

The Longest Journey

Act 2 Adagio



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Act 2 ~ Chapter 1



Pieces of a Past

A group of soldiers comes to a halt. In the distance, they can recognize the outline of a small farm, with a windmill rising above the main building and storage barn. Its blades **don't respond** to the soft breeze, sails torn. A fitting match for the lack of life on the farm. No inhabitants, no livestock, since long abandoned to steadily decay, as passing of time has shown no mercy.

The soldiers' commander barks an order at his men, calling for them to line up and stand at the ready, not acquiring much of a response out of them. Only the bare minimum to not be scolded and still earn their pay. More than one disgruntled voice complains, identity camouflaged by the relatively large group of infantry.

"Come on, men!" another voice tries to prod energy into the group. "Let's get this job done so we can all go home."

The men increase their pace, stop complaining and adjust their posture. A stark difference from the earlier received order. A disorderly bunch of rag-tag military grunts from all over the Union now turns into a recognizably disciplined formation.

Their commander is now the one grumbling to himself, change in attitude not lost on him. While not nearly bothered enough to do anything about it. The man recognizes the higher amount of respect given to one of his sub-commanders, compared to himself. And frankly speaking, he **doesn't particularly give much of a shit about it all. It's no different to how he himself doesn't give a rat's ass about those employed under him.** Let's be frank, after this mission is over, they will part ways regardless, as he will simply be reassigned somewhere else again. And they're not even his people to begin with, practically all of them stuck in a foreign land from who knows where, with only few exceptions.

Such is how the Uskandar Union operates with its military. Top commanders **don't** stay in charge of the same garrison or legion for too long, rotating them around regularly. Similar to how they rotate the legions and garrisons themselves over different countries. Much easier to keep social distance, in case an army has to squash a local uprising, when **its troops don't feel much of a connection to the people living there** to begin with. Same reason why commanders rotate, preventing them from forming long-lasting bonds with their troops, in case they were to develop ambitions which go against the Union's **wishes**.

"What do you think? A doozy?" a blond man speaks casually to his brown-haired comrade who got the troops motivated earlier.

"Shouldn't be anything special, but let's not drop our guard. Their numbers are higher than intelligence estimated."

The man who asked sighs. **"They got it wrong again? Those fucks from the intelligence department are nothing but a bunch of lazy slackers recently. Their estimates being off by an ocean's width is more the expected default by now."**

"Not like they will feel the pressure. It's not their lives on the line."

"I signed up for the wrong department," the blond man jokes, receiving a subtle chuckle from his companion.

“As if you would want to miss out on a chance to boast about your victories. All the tavern’s ladies tonight will get to hear about the great Adrian, and how his exploits in battle are almost as legendary as those in the bedroom.”

The man called Adrian laughs heartily in return. “*Almost* as legendary. True, that. No goal as encouraging as a **fine piece of ass to chase.**”

Especially tonight, when they will both finish their military service. One of them already with his mind fully made up on how to celebrate. Drinking plenty of beer and chasing an equally impressive amount of booty.

“So, how will *you* celebrate our layoff? Somehow, I can’t imagine you barging into a tavern or brothel.”

The brown-haired man shrugs his shoulders. “**In modesty, with a book maybe.** And plenty of thinking about where to go from here on out.”

“**Why not stay in the military?** They would love to have you. Just look how the men treat you with more respect than our official commander. You would make it to high places in no time.”

“**My path lies somewhere else,**” the man mutters in a somber tone while peering far into the distance, observing the abandoned farm. “I roughly know where to go, just not how to get there **yet.**” He picks up his mood again and turns his attention back to Adrian. “**And you? Where will you go when done tapping local tavern ass? It’s not like the military wouldn’t want you either.**”

“I don’t know...” Adrian answers with a sigh. “**Wherever fate leads me. Preferably towards far-away places.**” He picks up his own dropping mood again afterwards. “On a quest for fine, exotic beauties!”

...

They both stare in silence towards their destination, further ahead inside the woods, to the west of the abandoned farm. A final obstacle to be overcome before they can both call it quits, and their formal military service is completed, allowed to leave with honor. A large bandit hideout, to be mopped up before the sun sets.

“I’ve heard rumors they got a mage...” Adrian turns serious.

“So I’ve heard.”

It's not part of their received intelligence, actually assuring those rumors are false, but the department's recent track record doesn't leave much confidence in their conclusions.

"You don't seem to mind much," Adrian asks. It's strange, how the man standing beside him is pleased about that rumor, almost. Not the first time he has seen that expression, every time a challenge appears.

"Always wanted to fight one..." the man replies.

"Never seen a mage before. Have you?" Adrian inquires.

His comrade remains silent, expression on the man's face turning grim. Better not to prod any deeper, so Adrian changes the topic's focus.

"Fighting a mage, eh? Why not... Sure would make those tales in the tavern tonight a lot livelier."

The general interrupts both men, shouting orders towards his troops. "Alright boys, it's about time to set out!" he nods to his sub-commanders afterwards.

"Looks like it's time to get this shit done and over with," Adrian sighs as one of those sub-commanders. Heading back to his own unit he's in charge of, the man turns around to wish his companion good luck in battle, followed by the usual words of caution. "Conrad... Take care."

The brown-haired man nods, and wishes Adrian the best.

*

Fighting a mage... Yes, somewhere deep inside, Conrad hopes that rumor to be true. Would make for good practice. Chances are low, sadly, with how exceedingly rare those are. Practically unheard of. Never faced any during all these years in the military. Neither did anyone else he met during his career.

How long has it been since his life was ruined? When everything and everyone was stripped away from him? Ten long years. The first four spent hiding in Bournesse until he was no longer recognizable. Four years of life under harsh conditions, stealing scraps and living like an outcast while avoiding capture. Though not a waste of time. Those four years made him not only older, but also stronger, wiser, more cunning and far less naive.

Still, not strong enough. That's why he signed up for the military, right here in Bournesse, as one of few locals in this army. To not let his skills with a weapon dull, never having forgotten his teachings from Odwin. Seeking to further polish his practical experience and preferably make it to a leadership position, to get that extra area of knowledge under his belt as well. Thankfully, with all he already knew, all his body already mastered from the time he was a part of the mercenaries, a leadership position was well within reach. Now, since recently in charge of a full battalion.

The army is where he met Adrian. The only one he trusts his back to. A citizen of Gleaze, who signed up in the same year as Conrad, and quickly was sent here as part of the usual troop exchanges. The young man got stuck here for whatever reason. Never re-assigned. A rarity for officers. Made a couple enemies back in deeper Union territory maybe? Sent to wither away in some **nobody's land of no importance**.

Not that it matters. They both face their last mission. To wipe out one of numerous, large bandit hideouts throughout the country. Once this task is done, tonight, they will be free to go where their legs take them. Their six-years-long tour of duty finished.

Conrad takes one last look at the abandoned farm in the distance. **"Bournesse sure changed..."** the man now in his **twenty's** murmurs.

The farm was left behind, probably. His troops scouted it out earlier today. No bodies to be found, so at least the farmers weren't murdered at the spot. Though whether they managed to escape the bandits is left up in the air.

The ragged windmill is a sad but fitting imagery for what his country turned into these last ten years. Ravaged by war, and with plenty of political strings pulled, they were too weak to resist absorption by the Union. Many citizens must have hoped joining a larger force would help with the regular starvations going on, or the numerous bandits out there. In practice, it only became predictably worse. More bloated administration, more favors, bribes and general corruption. To make it worse, those bandits turned into even more powerful cartels controlling most of local towns and cities.

From what Adrian told him about Gleaze, a similar story played out over there after the Throne was left empty, with both countries now falling under the Union's banner.

*

“For bandits, they sure are well prepared,” one of the men under Conrad’s local command grumbles.

Conrad can only agree, wooden barriers and towers built inside the woods. “Hold formation as best as possible,” he orders. “And keep those shields up!”

Better not underestimate them. They may be nothing but a bunch of thugs, yet those thugs sure are organized. Proof not only in numerous defenses, also the simple fact they didn’t flee deeper into the woods or try to get out. The enemy feels confident enough to tackle two battalions. Though he can’t exactly voice as much before the troops.

“Keep an eye out for the trees! They’ve made wooden overpasses,” he warns the group of archers attached to his battalion. No doubt, those overpasses are for the bandits to place archers of their own and take potshots at the oncoming army.

Conrad lets an audible warning be played for his comrade Adrian, who flanks the side with his group, warning him of the potential of enemy archers.

No need to hide their presence for the enemy, as they already know what comes their way. A large group of armed bandits take up defensive positions on top and behind their wooden constructs.

“What I would give for the mighty cavalry,” another man grumbles.

“Think positive. Means we don’t have to worry about any horses either, and we’ve got the upper hand in skill and training,” Conrad keeps up the motivation.

No horses would be able to make an effective assault in these woods anyway. Still, that knowledge should be known to the bandits as well. Their high numbers and wooden defenses help close the gap with a trained military, but shouldn’t be enough. And yet, they didn’t run. Maybe they are merely overconfident fools, who had it far too easy to live their lives as thugs for too long. A more unsettling possibility is equally likely. That the enemy has a secret card to play.

A shout from within the hideout signals the beginning of battle. Arrows zoom through the treetops in disorderly manner. Half of them quickly stuck in a branch or trunk, or lose

enough momentum to no longer penetrate the soldiers' **armor**. The other half is still deadly and obscured.

"Hold formation!" Conrad shouts, shields held above their heads to block incoming fire. Reflexes instantly dodge when a pointy tip appears between a pair of shields, not even enough time to register it already lost too much penetrating force and bounces from **his arm's chainmail**.

Conrad immediately throws out more orders. **"Aim for the overpasses!"**

A row of shields lowers and archers behind it release a volley, targeting the bandits shooting at them from the wooden bridges between trees. Shields rise again afterwards without wasting a second in perfectly drilled synchronicity.

"Towards the barriers! Steady!" he urges his men not to rush. Too quick of a pace would only weaken their wall of shields. **"Ready pikes!"**

A double row of long pikes forms at the front, poking out past the shields, the battalion drawing closer towards the first palisades like an armored turtle.

"Charge!"

With only a couple steps remaining, the front rows suddenly lower their defenses and rush forward, stabbing their weapon forward, quickly lining up again once the element of surprise has been used up.

Multiple screams enter **Conrad's ears**, as not all bandits estimated the coming charge correctly. Several dull bounces come from all around when shields take the weight of men falling from the wooden defenses, making the soldiers underneath groan at the sudden weight dropping on them. Yet, each of them more than happy to feel the weight of an **enemy's** life ending on their steel wall.

"Push them back!"

To give more weight behind his words, Conrad takes front himself and drives his sword through a defender while shouting the order. He well understands this is the most important part of the assault. Where they have to pass the wooden constructs. The enemy should be at their strongest here. This is where it will all get decided.

If the army breaks through, the enemy's morale will be crushed at the sight of their front line falling, and they will turn to disorder. If on the other hand the enemy can hold,

it will be the army that starts to get its morale chipped. The sooner they can break through, the better. If there is any spot where a battalion's commander can make the **difference on the front line, it's right here. That's why Conrad** steps up himself, unlike their general standing at the back.

The men roar like beasts, following their sub-commander into battle. All fatigue from marching in battle-dress gone, rejuvenated at the sight of their leadership doing what any leader should. Be a rally point for his followers. A beacon which guides them forwards as one of their brethren.

Another scream comes from next to Conrad, though **he doesn't look**. He trusts the men **on his side to cover him. They can't stop now!** The bandits have not placed these wooden defenses at random like inexperienced dimwits would. These thugs made good use of what is available, creating choke points with flanking barriers and elevated towers.

"Archers!" Conrad yells while pointing his sword to a nearby tower, where six men were in waiting, readying their shots towards the choke point, eyes quickly scanning for anyone in a leadership position. **Conrad's** words not meant as a warning, but tone of voice a clear instruction. Allied arrows immediately follow his word, taking out the threat.

A tumult appears among the bandits. Attention diverted to another location, though some keep storming forward in blind fervor, probably high on whatever drug they use. Conrad needs not wonder what caught their attention. That can only be **Adrian's unit pushing into the enemy's flank. Seems like** events go according to plan on his side as well.

"There they are!" one of Conrad's men calls out.

A smirk appears on his **face. As expected, Adrian's group pushes** hard. Not that he can see the soldiers already with all chaos in between, though **the Union's purple flag belonging to Adrian's battalion** towers above, slowly but surely crawling closer.

"Pin them!" he encourages his own battalion to push on.

Better mop up these front-line defenses now, before the enemy gains a better grasp on what occurs and starts to fall back in increased numbers. Their pinning quite apt a maneuver for the flag waved around. A hammer and anvil decorates the rich purple background. The bandits now caught in the middle, as they are about to get smashed.

So, this hive of scum were overconfident, foolish thugs in the end?

Conrad raises a triumphant fist towards the sight of Adrian appearing, while the remaining bandits flee deeper into their hideout. Then **the man's** senses suddenly shift into full alert.

What's this strangely familiar stench? His brain works at rapid pace to delve into decade-old memories, somehow still fresh in his mind, words already beginning to form before Conrad knows he drew the connection.

"Fall back!" He yells loud towards his comrade, hand flailing to the side, away from the battlefield. **"Don't pursue! Fall back!"**

Adrian is confused what the heck could cause a fallback. They have the upper hand! Bandits flee in panic. What's there to retreat for?! However, his footsteps come to an immediate stop, starting to call out to his men in turn. **"Fall back! Hurry!"**

He grabs a reluctant soldier by the shoulder and drags him back. Others quickly follow. None with a clue why **they can't proceed into clear, open terrain**, including their own **unit's sub**-commander. Adrian does know one reliable conclusion. His friend has always shown good senses in battle, and is not the type to fool around for no reason. If he is this panicked, there's no time to waste!

Conrad reaches for a bow from a fallen bandit and aims it at a single target. After a zoom through the air, the fired arrow reaches and fells a man.

Confusion only increases for Adrian. Why did he shoot at *that* guy, of all remaining bandits? **The man didn't even carry a sword, only a torch. And what's that strange smell around here? Also, why is the ground so muddy? It didn't rain last night.**

Whirling of fire catches attention of the entire army. The rumor which went around while marching to this battlefield suddenly confirmed by the loud warning of a fellow soldier.

"Mage!"

Conrad can spot the threat, trying to ready another arrow, aiming for the mage. But **it's too late. Fire forms** at the end of a staff, turning around in a dense ball, and the projectile is promptly blasted off towards the opposing army. Not aimed at anyone in particular, carrying out what the torch-bearer earlier failed to do.

A loud whoosh of fire fills the skies. The field Adrian stood on only moments earlier turns into an ocean of scorching flame.

“Fuck...” the blond man murmurs, taken aback. That came out of nowhere! If Conrad hadn’t warned them to fall back, half of his battalion and himself would be caught up in that firestorm!

Conrad loosens the arrow towards the mage.

“Bloody ass...!” he curses at the result. This fight won’t be easy.

The mage noticed an arrow was aimed at him, and rose a dagger in response, turning one of its sides forward. A white gem decorates its hilt, emitting a strange light as the arrow crashed itself into an invisible wall covering the wielder.

With the army temporarily halted in its advance, Adrian groups up with Conrad. “How did you know what was about to happen?!” he wonders out loud.

“Experience,” Conrad replies dry.

“I sure can’t remember us learning about that in training...”

“It’s an old story.”

“Must have been an interesting life,” Adrian shrugs off all last traces of shock at having been caught off guard and narrowly escaping disaster. “So they do have a mage. Now what?”

“We take him out.”

Adrian opens his mouth at the casual response of his comrade. He can only shake his head and shrug both shoulders afterwards. Alright then... Take him out. What else? “Any ideas how?”

“Nope.”

Another shake of disbelief from Adrian’s head follows. What a day to end a military career on.

Conrad starts to reorganize the troops. “Push on and watch out for more oil! Use your goddamn noses! Leave the mage to us.” He turns towards Adrian afterwards. “Let’s go feel this guy out. See what tricks he has up his sleeve.”

The blond man nods. Sounds like a good start against an unknown opponent, already reaching for a shield from a fallen soldier. Best to go defensive when up against an unknown fire arsenal.

The mage forms another fireball, scanning around for where it would provide the most bang for the buck, settling on a cluster of soldiers. Already aiming for them, when he suddenly aborts the attack and lifts the gemmed dagger once more.

Conrad grumbles. **“Well, at least we got his attention again.”**

The arrow he fired bounced off against that invisible wall again, with the fireball now aimed at him instead.

“Duck!” Adrian warns.

Both of them seek shelter of a nearby wooden defensive covering, while Adrian blocks the exposed bits and pieces as best as he can with his shield.

An intense heat cuts off their breath as both men close their eyes, feeling the hairs on their skin shrink.

“Whew...” Adrian brushes wildly through his hair when the flames dissipate, confirming it’s still there.

“We now know an iron shield works sufficiently against his flames,” Conrad boosts morale. **“And we can conclude that barrier he has seems to stop all physical objects.”**

He threw a dagger at the mage moments earlier to see if that had better luck than an arrow, to no avail. The invisible barrier even cracked nearby wood when it was activated, pushing it forcibly aside to a point of snapping branches.

“Look where he steps,” Adrian points out.

Conrad forms growing optimism on his face. He noticed what Adrian gets at. The mage avoids patches of ground which were previously set on fire. He taps his buddy on the shoulder when making a rush forward. **“Let’s get him!”**

Adrian grumbles before breaking cover from behind the wooden barrier. Still finding it crazy they even try this stunt. Their idle chit-chat from earlier about fighting mages definitely turned into dangerous reality.

A hand is stretched out by Conrad a couple steps ahead. No need to ask, as Adrian already heads in its direction, splitting up to take on the enemy from both sides. Troops support their leaders, engaging any bandits in their path.

“He’s trying to head up the trees!” Adrian yells out.

The mage rushes for a nearby ladder, heading upwards to the overpasses leading deeper into the camp. Both pursuers search for different ladders.

Conrad can feel the rush of adrenaline run through his body as he makes it up a ladder and runs over a thin hanging bridge, the battle playing out on the ground in complete view. He yells to his own men. **“Get some archers up here!”**

Ducking behind a tree trunk, more flames pass by his nose as another fireball is blasted in his direction. He curses out loud.

Their flanking attempt failed. The mage made it to another bridge, before either of them could cut him off. Another fireball already forms when Conrad suddenly notices a pouch landing near his feet. Pupils dilate once his mind processes the reality of his situation. **“Oh shi...”**

Adrian slides down, shield held up as best he can to take the incoming fireball while he kicks the pouch aside, causing it to fall somewhere to the ground beneath. Fire passes way too close for comfort as the man tries to curl up to cover his face.

“Adrian!” his friend calls out.

“I’m fine!” he replies. Unsure if he actually is or not, but at least he can still talk. **That’s** usually a good sign. Quickly trying to stomp out the fire embers lingering on the cloth parts of his outfit.

“How did you know what was in the pouch?” Conrad asks.

“I didn’t.”

Adrian only noticed the panic on **his friend’s** face, directed at the pouch, not the incoming fireball. **That’s the sole reason why** he kicked it away. Not having the time to ask now either, as Conrad rushes forward already, leaving his friend to grumble once more.

The mage is at a dead end. Only one bridge separates him from the others. Though he **doesn’t seem cornered yet**. Strangely confident. **Conrad’s quick pace comes to a stop**

when he notices the dagger rising again. Caught in the middle of the bridge with whatever this guy has planned, which is probably not a happy welcome.

The dagger gets flipped around, white gem disappearing and a red one on the opposite side now facing forward. A visible barrier forms around the mage. A bubble of sorts. Not of water, but of intense flame. The entire treetop lights up like a giant candle. The sudden temperature change sends flames out far and wide, reaching to nearby trees, including the one Conrad and Adrian came from.

“Fucking crap!” is all Adrian can muster. **“How do we get close to *that*?!”**

Conrad remains silent. Better silence than to give his honest answer... How? He has no idea.

“The bridge! Watch out!” Adrian yells out.

The bridge’s **dry wood and ropes** quickly catch fire, with a by now familiar whoosh rousing deep unrest. Another fireball is prepared. Aimed not at both men, but at the bridge they stand on.

A loud cracking of wood later, both men fall to the ground, flailing to try and grab on **anything that isn’t burning**. Adrian is first to find support, thanks to his shield latching behind still functional wooden sports of the broken bridge. **Only reason he didn’t let go is because he can’t, arm stuck inside the leather binding.**

The man doesn’t waste any time and grabs for his buddy, reaching for an arm, even if both of them know there’s no way a single man can take the sudden weight of a falling adult covered in armor with one hand. But regardless...

Adrian grunts out loud from pain as his arm is dislocated, though at least it had an effect. For an instant, he managed to hold, helping to break the fall of his fellow sub-commander.

Conrad does what he remembers from ten years ago, any time Odwin grabbed his wrist and twisted him on the ground. Roll. Always roll. Never try to take the fall. His shoulder hurts from taking most of the brunt, some pieces of burning wood falling down on him. Those only serve to reinforce that golden lining he survived the landing.

It takes three seconds to get clear vision again, facing upwards.

The mage stands triumphant on his platform like a fire-god. That tree will last for a while, even if set aflame, and no element can harm the man within his bubble. The army beneath stares up and starts to lose morale. Soon, they will become the target of his rain of fire, and there will not be anything they can seemingly do about him. Up till now, the **Union's troops were winning**, yet that tide will soon turn.

"Catch!" Conrad yells out to Adrian still hanging on his shield at the top of the broken bridge.

With a hard and precise throw, he flings an object towards his friend. Reaching for a nearby bow straight after, as he forcibly pulls it from the dead hands of a bandit. Quickly placing an arrow to take aim at the mage.

The mage smiles arrogantly. "Foolish man," is all he can think of. **Going for a bow again? Hah,** as if that didn't prove to be a futile effort already. **A sign how desperate** his opponents have become. Still holding his dagger, the man turns it around to reveal the white gem for the short while it will take to stop the arrow while the bubble of fire fades.

"Now!" Conrad shouts out loud, still holding the arrow.

Adrian doesn't bother thinking. Instinctively responding to **his comrade's** sign, only hoping he read his intentions correctly. Biting away the pain in his dislocated arm as he flings the object Conrad threw him earlier upwards, beyond the top of the broken bridge, right towards their opponent.

The mage's eyes turn to shock when noticing what plays out. Recognizing the pouch he threw himself towards Conrad earlier, now falling right next to him, where the platform still burns. Trying to turn the dagger as quick as he can.

A sudden, loud bang makes Adrian tense up, unsure what happened. Bits and pieces of wood fly down in all directions.

The mage stumbles. He managed to take most of the explosion, caused by black powder inside the pouch, while just a tad too slow with his dagger to prevent all damage. Legs injured and position of unbeatable godhood plummeting, replaced by rage. That Union dog managed to hurt him?! Unforgivable! They will all be turned to roasted pigs soon enough!

A dull thud **stops the man's thoughts...**

Conrad lowers his bow. The arrow landed. A short sigh of relief escapes his lungs at an accurate assessment of the situation. That dagger can only shield against either physical objects, or elemental effects such as the fire. Not both at the same time. If he had blocked the arrow, the pouch would have gotten him. And now he blocked the pouch...

The mage's body drops to the ground. Conrad lifts his tightened fist and releases a battle cry, rallying his troops. The enemy commander has fallen.

Adrian cheers with his friend, victorious mood dropping for only one important detail. "Can anyone get me down from here?!"

...

Remaining bandits are on the run. The Union army is victorious. Only now does their top commander come to the front.

"Don't let them escape!" Conrad orders his men

But the Commander overrides that order. "Let them go! The battle is won."

For some reason, the man doesn't seem very pleased.

"We took out their leader," Adrian boasts, making turns with his arm to get some flexibility in it again, followed by a painful grimace while he holds it in place.

"I know," the Union general grumbles.

*

Conrad sighs before he enters the hideout's main building. Overlooking his men making a pass to deliver mercy to the fatally injured. Not that this is a standard practice anymore, and the corpses will simply be left to rot rather than burned, though it's the most he can do. The traditions from ten years ago are not exactly followed anymore. And sadly, he's not in a position where he can override the general's orders.

No Hymn for the Fallen, no funeral pyre to send them off. Yet, he can bend orders enough to have any mortally injured put out of their suffering by masquerading the practice as simple brutality. It wouldn't be tolerated by the leadership otherwise, considering it a waste of time and resources to show mercy to the bunch of inhuman dogs which currently is known as "the enemy", or to give them a proper send-off.

“What a waste...” Adrian grumbles absentmindedly from beside Conrad, observing the same scenery, receiving an affirmative grunt.

A waste indeed. And Conrad is well aware of the double meaning in **the man’s** words, cause of the underlying frustration in his tone. All these injured and dead from either side, and for what purpose? A large part of the scattered bandits were allowed to flee. A pursuit swiftly halted by the Union general. Sure, they took out the local leader, but the cartel pulling the strings will not feel a dent from losing a single hideout, recuperating a large part of its forces now fleeing the area. Probably plundering whatever they come across in search of a new home. If only the army was sent to do what they never seem to be allowed to do... Cut off the head of the snake.

“You believe he’s in on it?” Adrian asks.

“Shh...” Conrad hints his companion while looking around. Best to not ask such matters in broad daylight. Then he replies in general terms. **“Probably just a tool, simply following orders, like we all do.”**

However, the man definitely knows. That man none other than their general. Reasons to conclude as much are straightforward. The discontent on his face when notified the enemy leader was taken out, the fact he ordered not to pursue when understanding what that means as to the futility of their mission, and this far from being a first time the army is sent on a trivial hunt which always seems to miss crucial targets. He knows. He must know. That said, what can he do?

Conrad can’t really blame their general either. If he disobeys, he simply gets the axe, and some jester who does dance on command will replace him instead. At least, the man allows them their game of pretend-butchers enjoying the slaughter of mortally injured. Even though he should be smart enough to understand the real motives at play behind that act, turning a blind eye to it.

“The cartels must have their hands in some pretty deep pockets,” Adrian concludes. Though he can’t help conclude it works just as easily the other way around. **“What are you staring at?”** the blond man wonders, noticing his comrade lowered his face and became lost in thought, holding onto a specific object. A grim loneliness surrounds him.

“Oh, this? It’s an old tale...”

“Another one? You must have stories, man.”

Stories... Yes, that’s one way to call it. Stories flash through Conrad’s mind, brought on by what he clings on to like it’s a part of himself. A bow. The one he used to take out the mage. Not the typical longbow the army uses, or the locals. But a composite bow with a design he remembers very well. Old, worn, over a decade of history carved into its yew wood. The same type the mercenaries used.

It must be a relic from that time, lost to the black market, now fallen back into the hands where it originally belonged in a strange twist of fate. Here to remind Conrad about the origins of these crime cartels. About who carefully nurtured their roots and watered them with blood a decade ago. Yet another burden to bear. One that should have been struck down after the war, as was promised to his mentor. Alas, it never was meant to be. Even now, with an entire battalion at his command, he does not have the means to keep that promise, all these skirmishes nothing more than a never-ending game of cat and mouse.

Conrad puts down the bow and gets back to work. “Well, let’s get back to search out this nest. Then we’re done for the day, and done with our service. How’s the arm?”

“Healthy as a... Ow-ow!” Adrian grimaces when trying to flex his arm.

“I’ll take a look at it when we’re done for today. Just don’t force it for now.”

“Thanks...” Adrian replies.

His friend nods. He knows that word of gratitude carried more. It was a thanks for saving his life from the field of fire. Adrian is not the type to be very upfront about his inner workings to easily voice gratitude, yet his pride will mandate him to stick to honor and do so anyway. How pride *should* be. To lift up a noble ideal, not to raise oneself.

Adrian confirms the deeper meaning behind his thanks. “If you ever need help in the future, no matter what, don’t hesitate to ask.” Another one of those pride matters. He owes Conrad now. A return favor is only to be expected. One which is a suitable match for saving his life.

“I don’t know, man... Careful what you ask for. You may find yourself dragged down quite the deep, dark rabbit hole.”

Adrian forms a humored smirk on his face before replying. “Does it have rabbit ladies with big jugs?”

Conrad releases a rare burst of an uncontrolled laugh. “Maybe?”

“Then I’m all game,” Adrian’s expression turns stern right after. “Seriously, man. I don’t mind a good adventure, even if it goes dark places. *Especially*, if it goes dark places.”

Conrad falls silent, typical aura of solitude returning. His friend **doesn’t** hint at desiring evil deeds. He’s simply as earnest as can be at trying to fulfill his debt. And what better path to take than to reach out a hand when the friend you owe is stuck grasping in the dark?

“I’ll consider it...”

...

Another bundle of documents gets searched through. Nothing interesting at first sight. A local topological map, an inventory of the bandits’ **arsenal and** medical herb storage, nope, nothing of value.

“Huh... Another inventory list, mostly cooking related,” Conrad murmurs when examining **the next document from inside the bandit leader’s room**. He observes it more closely. “Quite the refined taste, this guy. But whoever wrote this clearly can’t spell. I could do better ten years ago. Useless thugs, **even at this kind of crap.**”

Adrian comes over and takes a peek at the document, attention lingering. “Can I take a closer look?” he asks.

Conrad **doesn’t answer and simply** hands over the document to him. Stopping his search, to wait curiously at what plays out in front. The sight of his friend entranced by the document, lost in his own world.

He has seen it before. It’s not the first time Adrian shows his gift of nature. How he does it, Conrad has no idea, but the man has a talent for this kind of stuff. A mystery, really. Adrian noticed something almost instantly in this document, a pattern, and is busy working it out. And all he had to do was **see it once**. Conrad’s arms fold as he waits patiently for his friend to crack the code.

“This is going to take time, and I’ll need something to write,” Adrian murmurs.

*

The general looks up when hearing someone call his name. “What’s up?” he asks of the duo entering the room he made his own inside the bandit hideout.

“Sir, we found this note...” Conrad remarks.

The Commander places down his drink and first plops another piece of wood into the fireplace, preferring his environment warmer than is typical for Bournesse. Wishing everyday he was back in his home country Uskandar, where the sun shines bright. He comes over to reach for the note afterwards, taking a good look at it.

“Uh... I’m aware it’s you two’s last day in service, but we really can’t spare these resources from our food reserves.” Besides, where would they even acquire the ingredients on such a long list? You could feed an entire army with this.

“Sir, you misunderstand,” Conrad explains. “We believe it might be a coded message.”

The general turns to the note again, eyebrows frowning. A coded message? This is nothing but a badly written storage inventory? Though his face quickly turns more serious. “Did you decode it?”

Conrad hesitates two seconds before replying. “No. Not yet. That’s why we’re not certain. We thought it best to bring this to your attention as fast as possible.”

The general nods, mood improving again. “It’s just a note, you were mistaken,” he hands it back to Conrad, gesturing towards the fireplace. “Throw it in the fire, it will only keep our minds unfocused from the task at hand.”

Another couple seconds of silence follow, all eyes staring at each other. Until Conrad finally moves to the fireplace, hand reached out for a piece of paper to drop down. It quickly turns into smoldering embers.

“Perfect,” the general replies. “Anything else?”

“No, Sir.”

“Good. If you find any other potential coded messages, by all means, bring them here and I’ll confirm.” The man gestures he wants to enjoy the bandits’ alcohol storage in peace now.

Both sub-commanders leave the room.

*

Conrad throws his stuff to the side, plopping down on a bed. **“A real bed. Man... that has been a while.”**

Adrian laughs at him, sitting down on his own bed. They have the only room left in the nearby town. Not exactly what either had in mind, yet when left with no options, this is better than the hard floor.

They both left the army as they were allowed to once the day was over, spending four hours marching to the nearest hovel. No longer soldiers, now returned to regular citizens with six years of veteran experience under their belt.

“You may take my life, but you will *never* take my freedom!” Adrian rejoices in an exaggerated tone.

His companion doesn't waste any time at a retort. **“Pretty certain the bar lady downstairs could, if she ties you down to a bed.”**

Adrian angles his head around, **deliberating...** **“Hmm... Fine, maybe she can...”**

“She's married, I'll point out,” Conrad adds.

“That's okay, I'm not.”

“Fair point.”

Adrian reaches for a small bottle he almost knocks over. **“Oops, better not spill this.”** It's ink, with a quill. A piece of paper is placed on a book used as support, while the man lies down, leaning comfortably against a pillow. **“Still have that note?”**

Conrad smirks at him. **“Damn right, I have.”**

Now **there's enough time to figure out this code in detail, no curious mind wouldn't** want to know all about its peculiarities. What was thrown into the fireplace was not the original coded note, but a replica he wrote down to hand over to the general. Duty bound to report his findings, while not having expected any different result from the start.

As time ticks on, Adrian keeps writing down after carefully examining the note. **Something that couldn't really be done under potential watchful eyes of outsiders. You never know who's involved with all these cartel shenanigans.**

Once finished, he hands it over. “Those damn bastards,” he murmurs.

Conrad needs not wonder why, reading the decoded message himself. “Weapon smuggling...” the man turns his head to Adrian to give him a nod in appreciation of his decoding skills. “You got a real gift there.”

That plethora of spelling mistakes in the inventory list were not random errors at all. Take the letters that should be there, but aren’t. Write them down, and you get a sentence. An appointment for a contraband weapons deal. Union army weaponry, delivered to one of the cartels, straight from the source.

“Why would they do this kind of shit?” Adrian asks.

“Divide and conquer.”

“But doesn’t the Union have power already?”

“Yeah, but having and holding onto it are two different matters,” Conrad clarifies. “All crime lets the ignorant populace bend over for more power to the state, actively begging them to interfere more and more into everyday life.”

Adrian grumbles at what he hears. “And all the Union has to do is keep up appearances? Smash down the occasional, irrelevant hideout?”

“Basically. Same reason why our superior commanders always shift around, and you were stationed in Bournesse even though you are from Gleaze. All for division. I was more the exception, really.”

“In that case, they should have sent women from other places into our regiment,” Adrian laughs. “I’d tap some fine hatori ass.”

“There was hatori ass around,” Conrad remarks. “It only came with a sausage attached.”

“I’ll happily pass.”

“Let’s take a look at that arm of yours. How far can you move it around?”

Adrian rotates his arm until he feels the pain.

“It’s not too bad,” his friend concludes. “A couple days of rest will fix it up. Once the swelling settles down, keep it warm. I’ve seen far worse.”

“More of those old stories?” Adrian guesses the origin of Conrad’s knowledge.

“Yup.” Memories flash back in the man’s mind on his own joints hurting like heck after a training session with Odwin.

Adrian gives his outfit a good tug to get creases out. “Alright then. Time to head out and seek fine healing-warmth from the tavern owner’s wife. Doctor’s advice.”

“Don’t get us kicked out,” Conrad hopes for the best.

After Adrian left the room, he reaches for his private baggage and pulls out a single book. One he kept safe for ten years. A book he read multiple times already. Opening the first page, he reads from front to back once more.

Harald’s diary.

*

Early morning. The door to the tavern’s upstairs guestroom opens and a shining beacon of a man walks in.

“No need to ask how it went, I guess?” Conrad asks anyway, lowering the book he still reads.

Adrian gives a double thumbs up. “She would make a great wife.”

“She already *is* a wife,” Conrad corrects.

Adrian shrugs his shoulders at irrelevant details. “She swooned at the story of me heroically beating an evil master-sorcerer who could level an entire army with a single fire spell.”

Conrad raises an eyebrow at what he hears.

“Naturally, I didn’t forget the part about my trusted friend helping me secure victory.”

“And what about the part where you were screaming to be lowered down already?”

“Completely skipped it,” Adrian replies dry. “So, what were you up to all night? Reading that same book again?”

Conrad nods. It’s not the first time Adrian has seen him read this, though he never asked what it was about. Prying about one’s past was not really a custom in the army. Many who join do so because they have chapters in life which need closure. But they’re not in the army anymore... So...

“An old story?”

Conrad takes time. Not really sure what path he should take now, only feeling instinctively this is one of life’s crucial moments. Will he let his friend in on a chapter of cloaked history? Or will he keep it to himself? One is a risky venture, the other is safe but closes doors and whatever potential lies behind them. “Remember what I said about a deep, dark rabbit hole?”

“U-hu.”

“This is it,” Conrad closes the book and lifts it up towards Adrian. “This is the rabbit hole.” He pulls back when the man wants to reach for it, clarifying first. “Only if you really want to know. There’s no turning back once you get involved with this.”

“Problems with the law?” Adrian asks, hand still held up to reach, frozen.

“Yup. And something far worse than merely the law.”

Adrian stares into his friend’s eyes. They shine a fierce truth. His words are definitely not a joke. Worse than the law, though? That’s hard to imagine. Yet... The man reaches for the book and grabs on to it, waiting for Conrad to let go. That worse part only makes it more enticing to find out.

“I’ll let go,” Conrad says, “but I want to know your reasons to reach for it first.”

“To pay my debt,” Adrian returns straightforward.

That’s fine and all, but Conrad wants a different answer. Not debt related. A debt will be repaid at some point. And then what? “Other than such... A deeper meaning. You know there’s dark stuff attached to this book. Why do you still wish to go down that rabbit hole?” If it’s sheer curiosity, he cannot let go of the book. There has to be more to it. The man desires an answer he can agree with on a philosophical level. Something he can not only trust, but also find value in. Believe in.

Adrian lets go of the book again. He thinks deeply, searching into his own psyche. What *did* make him reach out for the book? There has to be more to it than something superficial like a debt. He takes minutes of time, spent in thought. Conrad’s patience only makes him more aware about the importance of answering this truthfully.

...

“The challenge,” he finally answers. Hesitating at first, growing more certain of his words, like he reached enlightenment about a part of human nature. **“I seek the challenge. To have one foot firmly in the domain of chaos, the unknown. I don’t want to live with both feet on steady ground, because then I’m no longer moving forward.”**

Yes, that’s exactly it. Not even thinking about the book anymore, realizing he touched upon a truth few understand in life.

To live as a part of the realm of man, is to have the ability to carve out the future and bargain with it. But that comes with risks. Many eschew those risks, seeking the boredom and stagnation of safety. When it’s seeking chaos, stepping into the unknown to transform it into the safe and known, turning chaos into order, that is solely the realm of the brave. The origin of all progress. Only meant for a rare few, for the Greats of history. Yet, **admired and desired by all.** Isn’t that why people seek stories about heroes and dragons? About gods and mortals?

“Yeah, I want to rise to the challenge.”

Adrian can feel the book touch the back of his hand. Not that he reaches for it, Conrad openly offers the diary. Impressed with the answer received. Now, his friend only has to accept it.

And Adrian does exactly that.

“Ever heard of the Gold Serpents?” Conrad asks him.

The man’s mouth opens. Damn right he has. **“Dude... Are you...?”**

“That book is the diary of Harald Beaumont, leader of the Gold Serpents. And my superior during the war ten years ago. Within it, you will find the chaos you seek.”

Adrian is awe-struck. One involved in the royal coup from ten years ago is here inside this room?! The event which left his home country in the rotten state it currently is?! And there’s more to that story? In complete silence, he sits down on his bed and opens the first page.

“Oh, one more important detail,” Conrad mentions. **“There’s supposed to be a hidden message in that book. But I haven’t been able to figure it out all these years.”**

And Adrian starts reading.

*

With a dull poof, the diary is closed again. It took many hours, already evening once more. However, the man got through it. Not a single word said, not a single bite taken. Only reading with complete focus. Now, left staring at his friend in disbelief, yet unable to deny all of what he read must be true.

“What is that darkness he speaks of? The shadow compelling him, by his own words?” That certainly didn’t seem like a metaphor, the way it gets mentioned regularly. Though frightened of it, not even naming it. Only vague references.

“The Faceless. It was the last message he told me,” Conrad replies. “Then he died from breaking his blood-contract.”

Adrian is confused. Faceless? Blood magic? He heard of the last one, that’s forbidden magic. Though he never heard of the first before. Thus, Conrad explains, leaving his friend stumped at the description of the horror which haunted Gleaze’s capital that fateful night.

“And Archduke Grimald is...?” Adrian wonders after hearing the connection.

“Probably. I’m not completely certain. But he’s definitely involved with it.” Either the man controls that creature, has a pact with it, or even worse, he *is* that monster. An existence which is nothing but a dark mystery. The current Archduke of Gleaze. In practice, its ruler. While the country officially still searches for an heir to the throne. Not that any will ever be found, even if they exist.

Adrian’s awe turns to excitement. This is it! This is exactly what he talked about before reaching for the book! Seeking the opportunity to turn chaos into order. And a mysterious coup? The Union behind it? The current Archduke? And forbidden magic with some unknown force at the center of it all, called the Faceless? This is definitely chaos in capital letters. His comrade **was right**. **There’s** no going back from this.

“I was told the answers to that creature were to be found in the diary by the author himself, at least some proof of statement present in his resulting death. But...” Conrad laments. All these years he never found the answer. Only those vague references Adrian mentioned. Hope starts to leave him again of ever finding out what happened.

Hope which gets reinvigorated right after.

“Yeah, there’s a pattern. I can notice its beginnings already. Give me some time to work it out.”

Conrad jumps up in excitement. Is that ink still here with the quill?! He quickly hands it over to his friend.

“Shit, man,” Adrian murmurs when taking the eagerly offered writing utensils, “I had no idea you carried such baggage. And from such a young age. That must have been brutal.”

Even without the sorcery parts, these events described were fascinating to read. To gain insight in how such an elaborate scheme to subdue not one but two countries was carried out, with only few involved actually knowing about it. And now, he is one of those few.

...

Time ticks once more as he browses through the book, much quicker this time. Not reading it again, but looking to more firmly establish that picture in his mind. To unravel the mystery contained within. A process which is painfully slow for Conrad, as he continuously taps his foot on the bed, legs pulled up. A practice he hasn’t done in years. Like a part of him which lied dormant re-awakened.

“It’s a location,” Adrian suddenly blurts out in the open, unable to contain the excitement in his own voice.

“Where?! How?! What?!” Conrad bombards him.

“One more minute, I’ve got the key to decipher, only need the last couple bits. But I tell you man, it’s a location.” He mumbles his current findings to reassure Conrad the answer is definitely forthcoming. “The key is to be found in the paragraphs. Every opening letter of each chapter’s paragraph is important.”

“They form a sentence?” Conrad asks.

“Yeah, but it’s not that easy. To begin with, chapters may not all be long, but there’s a shit-ton of them. And the alphabet he used for coding his secret message is realigned each chapter. The decipher key is in the chapter title itself. The number of letters in the title corresponds to a shift in the alphabet.”

He shows one of the titles.

“See this one? The title exists out of nine letters. Which means the alphabet gets shifted by nine letters. An “A” becomes a “J”. That specific code has to be applied to the opening letter of all this chapter’s paragraphs. Then doing the same with all other chapters and their corresponding shift. This guy was bloody careful with his information.”

Careful, and overly complex in a way Conrad himself would never have figured out. Though he can’t help but marvel at what Harald accomplished. His friend probably doesn’t really understand yet exactly how dangerous this was. To seek a loophole in the blood-contract in such a roundabout way. Where one slip-up spells death.

...

Adrian puts down the Quill and turns to Conrad.

He found the answer.

The decoded sentence.

...

“In the realm beyond the Misty Woods, in the Forbidden Library of Eralthyr, you will find the answer to what ails the world.”

“Eralthyr? Misty Woods?” Conrad asks. “I never heard of those places.”

“I have...” Adrian replies. “But no wonder you haven’t heard of them. They’re from old children’s stories, local to the Hatori lands. Eralthyr is a place from a country nobody has been to in a long, long time. Home of the Alma druids, according to those stories, at least. The Misty Woods are the only gateway into their lands, a barrier only few can supposedly pass. Nobody even knows if Eralthyr still exists. All I know is that it should be far away, beyond the Hatori lands.”

The room turned silent. Until Adrian rises up with vigor. “Well then, I’ll be damned! When do we leave?”

Conrad forms a smile on his face. A genuine one. A rarity throughout all those years. Glint in his eyes shines brighter than Adrian has ever seen them do. Renewed hope burns fierce within them. The man finally found his path to walk.

“With the early light of dawn.”

Act 2 ~ Chapter 2



Specter of Times Gone

Conrad attaches the new sword to his belt. Bought with his accumulated fee from six years of duty. Plenty left over after buying a full set of new gear, a gambeson on top for protection. Chain would be too heavy for a long journey. And expensive. They have plenty of funds, though with an **attitude of spending it all on the first day, they won't last for long.** Best to be well prepared when setting out on a journey. That said, his old clothes from before joining the army were not exactly suitable anymore. Besides, the condition they were in made them far from desirable. Only objects left from his youth are the diary and one particular valuable worn around the neck.

Back on that morning they set out on their journey, Adrian noticed Conrad was tinkering in his bed, careful, deep in thought. Every tiny part of what he worked on treated like an artifact, not dropping a single piece. He was crafting a necklace, made out of colored beads. They used to belong to a bracelet, but that one had become too small for

the man's arm. Clearly, a private possession from before joining the army, yet Adrian never saw him wear it once, even if such personal accessories were allowed in the army. Every single bead transferred to the necklace instead, now decorating his neck.

Adrian didn't ask about it. After reading the diary and hearing the man's story, he can puzzle bits and pieces together. It has to be a relic from the past. The necklace only worn now because its owner either finds it the right time, or because he finally considers himself worthy of it again. Maybe both.

"Better watch out for pickpockets," Adrian warns him.

"They better watch out for me."

Though Conrad is aware what his friend hints at. Their outfit reeks of wealth, as does the necklace. Few can afford new armor, a weapon and jewelry. That makes them a prime target for any prospective thief. And there will be plenty of those, born out of necessity. Levels of poverty as they traveled from Bournesse into Gleaze have not exactly improved.

Gleaze is not really the direction they have to head into, which is beyond the Hatori lands further to the north, but they move east for now. Approaching a destination Conrad has to visit. He cannot decide on any other spot to commence his journey for answers. There are things which need doing first. In Ramona, the City of Marble, capital of Gleaze. Where it all ended, and where it shall now all commence.

Beggars approach both men, asking for handouts. It pains Conrad, yet he can't give anything. There will never be an end to it if they do, and run out of finances on their first day. Responsibility lies with the local government. It still remains a hard stance to take, especially when they have children with them, clearly at the edge of starvation. The man hopes they will be out of the city soon enough, back into the open world where it's harder to get confronted with how the countryside has declined. For certain, it can't be that bad in the capital? The place was sprawling ten years ago.

"Sure are a lot of hatori around here," Conrad brings up.

"Refugees. It's a never-ending stream. Already started when I signed up for the army. They come here in hopes of a better life. Must be pretty disappointing to end up like this."

"Maybe it's still an improvement?" Conrad wonders, not wanting to imagine how bad conditions must be over there in that case.

They don't seem to get along well with the locals. Understandable. Gleaze's inhabitants have it hard enough on their own already, without all these extra mouths to feed.

"Most of them appear to be Leporid Tribe," Adrian adds to the conversation.

Conrad nods. They're clearly the same tribe. Most of those he saw over here in Gleaze, and also increasingly in Bournesse, were leporid. Curious. Is their homeland hit the hardest? Or are they simply closer to the border?

They're easy to recognize. All tribes are, through their distinctive features. By now, Conrad has seen some of practically every tribe already. They did have hatori in the army, after all. Except Muroid Tribe. He has never seen those for some reason, only vaguely heard of them. The Tribes are called Vulpes, Leporid, Sciurini, Felis, Lupus and Muroid. What makes them instantly recognizable are their physical features. While their main bodies are identical to a regular man or woman's for the most part, these leporid have long rabbit ears and a matching, round ball of fluffy tail. Well, usually fluffy. Most here are in pretty bad shape from malnutrition.

*

The city of Ramona comes into sight. From a distance, it's already noticeable the city is not what it used to be. Walls overgrown with moss. Cracks visible everywhere, and an entire section caved in.

"This place changed..." Conrad laments the sad sight of a once great city.

"No idea, I've never seen what it used to be. Only heard the tales."

"The tales were right, I'm certain. The city looked like a shining beacon even from this distance."

Adrian can only wonder what it would have been like. He has been strangely quiet since days ago, when crossing the border. The state of his home country not exactly improved since he left it for the army. It all comes rather as a shock what he witnesses now. How can life conditions get *this* bad in so little time? **"Where to first?"** he asks, trying to shake his own thoughts off.

“Right outside the city.”

...

They both stand in front of a statue. Recent, not even a decade old. Kind of simplistic and ugly. Minimalism, they call it, apparently. Like it was crafted in a hurry, missing a greater purpose. Yet, **it's supposed to mark a great event. The slaying of a mighty beast. A hydra, symbolizing the Gold Serpents who met their end on this very same spot.**

“Couldn't they pick a better imagery to make a statue out of?” Adrian asks. “I can't imagine the temples being very happy with a hydra depiction, trampled and stabbed by men.”

Conrad can only agree. This is not going to sit right with any devoted worshipers of Cloegandr. **It's too similar. What a weird choice of the designer.** Though he has other matters on his mind to linger on that mystery. Footsteps guide him forward to a desolate place, a bit further ahead. To kneel down in somber silence, hand seeking rest on the ground. Caressing it, like a living person is right there in hand's reach.

Adrian keeps his mouth shut. He read the diary. He heard what happened afterwards from Conrad's mouth. **And he heard the stories from his own countrymen about that day.** Somebody was lost here. Someone close. A brown spot on the ground eerily resembles dried blood, even if it can't be anything related to ten years ago.

“Annette...” Conrad tries to suppress his tears. “I'm sorry... I couldn't save you.”

After a moment of silence, he stands up again and takes a similar, short pause a couple steps ahead. Each area still burned in his mind. They always will be. This new spot is **Mira's resting place. But he can't linger for very long. It has been ten years since he was here, nobody should recognize him, though a man sitting here in respect to the dead for too long is probably not wise.**

Even if he should be unrecognizable, Conrad still pulls a hood deeper over his face. If only to hide his pained expression.

Adrian tries not to pay attention to it, offering his own moment of respect for the fallen before moving on. He always heard how the Gold Serpents were vile scum who plotted against the Montagu family, assassinating mother and daughter, sending his country straight downhill from there on out. Frankly speaking, he hated them for that act.

If he hadn't known Conrad from those six years of duty, he could have strangled him with his bare hands when finding out he was once a part of them.

It was those six years which made the difference. Those helped him conclude there must be more to the story than he knew, and made him read the diary with an open mind. Realizing as he read, that all of those resting here are about as innocent as he himself is. No, more innocent than that. They never knew they were part of a grander scheme. While he knew a pointless cat and mouse game still goes on between army and cartels, and simply went along with it like everyone else.

*

Next destination after entering the city's walls is inside the aristocratic district. How to get there was a worry to Conrad. Honestly, he didn't expect to gain access without sneaking in. Or maybe buy a guard's silence. Plenty of bribery shifts hands. Finding a suitable guard through an intermediary such as a beggar, so as not to get arrested on the spot, was his main plan in mind. That worry turned out to be unnecessary.

There are hardly any guards at all, and they don't really care who enters or leaves the area. Technically, he would be allowed in the higher places anyway, never officially stripped of his rank as gentry. Yet, he couldn't exactly use that option. If they looked on the registry, his identity would be found out instantly.

It doesn't take long to find out why the guards weren't paying attention. This area is clearly not "aristocratic" anymore in any sense of the word. Difference with the old beggars' district hardly noticeable. Only a much smaller area further in the distance is still closed off to protect what little remains of the higher and middle classes, due to many of the merchants who bought themselves a title having gone bankrupt by now.

Conrad starts to grow nervous. The location he has in mind better still be around. Main reason to even come to Gleaze to begin with. Though he suddenly stops walking.

"Something wrong?" Adrian asks, as this doesn't really look like the destination his companion had in mind.

"No... Nothing, just remembrances, that's all."

He stopped at a location which he remembers clearly, yet he almost walked by without noticing. It changed that much. The last aristocrat's house he infiltrated. Where a dog almost caught him, and a servant after that, and the kids playing. Before their blind granny actually did and let him go.

Collapsed. Remains overgrown. Homeless folk occupy what little remains. It makes him wonder what must have happened to the original inhabitants. The youngest children should have been spared the aftermath of being caught in the set-up he helped lure them in, as a minimum level of comfort. Celeste definitely wasn't heartless a ruler. But witnessing this result, those innocent children playing hide and seek back then are definitely not around anymore. Are they even still alive?

...

The duo stops before a temple. At this hour of day, there should be multiple visitors, yet nobody hangs around. Not even beggars, a clear indicator how little traffic this place gets. Walls cracked and vandalized. Slanderous slogans painted on, accompanied by distasteful imagery.

It's the temple where Conrad once sought guidance before infiltrating multiple noble's houses. It's the temple where he found refuge for a short while when all descended into ruin in the span of a single night. It's the temple where Cloe gave birth, and where he was forced to let go of her hand. Forever.

"Maybe there was an accident?" Adrian tries to find a reason why the place is abandoned and in bad state. Even if they both know that can't be true. The small shrine they passed earlier wasn't in much better condition.

"Watch your pockets..." Conrad warns him. "And keep your weapon close."

Adrian notices what his compatriot hints at. Some of those homeless trail them. As outsiders wearing proper outfits, they must look like good potential targets for a lucrative robbing. Better keep their hand on the hilt, and make certain those following them can notice it. While the pair keeps anyone coming up from further ahead along the road at a distance of several paces when they pass.

They have seen it before along the journey from Bournesse. Muggings are one problem, but violent robberies are another threat entirely. Getting a knife suddenly

jabbed between your ribs from someone passing by too close is not an attractive prospect. Sadly, far from rare.

...

The few locals who still have a functional house stare with angry faces, heading back **inside if they aren't already**, at the mere sight of more outsiders. Too many of those around already.

"Lots of hatori again..." Adrian remarks.

It appears like this place turned into a ghetto where the leporid refugees settle. Those as well keep their distance from the duo and locals, sticking to their own.

Conrad tries to approach a small group, intending to ask if they know where the local priest or his wife could be. Anyone he addresses simply walks away to seek distance. Already shaking their heads to indicate they know nothing without even hearing the question.

"What's up?" a voice suddenly calls out.

He turns his head and notices a single old man stand in the entrance of his dilapidated house. One of few locals still around in this leporid ghetto neighborhood. The man is cautious, but at least he offers a hand.

Conrad opens in a more general manner. **"What happened here? This place used to be so different."**

"You've got to be talking about years ago," the old man rises his hand and waves it aside. **"Just look around. That's what happened!** Every morning a couple new dead corpses to be dragged off, robbed of their clothes. Angry faces everywhere you turn. The tall-ears, they want us gone, we want them gone. **That's all there is to it. Was already hard enough to survive before they arrived."**

The man sighs in disbelief of what his own city turned to. **"They will have to try a lot harder to drive me out of here. Most locals fled for greener pastures already, wherever that place may be these days. Or they were outright pestered away. But I was born here, and I'll die here!"**

The man turns to an incomprehensible grumble before turning his attention to both strangers standing before him again. “What do you search for around these forsaken places?”

“I’m looking for the temple’s priest or his wife. Or a relative, even...” Anyone will do, as long as they know what Conrad seeks.

“Ah, those two... Good people, they were. Truly tragic.”

Conrad’s face turns sour already. That doesn’t sound like a happy story.

“Sad to say it, but they’re no longer among the living,” the old man confirms.

“How come?” Even though he didn’t know them very well, he respects what they did for Cloe and him. When first entering this district, he still had hopes they were doing fine. They deserved that much.

“The Plague three years ago claimed them. Like it did with half this district. Dark times...” the man reminisces, eyes cast downwards in defeat. “Damn scourge took my entire family.”

Conrad heard of the Great Plague three years ago. It started in the Hatori lands, quick to spread all the way deep into Bournesse and Gleaze territory, though his stationed location was thankfully spared of it. Thinking back on those times, a plague was unavoidable with these worsening conditions. Even the river right in this city is an indicator of the cause. Rats and trash everywhere, none of it kept clean anymore. All lost to bloated bureaucracy diverting funds to more personally lucrative ventures, or simply squandered on pointless projects. Only a matter of time before a new plague starts to spread.

“The priest and his wife took care of the sick. Gave them beds and shelter, and what little food they could, together with a couple doctors who dared to stay. There were few who made it out alive, still more than otherwise would have. Sadly, the priest and his wife were not among them. And look what it brought them... What they got as thanks and respect. Their home robbed and vandalized, some of it by those they saved!”

The man grumbles angrily again. “Never should have bothered taking those ingrates in...” After coughing to clear his throat, he asks what Conrad wanted to see them for.

“Do you know about a pair of children brought to them? A girl and a boy, one newly born, the other almost a year old.”

“Oh, for the orphanage? Yeah, happened regularly. I knew the place they brought any children to. My wife, bless her soul, grew up in it. Funded by the Prime Temple. A decent home. Far more so than what this place turned into...”

“Which means...?” Conrad grows hopeful. Eager to ask where this orphanage is, though the old man is ahead of him.

“Sorry to say, but that place is no more. It couldn’t exist with the temple’s funds reduced to the meager handouts they are now. The Union wants to cut down on their influence.”

“And the children?” Conrad asks.

“They were gone already by then. Sent to other places for their own safety when the Plague got going. I don’t know where,” the old man gives the sad news. Contemplating afterwards the plague just might be divine punishment for abandoning their rituals and traditions. He turns back to Conrad when noticing he lost hope of ever finding out where the only other survivors of the disaster ten years ago could be. “Like I said, they were sent across the country, away from locations hit by the Plague. Their chances of being alive are high.”

High, but not certain. Not that there’s a way of knowing more at this point in time. Conrad thanks the man for his information and leaves the district dejected.

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“What happened to the mother?” Adrian asks, not really sure if he should ask. If she was left behind or they got separated, she might be hiding somewhere. Two minds are better than one at figuring out where to go from here.

“That’s where we go to right now,” Conrad answers.

Adrian turns silent, realizing where they come to a stop. It’s the execution platform. He tries to form some words, before Conrad stops him.

“It’s fine, I understand.”

“What was her name?”

“Cloe.”

“And your daughter?”

“Lisette.”

Conrad has no issues stating their names, nor with Adrian asking for them. His friend merely inquires to spare some thoughts for them. Give those thoughts more substance through at least a name.

The hood covering Conrad is pulled further over his head as he silently observes this particular part of the city which survived unscathed these ten years, like he stepped through a portal back into time. Almost expecting to find a familiar face on the wooden platform in front of him. Yet there's not a single soul to be seen, while everyone in the area avoids the platform. Fingers cramp around the cloth in agony. Hood not meant to hide his identity. Who among the locals would even recognize him now? More meant to cover his emotions.

What bubbled uncontrollably once arriving at the spot where the mercenaries were once upon a time camped, now overflows in a stream of salty tears. Only some semblance of restraint possible through that other emotion which kept him alive since then. Rage. At Grimald, while equally at himself.

Not a single one... He couldn't save a single one. That Lisette and Roderik made it out was not thanks to him. And in the end, he had to be knocked out by Harald, or he himself would be captured. Wasting Cloe's determination to stay behind.

Conrad bites his lip to try and avert his rage back into the back of his mind. As if he wants to store it, safeguard it, for a fated day in the future he seeks. His anger should not be wasted on his own lamentations. There's someone else out there who deserves it far more. Thoughts move back to the one remnant still binding him with Cloe in the world of the living. Their daughter. **“I won't give up on her. I will find her.”**

Adrian keeps silent, letting his friend do whatever he wants. Not concerned about prying eyes observing them from aside. No need to. Sure, the reason behind **Conrad's** emotion is obvious to guess, and the hood **doesn't** succeed at preventing it from being

seen. But that's okay. The platform has fresh stains on it. This macabre place sees regular use.

There will be plenty of inhabitants around who secretly harbor similar feelings. Their gazes more meant out of envy than curiosity. Envy, that this man next to him is capable of showing his bond with whoever ended on that platform. Something most cannot do. Stifled by the most powerful of emotions. Fear. Afraid to be picked out by a guard and put on the platform themselves. Terrified of being associated with whatever crime which brought the mourned onto that platform to begin with.

While in contrast, this man has no such fears at all. Ten years ago, people would have said his ancestors would be proud of him. Now, most lack the courage to even face those ancestors, if they even care about them anymore. And as such, they envy the man, for they stare into a mirror of what they could have been, yet have long lost.

"There was another..." Conrad bites through the bitterness.

"Another person lost here?" Adrian asks, eyes not averting from the platform for the entire duration they have been here.

"My mentor."

Adrian doesn't have to think on who is referred to. He did read Harald's diary.

"Gutted everyone who took out his wife..." Conrad finds some pride in his voice again. While he never saw the result, or heard of it, he knows it to be true. Odwin's facial expression in his last moments revealed as much.

"Must have been one heck of a tough bastard."

Adrian's words don't ring hollow. Odwin's participation in the tournament was mentioned in the diary. And he knows firsthand how challenging it is to lead a company of men into battle. This guy has done it on the front-line of a brutal war, not mere raids against bandits. Besides, Adrian knows his friend's skills in combat. Their origins had always been a mystery, until recently.

"I'd like to hear a couple stories about him on our journey," he adds.

"I've got plenty..." Conrad answers.

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With a lingering stare, the duo marches on, deeper into a particular part of the city. **Right near the main barracks and a gate leading behind a second wall. They can't go any further, even if Conrad wants to. That's okay. He can spot his destination from here.** Fingers rubbing over his thumb which once signed a deadly contract, where a scar still serves as a painful reminder of how powerful forbidden magic can be, and what ruin it can lead to.

The castle towers into the sky, further ahead. Another part of the city which survived relatively unscathed. Conrad can still remember what lies behind every door and window. A once magically protected gateway to better times. A since long broken ward into the worst of times.

"This is where it all went wrong..." he mumbles to his comrade.

Adrian nods. He's aware what transpired. Conrad told him in his own words, before they set out.

"I'm... sorry," Conrad gives a plea. Short, while filled with emotion.

Sorry, for betraying Celeste's trust in him. Sorry, for the disaster he brought onto Charlotte. Both of them the individuals who led him to seek out this part of the city in his tour of reminiscence. **And one other person he apologizes to... One who was not around that fateful day...**

The back of a fist bumps into his shoulder. **"Apology accepted,"** Adrian answers straightforward.

A bit of that heavy weight falls from Conrad's shoulders. He has apologized at all these places, and at least one person can still answer.

Adrian had no need to ask what the apology was for. These last days in particular have not been easy on him. Even from back in the countryside, this is *not* the Gleaze he remembers from before signing up into the army. It has not left him unfazed. All because the country is left with an empty throne. And the man who can be held responsible, from a certain perspective, stands **right next to him. He won't take that perspective.** Though he won't reject the apology either. Not whimper it off with an "Oh, you don't have to feel that way. It was not your fault."

Such words are for the weak. Be it by ulterior powers or not, Conrad *still* was involved. Either to accept or reject his sincere words of regret are the only paths to take. Not trying to meander out of it like a coward while leaving the other party burdened with unsettled business. And Conrad couldn't be more grateful to his friend for taking this path.

*

As they walk back towards the outskirts of the city, Adrian tries to lift the mood while not straying from the purpose of their visit. "Cloe and Conrad... From the legend?"

"You know of it?" Conrad asks.

"Picked it up when I was young. Always had an interest for folklore and history."

"Sure you didn't hear the propaganda version?"

"Oh, the old pamphlets from before Queen Celeste's rule?"

Conrad shows some surprise on his face. He remembered what Celeste explained him during his time as her lover-boy. How her grandfather sent out propaganda against Bournesse in the form of defiling their sacred myths and icons. Very similar to what the Union is doing now. He had no idea how much the regular folk knew about that revisionism attempt.

"Hey, I wouldn't be into history if I didn't know *that* much," Adrian answers. "I had a knack for figuring out what was true, and what got more than just the regular *spin to it*."

"Can't be a ladies' man without the ability to detect truth from lies," Conrad shows a fragile laugh in return.

"Now you get it," Adrian smiles, relieved the dark mood from this day finally shows a couple cracks.

As they turn the corner leading back onto the main street, Conrad suddenly bumps into someone.

"Whoops, my bad..." he says, realizing he wasn't paying attention after all that heavy emotion loosened through a bad joke. Stepping backwards as an automated response, and feeling the ground beneath him give way as his foot slips over a loose pavement stone.

Avoiding a curse at the last moment to keep manners and decorum in the presence of the stranger he just bumped into, he simply gives a low grunt at the pain of his rear hitting the ground.

“Oh no, it was entirely my fault,” a voice replies.

Conrad’s mind instantly warps back through time at the sound reaching his ears. That voice, it’s one he remembers all too well. A voice which strikes a myriad of emotions like a master musician playing an instrument. Surprise, shock, disbelief, **anger... and fear.**

He looks up towards the figure he bumped into. A man, dressed in fancy and expensive clothes, accompanied by what can only be servants dressed in blue and white. One of those servants addresses their master.

“Milord?”

The addressed man casually whimpers off the question. **“I’m fine.”** Then he focuses his attention to the individual who collided into him, still sitting on the ground in total silence. **“That’s a daring thing to do, bumping into an Archduke.”**

Conrad lowers his face, wanting to reach for the hood to pull it deeper, though he refrains in time. Trying to avoid stirring any further suspicion by covering himself up more. He simply keeps his head low, while the man before him offers a hand to help him stand up.

It’s the ruler of the land in all but name. All political power in his reach with the Throne left empty and the Union having delegated the task to him. The former Duke, now Archduke. The man who taught Conrad that cursing in the presence of a stranger is bad decorum.

But above all, his arch-nemesis.

Grimald.

Hesitating at first, Conrad reaches for the offered hand yet refuses to hold on to it, hanging still right in front. Until Grimald latches on by the wrist, using force to pull him up.

He gets on his two feet, aided by the Archduke. **“My apologies, Milord,”** Conrad lowers his head further, hiding his face as best he can. Their status difference makes for a fine excuse.

The archduke **keeps holding on to Conrad's wrist.**

Even though Conrad only saw him for a short while before looking away, **it's like** the man **hasn't aged** a single day since. Not a wrinkle more. Not even a subtle change in his voice. Presence as overbearing as ever.

Why **doesn't** he let go?! Panic rises within Conrad at the possibility he was recognized.

Grimald stares in silence like a hawk who could strike at any moment, leaving his own servants confused what occurs. Until the hand suddenly **loosens its grip around Conrad's** wrist, and it feels like the air itself around the men is lifting. **"Ah, seems like I was lost in thought,"** he **mentions.** "Well then, I shall take my leave. Do take care not to bump into any others."

And his hand drops to his side, walking past Conrad without casting a further look at him. Both servants follow, **satisfied this incident didn't turn into a big deal.**

...

"Why didn't you take him out?" Adrian asks, though he already knows the answer.

"Impossible..." Conrad bites his growing anger and frustration, nails digging into his fists.

Yeah, that's about what Adrian expected as an answer. And he can't exactly deny it. There was something very weird and unsettling about that man, like the air turned cold as a deep winter's night once these fated men faced each other. A powerful aura radiated from the one dressed in clothes befitting an Archduke.

"Fuck, man... So that's the guy connected to that monster..." Adrian affirms to himself.

Unable to deny the eerie chills he felt earlier. Conrad is right. Impossible. All instincts honed during their military service screamed full-time at him, to take distance from what stood before him. No man can evoke such a feeling. However, according to that diary, **that's no mere man. A sorcerer at best, a monster at worst. On a whole different plane of existence than the mage they fought not that long ago. Taking up arms against the Archduke right here and now, would be akin to casting away one's life in an instant.**

Conrad reaches for his wrist, rubbing over it, trying to get the taint of Grimald off it.

Not yet... He can't face him yet. He needs answers first. And that's what the diary will lead him to, if he can get there.

“We leave right now,” he speaks with determination.

Their job in the capital is done.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 3



Thieves and Shadows

The border between Gleaze and the Hatori lands is near. As the travelling duo closes the distance, the amount of hatori refugees increases. **It's hard to tell where the border even is at this point.** For all they know, this might already be beyond, right into Muroid Tribe territory. Or what once was Muroid. Not many of those around anymore. They already were in decline from before the Hatori Tribe Wars.

After becoming the dominant tribe at some point in their history, they became particularly focused on appeasement and harm-avoidance. Survival instincts no longer tested. Senses no longer polished. Cunning shifted into a self-gratifying narcissism. Drive to compete lulled into an eternal sleep. Wisdom lost to blind, pacifying sheepishness. And they had the luxury to allow for it. As a result, all genetic qualities which made them great were gradually lost over time. They offered barely any resistance during the war, happy to

give away what little they had to the foreign other, to try and co-exist without any conflict.

Needless to say, already on the decline by then and with hardly anything left to call their own, muroid are now practically a dying breed. Especially after all these migration streams flooded into what was once their homeland. At one time too pacifist to resist their own demise, now since long having lost the spirit to offer any resistance, fading into the dark of night, never to walk under the light again.

Conrad can't help but ponder on such matters when observing the numerous tribe members he passes. It's like history repeats itself, and all of them walk that same path as the muroid once did. Defeat visible in the eyes of every man, woman and child. The fire of resentment still present in those who reached into Gleaze and Bournesse drowned out rapidly. Only left demoralized and broken.

"Let's get this job done," Conrad draws his vision away, before that defeat becomes contagious. He has no place for it.

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The chirping of birds and lush of greenery inside the forest makes the scene from a couple hours ago feel like a bad dream. Both men are here for one reason. Well, two reasons, to be honest. When given an option, they prefer this kind of green environment over the drab hovels and makeshift shanties they passed these last couple days. However, there's a primary reason for being in this particular forest. They have a job to do here. At least... Somewhere. If only this map was drawn by someone with more skill than a five-year-old who took a master class from a blind man.

"Would be so much easier if one of us could read tracks," Adrian grumbles.

Conrad keeps his voice low when replying. "Not part of the military curriculum. Trust me, at this point, I wish it was."

He turns the map around. Maybe it has to be read upside down? Why didn't the creative genius behind this rag even add a basic directional marker? Damn amateurs... How will they ever find what they look for?

“Why do we even take these kind of jobs? Won’t our salary last quite a while?”

Conrad gestures Adrian to be a bit more silent when asking these questions. Let’s not scare off the prey. Not that it’s hard to understand why he would like to know. They do have it quite wealthy, compared to regular citizens. They were Union officers, technically speaking. As much as the Union skimps on its citizens and sucks them empty with heavy taxes, it pays its own bloated bureaucracies quite well. And the military’s officer corps is naturally a part of that, even the lower officers.

“We have no idea how long this journey will take, or what will follow after. Got to be prudent,” Conrad explains. Most would blow through their assets, trusting they wouldn’t run out before the goal is achieved. When the goal’s destination is vague, that’s a risky and haughty attitude to hold.

Adrian groans. A fair assessment. He can’t really counter that argument. So, performing odd jobs along the way it shall be then. Eh, this bounty hunt does promise more action than the last job, where they had to help with chopping down trees all day long. His arms can still feel the hurt. As a comfort, what happened after made it well worth the effort.

“Hmm...” the man forms a smirk on his face again.

“What?” Conrad asks, curious about the sudden mood change.

“Oh, nothing. I just reminisced about our job from two days ago.”

“Don’t remind me of it...” Conrad grumbles. “I was barely off to sleep when all that yelling woke me up again. And to top it all off, I was forced to pack our shit up and make a run for it.”

Adrian shrugs his shoulders. “But she asked for it. What else could I do than to lead her over one of those trees we chopped down and give the woman what she wanted, like a true gentleman would?”

“She was just married that day. Didn’t even have her wedding night yet.”

“Perfect timing I’d say.”

Conrad shakes his head in disbelief. This guy and married women... Their own employer’s wife, no less.

“Hey, we did get paid already,” Adrian follows up. “That’s the second most important thing about that entire ordeal.”

“What’s the first then?”

