priest is doing is trying to break another living creature’s spirit. There’s an old saying, “you can take the elf out of the forest, but you can’t take the forest out of the elf.” You should know this.” She gave Laurien a long look, “After a life of never knowing what was out here, you managed to get away from Bridgemark anyway. They couldn’t break your spirit, could they?”

Not knowing how to respond, Laurien just nodded, heaving her bag of dresses and jewelry along next to her. Trying to think of something to talk about, she landed on something Atoña mentioned earlier. “You’re going to the University?” it suddenly sounded absurd. Atoña, war-paint, recurve, manicomore-chasing Atoña was going to go to school to be a scholar? “*Really?*” the really came out a little more mocking than she intended. She regretted it, Atoña looked genuinely wounded, and did not reply.

“I don’t know a lot about it,” Laurien continued, “but from what I’ve heard, it’s very hard to get in.”

“Yes.” Atoña moved her lip between her teeth, “I’m already in. I start later this year. I want to study literature and science.”

“I can’t believe anyone in their right mind would want to go to school.”

“Coming from you,” Atoña gave her a dirty look, “I am not surprised. Where are we going, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Laurien set her bag down with a thump, “my stuff’s all the way back on the road, like, a million miles, and the thought of carrying this all the way back sounds awful.”

“Well,” Atoña unsnapped the strap of her quiver, shrugging it off, “I’m camped not too far up here. You can steal a blanket if you like. Tomorrow, if you ask very nicely, I might just have a spare pack that I would be willing to fill with your garbage and carry along with you.”

“Thanks,” Laurien stared at her, “but why are you being nice to me? where is this going?”

“I’m not sure yet. It could go anywhere,” That evil grin, “but as for not liking you, I think you have convinced me you are not from Bridgemark.”

“Oh,” a tent appeared in the dimness, camouflaged geniusly into the ferns around it, and Laurien set down her pack. Her arms ached, and the pain in her knee was beginning to grow acute. “Then where am I from?”

Untying the opening flap of the tent, Atoña crawled in. After some shuffling sounds, a lantern sparked to life. “That,” she through a heavily woven blanket at Laurien, who staggered as it hit her, “I am not quite sure about. But I am sure I will find out.” She smiled a little, dark eyes

still bright. “Good night, little human freak.” She tied herself into the tent, leaving the lamp on the ground for Laurien.

A small smile found its way onto Laurien’s face. “Good night.”

## **Chapter 21**

### **How It Is**

In the enormous, pale green room, dimly lit by the early sun, Helena Shartruce sat thinking about how silly Father Sulvester looked without an ear. A glass of lemonade and brandy stood sweating on the counter next to her hand, surrounded by numerous water rings from where it, and its predecessors, previously sat.

Helena's rich dark hair hung in dingy ropes around a face made blotchy from smoke and alcohol. A once-fine gown of heavy silk clung desperately to her body in some places, while dangling flaccidly in others.

Last night was a blur of more chaos and confusion than her mind readily processed. Snatched of images, a lovely woman the Priest claimed to be a demon, the pyre riddled with sacrificial offering, her own fresh baked scones among them, that tiny, waif of a girl Sulvester

called his daughter drawing a bow that Rosquar knows how the hell she got her hands on... Everything ran together like different honey's poured onto a plate and spun. Thick and sticky. Screaming, moaning, shooting, running, fire. The only piece of the entire event Helena could get her mind around was Father Sulvester, supported by two of his monks, hand pressed over the place in his head an ear had once been. His face so pale he looked like ash, blood tricking in little rivers down his arm, it made Helena puzzle over what had made him so very attractive before. The demon woman cut off his ear. Why? Who knew. It certainly was no huge disfigurement, but for a reason Helena almost understood, he was no longer the beautiful man all the women made doe eyes at. And it wasn't the ear either. Not really. It was the look on his face. So angry. So jaded. Put upon.

Helena put the tall glass to her lips, pouring the liquid onto her tongue, savoring the bitterness of the lemons from her own garden. They never grew sweet. Not even the flowers smelled sweet, no matter how much she watered them. Swallowing, she licked her lips. She could no longer taste the rum.

The sound of the door being shoved open made her turn her head slightly.

"There you are, woman," William barged his way into the hall, face ruddy, cot rumpled and showing sweat stains, pocket watch swinging freely from the chain in his pocket. Helena did not need to look at him to know there would be dark smudges of lip rouge along his collar, on his shirt. Whenever a public spectacle was made, the crowd was expected to participate in 'holy power.' Helena was expected to put up with it.

"Where have you been?" A fist came down hard on the counter, and Helena looked at it mildly.

"I've been right here, William. Where else am I supposed to go?"

Not having a good answer, William went behind the counter and helped himself to some whiskey. He downed the first shot and poured himself another. “That was a disaster,” he spoke to the mirror, rather than his wife. “Now that demon’s curses will never be lifted from this place.”

“It’s out of the city at least,” Helena picked something dark from under a nail, “can’t see what harm it can do now.”

“It took his little girl with it.”

“Who?”

“What do you mean, who? You where there. Marie, Sulvester’s daughter. The demon took her.”

“Huh.”

“Don’t you see? Demons, coming into the city, snatching people. I’ll bet one of those things is responsible for Laurien.”

Helena was not impressed. She had had enough demons last night to happily last her the rest of her life, and was about to say something of the sort, when the door leading to the rest of the house creaked slowly open. Both Helena and William looked expectantly.

It was only Marshal. But he stumbled a little as he walked.

“Marshal!” Helena pushed back her stool, swaying a little as the room tilted. “What happened to you?”

The young man leaned against the wall, looking dizzy and like he might vomit. Dark bruises circled both eyes, and a rust colored pattern of dried blood crusted his cheek. One hand pressed to the side of his head, and when he removed it, Helena flinched at the size of the welt there.

“God Damn,” William frowned, twirling his whiskey, “did you fall down the stairs again?”

“Laurien,” Marshal took several heavy breaths, “she was here. Last night. In her room.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I don’t know what happened. I didn’t know it was her. She looked all different, and I had the crossbow...I don’t know what happened...” he wavered. “something hit me. I think there was someone with her.”

“Laurien was here!” Helena started for the door that would lead to her daughter’s room. William, who was not drunk yet, beat her to the staircase, and was the first to open the door to her room. Poor Marshal was forgotten in the main hall.

“What the fuck?” William said a few more foul things, waving his hands at the broken window, the cluttered floor, and open closet. “That little bitch broke into our house!” Swollen veins crawled up his neck, “How did she get in here? In Bridgemark? There were guards everywhere!”

“Not last night there weren’t.” Helena sat herself on the edge of Laurien’s bed, fingering a bit of shattered glass. “almost the whole city was at the service last night.”

William was quiet for a moment, all the while his veins climbed higher and his face darkened. “That means the bitch knew about the burning. Where would she have hear that, huh? She’s getting tips from the *seth neshkte*, and I’d put money on it!”

Helena did not have a counter argument. It made her irritated that William was making sense.

“She obviously has no intentions of coming home then,”

“She might not, but when Harold catches her, she’s going right into Sulvester’s dungeon. I’m not having a creature like that walking around, rubbing shit all over the Shartruce name.”

Helena pondered the patterns of broken glass in the window, imagining what caused the damage.

“Marshal mentioned she had someone with her.”

“A demon no—” Williams voice faded out. The red anger in his face bleached out into a soggy newspaper grey. “Helena,” his small eyes opened too wide for his face, “what if there was a demon, a *seth neshkte* in my house...”

For whatever reason, likely the rum, Helena really couldn't give a shit. “Yes, William, what if there was?”

“If, if anyone finds out, Sulvester will have my manor burned...”

“And who is going to tell him?”

“I don't know!” William was suddenly quailing, “Marshal, you, anyone...he has this way...he can just make you talk...”

“Talk if you want.”

“Bitch!” his little eyes roved frantically around the room, searching for the answer. “But, yes, yes. Laurien must have been the one who invited it in. She's the one responsible. All I have to do is give her to the Priest. Yes, that's all. It will all be alright.”

Helena didn't say what she was thinking. That was his only daughter he was talking about. Not that anything like that would matter to him. A daughter, unless she could marry into a more prestigious house, was not much better than a servant. Helena knew this too well. As William ranted, Helena lay back on Laurien's bed, eyes unfocussed on the powder-blue, pitched ceiling. She tried to imagine what Laurien must have seen there as a child.



“Harold will catch her, and everything will be just fine. Just fine.” William’s footfalls retreated down the hall. A minute later, the manic energy of his voice carried back up to Helena. She didn’t try to listen.

No matter how long she stared at the ceiling, all she could see was nothing.

## **Chapter 22**

### **Cheap Horse, Free Ride**

The coffee in Tosaga always reminded Atoña of the ocean. Why this was, she wasn't sure she knew. Maybe it was the fog that rolled up from the coast over the night that clung in heavy weeping tears from the redwood trees. Or maybe it was the thick, earthy, almost creamy quality of the brew, cut evenly with rich milk from the marshland dairies. Whatever it was, Atoña sipped it slowly, her nose feeling the soft, fragrant vapors rising from the mug.

Eight in the morning was a soft time of day in Tosaga. A small town, mostly just a heavily built main street with some houses scattered around, all the people leaving to morning jobs or distant work places were already gone, and those who did not have to venture out yet

were still in their homes. The Deer Creek Inn, situated on the end of Main Street with the most wilderness, offered dark wood walls, high-backed, cushioned booths, and big windows showing both the street and the forest. A group of older women sat at the bar, reading the newspaper over mugs of coffee. A man sat at a booth, scratching hurriedly into a notebook. Other than that, Atoŋa was alone. In her booth, elbows resting on the pitted surface of the table, Atoŋa's face pointed in a direction in which she could view the goings on of This and That Boutique and Pawn Shoppe, but all she could see was Sven's dead body. Dead things. Atoŋa knew all about dead things. Over the years, Atoŋa hunted her fair share of food, understanding the sacrifice on behalf of the animal so that she might eat. She also had many pets. Lizards, snakes, spiders. All grew to smile in whatever way they could when they saw her face, and eventually, each lived out its life. Tiny graves, each with a tiny totem stood around the fern grove on the edge of Terrebeth, one for every creature. Atoŋa had come to accept the fact that things die, but after Lunen, her desire to purposely subject herself to that fact faded. Lunen had been in the hands of death when Eranoth, Atoŋa's father brought her home. Kicked from the nest for being a runt, the tiny dove chick did not fill Atoŋa's palm, opening her beak in fear whenever Atoŋa tried to feed her. But, she managed, and after long months, Lunen grew out her flight feathers and began to fly. The idea was that she would be able to go free, to rejoin her own and have a family and a life. But she stayed with Atoŋa. No one ever really knew why, but the dove remained grey her adult life, never becoming the opalescent peach of the other doves, and she never left Atoŋa's side. Lunen followed her by day, often riding on her shoulder or head on long journeys, and slept on the windowsill of her room by night. She lived for ten long years, twice the life a dove was expected, but eventually, her generous time ran out.

Atoña remembered finding the little creature in the middle of her floor, unable to fly. Atona held her for the rest of the day and into the night, unwilling to set Lunen down. The whole time, she remembered talking to Lunen, remembering the adventures they had together, how they grew up together, and despite the deep ache in her chest, Atoña told her it was alright to go on. “It’s okay,” she remembered whispering, the dove limp across her hands, wings fanned out like lace, black eye watching, “I know you have to go now. You don’t have to be in pain any more. I love you Lunen. You can go.” And she died. But she died different than other creatures. One moment she was a bird, full, rounded and warm, the next, a stiff structure covered in limp feathers. Everything that made her a bird was in her soul. Without it, she was little more than twigs and feathers. After that, Atoña no longer wanted to keep pets.

Lunen’s grave was dug by the lake the Alduna Sidhe kept by damming the river. Atoña carved her totem herself. She wondered where Klieso would bury Sven. She wondered what he would carve for her. Tears slid down Atoña’s cheeks, and she wiped them on her sleeve.

Focus. She shook herself. She needed to stay focused on her own life right now, not pine away for someone she hardly knew. But still, close or not, Sven would leave a hole in Terrebeth. Everyone who died left a whole, be they sidhe, wolf, some other fey, huntsman, or pet. Demereian’s father had left the largest though. And there was nothing that could ever fill his.

Focus! Atoña grabbed the newspaper on the edge of her table, flipping through it with vigor. *The Valley Weekly* covered events from Tosaga to Cambren on the weekly basis, and atona often found the articles amusing. Today she ignored the stories with titles like “Woman Eats smallest Child,” and “Killer Poet in Bay City,” to look through the real estate listings. If she was going to do the University thing, she was going to need to find a place to live.

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Laurien leaned on her stick, shifting her weight to take the load off her knee. She didn't have the money to see a doctor, but the inn keeper, a bushy man with apple cheeks by the name of Mr. Hoffman, didn't seem to think they was anything a little rest wouldn't fix. Neither did Atoña.

"There's not hardly any swelling!" Atoña had cocked on eyebrow way up, "I think you're going to live through this one."

Laurien was not convinced. Every step she took sent a sharp needle of pain through the side of her knee, making her limp and gimp around like someone three times her age.

Laurien wished the pawn shop had a bench she could wait on. The skinny, beaky woman her ran the counter was currently engaged with another customer, someone selling old shawls, of all things, and Laurien was told to wait at the counter.

This and That Boutique and Pawn Shoppe looked like it made more money than was reasonable. The two story, highly embellished cottage was filled with ornate furnishings, classy clothing (mostly for women), and jewelry in glass cabinets with elaborate locking systems. The curtains were heavy, and hung in pinkish folds from every window, and there couldn't have been a kernel of dust in the whole place. And it smelled like followers. The overall effect was pleasant, but perhaps a little much. Especially for a place that sold other people's crap.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" the woman inserted herself between Laurien and the counter, smiling pleasantly behind dangling corkscrews of brown hair. "I'm Emma, how can I help you?" seeing Laurien's crutch, he pouted up her lips and made her eyes look very sympathetic, "Oh, I'm sorry. You could have had a seat in one of the chairs over there," she motioned to a pair of high-backed upholstered brocade beasts by the staircase.

“They had names on them,” Laurien pointed to the yellow slips of paper tethered over the seat cushion.

“Oh,” Emma looked genuinely surprised, “so they do. That’s right! Mrs. Scottston (need to reference this in a Jeffery chapter) put down a deposit on them! Sorry about that!” she laughed, looking a little bit like her mind was two blocks down.

Laurien sniffed, the woman had an unpleasant smell clinging to her, something smoky, like burnt weeds or something.

“I was hoping I might be able to sell some of my things,” she held up the bag of dresses and accessories. It was significantly smaller than yesterday, because Atoña had convinced her to only sell a potion in Tosaga, as she would get more money in Dale Port.

“Oh, right, right,” Emma smiled, let’s take a look at what you’ve got.”

Piece by piece, Laurien fished her items out of the bag, laying them out of the counter. She smiled a little on the inside, pleased by the radiance of her own wealth. She would sell two dresses today, one for church and one she wore for her Introduction party where she was presented to eligible young men. That was the night she lost her virginity to Daniel, who was not eligible. Along with the dresses she offered a golden broach bearing the crest of Rosquar, a cameo pin of fine, exotic ivory, and a necklace of pearls.

Emma gave Laurien a cushion so she could sit on the floor as well as a cup of weird smelling tea. “Must keep my guests cozy,”

Laurien sipped the tea, not finding it very cozy at all. Neither was her cushion, for that matter. It took Emma almost forty-five minutes to tally up the different values of each item, erasing mistakes every few minutes.

“Alright,” she said at last, pulling mounds of hair out of her face, “I think w have it.”

Pleased to be paid and on her way, Laurien hauled herself up to the counter.

“I can give you three-hundred-twenty welsky,” Emma counted off on her fingers again, “Yes, one hundred for each dress, sixty for the pearls, thirty for the cameo, and twenty for the broach.”

Laurien stared at her. “Is this a joke?” she managed at last.

Emma looked confused. “Well, no, miss. These are fair prices, anyone would agree.”

Laurien looked at the dresses, “But, these are fine imported silk! They cost almost a grand in Bridgemark!”

Emma inspected the collars of each. “Well,” she stretched the word out for several seconds, “that would be your problem. In Bridgemark, I’m sure they are worth quite a bit more. But here, I must say, they are only worth as much as the fabric itself. The style is long out of fashion, if it ever was a fashion. That said, the fabric is only a silk cotton blend. It is woven well, but other than that, there isn’t much that gives them value.”

“What,” Laurien swallowed, her hands shaking a little, “what about the jewelry, shouldn’t it even be worth its weight, for the gold?”

Hooking a finger through the pearls, Emma held them up. “Fifty for these is quite fair, as pearls are not terribly valuable these days. As for the broach, I’d be happy to give you the price for gold, if it was gold.”

“It is! I know it is!” Laurien protested, snatching the broach and examining it closely. “See?” she pointed to some numbers and symbol on the back side, “24 karat!”

“Actually,” Emma opened a book on the counter, flipping to a page of similar symbols and notations, “that says 24%. Your broach is only twenty-four percent gold. It’s an alloy.”

“But,” Laurien fought for some argument, “what about the cameo?”

“Ceramic,” Emma tested the ivory-looking substance against a piece of glass, “very pretty, but not made from elephants. Which is fine if you ask me, I don’t think they have any business hunting such nice big creatures over in Lebrythia.”

Tears pricked the corners of Laurien’s eyes and she stared at the counter.

“I’m sorry,” Emma said again, “you don’t have to sell them if you don’t want to.”

“No, take them.”

“Okay, here is a check. You can redeem it down the street at the bank. I’m sorry they’re not worth more. Here,” she pushed a box into Laurien’s hands with the scribbled on piece of paper Laurien had no idea what to do with, “take some tea with you.”

Outside, Laurien kicked a rock, sending it wobbling a few inches. She winced, leaning on her uninjured leg. None of this was going the way she imagined it should. Nothing seemed to be working in her favor. She conveniently forgot about Owlwing in Melithnion Temple, and Atoña’s intervention with the sheriff. All she thought about was how broke she was and how cruel a place the whole world seemed to be.

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*Nice small house in Tosaga Mountains. Four miles out of Dale Port proper. Two bedroom, one bath, fireplace, running water, on septic. Beautiful forest scenery. Removed from town life, close to nature. Perfect for University students to study. 26,000 welsky.*

The paper folded over itself neatly when Atoña set it back on the table with a quiet sigh. The picture accompanying the add featured a quaint, simple cottage backed up against a wall of redwoods. The small map included in the article showed the property in close proximity to both the Cambren train station and a trail Atoña knew dropped right into the University’s lap. The



whole set up was more than perfect, beyond ideal, and completely beyond any sort of thing Atoña was likely to be able to afford.

She rested her chin on her palm, and her elbow on the table. Tuition to the University did not cost anything, as the standards for admittance were so high and the students as a whole went on to become such accomplished scholars, but campus housing was not free. Apparently, neither was off-campus. While prepping to apply for admittance, Atoña poked around some looking into opportunities to work on campus in exchange for board. No such thing seemed to exist. The administration highly discouraged working more than a few hours a week for pay, as it made study very difficult, and a part time job would never pay for a place to live. There were always places like the Sea Mist Inn that were clean and cheep, but eventually they would catch on to her residency, and would not be happy about it. Dale Port became quite popular for tourism at various times of the year, and the hotels would likely not look kindly on a full-time live in student in one of their rooms. Still, it was an option for at least the first month.

Flipping open the paper, Atoña blinked at the picture on the back. Taped to the newspaper was a picture of Laurien. Hair long, face dower and without much expression, Laurien looked off the page. The photo had obviously been taken before Laurien went shopping, and even people who knew that girl in passing would not have been able to identify her as the same girl in the picture. Reading down the page, Atoña's eyes opened wide. The picture was part of a wanted poster issued by the sheriff of Bridgemark. Laurien was worth 50,000 welsky.

Atoña's gears whirred inside her head. She carefully unattached the poster from the news paper, cautious not to rip it. Putting down enough money on the table to pay for her meal and leave a tip, she let herself out of the Deer Creek Inn. The bell on the door jingled. Across the street, Laurien was just coming out of the pawn shop as well.

“Hey, Lari!” Atoña called, waving, “come here for a second.”

Looking horribly put upon, Laurien limped her way over, leaning heavily on the stick she was using as a crutch.