The man puts a wide, boastful smile on his face in reply. “We finished in time before her husband found out.”

Conrad can’t help a subtle grin himself while shaking his head again. Until he suddenly stops and gestures for silence.

Adrian looks towards where his comrade points, mood turning serious. That has to be it! The location where their bounty awaits, by whatever miracle led them here, because it certainly wasn’t the map.

A large wolf’s den. Not a regular wolf, but a breed rare and almost extinct. A dire wolf.

The beast doesn’t show itself, but scratch marks are visible on the nearby rock. Those do look similar to a large wolf’s paw. Or bear. Leopard maybe, if it’s a really large one? Only one way to find out if they hit the jackpot. Endangered species or not, it’s got a price on its head for taking out five villagers already.

When left to choose between hatori lives or a dire wolf, it’s an easy choice. And a good source of income for their journey by picking up the bounty contract. Not that anyone else around these poverty-struck areas has the means to put such a beast down. In fact, two of those casualties were wannabe hunters who took the contract before, probably desperate for coin and way out of their league for such a beast.

Wind direction is right ahead, so it shouldn’t be able to smell them approach. Now, where to best fight the damn thing? Lure it outside? Or fight inside the cave?

A hand signal from Conrad later, both men split up. Still staying away from the wind direction, while increasing their chances at least one of them can catch the wolf in case it were to storm out of its cave and make a run for it. Once it considers its home a lost cause and no longer returns here, this job will be as good as a failure. Financially, not a desirable outcome. However, far more important, the beast would then be free to keep terrorizing locals. It’s only a matter of time before it attacks an unfortunate child.

Swords drawn, both men approach the entrance to the dark cave. Almost pitch-black inside, far from optimal for human eyes. The wolf on the other hand won’t have that

much issues to see them come. And at this point, right before entering, might have smelled them approach already.

A spark follows after fire-stones collide. The torch Adrian brought along lightens up in response. A single nod to each other follows, and the first steps are taken inside.

Conrad sniffs through his **nose. It stinks like rot in here. Must be from a prey's carcass** which was dragged inside. A reliable indicator those claw marks at the entrance **aren't** old. Heart beats with adrenaline. A different kind of adrenaline than during a traditional battle. This is the excitement of a hunt, where hunter can be turned into prey at a **moment's notice. All senses boosted to the max, because all predictability has been left** at the entrance to this cave.

This is no man, hatori or uskandarian they are about to face, where some measure of action can be expected ahead of time. Not a battlefield where you see the cavalry prepare in the distance, and you already know what comes your way. No, this is the realm of a creature. And it can appear in an instant, from any direction, driven by what no man can ever understand, for reason has no place here. Only instinct, honed by hundreds of thousands in years of evolution, reaching near perfection.

Another bend. The cave is a lot deeper and larger than it appeared from the outside. Conrad tries to keep an eye out for side passages, though **it's hard to do with this little** light and this dark and wide a cave. Damn, they should have brought a second torch! But **there's no turning back now. This cave's master will already know its home** is compromised.

The men stop. They found the source of the foul odor. Has to be one of the previous hunters. What little is left of him. Large canine teeth-marks visible where meat and bone alike has been cleaved off. A reminder what happens when a mere job turns afoul.

The torch flickers. Conrad can feel a tingle run **over his body. These creatures aren't** the only ones who still have fully honed instincts! Entire body instantly turns to the side, where nothing but dark cave wall should be. Sword already lifts, yet will it be in time?!

"Front!" he yells to his comrade.

Adrian wastes no time and turns away from Conrad, trusting his words blindly. Facing forward in the direction they were going. Hearing to his side where Conrad stands something large lunged forward, he simply ignores it.

Conrad raises the sword with every ounce of speed and strength he can muster. That flicker just earlier, it was nothing other than a soft breeze. Flame blown aside, rather than back towards the entrance or deeper into the cave. That could only mean one thing, and he guessed it in the nick of time.

A large dire wolf jumps forward at him, from a well-hidden side passage. The beast waited in silence for just the right moment. As if the animal was smart enough to pounce only when these intruders stumbled onto the carcass of their predecessor, attention diverted for a short while. A while that should have been sufficient to seal the deal.

A loud yelp of pain reverberates throughout the cave when the sword finds its target, lifted up barely quick enough through nothing other than instinct feeling the threat approach. Weight of the wolf still bears down on Conrad, making him fall over backwards, together with the large animal.

However, **Adrian doesn't help. He does exactly as** asked. As they have done during their years in the military. That which got them out alive through countless dangerous situations. **Trust each other's back. Facing forward at** another dire wolf that appeared from deeper in the cave. Working in tandem with the one Conrad struggles with. A fire of pure hate burns in its eyes after hearing the cry of pain from its mate. Rage drives the beast forward into battle.

Adrian bites his teeth in pain, left arm lifted up defensively. A monstrous biting force starts to crush all around the metal bracer. A similar weight that pushed down his friend now bears down on him.

It's now or never! Either his sword finds the wolf while it got its teeth in the bracer, or the beast will quickly shift to **the man's** neck.

Another loud yelp later, all turns dark and quiet, torch dimmed after it got dropped.

"Good God!" a voice calls out from underneath the corpse of a wolf. Conrad wrestles himself free from **the animal's weight.** **"This animal weighs a ton!"**

“Bloody heck! This one’s still alive!” Adrian yells from somewhere next to him in the darkness. “I can feel it move!”

“That’s just me. I’ll help get it off.”

“Don’t move! Where’s that damn torch?” Adrian grumbles after crawling up.

Conrad knows what his friend insinuates. Better not go far, indeed. They’re not out of danger yet. Sure, any more **wolves won’t be an issue anymore. If there were, they would** have attacked already while both men were down on the ground. Regardless, this cave is huge, and who knows how deep and far it reaches. If they lose their bearing now, they could end up lost, never to find the exit again. Their best hope is the dimmed torch which should be around here somewhere.

“You stay in position, I’ll go look,” Conrad says.

Adrian sits down on the spot. He will act as a beacon. Letting his voice be heard at all times, so his friend has a good idea where he is, not straying far while searching the nearby area for the dropped torch. **Probably got stuck underneath a wolf’s body and** dimmed through lack of oxygen.

“Got it!” he can’t hold back a cheer of victory afterwards. After lighting it again with the fire-stones, they can spot both wolves on the ground. Their swords still stuck in them. “It’s almost sad it had to end like this.”

Adrian mumbles in agreement. Sure, it was an easy choice to make and a job that had to be done. They were too much of a threat. Still, one has to admire how cunning the dire wolves ambushed the intruders. Few would have made it out alive. He wants to believe the animals left the carcass here on purpose, as a trick.

“Let’s get them out,” Conrad says. “I don’t want to risk the torch going out again.”

Both men drag the wolves, one after the other, to the cave’s entrance. The contract will require proof the deed is done. Cutting off the head will do.

“Think we’ll get double the pay?” Adrian asks.

“Nah. Contract only said one. But the fur will sell for good coin.” And it will also serve as proof the locals are free from their menace, far less wasteful as a nice extra. It would be a shame and show of disrespect to the animal not to use what can be used, the fur in particular.

“Maybe we could keep the furs in reserve? Can always make use of it meanwhile,” Adrian suggests.

“Not a bad idea. Alright, let’s cut off the head then for our bounty, we’ll keep the furs for now.”

Nights aren’t cold yet, though similar as with the coin question, you never know what the future brings. In addition, the furs of such a rare animal will make for a good reserve fund.

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A couple hours later, both men sit at a campfire deeper in the forest. They don’t have to go back to collect the bounty. The notice was picked up in the previous village, while the employer is actually from the next one. Should save some time in not having to make a detour. Unfortunately, it already turned late after skinning the wolves and marching through the woods. They won’t get out before dark, and with both of them unfamiliar to these woods it’s best to set up camp here, with a cozy fire burning. Roasting wolf meat tempts both men to take a bite already, even if they will have to wait a while longer. Not ready yet.

“What’s wrong? Wolf got you?” Adrian asks after noticing his friend rubs his wrist.

“Nah, it’s only red and itchy, that’s all.”

“Maybe from the fall?”

Conrad shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah, maybe,” not all that assured for whatever reason. “Ever had wolf before?” he changes the topic.

“Nope. But I’ve heard it’s very lean with a strong taste.”

“Fits the smell,” Conrad answers, not meant in a bad way. “Would be great when cooked in a pot with beer.” They do have a pot, sadly no beer.

Adrian reaches for his travel pack and grins when pulling out a corked bladder.

“You’re kidding…” his comrade starts to smile himself.

“Guess again. Filled with beer. What, you think I wasn’t going in prepared when knowing we’re on a wild game hunt?”

Conrad reaches out for the pot. “So that’s why you brought this damn thing along?!” he laughs at Adrian, getting another haughty stare in return from the blond man.

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The fire crackles with the occasional spark flying out. A subtle whoosh audible when a new piece of log is thrown on and catches fire after heating up. As the pot containing meat boils with water from the river nearby, spiced with plenty of beer, roasted pieces are eaten as a preparatory side-dish. Until a sudden crack of dried wood makes both men look up.

A pair of bright, green eyes stares right at them. The owner freezes up when witnessing two armed men around a campfire. Eyes shift all over the place. Their weapons, the fire, their possessions, the furs drying while hanging over a branch near the fire, and then back to the weapons.

“It’s okay, we’re not going to do anything,” Conrad says, lifting his hands to reveal they don’t hold a blade.

He looks at a young girl. A hatori, Leporid Tribe. Her large rabbit ears lower. A sign she still feels uncomfortable. The outside is a very light shade of brown fur, the inside an equally furry pure-white. One of her ears is floppy. Other than those features, basically no different from a regular girl.

She turns to the direction she came from, peering somewhere in the distance. For that short duration, the men can spot her short, **fluffy rabbit’s tail** in that same brown as her ears and hair. Then she turns around again, while twin-tails hanging from a hair bun on each side of her head bounce lively. The girl is skittish. Quick on her feet and ready to make a run for it. Holding tight onto a bag held over her back.

Conrad repeats for her. “Don’t worry. We’re not bad folks. Look over there, see? We hunted a bounty for the village.”

She already noticed the furs anyway, and the wolf head they brought along.

Her ears begin to rise slowly. A sign she starts to believe what he says. Gaze shifting back into the forest where she came from. Then starting to walk away, a lingering attention aimed at the direction of the campfire.

“And... Bye?” Conrad says when the girl runs off.

“Shouldn’t we follow her?” Adrian asks.

“Nah, it’s fine.”

She’s obviously pursued, mindful of whoever could be following. Considering she’s a little girl running around with a bag, yeah, Conrad needs not ponder on what’s going on here.

“Little thief?” his friend openly states what they both already suspected.

“Probably.” That’s what the bag on her back must have contained. Stolen goods. Why else would she appear to be on the run?

“Not stopping her, ey?” Adrian grabs another piece of roasted meat and takes a chomp from it.

“Nope. Not part of our contract.” It’s not like Conrad can’t understand the thieving way of life. In particular these days. He had to go through it himself before joining the military. Some would consider it morally wrong to let her go. Life isn’t **always that** simple, however.

...

The pot is pulled from the fire. Ready to be eaten after a good hour of simmering.

“Yummy!” Adrian hungers after breathing in deeply, inhaling the odor of wolf meat, cooked in rich beer stock.

As Conrad wants to pour some out into the first bowl, he stops. “**Busy day** in the forest...” he mumbles. Ahead of him, at the exact same spot where the tall-ear girl passed about an hour ago, now stands a different person of tiny stature. “Hello there,” he greets the stranger.

Startled. That’s about the best impression he can get from this newcomer. Definitely didn’t expect to barge in on the camp of a couple armed men, their swords clearly visible in hand reach, outside of their sheath.

“Oh, don’t worry about those,” Conrad explains, noticing where startled eyes are aimed at. “We’re only here to help out the nearby village. Bounty on that big, bad wolf over there. Adrian is just about to finish cleaning our weapons while we wait for our juicy

meal.” He raises his thumb towards the wolf’s head resting nearby as proof of the bounty. “But it’s too late to head on, so we set up camp here for the night.”

The stranger doesn’t appear all that confident, though at least the story manages to ease the instant fear.

“In need of help?” Adrian opens his mouth.

A tiny shake of the head. Still not confident. A clear indicator that yes, help would be appreciated, yet unwilling to ask. Probably too afraid still.

“Let me guess,” Conrad says. “You’re looking for a girl.” He brings both hands to his head and flaps them like rabbit ears. “One like this.”

All confidence issues suddenly drop to the wayside, and the stranger takes a single step forward. Mouth opens, while nothing comes out. Then the individual freezes up again, keeping distance.

Conrad can guess what this newcomer wanted to ask. “Yeah, we saw her. Passed by here about an hour ago,” he lifts his thumb again to point a direction. “She went that way.”

Uncertainty lingers on the stranger’s face. What to do now? Clearly seeking to leave, to subsequently head in that pointed direction. Yet, unsure how to break contact with these two armed men.

“We’re not going to stop you, feel free to chase her. But honestly, I wouldn’t advise it.” Curious and fearful eyes look at him, making Conrad wonder if he should have phrased that last part a bit less threatening. “No, really, I mean it. Nothing to do with us. It’s just, you try to track her, right?”

The person nods.

“That’s some impressive skills you have there. Neither of us could track even a giant. But I do know one conclusion. You’re never going to catch up to her.”

It only makes sense. The leporid girl has no need to observe her environment. She can simply go at her own pace wherever she wants to. And as a thief, she probably knows these woods well enough and heads straight to the nearest town to blend in. Not stopping for the night, erasing all chance to find her. This person in pursuit, on the other hand, has to pay attention to tracks left behind, all alone. No way is catching up in the cards.

“Sorry to say it, but that’s a lost cause,” Conrad stops explaining.

His words seem to have effect. Reality sets in for the stranger. That thief was followed for a while now, never with any indication of drawing closer. And true, once the village is reached, it’s over. Too many others around so tracking becomes impossible. Exactly because of having this skill, denying **the man’s** logic is impossible to do.

“Stole something valuable?” he asks.

The stranger’s **mouth** begins to open, while once more no voice comes out, simply pointing to oneself.

Conrad sighs. Personal goods, eh? Those can be more precious than mere valuables. Maybe he really should have stopped the thief, rather than let her go. At a minimum, get the stolen goods off her back so they could be returned. Too late now.

He points at the simmering pot. “**There’s plenty for three. Why not join us for a bite?**” Part of the invitation is because he feels bad about having let this **individual’s** private goods get lost, while another part has to do with their environment. “**You’re not getting out of this forest before nightfall. It’s best to stay the night in a safe spot and with a full stomach.**”

The strange individual **hesitates**. Hungry, definitely, but even so... Those weapons...

Adrian opens his mouth, adding strength to Conrad’s words. “Look at the size of this bad boy here,” he taps his palm on the large head of the dire wolf. “Even carrying it was a chore. Who knows what else lives in these woods? Don’t want to get caught alone at night. I’d take his offer if I were you.”

Conrad fills the bowl with soup and a good chunk of meat, offering it to the stranger. “Here. Consider it our amends for letting the thief go. I’m Conrad, he’s Adrian.”

The stranger carefully shuffles closer. Still, no words appear. Only a piece of paper is shown. “Albert”, it says, offering a name behind the identity.

Conrad’s vision shifts shortly to his friend in mutual understanding. Albert? Yeah, that’s a fake name alright. The fragile posture hidden under dirty boy’s clothes, that cutesy face covered by an oversized hood, those curls of dark brown hair, wild but feminine. That’s not a boy. Hiding a girly voice? Or can she not speak?

“Alright, Albert. Nice to meet you,” he plays along. A fake identity for a girl who travels **alone...** Yeah, not a bad idea from her. Though she needs to work on her disguise. Even the way she nibbles **that bowl’s contents is too gentle and girly refined to act the part of a rough boy.** Should put that meat in her mouth and yank it to pieces with tasteful vigor.

Her eyes go for the weapons again, finding it hard to stray from them.

Conrad notices she has a small dagger hidden under her clothes. “My colleague here is almost done with them. If you want, he can **take care of your dagger too.**”

“Sure, no big deal,” that colleague confirms. “I like messing around with blades. Makes me feel like a tiring day truly comes to an end.”

“Of course, you can hold on to my dagger meanwhile,” Conrad eases her worries she would be left unarmed. Taking his own dagger, he flips it around, holding it by the pointy end to lay it down in hand reach of this mysterious Albert.

Once more, no words come. Only an asking pair of eyes.

“What, you don’t clean your weapon?” Conrad asks.

Panic appears on her face, and a clear confusion on how she should answer. Eventually, she grabs a stick and writes in the ground. “Why?”

“Well, if you use it, a blade definitely needs cleaning.”

The girl takes her small, hidden dagger and hesitantly hands it over, already holding on to the one Conrad gave her as replacement for security.

The man takes a closer look at it. “Oh boy...” he murmurs, noticing right away the horrible state this dagger is in. He chuckles out loud and addresses the girl. “Let’s conclude **you better keep that dagger over there, this one is only good for the scrap heap.**”

The girl stares down apologetically, realizing she must have mishandled the blade, not the slightest idea what went wrong. She always put it into its sheath after use, and cleaned it from blood, left behind by the small animals she hunted for food and furs.

Noticing her lack of knowledge, Conrad explains as a means to help close the distance she keeps. “Look, see?” he points to Adrian. “Beside him you can notice the cloth used to clean the blade, soaked in oil. Then it was polished and sharpened, with handguard

removed to ensure no blood can leak under it, and now he just finished adding another layer of oil to the blade.”

“Water?” the girl writes down with that same stick as before.

“Ah...” Conrad sighs. That’s what he thought already. She must have always used water to clean her dagger. “No, water will only make it rust. That’s why we use oil.” And not only for the quality of the blade which will last far longer. Cutting oneself on a badly maintained, bloodied or rusted blade can turn serious very quickly.

The girl picks up the dagger he gave her, already smelling a bit of that oil. “I can...?” her facial expression asks of him without words.

“Yeah, you can keep it as replacement. Consider it another form of amends.”

She suddenly clings onto the blade like it’s something precious. Affirming to herself it’s now her possession, given to her in good faith by this stranger. Source of her feelings not that big of a surprise to Conrad. It must be rare these days, to receive a handout like this without any strings attached.

“You can’t speak?” he asks the girl.

A vague gesture returns from her. A half yes, half no.

“I understand,” Conrad replies. “No need to try and force it.” He has seen it before. Rare, yet not unheard of. Losing the ability to speak as result of an event in the past which must have left her scarred, not in body, but in mind. Perhaps one day she will find the strength again to let her voice be known to the world. “How old are you?” he follows up. “You seem quite young to wander around alone in the forest.”

She writes down again.

Sixteen?! Yeah, that can only be another lie. She looks ten or so. Well, whatever. She must have her reasons.

Conrad rubs his own wrist before grabbing another bowl for himself. Damn that itchy red spot! It’s still not gone.

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It's the middle of night. All three went to sleep. This Albert figure stayed awake for quite a while, clinging onto the gifted dagger, maybe expecting one of these two strangers to approach her at night. Tiredness eventually overcame the girl. Now firmly lost in the land of dreams.

...

A faint rustle, only audible to the animals of the night, followed by a dim shadow caused by the campfire. The shadow dances in eerie silence, a distorted shape of a person, sneaking closer. It heads towards a specific spot. Where a man rests, covered by a blanket. A spot where his sword is partially visible nearby, held on to in his sleep. A spot where a pair of furs hang. **The shadow's hand starts** to reach out. Slow and silent like a stalking predator, determined.

The hand suddenly retracts when the blanket is flung aside, that sword revealed! **It's** too late for whoever tried to reach the furs. Already latched on to by the wrist, the man who pretended to be asleep not relenting in his steeled grip.

"Nah-ah, that's not for you!" Conrad says, quickly rising to his feet.

Adrian is second to rise, asleep till now, fast to get a grasp on what plays out. Only Albert wakes up in fear, confused by what's going on, clinging onto the dagger.

A leporid girl has her wrist caught in the grip of Conrad. Direction of her stealthy reach still visible, aimed at the furs.

"Knew you would come back for these," her captor grins at her. "No good thief would resist the temptation of very rare and very expensive dire wolf pelts."

The hatori is in shock. Even so, how did he know she was a thief?! Or even that she was skilled enough to recognize a dire wolf's fur!

"Should have hidden those pretty green eyes scanning over our possessions better, girl. They lingered too long on the furs." With pupils widened, no less. She knew the value at that very moment.

*

Adrian finished tying the girl's hands with rope while Conrad held her in check. Not very easy, as she sure was acting wild. Kicking, screaming, she even tried to bite him. Not that she could resist an adult man at her young age. Estimating her at around the same age as "Albert". Not really a wonder she tried to fight so hard, he knows well enough what happens to thieves when they're caught and handed in.

Her large, furry ears hang low over her face. For now, she's dominated by anger at the one who caught her, and her own failure. That emotion won't stay once reality starts to dawn.

"What's your name?" Conrad asks.

The girl turns away. Anger already shifting into that natural other emotion which always follows. Fear.

"Let me go!"

"Tell us your name first."

Her lips shiver. Yeah, the fear really begins to set in now. "C... Carrot. Let me go, please!"

"Some questions first, Carrot. See that girl over there?" Conrad points at Albert. Only now does the man realize he just gave out his knowledge she's a girl in disguise, but that should be okay by now. The person in question showed some shock at that fact, while attention is already drawn back to their captive. Hope shines in her eyes she may get to see her personal possessions again!

Carrot nods, shivering.

"You stole something from her, yeah?"

Rabbit ears twitch as she nods again, by now fully lowering onto her head in fear.

"Our young guest would like her stolen goods back now."

Carrot awkwardly shakes her head. "I can't. Please let me go. They'll cut off my hand!"

Conrad nods. True, that's what happens to thieves who are caught without enough coin to bribe their way out. They lose a hand, and if they're lucky enough, they also survive the injury.

Realizing Conrad **doesn't answer** her pleas, she rattles out her reason for not returning the goods. **"It's too late! I already handed them in to a contact. They're already at the fence by now! You have to believe me!"**

Conrad grabs her wrist and pulls back her sleeve. If she's **not lying, then...** He sighs when noticing the young thief has a marking. Not a fire brand, but a small body painting on her upper arm. She does belong to a larger bandit group. **"I'm afraid she speaks the truth,"** he turns to Albert.

He hoped the culprit would be a lone thief. Those tend to operate on their own principles. However, since she's part of a bandit group, yeah, those tend to have strict routines on how to handle stolen merchandise.

The leporid girl already tries to give weight behind her words, show they are true. **"We always give our goods to a courier heading towards the fence. No carrying them around. Too dangerous! Must shift hands!"**

Conrad nods to Albert. She's not wrong. That's how the cartels operate. Stolen goods tend to shift hands multiple times before they end up at the fence, which all happens in a quick and organized time-span so the thief can keep on stealing non-stop. **It's** surprisingly a system which relies on trust within a clan of thieves, robbers and murderers.

All it takes is for one pair of hands to claim a stolen good for their own, and the chain **falls apart. But that's where it works** so damn well. They all know the punishment when caught stealing within their own cartel. Nothing less than death through torture, body left as a clear example for others.

And she definitely **doesn't** fake that body painting either. Nobody would even dare do such. Pretending to belong to a cartel when not a part of them will only end up with your corpse in a ditch in a very quick and efficient manner, once they find out. And they *always* find out.

Albert responds dejected. Hope to find her lost possessions gone as quickly as it came.

"Please, I don't want to lose my hand!" the caught girl meekly whimpers.

Adrian looks at Conrad before shrugging his shoulders. “Well then, back to sleep,” he says. He already noticed his friend has no intention of doing anything else than going to sleep himself.

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Early morning. Conrad yawns when getting up. Sleep was not exactly easy to get, with the constant moping and whimpered crying audible throughout the night from the captured thief. Her eyes are still red.

He offers some wolf meat they ate for breakfast to the girl after hearing her stomach growl, though she simply turns away.

“I have no idea what you folks like to eat. If it’s not suitable, you’ll have to let me know.”

She doesn’t speak a word. Her spirit to resist lost during the night.

Conrad can feel tugging on his sleeve so he turns around. It’s Albert, about to write on the ground. “Huh, leporid only eat plants?” he asks, reading the clarification being written. “Only asters?” The man scratches his chin. Damn, that’s some very picky eating habits they have. Such stuff doesn’t grow all that much around these parts. “Seen any asters?” he asks to Adrian.

“I’ve seen shrooms?” the blond man replies, no idea what an aster is.

“Never mind.” Before he picks something poisonous because he doesn’t know the difference.

Another tug on Conrad’s maw follows. It comes from Albert again.

“You know where they grow?”

A shy nod, followed by more stomach rumbling from the captured girl.

“Alright then, asters it is. Lead the way.”

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The group marches through the forest as it turns noon. Adrian at the front, leading the captured girl in the middle. Conrad and Albert form the rear. In the end, they did find a handful of asters. Enough to have a meager breakfast. At first, **she didn't want to eat** them, eventually nibbling in a defeated manner. What awaits when reaching the village must weigh heavy on her.

"Careful, this spot is all loose ground," Conrad warns Albert when they have to make a short but steep descent.

"Wha!" a cute yelp makes him look backwards, only to see Albert slip out anyway, regardless of his warning.

Panic overcomes the girl. A branch got stuck under her shirt when sliding down, and lifted it up, belly and part of her chest revealed. She desperately tries to cover her chest again.

Conrad quickly turns away. **"Don't worry about it. We already figured out your secret yesterday,"** he rubs the red spot on his wrist when trying to ease her mind. **"Everyone has their secrets. Nothing unusual about it. I certainly have mine..."**

He lets go of his wrist and turns to Albert, **now she's covered again.** **"You know what? Since I found out about your secret, I could give you one of mine."**

Albert calms down and continues marching on, listening in silence.

"I used to be in the army until recently. But before that, I was a wanted person. Did plenty of bad things in my past. Stuff I'm not proud of. That I wish I could undo." He bites away the bitterness welling up and turns to Albert with an attempt at a smile. **"But that's not how life works. So, I just carry that past along, and see where it leads me. Hoping I'll become a better man someday."**

Albert seems lost in thought. No doubt, she carries a past of her own. Conrad understands well enough how hard it can be at her age.

The forest grows less dense. First hovels visible in the distance. The group stops and Conrad hands a couple asters they picked up along the way to the captured girl. **"Afraid?"** he asks the young thief.

"I... I can do anything. I will..." she speaks meekly again, noticing those same hovels. Realizing she's about to be handed in.

“I’m sure you would. Now, why did you join a thieves’ group?”

“Food...”

The man sighs. “There are other ways to earn food. You obviously have a set of skills.”

The girl munches on her food in silence, not really sure how to answer. How *did* it all start?

“You could hunt pelts or furs. Not big ones like those you tried to steal, but small game will be enough to earn a meal. You obviously know your way around the forest.” Heck, that’s how this Albert figure must have survived. She could even be a hired guide to whoever doesn’t know how to navigate around here.

“I can’t,” her eyes turn red again, tears about to show.

“Why?”

“I belong to the cartel now. I’m property,” Carrot replies.

“Is it the tattoo? It’s just paint, thankfully. Most would use a fire branding. It won’t wash off easily, but with the right product... You could always get rid of the cartel’s mark and flee to a neighboring cartel’s territory. Not to join them, but to restart your life.”

The girl shakes her head. For the first time, she looks up at Conrad, bright green eyes peering deep into him, close to begging him for help. “I *can’t*. They will find me. I don’t want to do this. I *hate* my life. But they always find runaways!”

“How?”

By now, Adrian and Albert shifted their attention, listening in silence at the conversation going on.

The girl sniffs through her nose to try and contain her emotions from running down. “I joined because they offered a job. A simple one-time job. I needed food. There’s hardly any around for our kind. They lied...” Another sniff follows, with an attempt at rubbing her wet eyes against her shoulder. “Now I’m stuck! They made us go through a ritual. It’s magic, I swear! You must believe me!”

Conrad sits down. “Alright, I believe you. We’ve seen magic before. How does it work?”

“It’s a mark. It’s at my left wrist. You can see it!” She tries to move her bound arms, failing to do so.

Conrad gestures her to come closer, taking a look at her wrist. “It’s red...” he mumbles.

“It’s a tracking mark,” Carrot clarifies. “We were all brought before a mage, who put this on us.”

“What kind of mage. Do you know who or where? How was it applied?”

The girl turns somber. “Inside the hideout, but I don’t know who. We were led there blindfolded. And I don’t know how the mage did it. We all got touched on the wrist, and then led back out.”

Conrad exchanges glances with Adrian, who wants to know his thoughts. A quick nod confirms to the blond man he believes her. If the thief really tried to bullshit her way out of this, she would come up with answers, ridiculous ones even, like some fake enchantment ritual. Not what she does now, saying it’s a mystery to her how it all works. And it does make sense a bandit hideout would want to keep a powerful asset like a mage hidden.

“Alright, and this magic crap tracks your location?”

“That’s what they say. Wherever we go, as long as that spot remains, the mage will know where we are. They always find runaways! And then...” She shivers again. What must follow after they find a runaway has to be worse than death.

“It’s hard to believe a bandit group would have a mage...” Adrian says.

The girl’s eyes shift in fear they don’t believe her.

“But we did encounter one before...” Conrad finishes what his friend was about to add. He stands up again, turning before Carrot and reaching for her binds. “I was really hoping there would be alternatives,” he murmurs to her.

Defeat sinks in for the girl again. This is where it all ends for her. He will take her to the village where she gets handed over. At best, she has her hand cut off. At worst, she dies from an infection or blood loss. Then again, maybe that isn’t so bad after all... At least, that’s one way to be finally done with all of this.

The binds fall on the ground and Conrad brushes some dirt from Carrots hands. “There, don’t get caught again, okay? I hope you learned your lesson and pick your targets better next time. And really, start thinking about other methods to earn your quota to please the cartel. Surely, you don’t want to live like this for the rest of your life?”

The girl’s rabbit ears rise in disbelief. What’s he saying?

“Go on, you’re free to go.”

Her mouth moves, yet **no sounds come out. Only amazement her fate hasn’t turned for** the worst. A single step forward, taking a glimpse at the other two who just stand there. Then another step, and a longer stare at the man nearest to her who removed her binds.

Freedom? He grants her freedom? After trying to steal from him? After stealing from that other girl? With an expression of pity stuck on his face.

Carrot’s pace hastens, tasting that freedom, somewhere inside expecting it to be snatched away again in a cruel twist of fate. Though that twist **doesn’t** come. One more step and she’s out of here, out of their sight! Nobody even shows any intention of **following her. She just can’t believe it?! Who would do such a thing in this cruel world?!**

The girl stops, her back facing the trio she left behind. **She doesn’t** move, ears tensing, posture strengthening. Thinking long and deep, with enough presence it leaves the other three to silently wait. A tiny pair of fists from the rabbit girl form as she clenches her hands in rapidly growing determination, as if she just stood before the largest and most important crossroad in her entire life, and has now made a choice.

The girl turns around. **“I…” she begins to speak.** Uncertain still, that certainty grows throughout her entire body language. **“I… can steal it back.”**

Albert’s eyes shine bright. She has to be talking about…

“Your goods,” Carrot addresses her. “I can steal them back from the fence.”

“Isn’t that risky business?” Conrad asks her.

“Only if I get caught.” The hatori girl takes a step closer again. **“I know how to do it, but…”**

“You need something from us?” Conrad asks.

The girl nods. **“I need goods valuable enough to reach the fence directly, no shifting hands.”**

Adrian raises his eyebrows. That’s a large leap of faith she asks for. That’s a thief asking to be trusted with high valuables, and not subsequently run off with them. A quick glimpse to his friend follows, leaving the decision to him.

That friend stares the girl in the eyes, measuring her. Eventually reaching for his possessions and throwing her a bag. **“That enough?”**

Adrian whistles his surprise. He knows what Conrad just threw her. The girl's mouth opens in shock at what she sees. Not actually having expected anyone present here to trust her with even a single coin. Yet, what she got is years' worth of fee, including an officer's bonus.

"Where will you bring it?" he asks.

"Right here, tonight. It will be late..." Her words followed by another glance of disbelief at the treasure she holds, never seen so much loot before. "You're going to... trust me?" she mumbles, almost shocked.

"On one condition," Conrad replies. "You're going to introduce me to that hideout as a prospective recruit."

The girl is now confused. First, he says she needs to go look for a more honest job, and now he wants to join the bandits?

Conrad lifts his shoulders at her. "How else will I find out who that mage is, and not so subtly convince him to undo the spell which binds you?"

"Eh...?" Carrot can only stumble out. "Why...?"

"Consider it a return favor."

Adrian bursts out in laughter. "Should have seen that one coming! Sure, why not. Need a hand?"

"Not for now. I need you here, and as backup plan."

"Guard duty?" Adrian nods towards Albert.

"You guessed it. And if I'm not back by morning, it's your turn to come up with a plan and get me out."

"Does it give me a chance to boast to all lovely ladies of the next tavern?" Adrian smirks already.

"Regardless whoever's plan saves the day, we're going to cheat bandits connected to a large cartel. That's worth more than one bedtime story."

"Alright, count me in."

*

The village isn't exactly large, but actually fits the term. Not a collection of shabby hovels like they encountered when entering Hatori territory, it's an actual small town. Makes sense, if it's large enough for a bandit group to set up operations. While the official justice system will keep their eyes closed for most of their activities, no doubt bribed, compromised or threatened, any clandestine business will still prefer to blend in with its surroundings rather than stick out like a sore thumb. There's only so much willful blindness one can expect from the guards.

Carrot walks next to Conrad, guiding him through narrow walkways. "It will be dangerous..." she whispers to him.

"I know."

"If they catch you..."

"I know."

"But..." she insists.

A hand falls on her tiny shoulder, giving an encouraging grip to it. "I know. Don't worry your pretty head about it. Besides, I'm not the only one going to take a risk. So will you, right?"

"Why do you trust me?" she asks. "I could run off with the coin, hand it to the fence."

Conrad stops to think about her question. *Why does he trust her?* "I don't know. Intuition maybe?" He reaches for the girl's ear to remove a leaf that got stuck in her fur. A soft twitch runs through when he touches it. "I do believe I've grown better at reading people. And my senses tell me you can be trusted. Maybe it's as simple as that?"

As they continue walking, he brings the topic to her part of the deal. "So, you got a plan?"

"I've been at the fence a couple times. There's a small toilet room at the back, used it before. It has a locked window. Small, but big enough I should be able to sneak through."

She does have a small posture, with not exactly a lot of meat on her bones. Not hard to see how she could navigate her way through a tight space. Likely has experience doing plenty of that, being a thief.

"So, I'll bring the pouch of coins, directly. That's why it has to be so valuable. Wouldn't be allowed otherwise. It takes a while for the fence to verify the value, removing

fake coins or other counterfeits if there are any among brought loot. I'll visit the toilet meanwhile, and unlock the window."

Conrad can already guess the rest. "And then you'll sneak in at night, to steal back Albert's goods and my bag of coins?"

Carrot nods at his conclusion.

He grumbles to himself. Should have seen this coming. Yet another reason to carry out his own plan. Not that he has doubt on what she intends to do, though surely the experienced thief should know? If it was that easy to steal from the fence, it would be done already. "Don't they keep a record on who goes in and out?" he asks.

She nods again, fear in her body language.

The man sighs. Yup, exactly as he thought after hearing her intentions. She won't be able to lock the window again when leaving. They'll notice the missing goods, and quickly realize how the theft happened. She will be suspect number one from the very start and be made an example of.

This girl already resigned herself to her fate when first volunteering for the job.

Another ensuring pat follows on her shoulder. "No need to worry. By the time they find out, we'll both be out of here."

She reaches for his maw and clings to it. Hope sets in she may escape her fate after all. "There's one individual who can be trusted among the bandits," she explains. "My only friend, Selena."

"I'll remember that name."

*

Carrot comes to a stop before a regular house. This has to be the bandits' recruitment office, or whatever it's called. Maybe even their hideout.

As she knocks the door with a particular rhythm, Conrad places his arm around Carrot and pulls the girl closer. She doesn't object or appear surprised by the sudden increase in physical contact. Just part of the plan.

A scruffy looking man opens up. "Carrot?" he looks at her, inquiring with a quick flash of his eyes about this strange fellow holding her close.

Carrot lets her own arm cling to Conrad, resting her head against him in an open, affectionate manner. "This is my boyfriend. He wants to join us."

The scruffy man sizes up this supposed boyfriend, who gently brushes through Carrot's hair, caressing her ear, while keeping his own eyes on the bandit.

"He can provide," she adds.

"Hmm?" the man seems interested. If what Carrot says is accurate, they don't mind taking in new recruits. And this boyfriend does seem to know her well. Lowers the odds he's a snitch from another cartel. Regardless, can't be too careful.

"Ex-military. Officer," Conrad states confident.

"Ho...? And why do you seek to join us?" the man is now openly intrigued. Military would explain why he's not in poor shape. Well fed, and that look in his eyes observant and radiating with vigor. You don't find that often these days.

Conrad reaches for his pocket and hands over a piece of paper to the scruffy man.

"What's this?" the man asks. "A storage inventory list?"

"Weapon smuggling. Coded. I'm sure one of your men can check it. I'll give the decipher code if you need it."

The man observes the paper more closely, eyes starting to twinkle. Looks like he doesn't need a decipher code at all. "And...?" he inquires.

"Certain higher-ups in the military search for a new outlet to sell the weapons we gather after a battle. Getting too hot in Gleaze currently. We're looking for a place across the border. Somewhere.... right about here will do."

The man keeps a stern expression while going over the offer in his mind. A smile suddenly appears. "Come on in. We're always interested in a good deal or new connections."

"I'll go back to work then," Carrot says.

Conrad grabs her closer and gives her a kiss on the cheek, still playing his role as boyfriend. "Alright love, see you tonight."

Carrot smiles at him with a dainty little wave when she prances off like a girl in love.

The scruffy man shakes his head when looking at her. **“Good thief. Light feet and nimble fingers. Had no idea she’s a good mistress as well. Always keeps to herself.”**

The inside of the house is a lot vaster than it looks from the outside. A network of rooms and connecting hallways run underground, probably connecting this building to plenty others throughout town.

“Going to meet the boss?” Conrad asks.

“I am the boss. For as much as that’s worth around these parts.” The man comes to a stop. Armed guards block all exits. **“Naturally, there will be questions. I’m sure you understand. We need certainty.”**

Conrad nods. Nothing unexpected. They will ask him plenty about the military. See if he’s faking **his background and blows his cover through a series of questions. Shouldn’t** be an issue. The best cover story is one steeped in truth. Quite fortunate they still had that weapon smuggling note around. With how these cartels operate being quite similar, **it’s a** code they will definitely be familiar with, or one close to it. Should add believability to his claims. Likely outcome is them trying to set up a preliminary agreement. A test run. And **that’s all the time** he needs.

*

The scruffy man lifts up his alcohol and cheers at a lucrative deal in the making. Conrad passed their questioning. He’s definitely military. **“This will score me a good promotion with the cartel,”** he claims overjoyed. **“Maybe they’ll even reposition me out of this shit-hole.”** He points his drink to Conrad. **“And you... Maybe you’ll make it as my replacement here. If your connections are what you claim them to be.”**

The man gestures to the guards. **“Alright then. Time for one more procedure. A formality until we can verify your claims.”** One of the guards brings a blindfold. **“Nothing scary. Just a secret location. That’s all.”**

Conrad lets them put on the blindfold. This is the outcome he hoped for. He is about to take the first step at initiation into their ranks, following precisely what Carrot explained would happen. A blindfold, and then led to this enigmatic mage who will put a tracking

spell on him. To ensure their new prospective recruit can't change his mind anymore about leaving.

It's hard to walk when blindfolded, led by a guard in front and one at the rear. They walked for a while now. Must be pretty deep in these premises, though it doesn't seem unusual for regular bandits to cross the hallways. Not the first time the guard stops him and lets him take a step aside for someone to pass.

"We're here," the guard says, opening a sliding door. "Take a seat and wait until we come pick you up. That's all."

Conrad takes a good breath, still blindfolded. No fresh air, while not damp or too dry. A lantern must be burning in this room, with a subtle odor of incense filling the immediate area. Flowery. Refreshing, with a faint hint of sultriness. Not too strong at all. Just right to capture the senses. Temperature is not too bad in here. No breeze, unlike what was present in the hallway. Flooring made of wood, though where he sits must be a carpet. Surprisingly luxurious for a bandit hideout. And this room must be spacious. He can hear it in the subtleties of how even the tiniest creak of wood behaves in here.

Ears trace footsteps of someone walking through the hallway outside, hearing those steps go around a corner that must mark this room's boundary. With eyes covered, all other senses work overtime.

His attention is suddenly caught in front. There's someone here with him, inside this same room. Cloth rustles. Different from basic, cheap leather. Soft, plenty of it, and flexible. Expensive cloth. It has to be the mage. Who else would wear such an outfit? Not even the boss of this place dresses fancier than an above-average pauper, though that is probably a partial disguise.

Another noise. One that instantly grabs all focus of his ears. A sound he recognizes. But... Here?! That's not what he expected, at all... Yet, there can be no other explanation.

That's a metallic clang. A chain. It moves as the person moves. This mage is a chained captive?!

The metal stops as the individual reached Conrad. Another surprise instantly overtakes him. His image of the mage forcibly adjusted from the horribly wrong depiction he had in mind.

Teensy fingers glide over his hand, just barely touching. So small they can only be a child's. So gentle and refined they can only belong to a girl. She traces his fingers, feeling them, almost as if she admires them. So different from her own. Large, strong and manly. Her own fingers move backwards, over his palm, a tiny thumb caressing it, taking in every bit of roughness encountered with its smooth, young skin.

The origin of that subtle odor of incense suddenly clicks **in Conrad's head**. **The fresh and slightly sultry odor wasn't incense at all. It's a hint of perfume.**

More metallic sounds catch his ears. Not the chain this time, but a pleasant, faint clanging of tiny bits and pieces of decorative metal, like the tiniest wind chime, coming from right in front. Earrings? Or maybe a hair decoration? Its soothing ringing resonates in tune with faint breaths coming from the girl.

Conrad feels captivated. Did she cast a spell on him? Or is this a result of being stripped of his sight? For the first time, he is fully capable of admiring the strangely beautiful orchestra of sounds an individual can make.

As her fingers move to the top of his palm, he can feel the cloth forming her maw. Exactly what he expected since earlier. Luxurious, and quite large of a maw. Her tiny wrist **has to be capable of fitting multiple times in it. Though a captive, these bandits haven't** stripped her of personal possessions. Allowed to wear expensive clothes and decorations, permitted to wear perfume.

That does make sense, considering how rare a mage is. She must be crucial to how they operate, granting the ability to track their employees at all times. A prisoner, yet one treated like a precious good. Undefined.

All softness in **the girl's** fingers suddenly cease. Her breath rises in volume, taking in air in surprise. What happened?!

Her fingers are **frozen on a particular part of Conrad's body. His wrist**. She rubs over it, curious, while careful. Like exploring something foreign and potentially dangerous.

Then she pulls her hands away, quickly. Decisively. Composure returns, those same soothing sounds resuming, as she reaches for his other hand. No surprise this time when she reaches his wrist. Only holding it with her tiny palm, as she presses a piece of metal against it. Strangely emanating warmth, which seeps into his body.

And the mage pulls back, slowly. It's done. The guard enters after the girl rings a bell to signal him.

*

“You can spend the night here. The boss will call you tomorrow.”

Conrad nods at the guard. Left behind in his temporary stay. Plenty of hustle and bustle happens throughout this part of the hideout. Not that there are a lot of folks around and about, though they tend to be quite rowdy. Most of them adult men and women, hatori and regular folks. Not particularly prude about mingling out in the open. A couple have sex right inside a doorway.

Girls like Carrot seem to be rare. Only one other at around her age visible. Not a hatori, with a vague hint of red in her hair. Maybe she has some Bournesse blood in her?

“Oi, Selena! Come here! I could use some messing around,” a man calls out to her.

The girl doesn't seem to mind and frolics towards the man. She teasingly drops herself on his lap.

Conrad closes the door to his room. Selena, eh? That must be Carrot's friend. Either she's a good actress, or she gets along well with the others. Definitely not a stranger to her sexual side, as she seemed well aware how to use body language when that man called for her. Banging of the girl's feet repeats into the wooden wall, following the rhythm of the man slamming his body into her.

Closing his eyes, Conrad decides on getting a quick nap, for as much as that is possible in this environment.

*

Opening his eyes again, he can't really see if it's day or night. Not needed either, as military life stamped a good sense of time in his body. All rowdiness died down. Most must be asleep, or out on a job during the night. It's almost eerily quiet and devoid of life in here.

Conrad stretches out and performs a quick warm-up of his muscles. Time for the next step in his improvised plan. And improvised is about the best description at this point. His goal is to get to the mage, somehow. Okay, he has a good idea on how to get there. But then what? That mage is a child... A captive one.

Before that nugget of information became known, he simply assumed it to be a bandit, similar to the mage he fought on his last day in the military. A good show of diplomacy at the tip of a blade would have been sufficient to get the mage to come along and drop the enchantment on Carrot, and himself, obviously. But now? He can't exactly point a blade at a captive girl. Oh well, problems for later. Time to check out the situation first.

He takes a look at his wrist where the mage must have placed an enchantment. It's red, similar to Carrot's mark. Got a small itch to it as well. Then he observes his other wrist, the one that young mage shunned away from. Still red, like it has been for a while now.

The man shakes off the thought which came to mind and stands up, heading out of his room. Nobody to be seen outside, though more than one couple is definitely busy behind a closed door. Sounds like there's an orgy happening in there. Perfect timing. There's no other activity in existence which can so easily make one drop their guard.

Multiple hallways pass. Conrad has no interest in them. He has a good idea on where to go. Sure, they blindfold all new recruits to visit the mage, yet this recruit had knowledge that was going to happen, and the foresight to count his steps and orient his bearings.

Twenty steps, and a turn to the left. As expected, there's a hallway right here. Reaching the mage's room won't be an issue. Her presence won't be either, as she is chained up in there. One small problem does pop its ugly head up. How to get inside unnoticed? For now, it won't be a big deal if they see him walk about, as there were no instructions not to. But no guard should allow him in. And starting a fight may be an option, it's still a very risky one. Taking someone out without noise isn't all that easy without the correct tools available. Finding a way in unseen remains the best option.

Thankfully, he has a good idea on the dimensions of that room. Beyond the corner here should be the entrance, with a pair of guards outside. Now, if only this door he looks at isn't locked...

Conrad breathes a sigh of relief. It's open. The door leads to a storage right next to the mage's room. And there's nobody inside, which is another piece of luck. Though he could always bluff his way out if there was, simply searching around in curiosity. They might not like that, but hey, nobody said he can't. And most people here probably wouldn't be very surprised to find a new face walking around. Recruits can't be very uncommon.

After closing the door, Conrad examines the floor. He knows this type quite well. Seen it before in Gleaze. Would make sense, for a bandit hideout to use this type of security. It's a creaking floor, similar to what nobility uses. And if the design isn't all too far removed from the ones in Gleaze, these have a hollow frame underneath. Now, all he has to do, is make an entrance. Which shouldn't be all that hard since these boards tend not to be nailed too tight. Doing so would only obstruct their function of making noise. With how dilapidated this hideout is, pulling a piece loose should be easy enough.

...

Conrad bites his lip. Pulling that piece of wood off, using his weapon as leverage, made more noise than he hoped. At least no follow-up seems to happen from any suspicious guard who may have heard it.

Space underneath the floor is tight, though capable to traverse. If he heard right, there's another quite loose piece of boarding right around where he sat for the ritual.

Probably best to leave his weapon here in this storage, its long blade a hindrance to crawl down there anyway, and only an additional source of noise. Then there's another good reason to leave it behind. Let's face it, an armed man sneaking into one's room at night, through the floor no less, can't be very easing on the mind of a young, trapped girl. She might scream the entire place awake at the mere sight of it.

...

Popping his head out of the floor, Conrad's muscles tense up as he comes to a stop.

A pair of eyes peer right at him, startled and afraid. Eyes unlike any he has seen before. They shine a beautiful and entrancing gold in the dark of night. As if every bit of light around is drawn to them, focused and reflected into large, vivid irises.

It's the mage girl. A hatori.

Her lips shiver, barely visible before she hides the lower part of her face with those large open maws of her fancy and colorful outfit. Holding both hands to her face in surprise of a man sneaking into her room through the floor. Luckily, she remains quiet.

Conrad puts a finger over his lips, gesturing her to not raise her voice and alarm the guards, crawling out of the opening in the floor.

The girl clings onto a single object. A dagger. If necessary, she will use it for defense. The object is a surprising presence to Conrad, at first. A captive is allowed to hold this dangerous thing? Only then does he understand its **purpose. It's got gems embedded**, similar as with that mage he fought against. She must use it for her magic, needs it for the tasks the bandits require of her. If using it as a regular dagger is the only offensive use it **has, it won't do her any good either to escape. Certainly, it won't get that metal chain** around her ankle open, or save her from the guards who would storm in right after.

The chain is barely visible. Covered underneath her giant tail. She's obviously well fed. **It's rare to see a Vulpes Tribe member with her tail in such luscious condition.** That fluffy-brown fox tail is larger than her entire upper body. With a large pair of equally fluffy fox ears to match on her head, lowered in fear.

"What's your name?" Conrad asks her, whispering.

The girl clasps onto her chest, not assured this man is safe to be alone with. Then again, **considering her situation as a captive... Just maybe he's here to...** "Primrose." A voice as refined as her looks. Golden eyes inquire why he's here.

"Don't worry, I won't harm you. Are you okay?"

The girl nods. Relieved he asked, showing concern about her well-being. Maybe she really can lower her guard?

"You know magic?"

Her large golden eyes blink twice in rapid succession before she nods again.

"Can you use it to get out of here?"

A shake of the head follows, but not with certainty.

"You need a weapon?" he asks, surmising she may have the ability to get free, yet lacks the tools.

“My staff,” the girl picks up her courage. “They took it after... putting something in my drink.”

So, they drugged her? That must be how she was captured. “That doesn’t work?” Conrad points at the dagger.

“Only for barriers, and enchanting.”

Which meshes with that mage he fought before. She’s a similar type? That guy used it for barriers as well, with a staff for his fireballs.

“Enchanting... Does that include the tracking spell?” he asks.

Primrose nods.

“Can you remove it easily?”

“Yes, with my dagger.”

There’s something on Conrad’s mind. A matter he has been increasingly curious and suspicious about. It’s really not the right timing for it... preferably getting out of here as quickly as possible, but... “Do you know anything about this?” he lifts his other wrist. The one she shied away from.

“It’s a mark,” the girl responds.

“Magic?”

Conrad can’t help flick his tongue when she confirms it’s magical in nature. His suspicion since meeting her now turned into reality. It must be a tracking mark, similar to how the bandits track their grunts. Which begs the question where he received this. An answer comes to mind, though it’s one he really doesn’t want to wonder about right now.

“Can you remove it?” he hopes she has the ability.

“Maybe...”

“Alright, let’s get you out of here. Do you know where they keep your staff?”

“Weapon storage... Basement.”

The door suddenly slides open with force. “Be quiet in there,” the guard suddenly stops speaking, noticing Conrad.

“Intruder!”

*

Conrad sighs while observing the prison cell from within. If one can call it a cell. There are no metal bars. Only an empty room, with a chain preventing him from leaving. What a blunder! Really should have kept the talk with that girl to a minimum. He could always have asked later about the red spot. Ugh, now what? **Wait for Adrian to save the day? It's** not like he has many other options, even if he would rather not be chained anywhere right now. **Not after finding out he's got an additional magic brand on him.**

A door opens. The single man in charge of guarding the prisoner addresses the newcomer. **"Hey, Selena. Come to give a lone man some company?"**

The girl carries a plate of food. **"Food for the prisoner,"** she answers, winking at the man. **"Maybe afterwards?"**

The man slaps her tight ass as she passes, laughing heartily. He leans backwards on his chair to rock it, closing his eyes in boredom.

She steps near Conrad and places down the plate.

"Selena?" he asks.

The girl stops, looking at him shortly before she shows intent on walking away again.

"Carrot's friend?" Conrad adds.

Her pace stops, and she turns around once more. Interest caught at the mention of that name. **"Yeah...?"** she replies.

"Look, I'm going to keep it short," he whispers to her, signaling she should keep quiet as to not have the guard open his eyes. **"Carrot does something very dangerous right now. And if I'm not free by daylight, she will be in serious trouble."**

Selena's eyes dart all over him, measuring the man in front. What is he saying?! Carrot is in danger? Why?

"She told me I could trust you," he adds.

The girl takes a step back. Observing the resting guard, to then shift back towards Conrad. A struggle visibly plays out **inside of her. Not sure what to make of this stranger's** words. Believe them? Reject them right now? Or maybe just hear him out? Her mouth opens, uncertain of her own answer, nodding to this strange captive. **"Later..."** she says, turning around to walk away.

*

Carrot sneaks through the night, heading to a specific location where a window should be left unlocked.

Everything went according to plan earlier today. The fence let her in, and was quite happy with the loot she brought. **He didn't even say anything when she asked for the toilet**, simply brushing her off with a hand gesture as the pouch filled with coin caught his full interest. Walking on roses because, no doubt, they would both enjoy a fine bonus for **today's haul**.

The window is still unlocked. Phew... Sure, it was already late in the day when she handed the pouch in, so chances were low, though it would have been disastrous if anyone noticed it as unlocked and placed the pin back in place.

Wrestling her tiny frame through the window, Carrot is very mindful on where she steps down. This toilet is nothing but a hole in the ground. No way will she step anywhere near it, holding her nose in contempt of the foul smell inside.

Opening the door, she finds herself in the main reception area. This is where she handed over the pouch, and waited for the longest part until the authenticity of each and every coin was confirmed. Behind the counter stands the door leading to the inner **storage. That's where the stolen goods are kept, somewhere.**

Officially, this is a small goods store. Plenty of regular merchandise will be present as well.

A surprisingly large storage lays out before Carrot. **Volume isn't** really huge, yet **it's** long and narrow. Everything kept quite in disorder, as if any attempt at taking an item will cause an avalanche of miscellaneous goods to fall down. **Her fluffy rabbit's tail** bounces up and down, left and right, with every step the girl takes. It energetically swings in what seems like excitement. A feminine bounce matches and emphasizes the sway of her hips when feet lightly touch on the wood below.

As a storage of precious valuables, plenty stolen and some actually owned, this room naturally has that same defense mechanism of a creaking floor. Even so, hardly anything

makes the slightest noise when Carrot first places her toes down, and then smoothly the rest of her foot. All weight perfectly kept in balance, with no sudden shifts. **She didn't** have the knowledge there is empty space beneath the flooring, nor the strength or know-how on how to loosen a board, yet is expertly skilled at navigating this kind of floor.

It's like she knows where the few supporting beams are, and chooses only those spots to place her foot down, doing it all on nothing but pure instinct and experience. An experienced thief, who only screwed up once, when the lure of rare furs worth almost as much as the pouch she brought in today, and all the asters they could buy to feed her hungry stomach, was too much to resist. Caught by the similar experience of once a fellow thief. Normally, what would be considered a most unfortunate turn of events. Now, it only appears to her as a tiny miracle in the ocean of filth which has been her life, with only one friend she could talk to.

Right now, that man should be dealing with the mage. Just maybe, that means **there's** a chance for Carrot to make it out of this nightly adventure alive. Because the fence will certainly remember who could have unlocked his window. However, even if that man **doesn't succeed, or fails to keep his word, it's okay. She's** done with this way of life. Selena has a reason to endure, **but she doesn't. Not anymore. Tonight, it will all come to** an end, one way or the other.

Carrot grins. There it is! The bag she handed over to an intermediary earlier today. **Contents really weren't** very precious. Quite disappointing actually, which came unexpected, as the owner safeguarded it so much. Thought there would be a lot more in it. Sure, a couple coin was present, though mostly personal possessions. Thankfully, those possessions are **still contained inside. That's a relief.**

With another smile at success, Carrot snoops the pouch of coin which brought her here to unlock the window, placing it in the bag, heading back to the exit.

Mission successful.

*

Conrad opens his eyes. The door opened to the underground area where he rests, only other occupant the sleepy guard. Voice of the newcomer already betrays her presence.

“Brought fine wine for my favorite guard,” Selena charms the bandit.

The man gets off his seat and lowers through his knees, placing his arms around her, just underneath her bum. **“Upsy-daisy,”** the guard cheers her arrival, lifting the girl up in the air. **“Here’s my favorite girl!”**

Here to bring his favorite drink. The girl laughs and guides the small wine urn close to his mouth while he lifts her, letting wine pour over his lips, which he tries to drink up.

The guard sits down with the girl on his lap, fondling her all over. **“Brought a pigskin?”** he asks her.

She winks at him and hands over an oil-soaked piece of thin leather.

“That’s my girl. You know, I’d rather prefer raw though...”

The girl massages his crotch and places the oiled skin over his cock once revealed. **“Maybe someday?”** she tempts him.

“That’s what you always say...” he grumbles, lifting Selena on top of the table to spread her legs.

Conrad waits patiently, lying down in silence as he can hear the festive mood of the guard. What goes on easy to form an image of. The man drinks his wine and pounds his pigskin-covered meat into the girl, before reaching back to wine, happily enticed by his young partner.

...

The one captive opens his eyes again. Selena stands in front of him, still keeping somewhat of a distance.

“He’ll be asleep for a while,” she whispers. **“Likes his wine, but can’t handle it.”**

Conrad wants to stand up, yet notices she takes a step backwards, so he sits down again. The girl needs answers first. Too uncertain about all of this. If she can’t trust him, Selena can simply turn around and walk away. The guard will know no better. For all he’s concerned, he just had a good bout of nightly company with fine wine and a young girl’s pussy.

“What do you know about Carrot?” she asks. **“Why is she in danger?”**

“She wants out,” Conrad replies.

Selena shakes her head in disbelief. “No, she would never. That’s foolish. They would find and kill her!”

“Not if we take the mage along.”

Selena doesn’t trust it at all, desiring to walk away already. This guy speaks nonsense! Carrot is well aware of the danger.

“Carrot is right now stealing inside the fence’s place. Probably done with it already. She’s pilfering something back for us.”

“You threatened her?!” Selena asks.

“No, we made a deal. She snatches our stuff back, and I get rid of the magic enchantment on her arm.”

Selena looks at her own wrist, a red spot visible.

“Yeah, that’s the one. The mage already knows and will join us. She’s a captive too. She can undo that tracking.”

“How will you get her out?”

“With your help,” Conrad points at Selena. “You get me out of here and lead me to the weapon storage. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Selena thinks deeply. He likely bluffs. Still, what if his words are true, and Carrot really is going along with this? But... “If I release you... The guard will blame me. He certainly won’t blame his own failing to keep watch.”

“You can come with us,” Conrad tries to convince the girl.

She wildly shakes her head. Nu-uh, that’s not an option! He asks for the impossible. Selena takes a step back and turns around. She shouldn’t have come here...

“Selena, why are you here?” Conrad asks her before she can leave.

The girl doesn’t face him, seeming like she could leave him behind at any time. No answer comes.

“What keeps you chained here?” he insists. “What you did with that guard... Is that what you have to do here?”

“It’s to survive,” she replies. “I’m not good at stealing, unlike Carrot. That’s the only way they allow me here.”

“Why?”

“I *have* to. If I don’t, then she’ll...” Selena shuts her mouth instantly, like she mentioned something she really shouldn’t have.

“Who?” Conrad asks. “You protect someone?”

Her eyes plead him to please stop asking already, while her mouth eventually speaks for reasons she doesn’t understand herself. A topic the bandits don’t know. “My sister. In the neighboring village. She’s sick...”

Why does she talk about this?! The girl simply **doesn’t** understand it. She kept the identity or even existence of her sister a secret. If the cartel finds out... They will definitely reel her in, sick or not. Selena **can’t** take that risk, but...

“She needs her medicine.”

“And you provide the coin?”

Selena swallows at giving away her secret.

“We’ll take her along,” Conrad offers.

The girl wants to shake her head again. It’s far too risky!

“We’ll take her to a doctor. We’ve got plenty of coin to pay for the best in the area. The cartel doesn’t know of her existence. You’re a good sister, right? You kept her existence secret.”

Selena wants to **speak** but doesn’t know what. A struggle plays out in her mind while Conrad tries to offer the convincing argument.

“We can safely pick her up in the next village. After joining with Carrot in the forest.”

“I could hand you in for a reward,” Selena whimpers.

“Yes, you could set me free first, then immediately hand all of us in for a reward. Me and Carrot.”

“No, I wou...” Selena wants to instantly deny she would ever sell out Carrot. That’s not what she meant!

“I know,” Conrad doesn’t let her finish. “Carrot trusts you, so I know I can trust you. It’s as simple as that.”

The girl falls silent. That struggle in her mind almost at an end.

“What’s her name?” Conrad asks.

She looks confused at first, then answers. “Luna.”

“That’s a fine name. Let’s go find her a good doctor, far away from here.”

Selena takes another step back, though Conrad doesn’t stop her this time. He can recognize it in her eyes. She heads to the guard, reaching for a key lying on the table. The girl swipes the used pigskin off, looking at it fall to the ground. An invention which spared the girl from offering her purity, in a sense. An invention which unshackled the people from their greatest responsibility for all of known and unknown history. An invention of the Union.

With a lingering sense of disgust, finally turning her face away from the used object and what it embodies, the girl heads back to the chained man, key in hand.

*

Selena leads him straight to the weapon storage. It’s at one level higher, right above the prison cells.

“The mage staff should be in there?” Conrad asks.

“Yeah, it’s at the back. I’ve seen it before.”

“And swords?”

“Plenty.” The girl covers her upper arms in fear. This is all so sudden! Never would she have expected to go along with this crazy plan. And why is it so cold suddenly? Is that fear? Her arms actually shiver.

Turning the corner, Conrad almost stumbles when kicking a dull object on the ground. “The fuck...?” he stares at a man lying down.

Selena grasps to cover her own mouth when the man on the ground rolls over. A black injury visible at his neck. Like he got stabbed with a red-hot poker, or his flesh rots somehow.

Conrad reaches for his wrist, a strange itch present in it. “You got to be kidding me... Of all possible times...” He grabs the hand of Selena and drags her close, stepping inside the weapon storage. “We have to get out of here, and fast!”

Luckily, there's no hint of whoever killed the man inside the weapon storage. Conrad grabs a sword and rushes for a staff near the back wall. This has to be it! A wooden staff with a set of red gems at the end.

He hands it to Selena for carrying. **"Do you know where the key is for her chains?"**

No need to clarify he talks about the mage, as she already answers. **"No, but no need for keys. I don't have the quick fingers of Carrot, but I can pick locks just fine,"** she lifts up a lock-pick which was hidden in her belt.

"Stay close," he advises, rushing out of the weapon storage and heading a level higher, towards the mage's room.

Selena glances around in panic once reaching the upper floor. Multiple dead bodies everywhere! All disposed in a swift and efficient manner. **Many who didn't even see it** come. Those who did, locked in an expression of pure terror, as if they watched death itself lunge at them with a swift, unavoidable pace.

Conrad's senses urge him to flee. Not head right to where this trail of corpses leads him. Painful visions of the past flash through his mind, clinging onto an ever-shrinking **light of hope he will not open that mage's door and be confronted with a sight** which resembles a particular piece of his past all too well.

There **it is... the all-**important door! Smashing of a small table reaches his ears as it is thrown around inside. Not from the guards, as both already turned to corpses near the entrance.

Conrad holds his hand towards Selena. **"Stay behind me!"**

He kicks open the door. Sword at the ready.

The room seems frozen in time. Nobody moves. Not Conrad, who is faced with his nemesis. Not Selena, terrified by the vile, black creature she can see inside. Not the mage, Primrose, who feels a similar fear, staring at the creature right in front as it was just about to stab her to death. Protective dagger in hand reach, yet too late to use it. And lastly, the creature itself. As hideous and deadly in its appearance as it was ten years ago. Standing there, a blade crafted from its own shadowy body **pointed at the girl's throat**, jostled in her direction with nothing less than pure intent to kill! However, brought to a **complete stop at a mere hair's width**.

To simply stare at her. Right into those large, golden and beautiful, shining eyes.

Conrad is first to recompose himself. Breaking the deadly, terrifying picture by a rush forward to slash his sword at the creature.

It steps back, eyes observing the newcomers into the room, before straying back to the vulpes girl. To then remain onto the armed man in front.

“Get her out!” Conrad yells at Selena, trying to place himself between the girls and the creature.

He can’t hurt it. The man remembers that much painstakingly well from ten years ago. His sword will only lightly affect its shape, not harming the monster at all. Nevertheless, he *can* deflect its attacks!

Selena hands over the staff to Primrose and works on her binds. Fingers shiver from fear, trying to get the lock-pick in the right spot.

“Light! Whatever gives light!” Conrad yells out.

A familiar whoosh rises as **the most melodic music to Conrad’s ears**. A flare he remembers from his fight with the bandit mage lights up the room, while swelling heat warms his back.

“Step aside!” Primrose calls out, blasting her fireball in the direction of that terror once Conrad moves aside. Part of the wooden wall pulverized in the process.

“Progress?!” he asks.

“Working on it!” Selena replies, now with shifted pressure, as the room quickly catches fire. The entire hideout will burn down at this rate! Even so, preferable to face the fire than that dark nightmare.

Conrad covers his face from the licking flames and heat. Trying to catch a glimpse of the monster in the sudden inferno. **“Fuck..” he curses his fate.**

It’s there alright. Weakened, but not injured. Exactly like last time, when Odwin’s house was lit on fire, it has difficulty sustaining its shape when not having stable darkness or shade to cling to, though its expression is clear as day. **It didn’t take a single scratch** from that head-on blast.

“Got it!” Selena yells with renewed energy.

The creature doesn't try to rush forward, simply standing there as its invulnerable self. Not to gloat about its invulnerability, like it did ten years ago. Only staring, watching the vulpes mage stand up and turn her golden eyes towards it. Then shortly turning to Conrad, who takes a step backwards to try and follow the girls, covering their exit out of the burning building. And the creature disappears, fading like a shadow in the night.

"Don't let go of each other!" Conrad yells to the girls. "Left! To the forest!"

He quickly catches up and grabs Primrose by the hand. Selena is quick on her feet, she can keep up easily. Primrose on the other hand has difficulty to keep this mad dash going. Eyes of both girls show tears from sudden shock at what happened, realizing their lives hung from a silver thread. And they only escaped by crawling through a fine needle.

*

Subtle hue of a campfire in the forest welcomes the escapees. **They should be safe...** They *have to be safe...* **Conrad finds** renewed energy when met with the curious faces of Adrian and Albert, sitting at the campfire. What a relief! They're alive and well. His assumption was correct. The creature tracks him by that mark on his wrist. Grimald must have placed it back in Gleaze, after bumping into him, when he offered his hand!

That's why it attacked the hideout. Waiting for the right time to strike, at the right place. Intend on clearing out that entire den of crime and corruption. Nobody would miss a bunch of thugs, thinking they must have been disposed of by a rival cartel. Thankfully, it went there first, and not here, to remove these two connected to Conrad. It surely **wouldn't have left them unharmed.**

"Take guard!" Conrad yells at Adrian.

The blond man wastes no time and swiftly jumps on his feet, observing the dark forest around them with weapon drawn. **"What's going on?!" he calls out.**

Before Conrad can answer, a twig cracks and draws their attention. Weapons immediately pointed.

"Eh?!" Carrot stops in her tracks.

"Carrot?" Selena is the first to address her.

“Come over here, quickly, to the light!” Conrad yells at her, lowering his weapon to hold out his hand.

The girl grabs his hand, confused. Feeling herself dragged with might towards the campfire. Not that she’s afraid of all strength latching onto her. On the contrary, it feels strangely assuring. Something scary is going on, and this man seeks to protect her.

“Primrose, can you look at my wrist?” Conrad asks the mage.

The girl reaches for his hand. Not the wrist she put a mark on, that one can wait. The bandit hideout is wiped out anyway, none of its members will pursue them. No, she reaches for that other wrist. Holding the strange mark she as much figured out the meaning for. As long as this mark stays, there’s no point in changing location away from the campfire.

“And?!” Conrad shows his nerves through growing impatience, tapping his foot.

The girl observes the mark closely, feeling it with her fingers, focusing her mind onto it, reading energies he can’t even see. “It’s... vile. And complex. But maybe I can remove it, I think...?”

“Good, let’s get it done, however it needs to!” Even if he has to cut off that entire hand.

Primrose takes her dagger and places it on the mark. Similar to how she did to place her own mark.

“Technically, I can’t undo it directly. It’s too foreign. I don’t understand it. But I can maybe overwrite the energy. That could get rid of it... I believe.”

Doesn’t sound very assuring, but it’s better than nothing.

“We’ve got a visitor...” Adrian mumbles to Conrad.

Conrad scans around. He’s right. A pair of familiar eyes observe them from within the brooding darkness of the forest. Cold and distant, yet strangely filled with more emotion than he has seen before.

“Done!” Primrose lets go of his arm.

“It’s still red?” Conrad takes a quick look before turning his attention back to the shadow.

“That’s my own mark now. The old one is gone!”

He'll simply have to trust her word for it. Her own mark can be removed whenever they have the leisure to do so.

Adrian takes a step closer to the shadow, challenging it.

“Careful!” Conrad cautions. “It can't be harmed! Don't let it bait you.”

Adrian stops and lifts up a torch towards the thing. His face turns to horror at what he sees. “The fuck...?!” he mumbles at the shadowy existence, while it grins at them.

The monster lingers its eyes one last time at the vulpes girl. It reasons. Deliberates on what action to take. Until a conclusion has been reached. The creature fades, disappearing into the dark without a trace.

“We move out of the forest, now! Everyone carries a torch,” Conrad orders. “I'll take point. Adrian, take rearguard! The girls carry our stuff.”

The man nods and starts to prepare. For whatever reason, the overwhelming presence of that hideous thing is gone. Now is the time to move, with the means it used to track them gone as well.

“You promised a deep, dark rabbit hole,” Adrian mentions while taking up guard. “And I must say, you certainly delivered.”

*

The light of day breaks inside the next village. They marched throughout the night, while no further encounters happened. Not a word spoken along the way, all energy dedicated to marching and paying attention to every sound, every flash, and every vibration in the air. Finally, the group is allowed to get a breather inside a local inn, where Conrad hired two private rooms. Tired, yet nobody really in any mood to find sleep right away. Last night's events roused too much adrenaline which now needs time to settle down.

“Well... I got the goods,” Carrot is first to change topic, placing the bag she stole from the fence on the ground.

Albert already stands up to reach for her possessions, unsure how to deal with the little thief holding on to it who stole it in the first place.

That little thief reaches into the bag and takes out the pouch from Conrad. **“Filled with coin,” she says, proud at** acquiring it all back, and more. Carrot pulls out another pouch **with coin she snatched while in there.** **“For the effort,”** the girl adds as excuse.

Conrad pats the young thief on the head for a job well done and gives her a good rub between the ears.

The girl pulls her shoulders up in response, while laughing all stress away. To then grab into the bag again, facing Albert. Not really certain what expression to use. **“These are yours...”** she speaks softly.

Albert jumps up and reaches for the offered items, all barriers to deal with the little thief suddenly broken at the sight of her precious goods.

...

Conrad can feel all his hairs stand **upright. It can't be...**

He jumps forward instantly and with determined paces walks towards Albert, to remove the hood covering her face for the first time. Staring at a girl with ruffled, messy hair, looking back confused with her blue eyes. While she holds onto her blue and white blanket with a chrysanthemum motif, and a single homemade flute.

“Lisette...?”