“I think if you stretch that leg out,” Atoña pointed at Laurien’s knee, “it will feel better. You just tweaked it a little.”

“Easy for you to say,” Laurien glared up at her, and Atoña put her hands on her hips.

“You sure don’t look happy. Did your stuff not sell?”

“Oh, it sold, alright,” Laurien blew a tuft of hair out of her eyes, “just not for any amount of money worth writing home about.”

This surprised Atoña, “Really? Why not?”

“It’s fake,” Laurien straightened her leg out in front of herself, flexing her foot, “none of the stuff is real. Fake gold, blended silk, you name it.”

“Bridgemark is cheap.”

Laurien glared at her. “You don’t say?”

“But you’re not,” Atoña handed her the poster.

Laurien’s olive complexion blanched to an almost greenish color. “They’re after me!”

“I thought you knew that already?” Atoña looked at the backs of her hands.

“They want me bad enough to pay for me!”

A smile moved slyly over Atoña’s lips, “I know. I think I’m going to give you to them.”

Laurien’s face paled a little more. The poster slipped a little in her fingers. “You wouldn’t.”

The smile broadened. “Oh, but I would. Then I’d bust you out again once I got the money, and we could split it. Is 50/50 fair?”

Laurien opened her mouth then shut it again. Her color came back a little. “You know...”

“Not so stupid, is it?” Atoña put her hands on her hips, “25,000 welsky isn’t too shabby!”

“There’s just one problem,” Laurien folded her arms, “I’d have to be given to my family in order for you to get the money.”

“Yeah,” Atoña nodded, eyes big and bright, “and then I sneak back that night, climb up to your window, and we’re off free!”

“No,” Laurien began to look frightened, “then I’m given to the High Priest and never heard from again.”

Atoña faltered.

“I know you think the people from Bridgemark are a bunch of idiots, and yeah, some of them are, but that priest is not. He just had a demon break out of the city with what we all thought was his daughter. He won’t be letting anything be slipping through his fingers for a long time.” She looked at the poster. “Knowing him, he will probably just kill me. I’m no better than a demon now.”

“It was a good plan though,” Atoña tried not to let her disappointment show too much. “maybe we could try in a few months?”

“Maybe.” Laurien didn’t sound convinced. “I guess it sort of makes sense. You can make yourself look human right? No one would suspect you were actually a sidhe. I saw Owlwing and her gang do that.”

A look did show on Atoña’s face now, though she tried very hard to hide it. The corners of her eyes stung a little, and her lips trembled.

“Are you alright?” Laurien stepped back half a step, “what’s wrong?”

Getting a grip on herself quickly, Atoña took a deep breath, holding it until she knew her voice wouldn't catch. "I don't know how."

"How to what?"

"You know... look normal."

"Oh," Laurien shrugged. "Me either."

Atoña gave a small laugh, "I like you, Lari."

"Yeah, I kind of like you too."

"So," Atoña rolled up the poster into a skinny tube, "we go to Dale Port?"

Laurien hobbled next to her. "I want a horse."

Atoña pursed her lips. "Your knee will heal, give it a little rest..."

Laurien's breath left her lungs with a whoosh. "No, I want a horse, you long-legged goblin. I don't like walking as much as you do."

Atoña put one hand on a hip. "Okay then. If you want a horse, I'm not going to stop you."

"Good," Laurien leaned heavily on her crutch, breathing hard, "where o I find one?"

"A horse? If there are any for sale, I'd guess down on the other side of town in the stables."

Letting out another long breath, Laurien painfully swiveled herself around, hobbling back down the street.

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Not every aspect of the day was lost. There was in fact, a horse for sale. Laurien leaned against the door of his stall, hiked up on tip toes, face pressed to the metal bars. "Isn't he beautiful?"

Atoña took a moment to answer, and that made Laurien's eyes narrow a little.

"Well," Atoña's voice pitched a tiny bit too high, "he certainly is...distinguished."

Looking back at her soon-to-be horse, Laurien ignored Atoña. His Majestic Night could not have been more perfect. Long and black, his mane rippled over his neck, fell over his mellow eyes. She could see the muscles move beneath his skin, and the gloss of his obsidian hair in the dim light.

What she could not see, and what Atoña could, was the swayed bend in his back, the outwardly dished curve of his huge head, and the not-quite-lined-up stance of his knobby legs. Or the gnawed out boards along the perimeter of the stall.

The stable manager strode into the stable. A rather uninteresting looking man with thinning hair and a slightly out-dated waistcoat, he flashed almost-straight teeth at Laurien and Atoña.

"Are you the ones looking to buy our Chewy?"

"Yes," Laurien bounced on the ball of her uninjured foot.

"You're lucky we still had any horses for sale. A few weeks ago, some group from out of province bought up our nice mares and stallions. Chewy here's a gelding, so I don't think they were interested."

"Hm." Atoña tilted her head.

Laurien's light eyes looked a little too light.

The stable manager peered over the door to the horse's stall as well. "Chewy's a first class beast. That's for sure. We've had him hear for quite a while, oddly enough. He's been professionally trained twice."

"Twice!" Laurien echoed.

Atoña folded her arms, twisting a twig of hair around her finger. But she kept her mouth shut. If this was how Laurien wanted to spend what little money she had, so be it.

“He’s only ten years old,” the manager continued, pulling a saddle and bridle off a rack across from the stall, “and could very well give you twenty more.”

“Who put him up for sale?” Atoña finally spoke up.

The man frowned slightly, “I’m not exactly sure, but as I understand it, he used to belong to a boy who competed in trick riding shows.”

“Hm.” Atoña unfolded her arms and laced her fingers together. “So, why did he put him up for sale? How long ago was this?” she did not miss the distracted flick of the man’s eyes.

“I suppose he was moving away and couldn’t take Chewy with him.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I think we’ve had him about three years now? Yes, three.”

Atoña did not say what she was thinking.

“He’s beautiful!” Laurien leaned on her uninjured leg, “and I can ride him, right?”

“Of course! Like I said, he’s been professionally trained-“

“Twice!” Laurien finished.

“Exactly.”

“Well,” Laurien dug around in her bag, “how much did you say he’s going for?”

“Normally,” the manager stacked the saddle and tack in front of the door, “a horse like him would go for about sixty welsky.”

Atoña watched Laurien’s face contort uncomfortably. There was a train after all. They could take the train for much less money.

“However,” continued the man, “considering he’d be going to such a nice home, I think I can give him to you for half that.”

“Really?” Laurien looked like something just landed on her foot.

“Oh hell, take the tack and his blanket for twenty-five, and be on your way. You look like a woman with places to be.”

“God,” Laurien fingered the none-too-shabby leather on the bridle, “thank you, thank you sir!” leaving out the twenty-five welsky, Laurien and the man shook hands. When the man offered to assist her in tacking up, she assured him she already knew how.

“And what can I do for you,” the stable manager’s attention turned at last the Atoña. his eyes rested on the bow propped against the top of her shoe, then traveled up, obviously noticing certain details for the first time. His face became imperceptibly whiter, and Atoña smiled.

“Nothing, thank you.” She tilted her head to one side. “I’m with her.”

“I see, I see, well, best of luck to the both of you.” He shuffled off.

Atoña watched him walk off, the tips of her ears twitching under her bandana. “Kook.”

“Isn’t he beautiful?” Laurien’s voice came from inside the stall, slightly muffled.

“I do hope you didn’t just buy a dud.” Atoña leaned against the closed stall door, watching Laurien saddle the black horse. To his credit, Chewy, as he seemed to be called, kept his head down, wallowing around by his feet.

“Are you kidding?” Laurien looked back at Atoña from beneath the horse’s belly as she tightened the cinch, “you heard him, he’s been professionally trained-“

“Twice, I know. That’s what I’m afraid of. What sort of horse gets sent to the trainer twice? A lousy one is what.”

Laurien did not answer. Likely a conscious choice. “You know,” Laurien slipped the bit easily into the horse’s mouth, “I was going to need a horse sooner or later anyway. If I’m going

to be looking for Eugene, I'm certainly not going to be walking around these trails, bad knee or not."

"Each to her own," Atoña leaned her stringy length against the outside stall wall.

"Hey, why do you think they call him Chewy?" Laurien gave the bridal a tug, and the horse wandered obediently forward.

Atoña gave the horse's drawn, bored expression a long look before glancing back into the stall. "Oh, I don't know," she flicked a hand at the gnawed interior of the stall. "maybe because he's secretly a termite."

Laurien did not answer again, leading her new horse proudly out of the stable, using his bony shoulder to support herself.

Atoña followed lightly behind them. Beneath her bandana, her long ears quivered. Laurien spoke in turn to the horse than to Atoña who answered with various 'hmm's and 'huh's. her heart thumped against the inside of her throat, and her fingers strayed to her knife.

They were almost into the stable yard when Atoña snatched Chewy by the bridle, holding him inside. He didn't seem much to care. His dark eyes were so dim, Atoña could not see images reflected in them. She noticed, with a cold feeling in her belly, the thin white scars along the creature's neck and the bony parts of his long, unbeautiful face.

"What?" Laurien met Atoña's pause with round brown eyes.

"Let's go out the other way. I saw, there's another exit through the tack room. It lets out right at the edge of the woods."

"Okay," Laurien breathed deeply. She pulled Chewy around. He flicked an ear, rolling the bit with his tongue. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, I don't know."



“Well, what do you think’s going on?”

There should have been snatches of voices, stable hands, people taking riding lessons, children brushing their ponies, anything. But it was quiet.

(really need to expand this idea...the stable manager needs more development and set up)

“I think the stable hand recognized you from the poster,” Atoña threw the bolt to the tack room, beckoning Laurien to follow, “I think there might be Bridgemark people here.”

“Oh god,” Laurien pressed up against the big black horse.

The tack room was not large, and Atoña’s hand soon popped the latch on the door to the outside. Whatever was happening must not have been rehearsed or even planned. The door was unlocked.

Sliding one eye along the crack in the door, Atoña saw no one between the stable and the trees. Letting the door swing open, she turned back to Laurien.

Whispers slithered down the hall from the main entrance. Atoña pulled the bandana from her head so she could hear better. The voices were incredibly hushed, but words flittered to her ears, snatches. *I think it’s her. Getting away. Already gone. You will be paid.* “Shit.”