Act 2 ~ Chapter 4



Bonds of Blood

“That’s when I was forced to leave you behind with the priest, and...” Conrad swallows at the tale of his past, “and your mother got arrested.”

The entire group listens. Adrian heard it before, though he sure could not foresee this Albert figure being Conrad’s daughter. The others all remained silent, identity of the dark creature revealed to them by now.

“What happened to you?” Conrad asks Lisette. “Do you know Roderik?”

She nods yes, her mood turning sour afterwards. Trying to convey meaning, still unable to speak.

“I’ll fetch writing utensils downstairs,” Adrian stands up.

...

“I don’t know where he is,” the parchment shows after Lisette finished writing.

Conrad flicks his tongue in fresh disappointment. He really hoped she would know.

His daughter writes down why she lost track of him. "Separated after plague. Sent to different orphanage. Not from the temple. He left quarantine safe. None of us were sick. It hadn't reached us yet." All scribbled down in quick succession.

"Why Albert?" her father asks about her chosen identity.

"Safer," Lisette writes down, looking away afterwards.

There's definitely more to her words. Regardless, her father **doesn't pry**. Whatever it is, it can stay in the past for now. Enough happened already to fill a day.

"Well then," he stands up. "Let's all get some rest. It's been a very long night." Conrad turns to Selena afterwards. "Just a couple hours of sleep, and then we go pick up your sister. Don't worry. The bandits didn't know about her, and neither did Grimald."

Selena accepts his words. They all know who this Grimald fellow is now, and that he must be connected to the creature. From the story told, where Conrad also explained the mark on his wrist, the monster **shouldn't be able to track them anymore**. Meanwhile, the other tracking enchantments made by Primrose were **dispelled already**. Didn't take her very long. Though it did seem to ask energy of the girl, as she is quite fatigued. Even if it's hard to say what is the cause with all that happened. The encounter, the long night, or the use of magic. Probably a combination.

"I... I'm sorry," Carrot addresses Lisette. "I almost ruined your family reunion by stealing your possessions."

Lisette grabs the leporid girl's hand while pointing to herself.

"You're... sorry?" Carrot asks, receiving an energetic nod. "But why...?" Only then does she understand. Lisette **must have doubted Carrot's words in the forest, when volunteering to steal her stuff back**. Rabbit ears drop low from shyness, feeling like she **doesn't deserve the apology**. While the girl's tail twitches in gratitude, a weight dropping from her shoulders.

"Thanks for saving me," Primrose reaches for the maw of Conrad, enjoying a pat over her head.

"Anytime. Now, let's enjoy a couple hours of sleep. You must be exhausted from all that running." Stamina is not exactly one of her qualities. "That said," Conrad lightly slaps the table. "We've got two rooms booked. Who sleeps where?"

Everyone has a choice, except Adrian and him. They will split over the rooms, to act as guard, just in case. Not much sleep for them.

Selena grabs the hand of her friend, Carrot.

“Alright then, that’s decided. Selena and Carrot will sleep in Adrian’s room, while Primrose and Lisette will sleep here.”

Selena comes to say goodnight to the other two before waiting for her ex-bandit friend, Carrot, at the entrance. That friend takes the hand of Lisette and wishes her a good **night’s rest**. To straight-out ignore Primrose afterwards.

“Must be fatigue...” Conrad wonders about that flat-out rejection.

*

A loud yawn makes Selena laugh. **“You need more sleep,”** she mocks Conrad, knowing well enough he had to be guard while they slept cozily.

“Maybe tonight,” he yawns again.

They’re both inside an old house. More of a shanty, really. Amazing how someone can live in here. Yet, this is the old home of Selena and her sister. That sister resides in the one other room of the building, currently checked by the most expensive doctor Conrad could find. Meanwhile, both of them wait here. The man is tired and in need of sleep, while Selena is hyped at finally having professional help for her sister. Hyped, and impressed. This man actually kept his word and paid good coin for her sister’s **sake**. Even if he drops them now, he already did far more than most would.

“Why are you smiling at me? Is my face funny?” Conrad asks, wondering if there’s something smeared on his cheek or whatever.

“M-hm-hm...” Selena doesn’t deny or confirm, only throwing a big, bright grin at him, while she bounces lively on an old, half-rotten chair.

“Just wait till that thing cracks in half, then I’ll be the one laughing,” Conrad chuckles at her.

The door opens and the doctor comes out, closing the entrance afterwards.

“How is she doing?” Conrad asks, all attention of Selena suddenly shifting to the doctor to hear his conclusion.

“I’ve given her the best herbs we have. It will take the pain away.”

“Can she be cured?” Selena asks energetically.

The doctor looks at the girl with eyes that betray he’ll have to hurt her feelings, trying to weigh his words. “Curing is impossible, but we can take away her pain, and give her joy in life again.”

Selena doesn’t really understand. Feeling joy again? No pain? Isn’t that the same as cured?

The doctor explains to Conrad what the girl’s condition is. “She had the Great Plague, years ago. Survived it, but her lungs are permanently damaged and vulnerable to infection. Herbs will take care of the pain. Other than that...”

Conrad understands. Her lungs will never get better. All they can do is try and avoid a new infection. “What would you recommend?” he asks.

“Best case would be plenty of fresh air and sunshine,” the doctor glances around at the old worn house they are in, mold growing in multiple spots. “Definitely, don’t have her stay in here.”

Selena grows visibly worried. Eyes ask for clarification from the man who rescued her from the bandit’s life. Afraid of the words which will follow now.

Conrad gives her a gentle pat on the back. “That can be arranged. She’ll be out of here before the day is over.”

A smile returns on Selena’s face, wider than before.

“We’re heading to the lands to the north of Hatori, she can come along,” he clarifies.

The doctor raises his eyebrows. Now there’s a location he hasn’t heard in what feels like forever. “The lands of the Alma druids? I thought they were nothing but a myth by now. If you can manage to find even one, it should help the girl a lot. Their medicine was known to be far ahead of ours. More so even than the Muroid Tribe’s. At least, that’s how the legends go.”

Not that he actually believes these travelers will ever get there, or that place still exists, if it ever did. Still, hope to cling to also makes for good medicine.

After the man leaves, Conrad gives Selena another pat into the direction of her sister's room. "Go on, let her know she should say goodbye to her old home. And don't forget to do the same. Then we've got shopping to do for our journey."

*

It's afternoon already when all three of them, Conrad, Selena and Luna, are out and about in town. Luna is carried on Conrad's back, just about to place her on a covered wagon. One of two he bought. They didn't have much choice here when it comes to type of wagons available. Thankfully, these are fine merchant wagons. With good protection from the elements. The sickly girl already enjoys all fresh air and warm sun she rarely gets to see.

Conrad checks the horses on offer. Teeth are in good condition, always a fine indicator of their health and age. Four horses in total are needed, a pair for each wagon.

The occasional cough from Luna flares up a sense of worry. Hopefully, **she didn't catch** an infection already. Not a time too soon to get out of that molded shanty. And with the **dire wolf pelts they still have, she won't have to worry about the cold of night.** Even one fur is big enough to cover more than one girl. Not selling them turned out to be a good idea from Adrian.

Speaking of Adrian, he's currently at the inn, with Lisette, Primrose and Carrot. No doubt, those girls are still asleep. Might sound odd Conrad would entrust his own daughter to the specialized womanizer machine that is his friend, but **he's** not actually worried. The man **won't try anything with those three. Adrian likes his women** voluptuous, as he calls it. Mature, with a big bust to dive into and a big butt to pound in. He has no interest in children. Besides, none of them are married.

Conrad moves the wagons with the girls on top towards the local merchant. The store owners will load in supplies already bought, while he can take a nap in the nearby shade of a **tree and some shrubbery, behind the merchant's house. Definitely could use the rest.**

...

A plop onto the grass makes him open his eyes again. Selena sits right next to him.

“Not staying with your sister?”

“She sleeps in the wagon.”

Conrad can imagine she would. That girl can't have a lot of stamina, stuck in a bed for who knows how many years. This short trip through the village must have sapped her of energy already. Another reason to take it easy right now and enjoy a quick nap himself.

“I joined the bandits one year ago...” Selena seems intent on not granting him that nap. “You know, to earn coin for Luna's medicine. We lost our mother to the Plague, so there wasn't much of another choice.”

“No father?” Conrad asks.

“Mine left Mom behind. Luna's passed away before Mom did.”

“You're half-sisters then?”

The girl nods. With Selena one year older than her sister. Selena's father might still be out there, somewhere. Doesn't matter, she doesn't even know his name.

“After joining the bandits, I was assigned the same job as another newcomer... Carrot.”

Conrad closes his eyes, while listening to what she has to say, not interrupting.

“We worked as a team. I was supposed to steal. She was the decoy, drawing our target's attention.” She chuckles at her own past, nostalgically. “I blundered. Fingers got stuck around his belt, and the entire pouch I had to steal fell to the ground. He grabbed me instantly.”

Conrad's eyes open again. She must have escaped one way or the other, or her hand wouldn't be there anymore.

“Would have lost my hand on the very first day,” she confirms what would have happened. “But Carrot ran up to him and bit him in the arm. Then she grabbed my startled hand and dragged me forward. Even picked up the pouch along the way.” She laughs again. “Should have seen the man's anger. Teeth marks visible in his arm.”

“What happened after?” Conrad finally opens his mouth.

“I wasn't cut out for it. We were lucky there. I would only get both of us caught one day. So, we switched roles. I became decoy.” Selena leans closer to Conrad, placing a hand on his arm, slowly brushing it. Giving him a smile while she pulls a single leg over his,

making sure her thigh is visible. “I’m much more suited for that role. Spared Carrot from having to do it. It’s how I repay her.”

The girl’s hand moves from his arm, starting to go down, over Conrad’s thigh. Taking in its shape, while she locks her eyes on his for the entire duration. Face drawing closer, her breath felt on his cheek. Wet lips separate lightly, just enough to see the tip of her tongue, tracing the inside of her red gloss. “This was always my best survival tactic,” she whispers to him.

Conrad swallows. Her mouth hovers so close to his. Her eyes show he only has to reach forward and claim her lips. How long has it been since he was last charmed by a girl? Ten years ago... It never happened again after. Not that his interest was gone. Not that his life didn’t bring the opportunity, in particularly after joining the military. Only, he couldn’t. Not anymore. He didn’t deserve fun. Didn’t deserve pleasure. And definitely didn’t deserve love.

“There’s no need to, not with me,” he whispers in return, captivated by her charm, finding it hard to resist. Yet, that’s exactly why he has to stop her. She shouldn’t feel a need to use her survival tactic here. He will never seek to harm her.

“I know,” her soft breath strokes his ears. “There’s no need to.”

Selena draws just that extra little closer, turning more towards him, placing a hand on the ground while she leans over Conrad. Only a single finger’s width separates her lips from his.

“That’s why I want to.”

Resistance leaves Conrad, frozen in emotions he has no control of, when he can feel the soft squishiness of her lips barely touch his. Depositing their wetness in gratitude for saving her sister from that damp hovel which was their home. For dragging her friend out of a life of crime and misery. And lastly, for removing all need for Selena to ever play out another act.

With a soft nibbling, the girl’s lips caress Conrad’s. Parting again with a reluctant plop after her saliva tried to seal them together.

Yes, she no longer has to act. Now, she can simply follow her own desire. Only when it suits her. Only with whoever it suits her. Even if her life were to end tomorrow, she at least had today. Free.

“Thank you,” she whispers in his ear. “Thank you, eternally.”

Conrad can't help himself anymore. Such gratitude... Can he really deserve it? Is it possible, for the first time since that horrible day, he's actually worthy again of being loved, ever so slightly?

His fingers brush through her hair, trying to get a better look at the girl's face. Hair simply falls back in place as he slides through, though that's okay. The man got the answer he asked for already. Her eyes draw him in. A small blush on her face, not from shyness, but from excitement. Excited at the realization her charms aren't lost on the man beneath her. Happy she can do this much for him. Eyes which encourage him and convey meaning, even if she doesn't speak.

Whatever it is that holds you trapped in the past... You can let go of it. At least, for this short instant, for me. If it's a heavy weight you carry, then cast it upon me. If it's a darkness, then let it consume me. Whatever it may be, don't try and hold it in any longer, when there's someone willing to share it with you.

Similar to how she desires to share herself. A mutual contract, a bond between two, passionately bound in lust and lovingly carved in flesh.

And it's like the weight of the world suddenly feels lighter on Conrad's shoulders. Fingers that were flicking through her hair now seek out her back. Flow over her shoulders, follow her waist, to admire Selena's round bum.

It's impossible to lie to himself. Impossible to lie to the girl.

He wants her. Be granted her love, as if after ten years he can finally be granted forgiveness.

*

The bushes ahead rustle, and Selena stares annoyed to the side. What insufferable asshole interrupts them right when the heat of passion cranks up?

Source of the rustling comes to a stop. Startled at the sight of a small girl hunched over an adult man, sultry aura surrounding them. Her annoyed stare not lost on the newcomer, clearly interrupting at a bad time.

“I, uh... Sorry?”

It’s a young boy. The kid looks behind him, where more tumult comes from, and he jumps behind a bush, right beside the couple he just bothered. Remaining in total silence, to crawl into a ball.

“Over there maybe?!” a man’s voice calls out. One of the town’s guards appears and takes in the sight of the couple. “My apologies, have you seen a young brat run past?”

“What’s going on?” Conrad asks.

“Official business. We’re looking for him.”

“What did he do wrong?” Conrad tries to prod for more information, though the guard brushes him off.

“That doesn’t matter. Have you seen him or not?”

Better answer quickly, before the guard grows annoyed and takes them in for acting suspicious or obstructing their duty. “Yeah, I might have. About this tall?” Conrad stands up after Selena moved aside. “Wearing dirty rags. Had the air of a little criminal all around him.”

“That’s the one,” the guard answers.

“He ran that way,” Conrad points to the bush furthest ahead. “Seemed to be in a hurry.”

The guard nods and wants to head off.

A couple more words are thrown towards him. “Thank you for your service!”

The guard turns around quickly and replies. “Thank you for your duty, citizen.”

...

The man left, and his fellow guards in the distance are no longer audible, so Conrad turns to the bush nearby. A young face peeks over it. “Problems?” he asks the kid.

The boy nods at him, still unsure if the guards are really gone.

“Stole something?”

Pride shines in the boy's eyes, immediately denying. "Nuh-uh. I would *never* steal! That's only done by bad...!"

"Alright, alright, I get it," Conrad lifts his arms to calm the kid down. "Don't make too much noise now, or they'll return and then we're in trouble too."

The boy covers his mouth, suddenly realizing his mistake. Not very concerned about being caught himself, yet to involve these strangers who helped him out with trouble would be nothing but shame and dishonor. "Th... Thanks," he bows his head to the stranger in front.

Conrad brushes the dirt of his clothes from sitting on the ground earlier. "Sounds like someone bestowed you with a good sense of ethics," he gives the boy a tap on his shoulder and prods him to come along. "Let's get away from here. Before they return."

*

Since the wagons finished loading, the group is ready to depart. All Conrad needs to do is pick up the others at the inn. No need to worry about the wagons, the merchants will keep them safe for the time being. Now, to first head back to the boy hiding behind a corner, and they can all return towards the inn. Selena walks in tow while Conrad carries her sister. The girl sleeps on his back.

"Out of curiosity, what were you up to? Why did the guards chase you? Be honest, did you do anything wrong?"

"I didn't, I swear!" the boy bashes his own chest in pride. "Only wanted to board a wagon to the Sea of Salt. They didn't want to take me along, so I tried to sneak in."

"Sea of Salt?" Conrad wonders out loud.

"Huh? Never heard of it?" the kid is surprised. "It's an oasis of untapped resources! Unlimited potential!" Then he turns calm again. "At least, that's what I've heard."

"Well, I'm not from around," Conrad explains his lack of local knowledge. "But you don't sound very convinced yourself?"

The kid mopes around. "I don't know what to believe anymore... The man who took me in, my guardian, he never wanted to say much about it. Until one day he went away, to the

Sea of Salt. To become one of many settlers. They were all going on a caravan. There were plenty of guards, must be a dangerous place...”

The boy turned sad. Not sure what to think of it all. “He said I couldn’t come along. I don’t understand. He spoke happy words, while his face looked sad. None of it makes sense anymore...” he mumbles to himself, picking up vigor again afterwards. “That’s why I want to see with my own eyes!”

“Impossible,” Selena suddenly opens her mouth, silent until now.

“Why?!” the kid asks, in total disbelief.

“When did they take him?” she asks.

“A month ago.”

“Then it’s too late.”

The boy stares at her with growing disbelief. What unacceptable nonsense does this girl babble?!

Thus, Selena begins to explain the true nature of this Sea of Salt. “That’s not an oasis. It’s a desert. Nothing but salt as far as you can see. It’s where they dump all undesirables, until they die from lack of water and food.”

The kid shakes his head wildly. This cannot be true. He refuses to accept such a ludicrous explanation! If true, that would mean... No, it *can’t* be true!

“The settling, the resources, it’s all a big lie!” she yells at him, leaving the boy speechless. Harshness of her words slowly sinks in.

“Who are these undesirables?” Conrad asks.

“Anyone. Whoever is a nuisance to the cartels, or to the Union.” With laws and norms kept vague and contradictory on purpose, constantly changing. Makes it so much easier to catch anyone for whatever crime they want.

Conrad turns to the boy, asking him about his guardian. “That man who looked after you, did he speak badly about the Union or the cartels?”

The boy bites his lips together staunchly. Only opening them again to give his reason for silence. “Snitching is bad.”

“True, and I respect your attitude,” Conrad agrees. “But isn’t it too late already?”

The boy bites his lip again, frustration starts to show. The man is right. If what that girl says is true, then... “He made pamphlets... About the Union and their shady deals. I helped spread them out at night.” Already starting to draw his own conclusions with a growing angry frown. “Somebody snitched...”

“Any idea who would?” Conrad asks.

The boy doesn’t have to give the answer, as Selena is ahead of him. “Everyone.” She points to a mural afterwards, painted on one of the houses further ahead. The painting depicts a couple nameless faces, all looking slightly upwards in the exact same direction. A single slogan accompanies it.

“Join Citizen Watch! All eyes towards a better future! **Are yours?**”

Few would be able to actually read the slogan, though it **doesn’t matter**. The iconography is clear enough.

“Citizen Watch...?” Conrad asks with growing distaste. “What’s that? Or who?”

“Like I said, everyone. Strangers, neighbors, friends, family. Sell out and get a reward. Never sell anyone, and someday you find yourself on a one-way trip to the Sea of Salt. **Regardless if you genuinely don’t know** anything to report or not.”

The perfect recipe to subdue a populace, or even send them straight into annihilation, leaving them as walking corpses unable to resist their own demise. A recipe which consists of constant fear, combined with equally constant division on every single level of society. From their tribe, all the way down to the family. Unable to even trust their own children anymore. While culture and roots are dismantled, left broken and shattered into the wind, leading these lost souls straight into the cold and all-consuming embrace of nihilism. Detached from their past. Stripped of a future. Eternally trapped within the present. **With the people’s spirit crushed under the overbearing weight of a world without meaning.**

“You seem to know a lot about it?” Conrad asks Selena.

“The bandits exist outside the system. It’s one of the benefits why many joined them. **Heard plenty about it from others.**”

The boy heard enough. His pace comes to a stop. Quite obvious he wants to go his own way now.

“Hey,” Conrad addresses him. “Wait up. Still want to visit the Sea of Salt?”

The kid clenches his fists, face determined. He definitely will get there, to find out the truth with his own eyes!

“No need to sneak into a wagon when you can simply join one,” the man says. “We’re heading in that direction. You can come along,” he offers his hand to make a reasonable proposal. “Consider your options. You can’t go there if the guards catch you first.”

He subtly gives a wink to Selena, who backs him up.

“Yeah, we pass nearby. Might as well join.”

Not that Conrad has any idea if they even go remotely close to this supposed Sea of Salt, but whatever. As long as it stops this kid from rushing to an untimely fate. At a minimum, it will give him time to ponder things over before he figures it out.

“Okay...” the boy agrees.

As they continue towards the inn, Conrad is left with a sad truth. Life really is even worse here than back in Bournesse and Gleaze.

...

Arriving at the inn while still carrying Luna, Conrad asks the boy where he’s from. He’s clearly not hatori, though that doesn’t mean much anymore these days.

“I dunno... I have no parents,” he answers, strangely detached.

“Never knew them?”

“I don’t want to know them.”

Conrad grimaces. Another sad story. So many folks run around carrying one or two.

“All I know is I got dumped in an orphanage, back in Gleaze.”

The man gives him a push inside, where the others wait. “Alright folks, time to introduce a couple new faces. The sleepyhead here is Luna, Selena’s sister.”

Selena already hops to the other girls to join their company.

“And the kid over here is... uh...” Right, he doesn’t know his name yet. Should have asked sooner. “Who are you again?”

A deep gasp of surprise comes from inside, right where Lisette sits, now rising up with a sudden rush of energy. The boy next to Conrad equally unexpected responds to her.

“Huh? Lisette...?”

*

The mood is silent again, as Conrad finished plenty of more talking. This time with most of the girls or Adrian not present. They already heard it before.

“So, you knew my parents?” the boy called Roderik asks, after listening attentively.

“Your father, Odwin, was my mentor. Your mother, Mira, looked after my sister and I.”

Roderik’s mouth hangs open at the tale of his parents being part of a mercenary group. And not just any group, quite the infamous one. “Which means, they didn’t... abandon me?”

“No. When your father heard what happened at the castle, he only showed concern for you and your mother, rushing to our camp site. Determined to get you out of there. That’s where he entrusted you to me.” Conrad sighs deeply. He had to repeat this story way too often lately. “You were so tiny back then, and fragile.”

“That means you were the one who left me in the orphanage?” Roderik asks.

“Ouch... Technically, I left you with the priest, who brought you to the orphanage. But yeah, I did.”

The only girl left in the room, Lisette, stands up to reach for her father’s hand on the table, looking at Roderik defensively. He *has* to understand, her father had no other choice!

Conrad grabs her hand in gratitude. “It’s fine, dear... No, I couldn’t take either of you along. If I had tried, then none of us three would be alive right now. I’m sorry.”

Only silence follows, the boy lost in thought at all he heard. A part of his own past he never had the faintest inkling about. A part of history he never knew the truth of.

Conrad rises from his chair. “Let’s go gather the others. The day isn’t over yet, and I want to be out of here before night falls.”

Roderik reaches out and pulls on the man’s maw. “My parents... How did they die?”

“Your mother by protecting you with her own body until we arrived. You father by enacting revenge for her loss, buying us the window of opportunity to escape.”

Right before Conrad wants to head out of the doorway, Roderik asks one last question, a need to know written on his face. **“Those who attacked Mother... Did he get ‘em?”**

“Every last one.”

*

The girls run around in the store Conrad brought them to. Quite a surprise, for there to be a store with this quality of goods to still be around. Apparently, a local specialty, with aristocracy as their customer. Items usually shipped from here, because this is technically the production facility, not a store. **Doesn’t really matter, as** the owners are happy enough to sell their products directly. Not many customers anymore, lately. Aristocracy is on the decline, and so are wealthy merchants and other middle class.

“You sure aren’t stingy when it comes to these matters,” Adrian laughs when observing the girls, still closing his pants after fooling around with the owner’s wife in secret.

Conrad set no limit. They can all choose an outfit to their liking, spared no expense.

“Not that I blame you,” Adrian adds. **“I’m more into women with grip to them, you know? But I don’t judge others’ tastes, and it’s nice to see them smile.”**

“That it is,” Conrad confirms, **“but there’s more to it. This is for their own safety.”** Especially after he heard the stories of Citizen Watch. **“A rich family will be just that bit less susceptible to be picked up and carted off to some nobody’s land than a group of paupers. And let’s not forget,** we already have a local fugitive of law in our midst, with the addition of Roderik. Stuffed in an expensive suit, **the town’s guards won’t recognize or even suspect him. That disguise won’t work if the boy is the only one wearing such clothes.”**

Though the man has no intention of staying around this town for longer than necessary to begin with. Having this mandatory snitching crap going around, better to not linger at any same spot for too long.

“What do you think?” Selena comes up to him, showing off her new fancy dress, followed by her sister who wears a matching set.

“Looking cute,” he replies, already showered with smiles.

They wear a dark purple beret, decorating their similar hairstyle. A local maid, working for the store, proposed styling their hair. Surely, **these girls couldn't run around with dirtied hair while donning fancy clothes?** And a bath. They definitely needed a bath with a good scrubbing. Conrad was more than happy to offer the extra coin for the service. And **to ensure the merchants' silence, naturally. The maid's** rationale did make sense. Not much of a disguise to run around all rich and pampered when having only dirty clits for hair.

Selena and Luna have a thick braid running to their waist. It matches well with the beret. A light beige one-piece dress covers their body, with short maws, equally short skirt and a bow-tie over the chest. A thin, white pantyhose covers their slender legs.

The pantyhose gets full glory as Selena turns around for Conrad, skirt lifting up from rotation. The girl well aware what she shows him, sticking out her tongue afterwards to Roderik, **who doesn't have a clue where to place his eyes in all his young**, naive innocence. And even less of a clue what this strange feeling which runs through him right now is.

Only difference with Luna is that girl being a lot more modest in her behavior than her sister. That, and a bit paler in complexion. Her outfit is the same, with only the bow-tie in a different color. Green, rather than pastel orange.

Selena gives a wink to Conrad, when Adrian is distracted by the maid and Roderik turned away with a red face, **fiddling with his fancy maws' extra decorative layer** as a distraction. The girl has her finger placed inside her white pantyhose, right at the waist, pushing into her rear bum. Slowly starting to drag the white cloth down while emphasizing her rear. Upper halve of her butt cheeks start to show naked flesh. A color more beautiful and enticing than any she wears.

Another short flick of her tongue, and the white cloth slaps back into place, hugging her skintight. Then she prances off, dragging her sister by the hand, giggling.

Conrad can't help but smile. What a temptress. No wonder she managed to survive on that skill. Now, she can just do it for her own fun.

A short tug on the sleeve makes his attention focus to the side. It comes from Lisette, trying to draw the attention of her father. The girl wants to show her own dress to him.

Roderik already turns away again, just when he thought he mastered these new, strange feelings. Already in need of more training. This is definitely not the Lisette he remembers from the orphanage.

Conrad chuckles at his daughter, hiding a complex emotion rising up from deep inside. That hair, after a good wash and no longer tied up to appear like a **boy's... It's** exactly like **Cloe's. And her matching face... like he** stares at his sister from ten years ago once more. He lets his hand brush through her brown lushness in almost disbelief.

A little wild, with stubborn tufts here and there. But in remarkably good condition. She wears a vivid-blue dress with a white apron. Looking all posh, with a similarly-blue hair ribbon, like she could jump down a rabbit hole into some wonderland at any moment.

“Beautiful,” he compliments her choice of garment. “Suits you much better than that boy's outfit.”

She beams in joy at her father, following Selena to wherever she ran off to.

That only leaves Carrot and Primrose. Both browsed for a while already through the Hatori selection of clothes. The man has to admit, he's actually quite curious to see what the more luxurious outfits of their homelands look like. So far, all he has seen from Hatori are the same rags the rest of poor folk wear. **He did get a taste of it with Primrose's old** outfit, though that one faded and ruffled from being stuck inside the dirty bandits' hideout.

Carrot is first to appear. Ears bounce on her head energetically, eager to show her pretty-girl makeover.

It's a thin red cloth, with yellow hatori-themed motif on it. A kind of elegant brush strokes, mainly detailing the edges. The outfit runs down, forming a sort of loincloth. A similar piece covers her rear. A large diamond shape cut-out decorates her chest, revealing plenty of skin. The rear flap of the dress has a hole for her fluffy round tail to poke through.

“That's cute,” Conrad remarks. And daring. As if a light breeze could flip up that loincloth covering her bottom, where nothing hides her modesty underneath, clearly noticeable by the lack of any underwear band around her revealed sides. But he settles on a more refined choice of words.

“Very feminine.”

Feminine indeed. He doesn't lie. No frills, unlike the other girls, yet elegant in its shapes and patterns.

The girl chose to keep her hair the same, only giving it a wash. A pair of twin-tails, starting at a hair bun each.

Carrot's ears twitch from the praise received, tail bouncing happily like an enticing lure when she as well runs off to her friends.

Conrad patiently waits for the only one remaining who should come out any moment now. With how Carrot was dressed, and Primrose also browsing the Hatori selection, he's kind of expecting –and secretly hoping- she chose a similar feminine piece.

A soft metallic ring of small metal parts clanging together signals her reveal. It comes from her hair decoration she already wore, now with an all - new and fitting outfit.

“Uh...” Conrad has to stop his mouth from opening.

Roderik shakes his head from further away. What is going on?! It's like these girls all do it on purpose?! Why do they make him feel this way! All training fails as he is unable to steer his eyes away. A desire matched by Conrad.

“That's... Pretty,” the man praises her, thinking the term “steaming hot” is more suitable. Do all vulpes girls dress this mature?!

She wears a fancy, colored robe, with expansive flower motif. A rich blue, with the cloth thick and loose. Large open sleeves, and an equally large split. Long over-knee socks visible underneath.

That top, though... How the heck does that robe not slide down her body? Does she use magic to keep it up? That *has* to be it, there's just no other rational explanation!

“I'm pretty certain somebody likes you,” Adrian whispers to him, after the maid walked away and stopped grabbing his attention.

Both shoulders are completely revealed, nothing keeping up the top of Primrose's robe, already slid down at least halfway her upper arms, where it only rests on her cleavage. And what a cleavage...

“I had no idea vulpes were so... endowed,” Adrian tries to be diplomatic, already wondering to himself what a healthy adult one would look like.

Conrad nods. Yeah, **that's quite round what she has there.** Amazing for her age. Maybe **that's a vulpes thing?** Her old outfit didn't exactly offer much opportunity to showcase her ample assets. But this choice of luxury wear? One would expect a nipple slip and complete wardrobe malfunction at the slightest movement, yet she keeps it up, somehow.

Definitely magic.

The girl plays with her giant fox tail, trying to get the last tufts in place. Should have seen the maid earlier, after giving this girl her scrubbing. As if she just finished a titan's job, washing, drying and brushing all that hair. Vulpes must have it hard, with those gigantic tails and large, furry ears, on top of her already long brown hair. A maintenance nightmare. **That's the advantage for Carrot. Hers doesn't clit as easily,** and that round, fluffy ball on her rear is manageable.

*

Satisfied, the group leaves the store. That should be about it for today. Time to head back and set out towards the direction where the sun goes down.

Conrad is approached by a shady man, hiding merchandise under his clothes. **"Sir, would you like a panacea?"**

"What's that?"

"Panacea. Cure-all. Only the best quality."

Definitely a fraud. If only such a product existed, then Luna wouldn't have to be so careful about her health. **"What's it made of?"** he asks, confused about the familiar shape of what he sees. But surely, **that can't be?**

"Dried leporid ears. Cure-all medicine."

Conrad shakes his head. What is this crap!? He steps promptly away from the shady man. **That can't be real leporid ears,** right? Who in their right mind would use such?! Must be some wild animal's they cut off and dried to make it seem alike. Trying to sell it to any sucker who appears wealthy enough.

He shakes off the thought and they move on, reaching the wagons. **"So, you're coming with us?"** he asks Primrose, trying to keep his eyes from her half-exposed assets.

The girl is happy to confirm. **“My grandfather lives in the Hatori capital. We have to pass there to reach the Misty Woods, if you want to head into the lands to the north.”**

“Oh, you know the place?”

“The Woods? About half a day removed from the capital. Been there once, got lost in it.”

Matches what Conrad heard of it by now. People who go in too deep simply get lost.

“There’s no way through?”

“Nobody ever managed. Grandfather knows more about it. He used to be part of those who tried.”

Another reason to bring her along then. Go see that grandfather she speaks of. **“To the Hatori capital, eh? I thought the Tribes would each have their own capital.”**

“That’s how it used to be, before the Union took over. Now, the Vulpes capital, Sakai, is the only one left.”

“Big?” Conrad asks.

Primrose affirms energetically. **“And wealthy! Compared to the rest. Even if grandfather says it used to be prettier when he was young.”**

Conrad can only conclude it has to be a refuge spot for whoever has enough means to settle. A place where the rich move to, away from all misery around these parts. **“Your grandfather always lived there?”**

“Yup! He owns a big business in Sakai. Most thriving in the entire city!” she answers with pride.

“And your parents? I only hear about your grandfather.”

Conrad immediately recognizes his mistake, the girl’s face turning sour.

“Mother died giving birth to me. Father... I never knew. He ran off.”

The girl’s smile returns when his hand brushes through her hair. **“I never thanked you for removing the enchantment. Thanks a lot!”**

Primrose grabs his wrist, taking another look at it. Confirming it’s indeed gone. **“No more traces of any dark energy,”** she confirms, overjoyed to be of service to her savior.

“Seen it before?” Conrad asks her about Grimald’s tracking enchantment.

The girl shakes her head. "Never seen anything like it. Never learned about it at the Spire." Got to be the location she acquired her arcane arts. Not that Conrad knows anything about such matters. "It's very strange..." she remarks, lost in her own thoughts. "Overwriting it shouldn't actually have worked without being familiar with the spell... But somehow, I felt it would. And it did."

"Must be proof of your talent," Conrad tries to ease her mind.

"Top of my class," she boasts proudly. "And youngest to graduate ever!"

The girl pushes her chest forward in pride when Conrad praises her achievement as impressive, possibly not really aware how much softness she reveals.

A single piece of advice gets added to that praise for good measure. "Honor student, eh? That's very impressive. But let's not accept drugged drinks from random strangers anymore, okay? Or you'll only end up in another bandit hideout."

Her mouth turns all pouty like a goldfish.

...

The last goods are being loaded. Personal accommodations, for the most part, that the local store owners didn't know about. Such as correct distribution of furs and immediate food supplies over both wagons.

Carrot joins Conrad, carrying multiple blankets. "Where should these go?" she asks.

"Distribute them over both wagons. They're for sleeping."

"And these supplies?"

"Front wagon."

Lastly, the girl picks out a blue-and-white blanket. "What about this one? With you, or Lisette?"

Conrad takes the blanket and sighs nostalgically, more of those complex emotions actively suppressed. Caressing his thumb over the spot where Charlotte embroidered their initials.

"A girl?" Carrot asks him suddenly, noticing his fascination with the blanket.

"Ah... Yeah."

"Close?" She knows what happened to Charlotte because of his story, yet she has no idea about the details behind this blanket.

“Yeah... I’d like to believe so,” he answers.

Carrot pulls on his maw, gesturing Conrad to drop lower. As he drops through his knees, the rabbit girl rises herself on her toes and places a hand against his ear, whispering into it. Her furry ears tickle his face. “Made with love, I can tell.”

Conrad smiles at her, hiding his inner pain, caressing one of her ears.

“Well, this one goes here then,” she declares about the blue blanket. “I’m sure Lisette won’t mind.” Then she ponders over the remaining blankets to be spread out. “Um... How many?”

“Well, there’s five girls in one wagon, and three males in the other,” Conrad declares their sleeping arrangements.

Carrot’s face loses its joy. “All girls in one wagon?”

“Uh, yeah?” he can’t really see the problem here. Isn’t it better for the girls to sleep together? Not that Adrian will do anything with them, not even Primrose with her bigger bust. She may have the rack, but is still too small in stature for his taste. And Roderik? He’s... Well, he’s exactly like Conrad was himself when around that age. Innocence itself. Doesn’t have a clue where his dick is supposed to go. Probably only discovered today he actually has one, when they received their new clothes. Regardless, it’s a good idea to let the girls have their privacy.

“There’s a problem?” he asks.

A disappointed glance of Carrot is cast in the other direction, where the other wagon undergoes final preparations. Vision focused on one girl in particular.

“You don’t like Primrose?” Conrad asks.

Carrot doesn’t reply and places down another blanket. Mood sour.

“I did notice you ignored her yesterday, before going to sleep.”

Technically, that was today, with how late they got sleep, but details...

When she still doesn’t reply, Conrad places a hand on her back and gives it a gentle pat.

“Can’t tell me?”

Carrot mumbles incomprehensible, before finally opening her mouth. “She’s Vulpes.”

“Uhu?” he doesn’t see the issue yet.

“I don’t like her kind.”

Lifting himself onto the wagon, the man sits down on it. “Why is that?”

Carrot bites her lip at first, not really willing to talk about it, though she can't resist his desire to know. He did help her out, she owes him. “Our tribe... They're doing really bad. Many are... dying.”

Conrad was afraid it would be something like this. That glint of resentment he noticed in her eyes is not caused by a trivial matter. And he has seen lots of leporid around, fleeing all the way into Gleaze and Bournesse. There has to be a reason.

“We come from further in the west. But we're scattered now, on the run. Always searching for what little food is left.”

This girl is quite a handful when it comes to her eating habits, that's for certain. He had to pay extra for a good supply of asters for their trip. These things aren't exactly cheap with the high demand going around, and not overwhelming in supply either around these parts. “And vulpes are the cause?” he asks.

Carrot nods. “Those left behind in our homeland have hardly anything remaining to eat.”

“And that's our fault?” another girly voice suddenly interrupts, asking with a curious tone.

Carrot turns around and notices Primrose heard part of their conversation. Turning her back to the vulpes girl right after, to stare down at one of the blankets, frustrated. “Yeah, it is! Vulpes brought their cattle when flooding in our lands. Those trampled and ate all our food. Or contaminated it with...” She doesn't even want to speak the words. Contaminated their food with the cattle's excrement, bringing all kinds of new diseases to the tall-ear tribe.

Conrad sighs. Not an easy situation at all. How the heck is he going to solve this? It's true that vulpes are all meat-eaters. Another handful, that girl, even if not of the scale Carrot is. Meat is easier to acquire than anything else these days. For who has the ability to hunt, that is, and with only one vulpes mouth to feed. Makes sense most vulpes communities would keep large stocks of cattle. And those would need a lot of room. Room the local leporid can no longer use for their fields of asters.

“Can’t you eat something else?” Primrose asks innocently, receiving an angry scowl from Carrot.

Conrad shakes his head at the young mage. **That’s impossible. Their stomach can’t handle much else. Many try to survive on plain weeds, yet it’s noticeable in their rapidly declining health. He learned as much from Carrot today when preparing her stash of food for their trip.**

Carrot speaks with harsh bitterness in her voice. **“Mom and Dad had to sell Cherry, my younger sister, because they couldn’t feed both of us anymore. They starved themselves shortly after, simply to keep me fed!”**

The man’s face frowns up. Dammit! So much suffering in this world! He is far from alone with a horrible past. Starts to feel like everyone has a similar story. **Not that he can’t understand what her parents have done. Selling her sister... It must have been a horrible choice. Shows how desperate they were. In a sense, it’s not far removed from how he had to leave Lisette and Roderik behind.**

“That’s when I fled here.” Where she joined the bandits out of equal desperation.

“But the vulpes have it hard too...” Primrose answers with a weak voice.

“*Think I don’t know that?!*” Carrot bites at her. **“I don’t need stories. I saw the ditches filled with our Tribe! Saw their corpses shoved into it! Crawled over the dead still on the road! Adults, children... babies! Some dead for weeks before they finally were dragged away!”** Carrot throws the blanket aside and tries to cover her tears as she runs away into an alley.

First giving a sign to Primrose all will be right, Conrad follows the crying girl, encountering her further in the alley. She holds an arm over her eyes, sobbing.

“Come here,” he says, trying to place an arm around her.

She tries to push him away at first, but quickly stops resisting, placing her head against him while crying. Caressed and shushed by the man in front.

“Shh.. Take your time. Let it all out.”

“I... I’m sorry,” she stumbles out over her tears. “I’m sorry for ruining our trip...”

“That’s okay. We all have our moments like these.”

Conrad's eyes lift up, noticing Primrose followed them, standing further ahead. She's worried and without a clue what to do or say. He gives her a wink, indicating to wait there for a short while longer.

"I'm sorry..." Carrot repeats in his arms.

"It must have been very hard..." he rubs over Carrot's back. "And we all know you're only worried about your people. Completely understandable and normal under these harsh circumstances." He looks up again, addressing the girl further ahead as well. "But you know what? I have this feeling there's something we can do about all of this."

Carrot sniffs while trying to stop her tears, curiosity drawn to his words. Primrose holds a hand to her chest, clenching her robe. Hoping this man *has* a solution. One which can give them hope, at a minimum.

"Remember what I told about my past? And that black shadow monster you've both seen? I firmly believe that creature is connected to all misery back in my homeland, and the suffering back in Gleaze. The war, the bandits, starvation, plague, corruption, all of it! Behind all the reasons why people feel like fleeing. I don't know why this crap happens, but I fully intend to put a stop to that thing and whoever or whatever is behind it!"

What started as a means to offer comfort to these girls, has by now become words Conrad fully believes in. Anger rises, frustrations hidden deep within increasingly harder to contain.

"And I'm truly convinced what goes on in your respective homelands is caused by the same evil filth! That's why we will travel to the lands of the Alma druids, beyond the Misty Woods. To find out the truth."

He turns Carrot around so she faces Primrose, stating his conviction.

"For no other reason than to put a goddamn stop to it all!"

Conrad gives the girl a pat on the shoulder and lowers his voice, letting go of the anger which began to bubble up at the source of all this suffering. Suppressing it once more. "We're going to fix it, restore your homes, back to how they should be. So, let's try and get along now, okay?"

"I... didn't know," Primrose mumbles to Carrot.

“It’s not your fault,” the rabbit girl replies with a weak voice, eyes still red, not yet capable to stare at Primrose directly.

Conrad places an arm firmly around Carrot’s waist and pushes her forward. “Let’s go back to the wagons. We’re done here.” The man lets his other arm fold around Primrose’s waist when passing her, to guide both girls back to the group.

...

Carrot sniffs her last bit of tears away and picks up the blankets again. “So... blankets. All of these to the girls’ wagon?”

“That’s right,” Conrad smiles at her.

Their differences won’t be solved with only a single conversation. What is at risk for both of them is far too precious, far too heavy for that. This is not about merely groups of leporid or vulpes anymore. It’s quite obvious what’s going on will affect the very survival of their entire tribe. Though at a minimum, they won’t be at each other’s hair anymore.

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The wagons leave the village behind. Their journey commencing, while purpose of it all became a lot more fixated in their minds. To not reach beyond the Misty Woods is no longer an option.

Lisette sits right next to Conrad on the front wagon. Sleeping will be separate, while simply riding like this they can sit wherever they want. Carrot and Primrose are in the hooded part of the wagon. Carrot specifically picked out this wagon after noticing Primrose already occupied it. Probably her way of saying sorry. Adrian drives the other wagon, carrying Selena and Luna safely inside. Roderik was inside as well. Now they left town and no longer have to worry about guards, he took place on the rider’s bench.

The boy fiddles with a handkerchief. He pulled it out when their wagons stopped on the one location in the village where Conrad took a small detour. The spot where Roderik was taken in by a man, who cared for him and taught him a sense of good ethics. A man who was picked up against his will and sent off to a salt desert. This short stop gave the boy time to say goodbye. Where he held onto that handkerchief for support. One he kept for as long as he can remember. An heirloom. Even though he always hated his parents,

he could never let go of this one object. Now he finally learned the truth about them, grateful for that fact.

Lisette holds an object **in her hands**. It's the flute which once belonged to her parents.

"Can you play it?" Conrad asks.

She wants to speak, trying her best to create a word. Only a breathing comes out.

"There's no need to rush it," her father says. The man's attention is suddenly caught by an unexpected sight. **"What the...?"** he gazes in amazement at his daughter.

Strange lights buzz around her, like fireflies. She herself doesn't seem startled at all. Placing down the flute to hold the lights like they're fish in a tiny hand-bowl.

"They do that often?" Conrad asks her, recognizing those lights from the last time he saw them. During her birth, when a tiny miracle happened.

His daughter nods.

"How many?" he wonders at the lights

Lisette lifts a hand with five outstretched fingers.

"Huh, five? So, my eyes aren't cheating me. I thought there were four back then..."

Lisette has no idea what he talks about, but these five have been around all her life. Sometimes, they show themselves, for whatever reason. Usually, when an emotional day passed. There's something comforting about them, easing her worries. That as long as these are around, she will be fine. Like they have a mind of their own, trying to encourage her.

The girl grabs the flute again, pulling her father's maw. Her mouth opens. Trying hard to speak again. A hoarse tone suddenly audible, followed by a very faint but recognizable word.

"Dad."

She lifts up the flute and shakes her head. No, she can't play.

"Alright then," Conrad smiles with renewed energy at his daughter's first word since who knows when. **"I'll teach you."**

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There's an awkward silence around the campfire that evening. Not awkward as in uncomfortable around each other. Even Carrot and Primrose seem to be over their little scuffle from earlier today. No, it's a change in the air. They all know their lives will never be the same again. How this campfire marks the passing of a new crossroads, already behind them, never to return.

"Not too chilly?" Conrad asks Luna.

The girl smiles shyly at him. She received an extra blanket a while ago. **"It's warm, and nice," she replies.**

Her sister carefully looked after her for the entire evening. Took Luna a while to chew through the meat they had earlier, not used to such solid food. Did give her more color on the cheeks, and she ate it while not hiding her joy for its rich flavor.

Conrad can't even imagine what she must have eaten before. And he would rather not regardless. That as well is a matter of the past now, enjoying the sight of the girl staring enchanted at all sparks coming from the fire, throwing on another log just to give her a little more to dream away at.

Selena regularly throws him appealing glances. The kiss she gave him earlier today **hasn't been forgotten. If Roderik hadn't shown up at the time, he would no doubt** have gone further with her, feeling sad that magical opportunity was lost. It has been so long since he last felt butterflies in his stomach, and she awakened them again. Broke down the wall he had built this last decade, with so much ease he can only admire it.

Another flash of her eyes... **reflecting light of the campfire, shining bright with** gratitude for how he dragged her sister out of that village. If only that interruption **didn't** happen.

Yet, Conrad is relieved that interruption happened. It restored a piece of his past. **Brought back what never should have been lost. Roderik. If today hadn't happened, if they** arrived a single day later or earlier, their paths would never have crossed, and the boy would be captured right now. How would he ever be able to face his old mentor, if that could have been prevented, like thankfully fate found it worthy to occur today?

Carrot pulled up her legs, wrapping her arms around them. She hasn't said a word since the fire was lit, other than a single thanks when Primrose brought her asters from

the food supply, when the others had their meat. Considering what happened these last twenty-four hours, a lot must be going on in her mind right now. Overwhelmed... Tired. However, the girl found something to cling to for the first time. There just might be hope for her people. And here she is, about to become part in a chain of future history which will make it happen.

Adrian is in one of the wagons, sleeping. Conrad prefers to have someone awake at all times, until they are in safer territories. Further away from where they encountered the horror which pursued them from all the way in Gleaze. Even if Conrad has this strange foreboding it won't show its ugly head for a while, after the manner in which it willfully left last time. For whatever reason that may have been. Regardless, once Adrian wakes up, it's time for Conrad to get some sleep, a changing of the guards.

He wonders what must have played out in his friend's mind today. The man should finally have a better idea what trouble he got himself involved with. Not that Adrian is one to worry about. He wouldn't want to miss adventure like this for anything else in the world.

Which leaves two more faces. One as his own daughter, Lisette. She spoke a couple words earlier, when he showed her some basics on playing the flute. That's about the best she can muster right now, voice too weakened from lack of use. Should recover rather quickly, now she regained her will to speak.

A lot of mystery surrounds that girl. What events led her to stop speaking? Where did she pick up tracking? And how does she know how to read and write? Not exactly skills one would expect from a girl who grew up in an orphanage. Not to mention, that entire spirits thing she has going. Sure caught the others by wonder when she let those little lights buzz around when the fire was freshly lit.

Especially the last face around the campfire, Primrose, showed lots of interest at those lights. No wonder, schooled in the arcane arts. She apparently heard of spirit users before, while never having seen one. The rarest of casters. Said something about becoming Lisette's mentor, heh... Conrad can only smile at the thought. His daughter, a mage apprentice? Who would have thought? Not that he expects much. I mean, what can a couple weird fireflies even do?

A yawn comes from behind the man. **It's Adrian who woke up. Conrad's turn to enjoy a moment of rest. The others don't seem very interested in going to sleep yet, even if it's getting late.**

A smug face is lifted up, intensely focused on Conrad when he stands up.

The man chuckles and gives a wink to Selena, giving her a pat over the head as he passes. **"Damn you, girl," he whispers over his own breath.**

She held a hand over her chest, pulling down the top of her dress. Source of her smugness, treating him to a private flash of naked skin. Does she not want him to get any sleep at all? Doing a fine job, if so.

Crackling of wood in lively flames fades as Conrad reaches the furthest wagon. Time to hop in and hit the sack. The blue-and-white blanket right here, where Carrot placed it earlier today.

...

Wood of the wagon creaks as another person climbs in.

"What are you up to?" Conrad asks, expecting nothing but a naughty answer.

Selena hides her mouth when smiling, sitting down on the wooden floor of the wagon, peeking around. **"I don't know..." she replies in exactly that playful tone he already expected.**

She curls her hair around a finger, legs lying sideways to her right, white of her pantyhose contrasting with the dark of night. Its cloth radiates **some of the campfire's** glow which makes it all the way over here.

Her vision shifts around the wagon, searching for something.

"What are you...?" Conrad begins to speak, lowering his voice once she places her finger over her lips.

"Shh..." she says.

"What are you looking for?" Conrad whispers, feeling like playing along.

The girl tilts her head from left to right. Should she say it? Or not? Then she smiles again, finding what is looked for. Selena reaches out for the spare dire wolf fur.

"What you need that for?" Conrad grins to her in return.

"To lay them down," she replies, starting to spread it out on the wooden floor.

Conrad makes room for her and asks. **“What for?”**

That smug glint greets him again, head lifted high, tongue flicking over her lips. Voice nothing but a tease. **“I dunno~... Depends?”**

He lets her place down multiple rugs, observing the girl. **“How’s your sister doing? I mean, you have visited her, even if you were part of the bandits. You’ve seen how she regularly is...”** It’s hard for him to compare how Luna has been today, with how she was before.

Gratitude radiates from the girl in front with an overwhelming aura, as if she is an enlightened saint. **“I’ve never seen Luna so happy, so energetic! Not since before...”** she stops her words. This moment has no place for sad thoughts.

Conrad doesn’t really know how to respond. Energetic? Luna slept for half of this day! Her condition must be bad if this is such an improvement. **Regardless, it’s good to know she does better already.**

Selena finished laying down the last rug and comes to a stop. She noticed a particular object, carefully placed in this wagon where Conrad sleeps. **Charlotte’s blanket.** She reaches out for it, halting right before she would touch its old but quality fabric. **“Can I?”**

Conrad nods at her. Sure, she can take a closer look.

Selena rubs her fingers over the cloth, imprinting it into her memories. She thinks **deeply. Details aren’t quite clear** to the man, but he’s certain she must be going over his story again in her mind. The story she heard inside the inn, describing what happened in his past. The one story where that particular night his entire world fell apart was not excluded.

“She won’t blame you...”

A piercing hurt shoots through Conrad in an instant, trying to use every reserve of mental strength to subdue it by bringing his thoughts back to the present. For being so young, Selena sure has good understanding of what torments him, to so accurately and directly be capable of stating the main emotion dominating him when seeing that blanket.

Guilt.

“I don’t know,” Conrad answers. **“And I’ll never have a way of knowing.”**

Selena shakes her head in determination. “Of course, you’ll know. When you see her again! In the afterlife, when we return to Cloegandr.”

She must be a believer. Years ago, Conrad would have believed the same. Now, he honestly doesn’t know anymore. So many stories turned out to be nothing but falsehoods and lies. Children’s bedtime stories. How can he still believe after all which happened? Just look at the world they live in now. Misery everywhere! Is there truly a deity looking after them at the end of it all? He wants to, desperately wants to... Though it’s hard to believe anymore.

“Besides, I simply *know* she would not blame you,” Selena continues.

“How so?” he cautiously lifts his eyebrows, quite curious where all that confidence comes from. Faintly hoping she actually has a good reason.

The girl’s face turns all serious, tiny fists tightening to strengthen her answer. “Because I wouldn’t in her place!”

Conrad’s mouth opens, not really knowing how to reply. Similar words would usually be brushed off easily as empty and vapid. Yet, somehow, **he can’t deny them**. Similar to how he can’t deny the impact they have on him. Leaving the man trying to understand why. Is it because she encountered that monster herself? Faced it, and thus has a better idea what she talks about? Or maybe it’s because she understands hardship, living the life of a bandit group’s toy where she had to appease them day after day with her own body, working for her sister? That certainly puts weight behind her words. Though it might as well be the sincerity he can see all over her body.

“You really believe so?” he asks, no longer certain himself.

Selena places down the blanket and reaches for his large hands. “Definitely! Pinky swear.”

Conrad can’t contain a fragile laugh at her reply.

“I’m serious!” she mopes at him.

“I know you are,” he puts some of Selena’s hair behind her ear to enjoy a better view at the girl’s face. Wanting to look her straight in the eyes for his following declaration. “Thanks.”

Her mood instantly recovers, pleased at her words being accepted. Only to shift again as a new worry takes over. **“Was it... lonely?”**

No need to ask what she asks about. There's only one thought dominating all others inside Conrad's mind right now. **“Damn lonely,”** he honestly answers.

This last decade has been a nightmare. Especially the first years, when he didn't have enough mental fortitude to endure yet. Often crying himself to sleep at night. Once the sadness faded, it only did so because two other emotions overshadowed it. Loneliness was one of those two, with sheer hate as the other. Left all alone in a wide, harsh world. Every single person he knew gone.

Conrad's thoughts, digging deeper into areas they would rather not go, are suddenly drawn back to the present. A wet flicking of a small tongue just barely touches his cheek. Selena licks up a tear which came rolling down, hanging her face right before him. Moist air of her breath flows over his mouth, as he starts to inhale it as an intimate exchange. **Distinct from the night's chill, evaporating that loneliness through the simple unspoken** message it signifies. She's right here. Breathing his same air, like he breathes hers. Taking in a warmth which comes from deep inside her chest, to let it warm his heart.

“I was lonely,” she whispers.

No doubt, with only one friend among the bandits, Carrot, who was out on a job most of the time. With Selena either having to fake emotion when seducing a target as decoy, or left to fend for herself in the hideout to perform a similar act. Sleeping with men she felt no bond with. Isolating her heart, because she didn't even have the option to isolate her body.

Another delicate flick of the tongue to wipe his last tear later, Selena continues. **“Now, I don't have to be alone anymore.”**

Conrad is mesmerized, letting the girl continue what she started earlier today, right before Roderik interrupted them. Both body and mind incapable of resisting the powerful medicine he needed for the longest time. Another person's loving presence and touch. Simply closing his eyes to take in the feeling of her wet lips as they tingle his dried mouth.

She blows faint words at him. **“If you want to... You don't have to be alone anymore either.”**

Selena doesn't give him time to answer, his reply simply comes as a complete surrender to her lips.

The mixing of saliva becomes barely loud enough to overtake the crackling fire outside. **A wet slithering of a tongue's tip** as it seeks the contents of his mouth. Surface of her lips imprinted with only interruption as the short time it takes to wet her own lips again, so they can fuse once more right after.

She finally takes distance again, letting a finger slide over her lips in fascination of that light tingling still present.

"You've never kissed before?" Conrad guesses from her curious response.

"First time this afternoon," she confirms her lack of experience.

Kissing is for lovers. There was no room for such among the bandits. None of them asked for a kiss, only desiring her body. **And she didn't ask them**, no desire at all, and no need for it to act her role. Very different from today, where there's no need to act, and certainly no lack of desire. A little blow through her nose with a half-hidden chuckle from amusement follows, when teeth bump into his at just the right amount of clumsy to mark her first day of kissing. Instantly mellowing again into a sultry union as the rest of her body seeks closer contact.

She should know... Conrad is well aware. This girl should definitely know what she does. As innocent she is in matters of the heart, learning about them right now, she's well experienced in matters of the body. Bringing that body closer to a man, letting it rest in his embrace, pressing her chest against him, head tilted upwards to keep her lips in contact with his at all times. She should be damn well aware what she tempts him to do. What happens when a man grows aroused to such a degree as Conrad can feel welling up rapidly. Yet, she only presses her body closer, both thighs sinking over his leg, crotch drawn against his hip.

Even with this lack of light, the blush on her face is visible for those short moments her face is removed far enough. Body temperature seems to rise ever higher, a compact bundle of living and breathing hotness which radiates through cloth. A faint odor of the **girl's sweat turns the man drunk. A drunkenness he hasn't experienced in a very long**

time. Making him breathe in deeper subconsciously to take in more of the seductiveness that is a **young girl's** lust-filled pheromones.

A constant frothing begins over his leg. Selena moves **her genitals over Conrad's thigh**. A slow and explorative caress at first, gradually shifting into an overt grinding. **The girl's** eyes dance as hips rotate, keeping her vision locked with her man, desiring him to witness.

Selena still wears her expensive outfit. Bottom covered by a white pantyhose. Its cloth tight enough to stick perfectly to all bits of covered skin, including the spot between her legs. Starting to absorb all fluids released from the girl, white showing a stain if only there were enough light to see it. Presence noticeable to Conrad regardless, through some of it seeping into his pants, and that sultry dose of pheromones showered into the wagon growing increasingly stronger.

Another quick touch of her lips, and Conrad can feel a tiny hand grasp for his erection. The girl skillfully opens his pants, slender fingers reaching around the hard meat they find.

For the first time ever, Selena actually finds value in her experience. All of that acting was not a complete waste after all. It definitely taught her what to do, so she can assure this man in front has no chance to let his thoughts wander to sad memories again. Assure he cannot resist. Every joint in her arm, wrist and fingers in constant motion, stroking his shaft for its entire length. With the occasional prod at the tip with a single finger. Dipping that finger repeatedly in pre-cum to smear it over his entire penis.

Her lips detach, and the girl moves her head backwards, enchanting smile thrown towards Conrad. A mixture of devious and playful. Hand slowing down, emphasizing its motion with a stronger grip to compensate for lower speed.

Then she stops, tip of her tongue sticking out before she asks a question. **“Want to play with me?”**

Conrad breathes like a wild animal. The definition of **“play”** well known to him, and the thought taking control over his mind.

Selena gets off his leg, leaving a wet stain. Her own breathing matches his.

“They’ll hear...” Conrad answers, finding it hard to believe his ten year streak of abstinence is possibly about to reach its end.

“They shouldn’t...?” a naughty mutter pleads him apologetically. Selena turns around on her knees, rear facing him, both hands moving to her pantyhose. She clasps around the top edge, turning her head sideways to keep eye contact as best as possible. Tone turns into a playfully faked sadness. “You don’t want me?”

“I... I do. But...”

The girl’s hands move a little lower, pantyhose slowly dragged about halfway her bum, edges sinking into her squishiness. “But...?” she asks, keeping that deviousness in her tone.

Conrad swallows hard at her teasing, saliva building up. God, it has been so long since he last enjoyed a good fuck with a young, pretty girl. What she does right now is nothing other than a powerful spell on his mind and body. Last time, he was only a kid himself, around her age. And now he became a man, it still feels like being as powerless in front of female beauty as back then. Eyes burned onto that line where her pantyhose ends, mind working overtime to envision what lies further.

“I have no protection,” he murmurs. Aware she always had her partner use a pigskin among the bandits. Relying on her charms to coerce them into obedience.

“I know...” she replies, naughtiness fading, replaced by an emotion which is very different.

“Conrad?” a sweetness begs his attention for whatever words will follow. Her hands drop lower, edge of her pantyhose sliding down over the remaining half of her rear, until a translucent fluid can be seen, attaching cloth to her skin through a dense string. “Take me...? Pretty please?”

A hard throb shoots through Conrad’s penis. His fingers already dig into Selena’s supple skin, mind basking in the comfort of her warmth. Lowering through his own knees, he lifts the girl’s bum higher. Matching her longing sigh at a familiar feeling which has been lost for far too long. The feeling of a child’s pussy giving just enough space to have his cock dig in, with more smooth surface friction than that skintight pantyhose hugging her legs. Realizing with ten years of pent-up lusts all released at once, there’s

simply no way he can ever endure her passion for longer than the time it takes to push it in.

For **the first time ever, the girl doesn't** act when releasing all her joy and bliss at the sensation of a man bashing into her rear, reaching orgasm in the depth of her girlhood. Thrilled there is no form of layer separating them at all, no protection to prevent his fertility from claiming her. Like only told in the most lewd but romantic of stories. Overjoyed she can thank him for all he has done. Desiring to receive it all. His decade of guilt, loneliness and lust. Embodied by his raw cock rammed deep into her, and that flood of warm semen still **rushing into her body. The girl's approving gasp as proof he has not** the slightest need to ever hold back again.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 5



Shady Business

Conrad stretches out in the morning, noticing Selena gossips with Carrot near the **remains of last night's campfire**. From Carrot's excitement and embarrassed amazement, she probably asked her friend about last night. No wonder. As Conrad warned when Selena tempted him, they would definitely hear. No doubt they all did. If not that first penetration, then the longer session which **followed**. **Selena didn't exactly bother hiding** much, and besides, he is well aware from his mercenary days what little privacy a wagon offers when it comes to these matters.

Whatever. Not like he regrets what happened. That girl managed to bring peace to a burdened mind yesterday, even if only temporarily. **And it doesn't seem like she minds** if the others have a good clue what occurred.

Finished with naughty gossip, Selena approaches Conrad, tugging him lower while standing on her toes. **"Last night was amazing,"** she blows in his ear. Far more amazing

than she even expected. The girl still feels all fluttery inside. Even the air she breathes this morning tingles different, more filled with life for some reason.

“All ready to leave!” Adrian yells at everyone from the other wagon.

Selena grabs Conrad’s hand and pulls him to the back of the wagon, flirting with every cell of her body.

The man smiles at her and shakes his head in disbelief at how casual and upfront she can be about it all. Turning to Adrian as he lets himself get guided, lifting his free arm in a sign of helplessness.

“Correction,” Adrian sighs. “We leave in twenty minutes... Or so.”

*

The wagons move along at a steady pace, deeper into the Hatori lands.

“Good, now focus your thoughts on nature. Let them take shape in whatever form comes by itself.”

Conrad listens as he can hear Primrose give instructions to his daughter. Those spirits sure caught her attention, now giving classes with the occasional flair of pride in her arcane knowledge. **“What are you girls up to?” he asks.**

“I’m trying to find out Lisette’s element,” the young yet busty vulpes mage answers.

“Element?” Conrad turns his head, peeking inside the wagon.

“Mine is fire. We all have an element. Very important to know if she wants to control those spirits.”

“Fire, eh? Not surprised to hear that...” he answers, receiving only a curious head-tilt from Primrose why he would conclude such, hair decoration offering a soft clang.

Golden eyes suddenly light up as she believes to have found the answer. **“Oh, right, you did see me use fireballs before.”**

“Uh, yeah, those.”

Honestly, no, that was not what he had in mind at all. Now that she mentions it, true, she did shoot a fireball at the creature. All fiery passion radiating from her partially

revealed bust was more his first thought. Which prompts an important question begging to be asked.

“How old are you again?”

“Twelve. I’ll be thirteen in a couple months.”

Conrad can prevent himself from saying “goddamn” at the nick of time. While not out of natural proportions, still twelve and already so perky-round? Many an adult woman would envy her. And how does she prevent her skin from tanning? She **doesn’t exactly** hide its vulnerable paleness. Seriously, how does that robe not slide down? Only a fraction more and she would start showing the pink rings of...

He quickly shifts his eyes towards her twitching ears, realizing he spent way too long admiring her supple assets. **The girl’s** golden irises widened, possibly because she noticed where he was staring at.

“So, um, you know other magic than only fire?” he tries to deflect her attention.

“A tiny amount, **but it’s** far from my specialty and hardly of any use. Much easier to use magic related to our natural element.”

Her irises stay on him for a while, to then turn away. A tiny hint of red visible on her cheeks. Conrad is left **wondering if it’s** only his imagination, or she really does push her breasts forward that extra bit more? With her face turned away, he now has an opening again to peek, as if she invites **him to do so. At least, that’s the excuse** he already formed up in his mind.

“How does all this magic stuff work? You just form a picture in your head of how to make a fireball and it happens?” If that’s the case, he should pick up the skill. Could be useful.

“No, it’s not that easy,” she instantly crushes his fantasy. “We tap from ley-lines to find the necessary power. It requires a lot of focus, on top of a naturally strong connection with the network of ley-lines. Only very few people even have that potential for a strong connection. And it only really works well when applied as our matching element.”

Conrad lifts up an eyebrow, trying to make heads or tails of what she’s talking about. “What’s a ley-line?”

“A river of energy, flowing through the world. There’s a lot of them!”

“Never seen a river like that.”

Primrose laughs out loud at his silly remark. “Of course, you didn’t! They’re invisible.”

“Sounds convenient. Where does that energy come from? If it’s a river, it must have a source **and a destination.**”

A fascination radiates from Primrose, filled with innocent curiosity of her own, combined with a sense of awe. “**Nobody really knows! It’s all a mystery.** All we know is that they flow to the same spot.” A mystery which only stimulates her child-like imagination, eager to share all excitement with Conrad.

“**And that dark magic** which was on my wrist, or the monster that attacked us. **That’s a part of it too?**”

“They’re a type of **blood magic**, I don’t really know much about it,” she answers, fascination not gone, now turned into a topic scarier rather than awe-filled. “**Forbidden magic.**”

“**Why is it forbidden?**” He knows it is, from the stories told in his childhood, yet those never explained why. Other than vagueness, such as it being a source of evil deeds.

“**It’s stronger.** Master Gerald says it’s **more... What was the term again...? Pristine?** Yeah, that was the word. Those who deal in blood magic tap from somewhere deeper, where the ley-lines flow to. **It’s not inherently bad** or really different, but bad things are often related to it. My Master says such power is too easily taken too far, with horrible results. **That’s why it’s forbidden!**”

This Master Gerald figure has to be one of her mentors. From what she explains, Conrad gathers blood magic might simply be too potent for mortal hands to wield responsibly. Temptation to go beyond the realm of morally acceptable hard to resist. Even holding no understanding of magic at all, he can only agree and feel the natural resentment from remembering the hideous form of that creature, or the deadly potency of a blood contract.

Forbidden or corrupting or whatever, he’ll still need information on it to accomplish his goals. “**So that thing, how would you assess it? Is it Grimald? An individual?**”

Primrose spends a moment in deep thought, finger placed on her lips as if it helps her gather those thoughts into a conclusion. Drawing on all knowledge she learned at the Spire, combined with what she witnessed first-hand. “Sort of. It’s an individual, the caster himself, while **not really him.**”

A questioning mumble comes her way. Thus, the girl tries to phrase it better.

“Like it’s his shadow. A puppet he can control, a puppet which reflects himself.”

“Okay...” a better picture starts to form for Conrad. “Which means it’s Grimald, but not really in person. A sort of avatar he can manifest at range? **It doesn’t have a mind of its own?**”

“Yeah, that’s about it, I think. I could feel its energies tie it to the actual caster.”

“Have you ever heard of a Faceless at that... Spire?”

“No,” Primrose responds, **disappointed she can’t offer more help.**

“Any idea how we can beat it?”

“I... No...” she sounds even more disappointed.

“So, which one would be more dangerous to face. The puppet, or the caster?”

“The caster,” she sounds certain, spoken without hesitation.

“Fire wouldn’t work either?” Conrad already expects a negative.

“Fire only works on the puppet because it weakens the remote connection with the caster. From what I could puzzle together, the puppet manifests out of shadow. Those shadows are best stable, unchanging, to maintain a good connection. A sudden flicker of bright fire or light messes that stability up.”

She appears sad, incapable of delivering good news, so Conrad tries to cheer her up. “Thanks for the info. We’ll find a way to deal with it. That’s a lot of knowledge you have there. I can definitely see **why you were the best in your class.**”

Her lips turn towards a faint smile again. “I could deduce that information by reading the arcane **energies. It’s not** very difficult for someone trained...”

“**Even so, you paid attention to it mid-battle against a fearsome foe. Enough to remember the details. That’s praiseworthy.**”

Her smile widens, another twitch going through her large ears, tail visibly starting to waggle.

“So, about Lisette’s element. Any ideas yet?”

Primrose beams with joy at finally being able to talk about happy things. “Not certain yet, but pretty sure it’s water.”

“Then she can cast water spells?”

The mage girl tilts her head around ambiguously. “Hmm... Sort of? It depends on the spirits, and what they’re capable of. She’s a spirit user, not a mage. She can’t directly draw from the ley-lines. Like I said, only very few people can. But that’s not a problem for a spirit user, if their spirits are capable of tapping power instead. What they can do with that power depends on the element of the caster they are attached to, eventually, theoretically.”

“You don’t sound very certain?” he asks.

“All I know is from old books. There hasn’t been a spirit user in forever!”

Conrad laughs at her choice of words. “That’s a long time indeed.” He turns back to the front of the road they traverse, approaching a village. “Alright then, I’ll leave you girls to it.”

*

Another set of wooden shutters closes, another house in the village which appears sealed off at the sight of strangers approaching. A woman nearby stops weaving a basket and keeps the wagons in her vision. Tension is about the best word to describe the mood once they entered this small town.

Conrad brings the wagon to a stop. A villager approaches him. A single woman. Leporid Tribe, like most around here, hesitating to come closer while clearly with something on her mind.

“What’s up?” he asks the woman in a friendly tone, trying to assuage any lingering fear in her.

She comes closer, shuffling her feet, definitely afraid. Driven forward by whatever must be stronger than that fear. Homeless, clothes torn and ragged, caked with mud. “My apologies for...” she begins to utter her speech.

“It’s fine really, what’s wrong?” Conrad tries to skip past formalities. She’s obviously uncomfortable, which makes sense considering their apparent difference in wealth and class.

“My children... Have you seen my children?” she speaks with nothing other than desperation.

“I’m sorry, you’ll have to be more precise. Could you give specific characteristics?”

The woman wants to provide a description, only to suddenly take a step back. A face peeks from behind Conrad, belonging to a vulpes girl. And there’s another young girl in that wagon? Rapidly growing panic appears on the woman’s face, turning to the other wagon with Adrian, where she notices a hatori girl as well. A fellow leporid.

Another step backwards...

“I’m sorry...” she apologizes and takes distance, rushing off as if running from trouble.

“What was that about?” Lisette now takes a look.

“No idea...” All he knows, is that woman not being the first who sought information on her children.

“Do we stay here for the night?” Lisette asks. It’s late in the afternoon already. Reaching the next village before nightfall will be difficult.

“No, not here,” her father replies, working the horses back into action. Wagons pick up speed. “We travel through the night.”

He wants to get far away from this place as possible. Something doesn’t feel right here. Too much hostility around, and a peculiar detail which has gone unnoticed, though with this recent encounter just clicked in his mind. Where are all the children? There are none to be seen or heard, anywhere.

With the village left behind, Conrad gives the leash to his daughter while hopping off the wagon, heading towards Adrian. “We’ve got a stretch of forest to pass through ahead. Keep an eye out.” He kept his voice down as not to cause worry among the wagon’s inhabitants.

Adrian nods, understanding the message well enough. He’ll keep an eye to their rear and surrounding areas.

*

“Whoa...” Lisette’s still hoarse voice basks in wonder, making her father look around. “Look Dad! I’m...” and Conrad is just in time to spot a small bubble of water splash onto the wagon’s floor. “Ah...” she reacts disappointed.

“Was that magic?!” he asks.

A haughty Primrose affirms the result of her teachings. “Indeed, it was!”

Small, for the moment, that was a ball of water which her apprentice managed to form. Possible, now the correct element has been successfully established. For now, a tiny ball of water is the extent of her power. And later? Who knows?

“Very impressive,” Conrad pats both teacher and apprentice on the head. “But maybe next time it’s a good idea to summon water *outside* of the wagon?”

Lisette’s embarrassed face is swiftly joined by Primrose’s acute poutiness.

As he wants to head onward, his daughter tugs on his sleeve. “Dad... I need to...”

“Huh?” Only ten seconds and a confused stare later does it dawn on him what she means, legs held together, expression of endurance all over the girl. “Need to pee?”

His daughter quickly turns red. Why did he need to put that in actual words?!

“Actually...” Primrose opens her mouth, glancing at the pool of spilled water in the wagon.

The man sighs. “Alright, I get the message. Pee break.”

...

Whizzing against a tree, Conrad finishes a good release of fluid himself and heads back to the wagon. Shouldn’t be long before the others return. Roderik already finished, trying to hide a wet spot around his knee. Yeah, that’s what happens when not having mastered the art of whirling around. The boy lacks practice. Adrian is next, and both sisters are finished as well. Luna guided by the hand of Selena.

If one goes to pee, might as well all have a whizz. Better than to constantly stop their trip for one after the other. They’re a good distance from the village now, with the sun setting low, even if he’d rather increase the distance further.

Primrose is next to return. Holding onto her luxury robe to not let the bottom hem fall too low, afraid to get it dirtied. Releasing a little yelp when her tail is suddenly tugged by being stuck in a bush. She wrings it loose, only to promptly get stuck in another one. Ears flick nervously afterwards, and with a hint of anger and frustration, when she realizes her clumsy bush adventures were spotted by Conrad.

Lisette appears shortly after. **Those girls... Why can't they simply pick the nearest tree to piss against?** No, all of them had to go inside the forest, out of sight.

"Women..." Conrad sighs. **Always such a handful. A delightful handful, but a handful nonetheless.** Now, where is that last name on the list? She takes **her sweet time...** **"Carrot! Hurry up!"** he calls out into the forest, foot tapping impatiently. **"Carrot?!"**

Impatience begins a rapid transition into worry. No response, and no sight of the girl anywhere. The others grow equally worried.

The man flicks his tongue. **"I'll go search. You all stay with Adrian."**

He grumbles **on the inside.** **He'll have to give that girl a good scolding!** She went way too far from the wagons and caused everyone to feel anxious. Now, only to hope he **doesn't stumble on her while she's** still in the midst of taking a piss, only to yell at him.

That grumbling intensifies. Actually, finding her in an embarrassing state would be great. Just means there was no need to feel worried. Much more preferable over the **alternative...**

Conrad comes to a stop, sword drawn and observing his surroundings.

"Goddammit..."

Broken twigs, footsteps from more than one person, and an odor someone peed around here not long ago. Carrot was here, and she was not alone.

He swiftly turns around at the cracking of a twig. **"What are you doing here?!"** he yells angry at Lisette. **Didn't he tell them to wait with Adrian?** Now is really not the time to do womanly things and wander around oblivious to danger!

"Three adults..." Lisette murmurs, searching around the area.

"What?"

"There were three adults," she repeats, closely observing the area. The girl squats to observe the tracks at her feet in finer detail. **"Traces of a struggle. They went that way."**

She points deeper into the forest. Only now does Conrad remember. His daughter can read tracks. She exhibited that skill when following Carrot, back on the first day he encountered them, when the girl was in pursuit of her stolen goods.

“I can lead you to them,” she peers at her father.

Gears work in his mind. What is he to do? Bringing Lisette along will be dangerous. These are obviously bandits at work. Scum. And she will lead them right towards their camp. However... **Abandoning Carrot is not an option either.**

Conrad smashes his fist into a nearby tree in frustration. If only he had the skill to track himself! **“Alright, but we need to prepare first.”**

To stay optimistic, **their opposition is not Grimald’s monstrous puppet.** A couple bandits he can deal with, as long as **they don’t have a large hideout** or some unusual means of defense.

*

“I want to go!” Roderik proclaims his desire to come along.

Not a surprise to Conrad that the boy would. Him and Lisette grew up together for a significant part of their lives, until the plague happened three years ago. Those two are practically siblings.

“I want to go too!” a girl’s voice joins him. It’s Primrose. Sure, her magic would be an asset, but... She’s still a young girl, vulnerable when caught.

“You two stay here,” he concludes instantly. Not giving them time to argue as they clearly would otherwise. **“Adrian can’t look after Luna and Selena all on his own. You are all to stay inside the same wagon.”**

The man pushes them inside, where Selena and Luna already wait. **“Roderik, come here,”** he reaches for a storage box. **“Take this.”**

The box contains a pair of skinning knives. Reaching for one, Conrad hands it to the boy. Grabbing him by both shoulders afterwards, he looks him in the eyes while whispering.

“This wagon has three girls. They will need protection. You are the second line of defense, after Adrian. Okay?”

Roderik grabs tighter around the skinning knife, pride welling up at his presented duty.

“Keep them safe! I’m counting on you.”

The boy nods with determination. A final piece of advice is offered while Conrad hides the skinning knife under the boy’s shirt. “Hide your weapon. Never reveal all your options. They won’t suspect children to be armed and prepared. Always make certain you have a trick up your sleeve, you understand?”

After another enthusiastic nod, Conrad slaps him on the shoulder in approval. A quick glance is offered towards the worried girls, followed by a wink. “I’ll be back. Won’t be long.”

*

Adrian brings the front wagon as close as possible, using a chain from inside their stash to tie them together. Horses restless, unable to understand what is going on, yet the animals instinctively sense the defensive atmosphere radiating from their owners.

Conrad left a short while ago, together with his daughter. Adrian wanted to accompany him. An extra sword would have made a huge difference. Unfortunately, **they don’t have that luxury. These kids can’t be left undefended. Not with one already abducted. Leaving them alone is nothing other than an open invitation to grab them all.**

Taking them along **wasn’t** an option either. Far too dangerous, and increasingly harder to sneak up on the bandits with a larger group. Best case scenario, Conrad can sneak in, get Carrot out, and sneak back without any of the bandits having a clue what happened before they can get the wagons moving again.

With those wagons chained up, Adrian sticks his head into the rear wagon containing the children. “Where’s the foxy one?” he asks, noticing Primrose’s absence.

“Huh?” Roderik answers. “Wasn’t she going to help you?”

“For fuck’s sake...” Adrian curses out loud. That’s already one part which doesn’t go according to plan.

“Should we search for her?” Roderik asks, eager to help.

“No, we wait here as agreed upon. Leave her to Conrad.”

Any further action on their part would only make matters worse for him. All they can do is hope she either gives up and returns, or reaches Conrad before getting herself into trouble.

*

Lisette takes point while they crawl through the forest, head held low in case any bandit lookouts are nearby. Her father would rather be at the front, though he would only mess up the tracks she tries to follow.

It’s not hard to see where she finds clues, always using her fingers to point out tracks to herself. Maybe it helps her keep focus? She definitely found another track, which only confuses Conrad. Yeah, he’s an amateur, but **doesn’t** she make a mistake here?

“Isn’t this a game trail?” he asks. Even he can recognize *that* much with his complete amateur knowledge. Why would she follow a game trail?

“It is...” Lisette replies.

Now nothing makes sense anymore to him. Why are they following this trail, if a bunch of random animals made these tracks?

“There are things off about the trail,” she explains. **“Look at these...”**

Conrad observes closer where she points. **“Animal poop?”** More proof this is an animal trail. Though he understands by now she must be aware of a detail he’s missing. Trusting his daughter has more than just a clue what she talks about.

“It’s dried and shows its age. But still in one piece, intact.”

A light-bulb goes on in her father’s head. **“Oh, I get it!** If the animal poop is old, it would be trampled already if this trail really sees so much activity from large game. This was placed here recently as camouflage.”

Lisette nods, impressed by how quickly he drew the connection, confirming the purpose of these droppings. **“Picked up somewhere else and placed here to help emphasize this is merely an animal trail.”**

Conrad nods in growing excitement. She *does* know what she’s doing. This path will definitely lead them to Carrot! Any likely pursuers from the nearby village would only have knowledge of basic hunting and not bother with an obvious animal trail. Really begs the question where Lisette picked up this skill, though that question will have to be for later.

She points at another track. A tiny hole in the ground. **“Too perfectly round, and just the right depth for a man to press his weight on. Walking stick or end of a spear, used as support.”**

The game trail eventually comes to an end, where the girl searches around. **“Over here... see?”**

An old tree, half rotten, snapped off years ago. Overgrown with moss and spots of mushrooms.

“Shaved off,” Conrad concludes correctly. **“But can’t it be an animal, like a boar using its tusks, or a predator’s claws to mark territory?”**

“Then it would be random. These are all in one direction. Something heavy was dragged over it very recently.”

Heavy, such as an abducted girl.

The patch of forest is at its densest around here. Conrad’s instincts at their sharpest. If he would set up a hidden camp, it would be around this spot, where visual obscurity is at its highest. A raised hand from his daughter makes him crawl towards a small, rocky ascend, only a couple steps high.

The girl keeps her mouth silent, simply pointing at the next track. No need to explain either, as her father understands immediately. Now *this* he has experience with, has seen before. This rock has a recent mark on it, which is definitely caused by a metallic object scraping against it with quite some force. Not all that different from the scars on battle equipment. Very likely, one of the bandits scaled this ascend and slipped, jamming his

weapon down to try and find balance again. Conrad concludes he might get a feel for this tracking business, now he has a better idea what needs to be searched for.

Ascending the rocks himself, he gestures his daughter to be silent and keep low. They are near...

She should stay hidden in a bush while he goes around, observing the perimeter. First task is to measure the **opposition's numbers and makeup**. Gain a good grasp on what can be expected when the situation turns dire and quick action has to be taken. And preferably, find Carrot, get her out safe and silently, and sneak back to the wagons without being spotted. She *should* be around here, somewhere. Unharmed. That's what he can only believe in, cling to. Any other thought pushed aside. Besides, she can't have arrived here long ago. They won't harm her *that fast*... For whatever reason they even need her to begin with.

Conrad pulls up his nose. Lisette can smell it as well, taking cover in a bush. Thankfully, **she doesn't recognize it**. Her father certainly does. A smell he got familiar with around thirteen years ago, when joining a mercenary force. One he was re-acquainted with when part of the regular army. The stench of death. Some of it fresh, some of it old.

Keeping his thoughts aside becomes increasingly harder as the smell grows stronger with every sneaking step taken. **The foul odor's source is** situated away from the camp, at about a five-minute distance. No guards around here, which makes sense, as few would want to be around for longer than they really have to.

A large pit has been dug, further ahead. No need to look to know what lies inside. Bodies. Corpses. The stench alone is revolting proof enough. Yet, Conrad crawls closer. He *has* to know. There's **fresh blood to be seen around the edge**. It can't be the individual he thinks of. It just **can't** be. He damn well **won't** accept it to be!

Arm held before his nose, the man turns away again. Stomach turning, barely able to keep it inside.

It's not Carrot... That's the small, silver lining. However, that fresh kill is a child. And the pit is filled with more. An excruciating detail **didn't** escape him. **They've all been** gutted. A large, gaping hole was present in their stomach, reaching up to the chest. What

the fuck was that for?! Is it some kind of vile ritual? **One wouldn't really expect** such of bandits, who are typically profit-driven in their activities.

After returning to the camp, he examines the perimeter. Few occupants, only two counted so far. There may be more inside the pair of huts. Hope rises suddenly when a wooden cage becomes visible from behind one of those huts. Quite big, containing about a dozen children. Alive. Multiple pairs of leporid ears instantly draw attention from the man, rekindling hope to recognize the girl they belong to.

He has to contain a breath of relief.

There she is... Carrot. The girl sits down in the cage, moping and in shock at her perilous situation.

Then that relief of finding her unharmed is quickly pushed aside again. What is that macabre display which hangs next to the cage, drying like one would a piece of meat? Are those multiple pairs of leporid ears?!

A recent memory comes to mind. Back in that village where they picked up Luna and **bought the wagons... Where they went shopping for expensive clothes...** A shady merchant tried to promote his wares to Conrad. Wares which were fraudulently advertised as a cure-all.

Dried leporid ears.

Those shriveled things were *real*?!

Conrad ducks down when a man he spotted earlier comes out of a hut, heading to the middle of the camp where a bloodied tree trunk sees action as a chopping block. The bandit picks up a hunting knife. The man is Leporid Tribe himself.

Approaching the dried ears, he observes them closely, checking their condition.

"What are you going to do?" a girl's voice asks the bandit. It's Carrot. An audible vibrato in her voice from underlying fear.

"Rejoice," the man answers her while he sharpens his knife. **"You're a lucky one, unlike the others in there."** Sparks fly from his knife as he picks up the sharpening pace. **"You're obviously from a rich family or owner, judging from your fancy clothes. If they like you enough, they will pay good coin for your return."**

He turns his face to Carrot and gives her a smirk. **"You get to live. Probably."**

The man places down the knife and heads to a nearby barrel, checking on its contents. Sobbing and crying from within the cage reaches all the way to Conrad, as the children who were already present before Carrot was brought in are confronted with a painful memory. They witnessed first-hand how the bandit acquired what he holds now.

Organs.

He removes them from a barrel where they could take in embalming oils, and now about to bring the macabre goods to another barrel filled with salt for storage.

“Funny rich folks, all over the Union,” the man feels like explaining the macabre. “Pay good coin for these. The younger the original owner, the more filled with life force, they say.” He closes the barrel once done storing the organs. **“Silly death cults is all they are, if you ask me.”**

Cults that have risen to prominence in certain circles after the deconstruction of their age-old traditions, rituals and beliefs was complete. Part of their transition into the Union. As if they now actively seek to rebel against their undermined, traditional faith in Cloegandr by peddling into the arts of death, turning life into nothing but a mockery. All in hope to gain youth and vigor by consumption of children’s organs.

“But hey, the trade pays off, and we all need food on the table one way or the other.” The man reaches for the knife again and heads towards the cage. **“Sorry doll, your turn,”** he opens the cage, knife held at the ready to strike at whoever has the idea to run past him. A fierce hand grabs **Carrot by the wrist. “You’re worth coin alive. But you have no need for those pretty ears.”**

Conrad jumps up in seething rage. Rushing at the man while preparing to swing his sword. He leaves the bandit startled, shifting his attention away from Carrot. Already realizing he is outmatched with just a knife in his hands, the bandit yells for help.

The sword strikes down with no mercy, followed by a rage-filled stab to make sure no threat can harm Carrot or the others in that cage any longer. **It certainly won’t be this guy anymore.**

“Scum!” Conrad bites at his target. “They’re your own goddamn people!”

He struggles to recompose himself. All lessons of the past rush through his mind, albeit a fraction too late. He allowed emotion to take complete control. As much as it feels right, **that's far from a good strategy.**

Another bandit appears from the hut, more prepared for a scuffle with an unknown intruder. He carries a spear and weighted fishing net.

Conrad doesn't rush in, taking in the situation. He'll have to act quickly! He only counted two bandits, yet that number is far from reliable. That net, however, is an unfamiliar threat. Never faced one before.

To make matters worse, the murderous thug is the one taking initiative, throwing the **net towards Conrad. It's impossible to dodge**, so best action to take is avoid getting his sword caught up into its mesh. Conrad lifts up an arm defensively to take the incoming net. While the bandit quickly rushes forward with the spear, leaving multiple children in the cage to scream as they expect to be confronted with another sight of blood and spilled guts any moment now.

Conrad steps aside and manages to get the spear's tip caught in the net. Grabbing the weapon behind the pointy end to pull it towards him. Catching the bandit off-balance, his sword finds contact with another target.

Another victory, though he is still caught in the net, with **the previous bandit's corpse** at his feet and now a fresh kill falling down on him. The man **can't keep his balance and** slides to the ground. Trying to get that damn net off him while it repeatedly gets stuck on bits and pieces of armor, sheath and belt.

With plenty of heartfelt cursing, Carrot's savior crawls back on his feet.

He screwed up...! The realization already settles in.

A third bandit appeared, armed with an axe, not wasting any time with running to the ex-soldier, now he is still mid-recovery. The attacker has a clear opening, only in need to swing his axe down as hard as possible!

The thug swings prematurely, trying to face away in sudden panic. His scream strangely muffled and obscured when he can feel the tip of a sword dig in his body.

Conrad stares down on his most recent kill, the third bandit. **What's that** small bubble of water around the **scum's** mouth? With a strange glowing light inside of it, which now

returns to where it came from. The light fuses into the body of a girl, standing next to the bush she hid in until now.

Lisette.

Her father instantly refocuses on his surroundings. **One fuck up after the other... That** outburst of emotion and unexpected confrontation with a net sure caught him by surprise. And when one misstep happens, it often leads straight into another. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Conrad can only feel annoyance at yet another bandit. A woman, about to throw a knife at **him. And from her posture, she's** definitely skilled at it. Dodging will be possible, yet **tricky... All about getting the timing right...**

A whoosh makes both man and woman look aside, and another scream fills the forest as the woman turns into a living torch.

Primrose stands close to Lisette, staff which sent out a fireball moments earlier still held out, a red gem radiating on it. She breathes hard from exertion at finally having caught up with them. The girl observes what she never expected to see in her entire life, her own magic in the process of claiming an individual.

Conrad processes the situation in a split second, and rushes forward to finish off the suffering bandit woman before the flames consume her. He quickly overviews the battlefield. **“Any others?!”** he calls out to the children in the cage. **“How many are there?!”**

“Four...” Carrot answers, clutching onto her chest in fear, unable to stand from both legs feeling too weak with fear. **“There were four... More left earlier, before you arrived.”**

Four... Which means they got them all?

“Those others, do you know where they went?” he asks.

None of the children reply. They have no idea.

Still catching his breath while trying to calm down from adrenaline, Conrad raises his finger to Primrose who came towards him. His eyes reveal **she's** about to receive a firm scolding for not staying behind as told. Then he pats the girl on the head for a job well done, giving a wink to his daughter still near the bush further ahead.

“Alright, let's all get out of here. Stay together, stay silent, and keep your heads low.”

Honestly, he would rather rush back to the wagons right now, realizing the bandits who left earlier may be heading back there to capture the rest of the children. That said, he can't leave these freed kids alone. Not without certainty. Neither can he rush with them through the forest and risk running into the enemy group.

"I'm sorry..." Carrot starts to let go of her stress through tears.

Conrad grabs her close and caresses the girl's back. "Shh, you're safe now. You have nothing to apologize for."

Better escort her and these other poor children out of this camp as quickly as possible, away from that revolting display of dried leporid ears and bloodied tree trunk.

*

"When will they return?" Luna asks, legs pulled up.

"Soon," Roderik answers her, confident in his answer.

"Maybe they were captured?"

"Nuh, that will never happen," the boy doesn't waver.

"How can you be so certain?"

"He can't lose. Not to dumb bandits."

"What's that?" Selena asks, wondering what Roderik fiddles with.

"A handkerchief." His thumb slides over the M&O embroidery. Yeah, there's no way Conrad will lose. Not a shred of doubt about that. Think about it... "Conrad was trained by my father. He *can't* lose."

The man avenged Mother, and was the ruling Champion of Valor. Actually, there hasn't been a tournament in Gleaze since, so he still *is* the ruling Champion. No apprentice of his will bite the dust against mere bandits and thugs.

...

Adrian stands outside, covered by a wagon, keeping an eye out. He detected movement, hoping at first it would be the return of Conrad. That hope already faded. Whoever is out there tries not to be seen. No signs of an archer, so that's a good start

already. The man keeps his back angled against the wagon for defense, though full cover is impossible without giving away he's aware a threat is out there.

...

Adrian's sword is quickly drawn in a single swoop while he turns around. Bandit shocked and not yet realizing he just had his throat sliced. That's one down! And two more are out in the open already. The trained soldier doesn't waste any time to close the distance.

"How the fu...?" one of the bandits voices his frustration at being caught.

How did their target see them approach!? He had his back turned to them! The man doesn't realize Adrian chose an angle which left the sun behind him, creating a shadow on the ground if someone tried to sneak up. Only receiving a confident smirk in return when prey-turned-hunter crosses blades with his opponents.

The children can hear all action outside. Another yell of pain. Someone took a hit. Luckily, it's a voice they don't recognize. Both sisters hold each other in comfort. Roderik tries to resist heading outside and help Adrian. Constantly in need of reminding himself.

He has to stay here... He has to protect these two. Conrad counts on him, the man said so himself! Adrian can't cover all sides of the wagon all alone. The boy can't bring shame to his ancestors by abandoning his duty.

The girls gasp in despair. Their wagon's cover is lifted at the rear, while fighting occurs at the other side... That can't be Adrian trying to get in.

The cover is yanked aside, and a middle-aged man steps in, partially bald, rotten teeth smiling at the girls. "What do we have 'ere, eh?" he puts his knee on the wagon and crawls in, dagger in hand. "A pair of fine lasses."

The girls are too terrified to scream, only capable of staring at an unknown fate creeping into their wagon. Maybe he's here to take them away while his buddies keep Adrian occupied? Or maybe he wants to take them hostage to have him surrender? Regardless, that sharp blade in the man's hands is proof enough of his intentions.

A flash moves from the corner of the wagon, hidden behind the closing flap. The man responds in instinct, but releases an outburst of anger and surprise. Trying to reach out for what just sliced him in the arm.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” he bites at the boy who cut him, deep gash visible in the arm, up to the bone. “But I got you now!”

His free hand was right in time to grasp onto the skinning knife Roderik wields, its blade cutting in his fingers. Though the man **doesn't** let go, yanking it aside with a sudden outburst of strength. The bandit bashes the kid with his hurt arm. Hissing in hatred at the boy while he picks up his weapon again.

“You little piece of shit! I'll slice all your fucking throats!”

As the man rises to deal death with his dagger, he suddenly falls back to his knees, hunched over. Roderik leans in his side. Disbelief visible from **the man's** enraged eyes.

“How...?” is all which can be uttered before the man slides down, not understanding what just happened. How can it be? The skinning knife is right there, on the wooden floor. So, then what...?

The man falls down, life leaving him. Roderik breathes heavily from sudden burst of adrenaline, realizing what he just did. To be the second line of defense. Firmly clinging onto the other skinning knife which **was stashed in the wagon's storage box**. The one he placed down the side of his belt as a spare. Well remembering the words Conrad told him before leaving.

Always make sure to have a trick up your sleeve.

...

Adrian hides behind the wagon, taking cover. Three bodies lie on the ground, while the fourth one proves to be trouble.

“So they *did* have an archer,” he grumbles.

Without a shield, it would be suicidal to rush at a skilled archer, and this guy isn't half-bad. Optimistically seen, the bandit **can't** easily close the distance either, leaving both at a stand-off until he either gives up, or manages to sneak around and shoot Adrian from another angle. Staying aware of the enemy's location is now all which matters. Until reinforcements arrive, hopefully not on the bandit's side. Alternatively, there's the option of another group of travelers appearing. That would at a minimum create opportunities.

Rustling comes from ahead. That moment of reinforcements came far sooner than expected.

“Adrian!” a familiar voice calls out.

“Careful! Archer!” Adrian yells in return.

“I got him already!”

Adrian peeks around the corner of the wagon and notices Conrad standing near a downed body. A smile of victory appears, then only confusion. “Wait, what? Where do all those kids come from?”

“Long story, we need to get out of here first! We’re heading back to the village.”

No need to let him know Primrose ran off, as she’s visible right there. Luckily, that slip-up in their plan didn’t turn into a disaster.

“You, young lady, deserve a big scolding,” Adrian throws a glare at her. She could have made all the difference with that archer.

“She did save my ass,” Conrad gives her an encouraging pat. But yeah, some sense of repentance would be warranted.

Checking the trio he left behind, Conrad finds the dead bandit inside. Both sisters instantly relieved to see him, and the one boy remaining silent, left in the aftermath. Not really certain what to do or say. While he simply holds onto the skinning knife in shock and confusion.

Conrad gestures to the girls they should wait a moment before showering him with hugs, shoving the bandit out of the wagon. **There’s** an important task to do first.

“Roderik,” he calmly calls out to him, sitting down on his knees before the kid, grabbing on to the knife in the boy’s hands. “You can let go now. You have done great.”

The boy looks up, showing a bloodied lip where the bandit bashed him. “I…”

“I know,” Conrad doesn’t give him much time to think. “You saved Selena and Luna. Your parents would be proud. So am I.” With a firm but gentle measure of force, he opens Roderik’s fingers clinging to the blade. “You can let go now… It’s all over.”

“I… I saved them,” Roderik tries to find some confidence again.

“That’s right,” Conrad glances around, noticing the presence of both skinning knives. He gives a **hearty slap onto the boy’s shoulder** after checking out his hurt lip. **“Clever kid. That lip isn’t too bad. Will heal in a day or two. Wear its sting with pride.”**

*

The wagons roll back into the village at nightfall. Children safely inside. Interior cramped with all those they picked up, yet better than having them walk.

A pair of children rush out of the wagon, heading straight to their parents. A steady stream of villagers comes to investigate all bustle going about. The result is a scenery which leaves Conrad in silence. A bizarre and all too sad contrast. Some families celebrate the return of their children with laughs and tears of happiness. Some left on their knees in lamentation, crying and weeping their lost loved ones are not inside the wagons, fate as good as confirmed. The woman who approached them earlier today among them.

An old man approaches. It’s the village chief, here to thank these strangers for taking care of the bandits and returning these lucky few. **“There’s not much we can offer, but we can grant a meal and a place to sleep.”**

Conrad accepts their gratitude.

*

The place they will spend the night in isn’t exactly stellar, though it’s far from bad. Decent in comfort and clean. The owners, local merchants, happy to offer their home for the night after being among the lucky ones who had their children return. Their group **won’t take up too much of the village’s time and resources**, locals could use those themselves more than enough. Still, not accepting this measure of gratitude would be an insult, especially within hatori culture. For all their differences, this is one of those habits the tribes share and still retain. The best action to take with a gift is to nod and simply accept the spirit in which it is given.

“Don’t run off anymore, okay?” Conrad tries to be angry at Primrose. “Or Adrian will get very mad.”

She can’t contain a cautious chuckle when Adrian protests.

“Don’t make *me* the bad man here!” he yells from further ahead, courting a local hatori woman. Possibly married.

“I wouldn’t dare.” Conrad brushes his young mage over the cheek. “That said, I really appreciate your help.”

It’s fascinating to him. The more he caresses her cheek, the more her golden eyes start to close and the girl’s ears fall down, lost in a trance. Except for that wagging tail. Sometimes, she feels more like a dog than a fox. Her reaction leaves him wondering what would happen if he scratches her under the chin, or behind an ear.

He can’t really scold her for running off to pursue him. Not with her current mental state. She’s hiding it, though similar to Roderik, she was directly involved in claiming a life. Set on fire by her magic. A burden which weighs on her.

“Did I do bad?” she mumbles, confirming those feelings through a complex sense of regret.

“No, you didn’t. It was the right action to take.”

“My Master won’t be angry for taking a life?” she asks.

Conrad has no idea how her school of magic handles rules, or what those rules even are, but he does know one fact. “You didn’t take that life. I did.”

In the end, it was his blade which put the bandit woman out of her misery. A meager comfort for the girl, yet any comfort is a welcome option. Unlike Roderik’s case, where that option of deflecting responsibility doesn’t even exist.

“We have strict rules on how to use our magic,” the girl mumbles.

“Not doing bad deeds?” Conrad guesses.

Primrose nods in response, explaining a little more about the Spire. “We can’t use our power to harm people. Strictly forbidden,” she begins to rattle a short set of rules, stamped into her mind. “Bring no harm. Wage never war. Choose no side.”

“Not even my side?” he asks.

She faintly smiles at his attempt at lightheartedness. “It means we can’t work for any country. The Spire has always been neutral ground.”

“And who breaks those rules gets punished?”

Primrose nods. “Master Gerald himself, my main mentor, has dealt punishment to oath-breakers before.”

“Well, that can’t be consistently or efficiently applied. I did meet a bad mage before. He led an entire hideout for the local cartel. Must have been around for a while, as rumors about him had spread already.”

“Really?” Primrose responds with curiosity. “The Spire didn’t punish him for doing bad things? That’s odd...”

Conrad has to admit, he had never seen a mage before. Not even in the army. Which would make sense, especially considering how rare they are to begin with, if such strict rules are indeed staunchly enforced. Regardless, whatever method the Spire used to prevent rule-breaking, that method is clearly no longer applied as efficiently, or even openly ignored. A fact the girl next to him finds hard to believe.

She leans her head against his side, seeking the comfort of a strong arm around her.

“Don’t worry about it,” he caresses her side. “You were fighting bad people today, to save the innocent. I’m certain your Master takes no issue with that. You certainly didn’t do bad. In fact, you punished bad people. In a sense, that’s very similar to what your Master has apparently done before. You’ve walked in his footsteps.”

Sure, the circumstances are different, though it’s the same in spirit.

“You also didn’t break your institute’s neutrality, because neither these thugs nor we are officially affiliated with any country. And let’s face it, one of your fireballs hardly counts as waging war. You may be the Spire’s finest student, but using terms like war would be a step too much for bragging purposes, right? Sounds to me like you’re completely in the clear with these rules.”

A subtle chuckle muffled by his maw reveals the man’s words have some effect.

*

With Primrose's emotions eased to the degree possible, and the girl now reflecting on his words, Conrad sits down next to Carrot. "How are you doing?"

She mumbles, touching her own ears, affirming they are still present.

"You knew about that?" he asks about the shady business involving leporid ears.

"Seen it a lot... Home..."

Home, wherever that may have been. Deeper in what was leporid territory, now mostly taken over by vulpes. Which means, that stupid panacea crap already went around when this girl lost her home?

Conrad pulls her closer, desiring to give the girl a hug.

She lowers further, head resting on his lap while facing sideways. "They got Mom..." she murmurs. "One day, she came home from gathering food with her ears gone."

Conrad brushes through the girl's hair, feeling her warmth on his lap.

"They were bloodied stumps. Then Mom became sick."

Inflammation, no doubt. Might even be the actual cause of her death, if they were already weakened through starvation.

He reaches for the pot of asters the village left for Carrot. He picks one and gives it to her. The girl takes a bite and chews while lying down. Slowly, he feeds her while she patiently waits every time for more. Hand brushing through her hair starts to move, seeking out her ears. Carefully, Conrad strokes them. Fluffy, with some tufts in the interior part, though not as much as Primrose. Yet, her ears are even larger. Long and slender, with a cute bend in them about halfway. Flexible enough you could flop them around, yet she can control them with finesse. One of them regularly kept in its half-floppy state.

"You must have good hearing," he tries to change topic after feeding her in silence for a while.

"I can easily hear your heartbeat."

Conrad is impressed. That's pretty good indeed, to make out such a detail from where she lies down. Must have been too much in a hurry to pay attention to her surroundings when walking into their camp, back when pursued by Lisette.

Carrot turns, no longer facing sideways, now facing upwards, right towards the man she rests on. **The girl's tiny hand rises**, reaching for his face. Where she traces a cheek and heads for his ear, feeling it like he feels hers. **"Are they odd?" she suddenly asks.**

"What, your ears?"

A very subtle nod follows, filled with insecurity.

"No. They're quite cute, actually."

"Cute...?"

"That's right. Soft and warm, so big and fluffy, all furry on the outside while pink on the inside. Cute."

"Cute..." she repeats, now with an equally subtle smile.

Carrot gets up from his lap and takes the now empty food basket, about to place it aside. Leaving Conrad to fiddle with his fingers, as if those rabbit ears are still present. Until he suddenly feels a bump into his back. Weight of a girl resting on it, with her arms wrapped around. One of those same fluffy ears pressed to his cheek.

"I think I'm starting to understand Selena..." she softly blows into his ear.

Conrad wants to turn around, though Carrot already let go, heading off with the basket. Leaving the man with a smile, and left wondering that surely, she will have heard his heart beat faster at that sentence.

*

The evening ended without incidents. It was warming to see Carrot thank Lisette and Primrose for being a part of her rescue squad. And funny to see Roderik get thanked by Luna and Selena. The boy stiffened up as a wooden plank when Selena touched his hurt lip. He sure is innocent when it comes to girls.

Most already went to their room. A pair of rooms where they will sleep. Arrangements **haven't exactly been made**, though Conrad will simply see with his own eyes who will share the room with him. It **doesn't particularly matter**. Except for Adrian. He should definitely be in the other room, or the noise of him banging some random woman will keep Conrad awake all night. Actually, **Adrian probably won't be in either room's bedding.**

Not like they have need for a guard inside this building. And the monster hasn't appeared anymore either. They haven't been this safe in quite a while.

Only one individual left here with him downstairs is Lisette. She was strangely quiet ever since what happened in the forest, and distant this entire night. Her father has a vague suspicion what could lie at its source. Waiting till now to approach her.

"Hey there," he sits down next to his daughter, as she stares into the dying fire keeping this room warm.

Seeking contact by placing his hand on hers, he asks Lisette a simple, straightforward question. "Want to talk about it?"

"You're going to hate me..."

"No, I won't. Nothing can cause that to happen." Noticing she could use a prod, he brings up the topic himself. "It's about that tracking, isn't it?"

The sudden shudder in her shoulders is proof enough.

"Hey, I'm your father. You can trust me with anything."

This might require a different approach, so Conrad tries after a deep inhale. Seeking the courage to rake up old memories.

"You know about my past. I've done some pretty bad things, caused plenty of suffering. And I had to repent hard for them. Not sure if I even deserve better but..." he reaches for his necklace. "This is a story you don't know about yet. She was called Helmine..."

Lisette listens attentively, staring at the fire, while her father tells how he unknowingly played a hand in the plunder and slaughter of Milgard.

...

"It wasn't your fault!" Lisette returns resolute. "You didn't know! You tried to warn her, keep her safe!"

"But I failed, and ignorant or not, I still played an important role in it." He pats the girl through those same wild tufts as Cloe had. "Always one sticking out, just like your mother... Anyway, I'll carry that guilt for the rest of my life, and try to do better. Now... I told you a story, so how about you tell me one of yours? It's only a fair trade."

He bends forward so he can spot her downtrodden face, taking a peek at her from the side. **“You are a fair girl, right?”**

Her mouth begins to move. For a moment, it seems the girl went back to the individual she was when he first met her. Unable to speak. Slowly, eventually, words form over her lips. **“I learned to track in the orphanage.”**

“The one with Roderik?”

“No, after the plague, when we were separated. The owner of our orphanage was an old man. A noble, who left the city to seek out the countryside.”

“A bad man?” Conrad asks.

Lisette shakes her head. **“No. A good man. He taught me how to track animals first. Hunting was his hobby. He said skills were important to have for orphans, to earn our living later on in life.”**

She definitely has good memories about that time, noticeable by her dreamy look.

“The others weren’t very interested, but I was. I liked being outside, in nature. Then one of the orphanage boys got lost. I went along as he tracked him. Found the boy stuck in a cave after sliding down. I was amazed at his skill...”

“That was when he taught you how to track people?”

“Yeah... It was a skill he picked up as part of the heavy cavalry, from a friend in the army, a scout.”

Conrad can follow her story easily. Not unusual for a noble who was part of the military forces to learn how to track people. Their army had plenty of scouts as well with that knowledge. Wishing he had the foresight to pick it up from one of them, rather than constantly swing a weapon in his free time.

“The Great Plague spread further, and he went back to the city to look after family members. He never returned...”

Her father remains quiet. That orphanage owner probably didn’t make it, catching the deadly disease while he was in the city. He witnessed with his own eyes what happened to the aristocrats’ **quarters in Gleaze. How it** was decimated by the Plague.

“So, we got a new owner. A matron. She seemed nice, at first.”

Conrad swallows. That last bit reveals they will get to the part of **his daughter's** story which makes it hard to tell.

“There were odd things happening. Orphans came and went much more frequent. Most were happy someone appeared to adopt them. **Until...** Some began to **notice...**” Her shoulders drop lower again, voice choking up. **“We** recognized the same man multiple times, choosing someone for adoption. At least, those of us who were around for a while noticed it. Rumors went around, we were being sold. The number of runaways increased **shortly after.**”

Conrad squeezes harder in his daughter's hand when he hears her begin to cry.

“They found out I could track people, so they had me search for the runaways. Said it was for their own good and safety.” She wipes her tears with an arm before continuing. **“I** had a friend. She ran away, saying something was wrong about that place. I had to track her down. I didn't return to the orphanage after finding her, too curious. The matron was there, and the man who wanted to adopt her. **They...** They killed her when she resisted. Only needed her organs anyway, he said.”

Visions from the pit of corpses earlier today flash before Conrad's mind. Lisette was unknowingly involved in that vile business?!

“They spotted me... And I ran.”

Her story is finished, whatever comes after no longer relevant. This was the part that caused her to stop speaking. The part which weighed on her after tracking a person once more, leading to an incident where she was confronted with her past.

“I'm so sorry,” Conrad pulls his daughter closer, hugging her tight. He should have been there for her. She never should have been inside an orphanage to begin with. What he can do now is far too little, too late. To let her sob in his arms.

Another voice suddenly announces its unexpected presence. **“It's** not your fault!” Roderik stands in the doorway, having heard her story. **“I** should have been around, to protect you as family should,” he says. **“I'm** sorry.”

Lisette doesn't really know what to think anymore. Why are both of them apologizing to her, for the same reason? They were not involved. Yet, it feels strangely comforting. That she can share her burden with two more, who are willing to carry it alongside.

“All those children returned today...” Conrad adds. “Together with Carrot, they were all saved because of your tracking skills. And you helped save my life while you were at it. I’m nothing less than proud of you. And I’m certain the older brother in our peculiar family feels the same way, right?” he winks at Roderik.

The boy takes a step forward, coming inside the room, speaking loud enough they should be able to hear it upstairs. “Definitely!”

“What that man taught you is a valuable skill,” Conrad lifts his daughter from his chest, peering in her eyes. “And I would like to learn it from you. If you’re okay with that?”

She smiles at him through her tears.

*

Conrad sighs when dropping down on his bed. What a day this has been. One of those you can **only feel glad it’s all over**. Definitely learned a lesson today. Roderik has heart, though he will require training. And the girls better acquire some means to defend themselves, one way or the other. Maybe Primrose can help, with some kind of enchanted item or whatever. Should definitely ask her about it.

In the end, this room ended up empty except for him and Roderik. The girls have all decided on sharing a room among each other. And Adrian? He’s no doubt growing familiar with the bosom of a random woman from the village. Possibly more than one. **Probably. Well, can’t blame him. Definitely a couple lone mothers or older sisters** around who want to offer their gratitude. And you know how it goes with hatori. It’s rude to reject their offerings.

Eyes close, and Conrad heads off to the land of dreams.

...

Hands twitch as he wakes up. The door opened. Slowly, while trying not to make noise. Should he grab for a weapon?! **No, wait... Those footsteps are too light. That’s not an adult.**

Suspicions are confirmed when Conrad can feel a small posture lift up the sheets and crawl into his bed. Must be Selena. Not that he minds. He can use the diversion and stress-relieve after what happened today.

“Hmm?” his thoughts break through lingering fatigue. Since when does Selena have furry patches? Only then does he realize who it is.

“Looks like I can’t sneak up on you,” a cute voice confirms the nightly intruder’s identity.

Conrad grins at Carrot. “Must be a skill of mine,” he replies. That’s twice now he noticed when she tried to sneak during his sleep. Once for grabbing dire wolf furs, now for an entirely different reason, as she nestles close to him.

Carrot prods his abdomen muscles, examining them purely with the sense of touch. Head buried against his chest, only a hint of her large bunny ears peeking out from under the bed-sheets. A subtle twitch runs through them occasionally.

She can hear his breathing, even feel it run over the hairs of her inner ear. His heart responds to her curious play around the stomach area, which she can hear as well. Only makes her want to prod even more. Though she has other things in mind. A reason for entering this room to begin with, and it’s not simply to fool around.

After rustling of sheets, the cutesy face of a leporid peeks from under the covers.

“Hello there,” Conrad greets her.

Carrot’s lips curl up, before she tries to find enough courage to speak. Soft, trying not to wake the sleeping Roderik in this same room. “You’ve saved me... Today and... And when setting me free from the bandits.”

“Of course, I did,” the man in front whispers, brushing her shoulder with the back of a pair of fingers.

He won’t say something stupid like, “Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal.” For certain, it’s a big deal. His actions decided her entire life. It can’t get any bigger. Which is exactly why it was the only right action to take.

“In our culture, there’s this tradition...” she continues.

“To accept gratitude?” Conrad guesses.

Her eyes widen, only to settle down again. Good... He knows already. That makes this easier.

The sheets slide down as Carrot rises, looking down on the man next to her. Still playing with his muscles while she draws contours with a single finger. “Will you come with me?” she almost pleads him. “Outside...”

Conrad pushes himself up, reaching for her cheek. “This has to do with your gratitude?”

Carrot holds his hand and keeps it pressed to her cheek, cherishing it, taking her sweet time to nod a yes.

“Alright then. Pretty clear I have no other choice,” he winks at the girl.

As he gets up and reaches for his clothes, Carrot grabs his arm and holds it in place. “No need...” and she gestures to a piece of cloth she brought along.

Curious, Conrad picks it up. “A towel?” he wonders out loud, though not too loud with someone still sleeping in this same room. Shrugging his shoulders, he wraps the towel around his mid as he is supposed to and follows her out of the room when she leads him downstairs.

“Our tribe used to be known for our specialty,” she explains.

“Used to be?”

She temporarily comes to a stop, nibbling her own lower lip, and continuing forward towards the house’s entrance while answering. “Now, no longer.”

Conrad doesn’t reply. Hammering on this topic won’t do her any good. This is obviously a part of her people and culture in decline.

She opens the sliding lock on the door and heads outside. A couple village guards nod towards them, already aware two of their guests would head to the back of the humble merchant’s stead.

“We used to do pottery. Mom and Dad... I still remember from years ago.” Carrot turns around with a hint of pride on her face. “Our people always were excellent potters. We can hear it, the right temperature for baking pottery. The fire pops just right when it hits the correct temperature.”

She leads Conrad around the corner, towards the back of the house they stay in. Nothing but a small, enclosed area. **“This place has a special kind of pot...”**

“He~h...” Conrad releases his surprise. There’s a pot alright, and it’s huge. Steam rises up from above. Not from a boiling or prattling, an invitingly warm and vapid steam. **“A hot bath?”** he asks.

Carrot smiles in affirmation. **“They still had one at the back. I prepared it myself. Ah, after I asked permission, of course.”** Which is why the guards at the door weren’t surprised. **“It’s very hard to make pottery this big,”** she explains. **“At least, in this quality. But we can do it. Some are even bigger. For entire families.”**

This one’s not meant for families, a smaller version, for a single individual. That’s probably why it even survived the passing of time and the waning of culture.

“So... If you want, you can take a hot bath?” Carrot asks, voice fading as she speaks. Afraid her moment of sharing a part of her cultural heritage will be rejected.

“How do I get in?” Conrad grows excited. This thing is pretty tall. Lifting himself in will be difficult.

“Ah...” Carrot notices she forgot a detail. **“There’s a step for entering. I’ll get it.”** Ears bounce as happily as her tail when she dashes off to bring the step, overjoyed her gift will be accepted.

While she’s gone, Conrad takes a closer examination of the bath and taps the pot. Very sturdy earthenware. Definitely among the finest quality he has seen before, with nice decorative patterns running across. **They match the motif on Carrot’s loin-cloth dress in style.** A fire burns underneath to keep the temperature going.

“Won’t this be hot to stand on?” he asks when his leporid companion returns.

“It will be just right,” she smiles at him. **“There’s a false floor at the bottom. The one you see soaks up the heat, warming the water, made in a different kind of clay. The one you stand on will be a good temperature.”**

“A false floor and different mixtures of clay? Intricate design.” But that’s what makes it a specialty.

Scaling the steps, Conrad dips his hand in the water while feeling the vapid air warm his face. Hot, while not too hot.

“Ever had a hot bath before?” Carrot asks.

“Hot? No. Only warm. Many years ago, in the castle.”

Carrot understands what he talks about. Must be his time in the capital of Gleaze.

A part of Conrad wants to jump in, though that would create too much of a mess with water splashing all around. So he sits down on the step first, placing his legs in the water. “Oh, this is going to feel great...” he already anticipates an excellent relaxation time for his muscles.

“You can keep the towel on,” she explains.

A deep exhale follows when the rest of his body slides down into the hot-pot. “You folks aren’t secret meat-eaters, right?” he kids, receiving a laugh from Carrot in response.

“It does look like you’re being cooked.”

“You mind if I place the cloth on the step?” Not that she would be able to see inside from where she stands anyway.

The girl vigorously shakes her head. “Feel free to remove it.”

“Ah, freedom!” Conrad slaps the cloth over the edge of the pot, onto the step, receiving another laugh. Closing his eyes afterwards to really drowse himself in all relaxation on offer. His nose takes a good sniff at the sudden rise of a sweet, flowery scent. Caused by Carrot sprinkling dried flowers over the fire beneath. All part of tradition. “You folks should get into pottery again.”

“We can’t. It’s part of our agreement with the Union.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s unfair, they say. That we financially benefit from this specialty, while others don’t.”

“What a bunch of bollocks. Others only have to make a specialty of their own to compete.”

Conrad sighs at his own words. He shouldn’t accept the reasons anyway. They’re all Union lies. Benefit? Unfair? Nothing but excuses to tear down the Tribe’s autonomy and identity. Same practice happens among the other tribes, and to his own lands of man. And honestly, the regular folks of Uskandar are likely no different. Their identity ripped out by

whoever is in charge, to make them an obedient, dependent and complacent part of the whole that is the Union.

Creaking of the wooden step makes Conrad open his eyes again, breaking his chain of thought. A girl ascends the stairs, standing in front of him. She wears nothing but a flimsy towel.

“Carrot...?”

She doesn't reply and keeps her posture, holding up the towel over her chest. Bared thighs peek out from underneath. Side of her hips revealed by the towel being too small to cover them. Rear left **completely naked, though he can't see it.**

The girl nervously curls one of the brown twin-tails in her hair with her free hand. **“May I?”** her voice barely breaks the crackling of fire. She sinks through her knees, keeping them firmly pressed together, resting them onto the step, right in front of the water.

“It's going to be tight,” Conrad replies, his tone not really offering any resistance, eyes glued to her bared legs.

“I know.” The girl places her bum down and dips her foot into the water. Then she pushes herself off the step.

Conrad can feel her body slide against his when she enters the pot meant for only one adult, unsure where to place his hands, instinctively trying to catch her. He can feel her round rear holding a fluffy tail before he lets go with a red face. **“Sure is hot in here,”** the man deflects.

Carrot keeps her gaze onto his chest, replying with a simple nasal hum.

Would she have heard his heart go crazy when she slid in? Can she hear it now? Is that why she's so focused **on his chest? So many questions rise up in Conrad's mind.** Many more added when he can see her hand placed down on the step, where another towel is left behind. The one she held in front of her body, now completely uncovered.

A soft brush of skin greets Conrad around his chest. Is that her body he can feel? Barely touching? And that tickle around his shoulders, are those the tips of her ears acting as a flirtatious tease?

He tries to move backwards what little distance he can inside the pot. Nothing more than a couple fingers' width, yet that presence stimulating his cells and tingling his skin doesn't change. Carrot simply moves together with him, until she can feel her body lean onto the man in front. Weight of a girl resting on his chest, a single ear runs up his neck, pressed close. Where she listens to **an excited thumping... Ba-dum... Ba-dum**. A melody which leaves the girl at peace.

*

From the first floor of the building, a boy looks down. Curious. Mesmerized. Enchanted. It's Roderik, awakened when Conrad left their room, unable to resist knowing why he heard the voice of a girl. Now, finding himself trapped by the spectacle he willingly peeked at. No longer capable of turning away. Hiding presence and containing his voice in all attempts to stay unseen, while **capable of witnessing...**

A different presence calls for his attention. One as strong as the sight he could taste a glimpse of earlier, of Carrot in nothing but a towel too small to fully cover her. A presence which **manifested between the boy's legs, rising in intensity as it still rises in stature**. Hands try to push it down, even if their touch only makes it worse. Far worse.

He doesn't understand. What is going on? It's that strange phenomenon which took control of his body when the girls shopped for clothes, twirling and prancing around like fairies. Only far stronger.

Why does she press herself onto Conrad? Why does it make him feel as hot as that water seems to be? And why does he wish so strongly a girl would do as much with him?

Nothing but mysteries. Very alluring, desirable mysteries. As if the boy stumbled onto the greatest secret the world kept hidden from him, adults seeking to keep it to themselves, girls only whispering about it among their most inner circle. And now a glint of **that world's secret is about to reveal itself, if only he doesn't interrupt.**

*

Heat coming from the water is overshadowed by all hotness pressing itself into Conrad. His own body filled with a rush, the girl as serene as a holy maiden in contrast. Her relaxed breaths nothing other than hypnotizing. Tiny arms fold around the man she seeks to cling to, source of all serenity, for as tight as she can reach.

With fragrance radiating from the fire as if it comes straight from Carrot herself, he inhales and begins to relax himself. Initial surprise at **the girl's** sudden proximity had time to settle down, the same mood affecting her now shared to the man she hugs so tight. Transmitted through the touch of skin. If this is part of **her tribe's tradition** to ease mind and body inside a hot-pot, it certainly works like magic.

Still, **one part of Conrad's body has no desire for relaxation at all. On the contrary. That part hardens at a rapid pace.** Not that he minds it at this point. Surely, the girl could notice from the very start? And her entire body speaks **she doesn't mind that hard thing** forming, digging up between her legs. Not one bit. Only fascinated, a tiny twitch in her tail, caused by the pressure of that hot rod of meat gradually slipping ever higher in the hug of her thighs, until it bumps into the spot where her legs come together. Where she simply holds it there, feet not moving, thighs pressed tight, and the occasional hint of friction when sliding them over the hot shaft.

Arms fold around Carrot, first giving the girl a good, tight press, to then seek out her features. Massage her ear, taking a soft bite in it, and examine her round leporid bum cheeks, leading to a good grasp around the wet fluffiness that is her tail.

A spasm ran through it, matched by a repeated jolt of the top of his penis knocking between her legs, begging the child for permission. Hot steam wells up, joined by her moist breath, depositing dampness onto his chest muscles. The girl rubs her cheek onto it like seeking to fuse.

For the first time since entering the pot, Carrot caresses his ears with the spoken tongue. **"Selena told me what happened... That night."**

Conrad breathes into her ear, feeling out the shape of her thigh. **"How much did she reveal?"**

"Everything... How you took her."

Conrad doesn't particularly mind. Not like it wasn't known already to the others.

“She told me how it felt,” Carrot continues.

His hand moves back to her shoulders. A shame he can't put his palms firmly over her chest, yet happy he can't all the same, for it signifies their physical closeness. Still capable of feeling her chest squished into his since the very beginning.

“So what did she answer?” Conrad asks, his cheek gently caressing Carrot's, curious how Selena voiced her satisfaction to others.

“Beautiful, wonderful, lustful.” Answered with as much intimacy as her own cheek reciprocating his affection.

“Lustful...?” Conrad asks teasingly, biting in her ear once more and sliding his mouth over its length. Arms in constant and careful motion, seeking out every curve of the bundle of cuddly hotness held in his tightened embrace. The feeling of her nipples growing harder and larger as they poke into his flesh, more voluptuous, only makes him squeeze her tighter.

An affirmative moan replies. “Mm-... Lustful.” Her arms answer, seeking his back in their own never-ending motion of admiration and dedication. Furry hairs of her closest ear pressed against him, like the softest brush showering him with approval for his hungering presence feasting on her ample touch, her scent, her taste.

*

Roderik can't help touch himself. His penis is so itchy, though it's not really itchy. What is this feeling?! And it just doesn't stop! And what is all that liquid dripping down? His entire hand is covered in it already. Yet, he can't stop rubbing. Can't stop stretching his skin. Something peeks out at the front, like it wants to escape from underneath a hood.

What would it feel like if a girl were to rub herself all over him? What if her hands touched him, stroking his penis? And what were they talking about? He could hear them speak in the quiet of the night, window opened at a small gap. Beautiful? Yes... That scenery down there is strangely beautiful. He can't deny at all. Wonderful? True... This sensation running through him, fueled by the sight of a young, female body rubbing so

enviously tight in a far larger embrace, that's definitely nothing less than a wonder he can feel.

But lustful? What is that? He never heard of it before. Only conclusion he can make is that it must be true. Yes, it must be lustful, whatever it is. It sounded so right when she moaned it. A vague idea starting to form that just may be the answer to its meaning. This raging desire which compels **him to keep rubbing his penis...** Could that be it? If so, then definitely. Lustful is an understatement.

Yet, he can't help conclude there is more to this all. As extreme this lust is, it still feels like only a build-up. Then, what lies beyond? Oh, the things he would do to find out that particular answer. Eyes frozen on the couple beneath in hopes they will provide it, or at a minimum offer another clue.

*

Carrot pushes herself slowly away from Conrad. Gentle, a bright smirk cast all over him, cutesy face openly flirting. Letting that hard cock between her thighs slip out from their tight squeeze. Taking a single step back, as far as she can in this pot. To let both arms rest on top of its edge, spread out wide, no intent at hiding her chest. Enchanting in its roundness, subtle while filled with girly youth in its earliest grace. She never felt her nipples erect before, now eagerly pushing them forward, back arching ever so slightly to angle them upwards in pride when she notices his gaze is already captivated. She bides her time, to let the man in front take in the offered view. Cheeks rosy from more than only the heat of a bath.

"I'm curious, what Selena told about," she flirts.

The **girl's legs separate**. **One rises** up next to Conrad, the other following on his other side.

"About love..."

Carrot keeps her thighs in close contact with the man between them while she lifts them ever higher, up to his mid. Subtly rubbing them against him in open affection.

"About sex..."

She keeps her legs in place, starting to hook them behind his back, nudging the man closer.

“Could you **teach me?**”

The girl’s smile widens brighter than it ever did as Conrad closes the single, small step worth of distance, determined to take her up on that offer. Body running hot as she gazes at a hard penis readied to penetrate her. **She doesn’t** let the fleshy thing out of her sight for a moment, not until it will be completely gone. Every single word of praise Selena **bestowed upon the act flashing through Carrot’s** thoughts. What would it feel like, to be penetrated in her most private spot by this hard and hot thing?

The man’s words aimed at her only add to pleasure.

“**I had no idea** you were such a horny, little sex-bunny.”

Grabbing on to her lower legs, he enjoys a good feel as he follows them up all the way to her hips. The same hotness which earlier hugged his cock from the sides now felt at its tip.

The girl’s chest heaves, already imagining what it will be like if he puts it in.

“**Ah!**” **she suddenly yelps**, short and filled with surprise.

Water sloshes up and splashes out of the pot. Rabbit ears still recover from a sudden bounce, her entire body lifted from the force it took, now settling back into place. Expression turns into delight at feeling that hot cock cocooned by her vagina. Eyes dream off into a deep daze at his base barely visible, all the rest rammed inside in one go. Legs naturally close further behind the man, to keep him stuck there. And to ensure that last remaining distance of his hard meat nestling into her can be closed as tight as their embrace earlier, vaginal lips molding to the shape of the man pressing into them.

Conrad pulls back slowly, letting her observe how her lower lips leave behind a slippery coat as they slide over his shaft, its dense moist dissolving in the water. To then push it back in, equally slow, to witness that tasty coat disappear for a fresh renewal.

“*Mmm...*” **she signals her approval when** he lowers and seals her upper lips as passionate as her lower ones already are. **The young girl’s lustful gasp** escaping her nose charms the night when the hard rod is gradually swallowed up by her own body again. Every split second savored by mind and body.

Arms join her legs around him, speed picking up as she begins to bounce up and down. Floppy ears lag behind in their matching movement, tail grasped and tugged, while the girl already realizes Selena was right about every word of praise.

Conrad's hips come to a stop. Why does he stop? Incapable of asking, as that would mean detaching her lips. The girls' thighs shove into his sides. Trying to get him to move again. Don't stop now!

He can't resist a chuckle, hidden in their kiss. Her desperate desire not lost on him.

Carrot tries to move her own hips with a hunger for more. If he won't delve repeatedly into her, than she only has to make it happen instead. Though the pot prevents her, the girl's body pressed against its edge, unable to ride the cock like she so eagerly wishes to. More lovely thigh-prodding follows immediately afterwards. A begging tone leaks through her nose.

The man had enough fun by teasing her, and resumes caressing the inside of her itching tunnel with his cock. Mouth releasing only so he can see her move up and down at his thrusts. The girl's hips rotating with all lust-crazed eagerness of a young girl who just discovered what joys can await while stuck with a man inside a hot-pot meant for only one, both attached at the crotch, his hot presence felt radiating from within her lower belly. Waves of water matching their entangled bodies, to form a hypnotizing rhythm of hard and older repeatedly driving itself into soft and younger. The girl's short, angry frown from his earlier teasing quickly fades into full-out, mouth-gaping approval for his brand of carnal love.

*

On the first floor, a boy admires the show on offer. His hand tries to match the pace seen. Trying to imagine what it would be like to bounce a girl's body like Conrad is doing, have her ears dance as hypnotizing at his own rhythm. To have her legs firmly around, all of her skin caressing all of his. And most of all, to have his penis rub against her, or whatever may be happening underneath the steamy and constantly in motion waterline. Only realizing from what little he can spot of their expressions it must be even a step

above what he experiences **right now**. **Carrot's moans** reach up to this floor, a constant affirmation of bliss which keeps asking for more.

Roderik has to bite his teeth together to try and contain what wells up. Not a clue what it is, only aware down there in the pot of steaming water something similar is happening. A similar surge about to overtake the couple.

A squirt of dense liquid shoots out, reaching quite far, landing on the floor ahead. More follows with energetic bursts. A massive release, unlike anything Roderik felt before, thrilling and shaking his body to the core.

The couple outside locked as one, as if they were always destined together. That same **thrilling and shaking occurring, particularly noticeable in the girl's** grasping legs. Tensing hard to match her sweet gasp for air. To then release all tension, so her legs can tense up all over again. And again. While **the man's** equally tensed posture pushes into her with might. Leaving the boy aware a release of such strange liquid must be involved, somehow, no clue it just got transferred deep **into Carrot's womb**.

*

Conrad holds his young leporid lover behind one of her hair buns, giving her another kiss. Still capable of feeling her touch linger around his cock, even if he already left her cradle.

“Was that also part of a Leporid Tribe custom?” he places his forehead against hers.

A pair of rabbit ears seek rest on his head. **“Maybe? Or maybe I only** wanted to do what naughty bunnies do?” She seals her own lips again with a kiss.

...

Arriving back into his bedroom, Conrad plops down satisfied onto his bed. **“That was quite the bath,”** he murmurs more than relieved of all today's stress, closing his eyes for a good round of sleep.

In the other bed, a single boy still lies awake, pretending to be asleep. Not even capable of getting any. A clear picture still freshly burned in his mind on what happened outside

the window, thoughts too active, body too restless. Aware there won't be any sleep tonight.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 6



House of Leisurely Wiles

A large field of cattle stretches out, grazing without a care in the world.

“Whoa~h, so much cattle!” Luna peeks her head from outside of the wagon. “Look at that tiny one, with the short legs! So cute!”

Conrad quickly changes his mind about telling her the function of all cattle. Better she **doesn't know that cute one will not escape ending up on a dinner plate. They are within vulpes dominated territory now. Cattle is the main source of sustenance.**

A glimpse towards the rear wagon brings up mixed feelings. He could notice Carrot take a peek outside, joining the others, but she already hid herself back inside the wagon. Sight of these fields of grazing livestock is a complicated one, as a key part in the suffering of her people. For as much as these fields embody filled vulpes stomachs, in her own lands they also symbolize starving leporid. Thankfully, that's not an issue here, with this part of land they go through as native vulpes territory.

Another gasp from Luna makes the man turn his vision ahead, where she points to. That girl has been **nothing but ooh's and ah's this entire day, attention caught by one thing after the other.** This one due to what appears at the horizon. A large city, rivaling Ramona in size, though far different in architecture. A style Luna has never seen before.

Not very surprising. It is native vulpes architecture, even if hardly any sign it even existed was noticeable once entering their territory until now. Most places were shabby hovels, constructed in haste. Whatever was left of a more culture-rich time nothing but a worn and dilapidated remnant. What they now approach is about the only city left which retained the style once so traditional. The Vulpes capital, and after unification through the Uskandar Union, also the capital of all hatori territory. The Jewel of the West, Sakai.

Its vivid colors brighten the day, making all shades of brown and dirt they passed to get here seem like nothing but a mirage. Or maybe this is the mirage? For certain, a city with such vibrancy can no longer exist?

“Doesn't look like a bad place to live,” Conrad indirectly asks Primrose how her home managed to thrive while the rest of their lands are in decline.

The girl more than proud to talk about the place she was born and grew up in. **“That's because lots of wealthy merchants and land owners moved here. Grandpa is wealthy too!”**

Approaching the gate, Conrad can spot plenty of mounted guards, belonging to the local garrison, patrolling around the city. **“That's a large garrison they have here.”**

“Only those who live here or can pay the fee can enter the city.”

“Fee?” he frowns in response, annoyed.

There goes an unexpected bite in their budget. Already hoping they offer a cut for a larger group and he doesn't have to pay for everyone individually. Or maybe Primrose can let them enter for free, or at an additional discount? **She does live here... That would be nice.**

“No inns outside the city walls... No storage for horses or wagons either.” That's unusual. Larger cities tend to have facilities outside their walls for travelers who don't stay very long. Yet, he can only spot a garrison outpost.

“No outsiders allowed near the city walls,” Primrose explains.

That would certainly explain why they have no need for such facilities. And the heightened number of patrols.

“They’re not going to kick us out?” Conrad begins to wonder.

“Oh no, not if you can afford the entry fee. But I can enter for free.”

That’s at least one person he doesn’t have to pay for.

A sudden coughing shifts his attention. “You okay?” he asks Luna.

The girl tries to answer, indicating she’s doing fine, while her cough makes it hard to respond.

“Why not go inside the wagon until we’re past the gate, okay? It’s probably some dust in the air causing it. Maybe have a drink, it will get rid of the itch in your throat.”

The girl nods and sticks her head back in the wagon.

Concern shows on Conrad’s face. That cough **wasn’t** the first time he heard it. Since two days ago, she began coughing more often. And there’s a certain undertone in it he **doesn’t like at all. She has moist on her lungs. Not good. They should definitely go seek out a doctor inside the city. If they’re lucky, it’s only a cold.**

There’s another reason on top he sent her inside the wagon. With how this city seems to be well sheltered for whoever can afford it, no doubt acting as a refuge from all misery in the rest of the Hatori lands, they risk getting turned one-eighty degrees and sent right back where they came from. Definitely a possibility when the garrison posts would suspect an illness. Better to keep her out of sight until they left the check post behind them.

“Does this place have good doctors?” he asks Primrose.

The girl doesn’t respond and simply dreams off in a daze at her home city.

“Hello? Anybody home?” Conrad waves in front of her eyes.

“Eh?!” she breaks out of her inner thoughts, listening to Conrad repeat the question. “Ah, yeah, we have lots of doctors. But Grandpa has the best! And a large stock of medical herbs.”

“Oh, really? That’s good to hear. Why does he need those for?”

“It’s for our employees.”

“They’re sick?” Conrad grows worried. That would be a dangerous environment to send Luna in, or any of these other children for that matter.

“No-no, everyone’s in good health!” Primrose boasts about her grandfather’s business. “But Grandpa cares about them a lot, so he has his own private doctors to look after them.”

“Hmm... That must be a big business he has there.” Or he wouldn’t be able to afford private doctors at all. Besides, she speaks in plural. A small business **won’t** have a need for more than one practitioner.

“The biggest in all the land!” she boasts some more.

Conrad expected this girl to belong to a wealthy family from the start, yet it sounds more and more like they’re damn rich. “You certain you’re not a Lord’s daughter?”

“Nope! I’m Grandpa’s! And he’s a businessman.”

Well, it’s not that unusual for a prospering merchant to be as rich as nobility. Rare these days, though in a gate-kept location such as this one not particularly odd.

Conrad can feel a hand reach for his arm. She returned back to absentmindedness, holding onto his maw. A warm poke **warms his back. It’s the girl’s** lush tail, in search of closer contact. What could be on her mind? She clearly speaks with pride and joy about her grandfather and his successful business. She was happy earlier today to return to her home. Yet, now, Primrose turned strangely melancholic.

*

Entrance into the city comes without difficulty. The fee wasn’t too bad, though definitely out of reach for the majority of hatori. Their expensive outfits certainly helped, as it would be doubtful a pauper would be granted entry even if they, by some miracle, have enough coin. Harsh, but understandable they would want to keep one last bastion of their culture around. Even if for most who live here the dominating motivation is probably nothing other than their own survival and well-being.

“This place definitely is pretty...” he looks around like the others do, to admire the city in all its vibrancy. Houses with red walls, green tiled roofs in multiple stages, sandstone-

yellow circumferences, beige sliding doors, and elevated wooden floors. Not a hint of any slogan involving Citizen Watch. The rich folks living here probably have enough means to buy themselves out of its system. Only a myriad of colors all around. Quite matching with the vibrant pallet present on Primrose's robe.

As pretty as Sakai may be, eyes glide down to right beside him where a girl is lost in her own thoughts. From this angle, while she leans against him, Conrad can easily peer down her wide-open cleavage.

Damn, that's some squishiness she has there. By now, he knows that's a vulpes trait, and the wealthy girls and women they pass inside the city are no less endowed. However, few dress as revealing as this fiery mage. Makes sense though, as they wouldn't be able to keep the robe up. That scandalous thing is definitely enchanted.

"What's the matter?" Conrad asks her, trying to draw his attention from her breasts by prying about her source of melancholy, failing to do so.

Primrose only returns a vague mumble, eventually asking her own question. "So, you are going to the Misty Woods?"

"That's the plan. You know, with getting past the Woods as our entire purpose behind this trip to begin with."

"Today?" she mopes.

Conrad scratches his stubble. Technically, they could depart for the Woods today. All they're here for is to return Primrose to her home, and then they can head off. Admittedly, it does look like a nice place to spend the night, especially considering he paid a fee already. Who wouldn't want to get their coin's worth? Oh, and he has to get Luna checked out, that's definitely a priority matter. "Maybe?" he answers, not sure if they will have enough time left over. It's a half-day trip to reach the Misty Woods from what Primrose told before. It's possible.

"But you can't get through?" she tilts her head.

Yeah, that little obstacle does apparently exist. Wasn't her grandfather one of those who tried to travel through but failed? Still, to give it a try first seems like the reasonable path to take. "We'll try and make it through the Woods, and if not, then..."

“You come back here?!” Primrose suddenly turns more energetic, mood instantly lifting.

“Uh, I guess?” Would make for a better sleeping spot than whatever hovel is located right next to the Woods.

A constant bump on his back beckons attention. What is this rhythmical slap coming from?

Oh... It's her fox tail. Flicking left and right like a happy puppy who just got reunited with its owner after a long separation. Constantly slapping its thick fur on his back in fresh excitement.

Conrad forms a bright smile on his face, grabbing the girl around her bared shoulders and giving her a good, tight press. So *that's* why she was so silent since coming here. This *sweetie simply doesn't want* to be left behind, a realization which carved itself into her mind when arriving at her good-old home. Considering the unique charm this girl brings to their team... A shame indeed if she would no longer tag along. Oh, and her magic, of course. Even so, *it's best if she stays with her grandpa. The others don't really have a home, not anymore. She does, however.*

Curious where that sudden hug comes from, Primrose meets Conrad's brown eyes just in time to see them shift from round and pale cleavage onto her golden irises. A shade of red rises on her cheeks, followed by accepting his pampering, pressing her ear onto him as she rests down her head. Not the slightest intent at changing angle of her bosom on display.

*

The wagons come to a stop before their destination. Only one drop was present in Conrad's mood along the way. Earlier, when entering this district, they passed a street stall which offered dried leporid ears. That vile business crept into this city as well. It made him want to burn down the entire stall at the spot. Sadly, they were left with no other choice than to turn away. Troubles would get them kicked out of the city quickly. It

does make sense for such scams to exist here. Plenty potential customers around in this place, who can afford to waste coin on a fake panacea.

The building their group stands before is huge. Four floors tall, wide in diameter and with a private, walled garden.

Adrian slaps Conrad's shoulder. "Nice! What are we waiting for? Let's head inside!"

No surprise the man is excited. Without a doubt, there are a ton of lusty females to court in this place. Even if "court" may not be the correct term. The kind of business this spot deals in not particularly hard to guess. It's a business alright. Largest in all of Hatori, as Primrose bragged about. A giant luxury-brothel. Red-colored wood a fine match for this business' trade, window frames capturing multiple well-dressed women in outfits resembling Primrose's, trying to beckon attention from within various rooms of the brothel. Countless covered lanterns decorate the area and radiate a welcoming glow and aroma.

"Your grandpa owns this?" Conrad asks, not really certain how much he can reveal about this business' purpose.

"Yup! With plenty of private doctors!"

Yeah, that detail makes sense now. Keeping those girls in good health should be basic business sense. Back in his mercenary days, the comfort wagons received a good share of the medical supplies, even if they didn't have to fight.

How much does Primrose even know about this place? Plenty of parents do shelter their offspring from such carnal influences, his own parents no different. With this business, that might be hard to do. Definitely, she has a clue, at the minimum?

"You know what their trade is?"

Primrose turns red, nodding. That's affirmed then, she does have a clue. And probably more than merely a vague one. Figures... Would be difficult to avoid when growing up in here.

More coughing comes from the wagon where Luna is still inside, aided by her sister to have another drink. Those private doctors better be skilled. Hopefully, this grandfather figure won't deny them a visit.

"Ooh! My little Rose!" an old man's freshly rejuvenated joy calls for attention.

That has to be her grandfather, in a hurry descending the brothel's stairs to greet his lost granddaughter. A mixture of emotion controls the man. Anger, at whatever caused her to end up lost, overshadowed by ever-rising joy after witnessing her safe return.

"Where have you been?!" he begins to cry while latching on to his grandchild with the vigor of a young man.

"Grandpa... Not in front of the others..." the girl reveals some tears of her own, slightly embarrassed by his overt show of affection.

"Who are these people?" the man asks, still protectively clinging to his granddaughter, taking in these newcomers with their pair of wagons. Not odd to see men here, but those children accompanying them are not exactly a daily occurrence. And Primrose was clearly part of this band of travelers.

"We're here to safely escort your granddaughter home," Conrad eases his worries.

The old man sizes up both adults. "Soldiers..." he utters, eyes sharpening.

"Ex-soldiers," Conrad clarifies. "We served together, in Bournesse."

"To serve the Union?"

"No. To serve our people."

Hawk-eyes turn soft again, a well-aged smile appearing. "Good, good... I respect that. Come on in. You must all be tired."

...

The place looks as cozy from the inside as it seemed from the outside. A large entrance hall leads into a private meeting room, away from the entrance where a couple guests arrive while others leave. This building shows a steady stream of customers coming and going. Should be even busier when it turns night.

"Nice establishment," Adrian compliments the old man's business after waving at a busty woman he passed.

"Ha-ha, I can understand why you would say that. A fine lass, that one. This has been a family business since my great-grandfather. Best there is." He rings a bell, and a pair of vulpes women come inside the room, carrying plates with drinks and food. "As you can see, all our girls are well taken care of. This place is different than most brothels. We

don't deal in merely the physical. It's all about the experience. And such can only be offered with the finest, healthiest and joyful of women."

"Don't you get plenty begging for a job?" Adrian wonders out loud.