Laurien’s eyes darted back and forth. “What is it?”

Atoña could hear Laurien’s shallow breaths stir the air. “Get outside, run to the woods. I think it is Bridgemark people.”

Laurien staggered for the door, dragging the horse behind her.

“Leave the horse!” Atoña hissed, snapping an arrow on the string, “Run!”

“I can’t!” Laurien choked on an intake of breath. “Please don’t leave me!”

Something in Atoña stirred, something so close to compassion her dark eyes moistened.

“You have to get out of here, I’ll throw off their trail.”

Atoña bit off a snarl of frustration as Laurien clambered into the saddle. To the horse's credit, he followed Laurien's instructions to step down the two stairs out of the tack room.

Footsteps grew hesitantly closer. Two people. Three? Atoña couldn't tell.

Outside, the sun shone, the wind lifted the smell of trees and summer. The horse's head came up, his ears pricked forward. In a single heartbeat, the deadened creature suddenly trembled with life. Filling his lungs, the horse gave a shrill, quavering whinny.

Voices shouted from down the hall.

"Ah shit!" Atoña snapped the arrow off the string, slapping it as hard as she could against the horse's rump. The shaft snapped.

With a squeal somewhere between surprise and savage delight, the black horse gathered himself and bolted into the line of trees. Laurien clung frantically to his neck. They vanished quickly.

In a movement far quicker than she thought herself capable, Atoña rolled into the crack between the stable and the ground. The tack room did not have a proper foundation, resting instead on concrete blocks. The space was only a hair's breadth higher than a foot, but Atoña was skinny, and flattened easily. Scooting back in a yard or so, she squirmed around, freeing another arrow. Orion lay flat in front of her, blessedly the right way up. Boots appeared running next to the stairs, hurrying toward the woods. Black loafers, the stable manager. Two pairs of polished boots. As they moved farther from the barn, Atoña started to shiver. The two men from Bridgemark wore knee-length black coats, even on the warm Summer's day. Blue and purple bands of fabric wrapped around their forearms. On their backs, the image of the Black Sun blazed darkly. Priests. Not the High Priest, but two of the top clergy.

Silently, Atoŋa set the arrow on the string. She could shoot from this angle, but reloading would be difficult. Once the first shot was fired, they would know she was there.

The two priests held small crossbows. They stood at the edge of the wood. Their voices were angry.

“The girl road off!” one of them spat. “Get the horses, we’re going after her!”

“Wait,” the other priest put a dark hand on his comrade’s shoulder, “where is the other one then? Didn’t you say there were two? Stable rat?”

The stable manager, puffed and on the verge of a snarl, put his hands on his waist. “Yes, there was a young woman with her. I am not sure, and don’t think I’m crazy, but I think she might have been one of those elves. She had these big, dark eyes.”

“Did she have pointed ears?”

“I can’t say, she had her head covered.”

“*Seth neskte*,” the words hissed like the voices of hungry serpents.

Atoŋa crawled back a little farther. She dared not move.

“She did not go with the Shartruce girl,” one of the priests did something with his crossbow. Atoŋa guessed he was loading a bolt. “Find her.”

“Run Laurien,” Atoŋa moved her lips, but did not dare to whisper as the men became legs and then boots, so close she could see the stitches in the leather. Flat on her belly, covered in dust and spider webs and spiders, Atoŋa gritted her teeth and wished for the magic she did not have.

The men stopped as they placed their boots on the stairs. A pair of steps retreated, which Atoŋa assumed was the stable manager. One of the priests spoke. He had a soft voice. Atoŋa guessed he was young, maybe not much older than her.

“I can’t believe Laurien got away,”

The other man poked one toe against the dusty ground. “You heard the horse hound, she’s fallen in with the demons. They have their filthy magic all over her now. We’ll be lucky to set eyes on her again.”

“I just can’t get the other night out of my head.” The first voice went up a little as if the man was stretching. “I thought Sulvester had Marie turned... I never dreamed he’d be wrong about her.”

Atoña canted her head to hear better.

“I could have seen it coming. She was a demon. You can’t make a demon into a human no matter how much love you give it. They have no souls to save.”

Silence in the conversation for a moment, in which time feet were shuffled.

“What’s taking that bastard so fucking long?” the first voice spat into the dust.

“I don’t know,” the second scuffed at the dust, “but just between you and me, I’m not too excited to be running back into those woods.”

“So you think Sulvester’s right then? About Laurien?”

Atoña’s palms prickled a little with sweat. She took slow, measured breaths to ensure she made no sound.

“I do. I overheard the Shartruce duke conversing with Sulvester. The night the demon woman and the priest’s pet escaped, all of Laurien’s valuables disappeared from her room. That’s far too much of a coincidence. Sure, the army waiting outside the wall was a bad omen, but who else would have known where Laurien’s room was and what to take? She’s fallen in with the *seth neshkte*. I’m certain of it. Sulvester won’t stand for that.”

“That’s why he gave us the order to shoot on site. It doesn’t matter if we bring her back alive or dead. We just need the body so he can purify it. Otherwise, she will have marked the city yet again with evil.”

“Too bad, she wasn’t too bad looking. Where are our horses?”

“The manager said there was a demon with Laurien. Maybe it got him?”

“Shit.” The voice spat again. A crossbow clicked, and the two pairs of boots bolted into the barn.

The second the thump of foot falls became muffled by the hard-packed floor of the barn proper, Atoña clawed her way out from under the tack room. Her legs wobbled a little as she clambered to her feet. She wanted nothing but to turn and flee into the woods as fast as her legs would move, but she held her ground. Carefully, moving slowly in response to shaking hands, she set a fresh arrow (**note to self**, should the priests find her old arrow? Maybe...to what end?) on the string of her bow. Pulling the string to half draw, she walked backwards towards the line of trees. Around the stable, she could see pieces of town with people milling about. She hoped none of them saw her. This would certainly qualify as suspicious behavior, and that was the last thing she needed.

One part of her quailed in horror at the thought of the priests coming back out of the doorway with their crossbows and hearts filled with hate. But another part, a part she was not sure she liked, licked its lips at the thought of putting an arrow through each of their stomachs and watching them writhe and bleed out slowly.

She took a long breath, stepping back quickly. Trees moved past her, darkening the bright summer day. She took three more steps back, branches brushing against her arms and back, lowered her bow and ran. An electric energy pulsed in her muscles as she cleared logs and

gullies with near effortlessness. Normally, her balance would have been off, but right this second, she felt like she was flying.

Under branches, over rocks, through the thickets, Atoña panted harshly, using an arrow to sweep dead sticks out of her way. Disturbed earth and snapped twigs pointed a clear path the way Laurien had gone. She did not worry too much for Laurien's safety on her new horse. She might fall off, sure, it happened to the best. It was the priests, likely mounting their horses about now that filled her with strength and speed she did not normally possess.

Bridgemark thought Laurien was somehow connected to Sven and her sister's escape. They were going to kill her. Atoña ran with purpose she had never known.

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Laurien clung to the horse's mane with white knuckled fingers. Trees flashed by in a brightly dappled circus of green and brown and sunlight. Things tore at her hair, scratched her face. Beneath the saddle, Chewy, the docile, benign horse surged into the forest with the force of a train. His big clumsy hooves pounded the ground with staccato elegance, somehow avoiding low branches and holes, carrying the two of them through the thick foliage as easily as if they were birds. Lungs heaved against Laurien's legs, rubbing the skin beneath her thin pants until it burned.

The girl from Bridgemark fell into fits of tears. Her breath came out in ragged sobs against the horse's neck. "Stop! Please stop!" her voice wailed weakly into the rushing air. Fear and bile rose in her throat, and her hands jerked uselessly at the reigns. "Stop!"

In response to her panic, Chewy bunched in the middle, throwing himself high into the air. The force of his landing knocked Laurien forward. One foot came free of a stirrup. He

bucked again, throwing her back. all that kept her up was her one hand twisted into his mane and her right toe still in the stirrup.

Laurien shrieked, clumsy and weak, she clawed at the reins, tears and sweat blurring her vision. Chewy landed a third buck and took off again, launching himself over a downed redwood as tall as a bar stool.

“Please stop!” her voice was only a whimper in the rush of wind. It occurred to her that she would probably break her neck if she fell. Then she would die. The priest would find her body.

An image flicked across her imagination. It was fleeting and half formed, but she caught it and clung like a bur. A pyre stood around the metal pole in the center of Bridgemark. Flames moves like writhing animals through the wood and offerings. Father Sulvester’s velvet voice floated over the night in ritual prayer. Laurien’s parents and brothers stood in front of the flames. Her father put an arm around her mother’s shoulder. “This is for the best, you know. We never had a daughter.”

A pale dead hand glistened with kerosene on top of the pyre, it was all she could see. In the hand was grasped a sword. Her sword. This was what would happen if she died. No one would care.

*What the fuck?*

Laurien shook the tears off her face and ducked an arm-sized branch. For an instant she thought of Atoña. She imagined one of the priests peeling Atoña’s hair from her skull with a short silver knife as she thrashed.

Laurien gritted her teeth and screamed. “Stop!”

Chewy answered by crow-hopping to the left and continuing his suicide sprint.

“Stop, you piece of shit!” Laurien yanked back on both reins.

Chewy tucked his head, biting down on the bit and charged forward with a snort.

Laurien reached out, taking hold of the rein halfway up the right side of the horse's neck with both hands. “I said *stop!*” she pulled her hands to her chest and leaned back in the saddle.

The horse's big head came around, almost touching her knee. White shone around the dark part of his eye as he tried to spin. But the laws of inertia were against him. With a squeal, he began to tip over.

It happened very slowly. Laurien felt the shift in balance as the horse started to fall. One of her feet was free, and without thinking she kicked off the second stirrup. Her unhurt leg was on the side that would be crushed when the horse hit the ground, so she flung it up and over the front of the saddle. It took a long time for Chewy's side to hit the ground. All around Laurien the forest froze in motion, blurred and uncertain about what it was supposed to look like. The jolt of impact unseated Laurien, and as she lifted into the air, she kicked off the saddle, throwing her body as far from the horse as possible. She watched the ground come towards her face and tucked her head into her arms.