That's how it usually goes in a brothel. Plenty of poor folks out there who desperately need finances to feed their children. This is one of the easiest methods to secure those finances. And as much as this city is a refuge for the rich, there will still be plenty locals born here who aren't as well off.

"Indeed, almost a daily occurrence. I have no other option than to reject them. Few who would work for such reasons are truly capable of exhibiting that experience we seek to offer."

"Grandpa feeds and houses them first!" Primrose excitedly and inadvertently exposes a secret wing of this brothel.

Her grandfather sighs, shaking his head at the naive innocence of his youngest family member. Clarifying for the now obviously curious Conrad, with the cat already out of the bag. "I offer them a roof and place to sleep. The ones who have no other choice open to them, that is. Only once they have recovered, and still feel like it, they can repay their gratitude by working here. I don't really advertise that part of our humble establishment. We would be flooded by opportunists."

His granddaughter hides her own mouth in embarrassment. Only now realizing she should not have given that away.

"It's okay dear, they can be trusted, I'm certain. But try to be more cautious in the future."

"How did you know we were soldiers?" Adrian asks.

"Your mannerisms. I see lots of folks come and go in this place, from various backgrounds. There's something about military, their presence. You can't hide it from an old geezer like me who has seen his fair share of time in this world." He grabs a drink himself from the plate a woman offers him. "Don't worry. I'm not a bad judge of character, if I may toot my own horn. That answer you gave outside is satisfying enough. In addition to the safe return of my dear grand-daughter, naturally."

"You don't like the Union?"

“Who knows? I’m merely a whimsical old man, slowly turning senile,” he simply smiles, old and wise enough to keep his mouth shut on certain topics.

Conrad takes an offered drink and raises it to his host. He took a liking to this old fellow. He doesn’t consider himself a bad judge of character either, and this one has a good head on his shoulders. That part definitely was spared the process of aging.

A pair of hands stumble when reaching for a cup of fruit juice. It’s Roderik, sitting patiently aside with the girls of their group. Almost knocking the cup over when the woman who offered it showed her interest in the boy. Now leaving the boy to peer around uncomfortably, hoping nobody noticed what caused distraction. Too late, as the owner is already aware.

“Ha-ha, healthy young fellow you have there! Another one with good taste. Your son?”

“No, my mentor’s son. But yeah, as good as family. You’ll have to excuse his clumsiness. He’s... inexperienced.”

Roderik doesn’t really know what kind of experience they talk about, though instinctively feels it must have something to do with female beauty. The vision of Carrot and Conrad in the hot-pot flashes before his eyes again. Legs already pressed together, trying to contain a rapidly growing erection.

The old brothel owner reminisces when observing the boy. “He’s about that age where inexperience is a short-lived remnant of fleeting childhood. Ah, to be young and discover the charms of budding adulthood all over again... So, let’s get to the most important matter at hand now. How can I repay you for returning my dear Rose?”

Luna coughs again, persisting for longer than usual. A creaking wheeze draws the old man’s attention.

“Oh dear... That’s...” Bad. That’s what the old man wanted to say, catching his own words in time.

“An examination from a skilled practitioner, and if possible, a couple herbs. That’s all we can ask for in return.”

“Yes, that’s easy to arrange. So, is it...?” the old man doesn’t have to finish his sentence. An assuring shake of Conrad’s head gives the answer discreetly. No, it’s not contagious. Not according to the last doctor they visited.

“Good. I’ll have my entire team take a look at the girl. Of course, expenses are all on me. They’re currently either at work or not present. I’ll have them assembled and ready by tonight.”

The man nods to one of the women, and she subsequently takes leave of the room. The pair seems to hold a secretary role, the one woman addressed no doubt heading out now to arrange that meeting.

“You’re all free to stay for as long as you want. I’ll have your wagons safely stored in our inner court.”

“We can stay? In here?” Adrian shows a wide grin.

“Indeed,” the owner of the brothel laughs. “And with unlimited access to our offered services, naturally. It’s the least I can do.”

“Naturally,” Adrian repeats, admiring the remaining vulpes secretary. The woman herself doesn’t particularly mind all received attention from both the blond man and the young boy. An occasional flirt openly offered their way.

The old man slaps her ass in appreciation. “Ha-ha, already eyeing my lovely secretary? A fine woman. She will eagerly keep you company tonight, isn’t that right, dear?”

The woman gives a refined bow towards Adrian, slow and emphasized, femininity radiating from her every move. “I will happily offer both heart and body for the night.”

She doesn’t lie. Conrad has seen her type before, ten years ago in the comfort wagons. Vivid and fond memories of Annette well up in his own heart.

“Passiflora arrived here three years ago,” the old man explains. “Poor thing was knocking at death’s door. It was a close call. Took her a full year to recover, inside our hidden wing.”

Gratitude is visible all over the woman’s body. That story certainly explains why she’s so eager to work for him, and give her heart and soul to help her savior’s business boom.

“Passiflora?” Conrad asks. “Is that her name?”

“Indeed, never heard of it? Passion flower? A fitting name, really. That girl can even breathe life in an old shriveled-up corpse like me.”

Primrose can’t help but laugh at her grandfather’s own description.

“I have heard it before,” Conrad replies. “Just never used as a name.”

“Ah yes, you’re from Bournesse. Explains. You won’t be very familiar with our Tribe. All female names are flowers, hence, my secretary Passiflora. And Edelweiss, who left earlier to arrange your doctor’s appointment. Not to forget, my lovely Primrose, and her belated mother Amaryllis.”

“And boys?” Selena interrupts the adults.

“Ah, those are a well-kept secret,” the man winks at the girl. “Only our beloved wives and children ever find out our real name. That’s how it goes for vulpes.”

At first, Conrad concludes he must be fooling around to give Selena a sense of mystery. However, Primrose nods, so it has to be true. For anyone else, he’s simply known as “Boss”, “Master”, or in case of a good friendship, “Old man”.

“We’re hardly the only ones with distinct naming habits. That cute leporid girl over there...” the brothel owner points to Carrot while she munches on asters offered earlier. “I don’t know her name, but I know it will be a consumable. Similar in habit as Sciurini Tribe.”

“Heh...” Conrad seeks confirmation from Carrot. What was her younger sister called again? Cherry? That would certainly fit. Her rabbit ears bounce as she confirms it to be true, not stopping a cutesy-quick nibbling on tasty asters.

“We have girls of all kind in here. Naturally, I would know a detail or two about them,” the old man explains. “Well, I believe we’re about done then. Passiflora will guide you to your rooms.”

...

With most having left the room, only Conrad and Primrose lingering behind, the old man suddenly blocks the exit when his granddaughter wants to leave.

“Ah-ah, not yet, dear. You didn’t expect to sneak away without punishment for running off, hmm? Look where it brought you... These folks had to bring you back from whatever trouble you found yourself in.”

The girl tries to fake a smile. Darn... She really hoped that little detail would be forgotten by the joy of her unexpected return.

“You ran away?” Conrad asks her.

“Oh, yes, she did! Little trouble-maker, exactly like her late mother, always drifting off onto some adventure. Where did you find her? Don’t tell me she really was in trouble?”

Primrose turns her large golden irises towards Conrad, giving her best doe-eyed look.

“She was caught by bandits. We had to save her from within their hideout, chained to a wall.” Her plea for secrecy was promptly ignored.

The old man almost gets a heart-attack on the spot. “Why you little...!” he raises his hand, then lowering it again. Sighing, as he remembers a past long gone. “Really... Exactly like your mother.”

“What happened to her father?”

“Bastard ran off after Amaryllis passed away giving birth. Probably back to his homeland. Those are the only words I have to say about him.”

That matches what she said before about her past. Too bad her grandfather doesn’t know more. With what was revealed now about their naming habits, she likely doesn’t even know his name.

“Wait, to his homeland?” Conrad only now picks up on that detail.

“Yeah, Primrose is a half. She has the blood of man in her.”

“Oh, wouldn’t notice it. I can’t see any difference with the others of her tribe.”

“Not unusual with hatori. Her vulpes side is strong,” the man grumbles. “Must be why she takes so much after her mother, always thirsting for adventure. That’s why I went along when she showed magic talent and wished to attend the Spire. Would only have run off by herself anyway.”

Conrad mumbles in shared understanding. So that incident when Carrot was abducted and she pursued him into the forest was not an isolated case. “She’s a handful...” he can only agree.

The girl clings onto him, not sure whether she should give those doe-eyes another chance, or switch to pouting. Not aware her grandfather observed her behavior since she arrived.

“Alright then. Time for your punishment.”

Her ears drop low, fully expecting a well-earned spanking.

“You’re going to take over part of Passiflora’s job, and show this gentleman his quarters. Give him a tour of the place while you’re at it.”

Her ears start to rise. Does she hear that correctly?!

“For the entire duration these guests stay here, you are to be at his service.”

That debate between doe-eyes and pouting is instantly decided, granting decisive victory to an unexpected challenger. A bright smile, supported by a wagging tail.

Before they leave, the boss of this fancy establishment beckons attention for one last piece of advice. “About that tall-ear girl in your group, make certain she doesn’t run off alone in the city. Far too dangerous a place for her kind, especially at her age.” The man doesn’t hide his scorn when speaking his next words. “Pure scum, those black-market dealers and their suppliers. But all I can do is chase them from our gates when they get too close.”

“We ran into those in the countryside. Rest assured, I’m aware.”

*

“This will be your room,” Primrose guides Conrad around, carrying out her punishment.

Not exactly aristocracy level, though it’s getting close. A large double room, with a window providing view over the inner garden. Even has a small balcony. Lots of wood in its architectural design, with decorated folding screens depicting vivid landscapes near the wall. Those can be placed wherever Conrad wants them, adding to a feel of privacy. A small table with a flower decoration marks the middle, a couple stools surrounding it. As appears to be a norm here, these seats have no support for the back. Must be too annoying for their tails.

“No bed?” he asks the one peculiar part about this room.

“We sleep on the floor. Bedding is changed every day. A new one will be brought before evening.” Or in case where employees receive visitors, beddings are changed after every visitor received his share of love. A team constantly works on washing and drying the large supply. “We do have a couple regular beds in storage, if you prefer.”

Heading back in the hallway, the others already peek around the area, examining their own rooms and surrounding hallways. They are all in the rear part of this large building, not meant for regular clients. Selena guides both her sister and Carrot around, observing the numerous, large folding screens with all interest fitting a young child in an all-new area. Dashing around, prodding at everything in sight while they laugh without any restraint.

The local employees **don't** appear to mind. With this as a private part of the brothel, **the children won't bother anyone by being loud. Far better for youngsters to be lively and loud, enjoying life to its fullest, than to be out there on the streets, too starved to still have any energy left to spare.**

Roderik is more reserved. Definitely curious, while not certain where he should go or what to do. Trying to figure out why this place and all its pretty employees exudes such a mysterious attraction.

And Adrian... He's definitely in his room already. Or Passiflora's. He's not particularly picky about locations. Not wasting a single second to put her reputation as an excellent lover to the test.

"Alright then," Conrad winks to Primrose. "Time for that tour?"

The girl latches on to his hand and begins her tour. **"It's a big place..."** she hints he'll get to see it all, if it means spending more time together.

"Sure, I don't mind. We've got time."

Luna can only visit the doctors tonight anyway. He does have something else in mind which needs doing, but there's no particular hurry. Pampering this girl by letting her enjoy the moment is **well worth an investment. It's not like he doesn't have a good idea from where inside that young but voluptuous chest her happy mood originates from.** Primrose wears her affection on her large, wide-open sleeves.

...

"Heh... Isn't that a leporid hot-pot?" he asks when she shows him the private baths.

"It is, but it's cracked from old age. Grandpa searches for a new one, but..."

But he can't find a new one. Not enough potters, not enough supply remaining. Conrad sighs at it all. There's no escaping the decline of this world's cultures and peoples.

“Grandpa wants me to take over the business...” she mentions after closing the sliding door again.

“You don’t want to?”

“Mmm...” she mumbles, in doubt on what to answer. “I want to see the world, like Mama did.”

“She traveled a lot?”

“That’s what Grandpa always told me.”

She comes to a stop at another private room. Sober interior, practically empty other than flowers and a pair of urns. A larger and a smaller one, right next to each other. Even without being told what it is, Conrad would know what this room and this single display with the urns is all about.

It’s a memorial.

“Your mother?” he asks, noticing the girl offers a greeting to both urns, no doubt holding ashes of lost family members.

“This one’s Mama, the smaller one is my sister.”

“I had no idea you have a sister...”

“She wasn’t born alive. Mother went with her. Only I was left behind.” Primrose picks up her mood again and puts on a forced smile. “I still have Grandpa, but my sister would have been all alone.”

Conrad pats her over the head, not really with a clue on what to say. It might be best to change the subject. “I do believe it’s a good idea to take over the family business.”

“Why?” she asks.

First of all, it’s a lot safer than out there. Does he really have to bring up the bandits and organ traffickers again? Though he settles on arguments which don’t sound as gruesome. “This building is more than only a trade. To begin with, it’s a safe and prosperous future. Your grandpa and mom will definitely feel more at ease if you don’t run off all the time without a safe place to return to.”

Primrose starts pondering. True, she already figured that much.

“And think about it, how long ago was this business started? Wasn’t it your grandpa’s grandpa or even older? That’s damn long. They all worked hard to make it grow, to let it

prosper. It's more than merely a safe backup. This place is a family legacy. Wouldn't you want to protect that?"

Now *that* she hasn't thought about. Finger placed on her lips, thoughts going to her ancestors and several lifetimes' worth of work which crawled into this building. Now, to add the cherry on top.

"Thirdly, this is not only about you, or your grandpa for that matter. Imagine how many people work here, to earn a living in conditions far better than they would know anywhere else. How many are right now inside that hidden wing, recovering from illness and starvation? What would happen to them, and those who come knocking on these doors later?"

He can see it in the transition on her face. His words sink in. She never thought about that at all. A bit of shame settles in she has been selfish in her desires, not considering all others who live and work here, those who came before, and those who will come after.

Her fluffy ear receives a good encouraging rub from the man walking beside.

"And if you want to go see the world, that's still possible as the big boss of this place. That's what your grandpa has secretaries for. This way, you always have a place called home to return to after every trip."

Those ears rise. Conrad already knows her mood improves. She's so easy to read. Anyway, she's not the type to throw his advice out the door. His arguments will not fall on deaf ears, though they might take some time to really settle.

...

"This is the client's wing," she points at a hallway.

A man leaves while another one is escorted in by a well-groomed girl. Laughter and joy echoes throughout the entire wing. It never stops, day or night. Every time the sun rises, every time it sets, this wing bustles with life. Steeped in alcohol, accompanied by music, and celebrated by non-stop, passionate lust.

"Do you folks have good hearing?" Conrad has to know.

"Average...?" she replies.

What does that even mean?! What is "average" in vulpes terms?

"Like you," Primrose clarifies.

“Oh, okay.” Which means she must definitely hear that couple reach orgasm in the neighboring room, where only a folding screen adds privacy. It does come with a strange sense of nostalgia for Conrad. These sounds, this dominant odor, men coming and going, led by the unseen lure of a woman or girl. It all reminds him of the better parts of his mercenary life.

For some reason, his young guide is intent on showing this part of the building as well. Not left untouched by surrounding scenery, her voice changed from its natural, soothing soprano firmly into the whistle register. Spoken barely audible above the festive mood, love-thirsting and sex-crazed atmosphere all around. **“These are the oil baths...”**

Oil baths? While Conrad doesn't really want to intrude on the privacy of anyone inside, he can't really resist taking a peek out of sheer curiosity. And really, if they were worried about spectators, the guests should have kept their sliding door closed. A pair of golden vulpes eyes peeks together, right next to him.

“A mixture of plant oils,” she explains, red forming on her cheeks. **“We let our tails and ears soak up the oil. Good for its health and volume. Then we wash them clean.”**

“Uhu...” Conrad can only respond. Plenty of soaking going on in there, so much is true alright. No idea about health or volume. Doubtful anyone in that room has any thought left to spare for those. But apparently, oil baths are a part of vulpes culture with a touch of healthcare.

“Damn...” Conrad notices an eye-catching detail. **“Is that milk?”**

As they stop peeking and continue through the hallway, leaving the customer's wing, Primrose explains. **“We all produce, once we reach early puberty.”**

The man's vision descends down her valley, the girl pretending she doesn't notice, hand over her chest moving aside.

“We used to have large families, with multiple mothers. This way, older sisters or other wives can help feed the young.”

That would be helpful, Conrad has to conclude. The mercenaries' comfort women did use similar practices. When one had to work, another woman who produced milk would look after the child and keep it fed. Vulpes are more naturally attuned to that lifestyle,

traditionally practicing polygamy, and with plenty of children around in their large families who all need looking after.

Another practice which has fallen to the wayside, as few even have the resources now to take a single wife. As a result, all of them go to the top layer which still has the financial means. The women themselves who are left over **don't do** much better. Many poor folks in the countryside **don't** even produce milk anymore. Too starved for that bodily function to work as it should.

“And you...?” Conrad stops his words too late, trying to be polite, still eager to hear the answer.

“Yeah,” she almost whispers, looking more to the side while keeping her chest firmly ahead and in view, extra bit of blush appearing. **“I produce milk.”**

*

The late afternoon sun shines warmth onto the inner garden. Conrad paces around left to right, waiting impatiently. Finally coming to a stop once Roderik arrives, brought here by an employee. **“Ah, good. There you are. Come here,”** he addresses the curious boy.

“I didn't peek...” Roderik betrays he has done a measure of snooping around at least.

“That's not what I called you for. Here, grab this.” Conrad throws him a wooden training sword. **“I started with a pike, but they don't have one here. Take a stance.”**

Roderik's mouth falls open. Could it be?! **“Am I going to receive training?!”** he cheers out loud.

“Damn right you are, now take your stance.”

Conrad did come to the conclusion after recent events the boy needs a guiding hand. Roderik has plenty of spirit, good endurance and willpower, and a fine set of values. That said, exactly this combination means he will work himself into trouble sooner or later. To leave him untrained is not an option. He's in need of a good set of combat skills to accompany his commendable mindset. And he's not the only one who can use a means to defend himself.

Earlier today, after the tour, Conrad had a private talk with Primrose, leaving the girl overjoyed she could be of help through her magic. Tomorrow, he will head out to the Misty Woods to check out the place. Not that he expects to get beyond at all, but a basic recon sounds like a good idea. Meanwhile, Primrose will prepare whatever she needs for enchantments. Another part of her task is to think up a good match as enchantment for their preferred weapon. She probably won't have all ingredients required, though those can be ordered by her grandfather. Providing a means for the other girls to defend themselves.

"Roderik..." the man lowers his own weapon before the hyped-up boy. "Flip around that sword, you're holding the wrong side."

"I was only doing a flurry!" the boy tries to brush off his screw-up.

"Showing off is for when you have the skill to back it up. If I see any attempt before you reach that level, you mop the floor of all our rooms afterwards."

"Hu-ya!" Roderik lunges wildly at Conrad. "Ow!" he yells out afterwards, knocked on his head by his mentor's training sword. A reprimand swiftly follows.

"What are you, a wild boar?! Don't rush blindly ahead. And keep those yells to yourself. If you have enough energy to shout, put it in your swing instead."

From the building's entrance, four girls take a curious peek.

"Oh look, they're fighting!" Selena runs to the inner garden, taking a seat as a spectator.

"Go! Go! Conrad!"

Luna, Lisette and Carrot join her. A tiny wave or nod comes from all of them.

Conrad makes a little bow to his audience and focuses his attention back to his apprentice.

"Th... They're watching," Roderik stumbles over his own words.

"And?"

"That's not fair!"

Carrot places her hands around her mouth and yells at him. "Roderik is afraid we'll see him lose!"

"I am not!"

A whip on his ass with the wooden sword follows, evoking plenty of laughs from the audience.

“I’m right here, where are you looking?” Conrad readies himself to whip again.

“Hm! Fine, I’ll show ‘em,” the kid picks up his motivation again for lack of other options.

*

Roderik wheezes hard, hands lowered onto his knees.

“Pick up the sword, we’re not done yet.”

“It’s not fair!” the boy catches his breath.

“Your father fought before an entire arena, becoming Champion by standing victorious above a cheater. Never use fairness as an excuse for lack of skill.”

“But I can’t beat you..”

“Of course, you can’t,” Conrad replies. “Nothing wrong about that. It’s only your first lesson. The one way you can win for now is if I let you win. Would you really prefer me going easy on you, in front of everyone else, no less?”

“No,” Roderik picks up his honor again.

“Good. This is how I learned from your father. And this is how he learned to fight before me. Now it’s your turn to walk his path. Without shortcuts, without pandering, and it will take time. But you’ll get there.” Conrad lowers his weapon, noticing a pair of the brothel’s girls bring drinks for their honored guests. “You can have a short break.”

“Hello,” the older of the two brothel girls greets Roderik, offering him a drink. Her manner is best described as motherly. She actually *is* a mother, to the other girl next to her. “I’m Olive, and this is my daughter, Pepper. We will be at your assistance whenever you have training.”

Conrad greets them with a nod. He already met them earlier, when arranging this training session. Asking their boss for a wooden pair of weapons and a good spot where they are allowed to practice. The weapons **weren’t an issue, they have those** for their bouncers, whenever they practice among themselves. And location was decided on the

inner garden. Primrose's grandfather added this mother-daughter duo on top. To take care of whatever his honored guests need.

Roderik is left staring at Olive, not returning the greeting, receiving another slap on his ass with the training sword.

"A lady greets you. Return her courtesy."

"I... I'm Roderik! At your service!"

Conrad sighs while he rolls his eyes. They are at *his* service, not the other way around. But whatever, **it's not a bad greeting. Not like he can't understand what caught the boy's** interest. Their kind are a relatively rare sight around these areas. Scieurini Tribe.

The woman is both flattered and humored by the foreign boy offering his services with such open honesty. **"Oh, a young gentleman," she happily plays along,** offering a courtesy bow.

Her response evokes a proud and particularly smug grin from Roderik towards Conrad. See?! She liked it! He greeted her just fine.

The other girl, her daughter Pepper, comes next to her mother, joining in the courtesy, trying to hide amusement. She's about the same age as Roderik and the other girls here. Her mother somewhere in the mid-twenties. Biggest eye-catch obviously their specific tribal features, drawing plenty of attention from the boy they face.

Their squirrel tails are about **as large and wide as Primrose's**, yet different in shape. Held up against their upper bodies, tall enough to rise up above their heads, outer end curled up. Ears a pair of fluffy balls, bent upwards, with a thick bush of long, light-colored hair tufts filling the inner parts. They're constantly in motion, turning and twitching. Otherwise, like the other Hatori Tribe members, they appear like normal girls.

...

"Ow!" Roderik reaches for his head once more. Training resumed after their short break.

"Keep focused! Female beauty is to drop your pants, not your guard."

"Shall we take our leave?" Olive asks if they should go now. The boy is clearly distracted by their presence. Definitely leaves her flattered, yet her duty is to serve them, not be an obstruction.

“No, by all means, please stay,” Conrad answers. “All part of his training.”

“Why would I drop my pants?” Roderik answers, confused about his mentor’s earlier remark.

Conrad chuckles at his apprentice, joined by Olive while she does a better job of hiding it.

The woman suddenly calls his attention. “If the young Master would like to find out, he’ll have to train very hard. Maybe then his honorable mentor will grant him a fitting reward?”

Said mentor prepares his sword again. “Well, there you have it, kid. She just offered you a sneak-peek behind those folding screens. But only if you earn it.”

Roderik stares at the sciurini duo as if bedazzled. There’s a weird undertone to everything they said. He knows it has something to do with what bothered him for a while now. A feeling smolders inside, making his stomach all fluttery and energetic. He did pick up bits and pieces by now of weird things happening behind the folding screens. Men going in... Men leaving... Women and girls joining them... A mesmerizing atmosphere around the entire place he can’t describe. And every single hair on his body stood upright at the thrill of what all these sensations rushing through his being were all about.

He wished to know ever since seeing Carrot in the hot-pot. And if he reads this situation correctly, is that knowledge what is on offer here?

The boy readies his sword, all attention aimed at Conrad, determined to score a victory. Both Olive and Conrad unable to hide their inner fun at seeing him so suddenly hyped and serious, as if the fate of the world rests on the boy’s shoulders.

*

Roderik sighs, ashamed he couldn’t score a hit, regardless of his desperate attempts. “But I tried all you told me to...” he mopes.

“As I said, it’s only normal to lose continuously when starting out. However, in the end, you *did* do all I instructed. You left me satisfied with today’s training. Good job. We’ll train every day from now on.”

“So...?” the boy picks up all hope again, receiving a good slap on the back of his shoulders.

“Yeah, don’t worry. You’ve earned your reward. But first you clean the floors.”

“Huh!?”

Conrad raises his shoulders, uncaring. Rules were stipulated clear enough at the start. “Showing off means cleaning floors, remember? You tried to show off in the end. I wasn’t kidding.”

“I’ll show the young Master towards the cleaning bucket,” Olive offers her services, tapping her daughter on the back to try and hide her laughter better.

*

While Roderik is bent over some floor, wiping it by hand and cloth, Conrad waits in the doctors’ examination office where Luna was brought. A total of seven medical practitioners examine the girl. A man from Gleaze, one from Uskandar, and one of the tribes each, other than Muroid Tribe as they are near extinct. Too hard to find a muroid doctor, if there’s even one left anywhere.

They all take turns examining the girl, spending time debating among themselves. They seem to be in agreement.

Conrad still taps his foot when they come out of the room, closing the sliding door behind them. They were chatting friendly with the girl earlier, yet their mood is entirely different now they left.

“Let’s head downstairs,” one of them advises.

This can’t be good. They don’t want to risk Luna hearing anything.

“The doctor in the village she came from said she had no signs of an infection...” Conrad tries to latch on to hope, arriving downstairs.

“That may have been true then, but she definitely shows the signs now. We all agree the girl carries it for a protracted period of time already, probably over a year. Sometimes, it takes a long while for the first symptoms to set in.”

“And... She needs different herbs?”

The men uncomfortably exchange glances. This is the part of their job they hate the most. **“It cannot be cured. Not with our current medicine.”**

Conrad shakes his head in disbelief. No, this is not what he promised Selena. Her sister will recover, no matter what it takes! He’ll pay the expense. **“What about Uskandar medicine, maybe that will work?”** he focuses on the one blueish-grey skin doctor who is native from Uskandar.

“I’m sorry... We can prolong the inevitable, but not prevent it. She has about a year, at most.”

And that’s with the best medicine?! There has to be a way, somehow! Hope suddenly pops into Conrad’s head. Right... Just maybe, *that* might work! **“What about Alma medicine?”**

The doctors ponder among each other again, not really certain what to respond. “The druids? Maybe. Impossible to say. According to rumors, they were very advanced in medicine. However... **That’s not even rumors anymore. They’re mere legends.**”

Acquiring such medicine is nothing but a dream, a fantasy.

Conrad nods. Good! He has an option left. That will do for now. An added reason to reach beyond the Misty Woods.

“It will be hard to get our hands on suitable medicine if you wish to prolong. We have some, but not enough. These days, **it’s hard to import more, and for high prices.** Too much demand and too little supply.”

“I’ll pay.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the old owner of the place steps into the room. **“I’ll cover all costs.”**

The doctors nod as they leave the room.

The old man waits for them to exit and turns to his guest. **“You intend to challenge the Misty Woods?”**

“I do. I’ll head out as soon as tomorrow, at dawn.”

“I’ll keep your room available,” he gestures for his guest to sit down.

“Do you know anything about that place? Or what lies beyond?” Conrad asks.

The old man scratches his chin before answering. “Little of the Woods themselves, nothing about the other side.”

“Are there any dangers?”

“Some wildlife. Bears, wolves, the usual. Nothing which strays close to the path.”

“And if I follow or stray from the path...?” Conrad asks.

“If you go too deep, a dense mist appears, as it always does, blocking view. And you inevitably return back to the same spot every time. I was part of multiple expeditions back as a young lad. We tried everything. Stamped down rods as guidelines to keep our bearing, formed a living chain, not relying on sight at all and use the heightened hearing of tall-ears to try and form a straight line through the forest...”

He sighs in remembrance of his younger days. “Nothing worked.”

The old man stands up again, heading back to his own room.

“I wish you luck on your attempt tomorrow. Maybe you’ll eventually find a clue where we failed.”

*

Primrose takes a peek inside a room, not sure where everyone has gone. She can spot Carrot, inside the private bath area, observing more of those gorgeous folding panels all over the place. A particular one depicting the cosmos captures her attention.

The leporid girl suddenly stands in silence, attention shifting, observing an object she never expected to find in a city such as this. “A hot-pot?”

Primrose joins her inside, clarifying. “That one has been here for as long as I remember. It’s Grandpa’s favorite.”

“Great for my back,” the old man sticks his head in the doorway, slowly walking inside. He observes the leporid girl with keen eyes while he closes the distance. “Surprised to find one here?”

She can only nod in agreement. These are hard to find now, even in their own lands.

The man lets his hand follow along a crack running down the pot, almost as if he’s comforting it. “This has been an old friend of mine. Sadly, it’s damaged now, as you can

see. No surprise. This boy is as old as I am.” He points out parts of the crack which have a different color to them. “We tried to repair it, but it won’t hold. Maybe strong enough for one more use, and that’ll be the end of it.”

His attention shifts back to the girl. She’s lost in thought, ears dropped low, mood a somber melancholy.

“You care a lot about your people,” he understands the source of her troubled expression. “I respect that a tremendous deal.”

Carrot looks up to him, once more surprised now, to hear such words come from an outsider.

“The leporid, they are more than just your people. You are one large family. And isn’t it our duty to look after our family?”

Her mouth opens, melancholy changing into renewed energy. That’s right! This old man gets it!

“You tall-ears have a lot to be proud of. Excellent craftsmen, best in the world. Not just clay-works, but metallurgy as much. I knew a great tall-ear metallurgist in my younger days. The man was a genius, even among his own peers. He developed plans for a new weapon which would have turned the Hatori Tribe Wars all around...”

The old man sighs a lamentation. “Truly a shame he didn’t live long enough to make it a reality... True, that some of us would have lost the war as a result, while they would have won, but considering how we all ended up...”

Carrot turns her attention back to the pot, pondering out loud on the words she heard. “The Union says it’s not fair, so now it’s all gone,” she murmurs

A wrinkled hand plops down on her head, giving a good rub. “It’s *not* gone. Only asleep.” Vigor in his aging voice picks up, resolute in his words. “Never feel ashamed of what you are. Your talents... Your skills... We all have our strengths and weaknesses, both as individuals and as a people. Someday, you *will* rediscover what makes you great. So do your old nickname justice, Tall-Ears, and have them proudly point towards the sky.”

Carrot’s floppy ears start to rise, hesitating, picking up bits and pieces of growing confidence along the way. Causing the man to laugh approvingly.

“Good, much better already!”

“And vulpes...?” the girls asks. “What are they good in?”

The old man smiles bright at her. “Ah, I’m happy you ask! If I have to say what makes us special, it has to be art.”

“Art?”

“Indeed. To master and perfect beauty. You see, our culture was one of many wives, and they didn’t have much to do in their free time. Think about it, we don’t need to spend as much time as you folks on gathering food. Having all cattle nearby and always ready. A single herder could take care of a large drove, only in need to rotate them over our once bountiful, native grass-fields.”

Carrot listens attentively. She hardly knows anything about the vulpes.

“So, vulpes women, sharing their homely duties among each other, developed excellent art skills as a way to pass time. And eventually, to compete for attention of a man, in the case of a still unwed daughter.” He winks at Carrot. Surely, she understands that part. These girls’ affections for the man they travel with haven’t been lost on him. “That’s how they developed a constant hunger for the pursuit of beauty, becoming the finest of artists. It’s in their very blood now.”

He points towards the side, where a large folding screen is spread out, decorating the wall. A display of the cosmos under approving eye of Cloegandr depicts its panels. “These kinds of panels are a fine example. This one was crafted by Passiflora, working hard throughout her free time over a period of two years.”

“Two years!?” Carrot gasps.

“At least. Though she’s a busy woman, often lamenting she would rather have invested more into her creation.”

More?! It’s hard to grasp for Carrot. What could make this panel more beautiful than it already is? Its art is the reason she entered this room to begin with, drawn towards it like a magnet.

Then the old man asks her a difficult question. One she never thought about before. “What do you believe defines art?”

She tilts her head, trying hard to find an answer. What *is* art? “Painting?” she wonders, already realizing it can’t be that. It’s too simple an answer.

“Ha-ha, well, that’s part of it. But true art is far more than merely grabbing a brush and paint. Even a toddler can do that much. Then, what truly makes a work into art?”

Noticing she thinks hard, yet can’t find the answer, the man explains.

“I’ve seen you youngsters run around and observe all paintings. You naturally feel it, even if you can’t describe it yet, the inherent beauty of what is depicted. A pursuit of what is greater than life, trying to capture it with a fine set of brushes and ink. To pour your essence, your heart and soul, upon the endless possibilities of a blank canvas. Creating order and meaning where there was nothing before. Invest blood, sweat and tears, with no other intent than to create a masterpiece transcending the mortal bindings of life every time all over again. Completely detached from our own selfish interests. *That, is art.*”

The old man reaches out for the pot once more. “Very similar to what great men who made this old treasure poured into its creation, its birth. They didn’t just make pots for a trade. They breathed life and meaning into them.”

But now, those folding screens are no different than that old pot. A relic. A rarity few still bother with. Few even *can* bother with. Almost every screen bought in this establishment as a means to preserve them, for they would have been lost already otherwise. *Passiflora’s* masterpiece a fleeting remnant of a fading past. For the vulpes, similar to the tall-ears, have all gone asleep.

The old man forces his thoughts out of brooding darkness and winks at his granddaughter. “Why not fill this old beauty up one last time? Give it a worthy passing, and have all your friends join inside.”

“We can first have an oil-bath!” Primrose replies with plenty of energy. “Then we can wash it all off in the hot-pot afterwards!”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!”

“Oil-bath?” Carrot asks, not certain what to imagine at those words.

“Another local specialty,” the old man clarifies. “I’ll happily offer our entire premises. Rose, I’ll let you gather your friends and teach them all about a fine oil-bath. Meanwhile, I’ll have this big boy prepared.”

The vulpes girl smiles bright at her grandfather and grabs the hand of Carrot, guiding her as they go get the others.

*

Conrad waves after Selena and Carrot gave him a kiss, the girls now heading with Lisette, Luna and Primrose towards the oil baths. Meanwhile, Roderik places the cleaned-out bucket aside. Job done. All floors he had to scrub as punishment for showing off during training are clean as a whistle.

“Hmm, not bad at all,” his mentor remarks on the quality of his job. The maids who normally have to clean are definitely impressed as much, **happy they don’t have to pick up the slack afterwards. Doesn’t happen every day** a guest takes on their work, and even did it properly.

Roderik can feel the strain in his back and muscles. As is fitting for an honorable **warrior’s** son, he took his punishment seriously and placed plenty of strength in his scrubbing. Face still red from exertion and sweat building up. Even if part of that red face is from seeing Selena and Carrot hug his mentor to share a kiss.

What strange behavior those girls do. Why would they place their mouths on someone else’s? **Yuck... But... Not really yuck.** Okay, so it still is, only a good kind of yuck? He has no idea anymore... **Only that his body is restless. Tired from training, exhausted from working,** and so damn restless. The reason well known to him.

“Right,” Conrad pats him on the back. “Let’s go. It’s time for your reward.”

All pain is gone. All tiredness rejuvenated. **This is it... A mysterious world is about to unfold its boundless treasures before the boy. He can sense it. The term “reward”** easily clear enough he can look forward to this more than anything else, ever.

Though **the boy has to admit... He’s nervous.** Even a little afraid. What will be expected of him? What if he screws up?

“Nervous?” Conrad chuckles, noticing Roderik’s hand shows cramps.

“A little... What will I have to do?”

The man laughs out loud. **“You just enjoy yourself. That’s all there is to it. Trust me, it will all come naturally.”** Another hearty slap makes Roderik almost cough up a lung. **“Before this night is over, you’ll be a real man.”**

Roderik swallows hard. So much depends on this?! Now he has even more reason to feel nervous! And yet, every step he takes is done with increased haste building up. How much further is their destination? Will those two be present? They should be, as they offered this reward to begin with, whatever it is.

When they cross a corner leading to the next hallway, muscles flex in sudden stress spike. There they are! The mother-and-daughter sciurini pair. Olive and Pepper. Waiting patiently in the hallway, not a single fault in their professional posture. Back straightened, shoulders a perfect set of curves, hands holding onto each other in front of their lap, and giant tails hugged tight to their bodies. Expression and body language already beam down rays of sunshine onto the coming boy.

“I’ll leave him in your capable hands,” Conrad greets them, leaving two tempting words with a wink towards his apprentice. “Have fun.”

“Shall we go, young Master?” Olive addresses the boy left in her care.

She guides him through the hallway, heading straight through the customers’ wing.

...

Roderik has no idea where to place his eyes. What is happening here?! He can hear men and women. That moan right now, definitely a woman... **It’s like she** tastes the most wonderful fruit in existence. What else can he compare it to? And that other one calling right now... She asks for more? More of what? Why does she beg to be taken, and how would one even do such a thing? He wants to take a look. A quick peek.

“Young Master...?” Olive comes to a stop. Noticing Roderik lingers at an open sliding door, she smiles and comes closer, not drawing him away. **“Want to take a sneak-peek?”** her gentle and lightly playful voice grants him approval.

Driven by a strong curiosity, Roderik looks past the open door.

“Can you see her?” she whispers to the boy.

He nods inadvertently, only faintly registering her words. All attention caught by a play of shadows, cast on a folding screen. Caused by a light on the other side, and a man and woman caught in its rays.

“Can you hear her enjoy the man?” Olive lowers herself, wrapping an arm around Roderik’s back, blowing temptation in his ear.

“It sounds... fun,” he replies, dazed.

“It *is* fun,” she tempts more. “The greatest of fun.”

“What is she doing?” he murmurs, unable to turn away from the sight of a female shadow riding on top a man’s shadow. As beautiful as the decorations on those screens. Like it came alive, and turned into a dancing, bouncing, rotating piece of art.

“She loves him, and he loves her,” she whispers Roderik wondrous words. “Physical. Body to body, skin to skin.” Olive places her cheek against his, observing the same scenery. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

Her cheek can feel the boy’s agreement.

“Shall we go?” she grabs his hand, leading him away from the entrance.

There wasn’t really a need to lead her young companion through this part of the building, though he’s so innocent. A part of her wanted to prepare him, give him a hint and something to look forward to. Another part sought to simply enjoy the tease.

...

They have come to a private room.

“I... uh... What will we do?”

“Now, we go inside,” the woman chuckles, accompanied by barely hidden grinning of her daughter.

“But I... I smell,” Roderik suddenly becomes aware he’s still covered in sweat from scrubbing earlier.

The woman places a finger next to her mouth, pondering. “Hmm... I don’t particularly mind sweat of a fine, young man. Do you, dear?”

The younger girl shakes her head, amused.

“If you wish, we could take a bath first?”

“Together?” Roderik is almost afraid to ask.

“Naturally, all three of us together. In the same bath. Entirely **naked.**”

Roderik plops his mouth like a fish seeking air, slowly starting to form words. **“And... After that...?”**

The woman smiles with the warmth of a mid-summer sun, **caressing Roderik’s cheek** with her palm. **“After that, we will love you, and you can love us. Body to body, skin to skin. All night long.”**

Her daughter fails to contain a chuckle at the dorky grin forming on their honored guest.

*

Roderik removes his last piece of clothing, placing it on a bench. Holding his breath like a thief trying not to be caught, staring at a folding screen where he can recognize the silhouette of a mother and daughter in a state of undress. Almost slipping when taking a single step ahead, he seeks the edge of the large, private bathing area. A thin cloud of vapor rises from it, making the water appear inviting. A deep breath of air follows, and the boy tries to regain control over his senses. A true hero is always the master over his own body and mind!

He doesn’t have a clue how these women can exhibit such a compelling power over him, yet **he can’t let that go on forever.** Such **mental weakness would** definitely bring shame to his mentor, and not to forget, his parents and guardian. What would they think if they look down on him now from the afterlife, **with the boy’s** body all tensed up at the mere thought of what happens behind those screens? At the subtle shape of the mother as she helps her daughter remove her top.

Roderik slaps his cheeks. Dammit, focus! Stop **thinking about their bodies!** **Soft and... so round and... beautiful.**

Three more slaps later Roderik stares down into **the water.** **Okay, he’s got this!** The sensation of relaxing water after a tiring day helps shift focus. Beginnings of his lower half going through a transformation has been halted for now. That would be so embarrassing, if they would see him like that. Actually, never mind, it will still be embarrassing, even with that thing appearing normal again.

Movement draws attention near the folding screen. The boy hides his manhood and continues to peer into the water, afraid to risk losing his mind again. All resistance futile once he can spot their lower legs at the edge of the bath. Eyes starting to turn upwards, gliding over those legs, past a pair of knees, instantly settling on the realization a **female's thighs are** truly a wonder of beauty.

Curiosity now flares up. He's always heard girls are different from boys down there, around that part which is just about to come into sharp focus. And their top? Women have those round, bouncy lumps at the front. What would those actually look like? Until now, he has only ever seen a teaser, an appetizer. Hands covering his crotch feel a tiny reaction already, for right this next second he will finally...

"Ah..." Roderik blurts out his surprise.

Both mother and daughter cover their front, not with a towel, but using their own large tail. It grasps onto their curves like giving a tight hug. For a couple seconds, the pair takes in all **disappointment on the boy's face, inner fun not hidden from the woman's** voice when she speaks.

"Is something wrong, young Master?"

What a devious creature, Roderik can only conclude. She knows, he can see it in that glint in her eyes. She damn well knows what went through his mind as his eyes crawled up her body. Straight-out devious! Taking enjoyment from building up his hopes and expectations, to then drop them straight into the water.

The little girl smirks out loud next to her mother, a badly-hidden laugh, muffled by the outer end of her tail, aimed at the naked boy.

Then the pair takes pity on their young guest, joy settling back into professional seduction, and the tail of the mother begins to move. The bottom first, followed by the rest in a smooth, gradual shift, as the large furry tail moves aside, seeking its usual spot at her back.

Olive is keenly aware of the eyes glued on her, yet **doesn't obstruct her guest any** longer. Not even by interrupting him with her own gaze, as she submissively faces into the water, where she first lowers herself onto her knees. One leg breaks the surface of warm water, slow and emphasized, breasts lifted by one arm. Making sure her most

feminine and private features are on full display as she steps into the bath with the elegance of a goddess.

Once inside, she holds out her hands to her daughter, who leans forward, resting her upper body on her mother, equally professional in a display of youthfulness, compared to the motherly affection from Olive.

The bath has a medium depth. Both children sit submerged up to right below their shoulders. The woman has water to around her waist.

Roderik has no idea where to look anymore. Is he even allowed to watch?! Mental fortitude already forgotten, easily shoved aside with the force of a giant. A quick glimpse follows **over the mother's thighs. What a difference to his own. Not a muscle or straight line to be seen, only gentle curves.** Her lower leg lies down, knee bent to keep those curves going. Her upper leg rests on it, its own knee at a slightly lesser bend.

A quick flick to her eyes follows, where he seeks approval.

"Take your time," she eases his mind.

To make her point, she lets that arm lift her breasts just a tad higher. Her palm seeks the contours of her bosom, helping to bring out their accentuated charm. As if she openly says: **"Look... These are all yours for the entire night. To admire, touch and love for all they're worth."**

"Have you seen breasts before?" she asks.

"No..." At least, not a female's. And what a world of difference that makes. There always was a strange kind of magic to those swaying things, whenever a woman passed them, or Primrose prances around in her low-hanging robe. However, nothing can compare to seeing them entirely revealed for the first time. **They're so captivating...**

Another bump comes knocking at Roderik's hands. There's no stopping that transformation anymore. It's okay... He gave in already. These two won't mind. They might tease, while they definitely won't mock. Whatever that transformation may be for, it can do its thing unabated. There would be no resisting it anyway. Not with these two around.

The daughter, Pepper, holds on to her mother with a loose grip. Not hiding her own chest. Much more humble in size, but still strangely captivating. A pair of sharp teeth

visible from the corners of her mouth, as she can't hide her smug expression. Source of her smugness can only be that power she can feel over him, capable of asking anything of the boy right now, and he would obey like a hungry puppy.

The mother reveals a similar set of sharp teeth, resembling canines. Pleased to see her daughter enjoys herself. Not that those teeth are meant for tearing meat. They are to crack nuts, one of their tribe's favorites when it comes to food.

Biggest eye-catch belonging to the young girl lies lower, however. Between her legs.

So girls *are* different... They don't have a penis. Instead, both mother and daughter have... How should he even describe it? Round, and a tiny bit bulgy. Like a peach? All fleshy and soft. And appearance is just as tasteful. Is that where girls pee? How would that work? All Roderik knows, is that very similar to the rest of their bodies, that little area neatly flanked by a set of protective thighs is nothing other than captivating.

The woman suddenly crawls closer. "May I wash your back, young Master?"

The stumbling mess coming out of his mouth needs no translation, as she turns him around, back facing her.

What a shame, he can't admire them anymore. Though that disappointment is already doused by the touch of her fingers over his back. Her impressions voiced as they come to mind when examining his body.

"Still young, yet a bit rough. Trained muscles... and tired from work." All words of praise.

"I always helped out," Roderik explains. "Ever since the orphanage." He's no stranger to physical work. Always liked that feeling of a good work-out and the satisfaction which follows.

"I like hard workers," the woman sends a thrill through his body by pushing her breasts into his back. "They're strong and reliable."

Roderik closes both eyes when Pepper uses a small bucket to pour water over his head after they washed his hair. He can feel those breasts again, squishing and prodding, while Olive wraps her arms around him, enjoying a good feel of a young, healthy boy. Then the young mother washes his front.

"What a cute belly," she says, using both hands to wash his abdomen.

Roderik remains silent. No idea if that's a compliment or not. Cute... That should be good, probably? His hands press down. Trying to cover his manhood, noticing Olive reaches lower, heading towards exactly that same spot.

"Shh... It's okay. No need to be ashamed," she blows in his ear, pressing her breasts even tighter into his back.

The boy's hands release their protectiveness, loosening. The weirdest exciting tingle runs from head to toe when her fingers glide underneath his hands to seek out his penis.

"Mm, already a respectable boy," she compliments him, very slowly tracing his entire erect penis to the front.

"It... It suddenly grew," Roderik tries to explain, not understanding any of its purpose or what is even normal.

"Of course, it did. Do you know why?"

"No..." All he knows is that it tries to grow ever bigger, even if it's at its largest already. Caused by her fingers repeatedly gliding over it, and her softness pushing in his back.

"So it can make love, like this." She tightens her grip and strokes the boy's penis, picking up pace, yet not too fast. "Does it feel good?"

Roderik tries a nod, vocal chords only capable of a moan. Whatever this woman may be doing to him, he never wants her to stop.

"No need to hold it in," she whispers. "Just let it all flow."

What a strange mixture of emotions. He knows, it's going to happen again. Similar to when he touched himself when witnessing Carrot and Conrad together. Only now in the presence of two girls. And one causes it to happen, doing the stroking. So embarrassing, yet so much more intense.

His gasp fills the room, unable to think anymore. Body tensing like it was never tired at all, senses pushed to an extreme. Leaning back onto the woman so he can keep constant contact with the comfy pillows that are her tits. His hands now completely removed so it's possible to witness Olive rub his shaft, surrendering to her. Dropping all remaining restraint to hold in what tries to come outside, encouraged by her motherly shush. Simply to let it all go.

Roderik's eyes are locked in a daze when he can hear his own moans, see his penis gush out that white liquid he has only seen once before. A thick substance shoots straight into the water all around. Followed by another wild gush, and a third.

"Good?" she asks.

He can only admit. This is not even comparable to doing it himself.

"Oh, so vigorous," the woman admires his erection only subsiding halfway, before it slowly turns hard again. Definitely one of the better traits of a younger partner.

Pepper comes to Roderik's front and sticks out her tongue for a short, teasing flick, revealing those sharp teeth again. The girl takes a deep breath of air and dives underwater.

What is she doing? Will she rub it now? Hope rises she will do exactly that, though the girl simply hovers before his crotch, holding his penis with one hand while observing it closely.

Another shush from Olive eases the boy's mind when his senses get overwhelmed once more, penis suddenly swallowed. At least, that's what it feels like. The semi-flaccid thing has completely disappeared into Pepper's mouth. The warmth of water replaced by encompassing hotness. The girl wastes no time, suckling on his cock as she can feel it quickly expand, growing to its full size again.

"She's..." Roderik blurts out, in need of more air than the girl underwater.

The mother explains for him. "My daughter washes your penis. Do you like it?"

Roderik wildly nods. "Yeah...! It's... hot. And feels great!" Senses that are practically virgin level already peak again. A fear enters Roderik's mind. If she continues like this... "I'll... I can't..."

A motherly cheek is pressed against his, shushing him once more. "Don't worry, you can let it all go again."

Let go? But how will she respond? What if the girl bites, with her sharp teeth?

Another moan, and another large load of semen gets pumped to the exit, spurred on by those exact thoughts. Fear now no longer one of shooting into her mouth, or the girl possibly biting, but that she might actually remove her mouth prematurely. Fear which

instantly subsides at her warmth and tongue as a constant presence throughout. The **girl's lips** held shut far over his shaft, throat swallowing what it receives with dedication.

Slowly, the girl pulls back while keeping those lips airtight around his cock, until the tip exits, giving it a quick kiss.

"There, all clean," her mother giggles, holding on to the boy in desperate need of a breather.

...

The trio left the bath, daughter drying her mother's tail after taking care of her own, while Olive dries Roderik's hair. Vigorous he may be, he's in need of rest. The night is still young.

"So, you grew up in an orphanage?" she strikes a chat with her guest, trying to steer his mind temporarily from eroticism, as it would only interfere with his rest.

"Yeah. My parents had no other choice. They died when I was young."

Olive isn't surprised at his story having sad details. She's used to such topics, yet was not afraid to bring up potential old scars. Most guests who come here hold similar scars. And many are quite happy, even relieved, to talk about them. There's something particular about this environment which allows them to more easily do so, often letting go of an emotional burden in the process.

It probably has to do with this type of business. As close as one can be, yet not all that close. Capable of bearing oneself naked in front of these women, but without the natural barriers that come with family, friends or lovers. Easier to share stories one would otherwise keep hidden. For some, **it's** about respect. For others, **it's the shame of having a family member know. And some just don't want to burden the people close to their hearts.** None of those become an issue within these walls.

Held in the arms of a loving woman one doesn't actually know. Yet, close enough to reveal secrets and rumors even Citizen Watch would love to hear. And as befitting professionalism, not a word is ever revealed, incapable of leaving these walls. In fact, there are many who come here for specifically that reason.

“Father is the Champion of Gleaze!” Roderik boasts, not feeling sad about his parents at all. They should be spoken about with pride, not tears. “And Mother was the boss of an entire department within an army force. They were all women. She looked after them all.”

No need to clarify for Olive what that job in the army would have been. She has a good enough picture. Very similar to her own boss.

“They died protecting me.”

Olive doesn’t let somberness take over and joins Roderik’s pride-filled smile. “No wonder you are a brave and handsome young man. So you grew up alone?”

“No, I had my sister. Okay, we’re not really blood-related, but she’s still my sister!”

“Is she part of your group?”

“The girl with brown hair, it’s often messy.”

The woman chuckles. She remembers seeing her when these guests ran around, looking at the art panels. “And you protect her, like a good brother would?”

“That’s what I’m training for!” he grows more confident with his words, feeling more and more at ease around this mother-daughter pair. No longer purely controlled by mysterious desires, feeling like he can tell them anything.

“And now you’re travelling?” Olive asks.

“Yup! We’re heading beyond the Misty Woods.”

“Oh, that sounds like an adventure.”

She heard of attempts to cross the Woods, the last one many years ago, long before she even came to this place. Which makes it the first time she hears that reason for travelling as stated by a client. It does sound like an adventure to her, even if they probably won’t succeed. Challenging the unknown always comes with mystique and charm. Those who seek out such adventures are always worthy of respect, regardless of whether they succeed in their venture.

“Honestly, I went along at first to visit the Sea of Salt.”

“Sea of Salt?” Olive repeats, a subtle difference in her tone present.

“Yeah. To search for the man who took care of me after I left the orphanage.”

“They took him?” Pepper now asks.

“I should have stopped them...” Roderik laments.

He figured it out by now. Their group is not heading there at all. It's okay, he understands why Conrad and Selena kept it hidden from him, even appreciates it. Still, someday he hopes to go there. Not for now though. Not only has he become aware of his powerlessness, unable to do anything even if he were to get there, he has a mission now.

To help Conrad reach past the Misty Woods, so the man can find out about that dark creature which supposedly exists. He didn't have the displeasure of meeting it, though the others all did. Such a being can be nothing other than evil. As a proud warrior's son, the boy cannot abandon them and bring shame to his family. Maybe somewhere along the road their quest will lead them to, he will have the opportunity to say goodbye to the man who took him in.

Roderik tries to turn. What's wrong? They don't ask questions anymore. And Olive's hands stopped moving. "I said something wrong?" he asks.

The woman tries to pick up her professionalism again, realizing she allowed herself to get lost in emotion. "Nothing, really," she insists.

Roderik doesn't buy it. She's doing a good job of hiding it, yet he can still see it linger on her daughter. "Sometimes, it's easier to talk," he offers a shoulder. Aware from his own experiences what a good conversation can do.

The woman stumbles over her words, trying to reject his offer, noticing her own daughter is still anxious. It's far from the first time this topic is brought up by a guest, and not the first time it makes her feel unease either. Nevertheless, it definitely is a first for someone to notice, and offer the kind of service she's here for. A complete reversal of their roles.

She sighs, noticing her young guest grows worried about her. Maybe it's not a bad idea to take him up on the offer, even if only to ease his mind. "I lost my husband to the Sea of Salt."

Roderik turns around to face her, attention focused on her story as the woman grabs her tail in comfort while talking about the events which led them here.

"We had a local business. They said we were too successful, making too much coin. That we were living off the suffering of others. So they took it all, by force."

The daughter peers down, somber. She doesn't remember much anymore from her youth, but that particular event is still burned in her memory.

“Naturally, we tried to resist, at first. As a result, we were about to be arrested and sent to the Sea of Salt. We managed to flee, thanks to my husband. But he was caught...”

It happened three years ago. Eventually fleeing their native lands as it got too dangerous, constantly on the run as fugitives, ending up here where the owner gave them shelter.

“Even after years, I still fear the gate will be barged open any day and guards storm in to take us away.”

“I won't let them!” Roderik quickly stands up, yelling out surprisingly loud.

The woman is startled at his sudden, loud voice. Left staring at the boy as he proclaims his determination.

“I'll protect you! Stop them all, even if they send a hundred men!”

“But... Why?” Olive can only wonder. Why would a guest go that far for a pair of glorified prostitutes? Only capable of sudden stupor at the answer received, given in total, earnest innocence.

“Didn't you say so before we came here? You will love me, and I can love you? Isn't that how love works?”

Complete silence. Two pairs of sciurini eyes are focused on the naked boy standing tall. Until the youngest breaks the silence first, heartfelt snicker hidden by her arm. Followed by a short chuckle from her mother, while a single tear carrying deep and complex emotion rolls down her cheek.

“Did I say something wrong...?” Roderik starts to turn red, aware he's the cause of their sudden change in mood, unsure what to make of it all.

“No,” Olive replies, reaching for his cheeks and holding them with both palms, leaning closer. **“You are absolutely right.”**

And the boy feels a pair of lips connect with his own. Warm... Wet... Filled with affection and gratitude. Seeking his lower lip, Olive takes it into her mouth, putting pressure on it. A soft pricking noticeable by Roderik, as he feels a trickle of warm fluid get exchanged. There's a hint of iron in it. No pain at all, instantly covered by the young

woman's saliva when her tongue glides over, before it seeks the interior of her partner's mouth.

Gently, her mouth disconnects, giving two more slow pecks over his lips. The woman stands up and wraps her arms around Roderik, using a measure of force to bury his face deep into her chest, brushing his hair. "You already felt my touch, **and my daughter's saliva,**" she whispers him. "Are you curious what comes after?"

"Yeah..." Roderik mumbles from between her cleavage, already erect again after that passionate kiss and this sudden, squishy development.

She lets him breathe again and grabs his hands, leading the boy backwards. Somehow, she seems even more inviting than earlier. That radiating warmth of a mid-summer sun has suddenly turned into a nova, her cheeks filled with vigor, eyes sparkling with life. Her tail has all its hairs stand in full volume, a glance decorating its held-high posture.

Olive sits down on their bedding. Legs spread out to reveal that strangely alluring peach. Only difference with her daughter is a small amount of hair growing above, in that same reddish tint as her tail. "That's my vagina," she explains for the boy. "Does it look pretty?"

"It does..." And many other descriptions. Tasty, alluring, inviting...

The young woman traces gently around the contours of her vagina, to show how that particular part of her body is almost as soft as her breasts. "Do you know what it's for?" she flirts.

He shakes his head with nothing but painful regret. If only he knew. From the hints he has seen, he has to place his own crotch there, but then what? Rub, maybe? There has to be more to it.

Olive waggles a finger before Roderik to beckon his attention towards it, and she guides it to his penis. Dipping the tip of her finger in all ample pre-cum leaking from it. Then she brings that finger to her vagina, twirling the pre-cum in her own slit. And she slowly digs in, entire finger disappearing.

A revelation of sexual passion suddenly opens up before the boy. Already longing to delve into her depths, thoughts only capable of imagining what new level of wonder

awaits down there. Thoughts that only intensify as Olive pulls her finger back out, and it glances stronger than her tail, royally covered in a tasty-looking, rich fluid.

“Come,” she tempts him to stop wondering, and partake instead. No longer any interest in performing her job, ever since that tear rolled down. Now shifted to something very different than merely seeking to please a guest. “Let’s make love..”

Her long, lush tail wraps to the front, seeking the back of Roderik, guiding him into her embrace. The boy has to resist all urges to cum right then and there, when he can feel his penis touch that appetizing peach, now aware it’s just as soft as one. Only far hotter in temperature. Eager to feel her fluid smother his shaft, reaching for her breasts to seek their touch. Never did he feel as safe as he does now, wrapped in a cocoon of living flesh, with added flair of furry tail.

Tiny hands reach for Roderik from behind. They are Pepper’s, one holding him, the other grasping around his penis. Pointing its tip to her mother’s entrance. Fascinated by that mother exuding such levels of eagerness, never having seen it before. Though understanding its source well enough.

With Pepper latched on to him, and the dominating impulse of his hard meat sinking into much softer meat, that feeling of a cocoon is only strengthened. Gradually fusing **with the woman’s body, only a bit** of ticklish hair caught between. While he instantly pulls back, so he can slap into her all over again. A similar sound strokes his ears as he **heard in the hallways leading to this room, but didn’t know the meaning of. One that is** now pure music. The music of making carnal love with a woman.

“Can I...?” he tries to ask, in hurried need of an answer.

Olive muzzles his question by pressing his face into her bouncing tits. There’s no need to ask. Of course he can. **She wouldn’t want anything else.** “Let it all flow inside of me, as deep as you wish,” she encourages him.

Roderik’s hips move so fast he might actually grow worried to shave off his skin, if only he had room left to spare a thought. Another load of cum prepares itself, not really certain where inside it will go, only that the thought of pouring it all into Olive makes him want to do it even more.

Pepper places her own hips against Roderik, spooning him from behind. The boy can only marvel at how exceedingly good it feels to release all his lusts, gasping for air, every muscle working in tandem to squish out more. Overjoyed he can feel that white stuff shoot out with vigor, knowing it's now finally where it belongs.

...

His heart has never beaten so hard. Like he ran a spurt in heavy armor. Sweat runs down his freshly-washed body. What a peculiar activity. Washing oneself first, only to get **sweaty right after. Deeply inhaling, caught in Olive's cleavage**, while he savors her own brand of sultry sweat.

The boy can only admire what he sees when Pepper guides his hips backwards, a soaked penis flopping out of her mother. That mother lifts her upper body, sitting down, guiding the boy who just pumped life into her to come sit. Onto the bedding, back leaning against the woman he just made love with. Lovingly caressed while she works his penis.

“Think you can go a fourth time?”

Roderik isn't really certain what to answer. Can he? This took a lot out of him. He feels too drained to even stand at this point.

“Look,” Olive seduces him. “Isn't she pretty?”

Pepper stands before Roderik, showing her frontal nudity without restraint. Smug, while heaving with lust. She just watched her own mother get taken, felt her own skin against the boy doing it. That same kind of affection and gratitude which was present in the mother now conquers her daughter.

His vision moves to her pelvis. She looks so tight. Equally wet, with a string clinging to her inner thigh, coming from inside her smaller peach. No hair, but so tight...

The boy's breathing grows heavier again, feeling his penis go for that fourth time, life returning to it, slowly.

“Can you see her tight pussy?” Olive gives him an extra push. **“Imagine how truly wonderful it must be, inside of my lovely daughter.”** She places a finger on the outer end of his manhood, causing an excited jump. **“From here...”** and she moves that finger to his base. **“All the way to here.”**

Pepper shows her sharp teeth through a wide grin when she spots a full-growing erection. Sinking onto her knees, the girl hangs over the **boy's lap**. A tiny mouth connects with his, exactly like her mother did before. Aiming for his lower lip to take it in. A sharp tooth punctures, and the taste of iron seeps into his mouth, only to be mixed with **Pepper's saliva**. **And the girl sits down. Right on top of his cock**, aimed upward by a loving mother's hand.

A pair of sighs sing a duet, as Pepper and Roderik match their breathing during the moment of penetration. Pure contentment strokes **her mother's furry ears when both** children can feel their crotches touch skintight. That mother capable of witnessing her **little precious indulge herself in the delights of a raw cock still wet with her mother's** fluid. Roles which will no doubt be reversed more than once before this night is over.

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While Conrad prepares the horses, **he can't help** throw another glance to the side. Roderik sure is pampered by those two sciurini. All three are practically fused at the hips. He would have asked him to give a hand already, rather than stand there like an oaf, though it would feel like tearing a bear cub from its overprotective mother and sibling. **And let's face it, getting mauled to death** by Mommy-Bear is not a great idea.

Today, they will head out towards the Misty Woods for a recon. He made preparations to try and travel past, even if **nobody expects success, not even himself**. **That's fine for** now, as there is value in holding a better grasp on what hurdle they deal with. Personal experiences are always valued over hearsay.

While there's a hurdle, at least they have the benefit of a good home base to return to. **The brothel's owner is more than happy to let them stay here for as many repeated** attempts as needed. In fact, they will always be welcome here. Rooms prepared for their expected return tonight, with a travel pass acquired to easily go through the garrison's check. No shred of doubt, one individual here can expect his bed to be kept at body temperature already.

Speaking of, Conrad calls out to Roderik. It's about time to temporarily separate the cub from Mommy-Bear and pray she doesn't fall into an angry frenzy.

After plenty of hugs and kisses, the kid finally makes it to the wagons.

"You left one heck of an impression," Conrad remarks. "Now better live up to it, okay? You do them right."

There's no lack of confidence in his young apprentice, taking the man's words to heart with head held high.

"What's that...? Teeth marks?" Conrad takes a look at the boy's lower lip. "Bit yourself?"

"Sort of, but it doesn't hurt. Actually, it feels great!"

"Um.... Okay," Conrad can only return a frown. What the fuck happened last night?

The old owner of the brothel, overhearing the conversation, suddenly steps closer and grabs the boy's chin, turning it towards him to take a closer look at that lip. "Well, I'll be damned... Looks like I'll be out of two working girls and have two more kitchen or cleaning crew instead."

"What?" Conrad can't follow what's going on. "Did they cause trouble?"

"No, not at all," the old man lets go of Roderik's chin. "But they exchanged blood through a kiss, didn't they?"

Roderik nods.

"Both of them?"

Another cautious nod.

"That confirms it then. This is how Scieurini Tribe exchange vows of familial bond. They pledged an engagement. And I can't have women work for customers when they're already bonded to a man. That would be inappropriate."

The old man turns around and heads back to his brothel, leaving his parting words. "I'll move them to the cleaning crew."

Conrad turns to his apprentice, ready to pick up his jaw from the ground. "You did what...!?"

The boy raises his shoulders, not having a clue. A pair of complicit scieurini in the background smile at him.

*

Their group reached the entrance to the Misty Woods. About three hours to arrive here, not as long as he expected. Means they have plenty of time to make a try before nightfall. The woods should be relatively safe, with exception of the occasional wolf or bear. However, those never attack wagons. With all mystery surrounding these woods, bandits or highwaymen haven't taken up camp here either. Hard to call this a lucrative spot when nobody can pass through, and only your own men risk getting lost.

Original plan was to have Primrose stay behind with the other girls, and have her work on preparations for making enchantments. Though her grandfather suggested to take the girl along. Her magic might always prove useful. An offer Conrad couldn't drop, as he had thought about the same option before. Only reason he didn't propose it was the expectation her grandfather would rather keep her around. Then again, if he expects them to return home for the night, and it only being a three-hour trip, that would make it easier to let her go. Working on those enchantments can always happen some other day, or maybe even tonight, depending how long it takes.

Luna is the only one who stayed behind. With her worsening condition, it's best to keep her in the brothel where she can enjoy fresh air, but not have the burden of staying in a rumbling wagon, away from the largest supply of medicine.

"Alright, let's go. Everybody knows what to do."

Both wagons travel through the single path leading through the Woods. A path nobody managed to reach the end of in over a thousand years. Even the great-grandchildren of who even had a clue what lies on the other side already long gone.

No fog for now, only a straightforward path which appears very well maintained for not being used. Definitely an oddity in itself, but not the one that matters.

Both wagons are connected with rope. A precaution in case the fog sets in. From what the old man described about his old expedition attempts, it will grow very dense. Won't be long now before they reach the point where fog should start appearing. They already traveled for about half an hour through the woods.

“There it is...” he mumbles to himself.

A low-hanging mist covers the road ahead and spreads out through the Woods. For now, **it doesn't obstruct much view**, which should change rapidly as they go deeper. He quickly places a marker down before they enter the fog. Nothing more than a basic stick with a piece of cloth on.

“Primrose, do you sense anything?”

The girl uses her staff to help focus, channeling energies to send them out like a magic radar. **“Nothing,”** she replies, **keeping her channeling** active.

“Lisette, you take over the wagon.”

Conrad hops off while his daughter takes **the reins**. **She doesn't know much about** horses, only having received the basics this morning, yet more is not needed. The horses are trained enough they should keep going on by themselves as long as they feel someone behind the reins. Meanwhile, he takes the side of the wagon, flanking it, while Roderik covers the other flank. Their goal is to widen the width of their tiny two-wagon convoy, keeping a better eye on the side of the road. Paying attention for any possible splits they might pass, so as not to accidentally make a turn inside the dense mist.

The fog grows increasingly thick. By now, **it's impossible to see the second wagon**. Only a vague light still shines through from the lanterns hung to its side, and that already dims further as well. Conrad and Roderik carry a similar lantern, to help observe the path forward.

“There's something!” Primrose suddenly announces, **uncertainty the dominant** presence in her spoken words.

“You recognize it?” Conrad asks her, **unable to read the girl's** face due to the fog, or he would already know from her confused expression.

“No. It's a flow of magical energy, different from what I'm used to. It feels almost as if the forest itself is tapping from the ley-line...?” She hypothesizes, trying to make sense of what she feels. **“It obscures my scan. How weird, it feels like the trees and animals themselves block me.”**

Conrad frowns. This **doesn't** look good. **“Carrot?”** he calls out to the other girl inside the wagon.

“No sounds. They’ve all stopped, swallowed by the mist. It feels so weird, it’s like I can’t hear anymore.”

That would explain the unease underlying her words. For a leporid, it has to feel odd to have practically complete silence all around.

“Selena?!” he calls out again, this time to the rear wagon out of sight, covered in fog.

The girl can only faintly hear his voice. It’s like he calls from very far away, even if the rope connects them and they should be pretty close. She holds the reins of the second wagon, to keep the horses going. Taking a quick look inside the wagon, she can spot the back of Adrian. He sits at the rear, carefully observing the path behind them while holding a simplistic tool, made out of sticks and rope, letting it slide over the ground. An instrument to help measure their path.

He lifts a thumb up towards Selena, and she relays the message to Conrad, yelling as loud as she can.

“We still go in a straight line!”

Picking up Selena’s voice from what seems far away, yet nearby, Conrad can’t wrap his head around it all. None of this makes sense. Even the going straight part is odd. No natural path through woods is ever perfectly straight, often with plenty of bends and turns. Yet, they haven’t passed a single one.

“The fog clears!” Lisette calls out.

Conrad peers as far as he can into the distance. She’s right, it’s thinning out, light of the second wagon’s lanterns behind them visible again. He can even notice the vague shape of Selena waving at him. Did they make it through?! Or...

The wagons come to a stop. The fog has lifted. Right next to Roderik stands a single stick planted in the ground, a piece of cloth hangs on it. The same marker which was placed down before entering the fog.

They’re right back where they started.

*

“What are your thoughts?” he asks Primrose, their third attempt failed. It’s about time to return towards Sakai for the night now.

“It’s definitely a kind of magic, but not an enchantment. I believe it’s a pact, fueled by the local ley-line.”

“A pact? With who? Or what?” Conrad asks. Isn’t a pact some kind of agreement?

“With the forest itself, acting as a medium to draw from the ley-line.”

“And Lisette’s spirits can’t pass either?” They did try the third time, to have her spirits guide them, though the result was the same.

“I’m pretty certain they can pass, but it doesn’t matter if they can or not if we can’t.”

The young man grumbles. Pursuing that option won’t help much either then. What is there left to do? “Do you know how to break a pact?” he asks.

“No, not this type. I’ve never seen it before. Only read about it in an old book. It’s a kind of magic the Alma druids were supposedly good at.”

Which would make sense, but some old book is still vague information from an unreliable source. “You believe the book is trustworthy?”

“It’s the same one that talked about blood magic.”

Well, that turned out to be real. “Let’s stay optimistic then. If that’s Alma magic, it’s confirmed they’re not merely legends.”

“Maybe the Spire has information,” Primrose tries that optimism part, “but...”

Judging from that tacked on part, she doesn’t expect them to have any useful knowledge. A thousand years is simply too long. Whatever little knowledge existed will already be gone without anyone who can practice such magic. Still, it’s an option. Definitely a detour though, so they shouldn’t act too quickly. Expending all options here first is probably best. That will have to be for another day.

“Let’s go back, it’s turning late.”

*

Early night has fallen. Conrad is on his knees before Selena. The girl sits down on all fours, moving her mouth over his cock, one of her hands seeking out her pantyhose to dig

underneath. After today's result, the man could use a measure of stress relief. Thankfully, this girl was happy to provide.

When he closes his pants again, she asks him a question. "Can we really not go past the Misty Woods?" She tries to hide it, how there's plenty of concern in her question. Looks like he wasn't the only one who needed stress relief.

"Don't worry about your sister. I'll make certain she gets there."

Selena doesn't know what the doctors told him, though she's not an idiot. Her sister's worsening condition has not gone unnoticed. Ease appears on her face from his words. That's exactly what she needed to hear. Confirmation everything will be fine.

"Do you think it's my fault?" she asks. "That I should have given her more rest, and not drag her around?"

Conrad reaches for the girl's cheek and brushes it with his thumb. "Don't you worry about that, love. It's definitely *not* your fault. In fact, don't stop taking her to the inner garden at least once every day, okay? It's doing her good."

Selena appears happier already, a burden dropped from her shoulders. Not that she had a reason to feel burdened. The times he sees Luna smile most is when she is shown around by her sister. Taking that away from the girl would not be acceptable.

The man instantly shifts attention, face turned towards the small balcony.

"Something wrong?" Selena asks.

"Nah, nothing," he answers, strapping his sword back to his belt and heading towards the balcony, hand ready to draw at any moment's notice. "Only seeking some fresh air."

He steps outside, subtle breeze chilling his face. No hint of any presence on the balcony. Yet, his hand reaches out for a certain object left behind.

A sealed letter, bearing the marking of a crow.

Conrad opens it and begins to read.

...

The door leading to the balcony is closed.

"Let's go join the others downstairs."

"Now? But I want us to sleep together," Selena mopes, rather spending time on the bed.

“Yes, now,” he suddenly lifts her up like a princess, receiving plenty of laughter in the process. “Sleep is for later tonight.”

Once downstairs, he takes in the room. Lisette and Carrot are eagerly listening to Primrose, explaining more about her past family life in this establishment. Roderik practices swings. Luna sleeps in the neighboring room. Good, they’re all here. Which only leaves Adrian, and as luck has it, the man comes downstairs after a fine round of learning the intricacies of Edelweiss’ hidden beauty spot.

“Adrian, can you keep them company for a while? I feel like stretching my legs outside first.”

The blond man nods, taking up position near the door where he can see both Luna and the others, hand resting on his weapon. Seemingly relaxed, while at the ready. That hand signal Conrad gave him didn’t go unnoticed. It’s one from back in their army days. Whatever he has to do outside, the man expects potential trouble and wants a guard around the children.

...

Conrad heads towards the inner garden, a location described in that letter. A meeting spot with whoever sent it. All battle senses at the ready, heart throbbing in this throat. Every darkened shadow in the garden draws attention as a potential threat.

He comes to a quick stop, a voice addressing him.

“Why so tense? Don’t want to have a good chat? For old times’ sake.”

In front of Conrad stands a man who makes his blood boil with rage.

“Grimald...”

“In person,” the old acquaintance replies.

Conrad prepares to draw his sword.

“Whoa there, hold it,” Grimald gestures to calm down. “I’m not here for a fight, or you would already be dead.”

It’s hard to believe. So that shadow he noticed on the balcony was the creature after all, as Conrad feared. A shadow puppet controlled by Grimald, sent to drop a letter. How did he find them?! And what does he even do here, sending an invitation for some shady meeting? Why didn’t he straight-out attack, like he did at the bandit hideout?

However, the man can't deny feeling relieved a fight might be avoidable. Relieved, and utterly frustrated. That puppet is strong, unbeatable even, for now. But standing in front of Grimald, he has to admit to being completely outmatched. This man or monster, or whatever he is, is a far greater threat than that puppet. Like he could suddenly strike from any corner, any shadow not covered by moonlight.

Grimald opens his mouth. "Certainly, you weren't naive enough to assume I had no idea where you were going?"

Does he talk about their trip to the Misty Woods? Even if he guessed as much, how would he know they stay at the brothel?

"Ah, yes. You are wondering how I know about this place. Of course, you would," Grimald almost seems relaxed. And definitely in a good mood. "It wasn't particularly hard to find out. Remember last time we met? At that den of thieves and robbers?"

Conrad nods, keeping his guard up. Trying not to show any fear, even if hairs all over his body stand tall, listening to Grimald's explanation.

"I didn't kill them all. Plenty of them were out thieving. All I had to do was wait for them to return, and politely ask, one by one. Before slitting their throats."

"Ask them what?" Conrad returns, more meant to keep up appearances of being in control, already figuring out himself how his nemesis managed to track them.

The enigma covered by deadly shadow points to his eyes. "The one with golden eyes. The vulpes. Mages are a rare sight, especially that young. She lived among the bandit group she was a part of. Presumably, one of those thieving thugs would know where the girl is from, right? Any cartel worth their salt knows all about their members' backgrounds. Turns out she lives here, in Sakai. And let's face it, there was no way you wouldn't escort the poor thing back home. You've always been a softy for young, female beauty."

For a short moment, his shadowy presence grows weaker. "Speaking of, how is she doing...?"

"Fine," Conrad tries to brush the conversation away from Primrose with a single word. The fewer his nemesis knows about these girls, the better.

Grimald recomposes himself instantly, darkness all around growing stronger. “Anyway, I noticed you left for the Misty Woods today, fancy that...” His bitter-cold eyes peer deeply into Conrad. “Interested in visiting the Alma druids?”

“We need herbs,” Conrad tries to mask the original intent of his visit, while still remain true. His old acquaintance would no doubt see right through a blatant lie.

“Yes, I’m sure you do. But you also want to know more about us...”

Grimald smiles suddenly, mood improving further as he continues.

“Ah, *good!* I see you’ve still got it. That which made me interested in a young farmer boy so many years ago. You’ve always been a smart-ass, with an eye for detail.”

Conrad curses on the inside. He couldn’t hide his surprise at hearing Grimald’s little hint, feeling like he’s nothing but a toy in the man’s hands.

“About us, you said... You’re not alone?” he no longer has to hide he picked up on that bit of info, so he tries to regain his own composure. Asking a question to try and even the scales of who is in control in this meeting.

However, Grimald simply shrugs his shoulders. “Does that really matter right now? You have other problems first. You can’t acquire the information you seek without meeting the Alma, and you can’t meet the Alma without successfully navigating the Misty Woods.”

“The Alma may not even exist anymore,” Conrad throws out.

“Oh, but they do,” Grimald grins at him. “Would you like to know how to get there? It’s very simple, really. All you need to traverse the Misty Woods is for one of the druids to guide you.”

Simple, if only they hadn’t been seen in over a thousand years.

“But wouldn’t you know it?” he adds with plenty of almost childlike joy. “Rumors go, there just happens to be one around these Hatori lands, somewhere.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Conrad has to ask. None of this makes sense. Why would their enemy reveal information which could harm himself? “You tried to kill us before... Now you help us?”

Grimald lifts a hand in a whimsical motion. “We *did* end our past partnership on a rather tumultuous tone, I’ll admit. And I *may* have tried to brutally savage you like a

guttled pig, fair enough. But you know, situations can change rather **quickly**, and I've come to the conclusion we may both benefit from a cooperative relationship, now and in the nearby future."

"What's in it for you?"

"Ah-ah, relationships are built on trust. And really, what other choice do you actually have?"

Conrad bites his teeth. This scum is right. Chances of successfully navigating those Woods are almost zero. It pains him to admit it, though **it's true**. And there's one other advantage to make a **temporary truce with Grimald**. **They won't have to worry about him** anymore, for the foreseeable future at least. Which could rapidly change as quick as right now if he declines the offer, endangering everyone else inside the brothel. "**So, about that Alma?**" he asks his nemesis.

"Well, you know how I work. My intelligence has always been reliable. And I'm certain you remember, I've never once lied. So, here's a tip. A little bird told me about one of their druids, right here, in vulpes territory. Close to the **capital**."

"Where?"

Grimald waggles a single finger left and right. "**How about you prove your worth? I've given you plenty of information already. I'll even throw in an extra hint**, a favor for a good-old acquaintance. You already have access to *exactly* the right tool you need, so go **find out for yourself**."

The darkness surrounding Grimald grows stronger, part of the man disappearing while he offers his last words for their unexpected meeting.

"One last piece of advice. Once heading beyond the Misty Woods, do *not* return before **finding that which you seek**."

The darkness expands, and moments later Conrad is left with only himself. Still finding it hard to believe what just happened.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 7



A Needle in a Haystack

Morning breaks with the first gentle rays shining through the window. Selena mumbles in her sleep while pulling her leg up, naked thigh appearing from under the sheets. Conrad removes a curl of hair from over her eyes, placing it behind her ear, and grabs the sheets. With a slow tug he pulls them higher to cover the girl.

On his other side lies Carrot, ear twitching. She's awake, albeit without any desire to rise out of bed. Early mornings are not really her specialty. Nestling against Conrad, she seeks **all security provided by his arm around her. It's going to take a couple minutes and** plenty of tingling in his arm to get blood running through it again. Nothing new by now. A price well worth paying for their presence under the same bed sheets.

Lying on his back, the **man's thoughts shift** back towards his unexpected meeting in the garden last night. What to make of it all? Trusting Grimald is not even remotely in the cards. That said, if his words have any chance to be true, they are worth keeping in mind.

And really, what would Grimald even gain from deceiving them? If he truly doesn't want them passing the Woods, simply not show himself would have done the trick. Or just as easy to use his dark sorcery, and take them all out in the middle of the night now he knows where they stay.

Finding information about us...

Us... So that means there are others... Other Faceless, whatever they may be.

That backstabbing weasel is definitely not the type to reveal such tidbits easily by accident. Maybe if he were emotional, but that wasn't the case. As much as it pains Conrad to admit, his nemesis was in complete control of that meeting. No, that was definitely not a slip-up.

Conrad wraps his other arm around Selena, as she is now the one seeking his proximity, helping to shift his thoughts away from brooding.

It doesn't matter if there are more of those puppet masters, for now. Primary focus is to pass the Misty Woods for Luna's sake. And if Grimald's information can help, he'll take it.

They need assistance from an Alma druid, apparently. Or there is simply no way to travel through the enchanted forest. A terrifying reality, with them as mere legends. Yet, they have to be living legends at a minimum, Grimald confirmed as much. And there should be one, somewhere in Hatori territory, even relatively nearby. Regardless, that is still searching for a needle in a haystack. What did he mean, with the right tool already available to Conrad? Why couldn't he simply give the damn answer!

Conrad loosens his pumped-up fist. Typical Grimald. Eager to crawl under everyone's skin, though never without purpose. Whatever plans he has in mind, that part about potentially working together does seem to be meant. That's exactly why he doesn't give his information out like candy. Conrad is being tested. He has to prove his value first, show he isn't dead weight which needs carrying every step of the way. Capable of standing on his own legs.

A tool to find information... Maybe he takes that term not abstract enough? And it's somehow already available...?

That fist closes again, this time in rising excitement. He just may have found the answer...

Carrot noticed her man is awake and crawls higher, seeking his face. Conrad listens when she whispers, then chuckles at what he heard.

“Does she? I’ll take care of it...” Using force in the arm underneath the girl, he lifts Carrot onto his lap. **“Now, where’s my cute, little sex-bunny? Come here you...”**

Carrot grins while rising up, hands resting on his chest while straddling her man with an air of flirtatiousness surrounding her. She found a good source of motivation to get awake and active.

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The door swings open.

“Breakfast is...” Primrose stops speaking, staring absentmindedly at Selena on all fours, doing her own share of that same waking-up routine, with Conrad behind her. Carrot is half-dressed, her bottom still revealed from earlier loving.

The young mage turns away, energy fading in her words. **“I’m sorry! I should have knocked! Breakfast is served...”**

*

“Nobody here yet?” Conrad asks when entering the dining room to grab his morning meal.

Primrose responds startled. **“Ah! I forgot to...”**

Conrad pats her over the head and reaches for a fox ear, carefully rubbing it, causing her eyes to fall half-shut in a sudden trance. **“Don’t worry about it, I’ll go get them.”**

Reason for the girl’s absentmindedness isn’t a mystery to him. Carrot did whisper a good hint earlier in the bedroom. She feels down, under the weather. Saddened her abilities as a mage have not been able to crack the code surrounding the Misty Woods. Her

honor and pride hurt. But most of all, she let her savior down. Or better said, that's what it feels like to her.

No need to search for Adrian and let him know breakfast is served, as he comes downstairs already after spending the night with whoever it was this time. That only leaves two girls.

"Morning, Lisette," her father opens the door to a specific bedroom, greeting the first face who pops into view. He greets the other girl inside right after. **"Morning, Luna."**

The girl coughs while trying to return a greeting. Lisette spent the night with her, since Luna can fall into the occasional coughing fit which is hard to subside. Having someone around to give her water to drink helps a lot.

Conrad places a hand on the sickly girl's forehead, confirming afterwards with his own forehead against hers. **"Somewhat of a fever today? I'll fetch your food. Might as well eat in here."**

"I'll come..." she answers, coughing again, sweat on her body.

It's not chilly in the dining room, so it should be okay... But still... **"Okay, if you wear an extra layer,"** he approves.

The fever isn't very high, so best to keep her warm for now. It will assist her mental comfort as well, to be surrounded by her friends, sharing a meal together. She knows her own body well enough. No doubt, Luna figured out her condition is worsening. Preventing her mind from dwelling on negative thoughts is important to keep her healthy for as long as possible.

While the girl prepares herself to crawl out of bed, Conrad strikes a conversation with his daughter, giving her a pat on the back.

"I'm sorry we haven't had a lot of time together lately."

"M-hmm, that's okay," she replies.

"No, it's not. Sadly, events haven't been very kind to us. You know, with the running away from a shadow monster, and the bandit parts. Not exactly standard family business." And now they're in a hurry to go past the Woods, for Luna's sake. Yet another cause which interrupts their private time.

“Maybe I should act more like Carrot and Selena,” Lisette sticks her tongue out with a light teasing.

Conrad rubs his knuckles over her head. “Who raised you to be so cheeky, eh?!”

Lisette tries to cover her head while laughing out loud. “I got it from Mama and Papa!”

The knuckles calm down and turn to a gentle rubbing. “Once we get through the Woods, we should have more time. I’ll make damn certain to reserve some for us, okay?”

Now that a sort of temporary truce has been established with Grimald, he certainly hopes that to be the case. So both of them can finally spend time as father and daughter should.

*

With their meal finished, only Primrose and her grandfather are left with Conrad in the dining area. As hosts, it would be bad courtesy to leave any time sooner.

“But I want to go to Eralthyr with them!” Primrose yells in anger at her grandfather.

“I would prefer you stay here!” her grandfather responds.

“Hm!” she turns around on the spot and quickly paces out of the room.

Conrad doesn’t really know what to say. It’s not his place to step into their family affairs. This topic sure turned unexpectedly sour.

The old man shakes his head while sinking lower onto his seat. “Why does she have to resemble her mother so much? One of these days she’ll run off on her own again!”

His guest has to resist making a remark Primrose’s father doesn’t escape scrutiny either. Didn’t he run off as well? She might have that part of her character from both parents. “Honestly, I doubt there’s much risk in going to Eralthyr,” he cautiously states his opinion.

Legends about the druids don’t really describe them as violent, and relations before they sealed themselves off are mentioned as amicable. If she’s going to run off anyway, isn’t she safer with their group from the very start? Though biggest reason for feeling secure in his assessment reaching Eralthyr safely is well within their reach, is his

unexpected meeting with Grimald. He made it seem like a done deal if only they could reach past the Woods.

“I know,” the old man grumbles. “And I’m not that bothered about her seeking to travel. But it’s such a waste she won’t take up the business right away. I’m not growing any younger here.”

From the conversation which happened right before her outburst of anger, she intends to take the business, accepting the reasons Conrad once stated. Though not before her savior accomplished his goals. Her sentiment is appreciated, yet that’s admittedly kind of vague as a time-span. And her grandfather is right. He’s not exactly a young man anymore. What would happen to this place if he bites the dust tomorrow?

“Won’t she inherit the business?” Conrad asks about the worst-case scenario.

“Under normal conditions, she should. But I don’t trust the city’s administration office for a single hair. If I’m gone, they will definitely try and steal ownership through whatever means possible. Without the right documents already in order, they’ll have an easy time.”

Conrad can’t deny those words. Governmental offices are definitely bloated and corrupt. It would be a miracle if they wouldn’t jump collectively on the opportunity to embezzle a young, naive girl out of her inheritance. “What if I give you a hand?” he proposes.

*

Primrose mopes around near the inner garden, plopping herself down on a bench, pouting at all frustrations. What a stupid day. First she forgot to knock, interrupting Conrad during his... private time. Then she forgets her duties. And that stupid argument with her grandfather to top it all off. She agreed to take the business already, so why does it have to be so sudden?! It only risks interfering with her trip to the Alma capital. No matter what he says, she will follow Conrad! Period!

Not like her grandfather will die any day soon... Right? Sure, he's growing old, but... He has ten more years in him, at a bare minimum! No, she refuses to even consider that possibility. It just can't happen!

The girl reaches for her ears and pulls at them, as if she tries to cover her face with them, sighing.

This morning... Why did that sight of Selena and Carrot doing adult things with Conrad make her so miffed? She has known about their relationship long enough now. And as the granddaughter of the world's largest luxury-brothel owner, she definitely has a good idea what goes on between those three, as if this morning wasn't obvious enough.

"Grrr..." she pulls harder on her ears, letting out her frustration in a scowl. *Again* this morning fails to leave her thoughts.

What do they have that she doesn't?! Is it her tits? Are they too big? He doesn't like them, or finds them ugly even? Did she misunderstand, and *that's* why he often stares at them? Put off? If only she wasn't so damn useless! Maybe then he would notice her.

"Hey there," a voice makes her almost jump up.

Hands let go of her ears, while Primrose pretends nothing bothered her.

Conrad sits down beside the young mage, not in need to say a word, as she already states her determination, some anger still lingering in it.

"I *will* go to Eralthyr."

The man holds a hand above his eyebrows, peering into the blue sky, shielding his vision from an overabundance of sunlight. "I wonder what the sky looks like from the other side of those Woods."

She finally faces up, towards the same blue sky.

"There, much better," he turns to Primrose. "That's a much cuter face now it's covered in sunlight, than that angry, sullen frown from earlier."

Primrose turns her head away again, complicated feelings rumbling inside. Eyes suddenly widen at the words Conrad grants her.

"You can come along. Don't worry. I won't ever leave you behind."

With the swiftness of a fox, her neck turns towards Conrad, hair decoration clanging loud. Golden eyes shine bright once more, while the tips of her ears sharpen towards the sky. “I can?!”

“Yup, already received permission from your grandfather.”

Not that he has much of another choice than to take them all along. Under normal circumstances, those children are far better off staying safe here with her grandfather. However, Grimald just came back into the picture... There may be a truce between them, it won't last forever. And that man wouldn't think twice about backstabbing Conrad. Now his nemesis knows where these girls are, it's too dangerous to keep them far from his side. Grimald might use them as hostage, or worse...

“You can come, on one condition.”

“What?!” she almost yells in excitement, willing to do anything.

“You take over the business.”

She frowns at his words. “I will, eventually. Grandpa can still take care of everything for now.”

Conrad wants to reply with “For now”, though stops himself in time. She will not want to hear that. Maybe he misunderstood part of the reason why she seeks to delay taking over the business? If the old man signs over his life-time occupation, it's like he signs his impending death warrant from age. Is *that* what bothers her?

“Eh!?” a little yelp leaves Primrose when she can feel Conrad's arm wrap around her, palm dropping down on her bared shoulder.

“You're such a sweetie, know that?”

Her cheeks turn all red. What is he saying?! Why now of all times?! What brought this on?

“You were going to do those enchantments for us, right?” he asks.

She nods, still embarrassed by his unexpected touch.

“You will need ingredients, yes?”

“Yeah...?” she has no idea where he's going with this. Charging the required gems to place the enchantments will need specific components for the intended purpose. Still, why bring the enchantments up now? She'll get them done. That was a promise.

“Those ingredients must be quite expensive, I’m sure. It’s great fortune you have the business to take as your own. I mean, you’re not the type to mooch of your grandfather’s finances, right? But if the business is yours... They are *your* finances, to do with as you please.”

Primrose has no idea what to reply. She can’t live up to his expectations. What is he saying, mooching?! Grandfather always paid for her. The fee for the Spire, her clothes, her staff and dagger...

The girl’s face turns redder by the second, now from shame. She was going to rely on him to pay for those ingredients.

“There’s also a favor I have to ask from the boss of this place,” Conrad isn’t finished yet. “An extremely important one, crucial for our journey. Ah, but I guess... I shouldn’t really ask that favor of you. Since you’re not yet the owner.”

“I’ll sign it!” Golden eyes peer right at him, upper body turned to face Conrad.

After five seconds, embarrassment settles in due to her sudden outburst, realizing simultaneously she squeezes her rack into Conrad. Quickly turning away again, face turned to the ground. While still reaffirming her earlier words, only now spoken softly.

“I’ll sign... So, I can help.”

*

The old man has no idea what kind of magic was used on his granddaughter, yet here she is, ready to sign an official piece of paper. The girl writes down her actual name, as one of few who can read and write, courtesy of her studies at the Spire. Then she hands the quill over to Conrad.

“You certain about this?” he asks both the new owner of the brothel, and the previous one.

“Absolutely,” the old man replies. “She needs a custodian at her current age, officially speaking. At first, I had Passiflora in mind, but Primrose has her own idea on who it should be. I don’t particularly mind her choice.”

Conrad takes the quill and signs the paper. Effectively becoming executive manager of this place, working right underneath Primrose. Even if he can make most decisions until she is a couple years older. Though Conrad will simply let the previous owner run things for now.

The old man smiles satisfied when observing the signed paper. **“Now I can finally rest assured our business will live on, and both our employees and my little Rose have a home.”**

“Which means, I can travel now?” she asks.

“Yes, you have my permission.”

A squeal of youthful joy fills the room.

“I heard you had a request?” the old man asks of Conrad.

“Indeed, I do,” he turns to Primrose, feeling obligated to ask her, even if technically he can take care of it himself now. **“I’ve picked up rumors from a reliable source an Alma is present, somewhere in the neighboring areas.”**

“Hoh?” the old man wonders, curiosity peaking as he listens in on the request. Such rumors existed before. They always turned out false. This young man seems certain though, that his source can be trusted.

“The problem is, I don’t know specifics, where exactly this rumored druid would be. Even narrowing down locations would be a great help. And I thought...”

The old man finishes for Conrad. **“...The girls who work here could be of help?”**

Conrad is pleased to hear no further explanation is necessary. It also makes him more certain his idea will work. **Primrose’s grandfather knows this business better** than any of them. If he concluded the same already, this plan is a confirmed good idea.

With all traffic coming and going every moment of the day, with all secrets entrusted in the loving embrace of a woman, there’s no better place to acquire information on just about any topic. This entire building and what it means is the very tool Grimald hinted at. The only place left in the entire city and far beyond where people gather to gossip and dare to speak their mind.

“I’ll have it arranged!” Primrose pats her own chest in swelling pride.

“We’re counting on you,” he winks at her.

*

“Ow!” Roderik takes another hit from the training sword.

“Still too eager. And hide those expressions! I can read your intent from here all the way to Bournesse.”

Roderik’s attention suddenly shifts, all pain from a new bump on his head instantly forgotten. Olive and Pepper arrived, pushing a small cart with weapons, accompanied by Primrose.

“We brought what you requested, Master,” Olive addresses one of her new bosses.

Conrad examines the weapons closely, checking their quality.

“All brand new,” she clarifies.

He picks out a short-sword and draws it from its sheath. Fine, shiny metal reflects sunlight on his face. “Roderik!” he calls out to his apprentice, placing the weapon back in its protective cover.

The boy comes closer with a curious stare, observing the weapons. He doesn’t dare ask, but could it be...?

“Here, a gift. I picked this one out myself.”

Roderik can’t believe his eyes. It really *is* true! He’s acquiring his first real weapon. Yet another step in becoming a man! Hands hesitate to reach for the sword, like he’s afraid it will get snatched away with a jeer.

Conrad doesn’t let go once his apprentice grabs the weapon, holding it in place. “No showing off, no swinging it around at random, don’t let it go unmaintained. You handle it with respect, as befitting a Champion’s son.”

Realizing a nod isn’t enough, as the man still doesn’t let go, Roderik picks up his confidence. “I’ll treat it with respect!”

“Good, I expect nothing less,” the weapon is handed over. Conrad calls out for the others. “Girls! Come here for a moment.”

Selena is the first to come running energetically, Carrot and Lisette following.

“I would like you all to pick something out. What you believe suits you best.”

They should all acquire a means to defend themselves. That bandit adventure with Carrot taught him as much. There **shouldn't** be any such thugs around in the Misty Woods, and probably beyond, yet **you never know**. Wild animals won't be used to seeing people, which makes them unpredictable. Most likely reaction will be to shy away. Even so, to **expect reason from an animal is a fool's errand**. If an outlier decides to attack, a measure of basic training and a sharp blade will take care of it.

"From today onward, you all join Roderik's training with your chosen weapon. So choose wisely. Adrian will assist me."

He asked for the smallest versions, and not too hard to acquire basic training on. Short spears, daggers, and so on.

"Oh! Oh! I'll take this!" Selena is the first to grab a weapon, settling on a spear. **It's the shortest available**. About right for her size.

"Alright, a fine choice. But don't wave it around. I'll take it over now and have it prepared. You'll be trained in basics before receiving the actual weapon first." Besides, there's another task which **needs doing with their chosen weapons**. That's why Primrose is here, as she doesn't need one, already having her staff and dagger.

Carrot reaches for a dagger. Not too large, not too small. Where Selena will have range advantage, this will offer fast and flexible swipes and jabs. They should work well together. Might be a good idea to give them team lessons.

Lisette is the last to choose a weapon. Luna isn't around, resting to recover from her fever. She's not really in a condition to fight regardless.

Conrad's daughter technically has her spirits she can use. Even so, to have a competent physical weapon is probably a good idea. His daughter is far from an expert at using her spirits, and **can't keep them in action** for very long either. That one trip through the woods where she tried to use one for guidance was pretty draining on her.

She picks up a small bow and quiver. Far from a battle bow, as she wouldn't have the strength at all to draw one. **It's a children's hunting-** initiation bow. It will still be heavy for her untrained arms, though Primrose said she can make it lighter with an enchantment, so that shouldn't be a problem. It doesn't have nearly enough power to

take down even leather armor, or a thick hide, though it will be enough against small animals or even to scare off something the size of a wolf.

...

Primrose joins Conrad as he carries the chosen weapons to a prepared room.

“You sure you have enough ingredients?” he asks.

“For most, yes. But not for the arrows yet. Passiflora already placed an order.”

“The arrows too? I thought you would enchant only the bow?”

“I’ll add the same enchantment to the arrows as I’ll put on your weapons.”

If Conrad understood her explanation she gave earlier, she will give these weapons a mixture of increased sharpness and sturdiness. Except for the bow, which will be made easier to draw.

“For reference, how sharp and sturdy can I expect?” he definitely grows curious.

Primrose tilts her head, thinking how to describe the intended outcome of her enchantments best.

“Should be able to cut through a similar weapon that is not enchanted.”

Conrad whistles, nothing less than impressed. “Damn, that’s a lot more than I expected.”

“Enchantments are my specialty,” Primrose smiles, though her fireballs aren’t exactly weak, and that dagger is pretty impressive too. A thought Conrad quickly corrects, as that dagger probably counts as an enchantment.

“Oh, but the more intensively you use it, the faster the enchantment wears off,” the mage adds as a warning.

And it will return back to a normal weapon. Learning to estimate how long the enchantment lasts will be crucial to get the best out of them, and not be caught with one’s pants down. Activating the enchantment is apparently done by the user’s own choice. By placing their thumb on a designated part of their weapon. That activation sequence is the part she needed to know their element for. Once activated, there’s no shutting it down anymore, and the enchantment will quickly wear down until reapplied.

“Are they hard to reapply?” Conrad asks about another crucial bit of information.

“No, about an evening to do them all. If I have the ingredients.”

That last part is the key. When they will be out there on their trip, additional supply won't be easy to acquire. Better bring a good stock for once they manage to get through the Woods.

“Alright then. I'll bring Roderik's sword after his afternoon training session is done, together with mine and Adrian's.”

*

Two weeks passed. Conrad heads to Primrose's room, because she asked for him. Along the way he passes Carrot's room, with the sliding door open.

“What are you doing?” he stops in front of the door, curiously observing the leporid girl bent over her dagger. Some kind of large leaf is held in her hand.

“I'm applying poison.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Conrad wants to quickly stop her. The girls received training these last two weeks, but handling deadly, poisoned weapons is a bridge too far.

“It's not deadly, only creates dizziness and disorientation,” Carrot clarifies.

“Where did you learn that stuff?”

“The bandits often used various types of poison on their weapons. Anything that could give them an edge. And applying it was part of my job, whenever I was not out.”

“You never cut yourself with it?”

“This type? Once. It felt like I was floating through the sky, looking at my own body while the earth was spinning around.”

Maybe it's not such a bad idea, if not lethal. She does seem informed, and there's no reason to disbelief she has experience handling such blades. Definitely would be an added tool available.

“I once cut myself on a different type of poison. I couldn't move for two hours, not even blink! That was so uncomfortable. My eyes were painfully dry afterwards, they itched for the entire day.”

“Uh, yeah. Let's stick with the dizziness ones, okay?”

Conrad is quite relieved to see her nod.

...

As he passes the inner court, Lisette practices with her bow while Selena spars with Adrian. Luna carefully watches them while seated on a bench.

“How you doing today?” he sits down next to Luna.

“Fine...”

There’s not much vigor in her words. And skin-tone is paler recently. The doctors examined her again yesterday, and **the girl’s** illness worsens more rapidly than expected. Luna never brings it up herself, though she definitely knows the outcome **doesn’t** look good.

“Don’t worry about it. We’re tracing the whereabouts of one of the Alma right now. **Their medicine will do the trick.**”

At least, he hopes it will. For now, those words and the small amount of comfort they provide will have to do.

Selena yells energetically at her sister while lunging forward during her training session “**Look, Luna! I’m a hero now! Watch me beat him!**”

Her short spear is **instantly slid aside by Adrian’s skilled counter, wrapping his arm** underneath her waist to lift Selena up on his shoulder. “Heroes should pay attention, or they get **manhandled.**”

Selena feigns being upset and laughs while bashing him on the back with her fists, kicking both feet around.

Her sister smiles at first, then laughs out loud. Conrad **doesn’t hold** himself in and enjoys a good laugh as well.

He noticed from that quick glimpse Selena gave to the bench. Her outburst of heroism was never meant to be a success in a sense of combat. Yet, it was a success in its actual goal. She knew Adrian would counter her easily, and give a reprimand for getting distracted and overconfident. The man understood as much as Conrad what his sparring partner tried to do. So he made that reprimand one which supports the girl in her simple yet praiseworthy goal.

To offer her sister a good laugh.

Conrad stands up, satisfied to see Luna smile, and heads towards her manhandled sister. **“You’re doing great,”** he praises Selena. **“Keep it up and someday you really will be a hero.”** He gives the girl a hug after Adrian put her down, while whispering words only meant for her. **“I love you for being such a good, older sister, but never rush into danger, okay? Don’t hesitate to count on us.”**

Her dedication to family is worthy of the greatest respect, though it comes with added risks. She might throw herself into a bad situation prematurely, all to try and protect her sister. **Finding the right balance is key. Keeping her aware she doesn’t stand alone can help with such.**

After sharing a kiss with Selena, he lets her continue training, changing focus to Lisette.

His daughter draws her bow and takes aim. After waiting for a short while, the arrow zooms to a **targeting rose. It’s not a bullseye**, actually as far removed as can be, the outer ring. Regardless, she hits **the target at a decent distance. That’s relatively quick progress.**

Lisette picks up another arrow, stopped by her father before she can place it.

“Let me take a look…” He grabs the arrow and holds it close to his eye, like using it as a guiding tool. **“Yeah, not this one. It’s bent.”**

Fine to use a less than perfect arrow once skills are developed, though **not while she’s** still in early training. It will only negatively affect her predictive ability and resulting aim.

As she places the next arrow, Lisette’s father takes place behind her, holding his own hands over hers.

“You’re holding the bow a little too much to the front. More like this, at the side and close to your body. Don’t try and place your face closer to compensate for the change in posture. You’ll only hit your cheek, ear or nose with the string. That’s going to hurt.”

After adjusting her posture, she shoots. The outer ring takes the arrow again.

“Excellent! Adjusted posture and you still hit the same spot. You’ll quickly improve.”

Though her arms need rest. **Even if it’s enchanted**, and the bow is originally meant for young boys, she trained for a while now. That eased draw weight still begins to bear down.

After giving her a pat, he finally moves on towards Primrose's room. Before she roasts his ass with a fireball for being late. That girl can be more moody and filled with spirit than he gave her credit for at first.

*

Primrose instantly forgets her frustrations at Conrad taking so long to get here. Dashing up to him with twinkles in her eyes. "I've got news!"

"Oh? What about?"

Olive enters the room, as she is the one who informed Primrose. "One of our girls has information on what you requested, Master."

When Conrad wants to dash out himself, immediately heading towards wherever that information may be, Olive calms him down with her typical kind voice.

"I already asked all details. She inquired about rumors from our guests, as was instructed of our personnel, and picked up on a specific location. I have it marked down."

*

The wagons arrive at a neighboring village. It's about four hours from here to Sakai, right next to the Misty Woods. Further along than where they had their failed attempts to get through. As rumors go, children here play with a druid. Or so those children themselves say. The adults living here don't believe a single word of it, for understandable reasons. No matter, as it's still a lead. After that meeting with Grimald, such rumors cannot be ignored.

"Aren't you worried about your kids playing in the Woods?" Conrad asks one of the locals.

"No, why would we? They know not to go too deep, and to stay away from the mist." They have lived here for the entirety of their lives. To them, it's just a normal wood, only with a layer of mystique to it. For whoever grew up here, avoiding the mist is about as casual an advice as not going out at night.

“Have you heard about there being an Alma around?”

The man he talks to laughs out loud. “Hah, that children’s tale? Yeah, the kids mentioned it before. They’re only fooling around. Wouldn’t surprise me if they come home saying they fought giants and dragons this time.”

Conrad laughs it off. Better not to appear like a lunatic to these people. Not like he’s going to acquire much more out of this guy. Besides, he has a reliable backup plan for when none of the villagers are of any help.

...

They asked some children, hoping those would be more talk-active. Some couldn’t keep their mouth shut and confirmed the rumors, yet none were willing to give a location or lead them there. They probably made a promise not to.

He flicks his tongue. Children... Can’t keep a secret worth their lives, and yet at times like these, you can’t get anything useful out of them. Why do they have to be such finicky creatures?

Time for that backup plan.

“Lisette, can you check the outskirts of the forest?”

“Sure.”

Who needs chatty mouths when you’ve got an experienced tracker in your midst?

...

“I’ve found a track,” Lisette beckons his attention.

“You sure it isn’t from villagers heading in here for wood?” Adrian asks. These footsteps she points at are too small for adults, though they could merely be from boys sent out to gather firewood. Not exactly a rare practice. Once twelve, they’re supposed to help their family.

“Nah, unlikely,” Conrad answers. “The trees around here are pristine.” Actually, he hasn’t seen a single chopped tree or branch. Even picking up fallen wood is unlikely to occur in this part of the Woods. From what he heard during his questioning round, the villagers don’t come here often. “Look,” he points to an aging plate, standing on a makeshift stone altar.

Adrian nods in understanding. He gets **the message. That's an offering plate.** A good indicator locals hold the forest in high enough respect they **wouldn't** want to anger it.

*

It doesn't take Lisette much effort to follow the tracks. Even Conrad doesn't have that hard of a time to spot them.

"I sense something..." Primrose stops walking.

Selena instantly readies her spear at those words, preparing for conflict, joined by Roderik as he draws his sword. Not that Conrad expects any trouble. If children play in here, it can't be a very dangerous place.

"You certain it's not the mist barrier?" he asks.

"No, it's similar in origin, but different. Much smaller."

...

Following the trail for another five minutes, the group comes to a sudden halt. A small river runs through the woods, with an open area in the forest nearby. The footsteps lead right to this spot. Right where bright, blue eyes of a young girl stare at them, startled.

"Eh? How...?" she wonders out loud.

Conrad raises his hands in a cautious motion, showing he's not armed. **"Don't worry, I only wish to talk. Please, it's important."**

She's definitely the person they look for. This blonde girl is not from the lands of man, and while she has different ears, they are not like any of the known tribes. In addition, **this girl seems to lack a tail, though it's hard to see with that brown coat she wears.** Definitely not from Uskandar either, with her skin color a complete contrast to their ashen-blue. She's even paler than Luna, almost at the level of clean snow. It actually feels like she's an ethereal ghost wandering the woods. However, that tone is far too natural on her to be a ghost, or that paleness to be a symptom of sickness.

"What is it?" she asks cautiously, **taking a step behind.** Feels like she could run away at any moment, blue eyes flicking around to try and spot her surroundings, see if any others are around, trying to ambush her.

The girl's ears are unlike anything seen before. They have an animal vibe, like the hatori, while not the furry kind. They're covered in a soft and fine plumage, very much resembling a tiny set of foldable wings. White for the most part, with outer tips turning a flaxen color. She spreads them wider, trying to increase her hearing.

"There are two requests I would like to ask," Conrad comes to a stop, keeping his distance to make her more comfortable, gesturing the others to do the same. "The first is to help a sick friend."

The girl stops walking backwards, still keenly aware of her surroundings, slowly beginning to feel more at ease. "Sick?" she asks, attention caught by that term.

"Yes," Conrad places an arm around Selena. "This girl's sister, Luna. She has an illness we cannot cure. The Alma are rumored to be great healers, so... We were hoping..."

The mysterious girl's blue eyes carefully observe Selena, reading her body language, detecting a mixture of concern and hope from her. "What kind of illness?"

"It's some kind of infection on her lungs. She has to cough a lot, and she builds up moist. Her lungs are in bad shape from an earlier disease. Can you help her? Or maybe lead us to someone who can help?"

The girl turns her head slightly sideways, pondering.

"Conrad..." Adrian whispers the man's name.

He nods, aware of the same issue Adrian noticed. There's something out there, in the woods, nearby. Peering at them, observing closely, ready to strike at a moment's notice. He has seen the leaves of a nearby bush move, heard the soft cracking of another presence. Even more than that, he can sense it. This girl is not alone, and they find themselves at an unseen stand-off with whatever is out there.

For now, he gestures Adrian to hold his position. Best not to antagonize through unexpected movement. The others aren't aware of it yet, no need to startle them either.

The girl's ears seem to relax more. She concluded there are no others around. Only these strangers at her front. Tiny wings as ears close halfway, not dropping their full guard yet, partially hiding behind her long and straight, light-blond hair.

"To help...?" she repeats what is asked of her. "I cannot make promises."

Conrad is unable to hide tension dropping from his body, replaced by sudden excitement. “But you can try?!” he asks. That’s all he can ask for, and if he understands her spoken words right, that appears to be what she implies.

“Yes...” she speaks soft. “If you bring her to me.”

“She’s back home,” the man explains. “We will bring her here, if you prefer.”

The girl nods, clearly not desiring to leave these woods. “And that other reason?” she asks, remembering this strange man described two reasons why he sought her in these woods.

“We would like to pass the Misty Woods.”

This time, she quickly shakes her head, blonde hair flowing like a curtain left and right. “I will not go back,” she answers determined.

“Okay,” Conrad tries not to upset her. “We can drop that topic for now. Luna’s health is most important.”

The mood eases. That feeling of being watched fades, as whatever hides out there doesn’t feel hostile anymore.

“So, we can return tomorrow with Luna, and you will be here?” he seeks confirmation.

“Yes, I will be here.”

“Then we will return, tomorrow, around the same time. That’s a promise.”

“Promise,” the girl agrees.

It would be too late to go back and return with Luna. It’s too long of a trip to cross it another two times today. They would have to stay here for the night. That would be a bad idea with a sickly girl. There’s plenty of time if they leave early tomorrow.

“I’m Conrad,” he introduces himself, letting the others give their names afterwards.

“Eris. Eris of House Faynore,” the girl states her own name.

“Alright, Eris. We will leave then. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

*

Luna coughs while Conrad carries her through the Woods. Today, they visit that druid girl again, hoping she can offer help. The thought she might not even be around anymore is one which doesn't register. She promised to be there, so she will. And any help won't come too soon. Luna has a fever again. It's happening more and more often. Letting her walk across this terrain on her own strength would no longer be possible.

Finding the same spot again isn't very hard. With their small group, there are plenty of tracks remaining. Should be any moment now they reach the same location as yesterday, where Eris should be waiting.

"I can feel it again," Primrose tugs at his maw.

That's a good start already. What magic or whatever was here yesterday is still present. Not that they have a clue what it's for, though it doesn't really matter. No harm befell them last time. They can always ask about it once they're more comfortable around each other.

...

Conrad stops.

There she is, Eris. Patiently waiting for them, still wearing that same brown coat. A part of her is surprised they actually returned. She notices the young girl on Conrad's back, more coughs filling the air.

"Please, place her down here," she instructs as gentle and soft-spoken as the world's kindest nurse.

Eris prepared a bed of moss and leaves, covering a fine turf underground. Selena and Carrot place down one of the dire-wolf furs on top, making it all very soft and warm.

"She has a fever," Conrad explains while placing down Luna.

The Alma girl overcomes her cautious attitude to step closer. She doesn't seem as worried anymore as yesterday.

"I'll examine her now," she speaks, sitting down on her knees before Luna, placing a hand on the patient's chest. Another hand reaches down onto the ground itself, seeking direct contact with the earth next to the fur. Then she closes her blue eyes.

"Whoa..." Primrose takes a step closer, ears standing tall in curiosity.

Conrad instantly understands the source of her curiosity. Eris uses a kind of magic. Probably the same type Primrose only read about in an old book. Little vines grow at rapid pace out of the earth, surrounding the girl's hand where she touched the ground, crawling up along her arm. Meanwhile, her other hand held over Luna's chest seems to turn radiant like the sun, shining a warm light.

Eris' eyes open again, bright blue shining more vivid, fueled with supernatural energy. She looks at Luna, as if she peers right through her. Sight gliding over her body, focusing on the girl's lungs. Eventually, the light fades and the vines wither.

"The illness took strong root. A week or two longer and it would have been too late."

"You can cure her?!" Conrad concludes from her words.

"Yes, I can. Though it won't be easy. I will need assistance."

"If you want another doctor, I can pay for any you want."

The girl shakes her head, because he understood her message wrong. "It's not another healer I need, but a warrior."

Conrad can only feel confusion. How would that help? What needs fighting?

"I'll explain while gathering ingredients. I would like you to come along."

Eris first turns to the worried Selena, doing what a doctor should do. Treat every patient, even those who suffer not in body, but in heart. Spoken in a humble tone, with complete confidence emitting from her every being like a saintly aura. "Don't worry. Your sister will be healed. I'll see to it. Promise."

Eris' ears make a quick flap of their wings when Selena energetically grabs the girl's hand, thanking her. They promptly prepare to head out in search of ingredients. Conrad, Primrose and Carrot will accompany her to help carry and search, while the others stay behind, Selena naturally right at the side of her sister.

"Okay then, let's pick up a guarding spot," Adrian taps Roderik's shoulder.

"That won't be necessary," Eris addresses him, followed by a whistle, faint while far-reaching.

It doesn't take long for a response to occur. That which observed them closely yesterday, protecting the alma girl as she made the Woods her home. A pair of wolves

make their presence known, aware of their surroundings, though not showing any aggression. On the other side, a large bear pokes its nose past a shrubbery.

“There’s no need to fear them. They will keep watch over our patient while I’m gone. Feel free to be at ease.”

...

As they walk through the Woods, Conrad finally has enough time and peace of mind to take a good look at their newest acquaintance. What a mysterious girl. Magic, skilled healer, and holding a strange bond with nature. Well-spoken, yet subdued and in a controlled manner, holding a tender voice like a salve applied straight to the soul. Gorgeous, with hair perfectly maintained and not a speck of dust or dirt anywhere. Not on her clothes, not on her snowy-pale skin, and not in that golden hair. Nothing short of a miracle in such a raw environment. With a constant refined elegance surrounding her. As if she’s a mature court lady in a child’s body. How old would she even be? He knows nothing about her people, other than them being druids and healers. Even their lifespan is a mystery.

“How old are you?” he asks straight out.

“I am twelve rotations.”

Conrad never heard of that term before, though she appears to be twelve. That’s about as old as she looks, physically, even if she appears so mature in mannerisms.

With the ice broken, Primrose grabs her chance and outs her own curiosity. “That magic earlier, you were scanning her?”

Eris nods. “Our style of magic is highly attuned to nature. That’s why we need close contact with the essence of nature flowing through the earth. Usually by touching the ground. A tree would work too, if its roots dig deep.”

“What kind of enchantment do you use?” the vulpes girl asks.

“I don’t use any. I asked the Woods to aid me.”

Primrose’s eyes sparkle at new knowledge, any remaining barrier between the two instantly gone. “Is it like tapping from a ley-line?! It feels similar to tapping from a ley-line!”

Eris smiles at her enthusiasm. “Yes, it’s very similar. We form a connection, a pact, with a local medium such as the forest itself. That’s how we can tap power, as you call it.” Though she’ll have to disappoint Primrose, since only the gifted ones among her kind are capable of forming such a pact.

Disappointment **doesn’t** last long, as the mage already tries to satiate more of her curiosity. “I sensed something when getting close to where you live. What was that?”

Eris thinks for a couple seconds before answering. “Oh, that... It’s to help protect my home from intruders.”

“But we got through?” Conrad asks confused.

“Yes, that was a surprise to see. It’s a barrier, in case someone comes looking for me. Anyone who holds ulterior or deceitful motives will feel a desire to simply give up the search and return home.”

It sounds very much like the barrier covering the Misty Woods itself, probably a similar pact behind it. Only much smaller scale, covering the immediate area where she stays. Children who come to play with her can pass through, as their hearts will not be filled with such ulterior motives. However, most adults trying to follow rumors about an Alma would likely end up returning empty-handed.

Conrad concludes that must be why she was so startled to see them yesterday. Yet, it’s also why she feels a lot more at ease today, now that initial surprise has worn off. The very nature of that barrier means she can trust what these unknown adults were saying and asking for.

“It requires a lot of concentration and skill, and can only be maintained where ley-lines are exceptionally strong, such as in this wood.”

“So uh, what do you need a warrior for?” Conrad brings the topic back to the reason behind their visit.

“A hunt for the last ingredient,” she answers, bending her legs to pick up an object. “This is the first ingredient.” She shows a type of dotted mushroom to them.

“Eh? That’s highly poisonous,” Carrot now opens her mouth.

“Oh, you know this type?” Eris asks, visibly impressed. “It’s a rare mushroom.”

“Yeah, I know it. We... uh... Bad people used it for doing bad things.”

Considering the disorienting poison she applied to her dagger, Carrot's knowledge probably comes from her time among the bandits. Yet another type of poison she had to work with.

"It's very deadly," Carrot shows off her knowledge, scoring more respect from Eris.

"It is, indeed. More importantly, this mushroom is also a part of the cure we need. In fact, it's the main component which will rid the patient of her illness."

"Won't it harm Luna?" Conrad asks.

"If given without precaution, yes. It will claim her life without fail." She bends through her legs again, to pick up something else. "Which is why we need this. The second ingredient."

Carrot seems disappointed she has no idea what that plant is. No wonder, as it's not a poison.

"This plant will neutralize the poison of the mushroom, removing the harmful effect on the girl, while retaining its effect on the illness."

"Huh?" Carrots tilts her head. "I never heard of that specific poison having an antidote?" And the bandits certainly always kept antidotes around.

Eris already explains why that's not common knowledge, even among experts in poisonous materials. "That's because it takes time to neutralize the mushroom's poison. And the victim never has that much time. Before the antidote can work, it's already too late."

"Which is why we need a third ingredient?" Conrad guesses.

Eris smiles at him, indicating a correct answer. And that ingredient, is also where she needs a warrior.

*

Only one mushroom was needed, though several of the plants. With her helping hands carrying those, Eris returns to her hidden base in the woods.

"As for the last ingredient, it's a specific kind of venom."

This cure sounds more and more dangerous. But with Luna's condition, there's not much other option than to trust in this beautiful yet strange girl, as she clarifies what type of substance is sought after.

"The venom of a cockatrice."

"Wha... those things are real?!" Adrian mumbles in disbelief.

Conrad has to agree, it's hard to believe. He heard of a cockatrice before, but never seen one. They only appeared in stories. Aren't such creatures mere legends?

Then again... Such a legend stands before them.

"Where would we find one?" he asks.

"You are in luck," Eris replies. "There's a cockatrice nest deeper inside these Woods, close to the barrier, yet still within reach from this side. They are more common on the other side."

"Aren't those animals supposed to be really dangerous?" Conrad asks, instantly backed up by Adrian.

"Yeah, I've heard stories about them turning people to stone by simply looking at them. Or biting." Differences do exist in legends. Which makes sense, since they deal with such obscure beings. They really could use reliable information at a time like this.

"Oh, don't worry, that's merely a legend," Eris tries to ease their minds.

Not that her attempt at easing works much, as those animals and she herself are no different than a legend. And yet, here she is. The term legend is not exactly a good guarantee for a fake fairy-tale anymore.

"They have no magic ability to turn you to stone," she insists.

"And what about their poison-breath?" Adrian doesn't feel assured. Referring to another such legend, that a cockatrice breathes poison capable of felling a man with the faintest wisp. "Isn't that the most deadly substance in existence?"

"Oh no," Eris replies with a harmless smile. "Manticore venom is the most deadly, by far. Slow working, while always fatal, no cure at all." Only then does she realize her druid trivia doesn't exactly ease any minds. "Cockatrices have no poison-breath. They do have a venomous bite and it works very quickly, near instantaneous, but it's not deadly. Only paralyzing. Which still makes them very dangerous, indeed."

In practice, it doesn't really matter much. As those who are paralyzed become easy victims for the sharp claws and powerful beak of the enraged cockatrice.

"To make it all worse, cockatrices are highly territorial with a good sense of camouflage. They always attack with deadly force whenever they spot an intruder." Eris doesn't spare any words at describing they're extremely dangerous for those combined reasons of paralysis-inducing venom with a high sense of aggression. Gradually losing vigor as she speaks, as if the young druid begins to consider this all a lost cause. Nobody would be crazy enough to face such a dangerous creature to save the life of another.

Conrad casually blurts her out of that daze. "Alright then. Let's get this hunt over with. Oversized-chicken venom it is."

Eris' blue eyes peer at him in surprise and plenty of growing curiosity. She just explained him about the risks involved, and he intends to go without doubts!? This man is either foolish, or...

"Guess you'll need a hand..." Adrian stands up and brushes off his legs from all dirt.

"It will be dangerous," Eris insists.

"Then we only have to avoid a bite," Conrad winks at her.

"I'm coming too!" Roderik crawls up, holding onto his sword.

Conrad wants to reject his bravado straight away, only to hesitate halfway the first spoken word. The boy faces him with a level of determination he hasn't seen in a long time. The life of one of their group depends on this. The kid won't sit on his ass and wait. He doesn't have that kind of blood running through him.

"Alright," the man relents. "You're coming with us."

Roderik can't really believe it at first. He didn't get ignored or pushed aside? They trust him?! He quickly recovers his surprise through a steeled grip.

"Loosen that hand, Roderik. Keep your strength for when we need it."

The boy nods, accepting critique. As long as he can help.

"I'm coming too!" Primrose is next to raise her voice.

"No, you're staying here," Conrad stays firm in this case. He won't relent to her pouty mouth, nor give her the time to voice critique. "We need the venom intact. We have no idea what your fireballs will do to it. Right? Think about it. We can't rely on magic here.

Besides, if there's too many of us, it will scare off the animals." Before anyone else gets the sudden idea to come along.

"He is right," Eris backs him up. "The venom should be pristine. Fire would only harm its effect."

If they bring Primrose along, they will only end up with roasted chicken. Fine for a meal, though not what they look for. And Selena is too personally involved. That comes with risks of making mistakes. Carrot's disorienting poison dagger could be useful, but is again too much of a risk in this case, where the cockatrice venom must be pristine. To have its blood infected with another poisonous substance could potentially create side-effects. And Lisette, well, her bow would be too much of a threat in this environment. Under the chaos of battle, against a wild animal blindly rushing in, she might accidentally hit someone through inexperience. Plus, her presence would undermine the others' motivation for staying behind.

"So, where do we find these walking birds?" Conrad asks Eris. The Woods are not exactly tiny.

"I'll ask the forest," she grins at him.

...

After doing a similar routine as earlier, connecting to a local ley-line through a pact, a bird of prey descends from the skies, landing right next to them. "This one shall guide you to the cockatrice nest."

Primrose, always eager to learn about magic, asks her about that particular ability. "Can't we ask a cockatrice nicely for a tiny amount of venom?"

"Not all creatures of the forest have enough mind and suitable nature to hear my words. Only the most noble of animals can answer the call."

Conrad shrugs his shoulders, faint hope of avoiding a confrontation fading as quickly as it came. Figures, that an oversized chicken wouldn't be considered noble enough. Back to good-old diplomacy through a sharpened blade.

*

The trio of men navigate the woods, following the bird of prey.

“Thanks, for taking me along,” Roderik offers his gratitude, with a hint of shyness.

“Because I deemed you ready,” his mentor answers. “Know I would not have agreed yet if these animals did have deadly venom. Understand as much.”

Roderik nods. He knows. When it comes to combat ability, these two adults are much more reliable. Only reason he’s allowed to come along, is because if he *does* screw up, he will only be paralyzed and the others can pick up the slack. Do what they would have done on their own regardless. Still, it’s far from a safe trip. That he can come along speaks mountains on the trust he earned.

“If you’re bitten, you’ll be out like a tiny, sleeping princess,” Adrian jokes.

“I’m not a princess!”

“True, but you *are* tiny,” Conrad joins the teasing.

Roderik lets off steam, grumbling to himself.

“You got balls kid, I respect that,” Adrian calms him down again. Before the boy warns the cockatrice about their presence with his loud grumbling. **It can’t be all that far anymore.**

*

With a hand signal, their small group comes to a stop. Even breathing halts temporarily. The bird of prey suddenly changed course and flew off.

It must be near. The cockatrice.

The woods are dense around these parts, and they have to be close to the barrier. The first hints of fog can already be seen up ahead. However, that’s not what catches attention. A shrill screech fills the air surrounding them, coming from behind the bush up **ahead. There’s** a ghastly air about it, though what exactly is hard to describe. All Conrad knows is that it makes the hairs on his arms stand upright.

Peeking past the bush, he can spot **the source of the screech. It’s the cockatrice. Can’t** be anything else, as no other creature he has ever seen looks anything like it. An over-sized chicken, he called it. And that’s closer to the truth than he could have thought. A

human-sized chicken, with bright colors and long tail of a peacock. Towering over its nest, as the beast performs maintenance work on its construction, adding twigs to the large bird-like nest.

Its neck moves at rapid speed, flicking upwards like a lightning cleaving the sky.

Were they spotted?!

No... Its head now turns aside, followed by a quick tilt. All in that same breakneck speed. Furious... Determined of its every subtle move. Large beady eyes turn independently like constantly rotating pincushions on its head. Each eye never focuses at the same thing as the other one, a display which is creepy and unsettling.

At first glance, **it doesn't** appear very threatening, almost comical with its rotating eyes and bird-like, swift movements. Head moving up and down when it takes a step, as if **the creature can't make up its mind on where to place it, another shrill and loud call** leaving its beak. Conrad finally understands why his hairs stood up, earlier already, at the discomfort of that first screech.

This thing knows no fear. Its screech was one without restraint, without care. Fully announcing its presence to anything and everything in the area, while it has its own nest, its most private area, right here. That can only mean one conclusion. There are no predators in these Woods which can challenge it. And what lies right next to the nest is a clear indicator why.

It's a boar carcass, half eaten. The animal takes a step towards it with that same head-bounce, one of its eyes flicking to the boar, before the beak suddenly dives down.

For a moment, Conrad could recognize fine, razor-sharp teeth as an additional layer of discomfort behind the beak. Torn boar meat stuck between, ripped off with ease. The neck swipes upwards and the meat disappears with two large, feisty gulps.

All claw and bite marks on that boar are hard to mistake. It was actively hunted, not scavenged. And if its hunter can take on a large boar, it can handle an unarmed man with ease. **It's dangerous. Very dangerous.**

One advantage left to take the animal out, is how there will be no need to try and create an ambush. Or prevent it from choosing an escape route. According to Eris, they are highly territorial. The creepy animal will only know one action if it spots Conrad or any of

the others. To rush in wild and furious, until whatever intruder is left as a mangled corpse.

Another hand signal follows, and Adrian heads off. While they don't need to seal an escape route, there's always value in a flanking maneuver. They have three swords at their disposal. Aiming them all at the creature from the exact same spot would be a waste, as they could never be brought to their fullest potential, even hindering each other's swings.

Roderik will stay behind his mentor. The boy knows what to do. Most training is a one-on-one sparring against Conrad, though sometimes they share a co-op session against Adrian. Where the young apprentice is taught how to fight in tandem with someone else. His job is to stay one step behind Conrad, and observe. Waiting for an opening to appear, created by his mentor. To then swiftly take that single step ahead to strike or jab at the offered weak spot.

With Adrian out of sight, Conrad takes the initiative. There's no method to know if his companion is in place already, but delaying for too long is not an option. The cockatrice will eventually spot or smell them. Initiative should be theirs. What little time it takes to respond to an unplanned attack could be enough to spell doom. A signal isn't possible either. Too much foliage around here, and using a bird whistle like they learned in the army is not in the cards. Animals are not fooled as easily as people. They might recognize the difference between a real bird's call and a faked one, far better than a man or hatori would.

A deep breath in, and Conrad steps forward, right next to a large tree, letting his presence be known. Staring right at the animal to openly challenge its dominance over this territory. Sword at the ready and an aura of imminent battle not hiding any intention.

The cockatrice's head rises. Pointing straight up, eyes dart in all directions. Head flicks sideways, facing this unknown intruder, not a hint of fear in its body language. Its ugly mug tilts, like mocking this newcomer, not about to take him seriously. The creature estimates his strength, measuring threat level, and finds it all rather lacking. At least, that's what it would appear to be, if it had any semblance of intelligence.

Both eyes suddenly tack with ferocity onto the man standing ahead, joined in their observed target for the first time. The weirdest effect happens all over its body. The cockatrice's plumage shifts color. The blue-with-green it had until now suddenly turn into shades of orange and red with fury. A single loud shriek hurts Conrad's ears, and the animal rapidly dashes forward with the swiftness of a hawk and the strength of a bull.

"Step back!" Conrad yells towards his apprentice, taking a step behind the large tree himself, unable to take the incoming force head-on.

The animal doesn't care about the tree and smashes its own weight around, branches shaking and leaves falling down while it flings its neck around to snap the mighty beak at the intruder. Foul stench of rotten meat and entrails still stuck between its sharp, venomous teeth.

Conrad lashes out with his sword, going straight for a fatal blow to the neck, but the animal recognizes danger, blade reflected in its beady and observant eyes. With amazing reflexes, the cockatrice swipes its own head aside to avoid the blow, beak already preparing for a swift counter, gauging distance and angle to its target. Conrad's arm is aimed for, neck muscles flexing as the beast moves in for the attack. Only to bite prematurely.

Roderik tries to hold steady, in need of all his strength to hold the sword as the cockatrice snapped right onto it. Realizing he doesn't have nearly enough muscle to keep this threat at bay for longer than one second.

Yet the boy's job is done. Adrian moves in from the side, taking a jab at the animal's main body. It's too late to avoid. The animal too large to throw as much momentum as is needed into another dodge. It should go down now, stabbed in the gut. It may live, and be dangerous for a while still, but that injury will severely handicap and seal its fate.

...

"Fuck!" Adrian curses. That tip of his sword which should have found soft belly is now stuck in a leg. This thing may be smarter than it looks! If dodging was impossible, the animal chose to take the hit instead, lifting its thigh to absorb incoming damage where it wouldn't be fatal.

The cockatrice lets out a painful howl, plumage turning even more vivid-red in fresh rage, and preparing to take a spiteful bite at this newcomer.

Conrad readies his sword for a sideways strike, grumbling on the inside. This is not going as planned! Regardless, the damn beast should go down either way with this next hit, attention diverted by Adrian and a fresh sense of pain. Better not waste any time and make this strike count, because that leg injury is far from lethal!

The sword swings with all force Conrad can place behind it. Time to end this fight!

For a short moment, he wants to hesitate. What is going on?! Why is his vision suddenly so blurry? Did he take a hit from those teeth and venom runs through his body?! No... **That can't** be it. Eris said cockatrice venom works paralyzing, not disorienting.

Then, what the heck is going on?!

The sword reaches target, yet misses it. Another howl of pain from the animal hurts his ears, though Conrad knows instinctively this is *not* the fatal blow it was intended to be. **Freshly drawn blood visible from the creature's** main body where he cut it, yet his **swing didn't** dive deep enough. **He can't** even see where he hit it!

A blurry mess of green and brown blends into the environment as the cockatrice constantly shifts its plumage's colors, adjusting it with near perfection to all surrounding scenery. An almost invisible mass bashes against Conrad.

He cannot see it, though the man **can feel it from the sword he holds...** **It's stuck** somewhere. Did it dig in a piece of bone? Did the creature bite on it? Is a claw pushing it aside? No way to tell in this camouflaged storm of violence! All he knows is that releasing the sword would be an instant death sentence. **If he can't get it loose right this very instant, then...**

Conrad braces all muscles for impact, noticing a blurriness head towards his side. It could be the head, **swiping in for the kill.** Or it might be the animal's body, about to **bash him against the tree.** Or maybe it's merely the tail?

A loud battle cry drives forward. Roderik stabs his sword into the unknown.

With a bash, both man and boy are knocked aside. The former smashed into a tree, the latter falling onto the ground.

Still, he did it. The boy did it! He drew blood, a heavy wound visible inside the blur. The creature hurt enough its colors adjust once more, returning to normal. It has a deep jab in the neck. Probably lethal, while **not immediately so. It's still a threat for now**, only caught off balance. Colors shift to pure red again. If it goes down anyway, it will take down these intruders with it!

Adrian finds another opportunity. His friends are knocked down, yet the cockatrice is also unstable, trying to regain its footing after its neck was gashed. It may have gotten lucky last time, it will not dodge his strike a second time!

Conrad lies down, vision still **blackened from the hit against the tree. That's going to** leave a bruise... The world turns as he regains vision, witnessing Adrian make his move in what appears as slow-motion. Behind the man, he can spot the large cockatrice nest.

Huh... There's another nest hidden behind it. He can notice it from this angle. Is that the shrubbery he can see move? Or is it his vision still turning...?

"Adrian! Behind!" he yells out.

Adrian doesn't waste time and turns around, sword swing immediately changing angle while keeping momentum. A blurry haze performs a mad-dash towards him, from outside the bushes. Another cockatrice, responding to the calls of the first, plumage in full camouflage for a direct assault.

There's no time. The sword will hit, but he has no idea where! It could be a fatal wound, or more likely, it will be just another leg or **get stuck inside the animal's beak.** Regardless, that thing will smash into Adrian with full momentum, claws and teeth no doubt impossible to avoid. Even if he gets a good swing in, it will thrash around in enraged fury. First the dire wolves, now this? Why do these animals always have to come in pairs?! **There's nothing he can do... Unless...**

Adrian's thumb presses against a specific spot on his sword's handguard as if his life depends on it, a subtle glow radiating instantly.

The sword finds its target, feathers losing their camouflage the moment the animal considers its victory assured, turning an imposing red. Its beak captured the sword, a single eye already shifting towards its new, vulnerable target.

Adrian shouts out while every muscle in his body focuses strength in the **weapon's** handle. A large streak of blood flows past as the magically enhanced sword reveals its greatly heightened sharpness. Swiping through the creature's head and not stopping there, neck and main body cleaved open in a single, powerful swing.

Conrad can see the outcome as his vision restores itself, trying to stand up as fast as he can. This is *not* over yet! That additional threat was disposed of, yet the first one is still right here, in front of him, about to crawl on its feet. At this rate, he will lag behind a split second. **That's all it takes in combat. A split second. With Roderik still down for the count, and Adrian finishing his swing, it's all up to Conrad himself. Yet, that split second... If only that didn't exist!**

A loud and fierce growl registers in **the man's** ears as he stands up.

A brown flash dashes out of the nearby shrubbery, shouting its own battle cry. The large claws of a brown bear maul the **cockatrice's head, bashing** it into the tree. Conrad wastes no time and activates his own enchantment, sword swung overhead as it slides **down like the world's sharpest guillotine. Slicing the cockatrice head clean off its body.**

The man is left standing, heaving from exertion, facing the large bear. When Adrian wants to come closer to aid, his comrade holds out a hand, stopping him.

The bear lowers itself and turns around, giving one last glance before it heads back into the woods.

"One of that girl's noble forest friends?" Adrian asks.

"Seems like it." She must have asked the bear to follow them, sending it as backup.

The man turns to Roderik, still lying on the ground.

"How's he doing?" Adrian asks.

Conrad observes the boy closely before standing up again. **"He got nicked in the arm, doesn't appear to be anything bad."** A pair of tooth marks are visible in his arm. They barely punctured, though the kid must have some of that venom in him. **"Should be okay, it's only paralyzing,"** he concludes.

"How long will it last?"

Conrad shrugs his shoulders. **"I don't know. Guess I'll carry him. You take the cockatrice head."**

Adrian pokes the boy with a stick. “Man, that’s so eerie. His eyes are wide open, and he doesn’t move at all. You think he can still hear and see us?”

Conrad picks up Roderik like a sack of potatoes and flings the boy over his shoulder. Sure is eerie alright. He can’t even feel a heartbeat or notice any breathing. Yet, he can see from that healthy shine in the boy’s eyes he’s still alive. “I have no idea, and I’d rather not find out. Let’s go back. We have what we need.”

Adrian examines his own sword in fascination, that part where he placed his thumb still glowing. Quite the brutal spectacle left behind where he used it. The man offers his conclusion. “Remember that fight against the fire mage, on our last day in the army? I’m pretty certain we were lucky back then.”

“No shit...”

*

Eris awaits their arrival, face turning from tension to joy when noticing the cockatrice head. “You succeeded...” she breathes a sigh of relief.

“Yes, thanks in part to your help,” Conrad winks at her

The girl offers an understanding nod. Pleased her furry friend was able to help.

“So, uh, about this one...” Conrad lowers Roderik.

Eris examines the boy, quickly reaching a conclusion. “He will be fine. I’ll prepare some herbal salve for where he was bitten, so it doesn’t infect.”

“How long will he be out?”

“About three hours.”

The girls stare curious at what the men brought with them. Lisette closely observes the cockatrice head while listening to the story how this mighty beast was brought down. Meanwhile, Carrot and Primrose poke randomly at Roderik, curious how the paralyzing poison can make someone appear dead when they aren’t.

Selena stays with her sister, both of them too stressed out about all of this. They still can’t see how that ugly head can help in curing Luna, even if they want to believe in it.

“I’ll prepare the medicine now,” Eris takes the plants first. “Timing and order is important for success. First, I’ll extract the liquid from these plants.”

She sits down onto the ground after gathering a mortar and pestle from her small amount of private possessions. And she grinds the plants.

...

“Please give her the mushroom now,” Eris says after the plant already turned about halfway into a pulp. “Timing is important.”

Conrad grabs the gathered mushroom and takes a last stare at it. This thing is lethal, though they have no other option than to trust in Eris’ knowledge and skill.

“Let her eat the entire mushroom and chew it well,” Eris instructs.

He offers the mushroom to Luna. “You heard the doctor. This will help you heal, trust me.”

Fear is visible on Luna’s face as much as her sister’s, yet the latter encourages her to go along with it.

“We can trust Conrad. He helped me to escape the bandits, and he took you along as promised. I *know* he’ll be right. This is going to work!”

Luna hesitantly takes the mushroom in her mouth and chews. Wherever this will lead, there’s no more going back now.

“The mushroom will take out the illness,” Eris reiterates, just finished grinding the plants. Lifting up the small mortar, she offers it to Luna. “Eat this now. This will neutralize the mushroom’s poison.”

“What’s next...?” Conrad asks, growing more and more anxious.

“Now, we wait.”

The man wants to interrupt. What did they hunt the cockatrice for?! Any moment now, Luna will feel the consequences of that poison, and...

“Timing is important,” Eris notices the growing worry, showing him a smile, then aiming it at her young patient. “Don’t worry. When it comes to medicine, I know what I’m doing.”

...

Time passes in silence. Nobody really dares ask anything. Eventually, a change occurs. Luna pants increasingly heavy, finding difficulty to breathe.

“I feel hot...” the girl murmurs.

Eris touches Luna’s forehead with her own. She developed an acute fever. The poison shows its effect and will kill her within fifteen minutes if nothing is done to prevent it. Those plants she took earlier should neutralize the poison, but they’re clearly not working yet. Neither will they work in time if no miracle happens.

“The cockatrice head,” Eris instructs Conrad. “It’s time.”

He picks it up with a short glimpse at Roderik, still appearing dead, even if he isn’t. That weird state of being he hasn’t seen before and is hard to believe if it weren’t for an example lying right there. “Here’s the head,” he joins Eris, unable to hide the worry in his voice.

“Press its teeth into her arm. One will do, make sure it punctures.”

“I’ll help,” Adrian joins him, taking over the head, so Conrad can press its mouth around Luna’s arm.

The girl herself rapidly degrades in condition, wheezing while her fever reaches ever greater heights. After a trickle of blood runs down Luna’s arm, Conrad lets go. The venom has been applied.

“Good,” Eris nods at them. “Now, we only have to wait. All work is done.”

“What will happen?” Selena asks, not really understanding any of this, suddenly shifting her attention as Luna already fell into that same, strange condition as Roderik.

“No need to worry,” Eris tries to ease her mind. “She is now in a state between life and death, preserved there by the cockatrice venom. For three hours she will remain like this, similar to your friend over there. Then, she will return to normal once more. Though she will feel very sleepy for an entire day.”

Carrot figured it out, no stranger to poisons, completing the sentence for her. “And by then, the mushroom poison will be neutralized!”

“Correct,” Eris smiles at her. “Now, let’s close the girl’s eyes, or they will sting from dryness when she wakes up again.”

“Oh, right,” Conrad ponders out loud. “Better do that with Roderik too.” He’s already going to feel the sting, no doubt.

*

Three hours almost passed. By now, Roderik returned among the living from his state between life and death. Rubbing his eyes from itchiness, desiring to stay awake, even if he finds it hard to do so. Luna is still in that weird state, though she should return any moment now, poison gone while the component which shall heal her remains. The artificially-induced cockatrice bite mark treated with the same salve used for Roderik, to ensure it doesn’t infect.

While they wait, Eris takes distance from the others, walking through the woods. Until she stops, turning to the man who followed her. “Is it about that second request?” she asks.

“We *have* to pass the Misty Woods,” Conrad insists.

“I’m sorry, I will not return home.”

“Then maybe you could give us a charm? Or an enchantment? Something to let us pass without having to come along?”

Eris shakes her head to him, not taking enjoyment in having to disappoint him. “I cannot make a charm.”

“Will you come with us, to the city?” he asks for her intentions. Surely, she won’t stay here, in the Woods her entire life long?

“No, I’ll stay here,” she replies.

Conrad sighs. He found the alma he was looking for, but... Getting through this barrier proves to be more challenging than he thought.

“You mind if I visit?” he asks.

The girl tilts her head, wondering why he’s so insistent on reaching beyond the Woods.

“I’ll visit every day,” he adds.

“Maybe tomorrow I’ll be gone?” she replies.

“Maybe,” he answers, chuckling to himself. “Then I’ll simply look like a bumbling fool, standing here, to shout your name for nobody to hear, every day all over again. You wouldn’t want to miss it.”

“Heh,” Eris can’t hide a laugh.

Movement comes from aside, in the direction of their camp. Shortly after, Lisette appears, following their tracks.

“Luna just woke up!”

Conrad picks up Lisette and places her on his shoulders, receiving plenty of laughter in return. “Alright then, let’s go see how our patient is doing.”