Everything sped up. Laurien rolled and tumbled, keeping herself as tightly together as possible. She slid in the thick forest floor dander, poked by hundreds of sticks and twigs. Completing a last roll, Laurien flung out her arms and stopped moving. The trees spun overhead. She heard the intake of her own breath as if it was someone else's.

Laurien rolled herself and came to her feet easily. Only two yards away Chewy gathered himself, grunting, eyes rolling. He saw Laurien approach and tried to bolt.

“Don't you *fucking* dare!” Laurien snatched up the dangling reins, pulling his head around as he lunged away. Dirt flew off the saddle and from his hooves.



Chewy tossed his head, trying to dislodge Laurien. She jerked him down. “You piece of shit!” Laurien took hold of his bit by both sides, pulling his face down to her level. “Look at me!”

Chewy snorted and rolled his eyes, but he was had.

“Don’t you ever do that again! Do you hear me?” tears made trails down the dirt on her face. “You will not treat me like that!”

Chewy made as if to scoot Laurien out of the way with his body, and she hit him across the nose with the ends of the reigns.

“No!” Laurien showed him her teeth. “No! You are going to be a good horse! Do you understand?”

Ears flicked back and forth. Chewy pawed at the ravished ground.

“Professionally trained twice,” Laurien glanced at the saddle bags to make sure her sword was still on one piece. It was. “For a fucking reason! I’ll be no one ever told you not to do something. The first time you showed them your ugly, they ran away, didn’t they?”

If horses could look ashamed, Chewy did. His previously dull eyes shone, but his ears drooped out to the sides. Laurien knew something about riding horses from Eugene. It was important to let some of them know who the boss was.

“We are going to be friends.” Laurien held out a hand. She noticed the palm was torn by sticks and bleeding. “Aren’t we?” she scratched the little swirl of hair under the horse’s forelock. He did nothing for a moment, then let his breath out in a long *whoosh*. “That’s better, isn’t it?” Laurien kept scratching until she saw the horse shift his weight into a relaxed position.

Keeping the reigns in one hand, Laurien tightened the cinch and adjusted the bridle. Sweat shone in soapy lumps along the animal’s chest and flanks. It struck Laurien that he was

out of shape, and she wondered if anyone ever rode him. Stepping up to the saddle, she took hold of some mane along with the reins. “You are going to behave, right?”

When Chewy didn’t make any threatening motions, Laurien pulled herself back into the saddle. She gave a slight cry as her knee gave a load pop, but she got herself mounted. Panting, she made sure she was securely seated before turning the horse back in the direction of town.

“Get going,” she pressed heels into the horse’s sides.

Chewy snorted, stepping backwards and tossing his head.

“Oh no you don’t!” Laurien waited until he stopped fidgeting before reaching behind herself and putting Gloucester’s crop from its place behind the saddle. When she gave Chewy the command to move forward again and he refused, she popped him one with the crop across the backside.

Giving an indignant snort, the horse started off down the road as nice as can be.

“I think we have an arrangement.” Laurien smiled to herself. Her hands and knees were shaking.

She rode for about five minutes before Chewy stopped. His ears came up and he snorted down the path he’d made. The horse back-stepped as Atoña came springing out of the trees, bow in hand, hair wild.

“Stop!” Laurien jerked the reins.

“Oh,” Atoña doubled over, “you’re okay.”

Even from her perch in the saddle, Laurien could hear the hoarse rasp of Atoña’s breath. She looked pale, drenched in sweat. She leaned on a tree to keep herself standing.

“We have to get out of here,” Atoña gasped, jabbing a thumb over her shoulder, “the priests want to kill you.”

Laurien's mouth became dry as sand.

"I thought that horse was going to kill you first," Atoña chuckled a little. Her eyes found the dirt covering one side of the horse and the disheveled state of Laurien. "Shit, are you alright? What happened?"

"He tried to kill me." Laurien tried to sound complacent. Her voice wavered. "Come on, get up behind me, he can carry both of us."

Atoña didn't hesitate. Taking hold of the back of the saddle, she pulled herself up, wrapping her arms around Laurien's waist. Laurien could feel Atoña's heart thudding against her back.

"Where should we go?" Laurien turned Chewy, who seemed to be complying, around in a circle.

"Dale Port is only a few miles. It's our best bet. If the priests catch us out here, it's us against them, but in the city, there are guardsmen.

"Tell me where to go, I'm driving." Laurien felt Atoña's quiet laugh against her shoulder. Something warm happened in her chest as she realized Atoña had referred to them as 'we,' as in, they were in this together.

"Hey," Atoña said quietly, as if reading Laurien's mind, "do you want to be friends?" Atoña pointed south-west.

"Yeah," Laurien pulled Chewy in the indicated direction and started him off at a rather jarring trot. "Let's be friends."

## Chapter 23

### Castle of Sand

He could smell the words on the air. They smelled of brine and mold, and low tide. They did not weave together as tightly as the words that made walls, and had nowhere the complexity of the words of people and conversation. But still they painted the image, appealed to the human senses. *The cold morning fog rolls back to the bay, dragging the stale air of the lower district with it, a thick, unalive smell that gets in the throat and stays there.* Forgettable words.

Robert strolled along the alleys, hands pushed deeply into pockets. He did not dare put his thoughts to words, but he thought, he hoped, maybe he was starting to understand.

Through the dank barren buildings, Robert looked out over the marshland, the bay a colorless sliver over the dunes. Wind buffeted through the buildings, out to the sea in persistent gusts, lifting the sand from the dunes in lacy tendrils, but when it reached Robert, the wind

moved around him. Maybe he just did not feel it, but imagining that it avoided him made his mouth tip into a thin smile.

Robert walked for a long time. Each time he set his foot down, he imagined the ground did not exist until his foot touched it. Sand whistled as the wind moaned, waves churned against the beach. Robert was not sure if he was thirsty or hungry, but his body felt hollow. He wondered if the shape of his bones beneath his skin was only shape, and if he cut open his arm, there would be nothing inside the shell. But the emptiness was perfection. This was an emptiness that could be filled. The words around him pressed closer and closer, and all he needed to do was let them in, and they would be his.

Garth's footsteps crunched in the sand and gravel behind Robert, but when he turned around, no one was there.

Shoving his hands even deeper into his pockets, Robert walked slowly through the marshland and away from the shelter of the buildings. Crossing the road that ran along the coast he saw other people, but he did not really care. He was a far greater danger to himself than anyone in this fragile world would ever be. Except for Garth. But Garth was dead.

Once on the beach Robert walked at the edge of the water, paying close attention to the moisture sinking into the sand as a wave receded. One moment the grey-gold particles were dark and brown, the next they were lightening into pale moonlike planes pocked by tiny craters of escaping bubbles.

It was all very beautiful.

Little by little, Robert weaved his way along until when he looked up, he was even with the boardwalk shops. The sun was higher into the sky. Kneeling at the water's edge, Robert removed a hand from his pocket and scooped up a handful of moist sand. Pressing it into a pile,

he shaped it with his fingers. A crude castle formed. Robert watched it. Tiny windows, a gaping door. Every grain of sand mattered. Every single one. It took them all to make a castle. That was it, wasn't it? It took every word to make the world. But the words belonged to everyone in the world.

Maybe so, maybe so. But every person was only an expression of other words, words that Robert could see. Garth was dead, and Robert had Garth's scroll. Did that make the words Robert's? No one told him otherwise.

A wave pushed it, just lapping the seaside wall of the castle. Cracks grew in the walls. The water went out and the outer wall split and fell away. Robert could imagine the sound it would make if he were small.

Standing, he shoved his hands back into his pockets and walked toward the boardwalk. Climbing the steps, he did not see the faces of shoppers and tourists, and doubted they saw his. That was how he wanted it.

The sandcastle stayed in his mind, and an old song floated out of his memory. Had his father sung it to him as a child? His mother maybe? Perhaps it wasn't even his memory, but wherever it came from, it filled him with a sense of purpose.

“The road that does not end is a way that does not bend

The wind that does not blow, the trees it will not know

The palace that does not stand, if the palace built on sand

But sand was once stone, glass, wood, and bone

That the waves took away, at the end of the day

All that you borrow, your joy and your sorrow

Your coat and your hat, you will one day give back

To a bigger dream, to a bigger dream...

A dream made of sand that can no longer stand

That the wind will carry away.”

Robert moved his lips slowly over the words, feeling the shape of each one. The shadows of Dale Port fell over him, and he took note, for the first time, that the old buildings were the color of sand.

He could hear them groan before they began to crack.

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Jeffery watched a swallow poke mud into its nest. It never failed to amaze him to think that two little birds could make their home one mouthful of mud at a time. For each mouthful, the little bird flew down to the river bank, what, a quarter mile away? And then flew back. So much toil. Jeffery liked to equate their toil with his paperwork.

The paperwork in question today was the official little from King Inez requesting the closure of the University. It was Jeffery's duty to deliver it. He let the paper slip out of his fingers. It caught a bit of draft from the door and floated off the desk. He made no move to retrieve it.

Resting his chin in one palm, Jeffery poked the corner of his wife Sandra's framed picture until it aligned exactly with the edge of the desk. How long had McWerein been on the loose? It might have been a year, but the calendar claimed it was only one week. But one week was a long time for Jeffery to not put his arms around Sandra's shoulders. He loved the way her curly yellow hair pressed into his hear, and the exaggerated V of her smile. Usually Jeffery worked two days or so, and went home for four more. Paperwork and Telegraphs he could push around just as easily in their cabin as the city. Sandra made her money in showing real estate,

and enjoyed a lively volunteer position at the Cambren firehouse tending the draft horses and rescue dogs. She'd even gone with the fire team on a few occasions, putting her small, lanky frame to good use pulling people out of collapsed cellars.

But that was there, and right now Jeffery was stuck in Dale Port for what looked like the rest of his life. Royal document by Royal document, the city was coming apart. How many more ways could Dale Port be compromised? Natural disaster. The thought made Jeffery's rust colored mustache bristle. One good tidal surge was all it would take.

It must have been the power of suggestion. Jeffery turned his head towards the bay, straining his ears to hear the faint cracking sounds. They had been going on for some time he imagined, but just gotten his attention.

His hearing on alert he heard boots pounding up the bottom flight of stairs, then the next flight, then down the hall, then his door slamming open. Ny hung to the door frame, face flushed, eyes squeezed shut and sweat sliding down his face.