*

Conrad lifts Luna up in his arms so the girl doesn’t have to walk in her drowsy state. She’s doing okay, no signs of the mushroom’s **poison remaining**. If all goes well, she should be rid of her illness. Her lungs will naturally not recover to what they were before the plague hit, but the deadly **infection will be gone**. For now, she hasn’t shown any sign of a need to cough. Though it’s too early to say.

“We’ll be going then. Thanks for everything,” Conrad gives a parting greeting towards Eris, giving the girl a wink. “See you tomorrow.”

The alma girl smiles while nodding.

*

Night has fallen. Conrad places an arm around Selena. “Don’t worry, your sister will fully recover. I truly believe so.”

Selena leans her head onto Conrad, observing her sleeping sister. As Eris explained, she and Roderik felt fatigued and had a hard time staying awake on the road back to Sakai. Nothing to be worried about. Tomorrow, they should both feel a lot better. Then he will take Luna back to the Woods for another check-up. **With Eris’ magic, she should be able to “see” if the illness is really gone.**

“You should get sleep too,” he picks up Selena and places her on the same large bed as Luna. “You can keep your sister company.”

It’s not late in the evening yet, though fatigue takes its toll on the older sister as well. No wonder. Selena tried to hide it, but she was eating herself from worry this entire time. Best she receives plenty of rest. After giving her a kiss on the cheek, Conrad heads out of the room, giving them both the rest they need.

Lisette awaits him at the door, asking him about today’s events. “You believe it’s going to work?”

“Absolutely.” And he has good reasons to believe as much. Eris definitely knew what she was doing. And once they retrieved the cockatrice head, her confidence rose instantly. If the doctor feels confident in the cure, so can they.

Lisette keeps clinging to his sleeve, reluctant to part.

“Want to breathe fresh air on the balcony?” her father asks.

“Mm,” she agrees.

Her father takes her to the balcony of his room, grabbing the blue-and-white blanket to keep them warm. Lisette is probably a little sentimental after today. Seeing Luna in that state between life and death, while in need of a poisonous mushroom to cure her illness, probably made it sink in how bad her condition really was. Considering what happened in his daughter’s past, the thought of almost losing another friend can’t be easy on her.

After placing the blue blanket over Lisette’s shoulders, he pulls her close. “The city doesn’t look half-bad from here.”

His daughter holds an object in her hands. Its shape one which is still burned in Conrad’s memories. The old flute.

“Let me hear how good you’ve gotten,” he taps at the flute.

“I’m no good...” she mopes.

“Eh, you should have heard me back on the farm. So bad we didn’t need a rooster for the morning call. Trust me, I’ll try not to laugh.”

Slightly embarrassed, Lisette places the flute against her lips and blows.

“Hah! What was that?!” Conrad can’t contain his laughter.

“Mm!” Lisette pushes against his side. “You promised not to laugh!”

“I promised I would *try*. But that was just too much.”

A tiny fist bumps into her father’s ribs a couple more times. “Ah, I’m sorry,” she suddenly pulls back, noticing a grimace from her father.

“Don’t worry about it. That was only where a big, ugly chicken bumped into my side. I’ve felt worse.” Conrad lifts the flute in her hands higher. “Here, place your mouth on it...” Then he nudges one of her fingers. “And move this one a bit... There, that’s it! You weren’t covering the holes correctly. Now change the angle of the flute more downwards.”

With the flute pressed against her lips, Lisette can’t speak, thus her eyes flick to his, asking if she follows his advice correctly.

“Yeah, that should do it! Now blow carefully. Don’t use a lot of force right from the beginning. Get a good feel with a soft breath. And then carefully pick up strength until you can hear a tone.”

A faint flowing of air suddenly changes tune and turns into a proper note. Enthusiasm quickly rises within the girl.

“That’s my girl! You’ll be as good as your mother in no time.”

...

Lisette places down the flute onto her lap, staring at the night-time city life of Sakai. Plenty of customers coming and going towards the brothel. Until she breaks the silence with a question. “Do you think I’ll ever meet her? And my grandparents?”

Conrad gazes over the roofs of the city, thinking about the question his daughter just asked. The most difficult question he ever heard.

“Maybe...”

That’s the best he can give. A long time ago, he would have not doubted, and gone straight for the affirmative, filled with conviction. After he lost his parents, he still believed he would meet them again someday, in whatever awaits them after life, when they return to Cloegandr. But now...

He just doesn’t know anymore. And apparently, he’s not the only one. Surely, that’s why the shrines are in decay, and temples near abandoned. Yes, the Union closes them,

one after the other, dismantling their legacy and ancestry. Yet, no force the Union can bring forth would ever be successful if people still had enough heart left to believe in their own myths and legends. And he himself has become a perfect example of that lack of spirit.

If only he could go back to being that boy, bodacious in swinging a stick around, acting out the stories he told about the origin of their names. But that boy is long gone. Repressed in a dark, little corner where no more light will ever shine. That “maybe” he answered nothing more than clinging to faint hope that someday he will find a reason again to believe. That his loved ones didn’t die for nothing. That the world isn’t just a dark and cold place, devoid of meaning and purpose.

“What are the others doing?” Lisette wonders, letting her vision glide over those same roofs as her father.

“You’ve seen Selena, she sleeps with her sister. Carrot takes a bath and will join her afterwards. Roderik is out like a candle. Primrose reports to her grandfather about what happened today. And Adrian, he’s being himself and no doubt hanging out somewhere.”

“With a woman?” Lisette asks, curiosity growing.

“Well, yeah?” Possibly more than one.

“What are they doing?”

Right after that earlier difficult question, she now throws this one? Where does that sudden interest come from? “They only have fun together, you know, hanging out.”

“Like you and Selena, or Carrot?”

There’s no dodging this question. Lisette has her face turned to him, eager to hear his response. Another grimace on her father’s face present. How much does she know? Selena definitely didn’t keep her mouth shut, though without any idea what is even going on, surely Lisette won’t have that much of a clue? He certainly wouldn’t have, back in the day, even if someone told him about sex.

“Um, yeah. Similar. Hugs and... such.”

“And kisses? And...” Lisette looks away, face turning red. Maybe she does have somewhat of a clue. Did she wander around in the client section of this brothel? Or was he spotted with Carrot or Selena?

Conrad sighs. “Yeah, that stuff.”

“Because you like them?”

Now that is finally a question he doesn't mind answering. “That's exactly it.”

“So, with Mama too?”

“Yeah. In fact, that's how you were born.”

Now, he's only left hoping she doesn't ask how it all works. Explaining the intricacies of baby-making isn't exactly his forte. How to even get started on it? And to be fair, he doesn't know half the stuff himself. A man and a woman have a union, and a tiny miracle can be the result. That's about it...

A tiny miracle, eh...? After his earlier, darker thoughts, it feels more like a tiny branch of hope he can still grasp for.

“So, does that mean Adrian makes a baby now?”

“Heh, no! That's just for fun.”

“What about Selena and Carrot? When you...”

And that's another topic he never really thought about. Now she mentions it, he can't really put it to the back of his mind anymore. It's not like they have their periods, so they're not going to have children yet. On the other hand, he definitely can't say he sleeps with them purely for fun either. Those two are special, exactly how others are special to him, by his side in earlier parts of his life. Lisette's mother one of them.

Yes, he keeps these kids around because Grimald is a potential threat. And yet... Even without that reason, he would still like them to join his journey. Leaving the girls behind here in Sakai while he moves on might be the rational thing to do, though his emotions call for the complete opposite. The only true answer he can give, is a simple and honest...

“I would like that, yeah.”

Have Selena and Carrot become a mother to his children? Yeah, that sounds nice. Maybe clinging to that tiny miracle part has something to do with it, he can't deny as much. Regardless, he definitely likes those two, and wants them in his life. Now, and forever.

*

Conrad closes the door to Lisette's room after bringing her back. She'll enjoy some early sleep as well. Though it wouldn't surprise him if she will practice on the flute for a while in privacy, where nobody can hear her screw-ups. After giving a goodnight kiss to Carrot when she comes back from her bath to join Selena into the land of dreams, he heads downstairs.

Primrose stands next to her grandfather, about to leave when they notice him.

"Oh, I just heard all about today from my little Rose," the old man greets him. "I wish I could have been there and see with my own eyes. Meeting one of the Alma, never would I have expected such rumors to be fruitful!"

It was far from the first time such rumors were spread, and this old man himself often investigated them with hope of a miraculous discovery. That hope faded as years passed, every rumor always nothing more than a fake, merely misleading gossip.

"Truly a miracle," Primrose's grandfather adds, a little light shining in his old eyes he at least lived long enough to hear about such a discovery, even if he wasn't there to be a part of it.

"Yes... A miracle," Conrad replies, not really assured of his own reply, unable to escape that word.

Maybe it was a miracle. Or maybe it was simple luck of the draw. Who knows? There might be more druids out there, within a day's reach, hiding their presence through that peculiar magic. With only reason why he discovered this one thanks to help from his own nemesis, no less. Yes, he was willing to accept that help, not much other avenue left to take, and Conrad is definitely very pleased with the results. Saving Luna is more important than his honor and quest for answers and vengeance. However, deep down inside, having to rely on that treacherous filth is nothing short of humiliating and a complete mockery. A miracle? No... If it was, Grimald would not have his stench anywhere remotely close to it!

Primrose wants to open her mouth, though the girl hesitates. Any topic would do, as long as it means talking with her savior, yet she feels strangely conflicted. The girl doesn't really understand her own feelings. A hand reaches out for Conrad, noticing he

broods on some kind of topic. Only to refrain, that same hand turning back to her side. Would he even want her to? Maybe if Carrot or Selena were to reach out for him, he would prefer that more?

The grandfather observes his little girl with a keen eye, hiding sharp wit under wrinkles. Those wrinkles suddenly soften as he turns towards Conrad. **“How was my little Rose today? Did she manage to help?”**

Primrose almost makes a jump on the spot. Why did he bring *her* up of all topics!? Now her grandfather will hear how useless she was. Couldn't even go along to fight that cockatrice, her magic too unfit for the type of job. And once again, she was confronted with a type of magic she didn't know. A savant and a genius, they called her at the spire. Some genius she is... Only suitable to sit there, waiting for their return, while her savior has to risk his life! Can't come up with a suitable enchantment against that shadow puppet, couldn't cure Luna, and can't help them pass the Misty Woods. She can't even draw his...

“Primrose has been a great help. Honestly, she saved our lives today,” Conrad breaks the girl's own downward spiral of brooding.

“Eh?” she looks up, face showing complete disbelief. What is he saying? Did she hear him right?

“Oh, she did? That makes me proud to hear,” her grandfather rejoices.

“Her enchantments were a crucial part in winning that cockatrice fight. Those darn chickens know how to put up a fierce struggle.”

The old man places his hand on the girl's head and rubs hard. **“You hear that? Let it sink into those large ears of yours.”**

“She made me realize how lucky we were last time we faced a mage. If that guy had anywhere near your granddaughter's talent, we would have been roasted.”

The old man keeps rubbing Primrose's head, laughing out loud while she turns red. **“I would have loved to witness it all. From a safe distance that is, ha-ha! I'm really pleased to hear such praise about my little girl. She has been trying very hard to draw your attention.”**

“Grandpa!!” she yells out, immediately hiding her face again.

“See?” the old man doesn’t relent, smiling from ear to ear. “She didn’t deny. Only got angry I revealed it.” The rubbing turns to a gentler brushing, the man’s tone of voice turning that bit more serious. “She will have to try far harder to hide her inner schemes from her own family. I know well enough what she desires.”

No matter how much she pouts right now, there’s no deceiving her grandfather.

The man turns his attention back to Conrad. “Even so, that must have been a hard and tiring fight. I heard you took a bruise to the ribs.”

“Yeah, nothing serious, but it will be blue for a couple days.”

“I see. Well, we do have a great remedy for aching muscles and bruises,” Primrose’s grandfather forms a sly grin on his face. “Our oil baths are not only for relaxation and health of our fur. The absorbed oils also help reduce swelling and alleviate pain. Isn’t that right, Primrose?”

The girl’s ear twitches, confused. Why does he bring her into the topic? Surely, he’s not...

Her head tilts, a subtle spasm runs through both fox ears, rising in excitement.

The old man winks at his granddaughter while giving her an encouraging slap on the shoulders. “Why don’t you teach our guest all about vulpes hospitality, and the merits of a good-old oil bath? Explain him all about how it works.”

*

Conrad follows Primrose, walking side by side as she guides him through the luxury brothel. He hasn’t spoken a word since they went on their way. Neither did the girl. Unexpectedly, they’re not heading towards the private baths. For whatever reason, Conrad finds himself brought to the regular clients’ quarters, couples on display from various rooms they pass.

In a strange sense, it feels like he is guided to one of such rooms by the hand of one of these ladies. Primrose’s outfit, with its plenitude of revealed femininity in all the right places, as luxurious as it is while dripping with overt sex-appeal, makes her blend in as a completely natural part of the scenery. Like a particularly young courtesan, in a constant

state of undress, for no other reason than to tempt a man into keeping her warm instead. Only the occasional, curious observation of a working-girl, with enough spare time for anyone or anything other than her partner, works as reliable indicator the young vulpes is an unexpected face around these parts. At least, to be seen guiding a man into one of numerous pleasure rooms.

The oil bath is a group room, with various beautifully decorated folding screens providing a tiny amount of privacy for whoever prefers a more intimate one-on-one. It's partially a steam house or sauna, and partially a massage room. A shallow depth of warm oil, about enough to lie down and feel the oils coat the body, acts as the so-called bath. And with plenty of hot vapor released to make the entire room feel steamy and damp.

A couple guests sit on a bench, enjoying the steam almost as much as they enjoy a **woman's** company to their side or on their lap. Others sought out their own pool of oil, often lying down for a massage, or let those oils get caught between their connected bodies.

Primrose comes to a stop at an available space, hesitating, observing her surroundings.

"In here?" Conrad wonders, amazed at the utter lack of privacy. Not that he hasn't been in shared bathing spaces before, or a river that can act as such, which both the army and the mercenaries made plenty use of to keep the smell of sweat at a manageable level.

He looks around... Yeah, definitely a different atmosphere than back then. Looks more like an orgy goes on in here. Actually, never mind. The more he stares, the more it becomes undeniable. A large orgy is *exactly* what goes on.

Girly fingers reach for his large palm, making up their mind if they should grasp or not, eventually gripping around and giving a tug into the bathing space. Primrose leads him towards a bench.

"Should I undress?" he asks for confirmation. More meant for Primrose to be capable of changing her mind. Obviously, he has to undress. Everyone else in here is naked or wearing only a loincloth. She did bring a small bundle of clothes and towels with her, so she may not go naked. That would make sense.

“Mmm...” Primrose mumbles a vague affirmative, slipping out of the wooden sandals she uses inside these premises while placing down the bundle of clothes on the bench.

Conrad takes a look at the bundle. A large-sized loincloth. That’s meant for him all right. A couple towels... Those will be for drying themselves once they are done. Though some guests seem to like wrapping their bodies in those towels to let the heat in this room soak in for that extra amount more. And what are these last two remaining pieces?

He quickly places those down again. Definitely not meant for him. That will be Primrose’s bathing outfit. A vision flashes in his mind on how she would look wearing it. These things are unlike any outfit he has seen before. Well, before entering this room, that is. A couple of the other women wear similar clothes, only further enhancing those fantasies about the little fox girl about to wear similar garments.

He turns his back to Primrose while undressing. A quick peek reveals she has opened her robe, her usual naked shoulders joined by a bared back as the cloth lowers, only pausing for a short while when she takes a peek herself. Noticing Conrad observes her, she lowers the robe further, her sideways peek not leaving contact with his eyes.

Her hair and tail cover most of the girl’s rear body, yet roundness of her hips and what lies just below is hard not to notice. Gradually brought into view as the robe descends further. A pudgy softness even larger than the one she has at the front. Tail lifted as not to obstruct the smooth curves of her rear while the girl holds her pose, robe left only to rest around her wrists, its upper hem pushing into her bared bum cheeks. As if to lift them into focus.

Until she lets her typical garment drop to the ground, left only with her tall socks on. A short gasp just left her mouth, brought on by a singular thought. The thought of what will happen when she removes her socks. A thought which makes her bend over and reach for the hem hugging her thigh, pushing it down, though not too fast.

Her rear naturally pushes backwards as she lowers to remove her sock. Roundness turning increasingly round, emphasized, offered. With a hint visible of what lies between her legs, equally pushed backwards, lifted for the man to witness. Posture held for longer than needed, only rising so she can do it all over again with the other sock.

Conrad finally draws his eyes away, further removing his own clothes. She brought a set of two pieces to wear. As enticing they may seem in design, it means she seeks to be covered to a degree. Staring at her during that vulnerable state of undress would feel like **defiling the girl's innocence. Loincloth around the man's hips unable to hide how that** thought and what she already showed him actually turns him on.

He can hear she turned around, facing him while standing slightly sideways. Hoping all this steam can mask his hot-running arousal, Conrad turns to face her as well.

The girl's eyes instantly glide down, observing an erection badly hidden under a small piece of cloth.

The man's vision flows over her sideways body, following a perfectly shaped S-curve which starts at her shoulders, runs down her voluptuous breasts where the S makes a glorious bend. Running across the hips to curve once more at her lower back, where that shapely bum extends in perfect balance to her front.

Primrose is not naked, as he already expected. Other than her typical hair brooch with hanging parts, worn even now, those two tiny pieces of cloth were indeed meant for her. Together, they form a bikini. A pair of triangles, not nearly large enough to fully cover her front, **soft breast tissue on every side exposed. Up, down, left or right... The triangles can't hide her suppleness** in any direction. Held in place with a thin piece of front-tied string, appearing as if it could pop open at any moment. She wears an equally tiny triangle at the bottom, held in place by a similar piece of string, tied to the sides. The string hugs the girl below the hips, rather than resting on it, squeezing lightly into her bum. Matching her top, it makes the entire thing appear as if it hangs so low it could slip down or untie naturally if she only bends over a little.

The fox girl uses an arm to cover her breasts, while the other one is held over her privates. Conrad can easily read her expressions by now. The angle of those ears, their **uncertainty...** Embarrassment is finally sinking in for her, while she tries to find enough courage to let those arms go.

Golden eyes **don't deviate**, staying onto that hidden erection, noticing it respond to her body. A peculiar curiosity flares up inside them, body starting to release her built-up tension. Slowly, her mind can find the required strength, and both arms drop down,

encouraged by the matching rise of what she observes. Until those arms hang right beside her. Bands holding her bikini together constantly stretch as she breathes harder from growing excitement. The small triangles they try to hold in place move with the shape of her breasts.

Primrose extends her arm, pointing towards the oil bath.

“We go in now?” Conrad asks.

The girl nods, unable to reply. A complexity of emotion hidden underneath the subtle red of her cheeks.

She reaches for a folding screen, only to change her mind halfway, leaving it open. Multiple couples visible on the other side, enjoying the oils as much as they enjoy each **other’s sex.**

The oil feels warm and dense. A weird sensation overcomes the man when sitting down in it. This stuff is odd and foreign, though not in a bad way. It relaxes yet tingles at the same time. For that short instance, it felt like the room had disappeared, and only he **was left. A hard day’s** work of fatigue suddenly released and ebbing out of his body at a rapid pace, all gates opened, seeping away into the warm cocoon of oil. A sigh leaves **Conrad’s mouth at the sudden sense** of relaxation.

That isolated peace of mind was only temporary though, fleeting. Peaceful, yes, but definitely not the tranquil kind, or isolated in any way. Tingles already turn into something far more stimulating. Warmth of the oil grows into a glowing heat. Ears stimulated by women and girls as young as Primrose moaning at the frothing of oil-covered bodies. Sight drawn to a woman on the bench, riding a man’s **cock.** Or that young girl to the side lying on her belly into another shallow pool of oil, her butt loudly slapped by the man behind as he drives himself into her cheeks over and over again.

“I’ll give a massage,” Primrose finally speaks, completely aware of all those same stimulations as her partner.

“Should I lie down?” Not that Conrad has an idea how these massages traditionally work, only that a nearby client receives a back-rub from a girl while lying down, and if he has to be honest, that sure does look heavenly.

“Yes, please. That will be easiest.”

Mimicking what others do, Conrad turns onto his belly and rests his head on both arms, over the edge of the shallow bath. The oil feels so thick he isn't even certain if his body floats on it, or he still touches the ground. Definitely makes his body feel lighter than simply lying down in water.

"These oils are great. And so warm."

"It will only get warmer when I rub it in," she replies.

Warmer? That's hard to imagine. Then again, it's probably where that muscle-ache reducing effect comes from. Sore muscles and bruises are very similar in how to treat them. First apply cold when swelling sets in, and once the swelling has settled, it is heat which makes blood flow through and helps the recovery process.

Primrose scoops up oil with a cup formed by both hands and pours it over his back, placing down her palms. Then, she massages his back and shoulders in silence.

It's a fascinating sensation. Sometimes, there's so much more that can be said through actions than through words. And Conrad can only conclude this has been such an example. Her fingers glide over his body while they rub in oil, its texture sinking into skin and flesh. Heat radiates from within his muscles. Sometimes, her fingers stop. Searching for his shape, examining it like a cat that found a new toy, seeking the form of every muscle. The girl's curiosity seeps through as much as the oil surrounding her fingers. So this is what a man feels like? How he looks? How he responds to her touch? It fascinates the girl as much as her response fascinates him.

Then there is the occasional pause, brought on by an entirely different reason. Even if he can't see her, he knows... This is when the girl looks up, and observes the couples around them. Enjoying their own massage, basking in oils, and openly give themselves into vivid temptations of the flesh. He knows, because those pauses always overlap with his own senses getting temporarily diverted.

There... She does it again. Her mind captivated by that display just ahead, of a girl about her age experiencing an orgasm, brought on by a man trapped within the oil-soaked honey-pot between her legs. Only afterwards do those fingers move once more.

"You can turn around now," Primrose finished massaging his back.

As Conrad tries to get up to turn around, his back bumps into Primrose.

“Oh, sorry...” he tries to formulate an apology, the last word barely audible. Already realizing there was no need for an apology, for she **doesn’t** break contact. On the contrary, the girl placed her cheek on his back, palm right next to it, to admire his broad shoulders. A pair of pressed cushions poke into his back, making the man reluctant to change posture. Soon unable to change posture, as she has wrapped her arms around, to seek out his abdomen.

Slowly, her oily fingers glide lower, **following Conrad’s hips**, to find the drenched loincloth.

With her cheek still pressed into his back, it feels as if she listens to his heartbeat, a tuft of fur from her ear stimulating his neck. Her own breathing noticeably turns deeper, heavier, as her hands slip down to his inner thighs, diving underneath the loincloth. **The girl’s own heartbeat turns** wilder when her fingertips touch an object she has never touched before. **Hard... hot...** and particularly tantalizing. Carefully prodding, before she reaches around with both hands. Tracing it from the back all the way to the front in a single slow-moving caress.

What a peculiar object. It responds to her every move. And the man she seeks closeness with matches those responses. An undertone of pleasure in his voice is like enchantment magic to her. Fingers cover every bit of surface to massage this hard thing for its entirety with oil.

And then she stops.

“You can turn on your back now,” she repeats once more.

After he turned around, the girl looks up again, at the others around them. She imitates what another woman is doing. Lifting a leg and placing it over Conrad. Sitting on his lap, hands in search of contact with his chest.

The hint of red on her cheeks grows that extra amount brighter. She can look him right in the eyes, and does exactly that. Chest heaving up and down, feeling something bump into her rear, trying to push between each soft cheek.

“If you want...” she begins to speak, afraid to even mention. **“You can massage me too.”** Shame rises in her golden irises, while **she doesn’t turn them away.**

After scooping up a handful of oil, Conrad pours it over her thighs, just barely breaking the surface of the oil, starting to rub them. The shame in her eyes fades, replaced by relief **he didn't reject her offer**. Both their arms cross in pursuit of exploring the body in front. The girl entranced by his pectoral muscles, the man's **arms** rising to seek out the side of her chest, lightly brushing the skin peeking out from underneath the cloth with his fingers.

Primrose looks aside again where that similarly aged girl now experiences passionate sex in exactly the same position the young vulpes mage sits. She listens to that girl giving herself in an arousing symphony of lust. A single question is dropped without diverting her gaze, a deep longing unable to be hidden in her tone.

“Does Selena also sound so beautiful when you... do it with her?”

Conrad needs not look at the couple Primrose asks about. Firmly focused on the gorgeous display right in front of him. **“Yeah... She does. She sounds even more beautiful than that girl.”**

With her chest pushing forward into Conrad's palms as his caressing of her breasts' sides continues, Primrose asks another question, still keeping her attention towards the couple.

“Does Carrot love it as much?”

He moves above her breasts, feeling out the edge where she transitions from a cute collarbone into soft breast tissue. **“Yeah... She does. She loves it a lot more than that girl.”**

“Because they like you? And you like them?”

Conrad's thumbs press up on her cleavage from below, feeling the weight of her rack as suppleness adjusts to his shape. **“Yeah. I like them, a lot.”**

The longing in her tone shifts into something far stronger. No more a mere desire, but a need, taking control over the girl. Ears constantly moving, as her entire body becomes restless. Heaving, hips subtly twist in non-stop search for good loving, while she similarly rubs her thighs against him. Body leaning forward, while weight seeks firmer contact with the hands groping her.

“Is that why you have... sex?”

That last word left her mouth with a deep exhale of pure hunger.

“Yeah. That’s why we do it.”

Only now does Primrose turn her eyes away from the other couple locked in sexual union, facing the man she straddles. “So... What about me? Am I really too big? Is that it?” Her question is more of a pleading. She *has* to know. Yet, the girl is afraid to know. “Am I... not good enough?”

Conrad stares at her in shock. Is that what she had on her mind? How long has she carried these doubts, this insecurity? Where does she even get the idea of not being good enough? Just look at her. She merely sits on his lap, **as a virgin girl who isn’t even thirteen** yet, and she already exudes far more arousal and sex than any others in this room.

“Not at all,” his hands seek firm contact with Primrose’s breasts, no longer carefully prodding and tracing them, now grasping around.

A sigh leaves the girl when she bends backwards, offering her chest, closing eyes to thoroughly indulge in the feeling of having her tits fondled and squeezed.

“You’re a truly amazing girl. Pretty... Kind... Caring.”

Every word sounds like a divine whisper straight in her furry ears. “I’m not too big?” she pleads again.

Conrad scoops up as much oil his hands can hold and lets it run down her valley. Oil slipping past every bit of skin, lots of it soaking in her bikini, plenty more runs underneath to try and delve between the inner sides where breasts touch and mold to each other, in search of her belly.

“**That** way you dress so slutty, with shoulders always fully bared, cloth as far down as your elbows. Over half of your tits exposed all the time... How you make it impossible to draw my eyes away, whenever **it seems like your nipples could slip out at any moment...** Which is every goddamn time. **It’s all so alluring.**”

And not only her mannerisms. Her own reasons for doing so are no less powerful a spell on his mind.

“You well know and revel in it. **Even more than that, you’re doing it on purpose. And admit it. You absolutely love the thought your nipples could actually pop out at the slightest mistake. You’re hoping for it, always flirting with that line. All because you’re a horny, sex-craving fox who wants nothing more than a hard cock shoved up your pussy.**”

Not a single word wrong, a deep gasp leaves Primrose's mouth when she can feel her rack get pushed in, the **man's fingers slipping underneath cloth** to seek the entirety of her bosom. His hands squeezed tight between freshly oiled skin and a soaked bikini. Where a white liquid appears, running down from underneath her too-small triangles, some of it seeping out of **the cloth's** texture, right at the spot where a pair of tips poke into it. That white liquid seeks out the same path the oil went earlier.

"The way you're lactating spontaneously right now betrays it all... You always hide it, but your body doesn't lie at times like these. Unable to contain its own excitement how I **will drag you across that line you've always desired to cross. You've often snuck around** these areas to peek at all the couples, **didn't you?** To fantasize how a cock would feel like, ever since you discovered the constant lure of sex, now permanently stuck in the back of your mind like a crazed hunger."

Milk spills forth non-stop, **increasing in bountiful flow at the man's words.** The mere thought this warm fluid betrays her most embarrassing desires, which Conrad so accurately guessed, only causes an extra gush to appear. Hoping he can expose more, a hope instantly matched by his following words.

"You're different from the others in this bath. You will stare at the typical pig-skin these others in here use, **only to remind yourself how you'll reject using one.** Your body has no need for protection. No, you want it raw. Only raw will ever do. **Because let's face it. Sure, you want only me, but you're secretly the greatest slut in our entire group.**"

Her golden eyes close, enjoying the warm flow running over her chest, descending towards the heat building up between her legs. What is this feeling? Like he enchants her with his words of magic, body left completely out of her control.

"You touched yourself every night, didn't you? While hiding your moans from leaking into the next room. **Wishing you weren't alone, and you had someone to share your bed** with, so you can eagerly share your drooling slit in return. You must have done all of these... Hoping someone would come along and sweep you of your young, inexperienced feet. **That's what you desperately want from me, isn't it? So I can fuck you right after. To** then fuck some more. And that secret desire of yours makes you so hot... And so damn **sexy..."**

Conrad reaches for the strings of her bikini. Primrose's mouth already opens in dazed excitement of what is certain to come, offering her chest with a level of erotic glee she had no idea she was capable of. The perfect present, offered in a thick, oily wrapping. A present he is free to unwrap of any binding, and claim for himself in whatever carnal way he desires.

He tugs on the strings. The piece of cloth falls down into the pool of oil below. A pair of milky breasts no longer restrained, their pink circles continuously leaking out more, vying for attention, and in particular, lots of steaming love. Her entire bosom a shiny gloss from all oils, making it seem even softer and smoother than it already is.

Primrose opens her eyes again and looks down, onto her own lactating bust. She never released milk in this manner before. But that constant tiny stream makes her glad she is a vulpes, even if only a half. Thankful she received that part from her mother, so she can expose it all.

Conrad licks his lips in anticipation.

“Tasty?” she asks, shoulders pressed backwards to emphasize her soft mammary, hoping for an affirmative. While simultaneously hinting an offer neither of them can refuse.

Even the girl herself has to admit, she would seek out her own bosom if only she could. Her front looks so inviting, her nipples so deliciously voluptuous. Though the trade-off is more than worth it, if it means this man can now seek them out instead.

Conrad lifts his back from the oily pool and places his mouth on her shiny, oiled nipple. A warm liquid instantly welcomes him, even without trying to suckle. Gentle flow quickly turns into an encouraging gush once he does, immediately sucking more, squeezing into both breasts with force. Even if he can only drink from one, he can at least enjoy the fluids of the other one running down their combined bodies by milking her like a cow.

“Ah~” Primrose blows in his ear, hugging the man in front, a single hand on the back of his head. She holds him with care and open affection. Telling him he can feast on her body and fluids for all she can provide. Finally... What she sought for since the day he saved her from those bandits... What she craved ever since hearing Selena first describe her loving night with Conrad. Finally, she gets to experience it herself! Through her

man's lips tightly pressed around a breast, a nipple firmly stuck in his mouth, teeth sinking in her flesh, and warm, fatty milk constantly running down them both.

The hard penis more persistently bumps up into her rear. The girl's tail in constant motion, a silhouette visible in the corner of her vision, where a girl offers her vagina to a client.

Primrose reaches for Conrad's face and gently nudges him away from her bosom. Breast snapping into place after he reluctantly lets go of her nipple, a remnant jiggle running through. The girl's tongue tastes her own milk, by seeking it from her partner's mouth. Showering him with a couple quick loving kisses afterwards. Then she leans back, taking an arms' length distance. Golden eyes beckon for attention.

"You like me?" she asks sweet and sugary.

"Damn right I do."

Her fingers reach for the little string tied around her lower halve.

"You... want me?"

Conrad licks his own lips again at her question. "I want to eat you whole."

Primrose chuckles adorably, tugging on the string with more sensuality than a twelve-year-old should be capable of. The piece of cloth covering her modesty joins her bikini top in the pool. A glancing oil-soaked pussy revealed.

Her arms close the distance again, folding around his neck lightly, followed with another quick peck on the lips. Her kisses interrupted by breathed words of pure lust.

"You want to... mate with me?"

Conrad reaches for her rear and lifts Primrose up, penis immediately rising upwards, no longer obstructed by her squishy butt-cheeks. "More than anything else. You also want to? Mate with me? Without a pig-skin?" Conrad has to contain himself from instantly taking her, face held so close he can directly inhale her warm, sex-crazed breath.

Primrose grins bright, nodding at him, slow while determined. Ears and tail rising tall while she rests her weight onto his arms and shoulders. Fuck pig-skins. He was so right on how she wants to be taken. All natural. Neither her lust, nor her love, has any need for an annoying, fun-spoiling barrier.

“*Hah~...*” she exhales, feeling a large hot object poke at her vagina. Turning into a cute and subtle squeal when the girl lets herself sink over his lap, feeling the same thing happen as she can see others practice in this same room. The same act she secretly dreams of every night.

A slippery, oiled cock digs itself into her vagina, gradually and slowly sucked in. She can feel it go deeper and deeper, pushing her walls apart. Hoping it can still go deeper. Until it disappeared entirely. Swallowed up by her pussy. Sitting on his lap, the girl running hot with lust enjoys an equally burning heat radiate from inside her lower belly, all the way up to where he penetrated. Breasts subtly bounce when she slides it out again, right to where the tip is about to appear, only so she can gasp when taking it in once more. A lewd slipping of flesh, stroking her ears as she can hear her own body repeatedly break the surface of the oily pool in a heartfelt and particularly wet slap.

The penis covers itself in oil, while spilling pre-cum, bathed in a non-stop stream of milk, coated in vaginal fluids, before it digs in again to deposit it all inside of Primrose.

Hips keep moving up and down, round and round, while she seeks the chest of Conrad, pressing her own against his. The hair decoration betraying her wealth has all its metal parts and jewels swinging wildly, softly clanging into the couple's ears. A forceful grip steels itself around the young girl, drawing her tight, squeezing her tits into his chest with increasing strength, seeking to drain them of all ample goodness. More runs out in response, both man and young girl adoring the sensation of warm liquid pouring down, frothed between both bodies. Heat of steam and internal radiation of their oiled muscles nothing in comparison to the sensation of that cock burning in her vagina, or her walls blanketing his shaft.

Primrose's mind tries to cope with all feelings coursing through. So this is what others in this room were searching for... This is what Selena desires, what Carrot wants to experience. Not that the girl can put it into words. Only that it's impossible to control her body. Left grinding like an animal lost into the raw emotion of lust, not desiring anything else. Only to mate, to fornicate, with her and Conrad as the only beings in existence. As closely connected as two people can ever be. Not only sharing him the entirety of her

body, but also offer the sanity of her mind, on top of giving her heart in its beating joy. Smothered in oils and bodily fluids.

Conrad can feel his limit approach. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a particular conversation lingers. That talk from earlier, with Lisette, on the topic of leaving children. Yes, he definitely wants to, even if **Selena and Carrot aren't fertile yet. But Primrose? She is hard to say... This girl definitely started puberty.** That youthful yet budding mammary pressed against his chest, constantly spilling ample milk, is as fine a proof one can hope for. Is she far enough advanced to have children?

"Primrose... if we continue, we risk making a baby." He has to let her know. Honestly, even if she could get pregnant, it would only want him to squeeze her even tighter.

"Mm..." is all she can mumble straight away, grasping for much needed air to process his message. Hips don't hesitate for an instant, rotating with increased passion. Honestly, she doesn't know if she can have children yet. And it doesn't matter, because her thoughts can only settle on a single conclusion. A bright smile aimed his way, eyes matching with radiant joy. **"I want you..."** she breathes into his ear.

Their union feels so perfect, so right. Taking him in raw was the only correct choice to make. Using a pig-skin never even an option in her mind. And pulling out now? Completely unnecessary and undesired.

Her declaration is followed by a sugary moan when she can feel her tits get squeezed flat. Quick and strong gushes of milk shoot out, while she can feel the man below bump upwards into her **vagina's lips**, thrusting with vigor. If she wants him, there's no reason to hesitate. Fertile or not.

Primrose uses what little strength she has to join Conrad's tight hug, face seeking warmth of his chest. She only heard it described before, by Selena and Carrot. She has only seen it before secretly, from couples in this establishment. Yet, she instantly knows it's happening right now. Body completely surrendering to the moment, mind turning white, experiencing the greatest rush she ever felt. Heart beats as if it could burst out of her ample chest. A strength tightens her **muscles she didn't even know she had**. While she moans at finally experiencing her deepest desire among secret desires. The sensation of a fountain of man's warmth gushing forth inside of her body.

...

With the rush of orgasm still settling, Conrad becomes aware again of his surroundings. No longer squeezing Primrose tight, he now hugs her with affection. His mind turns to a panic for a short instant. What is this he can feel? Why does liquid run down his chest? No, not the milk she still lactates, but higher, where her face is held close. **Is she... crying?**

“Primrose... Is something...?” Yet, he settles down, shoulders easing their suddenly built-up tension. **It’s okay. She’s** not hurt or sad at all. The girl simply needs time and a good hug. She cries, yes, that much is true.

She sheds tears of happiness.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 8



Succession of Life

Primrose playfully wraps her naked body with a part of the bed sheets, not feeling like getting dressed just yet. A devious gaze aimed at Conrad as she turns to face him. Exactly how he described her in the oil bath, before taking the girl to his private room to spend the night together locked in embrace. The young vulpes well aware of her charms, and now confident in them. A cute, little fox, with just the right amount of slutty. Reveling in the fact she could offer a nipple slip at any moment. Comfortable enough to strip naked and give her heart and sexual passion in the presence of an audience and orgy, as long as it means she can be with her chosen man. With a naughty yet well-camouflaged tug, she helps that nipple slip to occur.

The door barges open.

“Dad, the maids serve...” Lisette comes to a stop, “...breakfast.”

Primrose instantly discovers embarrassment again, quickly trying to cover up her deliberate slip. Only succeeding at pulling the sheets so far in front that her round rear is now fully revealed instead. The constant flux of hand gestures make her reasons for being **inside Conrad's bedroom**, with the man still undressed and the girl clumsily wrapped in sheets, all the more obvious.

"I'm sorry!" Lisette closes the door again.

Conrad shrugs his shoulders towards Primrose. No point in keeping their intimate relationship secret. Lisette already knows, and the others will find out one way or the other. Time to get used to it.

*

Lisette already warned the others about breakfast, but her father **heads to Luna's** bedroom anyway, where the older sister and Carrot should have spent the night alongside her. Once entering, it seems Carrot already woke up and left the room. While the pair of sisters are in the midst of morning dress-up.

"How are you feeling?" he asks Luna.

"Tired," she gapes from fatigue.

"She hasn't coughed all morning!" Selena cheers.

"Oh, that's good to hear. And that's a fine color on your cheeks." That she still feels tired is not a surprise, so nothing to worry about. **"Today we'll head to the Woods again, and you'll receive another check-up. That should confirm you're as healthy as a bird crossing the skies."**

Selena jumps from the bed and spreads her arms wide, pretending to be a bird, running around Conrad.

"Think you can get out of bed and join us in the dining room?" he asks her sister.

"Yeah, I believe so."

"Alright, see you there soon," Conrad winks while heading out of the room.

Next stop on the list before heading for breakfast is to **visit Roderik's room**. And the door is already open.

“Morning. How do you feel?” he asks the kid.

Roderik turns around, confused and only half dressed. Wearing the same shirt he was left with in here, missing pants and underwear... for whatever reason.

“What are you searching for?” Conrad asks, noticing Roderik scours the room while half asleep.

“I can’t find my pants.”

“Hmm...” Conrad can only mumble. The boy definitely wore pants last night, when he was out cold. Those don’t tend to walk away on their own or get stolen by leprechauns. And that smirking near the door, where a certain tall-ear girl tries to hide her peeking presence, probably has something to do with it. “Anyway, good job yesterday,” he changes topic. “You’ve proven yourself in combat.”

“I can’t remember much about what happened,” Roderik laments his heroics aren’t fully burned in his memories.

“Yeah, that might be for the best.” Considering how he had to be carried, only to be poked by sticks of curious girls.

Roderik responds confused, not really certain what his mentor hints at.

“Regardless, you earned a reward. I’ve got one in mind, but I’ll have to arrange it first. Can’t make promises yet.”

The boy can barely hide his excitement at earning a reward. What would it be?! A new weapon? A crossbow, maybe?! One of those tiny stealth ones, attached to the wrist! Those are so cool! Or a horse? He can ride his own steed!

“Yeah, well... I’ll be going then,” Conrad heads back to the door. “Good luck on your quest for pants.”

Once he leaves the room, the man gives a pat on Carrot’s back, still peeking into the room while trying to contain her laughter. “Don’t let him search for too long, okay?”

...

Entering the dining room, Primrose just now returns from her early morning tidying in the private bathing rooms.

“Oh, somebody is in an excellent mood,” her grandfather laughs. “Did a joyous event happen, perchance?”

Her ears constantly flick up and down at the tune of a hummed song, while her tail swipes with vigor **left and right like a happy dog**. She **didn't even hear her grandfather**, too absorbed in memories from last night. Not that he needs an answer, holding a pretty **good idea where his little girl's** flowery mood originates from. She **doesn't** really hide it either, particularly clingy the entire breakfast. Her chosen seat right next to Conrad, and dragged that extra bit closer before sitting down on it, hands constantly in contact with his leg or arm.

"I'll renew the enchantment after breakfast, before we leave together," she smiles at him.

Conrad nods. He understands the underlying message. No leaving before she's ready, because his reliable, busy mage definitely comes along for the ride. And to be fair, upsetting that smile would be nothing less than a sin.

Her magic did save their asses and proved to be a great asset to their team. Though it would be a bad idea to grow too familiar and reliant on it. Skills would dull over time, **which would spell disaster in case the enchantment isn't available at a difficult moment**. They may have a stock, yet **those ingredients aren't all that readily available**. Regardless, **those enchantments shouldn't be needed any time soon, with no other unexpected cockatrice hunt on the horizon**. Then again, it wouldn't be unexpected if he knew about it ahead of time.

*

The group arrives back on that same spot in the forest. Following their own tracks **from yesterday was particularly easy this time, with one of Eris' wolf companions** shown up earlier to guide the way. Still feels odd, to have a wild animal in such close proximity. What would go through its mind? Would it actually understand Eris, or does it follow her commands on instinct, with the druid girl acting as the alpha of a tiny pack? Certainly **doesn't seem to be any kind of mind control**. The animal behaves completely normal.

The girl in her typical brown coat comes into view, at exactly that same spot as yesterday and the day before. Where does she even sleep? There are no beds around here.

“Hey there,” Conrad greets her, receiving a polite greeting in return. “We’ve brought Luna for her check-up.”

Eris remembers from yesterday. It was agreed upon they would return. She instantly guides Luna to the same spot of fine ground covered in leaves, preparing her ritual. Once contact has been established with the ground, vines appear once more, tangling around. Then she opens her eyes as they shine a bright blue, observing her patient with a vision which pierces straight into the ethereal.

...

The vines disappear, and Eris’ eyes turn back to normal. Everyone else waits with rapidly growing anxiety at her conclusion. Surely, their effort yesterday paid off? It has to!

...

Eris encompasses the hand of Luna with both her own, face shifting into a mixture of kindness and joy. “You’re completely healed.”

Selena jumps up to Eris and hugs her instantly, making the girl almost stumble over, bird-wing ears flapping. Meanwhile, Luna still processes what she heard.

“I can’t find any harmful traces anymore of her illness. It’s gone,” the young druid clarifies, trying to keep balance. “It will take a couple days to fully recover her strength. I’ll teach you what herb mixture to prepare, so no new illness takes root while she still recovers.”

“Thanks a lot for the help, if there’s anything we can do in turn...” Conrad offers, though Eris shakes her head. No return offer is required.

An unexpected person suddenly takes a step forward. “Um... Is it possible for anyone else to... receive a check?”

Conrad feels a growing sense of worry. Why does Lisette step forward and ask such an ominous question? “Is something wrong? Do you not feel well?!” he asks, unable to hide concern.

“Only a little, over here,” she touches her belly.

“Did you eat something bad? Cramps?” Maybe it’s the type of food at the brothel she isn’t used to.

“It’s just... there was some blood... and...”

Conrad turns all pale. Blood?! What is his daughter talking about?! “Where?!” he grabs her shoulders.

Lisette turns away, hesitating to give the answer. “You know... Around there... Lower.”

Her father’s expression switches to confusion, before reality finally settles in. “Oh...” If this health problem is what he thinks it is... He turns to Eris, noticing she isn’t worried at all, offering her preliminary conclusion.

“Rest assured, that’s nothing strange. Completely normal. It happens to all girls. Some only sooner than others. But to help ease your mind, I’ll take a look.”

Conrad breathes a sigh of relief. So it *is* what he thought about. Lisette is merely confused about her first period. Damn, while definitely an early bloomer, she’s at that age already. And he only met her recently since the day she was born. Seeing his daughter enter this stage of puberty makes reality drive home. Every part which came before, that they were supposed to share together as father and daughter, ripped out of their lives.

“You’ll give her an explanation?” he asks. “Alright then, why don’t all you girls have a good listen?” Or any day soon they’ll come with the same questions about their own body. And let’s face it, he’s not exactly the best source of information on these matters.

Anyway, that explains a lot where Lisette’s conversation the other day came from. Where she asked about his relationships with Carrot and Selena, and her mother Cloe. Curious about the topic of having children. She must have been worried about her first period, and had some idea what it could be, but either wasn’t certain or didn’t really know if she had to do anything. Eris will take care of it.

...

A short while later, the girls all return from their lecture on the birds and the bees. All stress from Lisette gone without a trace. Yup, nothing to worry about, as expected. Eventually, they prepare to head back to Sakai.

“So, as promised... See you tomorrow,” Conrad waves at Eris.

*

A month has gone. Inside the Misty Woods a tasty smell rises, grabbing attention from the pair of wolves hanging around.

Conrad grabs two slices of the meat he roasts and throws it to the animals. Both of them reach for a part and chomp it quick and efficiently.

“Whoa there, easy. You won’t get any of the juicy taste if you wolf it all down in one go.”

Then again, **that’s probably** why they call it wolfing down to begin with. Both pieces only a tiny fraction of what the animals can take in during a single meal. Not leaving anything to chance when it comes to matters as crucial as basic sustenance and survival. If anything, Conrad is the odd one out in nature, as a fellow member of the realm of man. Holding enough intellect to bargain with the unknown. Capable of sacrificing the present to acquire the future.

Some animals seem to follow that same pattern, such as squirrels, gathering nuts for the winter. However, **that’s** a mere instinct, not a rational decision based on evaluation and planning, as intelligent life can make. Though that ability seems to decline as a society falls into decadence, shifting into the opposite. Craving only the immediate present while more than willing to sacrifice the future, not even taken into consideration anymore. Similar to what the wolves do whenever they consume a prey. In many ways, the civilized world outside these Woods slowly turns feral.

Cutting off ears of leporid children, carving out organs of just about anyone, all of it for the immediate enjoyment of those who can afford such **“luxuries”**. **Bandits cut down** and sell out their own people for nothing but a few coins, opting for the quick and dirty route. When they could have used their skills or even that unduly earned coin to invest in long-term growth. Most only spend it on gambling, booze and women, wasted in the span of a single day on nothing but immediate pleasure fulfillment.

The regular folks aren’t much different. Neighbors, friends and families willing to hand each other into the hands of the authorities, for whatever reason desired, if only it means they can escape the Sea of Salt for a day longer. Comforting their beaten and bruised conscientiousness afterwards, with an illusion the unfortunate souls they

stabbed in the back surely must have done something wrong to deserve it at one point or another in their lives.

And really, in the eyes of many, what else is there left, but to live day to day? With the bond to their group actively stripped by the Union, their history erased, the only reality most people are left with is nothing but their current selves. Locked in a world rapidly turning nihilistic.

The wolves tumble over the ground as they play together, waking Conrad from his brooding thoughts.

“You had something on your mind?” a young voice asks him. Eris returned with water from the river, to be cooked so they can drink it with the fresh meal.

“Ah, yeah. Random thoughts that came to mind when seeing those two furry rascals,” he tries to shake off any impression of brooding. “How did you get to know them? I mean, wolves, a bear, birds... You’re popular in these parts of the world.”

“And a daily visit from other people,” she adds with a smile. Even if the others aren’t around today, meaning Conrad and Eris have the Misty Woods entirely to themselves. And the animals, obviously.

“To be honest, I’d like to assume I’m good company.”

The girl laughs at his words. Would that be an affirmative, or does she laugh at his naivety? Conrad decides the first is a lot more desirable, so he’ll stick with it.

“I met the wolves when entering the Woods. We quickly became friends, and they led me here for some reason. Very persistent, they tugged on my maw all the time, not letting me go back.”

“You can’t ask them why?”

“I don’t know. That’s not how it works,” she chuckles at his lack of knowledge on her magic. “Maybe they simply like it more here?”

“And the bear? When did you meet him?”

“I met *her* right here, when she investigated the presence of these wolves in her territory. She does have cubs to protect.”

Eris laughs again when she sees Conrad casually raise an apologetic hand towards the trees and shrubbery, wherever Mommy-Bear may be.

“Sorry for calling you a mean and burly man-bear-grizzly,” he jokes. “I know girls are sensitive about that kind of stuff. You have to believe me, I could easily notice the difference! Slip of the tongue.”

Eris fails to contain her laugh and covers it with her hand, answering for Mommy-Bear. “I’m sure she doesn’t mind the misunderstanding.”

“So, want a bite? I caught enough for two,” Conrad offers a piece of meat to Eris. Only to suddenly feel less secure about this. The girl is a druid. Maybe it’s not a good idea to offer her animal meat?

“What’s the matter?” Eris asks.

“Uh, these weren’t part of your happy clique of forest friends, right?”

Eris glimpses at the rabbits roasted above a fire, before understanding the full depth of his concern. “Oh, no. I can only communicate with noble animals.”

“Right...” Conrad still has no idea what constitutes as noble. This pair of rabbits apparently doesn’t count. Really should have thought about that earlier though. Imagine the potential fallout, if this roasted meat was once known as Snuggles and had a good relationship with her. Definitely would have been somewhat of a mood-breaker. “Druids don’t eat only plant... stuff?”

“True, that I normally eat mushrooms, roots, fruit, berries and such. But we do eat fish, back at home.”

Conrad can feel his smile return. Good, not meat, though they do eat animals then. He tried the aster thing once, that Carrot has going, but damn... There’s nothing above a good steak. Or a fine, juicy chicken leg.

“I have no problem with anyone eating meat,” she adds. “After all, it’s only the natural way of things. We feed from life, taking it as our own. Or we sustain life, by giving ours back to nature.”

Yeah... Conrad would rather not imagine that last part while he’s busy eating. The vision of a corpse crawling with maggots is not his definition of appetizing. “Want some? The rabbit, that is,” he offers once more.

The girl chuckles and looks at the piece of rabbit leg on offer, slowly reaching for it. She observes it closely, clearly not used to seeing meat. And definitely not roasted. She suddenly closes her eyes.

Conrad lets her finish before asking. **“A prayer?”**

“A prayer of thanks to the World Shaper, and of course, to the rabbit.”

The World Shaper? So even in a part of the world sealed off for a thousand years, they have the same God, Cloegandr.

“You don’t do the same?” Eris asks.

“Uh, sure.”

Showing gratitude for a good-old meal. How long ago has that been? Hardly anyone does so anymore on this side of the Woods. How she mentions it as such simple matter of fact, it has to be normal practice over there. Maybe those Woods sheltered them from more than only strangers. **He can’t really call himself a believer anymore. But showing gratitude for a meal? That may not be such a bad idea...**

Conrad closes his eyes and gets lost in a short moment of spiritual thought, thanking the rabbit for all sustenance it provided.

Opening his eyes again, the smell of roasted rabbit enters his nostrils once more. It smells tastier, somehow. Whether it’s any supernatural connection with the animal, simply a flare of nostalgia, or a rare showing of an old and mostly forgotten Virtue known as Humility, he has no idea. Yes, **maybe that gratitude wasn’t such a bad idea at all.**

Satisfied with the mood-shift on **the man’s** face, Eris is now the one taking a good sniff, eyes widening when taking in **the meat’s** rich aroma.

“Not bad, eh?” Conrad smirks at her.

Eris places the meat against her lips and takes a tiny bite. Her pale face turns red while she tries to juggle the piece of meat in her mouth, seeking air.

“Don’t forget to blow, it’s hot.”

With temperature settling down, the girl can enjoy a good taste, quickly seeking another bite, yet hesitating. **“It’s so good!” she** offers her impression. Very good. While also hot enough she’s almost afraid to take another bite, even though her taste buds would definitely like to.

“Just blow it, like this,” Conrad demonstrates with his own piece of rabbit. Unable to contain his laughter.

“Why are you laughing?!”

“You really are something else. Wolves, a bear, hawks, and who knows what kind of weird magic of nature. With enough knowledge about the forest to survive here all alone, and yet you don’t know how to handle hot food.”

“Hum!” Eris pretends being upset, before blowing her food as Conrad demonstrated. Smirk returns when she tastes more juicy meat, this time at a good temperature.

...

“The others didn’t come today?” she suddenly asks.

Conrad came every day for this entire month, as he promised to. Usually, a couple different faces show up to accompany him, though nobody else is here now. No kids from the village arrived today either, as can happen occasionally.

“They help out at the uh... home where we stay.” Home definitely sounds better than a luxury brothel. Eris might acquire the wrong impression, if she even knows the word. “It’s a business, you see, so quite large. And twice a year the entire place receives an extra-good scrubbing.” Even Luna felt strong enough in her recovery to help out. She’s doing great, with that wet cough and fever completely gone. Hopefully, Eris doesn’t ask now what kind of goods this business deals in.

“Ah, I see. So that’s why she’s not here...”

Conrad ponders for a couple seconds, and then figures out who she talks about. “Primrose? Yeah, her grandfather runs the place.” Technically, not anymore. Even so, realistically speaking he still takes most tasks under his wing, effectively running the family business. With major difference the old man can now feel confident in the inheritance. “Don’t worry,” Conrad adds to ease the girl’s mind. “In fact, she’s already looking forward to visit again in coming days. Cleaning should be finished tomorrow.”

Eris relaxes at those words. Good. That means Conrad guessed the intent behind her question correctly. Yesterday, Primrose finally gave up on learning this pact-with-nature magic. No surprise, as she’s not an Alma. It was impossible from the start, not having the

required natural affinity. Yet, she still had to try. Her admittance of defeat definitely brought forth that typical pout. Eris must have been worried she grew annoyed as a result.

“I can’t learn her skills either,” the girl reveals this was indeed the cause of her concern. “She’s very talented.”

“Don’t mind her pouting,” Conrad jokes. “That’s just her being cute.” He imitates Primrose’s ears standing up in frustration, with a matching over-exaggerated pouty-face. Causing Eris to burst out in laughter as a result. “She’s taken an interest in your magic. And I’m pretty certain she likes you,” he turns serious again.

“I see...” Eris shows a warm smile. “But I’m convinced she likes you more. In a different way.”

“Well, yeah. I’m a fortunate man in that area.”

“Yes, the others do as well. They *all* seem to really like you,” Eris ponders deeply, entire body language appearing like she tries to reach the answer to a great mystery. “I wonder why?”

“Ouch.”

That sense of mystery from Eris turns to open amusement. Light payback for the hot rabbit embarrassment.

“I want to believe I’m just a charming guy.”

“Charming?” Eris asks him, blue eyes still twinkling from fun.

“You know. Witty, strong, reliable. All the good stuff... Attractive.”

“Attractive, eh?” she asks teasingly.

Conrad slides his hand over his stubble, giving his best dandy impression. “Sophisticated, but raw and manly, like a wolf. Capable of drawing eyes.”

“The same way the girls draw yours?”

Conrad coughs on his food which almost went down the wrong hole, causing Eris to almost do the same. “You noticed?” he finally gulps down the food.

“It’s hard not to. Especially particular areas appear to catch your attention.”

No point in denying. Besides, there’s not a hint visible from this girl she **doesn’t** enjoy this turn in conversation.

“True,” he admits. “They have certain, powerful charms. I’m only a man.”

“And that’s why you want to be... close?” Eris asks, observing her two wolf companions, a couple, as they lick each other while playing as mates.

Conrad follows her eyes and takes in the same pair, wolves tumbling over the ground, clearly having fun. “Yeah... Exactly like those two. It’s nothing but nature in the end, right? Completely normal.”

Eris turns silent, focused on the play. Lost in thought while enjoying her roasted rabbit.

*

With their meal finished, the silence is finally broken by the druid’s soft voice. “This entire month, you never asked even once.”

“Asked what?”

“Why I don’t want to lead you beyond the Misty Woods.”

Conrad sighs. “Ah, that... But I could say the same. You never asked why I want to go there.”

Eris holds a hand before her mouth, unaware of this until he mentioned. The thought never crossed her mind, her days filled with waiting for him to arrive at always the same time, at the same place. Followed by enjoyable banter like they had earlier, until he leaves temporarily once more.

“Why?” she asks, a sudden need to know growing in intensity with every passing second. “Why do you wish to go beyond?”

She would love to believe he comes here every day only to spend time with her, though that can’t be true. He already decided on such just over a month ago, before he even knew her well enough. No, his repeated visits are only an indicator how strong this man’s desire is to reach her homeland. Strong, yet... He never tried to force her, not even with words of subtle reminder, choosing to remain completely silent. Still, there’s no denying it. His reasons *have* to be important.

“Have you ever heard of the Faceless?”

The girl's mind dives deep into her own memories, starting to mutter eerie words to herself once she hears that one term, a fear underlying her line of ancient scripture.

"For the last Serpent will ask about that which has no face, the forthcoming of the Eternal Night."

"Please, tell me more," Eris asks him, nothing less than intrigued.

She listens intently, about the man's entire life. About the mercenaries known as the Gold Serpents, about the coup on Gleaze's throne, and the deadly betrayal by a dark, monstrous creature known as Grimald. Lastly, she hears about the diary of the former Gold Serpents' leader, and its hidden message how the truth about "the Faceless", the puppet masters behind all events which played out, can be found in the lands of her people. In a place known as Eralthyr.

"The Compendium Labyrinth..." she utters again.

"Do you have an idea?" Conrad asks her, noticing his words must have some kind of significance to her, at a minimum. Why else would she respond in this manner, and utter that eerie sentence? What was that even? And what about that labyrinth?

"I'm sorry, I don't know any specifics," Eris has to break his growing hope for answers. "That line was from a carved scripture, above the sealed door to the Compendium Labyrinth."

"What is that place? Where is it?!"

"It's in Eralthyr, my home. I don't know more, I'm sorry. That door hasn't been opened since long before our people closed ourselves off. That's so long ago not even my parents would know. You'll have to ask..." and she turns silent.

Conrad wants to keep prying, make a deal or beg her if necessary, though he stops himself. Calmness returns after a deep breath or two. To stay optimistic, he acquired a hint. The diary was correct! It has to be. With Eralthyr as a place which still exists. That knowledge in itself will have to do for now.

With his mind returning to equilibrium, a detail suddenly catches attention. "Didn't you say even your parents weren't around back then? When that labyrinth was closed?"

"Yes?" Eris doesn't really understand what he gets at.

“And that was before you sealed off the Misty Woods? Which was a thousand years ago?”

“Uhu?” Eris confirms that to be true again.

“Just how old do you people get?”

“Father now approaches seven centuries.”

Conrad can feel his jaw drop at her completely casual reveal. “Seven centuries?!”

Birds fly up from the sudden outburst. The wolves stop playing and look up confused, before returning to their bonding session. And Eris almost falls backwards, supporting herself on both arms.

“Oh, right. You people don’t grow very old,” she murmurs to herself.

“You’re the exception here, not us! How old were you again?” Appearances could be very deceiving with these folks. She once mentioned being twelve rotations, though who knows how much that actually is. This little girl could be older than his late grandma.

“I’m twelve.”

“Years?” Conrad asks, for certainty she isn’t talking in terms of decades or more.

“Yes, twelve years old. Mother and Father had a vow of abstinence in their marital union until late in their lives.”

Why would they do that? Not that Conrad is a beast like Adrian, though he does have plenty of experience himself, and the prospect of waiting for hundreds of years to seek out the lust of one’s spouse sounds like a lot of hassle and a giant waste of time.

“Isn’t that normal?” Eris asks, now the one confused.

Conrad opens his mouth, desiring to say “Absolutely not”, yet he reconsiders and performs the wise practice of thinking before speaking. “No, it’s completely normal in your situation,” he concludes.

If they grow so old, of course her people take childbirth on an entirely different level. Their population numbers would explode out of control otherwise. To limit the amount of children they have is going to be a requirement. One option is by having a couple of brats early on in life, which comes with risks of a marriage falling apart later on, causing all kinds of potential trouble. Or they cull their numbers one way or another, though no true believer in Cloegandr would perform such an affront to life. Waiting until an old age

seems like the best option for them. Well, seven centuries might not be considered super-old yet in their case.

“So you’re an only child?”

“No, I have a sister.”

Conrad takes another deep breath. That one little fact about her people was exactly what he needed to fully calm down again after finding out the Alma do likely hold answers to his questions.

Eris, however, is still deeply lost in thought from all she heard. Thus, he simply keeps his mouth shut to let her process everything. Only once she breaks out of her thoughts, and her smile returns, does he resume their regular banter.

“So, about that roasted rabbit. What’s the verdict?”

“It was very tasty.”

“There’s plenty of other types of meat out there. I could bring chicken tomorrow. Their juicy legs...” he pretends to wipe up drool. “Much yummy.”

Eris chuckles and nods it’s okay to bring some.

“Oh, except cockatrice meat. I’ll pass on that hunt. Deal?”

“Deal,” she laughs.

The man’s eyes glide downwards. She still wears that exact same coat from the first day he met her. An ugly brown rag, which appears way too large for her. Sometimes, such as is the case right now, a part of her legs can be spotted. Pretty and slender legs, covered in black socks. Just a tip visible of lighter embroidery on them. What would she wear underneath that coat?

A flapping of tiny wings makes him face forward again, noticing Eris flicked her peculiar ears.

“You’re watching...” she mentions casual, friendly. “At certain areas.”

Ah, she refers to their earlier conversation topic, about the other girls and their unmistakable charms. Considering that didn’t go unnoticed, he should have known she would pick up on his vision taking in her young legs.

“I’m only a man,” he repeats the same excuse. “It’s hard to turn away from a particularly pretty girl.”

Eris giggles while muffling her voice. “And I’m such a pretty girl?”

“Without any doubt.”

A shift in body language originates from her. Visibly charmed by his words. “It’s fine, there’s no harm in looking. It’s only nature.”

“Where did you fetch that brown coat from?” he asks.

“Home, maybe?”

Conrad frowns. Nah, that’s not from her home. Doubtful she even took it along. Somehow, it simply doesn’t fit her. That dirty and old rag is such a contrast to her refined facial features, or to that pretty blonde hair, so well maintained. And not to forget, those black socks which look far more elegant and intricate.

“Children from the nearby village brought it for me,” she confirms his guess. “I did not expect this place to be colder than home.”

It really doesn’t feel very chilly inside the Woods for Conrad. Then again, she does spend the night here, possibly without fire. Or maybe she’s simply used to higher temperatures? “Which means, that’s not what you wore when first coming here?”

“No. I wear a dress.”

“Okay, now I’m curious.”

Eris places a finger on her lips and tilts her head left to right. “Hmm...” she seems to try and make up her mind in quite the playful manner, eventually settling on a conclusion. The girl stands upright and reaches for her coat. “It’s always warm at home. And we like to be in touch with nature. So we don’t dress as... thick as you people.”

Various possibilities flash through Conrad’s mind on what she could be wearing, or not wear. In touch with nature, she says... Considering she needs physical contact for her magic, does that mean there’s plenty of skin? This girl does seem conscious of her body and what it can do to a man. Why else would she mention dressing lightly?

“Would you like to enjoy a glimpse?” she asks, slightly embarrassed.

Definitely conscious, Conrad can only conclude. It actually feels like she openly flirts with him, making him want to flirt in return. “I would, yes. But not dressed as thick, you say? I can’t promise my eyes won’t linger on your beauty.”

Eris reaches for the buttons of her coat. **“M-mm... That’s okay,”** she flicks open the buttons, one after the other. Keeping that coat closed for now, while she openly teases. **“You’re only a normal man. It can’t be helped.”**

The coat eventually opens, purposefully slow, while she keenly takes in where his attention shifts. Curious about **the man’s** response, as well as curious about her own.

Conrad’s eyes are firmly focused on the **girl’s** body, no longer paying any attention to anything else in the forest. Eris can read it from his unspoken language. Those wolves right **nearby could turn hostile, and he wouldn’t even notice.** Too captured by the contrast of that ugly coat and what she wears underneath. To be fair, she has to admit this man has a similar effect on her. Like she’s trapped in his gaze, frozen to stone, unable to close that coat again, as long as it means he keeps admiring.

Her outfit is an alluring mix of contrasts. White contrasting with black. Covered warmth with exposed skin. And stuck in a seeming state of undress. With one part of her outfit straight-out a hint of nostalgia for the man observing her.

It’s a dress alright, in the lightest sense possible. A thin piece of semi-transparent white, with small, black flower motifs, sparsely embroidered. It has no sleeves, and no skirt to speak of. Only a feminine top, reminiscent of erotic sleeping wear, held together by only a single bow-tie over her chest. Plenty of skin visible above and below, its tie runs down to her revealed bellybutton and wide-open belly. She wears a tiny poncho made out of white fur, thick and fluffy like a long-**haired rabbit’s.** **It covers only her shoulders and** down to right below her collarbone. At the back, it runs down a little further, almost to her waist, but not quite reaching.

And her bottom? She doesn’t really have one. Not a skirt, at least. Though **it’s the part** of her outfit which is such a nostalgia trip. Celeste and Charlotte would have loved her choice of bottoms. That same kind of black socks they often wore, held up by a garter belt, **with her similarly colored panties in the middle. And that’s it.**

Conrad whistles his admiration at her. Not as thickly dressed? Definitely. In touch with nature? Sure, in a sense. Though if this is how Alma dress, all he can say is that she’s one heck of a sexed-up druid.

“It’s the giver of life,” Eris whispers.

He has no need to ponder on the meaning of her words. Her outfit is one which resembles a shrine maiden to the First Virtue of Cloegandr, a disciple of Life. As a people of druids, it only makes sense the alma would dress in a way which embodies the nature of life itself. To emphasize what she accurately calls the giver of life. Fertility, and what is directly connected to it, the act of reproduction. Her outfit not only looks sexy, it's *meant* to evoke an image of sex and seduction, in honor to Life.

If **Eris'** mother dressed the same, Conrad can only give props to her father, and feel plenty of pity at the same time. That post-marital abstinence thing must have been a **titan's effort**. Though maybe that's part of it as much. Fostering the mental fortitude to resist through actual temptation. Oh well, Conrad is not an Alma. His life will be over before her people are even through a fraction of it. No need for such levels of restraint, and she did invite him to let his eyes feast. Still holding her coat wide open while well aware what runs through his mind.

"**You're** very attractive," he tells her, gaze constantly in doubt on whether to go for her tiny but present breasts, their pale skin-tone seeping through the white cloth trying to cover them, or to slide down towards the lower level, offering flesh of her thighs with that piece of black underwear caught in the middle. A hint of puffed up area visible where **the girl's** pubic mound pushes the cloth outwards, with a clear valley-line visible in the middle from how tight her flimsy panties hug her.

The weirdest feeling ever overcomes Eris when she can notice **Conrad's eyes** glued on that specific part of her body. Her strength almost fades, finding it hard to remain standing. Temperature suddenly rises higher than how she felt underneath that coat. See, *this* is how attraction **should be. Not like back at home where...**

With both man and girl lost in their own world, none of them notice one of the wolves comes closer, approaching Eris.

A sudden yelp from the girl makes her bend down. The wolf stuck its nose right into that puffy delta hidden by her panties, sniffing hard.

Conrad laughs out loud, slapping his knee, while **Eris can't contain her** girly giggling at the ticklish feeling. With both hands, she tries to push the wolf away, even if the animal is

quite determined, drawn to her by the strong release of pheromones it could suddenly notice. Most of that alluring odor originates from this particular area.

“No... Don’t!” Eris almost falls over while giggles turn to open laughter, eventually succeeding at pushing the wolf away. A wet spot from its nose printed into her sexy underwear, making Conrad wonder if any of it could have come from her own body, before the wolf ruined their moment.

With the **animal’s** attention returning back to its mate, Eris sits down, not bothered to wear her coat. **“It’s getting late,”** she mentions.

“Yeah, I guess I should be going.”

Conrad eventually sighs, standing up after delaying over a minute in silence. It really is **about time to return, if he wants to be back before the sun sets. And there’s still work to do in Sakai.**

“See you tomorrow?” Eris all cutesy tilts her head.

Conrad smiles at her. **That’s the first time she asked.** Until today, it has always been the other way around. **“Without the coat hiding your natural beauty?”** he flirts.

“Maybe... If you’re lucky,” she grins while partially hiding her face.

*

The girls perform training with their chosen weapons. Lisette draws her bow under light of a couple torches. The target is barely visible from this distance, with only a small glow of light reaching.

She lets go of the arrow and it zooms through the air, finding the target with a dull plop.

“Oh, very good!” her father congratulates her on a well-placed shot.

Lisette makes a jump in the air from excitement. **“Look, Dad! I did it!”**

“Damn right, you did,” he pats her on the head.

That’s no longer the outer ring of the target she hit, she scored a bull’s eye. Sure, it won’t be possible to repeat that result consistently yet, though it definitely wasn’t a fluke

either. Daytime shots find the bull's eye about a quarter of attempts already. That's excellent progress in such a short amount of time. His little girl has talent!

Selena, Carrot and Roderik take turns sparring against each other. It's a good idea to not always have them fight against him or Adrian. So they don't get too used to their style of fighting. As long as they take it seriously and don't fool around. The trio is cheered on by Luna. Even if she recovered, in her condition of damaged lungs, she will always be at a disadvantage in combat, running out of breath too fast. Picking up a weapon will never really be an option for her. She's doing fine otherwise.

"That spear tip is held too high," he remarks to Selena. "And *you* forgot to notice it," he then gives advice to Carrot. With that dagger, it's all about closing the distance, while Selena has to keep it at all times. If Carrot had noticed the opening, she could have dived under the spear and rush in. Though he can't complain about their progress. If an incident such as the bandits who took Carrot were to repeat itself, any idiot trying to crawl into a wagon with them while only expecting harmless kids is going to regret it.

A servant of the brothel approaches Conrad and whispers him a message.

"Alright, that's enough training for today. Well done everyone," he walks closer to Roderik and pats him on the shoulder. "You come with me."

...

They walk through the hallways, the boy one step behind, no idea what he's needed for. "I won most times today," he proclaims his victory in the training sessions with Selena and Carrot.

"Indeed, you did. You're coming along just fine."

"You believe with this progress, I could have taken on my father in a year or so?"

Conrad laughs out loud at what he hears. "Sorry kid, not a chance! You've got talent and are a quick learner, I'll give you that. But no way could you take on an opponent at the level of your father in only a year's worth of training."

Roderik doesn't seem very bothered, actually liking what he hears.

"Don't forget, your father is the Champion of Gleaze. You've got a tall mountain to climb if you want to match him. He stood alone at the top."

"Maybe after I can beat you?" Roderik asks, not feeling dejected in the least.

“Perhaps, but definitely not assured.” Conrad gives his apprentice an encouraging knock on the shoulder. “One day, yeah, I’m sure you can get there. You have what it takes. That said, beating me is only a step along the way. Even now, I would be capable of putting up a good fight and delay the inevitable, but I would still lose to your father in a fight.”