"Captain," wheezed Ny, swiping his face with the sleeve of his uniform, "it's an earthquake! We have to get outside! The buildings are coming down!"

For one moment, Jeffery just sat in his chair and looked at the swallow nest. He watched a bird cling to the husk of its mud house, tiny chest pulsing for breath.

"Get the guard out of here!" Jeffery commanded, strapping on his helmet and grabbing his rifle from the pegs above the door. Make sure everyone is outside and moving away from tall buildings."

The floor trembled as something deep in the foundation cracked.

"I'll sound the alarm."

"Yes, Captain." Ny took a deep breath and bounded back down the hall.



Fastening his black and red coat, Jeffery walked quickly down the hall to the alarm room. Below him, the guardsmen ran around shouting and swearing, men and women half in uniform scrambled for their helmets and rifles, jostling around in a very unprofessional manner to get out the door.

Unlocking the door to the alarm room, Jeffery ran a hand over the dusty levers on the control board. How long had it been since these levels had been used for anything other than practice drills? He blew on the control panel until the labels appeared under the dust. Finding the master alarm, Jeffery threw the switch that opened the alarm to the telegraph line and pulled the lever.

The response was almost instant. Across the street in the post office, bells went off. More bells echoed in every building in the block. The alarm traveled through the wires, connecting to the emergency bell in every business and most modern homes. They were in place for this very reason. Announce a natural disaster so people could die screaming in the streets rather than toiling away obliviously at their jobs.

The alarm would time out after ten minutes, so Jeffery left it. Jogging down the stairs, he pushed his way into the street with the last of his soldiers. The guardsmen assembled in the street in front of guardhouse, quasi in formation, watching people flood into Garden Street like a tide of panicked rats.

Peering down the street, Jeffery couldn't see any sign of earthquakes, but shouts and screams were coming from the direction of the bay. The street did not move, and Jeffery began to wonder if there really was a reason to panic. Maybe an old building was giving out. Maybe there was no reason to worry.

A report like a deep throated gunshot went off behind Jeffery, and he ducked. People screamed. Spinning, he took a step back, his mouth cracking open. A crack, wide across as his hand had opened the entire face of the post office. The ground did not move, but as he watched, the crack widened. A water pipe broke and began gushing out of the post office like blood from a wound. The sound of grinding stone and metal became almost like the cries of a wounded animal. A pair of young women screamed, pushing between guardsmen to get into an alley. Jeffery tried to order someone to block them, the alleys were not the right place to be at this moment, but nobody seemed to hear.

“There is nothing we can do.”

Jeffery looked over to find Winston standing next to him, round face blanched and quivering.

“He’s read it.” Winston’s voice broke. “Robert’s read the scroll.”

“What’s happening?” Jeffery roared, “what’s going on?”

“The world,” Winston started as a slab of cobblestones lifted a few inches out of the ground, “the world is breaking.”

\*\*\*

Laurien stared into her cup of coffee. Atoña drank the dark liquid mixed with milk like it was candy, but Laurien wasn’t sure what her opinion on it was. She did like the buzzing feeling it gave her.

“Now what?” Atoña watched Laurien across the table with her unsettling blue eyes. Atoña had an interesting face, but there was something shimmery around the black pupils of her large eyes that made Laurien feel that looking into them for too long would cause something terrible to happen.

Laurien kept her eyes on her cup. “I don’t know.” She heard Atoña shift across from her.

“We have no money. Well, none to speak of. You could sell Chewy to someone down here and we could put the money towards...something.”

Laurien looked up at Atoña, letting their eyes lock for a moment. “Why don’t you sell your bow while we’re at it.”

“But the horse is a menace!”

“Correction, he was a menace.” Laurien took a contemplative sip of coffee.

Atoña sniffed, tapping her long fingers together. “Well, a good place to start would be for us to wonder down to the Gaurdhouse and inquire about internships. They have connections to loads of programs, and they might just have something we have experience for.”

“Hmm,” Laurien shrugged, remembering the Guard as bearing unpleasant news about Eugene.

“We have to do something,” Atoña scooted a handful of coins into a tip pile and stood up, “you don’t want to end up sleeping in an old warehouse, do you?”

In reply, Laurien stood up, following Atoña out of the café. They were half way down Garden Street, two blocks from the Guard station. Shoppers milled along the sidewalks, now and again shooting Atoña’s bow a strange look. Atoña saw them, Laurien could tell by the way she lifted her nose and pretended she didn’t.

*Crack!*

Laurien spun around, ducking on impulse at the sound echoing down the street.

“What the hell was that?” Atoña’s hand hovered close to her quiver, just in case.

Rumbling came from down the street, a deep, supernatural groaning followed by sharp cracking and splintering sounds. Screams and shouts came out of the distance.

Laurien's feet fused with the cobble stones. As people jostled and fell into one another to get ahead of whatever unseen force coming up the street, her eyes landed on two men dressed in black coats with blue and purple armbands emblazoned with the Black Sun of Rosquar.

As if feeling her eyes, one of the men looked up, and his gaze found her in the smoldering chaos. His mouth twisted into a snarled word that could not have been anything good, and grabbed the other priest by the arm.

“Shit!” Atoña pulled an arrow from her quiver, “how the hell did they find us so fast?”

“Um, follow our trail?” Laurien tried to run backwards so she could keep the priests in her sight.

From everywhere at once, bells began ringing. There must have been one on every level of every building and on the outer walls, all ringing so loudly Laurien had to press her hands over her ears.

They were almost in front of the guardhouse and post office, when guardsmen in various degrees of uniform came flooding into the street. Laurien hobbled as fast as her knee would allow behind Atoña, wishing her new horse wasn't across town in a cozy boarding pasture for the afternoon. The priests faltered as Laurien watched them, presumably losing sight of her and Atoña as the uniformed officers filled up the street.

“In here!” Atoña tugged on Laurien's sleeve, motioning to the post office. “We can go out the back!”

As if an unseen force knew what they were doing, the front of the post office was suddenly rent open with a defining crack of marble. Laurien screamed, floundering over Atoña to get away. Her heart heaved in her chest, and her mouth was so dry her lips stuck to her teeth. Shoving her way through the assembled guardsmen, Laurien made for the street behind the

station, and the alley behind that. Half sprinting, half limping, Laurien shambled her way into the shadows with Atoña covering them with her bow.

“We need to get the horse and get out of here! He can run faster than us for longer. Come on, he’s only a few blocks away.”

Against everything her mind and body was telling her, Laurien hurried after Atoña, toward the growing sounds of a crumbling city.

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Robert reached up a trembling finger to feel the moisture on his cheek. He was crying. Not sad tears, not afraid tears, but tears of something much more wonderful and intoxicating than joy. He understood. He was a Poet. Around him, the city made of sand was crumbling, because it was made of words, and he could read them. And he could change them.

Robert walked the alleys until he reached Garden Street, at the end of which stood the Poet’s Guild. He needed to show them this. He needed to make them see that they, like him, could understand the mystery of their existence.

Crash! The balcony of an apartment came free and fell to the street. Boom! Something deep under the street exploded. Each and every movement of the city described itself to Robert in colorful words that made laughter rise in his throat.

“I did it!” he breathed, drinking in the feeling of words moving through his body, “I did it!”

“Did you now?” GARTH’s voice whispered in his ear.

Robert spun around, but GARTH was not there. Elation became a cold sweat and Robert ducked into between two buildings edging a horse boarding facility. GARTH was gone. He was gone!

Pain prickled on the inside of Robert's temple, and he began to falter. The words that had been so clear only a moment before became muddled, half formed thoughts left scribbled on a piece of paper. Robert found himself leaning heavily against the wall, mouth filling with saliva as if he was going to be sick. The city roared around him, but the soft clatter of polished stone on crude street made him look up. Filled him with tangible dread.

GARTH stood at the mouth of the alley, just stood there and looked at Robert. There were suddenly other people, running, screaming, he didn't know, but GARTH was the only one he saw. The scroll rolled and bounced as the street shook, landing against its master's boot. GARTH did not seem to move, his eyes did not leave Robert's, but he slowly held out his hand, long fingers wrapping around the black cylinder.

It was wrong, all wrong! GARTH was dead! He couldn't interfere, he couldn't touch the scroll. But there he stood, made of flesh and blood, and he was unmistakably GARTH.

Something melted out of Robert then, something that had been holding him together. Digging his fingers into his scalp, he sank to his knees and cried out until his voice was raw.

"Give it back! Give it back!!"

Suddenly there was no GARTH, there were two young women, barely older than children, cowering before him in the alley. Anger surged in Robert, becoming an animal all its own as he saw one of them clutching his scroll.

"Give it back, you bitch!" He lunged toward them. Colors flashed in front of his eyes and he didn't feel his body crumble into the cold ground.

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Laurien shook, her whole body. Even her teeth chattered in her mouth. The sword quivered momentarily, still raised, and then was still. The city became quiet. Unnaturally so. She

held her breath, waiting for something to explode, but it never did. Finally, she took a breath, letting the tip of the sword clink against cobble stones.

The man who attacked them lay sprawled, a welt already rising on the side of his head. He didn't stir, but Laurien could see his jacket fold and crinkle with his breath.

"What is that?" Laurien rasped, taking the stone cylinder from Atoña's shaking hand. It was a black stone, like granite, with flecks of mica winking in the evening light like eyes. Each end was capped with what looked like gold that came to slender points. Turning it, Laurien searched the surface with her fingers, finding no clue of its purpose.

"Let me see," Atoña held out her hand. Laurien watched as her eyes moved over the surface slowly. "Ambrosia XIII. You don't think...?"

"Wait, where does it say that?" Laurien craned her neck to get a better look.

"Step away from the demon, and you won't be killed."

Laurien's spine snapped straight, eyes bugging in her face. Moving just her head, she could see one of the black coated priests at the end of the alley. Turning her head the other way, she saw the setting sun blocked out by the second priest. Atoña's breath left her lips quietly next to Laurien. Her hands stayed at her sides. There was no way she could reach an arrow in time. Both men had their crossbows trained on Laurien and Atoña.

"You heard me girl," the priest to the left growled, stalking closer, "get away from the demon." He leveled the crossbow on Atoña's face.

"Don't come any closer, you piece of shit!" Laurien's voice squeaked, but she inserted her body in front of Atoña's. She felt Atoña's fingers tighten on her shoulder as something hard and wooden was pressed into the hand at her side. Wrapping it in her fingers, she recognized it as Atoña's knife.

The second priest approached as well. “Forget it. Let’s just keep it quick and clean.” He pulled a slender blade from his belt.

Laurien screamed. One of the priests slapped her across the face, sending her sprawling. Blurrily she was aware of Atoña diving to the ground on top of her. Floundering around with her hands, she found a boot and drove the knife as deeply into it as she could. A howl followed.

“Bitch!” the priest fell into his companion, face twisted and hideous. Then the crow bow leveled on her. Laurien watched as everything began to move sluggishly. She saw the weapon steady, the man’s finger flex on the trigger. Smoke erupted in a line across Laurien’s vision, and the priest’s hand jerked horribly.

*Bang!* The sound seemed to go on forever.

“Drop your weapons! You are under arrest!”

Clinging to Atoña, Laurien looked up as more than a dozen soldiers dressed in black and red filled up the alley. The man she recognized as the Captain lowered his still smoking rifle. Only then did it register that that priest who was going to shoot them was screaming, writhing on the ground, clutching what remained of his hand. The other priest backed against the wall, blood oozing slowly from his foot.

“Gentlemen,” the Captain’s face tightened as he watched the priests quail and squirm, “you are under arrest for attempted murder, to say the least, not to mention high treason against his Excellence the King and the Late Master Knight of Gauntland.” As he spoke, soldiers worked quickly to tie up the men. The one with the mangled hand slid out his knife, pulling up to his own throat. He might have said something in honor of Rosquar, but it was cut short by the butt of a rifle across the face.

The Captain offered Atoña his hand, and then Laurien. “Are you hurt?”



“Sir!” the voice came from a small man who was kneeling over the man who had first attacked them. “sir, I think you need to take a look at this!”

“Attend them,” the Captain waved a hand between two of his soldiers who immediately began ushering Laurien and Atoña away from the scene. Hands prodded and pulled at her arms, but Laurien didn’t care. She wanted as many soldiers around her as possible right that second. She and Atoña were lead out of the alley to the horse facilities directly behind, where they were directed to sit against the stone wall. A minute later, thick gray blankets were tossed over both of them.

Commotion erupted back in the alley, and Laurien craned her neck around the corner of the building to see, Atoña following suit. More people in deep purple robes were running into the alley. They pointed at the unconscious body then began to pull at his clothing.

“Where is it?” a man in a purple robe bellowed, his voice high with something like hysteria, “where is the Ambrosia Scroll? Did you see it? Did he have it?”

Next to Laurien, Atoña stood. Laurien followed.

“Excuse me,” Atoña called into the flurry of arrests and investigation. No one looked her way. “Hey!”

The man demanding the scroll looked her way and froze. Laurien saw something cross his face she did not recognize, something that may have been fear. A moment later, it dissolved into mania as his eyes found the stone tube in her hand.

“That’s it! That’s it! She has it!” the man bellowed, pushing his fat little body through the pack of bodies. Atoña backed away from the hungry look in his eyes, holding the cylinder close to her chest. “Give it to me!”

“Winston!” the Captain’s voice boomed.

“She has it!” the man called Winston wailed, pointing at Atoña, who’s ears were trembling.

“Winston, be still!”

Winston stopped. The Captain inserted himself in front of the Poet. He took a steadying breath, taking in Laurien and Atoña slowly with his eyes. “It is alright,” he reached for the scroll, but touched Atoña’s wrist instead, “it belongs to the Poets. You can give it to him.”

Atoña’s eyes remained round marbles in her face as Winston was allowed to approach her. They stared at each other for a long time with nothing said. The other Poets and Guards were watching.

“It is really an Ambrosia Scroll?” Atoña’s voice came out as a hiss of wonder or dread, Laurien couldn’t tell.

Slowly, the Poet Winston nodded. “Yes. It is the Thirteenth Scroll.”

Atoña held it for a moment more, then extended her arm to Winston. He let out a long breath as his fingers closed over the stone.

“You do not know what you have prevented today,” he spoke to both of them. “Thank you.”

As Winston backed away, the Captain took his place.

“What are your names?”

“Atoña Birgendi,” Atoña’s voice was small.

“Laurien Shartruce.”

The Captain’s face opened in surprise. “The Shartruce girl?” he laughed, and it sounded genuine. “I think you two ladies should come with me back to my office.”

## Chapter 24

### Loose Ends

Captain Jeffery's office was comfortable and inviting. Laurien and Atoña sat opposite him, sipping cold drinks as they filled him in on everything they knew. When they were finished, Jeffery leaned back in his chair, hands folded in front of him.

"You have no idea what the two of you have done, do you?"

"No," Laurien replied.

"An idea," Atoña wet her lips with her tongue, "Sir, what is to become of Robert McWerein?"

When they had first arrived, McWereian along with the priests was locked in the station holding cells while paperwork was filed. Both priests were tied to prevent self-harm, but the

young man was chained to a bench on his back. Apparently, he had woken, his screams tearing through the station like a devil wind. Laurien could discern very few words, but she did make out ‘destruction,’ ‘doom,’ and ‘GARTH.’ She wondered if Garth was a place or a name. the way he howled it, she wondered if it was a drug. Not long after, a small posse of Poets and official looking people in pale grey uniforms arrived and somebody gave him a sleeping drug.

A chill filled Laurien’s guts at the thought.

“Mr. McWereian is going to be evaluated for mental stability, in which case he will be sent to a sanitarium to recover. His crime itself was not severe, but there is suspicion his mind is no longer sound.” The Captain looked pained as he said it.

“He took one of the Thirteen Ambrosia Scrolls,” Atoña stated flatly, turning a pencil from the desk between her fingers, “was he the cause of the, um, earthquake?”

Captain Jeffery followed the pencil with his eyes. He looked unsettled. “I am not in a position to say, but what I can tell you, is that the both of you are singlehandedly responsible for keeping this city from figuratively falling apart.” He eyed them carefully.

Laurien felt something in her swell, and looked over to see Atoña all but glowing with pride.

“Did you hunt him down for the reward?”

That jolted Laurien back to attention. “What? No, of course not. we didn’t even know anything had been stolen. There’s a reward?”

The Captain’s mustache prickled to one side in a hidden smile. “Yes. The Guild was quite insistent there be incentive for his capture.”

Laurien looked at Atoña. Atoña looked at Laurien. Reward? Was this a joke?

“And by rights, and by my decree, the reward money is yours. Every coin of the (money value here) of the Guilds generous offer.”

Laurien’s jaw fell open.

“This, this is a joke?” Atoña stuttered over her words.

“No joke at all.”

“That’s enough to, to” Laurien panted past the strangled feeling in her chest.

“Buy a house?” Atoña provided, “and a whole hell of a lot more!”

Laurien thought she might burst into tears, and laughed instead. Atoña laughed with her, then burst into tears.

“I can’t believe it, I just can’t believe it!” Atoña sobbed into Laurien’s neck. “this couldn’t just happen! How did it happen?”

“Winston would tell you it was some fort of preordained mumbo jumbo, but if you ask me, you were just in the wrong place at the very right time. You got very lucky I heard your scream when the Bridgemark priests showed up.”

“Thank you,” Laurien looked at her hands.

“Don’t think on it. They are going to be tried to the fullest extent of the law, and the Knight’s Steward will be going to Bridgemark within the week to discuss recent events. I hear the practices within their city are going against Gauntland law, and that will not be tolerated.”

Laurien felt a little dizzy.

“Both of you are welcome to stay here for the evening if you like, or accommodations can be arranged for an inn. Are you both over sixteen?”

They answered yes.

“Then you are considered adults by Gauntland law and responsible for your own assets. It’s been a rough day, but first thing tomorrow, I will have one of my secretaries set both of you up with bank accounts if you do not already have one, and the money will be transferred. I am keeping your names and pictures out of the press. You do not want your faces associated with free money.” He smiled.

“Thank you sir,” Atoña said professionally, barely containing her excitement.

“Before you go, I have a question for Ms. Shartruce.”

“Yes?” Laurien felt a prickle of apprehension.

“Why did you leave Bridgemark?”

Laurien stared at him. A dozen different answers paraded across her thoughts. “How could I not?” she finally said.

Jeffery gave a nod. “I see. And did you do so to follow your brother?”

This rocked Laurien back a little. “What? I mean yes. How did you know?”

“Eugene Shartruce was one of my deputies until very recently.” The words sank in slowly. “He left his position here honorably and in pursuit of noble causes.” He paused. “I knew he was from Bridgemark, but he seldom discussed his old life. All he said was he had a younger sister he hoped I could one day meet.”

Tears finally filled Laurien’s eyes, spilling down her cheeks. “Do you know where he went?”

“No. He never said.”

Laurien closed her eyes and thought of Eugene. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If she was going to find him, it would not be today. Or tomorrow. But someday. Yes, someday.

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*Dear Cpt. Jeffery F. Scottston of the Dale Port Guard,*

*It has come to Our attention that the recent drama involving the Ambrosia Scroll has been resolved. Let Us extend out congratulations to you and those under your command for your intrepid...*

A knock sounded on the door. Jeffery hurriedly folded the letter once more signed The Alchemist. He tossed it on his desk. It was late in the evening, almost ten, and this time, there was only one person he was expecting to call on him. Getting to his feet, Jeffery pulled the door almost off its hinges, falling gratefully into Sandra's arms.

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"I can't *believe* Atoña has a house!" Demereian walked along next to Owlwing, kicking stones along the road as they presented themselves. "I mean, *geez!* She's not coming back to Terrebeth!"

Owlwing rolled her eyes. "Neither are you."

"But that's because I'm going with you!"

"And she's going to the University. Same difference. I think you're just going to miss her."

"NO!" Demereian tossed his orange hair out of his eyes.

"It is a cute house though, you must admit," Owlwing adjusted her pack over her shoulders. "Just think how nice it will be for them. Two young attractive young women living in a woodland cottage..."

"Ew." Demereian wrinkled up his long nose.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t think of it first.”

Demereian didn’t reply and Owlwing smiled. Earlier that day she took Demereian to visit the girls in their new home near Cambren. Her chest swelled a little with pride at the thought of Atoña, the girl without a scrap of magic in her name, going to the University to become a scientist (of all things!), and Laurien, settling nicely and already bussing at a small café pub. Only a few short weeks ago, they had both seemed much younger.

“I’m proud of you too,” Owlwing added as a spoken thought to Demereian.

“Huh?”

“Going out to see the world.”

“Because you invited me to travel with you!”

“And why does it matter that I invited you? Of course I invited you! I see a lot of potential, and I would like you to be my student.”

“Oh my god,” Demereian reached for the hilt of his sword, missed, reached again, and edged behind Owlwing, “what the hell is that?”

Unconcerned, Owlwing squinted at the animal laying in the sun on the side of the road, only a few yards ahead. It’s tawny fur glowed in the warm summer light, long black claws glistening almost as brightly as if they were slick with oil. “Well,” she said at last, “I do believe that is than manticore everyone was up in arms about a few weeks ago.”

“Shit!” Demereian squeaked, backing away, still reaching for the hilt he couldn’t seem to find.

“Oh calm down!” Owlwing ordered, to which the boy stopped, eyes huge and pleading.

“Let’s get out of here! Master!”



Owlwing looked back at the manticore that had rolled to its feet and was batting the ground with its claws, tongue lolling. “Don’t tell me you left your balls at home, Demereian!” Owlwing watched the animal move for a moment, then lifted one row. Getting on one knee, to hissed protests from Demereian, Owlwing held out her hand and clicked her tongue. “Here kitty, kitty! Come here boy!”

Demereian scrambled back as the manticore bounded closer, tail swinging.

“Get over here!” Owlwing drug him up beside her by the collar. “For godsake!”

Aware of the boy trembling next to her, Owlwing patted her fingers against the ground, to which the creature trotted over, sniffing the ground where she touched. “Go on,” she urged Demereian. “Look him in the eye and tell me he’s a monster.”

Demereian’s breath was fast and shallow. His big green eyes looked imploringly up at Owlwing, but she did not relent. Swallowing, he held out a shaking hand. The manticore pressed its face into his palm, making a resonant sound that might have been a purr. Owlwing smiled.

A moment later, the animal had rolled onto its back, exposing a softly furred belly to the boy, who tentatively scratched it.

“Hey,” Demereian looked puzzled at his master, “hey!” he ruffled the animals thick main, and it licked his hand with its black tongue. “He’s kind of cute! Look at that!” Soon the boy was laughing as the manticore tried to climb into his lap, slobbering and mewling all over his face.

Owlwing stood up and put her hands on her hips. Strange indeed the way things worked out.

“Hey,” Demereian sounded surprised, “his name’s Herbert.”

Owlwing blinked. “What?”

“The manticore,” Demereian held up a little silver tag attached to what was unmistakably a collar that had been hidden by thick fur. “I think he belongs to someone. There’s an address. 5786 New Mulberry Street, Aviar, Gauntland.” Demereian wrinkled his nose again. “Aviar, like the Aviar Mountains? You’re a long way from home boy!”

“New Mulberry Street in Aviar, huh?” Owlwing slowly folded her arms. Indeed. If this wasn’t an interesting turn of events. “How would you like to go on a little errand, Demereian? Say, to pay a visit to an obviously irresponsible pet owner?”

“Anything to get out of taking a boat anywhere!”

“Then to Aviar then.” Owlwing smiled at the look on the boys face as he encouraged the manticore to follow him. What a strange turn of events indeed, but a turn that could be to great advantage. An escaped manticore. The Alchemist had an apprentice.

Owlwing looked out over the rolling deep green mountains. It had been far too long since she saw the tall white faces of Aviar.

## Epilogue

Robert McWerein sat at the off-white table in the center of the off-white room, picking at the threads of his jacket, and trying as hard as he could not to focus on the vase of flowers set out to keep him company. They were such a violent shade of yellow they made his eyes ache. In the distance, down the long sterile corridor lined with nondescript doors, a scream echoed. It made a cold shudder creep up Robert's back, though by now, after over a year in the Marie Augustine Sanitarium for the Mentally Infirm, he should have been used to it. But he never did.

Over time, and with the proper cocktail of medications, the incapacitating pain in his head, and the mind boggling hallucinations of unraveling realities had lessened. But the primal fear instilled by the sound of a human scream, the knots it tightened in his chest, that could not be cured.

Warm sun came in through the barred window overlooking a garden filled with equally painful flowers. Nurses and orderlies tended to a handful of patients who were deemed to be mellow enough to chance a walk in the open air. Robert had enjoyed his first walk last month. It wasn't as rewarding as he had hoped.

The breeze from the outside world was clean and did not smell of chemicals and clothing starch. Presently, a nurse came by to loosen his restraints for the day. Robert was surprised to see she carried a tray of cupcakes. They were luminously pink and covered with little blue dots, and in spite of himself, Robert found his mouth watering.

"Happy birthday Robert," the nurse cooed with too much enthusiasm. She used a key to undo the leather straps that kept his arms immobile. He flexed his fingers and hands as soon as they were free. "You've been such a good boy that you can have another walk this afternoon," her face shone with pre-programmed happiness, "what do you think of that, Robert?"

Robert smiled his appreciation and picked up a cupcake. They looked far too pink to be palatable, but he didn't want to seem ungrateful. The nurse patted his shoulder and let herself out, double locking the solid metal door behind her. With a resigned sigh, Robert let the cupcake slip from his fingers. It made a hollow sound against the table.

"Happy birthday, my dear Robert," said a quiet voice from the far corner of the room.

Robert didn't react other than to rub his eyes. *Hello, Garth.* He thought.

Sauntering over to lean a hip against the table, Garth picked up the dropped cupcake and took a bite. "Mind if I have this?" he asked, turning the pastry slowly between his long fingers.

Robert shook his head. *Go for it.*

The weather was warm, and the Poet Laureate, imagined or not, had abandoned his hat, scarf and coat for a black cotton shirt, and skinny black denim pants tucked into the same pair of overlarge boots he always wore. A set of suspenders hung unused around the young man's narrow hips and a silver chain swung from his pocket. The whole effect succeeded in making him look benignly slender and feminine, as did his rich sable curls and full red lips. But he was the Poet Garth. *Build a castle in a day, raze a city in an hour*, that was what he had been known for.

Garth must have taken note of the dower shadow hanging over Robert, for he set down the cupcake and sat on the edge of the table.

"Why, whatever is the matter, Robert dear? Why so melancholy on your birthday?" he chuckled to himself, "Melancholy, I do love that word. Mellon-cully." He stretched out the sounds like ribbons of taffy between his teeth.

Robert shook his head. *This is the second birthday I've had to spend in this place. It seems like forever... like two lifetimes*, he let his head fall into his hands, *and I'll spend another*

*fifty, if I'm lucky.* He meant to shrug it off, but the shrug became a shudder, and the shudder became a sob. The sound of his own voice startled him, he could no longer converse with the living, since the Poets had seen fit to cut out his tongue, and the wordless, animal moan made him cry harder. He felt something ugly inside himself, twisting in his guts, and knew it was shame.

“There there now, don't cry,” Garth was beside him in a single light step, his cold arms wrapped around Roberts shoulders. “It's your birthday, it's bad luck to cry on your birthday.”

The statement struck Robert as sickeningly ironic. His laugh came out more like a gag. Garth petted his shoulder gently, his chin nestled against Robert's cheek.

*I wish this could all just stop,* Robert thought, crying out the hopelessness that had gathered under his skin over the past months, *I wish it could all just end,* he sniffed, *it's not worth it anymore.*

Garth said nothing, but patted Robert's arm reassuringly, pulling out some loose threads as he went. Robert stopped crying, but allowed himself to be comforted, even if it was by a figment of his own mind. Garth had become his only true company within the sallow, lifeless walls of his doom. He was grateful to have anything resembling normalcy.

Robert let himself dwell deeply in his own despair while Garth silently groomed his straightjacket. At last, he composed himself, to which Garth politely removed himself to the other chair.

Robert let his breath out in a long sigh. *Anything, I would give anything to just make this end. Anything to be out of here.* He was aware of eyes looking into him, and looked up to meet Garth's.

“Are you now, Robert?” Garth tilted his head, his hair covering all but part of one eye.

*You know I would!* Robert snapped mentally, than put his face back in his hands. *And you also know that it is impossible. I read the scroll, I cannot unread it.*

“Nothing is impossible, Robert.”

Robert stared at Garth, Garth stared at Robert, a smile turning up the corners of his pretty lips. Robert felt suddenly cold.

“I know how to make this all stop.”

*You mean... no, you said so yourself, a scroll once read cannot...*

“Oh, I said nothing of getting my pretty words out of your head,” Garth chuckled, “I said I know how make all this,” he gestured vaguely around the room, “stop.”

Robert swallowed, then nodded fervently, *Yes. Yes, anything. Please. I have to get out of here.*

Garth held out his hands which had been hidden by the table, revealing a few inches of braided rope. Taking it between his fingers, he tugged to show its resilience. “You see, straightjackets aren’t made to be ripped apart. Right down to the little threads they’re as tough as spider webs. If you braid enough little threads together...” He waved the rope back and forth. “You get a new jacket every three days... the laundry here is cruel enough to loosen a few threads here and there... in a few weeks you’ll have a yard of rope. In a month you’ll have two. And before you know it...” He smiled that smile that could freeze water in a glass. His eyes were a calm, unthreatening blue, but Robert could just see a faint golden glow behind them.

*Wh-what do I do with it?* Robert didn’t know why he asked, he didn’t want to know the answer.

Garth smiled, setting the piece of rope in Robert’s hand. “Don’t worry Robert, I’ll help you do it. I’ll show you how... just think, you’ll never have to see this fucking hell-hole ever

again. And, you'll be rid of me. Won't that be nice?" He took a huge bite from his cupcake, frosting sticking to his nose. "This is your only out, Robert, I suggest you take it."

It took Robert a moment to realize Garth was gone. The bit of rope was clutched in his right hand, a half eaten cupcake in his left. Reaching up, he felt a smudge of frosting on his own nose.

Robert looked at the rope for a long time. He looked out the window at the nauseating flowers. He listened to the screaming down the hall. He took a bite of cupcake and pulled another thread from his jacket.