“You can still improve!” Roderik now encourages his mentor.

“Hah! And you can be damn certain I’ll work on it!”

The boy lowers his head, proud to hear about his father’s skill, though not remaining silent for very long. “What about Mother? I heard a lot about Father, but what about Mom?”

“Ah, Mira. Sorry about that. Let me rectify. Cloe was the one who knew her best. You remember about Cloe, right?”

Roderik nods. He remembers hearing about his mentor’s sister from that talk about their past, including she’s Lisette’s mother.

“I know Mira was headstrong, unafraid of the largest army, jumping into the fray to protect the women she was in charge of. Seen her take out plenty of enemies with a well-aimed bolt or pike during those years of the war. I’ll always respect her for that.”

Conrad stops walking and turns to Roderik, to make sure his next words sink in.

“By looking after my sister, she is the reason Lisette even exists in this world. Honestly, I don’t believe either of us would have made it very long without both your parents. I would have quickly turned into a victim of war, lying on a random battlefield if not for your father’s guidance. And Lisette’s mother would have either cracked mentally or be killed when a breach happened, if not for Mira’s support and protection.”

Very similar to how Mira’s soft touch was the contrast with the harsher parts of his mercenary life, the precious times he could return into a pampered kid again.

Conrad grabs Roderik by both shoulders, putting pressure in them. “You have a lineage to be proud of, so don’t be afraid to show it and keep that chin up.”

“Maybe they could have ran away if not for me?” Roderik replies.

“True, I cannot deny that. Nobody knows what would have happened. But if I had even insinuated they should hold themselves before their child, they would have both beaten

the living shit out of me, deservedly so. Parents protect their children, no matter the circumstances! **That's what being a parent is all about.**"

"You would stay behind for Lisette?"

Conrad gives a quick slap over Roderik's head. "Boy, as one of our own, I would even stay behind for *you*. Someday, you will understand this is a strength, not a weakness."

"When I become a father?"

"That's right. When you have someone close to your heart to fight for. Someone you can cling to when all goes to shit, and you can't count anymore on ideals like honor and nobility to provide all strength you need. Think you are up to the task?"

Roderik ponders deeply for a moment, to answer with determination. "I am!"

"Perfect," Conrad puts force in the boy's shoulders and turns him around, sliding open the door they stand in front of afterwards. "Time to make work of it." And he pushes his apprentice inside the room.

Roderik has no idea what's going on. This is a bedroom. Why are they here?

"Remember that reward I promised you?"

For the cockatrice hunt? Yeah, that was a month ago. Roderik no longer expected that to come. His mentor did mention he would try to make it happen. Which sounded kind of vague, so he assumed it simply didn't work out. Wasn't that supposed to be his own horse, or whatever?

The boy's attention is quickly grabbed by a pair of figures appearing from behind a folding screen, a smile instantly forming. They're Olive and Pepper.

"Sorry it took so long," Conrad clarifies the reason why this reward only happens a month later. "I asked around for who was willing to have you take another step into adulthood. Then I had to give them enough time to reconsider, since this is such an **important matter.**"

Roderik waves secretly at the mother-and-daughter pair, receiving their heartfelt smile in return.

Another light slap promptly follows on his head. "As I said, **this is an important matter! Pay attention.**"

The daughter tries to contain her giggling.

“**These two have volunteered to become** a mother to your children, descendants who can carry on your legacy. To form a lasting bond of family together and become a source of strength. Know the weight of their decision. If you accept, you shall naturally take them as your wives, and make a vow to look after their well-being and that of your **children.**”

Which is what a marriage is really all about. Some would argue the same can be achieved without the formalities, in particular these days, though Conrad disagrees. A marriage is far more than living together and having a family. It should be an **unbreakable vow, made to one’s** husband or wife, as it is equally made to their ancestors and peers. Far more than simply to protect **one’s wife and children.** A vow to also carry on the legacy of those who came before. To ensure a future for those who will come after. And only in *last* place, to find personal happiness. Frankly speaking, the last part is optional, and a luxury. While those mentioned before are nothing less than a duty.

Conrad nods to both mother and daughter, and the pair leave the room again.

“**You are fortunate. As luck wants it, they’re** both fertile at the same time. And that happens to be right at this moment. That said, they will go for now, leaving you alone. Do **you understand why?**”

Roderik is overwhelmed by this sudden turn of events, not really certain what to make of it all yet, while he turns to Conrad and gives his answer. “**To think** it over.”

A hand plops down on his head, praising the boy. “**Exactly!** Take at least an hour to think this over. Do *not* accept this reward if you are not ready to handle the responsibility which comes after.”

Before Conrad heads out, he points at a small table. “**If you** do accept, ring that bell one hour or longer from now, and they will join you to make a son or daughter together. If you are not ready, you do *not* ring that bell, and go to **sleep alone.**”

Roderik nods as the door is closed.

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The boy sits on the bed. An hour passed. Before him, on a table, stands the bell. All he has to do is ring it. If, and only if, he feels ready. For this entire hour, he has done what his mentor instructed him to do. Thoughts spent on the gravity of this situation. What will happen tonight, and far more importantly, what came before his own life and what will happen after. And he reached a conclusion, with not a shred of doubt remaining.

The bell rings.

With a sliding of wood against wood, the door opens shortly after and the sciurini pair enters. They're dressed in white ceremonial robes radiating innocence, joined by an overjoyed expression from both. The daughter holds **her mother's hand in mutual** comfort, a tear ready to roll down.

Elated and grateful their heartfelt offer **wasn't** rejected.

They come to a stop before Roderik, letting the boy gather the words he tries to bring forth.

"I... I thought a lot about this. And I have come to a conclusion."

The stress is harsher than he anticipated. Conrad sure **wasn't** kidding when he used the term gravity.

"As you know, my mentor tries to head beyond the Misty Woods. To stop an evil from destroying our lands. Or at a minimum... **to find out how it's involved."** Roderik jumps up from the bed, standing tall on his feet. **"And that's why I must go with him!** Because if **he's right, that evil has to be stopped! Because if we don't..."**

His face turned pale, afraid to even say the words. **"...You two will also be harmed. And I can't allow that!"**

Tears roll from Olive's eyes, while Pepper pinks away one of her own.

"So, knowing that, if I'm still good enough... I would like to be the father of our children, and take you both as my wife!"

...

Behind the sliding door, Conrad stops leaning against the room and smiles. He heard enough. His apprentice already found a reason to **fight, and now it's time to grant them** their privacy.

*

Roderik tries to catch air while Olive smothers him between her breasts, no longer trying to contain her tears. The moment she lets go, the boy is pulled into the arms of Pepper instead, placing her head over his chest to seek closeness.

“Heh... hehe,” Roderik can’t hold a tear of his own, trying to hide it with laughter. Not really with a clue what drives his emotions so strongly, only that he never felt as happy before.

The three of them fall onto the bed as one, as the boy can feel his clothes get stripped with remarkable efficiency and haste.

“Roderik,” Olive calls for him. No longer using Master, as they are now to be husband and wife, even if the ceremony has to wait.

The boy turns towards Olive, answering her call, while Pepper is busy working on his pants. Olive has opened up her white robe, offering herself in whatever way he pleases.

He reaches for her nipple and takes it in, sucking with more energy and strength than the previous times he slept with them. Meanwhile, his pants drop to the floor, removed by Pepper.

“Look,” Olive whispers to him.

Roderik takes the nipple sideways in his mouth, nibbling on it while observing Pepper. The youngest opens her own matching robe, crawling on the bed, squirrel ears constantly twitching from anticipation.

“My dear daughter, your wife, wants to be first to make a baby.” Olive chuckles when she feels Roderik’s penis jump up in joy at her words, already drooling at the prospect. “Will you put a baby in her, before you put one in me?”

She **can’t hide** amusement when her young husband already moves his hips, even if he **hasn’t slipped** in yet.

Those hips freeze, feeling the girl on top take him in. He has no more need to thrust, as the girl already rides him instead. The young sciurini places one hand on his abs, while the other seeks his extended palm, fingers interlocking with his.

Olive can't help pink another tear away at witnessing her own daughter take her final step into womanhood, about to receive the seed of a man, and carry the fruit of their labor. The woman herself realizes, during this night, she will become a quite young grandmother, and a mother once more herself. A first dose of seed already claims the fertility of her daughter.

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Conrad leans back against a tree, not minding the wolf beside him, shoving its head into his leg. "Yeah, you're a good girl," he gives the wolf a pet. "Just make sure your buddy doesn't turn jealous."

In response, he receives a prod to his other side, from the other wolf.

"I wasn't bad-talking you, really. Yeah, you're a good boy too."

Fleas were a worry at first, even if Eris insists they don't carry any. On such matters, all he can do is trust the wise druid, and hope he's not left scratching his legs from itch before the day is over. Maybe she's an animal doctor as well, and that's why these two don't have parasites or rabies. They do appear to be in good health.

"Found you!" Selena yells out in the direction of Conrad.

The man turns around to look right behind him. "Well, she got you. Too bad."

Carrot mopes from behind his back, revealing herself. "I thought this would be a great hiding spot..."

It probably was, if not for those long rabbit ears sticking out.

"Only Eris, Lisette, Primrose and Luna left," Selena boasts her admirable success rate.

"Only..." Conrad repeats. Wouldn't that be everyone other than Carrot? Can't say she isn't optimistic.

The girls were playing hide and seek for a while now. This place is a good spot for it, though probably not the fairest. Eris has been hard to catch during every round so far. And Conrad has this sneaking suspicion that's only because she allows herself to be caught. By communicating with her animal companions, she should have a good idea where everyone is when searching them, or where to hide when someone else searches.

But it's a children's game. Fairness isn't a requirement. As long as they have fun. Besides, later on in life they can't count on fairness or equal treatment either. There's no place for it in nature.

Roderik isn't around. He spends the day with his wives. They have plenty to talk about, no doubt.

After Carrot and Selena left, one of the wolves lifts its head at another individual approaching.

"Not afraid to get caught?" Conrad asks.

"I know where they are," Eris confirms earlier suspicions. She *does* know, thanks to her forest friends. That bird of prey flying overhead did resemble the one leading Conrad's group to the cockatrice nest. Must be how she keeps an eye on them.

"Does it let you know where they are? Or can you see through the bird's eyes?"

Eris touches a tree in front of the man and lets her magic do its work. Vines grow from a branch up ahead, running downwards, where they tangle together. The girl sits on them like on a swing. "I can do both. But listening to the forest's **whispers** with my own ears is far easier than seeing through the eyes of another."

For the entire day, she wore that over-sized coat again. Only now, when sitting on the swing of vines, does she start to open it.

"It's warm today," she keeps her attention towards Conrad.

"It is..."

Not particularly warmer than yesterday, though he has no intention of taking away her excuse to remove that coat.

Her legs dangle in mid-air, swinging alternately. A gentle breeze tugs on her flimsy dress, the one string tying it together over her chest appears as if it could fail in its task at any time. With one arm holding tall onto the vines, she lifts the other before her mouth and signals Conrad to be silent. Then the vines pull the swing upwards, into the canopy.

Breathing of a girl makes the man **look aside**. It's Luna, short on breath from trying to find a new hiding spot, seeking to avoid her sister. She decides bravely on climbing into the tree, quick to give up before reaching even the lowest branch.

Yeah, that wasn't going to work out, not with her stamina already gone.

“*Gotcha!*” Selena dashes from outside a bush, grabbing her sister from behind.

“Eh!” Luna ekes out in surprise, jump-scare making her heart go wild. Playfully, she bashes her tiny fist on her sister. “Don’t ... scare me like that!” she has to gasp for air in the middle of her sentence, before joining the laughter of her sister.

“Don’t forget to take rest soon,” Conrad cautions her. To be tired is not really an issue, definitely not when she has fun. He knows the feeling well enough of how satisfying a day can be when all energy has been depleted. That said, she shouldn’t exert herself. Only out and recovered recently, Luna still needs to learn her limits.

“So...” Selena approaches Conrad. “Have you seen any of the others?”

Above her, he can spot Eris inside the canopy, casually peering down. “I have, indeed,” Conrad answers. “I’m looking at one right now.”

Selena shows faked grumpiness, thinking he either talks about her or Luna. Thus, she tries bargaining. “How about I sneak into your room tonight?”

“Don’t you do that anyway?” Often together with Carrot and Primrose.

“But I might decide not to,” Selena smirks at him.

Conrad rubs his stubble. “A very convincing point,” he admits. “I’ve seen a pair of fox ears head into that direction at the start of your game.”

Selena’s grin widens and she hunches forward, kissing him on the cheek. “Time for a fox hunt!” she boasts.

“See you tonight!” Conrad yells after her, amused.

He stares up towards Eris again, lifting his shoulders. Look, if Primrose doesn’t find out, no harm in it. He doesn’t miss Selena’s warmth tonight, and he did what Eris asked for, remain silent about her location. It’s the perfect deal! Besides, it’s not like he gave specifics. Only a vague direction.

The vines reach downwards again, Eris swinging with her legs once more. “The fox girl might pout if she finds out,” she says.

“Then I’ll seal her lips with a kiss, and she will forgive me.”

“Because she likes you...” Eris can’t really deny his words.

“Would you have forgiven me?”

Eris starts to swing lightly. “I might have. Depends...”

“How much you like me?”

She doesn't answer, only smiling at him. Her swinging comes to a stop, and the girl plays with her thigh-high socks. Lifting up the edge and tracing her finger around to let in air, give her leg a bit of breathing space. “Well, you did not sell out my spot,” her blue irises teasingly burn bright, a clear hint she uses magic.

She lets go of the sock and it slaps back against her thigh, toes alternating up and down in excitement, matched by her wing-like ears spreading. “Maybe I should show some gratitude?” she ponders out loud.

Head tilts, her arms reach up, where vines wrap around. The girl's wrists are tied, as the vines reach lower to wrap around, crawling down her arms. The blue light in her eyes reveals she is the one controlling her own bonds.

Conrad follows the vines with fascination, witnessing them trap the girl in his vision. They slide around her neck, creeping under the woolly poncho, downwards towards her dress. Some dive underneath the semi-transparent cloth, others going over it, seeking waist and hips. A lush green wraps around her thighs and slides over her panties.

The wolves rise again, drawn to that same alluring shower of pheromones as last time. Only to drop shortly after, when a message from the young druid tells them to not interfere this time.

Her own body entranced, the girl wonders if this is what it feels like to be paralyzed. Similar to turning to stone in the vision of a basilisk, only this time it's all attention from a man which makes her feel this way.

A pair of small vines reach for her chest, where a single string holds everything together. Skin visible above, where her chest goes up and down with more need for air than Luna earlier. And skin visible below, where the smooth curves of a young and tight belly reveal their charms.

The small vines wrap around the ends of the string, starting to tug sideways.

With baited breath, Conrad can see the little cord slide, painfully slow.

Until it suddenly pops open, cloth of a dress which looks more like sexy nightwear opening like a curtain, caressing all breast tissue it passes along the way. While buds of

yellow flowers on the vines rapidly grow and open up all at once, forming a colorful canvas around the girl's revealed femininity.

...

The vines lower and start to wither, Eris reaches for her brown coat and covers herself once more.

“Ah! Found the last one!” Selena yells out.

The druid allowed herself to be caught.

*

Conrad wakes up from an afternoon nap. They're still in the Woods. After playing hide and seek, the girls sat around Luna when she was in need of rest. That quickly turned into a napping session for the entire group.

“What a surreal sight,” the man murmurs to himself.

Lisette uses a wolf as a head pillow. Carrot seeks the warm fur of the other one, while Eris claimed that same **wolf's other side**.

Then he chuckles. In a sense, Selena and Luna do the same. The younger sister is **blanketed by Primrose's** thick tail, while the other has her arms around it.

Vision shifts to Eris. She's the only other person awake, observing him in silence.

“So, this is how you sleep, eh?” he whispers to her as to not wake the others. He has always been curious about that little fact. It does look warm as a method. Unconventional, yet warm.

She **moves her head ambiguously**. It isn't? He really thought she must have spent the night like this.

“Similar, but different,” she returns to him, maintaining an aura of mystery.

Conrad frowns at her words. What could be similar yet different? That poncho wouldn't count. It has the fur, but it's not nearly large enough to be of any practical use. **Maybe she can grow it using her magic?** Hmm, but he hasn't seen such an ability from her. So far, it's restricted to plants and connecting to animals only. **And there's no such thing as furry plants, is there?**

“Curious?” she asks. There’s something in those pretty eyes... The same emotion she has when flirting, only stronger. And just a bit naughty.

She grins when Conrad nods at her, removing her arm from the wolf to carefully stand up. Without saying another word to keep the others sleeping, she begins to walk. Stopping once while turning her face to Conrad, indicating his presence is desired.

...

They walked for about five minutes. Where does she lead him? He hunted in these Woods a couple times, though not in this direction. Near a river on the other side was his usual hunting ground.

There’s no need to be worried about the others. They have the wolves to keep them safe. Not that there’s anything dangerous around. Small predators will avoid the wolves, and large ones are loyal to Eris. Only a cockatrice would be a threat, and **there aren’t any** of those nasty creatures around on this side of the Woods currently.

The area opens up into a small, rocky outcropping.

“A cave?”

Eris reaches for Conrad’s hand. He’s not really sure why. Is she trying to ease his mind? Or maybe she merely wants to guide him? Not that he’s afraid. That cave has claw marks on it, from a bear it looks like, though that’s not a rare sight. Probably abandoned by now. Yeah, sleeping in the cave does have the advantage of staying dry when it rains, though it does come with hassles as well. Chances are high bats claimed it as a home. And those tend to filthy the place.

He takes a good breath through his nose. Huh, no smell of bat poop, and no visual indicator of any either near the entrance. Looks like this cave is clean. Actually, it smells quite nice. Flowery.

Eris pauses at the entrance. She seems deeply **lost in thought**, so he doesn’t interrupt her. The man has no idea what this is all about, with only conclusion he can make that he has seen that kind of expression before. From Carrot, when she turned around to offer her **help to steal Lisette’s goods back**. Or from Selena, when she freed him from the bandits’ prison. The young druid deliberates on a matter of great importance. And it appears she made up her mind. Expression softening, to guide Conrad inside.

...

“Well, damn,” he utters. “*This is where you sleep?*”

Eris nods at him.

It’s similar alright, yet different. Forget about this cave being abandoned. It’s the home of Mommy-Bear and her two healthy brats. And all three of them are at home right now, sleeping in their den.

The lack of bats is easy to understand. It must be the source of this flowery smell. Plants grow in this cave, nurtured by the amount of sunlight which comes in from the entrance. These plants emit the nice yet **strong smell. Bats probably don’t like it.**

Mother-bear lifts her head and observes the intruders to her home, casually dropping her head down again once noticing Eris. Her cubs are quite big, almost the same size as the wolves already.

“Thanks for the help the other day,” Conrad greets the bear. It’s the same one who rushed at the cockatrice to give it a powerful swipe of her claws.

Under any other condition, he would consider anyone intruding into a bear’s den where a mother protects her cubs as beyond insane. In this case, he learned enough about Eris this last month to feel completely at ease. Her bond with these animals is not one to be taken lightly. They are as devoted as a true Knight to the Lady of the Land.

The cubs have now noticed her presence and walk up towards Eris, still drowsy from sleep. The young druid bends through her knees and gives them a hug.

“That’s a healthy pair of brats she has there,” Conrad remarks. With the size they already are, it won’t be very long before they walk their own path in life.

“She will have a third one soon enough,” Eris replies. “She is fertile. And Papa-Bear is around. He should visit one of these days.”

“And you can sense that all somehow?”

“It’s all part of nature,” she makes it seem completely trivial.

“Wish I could do that...” Conrad laments he’s only a normal man with no latent magic potential.

The cubs return to their mother while Eris reaches out for Conrad’s hand with both of her own. She smiles mysteriously at him.

“What...?” he asks, though she doesn’t reply, only guiding him closer to the bear. Until he sits on his knees in front of the animal, the girl taking place next to him.

Conrad can feel the fur of the large bear as Eris holds his hand down. Then she seeks contact with the ground while keeping one hand on him. Her eyes begin to shine, and little vines crawl up from the ground, feeding her with flow of the local ley-line.

“Ah...” he responds in surprise. His vision shifts, altered by an exterior force. Until she removes his hand from the bear, leaving the man in awe.

“Did you sense it?” the girl asks.

Though she needs no answer. Conrad’s expression of amazement is proof enough. Yes, he could sense it, with sense being the right word. It wasn’t quite seeing, nor was it feeling. A strange combination of both. Eris was right, the bear is fertile. Somehow, he knows it, yet explaining how would be similar to explaining sight to a man who has always been blind.

“It was weird, but... Amazing.” A dormant presence, like a bud of life lying in waiting. Exactly as Eris said, waiting to meet Papa-Bear.

Conrad’s attention is drawn back to his normal senses.

Eris caresses the palm of his hand, sliding the tips of her fingers over it. “I’ve done a lot of thinking since yesterday, after you told me **your story**.” Her eyes still shining bright with energy from the ley-line turn upwards, from deep thoughts towards the man right in front. They capture him with their magical beauty. “I will lead you beyond the Misty Woods...”

Conrad wants to rise up again in jubilation of her words, though he contains himself. She has not finished speaking.

“...On one condition.” Her voice hesitates, changing tone, turning more insecure as she corrects herself. “No, not a condition. A request. Only if you really want to.” Firming her grip around his large palm, she guides it towards her own belly, channeling magic through him, exactly like she did earlier when touching the bear.

Conrad’s mouth opens at the sense of wonder he feels, slowly grasping what her request could be. The girl herself asks, pleading. Her request for reasons only she knows.

“Would you like to... make a little cub with me?”

“Why...?” Conrad can feel that same mysterious sense, focused in the belly of Eris. The girl is without question in her most fertile hour.

“It’s my request,” she seems determined to not state her reasons. Not yet. All he can conclude is that they must be important. Especially since childbirth is such a particularly big deal among her people.

Conrad thinks back on last night, where he had a talk with Roderik about the importance of having children. This is not an outlier situation like the girls who joined the mercenaries. This is not for mental healing, or as a need to earn a living. If he conceives a child with her, right here and now, it would be a conscious decision as an adult male. None of the other girls he sleeps with are fertile yet. Even Primrose with her more developed body turned out to be a late bloomer in her actual fertility. While this case couldn’t be more different.

If he sleeps with this girl, while she can and will conceive, he *has* to take the responsibilities which will assuredly come with the act. Or his words to Roderik would be those of a hypocrite.

“Eris, that means we have to...”

The girl rises higher on her knees, reaching for her black panties. “You don’t... wish to?”

It’s not a matter of wishing. Yes, he wants her, erection already bursting into the seams of his pants. Every measure of strength in his muscles dedicated to keep his body under control and not pin this girl down to take her right now. But... “If we have a child, I’ll have to take you as a wife.”

Eris slowly lowers her panties, her beautiful mound with not a single hair on yet gradually starting to appear in its bared beauty. “And I’ll take you as my husband.”

Spoken lines of sweetness offer far more than only her body or motherhood.

The panties come to a stop, right beneath her revealed vagina. A subconscious sway of her hips luring him with the most powerful of bait.

“Eris... I... I do like you. A lot. But there are others that I also...”

She should know. What she asks for is more than simply sleeping with him like the others do. She seeks the strongest bond of family. Somewhere, he already resigned

himself such bonds would be inevitable, eventually. With Selena, Carrot, and Primrose. They're not fertile yet, though they will be at some point. Until now, he avoided bringing up that topic. Lulled into the comfort none of it was necessary yet. At this very moment, Eris has woken him from that dream.

He certainly doesn't mind taking her as a wife. Though how would she feel about the others? **He can't stop loving them, exactly how he wouldn't be able to undo the spot Eris carved in his heart this last month.** The other girls know that already, **sharing the same bed together, but she...**

Eris leans her back onto the mother bear, the pair of cubs peeking curiously from each side. **"These cubs have brothers and sisters, inside this forest, from the same father."** She pets one of them when the cub pokes its nose against her. **"And yet, the father always comes back here, not forgetting about this mother. Dutifully patrolling a large area to keep threats at bay."**

The girl turns her attention back to Conrad. **"The others... You can love them, as you can love me," she replies without restraint. "And we can be a big, happy family, with lots of children."**

The girl rises tall on her knees, pushing her hips forward. A single finger slides over the top of her peach, drawing attention towards it.

"Would you like to know an alluring detail about me?" she flirts.

The man's eyes are frozen above that line drawn by her black panties, marking what they contained until only moments earlier.

"Yeah, I would..." he can only admit, unable to resist.

A naughty air surrounds the girl when she offers a piece of private information which reveals she understands **this man's** taste in female beauty very well.

"Until as recent as a week ago, I was still too young to have children."

Conrad crawls forward, reaching for her panties, evoking a bright smile from Eris. All resistance fades **at her words. She knows about his quest, and she won't stop him.** She knows about the other girls, and she will share his bed with them, as long as she can be a part of their family. And she equally knows his tastes in girls, and made quite clear she fits all requirements. Pretty, feminine, and particularly young.

He slides the panties across her thighs, thumbs not hesitating to enjoy the warmth of her fair skin as they move across. Eris leans back onto the bear again and lifts her legs, pressed together, a welcoming and temptation-filled grin constantly reminding the man exactly for what purpose he is free to carry on and completely rid her of underwear.

He doesn't cast the wet and stained piece of cloth aside just yet afterwards. His vision **doesn't break from Eris when he holds** her damp panties in front of his nose and inhales deep. Replete with pheromones of a girl in heat. Cloth still radiating her bodily warmth and filled with moist. A most wonderful appetizer, one which instantly makes the man drunk.

Eris pulls her legs up and spreads them wider.

"Oh no, you don't," Conrad says to one of the cubs, placing a hand on its head to stop the animal from getting first dibs.

Before the other cub gets the same idea, drawn by the aura of her leaking fluids, **Conrad lowers between Eris' thighs.** Towards the source of that drunkenness he had only a hint of through her panties. He breathes in deeply, understanding easily why the animals are lured like bees to honey.

A quick flutter bursts through Eris' ears at the warm flow of exhaled breath over her pussy. Her muscles relax once she can feel the tip of a tongue touch, tracing around her mound before it follows her slit.

Both the girl's thumbs caress the man feeding on her, feeling the surface of his cheeks. As a druid, she knows plenty about this part of nature. Yet, to know and to experience are two different matters. Until now, she never **even played with herself. Such desires didn't** even exist, until they culminated unexpectedly yesterday. Until this man wormed his way into her life, starting one month ago when asking such ludicrous things as going back home, returning every day. Obnoxious, **at first, though she wouldn't say it. Until she** found herself looking forward to his daily visits. After flirting with him yesterday, realizing her body had entered its first menstrual cycle, she finally made up her mind.

"Hah~" she takes in more air, back arching. She can feel her own fluids spill forth, feel **them mix with Conrad's saliva.** A bulky mass moving behind her when the bear takes

another look at what happens. The girl knows her furry friend understood on instinct. That the young druid is in the midst of a mating ritual. Her very first.

Conrad doesn't waste his chance to admire the girl, thumbs gliding underneath the garters, taking in the shape of her legs still covered by black socks, and massaging her tiny feet and even tinier toes.

He lifts his head again, drowning into the same longing as the girl in front. He wants her, though one piece has to go first.

With a quick tug, the dress opens and Eris' breasts reveal themselves, moving up and down. All heat radiating from her body draws him near, pants shoved down with fury.

A penis. Another part Eris knows enough about as a druid. Another part she knows nothing about when it comes to experiences. She has seen animals mate, and knows how **it's supposed to work, but never would have guessed** her first contact would be so thrilling, so gripping.

Her fingers prod over the thing's tip, examining it, finding it to be fascinating. The entire rod is such a contradiction of hardness with soft, outer skin. Fingertips flick over the outer tip, where a tiny hole is, covered in fluid. Her hands already smeared in it, while **she can't get enough of playing with it. Pulling its skin back,** she similarly smears it with that stretchy and sticky stuff.

Conrad hunches over Eris and lifts up her head, snatching **the girl's** breath away through a kiss. Those curious fingers stop, her entire body and mind caught in yet another sensation. Not having any experience at all, though she learns quickly.

Both of them chuckle while retaining their kiss, air blowing through their noses, when the bear nudges them out of curiosity. Only then does Eris discover she can actually breathe through her nose during a kiss.

Their mouths separate, and Conrad is rewarded by the dreamy blue eyes of Eris.

The girl's knees push repeatedly into the man's sides. She can't say it, she doesn't dare to say it. Too embarrassing. But common, get the message already!

Conrad snorts a laugh through his nose, grabbing Eris by the waist, holding her close. No need to worry, he understood just fine. **She can't hold it anymore. All these new**

experiences, all this fire which burns inside of her, and that incredible itch. She wants to mate, right now! With a passion.

A massive thrill runs through the girl's body, vibration felt resonating into her legs. Right when his penis established first contact with her slit.

Conrad waits, enduring his strong desire to instantly thrust in.

Both knees push once more into his sides, her face switching between his cock and his eyes. "Pu..." she stumbles over her words, lips whimpering.

"What?" Conrad plays along. "I can't hear you."

The faintest voice reaches his ears, spoken with hunger. **"Put it in..."**

"You want it in?"

"Mm," she confirms in a begging moan, nodding in quick, short bursts, knees encouraging him once more.

Eris can feel herself lowered further onto the bear, all weight entrusted to it. Her attention fully shifts towards his cock, in a mixture of lust with a strange sense of excitement and glee at surrendering her entire being for a man to claim. Realizing he is done teasing and prepares to take her. To put it in, as she so lovingly asked for.

Slowly, she can feel Conrad slip into her, thighs constantly adjusting to feel the man between them, while giving him just enough space to delve deeper down her cleft. Mind trapped by the experience of a foreign object invading her body. Capable of sensing every bit deeper it pushes in search of her fertile womb

Once Conrad can feel his pelvis squish into her young flesh, he holds in place so the girl can take in all new feelings. Her arms and legs constantly change posture, slowly seeking out the place where their connection feels strongest. Facial expression one of wonder, eager to explore more. Far more. As the hot thing she encompasses delightfully pokes and nudges her insides with every move she makes.

Would it still be leaking that fluid from the tip, even now she contains it inside?

A strong thrill of pure lust runs over her body at the mere thought.

Of course it would... And plenty more will leak out soon enough.

Another nasal moan from the girl fills the cave when Conrad moves. The pace is slow, both of them relishing the feeling of intimate contact.

Eris clasps her legs around, and then releases again. What a strange experience, this entire mating thing. The sensation of having her body dug into by a hot and very desirable object. Strange, while nothing less than amazing. Hard and rough, yet so gentle and intimate. And that constant presence of Conrad holding her, like she is safely sheltered from the world. It only makes her want to hold him even closer. Legs clamp around again, loosely, so he has room to keep driving his essence into her.

Eris' eyes shine bright blue. Vines appear from around, a snort from the bear echoing in curiosity of these sudden plants growing all around. Green foliage crawls up the couple and starts to bind them tight. **From Conrad's perspective, it feels like she reaches** around him from all directions, her essence somehow felt from those vines, as if they are a part of her body.

The girl isn't done with her magic. That sense of wonder returns to Conrad. She makes him experience it again, that mixture of sight and feeling. One particular spot in her body radiates like the sun. The spot where a soon-to-be miracle awaits to be conceived.

It only makes Conrad shove in with more energy, ignoring the bump of a curious cub into his side. Whatever it wants can wait. He has a girl to put his seed in. A girl to impregnate, as early as her first menstruation cycle. A girl who seeks to become a wife to him.

He caresses the cheek of Eris while asking. **"Are you sure?"**

She looks up and seals his lips, barely reaching. That is her answer. Of course, she is certain. He's about to make it happen, and that is exactly what she desires, ever more certain of her decision.

Eris' arms hold tight in invitation, legs close in eagerness, bird-wing ears stretch wide in wonder, while vines wrap around to trap them in this moment of sheer delight. Just faintly, Conrad thinks he heard a word of thanks, hidden under a gasp of pleasure. Right before his seed gushes forward to bathe that source of wonder he can feel radiating from Eris into matching fertility.

While the young druid girl basks with full commitment in the marvel that is conception of a new life.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 9



Into Myth and Legend

Primrose barges into the bedroom. “The wagons are ready to be loaded... Ah! That’s not fair!”

Selena turns her face and playfully sticks out her tongue, sitting right on top of Conrad. The girl’s hips don’t stop rotating even for a split second while her hands are daintily held free, right next to her own body, granting her an air of innocent childishness during the act of sex.

Carrot lies on her naked belly, legs skipping in the air, head resting on her chin, observing her friend riding Conrad. “We went first, because you weren’t around,” she speaks casually.

Primrose pouts while all hairs from her tail rise in anger. Not much required to calm her down again, as those hairs quickly relax once she can feel Conrad’s palm fondling her ear.

“Don’t worry love, you’ll get your turn. Don’t forget, you were first last night. It’s only fair.”

The girl mellows and drops onto the bed, already dreaming off at her love and friend in the midst of shared sexual ecstasy.

*

While the last supplies are loaded, an old grandfather observes with mixed feelings. “It’s hard to believe, finally someone will set off towards the Misty Woods and not return empty handed.” Though he has to admit, as much as he feels thrills in his aging body to be capable of living through these times, eagerly looking forward to their return and all tales which will come with it, this adventure also brings a sense of parting. “You make sure to keep those eyes and ears wide open, got it?!” he advises towards his granddaughter.

“We’ll take good care of her,” Conrad wraps an arm around her shoulder after placing down a crate.

“Maybe I’ll still see our household grow larger before I leave this world, ha-ha!”

“G... Grandpa!” the girl lowers her ears, fidgeting with her tail all shy.

The old man laughs while walking away, heading towards Olive and Pepper. Both of them particularly clingy around Roderik. The boy wanted to help load at first, though Conrad rejected his offer. Since his soon-to-be wives stay here, he should spend time with them.

“All done,” Adrian places down the last of their supplies.

They’re ready to head out and venture into the great unknown.

*

“Do you believe they will have a tail?” Roderik asks along the way.

Conrad wonders for a second, figuring out he asks about his kids with the sciurini pair, and gives the honest answer. “I have no idea. Anyway, you’re destined to find out.”

Primrose is a half, and she has one. Whether that's because she takes after her mother, or that's a norm, he wouldn't know.

"I'm going to be a father..." the boy grins ear to ear.

"We'll be back long before they are born. You'll see them straight after they pop out," Conrad bumps a fist against his apprentice. "And you make certain they stay safe. That's your duty."

"I'll come back a seasoned warrior!"

...

The wagons come to a stop. They arrived at the entrance to the woods. The same road they tried before and failed to traverse till its end. A blonde girl in a brown coat already waits. Once Conrad steps off the wagon, Eris removes her coat.

"Wha...?" Roderik responds, only used to Eris in her brown outfit. What a contrast with her current... dress? Underwear? What should he even call it?

"Don't get any ideas," Conrad raises an eyebrow at him. "She's already taken."

Best make that clear right away. Like with the rest of their group, Adrian won't be an issue, even if Conrad marries Eris, because she's far too young for the man's taste. The boy on the other hand should know not to let his hormones gain the better of him.

To prove his point, Conrad embraces Eris and gives her a lover's kiss.

Once their lips detach, she places a hand on a tree branch next to her and activates her magic, guiding the man's palm over her belly. "Can you feel it?" she beams at him with joy and warmth.

Conrad can't hear the girls giggling anymore, nor can he even sense the atmosphere all around them. Attention entirely trapped by the presence he can detect inside Eris' womb. Tiny, fragile, yet filled with the essence of Life. The fruit of what happened in the bear cave yesterday.

He wraps his arms around Eris once more and hugs her tight, desiring simply to feel her presence, share this moment with her. Eventually, lifting the girl up into the air, causing her to laugh out loud to try and hide her rising tears in shared joy.

It has been so long since he last felt this exact same experience. Back when Cloe and Annette were confirmed pregnant. Now he found that feeling again, he doesn't want to let it go anymore.

Introducing Eris as another partner in love won't be necessary, though he does it regardless, wrapping an arm around her and showing the girl to the others. They already knew since last night. Though the pregnancy part comes as a surprise.

"Can we do that magic thing?!" Luna asks, curious to know how it is like to do that mystical sensing Conrad just experienced.

Eris smiles at her and gives a nod.

"But not too long, okay?" Conrad advises. "Don't overdo that magic use. And no pressuring her," he remarks to the others.

He can't deny being worried, remembering what happened when Cloe was under heavy stress and had to give birth. It required a miracle to save Lisette. This situation isn't anything remotely similar, and yet, he just can't help it. Eris should take it easy.

Regardless, this is also a great opportunity. The girls have all gathered around, and are practically at each other's hair for who gets to sense first. All in good fun, of course. It's definitely a fine way to start out their new relationship with Eris. Just look at those happy faces and hear their joyous laughter. Most probably wonder what it would be like to become a mother themselves. And Conrad has to admit, with all who share his bed, he feels even stronger now in desire to see that outcome happen.

*

They were travelling for a while now. It won't be long, before that persistent and obnoxious fog will show up. Last time, the fog might as well have been an impenetrable wall, sending them back with complete perfection. Somehow, they should be able to make it past this time. He has no idea how, though has no doubt they will be successful.

Eris lightly touches his wrist. It's time to stop the horses as the first hints of fog appear up ahead.

Nobody speaks a word. Eris remains silent as she climbs off the wagon, while the **others don't want to interrupt what she's** about to do. She walks ahead of them, touching the ground, magic activated. The girl follows along an unseen path, touching every shrub and tree along the way, following the ley-line to where it's most powerful. Until she stops, still in sight of the wagons, yet almost disappeared into the Woods.

She found it... The knot where multiple ley-lines cross, like smaller rivers converging into a larger one, wherever it may flow to or originate from. She lies down on her back, seeking as much contact with the ground as possible. Vines appear from all around, more dense than any time seen before, covering her in a cocoon of greenery and flowers. An aura radiates from the cocoon, coming from inside, pulsing. Makes it seem as if Eris is fused as one with the Woods. Become its beating heart.

Primrose is fascinated by the display. Her arcane knowledge provides a good idea what is going on, even if that magic is unfamiliar to her. The flow of energies at display was triggered by Eris, while practically all its power comes from the ley-lines. With the Woods as her medium, through the form of a pact. And now she will regulate that flow, tune it, to allow these particular outsiders to pass, and only them. Their genetic code added into the memory of the ley-line. **It won't remember** such exceptions to its base programming for very long, though long enough to safely traverse the Woods.

The pulsing light fades, and the vines retract, withering shortly after.

Eris has finished.

...

Both wagons head into the fog, connected by a chain. Visually, nothing changed, and the fog grows as **thick as it did back then. This time, they don't bother with any attempts** at keeping the path.

"Huh...?" Primrose suddenly responds. While a hand reaches for Conrad, coming from Eris.

"What's up?" he asks, curious what caught both of their attention.

"I could feel something which doesn't belong," Eris leans on him, keeping her balance. Whatever it was must have made her dizzy.

"I felt it too!" Primrose joins her.

Conrad brings the horses to a quick stop. “Is there a problem?”

“No, the ley-line responds as it should,” Eris concludes. “This was different. Unrelated.”

He turns to Primrose, hoping she has an idea what happened.

The mage tries to answer his expectations. “It felt like a wide pulse. Very strong at first, and then quickly fading. Right when we crossed the point where it originated.”

Adrian comes up from behind, throwing his first thought into the group. “An alarm?”

What she describes sounds similar to a tripwire alarm, to let some kind of noise go off. The army used such contraptions to protect its stocks from thieving hands. That is, any thieving hands who weren’t sanctioned to deal in black-market goods.

“Possible,” Primrose responds. “They had magical alarms at the Spire, where students weren’t allowed to go. Basically, a burst of stored energy which goes off once conditions are met, a kind of enchantment. It doesn’t really do anything, except let the caster know it was activated.”

“Do the Alma have such alarms?” Conrad asks.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. You’ll have to ask my father.”

“It would make sense they have one, if they don’t want anyone crossing the Woods,” Adrian reasons.

The preliminary conclusion is quickly made for Conrad. “No big deal then, let’s carry on.”

Not like they have any means to figure out more regardless. Heading forward is all they can go with. They can always do as Eris proposed, and ask her father or someone else once they reach Eralthyr. As Adrian reasoned, it would make sense. Simply have “outsiders” as one of those conditions Primrose mentioned for triggering the alarm, anyone not an Alma, and it would warn them of intruders into their domain. Would also explain why the pulse was so strong, if it has to reach far. Eralthyr is the nearest city, and from what Eris explained along the way, it’s a five-day ride by wagon.

Doesn’t matter if they’re warned. Visiting them is the entire purpose of their trip to begin with. And both girls confirmed whatever magic was at work is gone now, without any negative effects.

*

The fog begins to clear. If this would be similar to any previous attempt, their group would find themselves back at the entrance to the Woods any time now.

Remaining fog fades unnaturally quick, and the Misty Woods open up. Both wagons come to a stop.

“We did it...” Conrad mumbles.

From beside him, Lisette leans forward, using her father as support. **“Whoa...”**

Primrose stands up as tall as **she can on the rider’s bench**, ears rising with curiosity, a single hand blocking excess sunlight.

“What’s that?! And look over there!” Selena comes running from the second wagon, dragging her sister along. Adrian and Roderik join immediately afterwards.

Eris only smiles, not really understanding what gets everybody so excited. What’s so odd about her homeland? Definitely leaves her satisfied they enjoy themselves.

“Shit... Are those harpies?!” Adrian wonders out loud, in disbelief at what he sees, eyes tracing a flock of beings in the distance. They’re too big to be regular birds, and there’s something strangely humanoid about them, even if **it’s too far** to enjoy a good view.

“They are,” Eris throws out casually.

“Oh, fuck yeah!” Adrian turns excited. **“Do they have...?”** he gestures over his chest.

“Yes, they have breasts,” Eris replies amused.

“Look at those giant mushrooms!” Luna joins the excitement of her sister.

“That’s a mushroom grove,” Eris explains. **“They grow along extra-damp but shaded spots, near the river.”**

A large, impressive wall of rock stretches out behind the mushroom grove, very steep, and source of that shade. It runs as far as the eye can see, deep into the Alma lands, similar to a gigantic scar. A wide river runs alongside the plateau, or mountain range, or whatever that rock-face is caused by. An explanation follows by Eris when she notices Conrad peer at the river.

“That wall along the river is a remnant from when one of Cloegandr’s heads last broke free of the earth, a long, long time ago.”

“There’s a similar formation running through the Hatori lands,” Primrose adds to that story. “Grandpa always used to say that mountain range was made by the World Shaper! It runs in the same direction. According to legends, that’s how the Sea of Salt was formed when part of the ocean was cut off. It stretches all the way to the Great Mountain Fortress of Sagara!”

Conrad has no idea about any of those stories, but if all are caused by a single neck from the Hydra-God rising from the ground, that has to be one big-ass head.

“Look, so many horses!” Lisette points ahead, not far from where they are. Where a giant herd of wild horses passes the entrance to the Woods.

The land is a mixture of steppes with patches of dense foliage, most of them along the river, like small oases. The herd makes plenty use of the open terrain of the steppes, grazing in a wide area as they go.

“Oh gosh, look!” Lisette suddenly points to the herd. “Over there! At the front!”

“I can’t see!” Luna mopes, trying to follow her sister onto the wagon to gain a better view.

Conrad picks the girl up and places her on his shoulders, staring ahead himself at another living legend walking casually around these lands. The man utters his own amazement. “A unicorn...”

The animal faces them, manes flowing in the wind. It stands out from the rest of the herd through its snowy color, and just a little larger in stature. A long, straight horn decorates its head. The unicorn observes these newcomers to its lands, not particularly concerned.

“He’s the leader of the herd,” Eris remains casual about it all. “Much stronger and faster than a regular wild horse.” This scenery is nothing other than everyday life to her.

There’s no road visible over the steppes or along the river, though the young druid instructs to simply follow the river. It will lead to her home.

*

Early evening. The wagons set up camp for the night in one of those oases, providing a good amount of shelter compared to the open steppes.

“Any dangerous animals we have to watch out for?” Conrad asks from the local expert.

“Only a tempest.”

“The weather doesn’t look bad,” Adrian mentions, standing nearby.

Eris laughs at his misunderstanding. “No, a tempest is what we call a particularly large flock of harpies, large enough to make daytime sky turn to night.” She points at a single harpy sitting in a tree of the oasis. “When alone or in small numbers, like that one, they’re not aggressive.”

Adrian sighs with deep regret.

“What’s wrong?” Eris wonders.

“They are extra-large birds.”

The girl grins at his disappointment. “But they do have breasts,” she pokes fun at him.

“Yeah, but they’re... birds.”

Conrad tries to contain his own snickering. Not that he can’t understand where Adrian’s disappointment originates from. They have some humanoid features, boobs for one, feathered they may be. Though for the most part, they’re merely wild animals. Definitely no cutesy face either.

Trying to make a point perhaps, the harpy in the tree turns its large bird-head to the strangers, tilting it in curiosity.

“You had something else in mind?” the druid girl asks.

“Damn right, I did,” Adrian sighs again. “All legends I heard talked about beautiful women, only winged. You know, a regular woman’s body for the most part. With all the right bits and pieces.”

“Oh, the ones who like to live in trees, sometimes nearby the ocean, and who eat berries and fish?”

“Yeah, yeah! That’s the one!” Adrian rekindles hope again. Not really certain about any of those described traits, but whatever. As long as her words imply what he wants to believe in.

“Sorry, those don’t have what you call a regular woman’s body either,” Eris crushes the man’s hope mercilessly.

Right when he wants to head off towards the wagons in another fresh disappointment of a lifetime, she throws out a line which catches instant attention.

“They do have alma bodies.”

He instantly stops and turns around. Alma? They’re practically the same, only the ears are different. Could it be...?!

“With all the right girly parts,” Eris laughs at him. “They’re not harpies, but called sirens. Some live in Eralthyr.”

Adrian forms a tightened fist in the air. “Dream saved!”

“What dream?” Luna curiously asks, taking a look what all that excitement was about.

“Um, nothing. I just wanted to see a siren once, that’s all,” Adrian answers, suddenly curious about another detail. “Wait, weren’t sirens related to mermaids? Luring sailors with their song onto the cliffs?”

“No, those are mixed up legends again. Sirens are related to harpies, not mermaids. One of their main roosts does live near the ocean, and they do love bathing in its water. They also sing enchantingly. That’s probably where the mix-up comes from.”

The man shrugs his shoulders. Whatever. Pretty fantasy women exist! That’s all he needed to know. The specifics of how accurate legends are is of no concern to him, as long as the right kind of round curves are involved.

Conrad faces towards the river flowing next to the oasis. A large skeleton lies half-buried in the water. “Shouldn’t we be worried about those? I heard of lions before, on the far outskirts of Uskandar. Seems like they live here as well.”

Those bones certainly fit the description. Even bigger than what he expected.

“That’s not a lion,” Eris corrects him. “See, over there? That’s the tail.”

Conrad follows where she points. Oh yeah, it’s hard to see, large parts covered, but... “Are those spikes?” And large ones at that. Overall shape resembles a giant scorpion tail.

“It’s a manticore skeleton,” she gives the answer.

“Isn’t that the super-dangerous venom creature mentioned during our cockatrice hunt?”

“M-hmm,” she confirms.

“Sounds like all the more reason to be careful to me.” Maybe this place isn’t as safe as he anticipated. These lands are far different than what he could have guessed.

“They haven’t been seen in three-hundred years.”

Well, that’s a relief then. Must be either very rare or extinct. “Any other big predators like these around? Dragons?” He just threw out the first example which came to mind which sounds outrageously impossible.

“Those haven’t been seen in over eight-hundred years. Though that’s not unusual for their kind.”

Conrad shakes his head. So much for outrageously impossible.

“Biggest danger is a tempest hunting for prey. Their claws and beak are very strong. But those always hunt on the steppes, usually picking off weaker horses which stray from the herd. They also fish.”

Concerns eased, to a certain degree, Conrad’s attention shifts to the large rock formation they followed along the river. Eris brings up the topic with a sense of awe.

“That’s where the World Shaper brought the Lion of Bournesse in front of his enemies.”

Conrad faces her in surprise. “The Lion of Bournesse? You know of that myth!?”

“Naturally,” she smiles at him. “Didn’t I say so? It was made when Cloegandr last broke free of the earth. That was when it happened.”

Conrad turns back to the rock wall. He has no idea what to believe anymore. Still, something about this geography makes it seem all possible. He certainly *wants* to believe. “What happened afterwards?” he asks.

“Once the enemies of Bournesse were beaten and its people freed, the World Shaper returned to slumber inside the middle of the earth. Where He still recovers from the fight which happened eons ago, at the birth of the cosmos.”

Another myth to match his own knowledge. The creation myth of their world and the cosmos which surrounds it. The unimaginable struggle that followed after the main trio came into existence, Life, Valor and Justice, all part of the same being. Though where

there is suddenly existence, there must also follow the birth of inexistence, to contrast with it. Thus, a second deity took shape immediately after. The Destroyer, Agmus.

As the avatars of existence and inexistence, matter and anti-matter, they naturally battled for supremacy. With existence winning by only a hair's width. All life which currently exists, all ancestors who came before, were born from the blood of the Divine Hydra which was spilled, and the immeasurable energies released during His fight of cosmic proportions. The Fires of Creation which gave birth to the cosmos itself.

Now, eons later, the World Shaper still recovers from the struggle. Asleep within the world He birthed. Or so the stories go, apparently as they do similar for the druids.

Conrad notices his apprentice listened in on their conversation. **"You shouldn't eavesdrop," he gives another one of life's lessons,** though his words lack scorn. There's something in the eyes of that boy which is reminiscent of old times. Very similar to what Eris has when she stares at that rock-wall and imagines the story behind it.

They're both in awe. In full belief every tiny detail of that story is established history. **Conrad wouldn't want to deny them that sense of awe. It's another one of those sources** of strength. One he currently lacks, but once had aplenty in his reach. When the man was only a young boy enacting legend and myth for his sister, wielding a humble stick as a mighty sword.

*

Lisette's melody flows through the air. She really improved on her flute. Makes the campfire look all that extra amount warmer. Their meal is dried jerky, with a local salad courteously offered by Eris in hospitality of her homeland. It consists of mushrooms, green-and-purple colored leaves, and a type of large, red berries.

Carrot and Primrose are the only exceptions, one with only the jerky, and the other with her usual aster diet. That was a headache at first, how to secure enough food for her. Some grow in these lands, but they're not very common. Relying on local supply would have been a risky choice, and Conrad has not the slightest intent on taking risks with any of his lovers.

Only option was to bring enough food along for the ride. Space isn't an issue. The one advantage of asters would be they don't take up much room when pressed together. Even so, they still need a full barrel or two. Preservation was the largest worry. This jerky is a fine example how dried food can work just fine and retain its nutritional value, though that's harder to do with plants.

Luckily, Primrose's grandfather has tall-ears under his care. So that headache was quickly solved once the right person was asked. They bathe the asters in some kind of oil to keep a stock at all times. A barrel should last for a couple months without losing nutrition. It does affect the taste, admittedly. He would like to ask Carrot how that works out, as she finished her meal already, though the girl isn't around. And neither is Primrose for whatever reason.

Standing up, Conrad heads to the wagons. They're probably inside. Hopefully, they aren't fighting again about their respective tribes' fate. Those two got along fine lately, yet one never knows. Feuds aren't always easy to completely put to an end.

Conrad opens the wagon's cover and stares inside, expression locked in time.

Primrose turns red like a tomato, while Carrot is unsure how to respond, quickly relaxing once noticing who caught them.

She drinks from Primrose.

Well... At least they don't fight.

"Girls, seriously," Conrad criticizes them. "I must object to what's going on." He steps onto the wagon and jumps in. "How could you leave me out of your fun?"

Carrot laughs while continuing her dessert, the vulpes girl she drinks from still trying to calm down from being caught.

...

The trio lies naked in the wagon, Primrose using a piece of cloth to wipe her chest covered in plenty of spilled milk.

"How were the oiled asters?" Conrad asks, wiping some lingering milk from his own chin, hoping she isn't here to wash the bad taste of her regular sustenance away.

"They're tasty."

Maybe she went for milky desserts exactly because the meal was good enough to make her hungry for more? **“You’ve eaten it before? With oil on?”**

Carrot peers into her past, speaking with nostalgia. **“Dad liked his asters as an oiled salad. Mom and Cherry preferred pickled or with spices on.”**

He wants to ask why she never mentioned those asters could be prepared as such, though he refrains. Spices and oils must be a luxury no longer affordable for most. Instead, he tries to shift topic to the present again, to something more light in mood. **“So that’s why you wanted a taste of our fine mage here? Because it’s a different pallet?”**

Primrose gives a little squeak when she can feel the man’s arm around her waist squeeze her close, some of that after-spillage clean-up job of her chest already made pointless.

Carrot confirms such was her intent, while crawling closer as well, seeking a head-pat.

It does make sense breast milk is an exception to asters as digestible for her people. You know, with the presence of breasts on leporid **bodies. They won’t be there for fun and games.**

Conrad’s other arm wraps around Carrot to draw her equally close and join Primrose’s chest squishing into his other side.

Okay, so they are for fun and games, yet also for nourishment of their young. **That’s** however not an exception they can rely on for everyday sustenance as a tribe.

Primrose takes some distance and leans before Conrad, her naked breasts jiggling in front, tugged affectionately by gravity. **“Can’t this work to help Carrot’s people? We vulpes can help feed them!”**

She’s excited about her idea, which makes it hard for Conrad to crush **the girl’s** hopes. Even if there’s no other option. **“That won’t work, sorry to say. Trust me, I thought about that option already.”**

In theory, this idea could work. In practice, **it’s not feasible.** Primrose is one of the exceptions as a healthy vulpes. She produces just fine. Sadly, most others her age or older **don’t. In particular outside of their capital, Sakai.**

“There are simply not enough vulpes left who produce milk, caused by their own lack of nutrition or other health issues. It was a good idea, though.” He pulls her closer once

more towards him and Carrot. "I'm sure Carrot appreciates you're putting thought into this."

The leporid girl wraps her own arm around Primrose, creating a three-way, naked hug.

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Three days have gone in peace, traversing across the land while following the river. With the stream entering a gorge, they have no other way than to cross the steppes. Two more days and they will reach their destination. Two more days, and that mystery about the Faceless should be in hand reach. And after that...?

Conrad overlooks the steppes where a large herd of horses rests, lost in thought. After acquiring the answers he seeks, he has no idea what will follow. All things as they come, that little is enough for now.

"Do druids only live in Eralthyr? We haven't passed a single town or village," Selena asks.

She and Luna sit on the front wagon today. Joined by Eris, naturally, as she is the guide. The girl is right, it's odd how they haven't passed even a single tiny hovel or outpost.

"There are other cities," Eris answer. "But those are further away. My home is closest to the Misty Woods. It's also the largest city."

Her people must live thinly divided across the land. Could be another method to keep their numbers from growing, retaining smaller communities. Easier to manage, for one. And the smaller their governmental body in place is, the less chance it grows corrupt and inevitably fails at its task. Also far easier dealt with if it does.

"Do you have any idea how they will receive us?" Conrad asks.

It's the biggest worry on his mind. Eris is kind and hospitable. If she's a good representative of her people, all should be well. Though one never knows. The Alma haven't seen outsiders in a thousand years. What response they'll receive when riding into their city is hard to predict.

“Father will welcome you as guests,” Eris answers very convinced.

Yes, though that doesn’t ease Conrad’s mind very much. Wouldn’t be the first time “guests” get a knife stabbed in the chest during their sleep. Or simply their possessions robbed if they’re lucky. “I hope they treat their guests well,” he mumbles to himself.

“Huh?” Eris tilts her head in confusion. “Why wouldn’t they? That’s what being a guest is all about.” She certainly does feel comfortable they will be received with hospitality.

“I need to pee,” Selena interrupts by tugging on Conrad’s clothes.

He scans the area for potential trouble. Not much to see on the steppes. Other than that large herd of horses. If the animals were to panic and rush past the wagons in a stampede, that could end up dangerous. That said, the horses are far enough removed to quickly make it back into the wagon. And the herd walked alongside them for the entire day now without incidents. The animals don’t pay much heed to the wagons and their occupants, actually.

“Alright, short break. If anything happens, you run back into the nearest wagon without delay.” Might as well take a piss himself.

...

“Oi! Watch where you’re swinging!” Conrad warns Roderik.

The boy laughs while calming down. He almost sprayed up to his mentor. Even if Conrad can’t deny it brought a grin to his face when his apprentice started whirling his tiny dick around while peeing. He used to do that himself as a kid. Got knocked on the head once by a mercenary when accidentally swinging the pee up to the veteran’s pants. That bruise lasted a couple days. He always used to think the guy hit way too hard for punishing a kid. Now, Conrad knows the man held back a lot.

The girls took their pee break on the other side of the wagons, minus the swinging part, for obvious reasons.

Eris still tugs her black panties in place when she appears as first from behind the wagons, a single finger sliding underneath her garters to slap them into place. Makes sense she would be quick to finish, with her minimal type of outfit.

Only now does Conrad notice the wild horses came closer, and Eris stares right at them. At the one white steed standing in front specifically, walking a distance from his herd, stopping about halfway towards the wagons. It's the same unicorn they spotted when first entering these lands. His herd must have followed ever since.

"He wants to know," she speaks softly, focused on the unicorn.

"Know what?" he asks.

"What outsiders are doing here, in these lands." She takes a first step and closes the distance.

Conrad wants to stop her, only to quickly change his mind and decide to stay put. She's the druid here, the animal whisperer. His meddling could only botch up what she intends to do and put her in danger. Instead, he gestures Adrian and the others to keep their distance and stay calm.

Eris reached the unicorn, hands gently reaching for its manes. The animal lowers its head once it feels her touch on its sides, horn stopping just shy of Eris' blonde hair. It appears as if they are forehead to forehead.

"Looks like she talks to it..." Adrian whispers.

"She does talk to it," Conrad returns.

Eventually, the druid lifts her head and brushes the animal through its wild manes. She turns around and heads back towards the wagons, the unicorn overlooking the strangers who await her return. Its head held high, standing tall on four legs, with a calm, noble demeanor. Head lowers once as if it offers a greeting, and the unicorn turns around, back to its herd.

"What did you talk about?" Conrad asks once his expecting wife is back at the wagons.

"I explained Silvermoon why we are here. About the shadow that pursues you, and which you pursue in turn. About the troubles in the lands beyond the Woods."

"Silvermoon?" Roderik sticks his head in the conversation.

"Yes, the unicorn's name," she explains, turning her attention back to Conrad. **"He told me about a shadow he saw once, a long time ago. It wandered these lands. Only to disappear into the Misty Woods, where one now resides."**

"What does he mean with that?" Conrad asks for more details.

“I’m sorry, that’s all I can say.”

“Can’t you ask?” Roderik butts in again.

“We didn’t really speak in words. It’s up to me to interpret what he told. And Silvermoon himself doesn’t really know exactly what he saw that day.”

“How long ago was this?”

“I can only give a rough estimate. Years ago, while less than a decade.”

“Hmm...” Conrad mumbles. Nothing recent then. It sounded ominous, but nothing to worry about for now. Still, it feels like an indicator they’re on the right path.

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Everyone stretches their legs for a while before they head out. Just for a couple minutes to get blood flowing well in their legs.

“It will be about time to head back!” Conrad warns the group while preparing the horses.

The girls played together, running over the steppes, trying to catch each other. Luna is furthest ahead, given more leeway in distance from her friends before they chase her, or she would be caught too easily.

He flicks his tongue when facing around again. Most returned already, except for Luna who **didn’t hear him and is left** gazing at the horses, oblivious to the others’ absence.

A loud yelling comes from aside him, where the girls reached the wagon. It originates from Selena. She suddenly runs back to her sister, spear in hand.

The man quickly **reaches for his weapon. What’s going on?! Why did she yell?!**

“Over there!” Lisette warns her father.

He turns around to face what his daughter points at. “Ah, fuck!” he curses, instantly dashing forward, pursuing Selena. “Get the wagons ready!” he yells to Adrian.

Roderik has no idea what’s going on. What is this sudden panic all about? What was Lisette pointing at? He can’t see anything. Only a dark rain cloud approaches. “Huh,” the kid wonders. That cloud sure approaches fast. A frightening thought forms in the

forefront of his mind. **This might not be a cloud at all... He quickly reaches for his own weapon.**

A vast shadow covers the steppes, flowing threateningly over Conrad and the girl he pursues. **There's** no point in trying to yell at Selena to stop and turn around. **She won't** have enough time to make it back anymore. And Luna, who noticed the wild horses grow restless, still needs to be reached. Best for Selena to keep running at this point, towards her sister, where he can protect them both! From the incoming tempest.

Loud screeching announces the looming threat. It comes from above, where the first harpies dive down. They're scouts for now, sent to test the strength of this unfamiliar prey.

Conrad wants to curse again, this time at seeing Roderik run up to him. The boy followed in pursuit once realizing the true nature of that cloud. His young legs surprisingly fast, catching up well. Honestly, as much as his mentor wants to beat sense into the apprentice **for such a reckless stunt, he's also happy to see him.** He'll need the extra blade with what approaches. Further behind Roderik, Adrian readied the horses and took the front reins. The wagons begin to move.

The first harpy swoops down, bearing its claws at Roderik.

"Dodge!" his mentor yells.

The boy throws himself to the ground and makes a roll, fluttering of wings passing right overhead, claws missing their mark. After leaving his roll, he instantly jumps up again and wastes no time.

A second harpy scout dives in, heading towards Luna.

"Shit!" Conrad curses out loud. He almost caught up with Selena, though neither will make it in time towards the younger sister! **The angle of that harpy's dive, its speed...** They will come just short! And the girl being targeted is frozen in fear at the dark, living cloud bearing down on them.

The harpy shrieks out loud, trying to dodge what is incoming. Its left wing smolders from the fireball which passed, dissipating into the air further ahead. Primrose fired it from the wagons, standing on the rider's bench while holding onto the wagon's cover to

keep balance. Not a direct hit, which was hard to do anyway at such a range on a moving wagon, but good enough to stop the harpy scout.

The tempest however **doesn't show any signs of retreat. They noticed Luna's response,** sense her fear, like a radiant aura signaling every predator in the flock this girl is vulnerable.

"Roderik! Take rear!" Conrad calls out to him once reaching Luna.

The boy doesn't hesitate and instantly takes his mentor's back. He knows what to do. He and his mentor will each take a spot around Luna, covering them from both sides, with Selena as final guard right beside her sister.

"Stay defensive!"

Roderik swallows from stress when he notices a large drift of harpies bend off and shift into attack vector, right towards them. They only have to last a short while, until the wagons arrive. Nevertheless, **against so many claws and beaks, they won't last very long at all!**

A pair of harpies lashes out towards Luna. Conrad intercepts one and carves it up with a single swing. Roderik jumps forward and stabs at the second. It's not a fatal hit, as the animal used a wing to shield itself, but **the boy's attempt** broke off its attack, blocking another pair which followed in its track.

That's one advantage the defenders have. The tempest has vast numbers, yet they **can't all be in one spot at the same time.** Chosen prey is far too small to make good use of their overwhelming numbers, only hindering each other if they try to attack with too many at a time. Those numbers more meant to strike fear in any potential target, usually a herd of wild horses. Drive some from the herd to isolate them, and pick on the weakest.

Staying defensive without giving in to fear, that is the best path to take, to try and get out of this mess.

Wings flapping is the only noise which fills **Luna's ears.** The girl so terrified she wants to squat down and close her eyes, pray it all goes away. However, that would mean she **can't see her sister anymore. While fear of the harpies is enough to shake her legs, the thought of suddenly hearing her sister's scream of mortal danger is far more mortifying.**

No, she can't close her eyes! This way, she can see her sister's yell is not one of impending doom, but a brave lunge forward.

With Conrad and Roderik occupied by a pair of harpies, the older sister thrusts her spear forward, diving the tip into the belly of a harpy. She wants to target another one, though a firm hand on her shoulder draws the girl back with strength.

“Don't rush forward!” Conrad yells at her.

Loud sneering from multiple harpies reveals their anger at a foiled opportunity. They wouldn't have hesitated to switch target from Luna to Selena. One step further ahead from the little girl and she would have been lost to the tempest. All it takes is a single, thin wall of wings and claws to isolate her, and she would be as good as gone.

Another fireball divides a larger cluster. Primrose adjusted her fireball's makeup, turning them time-fused. Force of the explosion strong and wide enough to drive a hole in the dark cloud. Though the harpies' numbers are so vast they simply close the gap again straight after.

The wagons are close, only a couple more seconds and they can climb on. Latch on, if necessary! Once inside, they should be more defensible, though Conrad has no idea how to get the children in there. Those couple extra seconds it will take to climb in will be a total nightmare. If they even manage to reach that point. The main flock is about to arrive. Forget about these first attacks. They're a tiny break in the dam compared to what is about to flush over them!

The coming flood is foreboded by a storm of flapping wings, loud enough to drown out all other sounds. Yet, a strange undertone starts to take form. A low thundering, shaking Conrad's eardrums, as it shakes the ground itself.

The harpies fully surrounded their prey, coming in from multiple angles. They can't stop them all... It's over. Adrian won't arrive in time... The first one already carries out its ferocious attack.

A white flash dashes right passed Conrad, impaling the harpy that was about to gouge him in the back. The source of that loud thunder storms past the harpies' desired prey, flood of predators split apart by a wall of wild horses. The white unicorn casts the harpy it

impaled aside and leads his herd. They rush passed the wagons, Conrad's group caught right in the middle.

"Board the wagons! Now!" he yells.

Adrian instantly jumps off once coming to a stop, to help push the children in the nearest wagon. Luna is lifted onto the first wagon, while Selena receives a push in the back to join her.

"Stay with your sister! Keep her safe!" Conrad shouts at her.

Eris is inside the same wagon. How much fight she can put up from inside a wagon is unknown. Not exactly any ley-lines around to seek direct contact with and draw power from. Trying to talk it out with the harpies is definitely not an option either.

Roderik runs to the second wagon, climbing on. Together with Carrot, the second wagon should have some means of close-combat capability. Complementary to Lisette and Primrose's **ranged potential**. Reins of the first wagon are taken by Adrian, while Conrad will cover him.

"Whereto?!" Adrian asks, seeking to get the horses moving, yet no idea in what direction with all this chaos around them.

"Follow the herd!"

The wagons' **wheels** turn, to join the herd of wild horses, surrounded by all sides.

"Don't fall off!" Conrad shouts towards the second wagon, still tied to the first one. Not certain if they can even hear him with everything going on. Falling down now, with a stampede on all sides and a cloud of nightmares above, would be nothing but an instant death sentence. Yet, simultaneously, this stampede is their best bet for making it out alive with all members intact.

"Try and stay in the middle!" he yells to Adrian, carving down another harpy.

Frankly, Conrad has no idea if directing the horses is even possible under all this chaos. Though if anyone can do it, it's Adrian. He's always been good with horses, for whatever reason.

A vicious shriek dominating both herd and tempest breaks an opening in the cloud.

"What the fuck is that?!"

"It's the Brood-Mother!" Eris sticks her head out of the wagon.

A large figure dives down, about four times the size of a regular man-sized harpy. Giant wings keep the monstrosity in the air, gushing wind around with its wings on pure power. Grotesque, is about all Conrad can describe her. An oversized, particularly fat harpy. A miracle how it can even stay in the air at such a size and mass, though weight can be misleading if she has hollow bones with plenty of fat.

Her bizarre mixture of humanoid characteristics with pure animal only makes the creature more hideous and creepy. Large, saggy tits flop around on a fat giant. The creature seems annoyed, angered, how their routine attempt at catching prey failed. Even worse, the prey and these horses teamed up.

With another loud shriek, the Brood-Mother lets her fury be known. Such insolence will not stand, even if she has to do the work herself!

The Brood-Mother swoops onto the front wagon, testing out these peculiar invaders in her hunting territory. Large claws, strong enough to splinter wood, tear a part of the wagon's cover in the process. **A bag of supplies falls out, instantly trampled by horses as a testament to what would happen if one were to lose balance.**

Conrad struck at her large bird leg, though his sword barely caused a scratch. Should he use the enchantment?! That would work, though **simply slicing off a leg wouldn't stop** that monstrosity. Would even risk make it more furious.

Primrose tries a fireball, yet the harpy matriarch reveals far greater intellect than her flock of minions, recognizing that staff movement instantly as a threat and dodging the fireball with ease. Even more than simply dodge, a swathe of harpies curves through the air like a single living organism with surprising elegance for such eerie creatures, forming a shield between the incoming detonation and their leader.

That Brood-Mother is clever enough to even anticipate the explosion, ordering her minions to take the blast!

A harpy tries to attack from the opened gash in the roof, **fend off by Selena's spear.**

"You're doing great!" Conrad encourages the girl.

She shows resilience and bravery. As much as he wants to help her out, he's stuck here at the front of the wagon where Adrian has to give full attention to keep their panicked horses under some semblance of control. Honestly, **it's amazing he manages to keep**

them going in unison. Meanwhile, relying on Selena to protect the other occupants of the front wagon is all they can do.

Conrad grits his teeth at a sudden change in events. That monstrosity shifted prime interest away from his wagon. Sure, that means the trio of girls in this wagon are safe from its mighty claws. Unfortunately, it also signifies the second wagon and Primrose in particular made themselves into the new prime target. With no way to reach them to offer help.

Thankfully, that wagon has the ranged options. An arrow reaches the first harpy that **wants to dive straight through the back of the cover. Lisette's bow is only for hunting small game, but that eerie human-like chest of the harpies makes for a soft enough target.**

The second one which dives in is greeted by **Roderik's sword.**

Conrad wants to shout out in panic, noticing a strike from right above, heading towards Primrose still trying to ready another fireball **from the rider's bench.** The animal smashes into an invisible wall, falling down low enough to get caught by the horses all around, instantly trampled by hundreds of hooves smashing down in rapid succession.

The man **sighs a breath of relief. Right... She has that enchanted dagger. He should remember well enough how effective those are, having fought against a mage holding such a dagger before. Primrose doesn't have to switch to elemental protection for quick blasts of smaller fireballs, so if she keeps her physical protection up at all times, she should be safe. As long as her gem's energy reserves don't run out.**

Lisette tries another arrow, this time at the Brood-Mother. It found its mark, yet the feeble strength of a **children's practice bow couldn't penetrate.** The animal unbothered by what is not even considered a viable threat.

"Conrad!"

He turns to Adrian, noticing what's up. The unicorn at the front changed angle. **He's** heading through a pair of hills, herd in tow.

"What do we do?!" Adrian asks. "Following them is risky without knowing what lies behind those hills!" Might as well be a dead end, a cliff, or rough terrain their wagons

would smash wheels or axles on. Staying on the steppes until they can reach an oasis would be safest.

However, Conrad already decided on a course of action. **“Follow him!”** He will place his trust in the unicorn, **hoping his hunch isn’t wrong.**

The wagons change vector, heading into the hills and towards the unknown, flanked by the wild herd.

With another fireball dodged, the Brood-Mother tries her hand at taking out that annoying caster. With surprising speed she dives towards Primrose, the girl preparing her barrier, trusting in its capabilities.

The animal smashes into the invisible wall, struggling against it, thrashing wild. An angry sneer thrown at the mage she can see within claw reach, yet **can’t actually touch.** The cover of the wagon quickly damaged by her wild thrashing, and subsequently torn off completely. **All children inside left exposed.** It’s a **sight** which strikes fear in the occupants of the first wagon. Their friends are vulnerable to the rest of the tempest if nothing changes, and fast!

Suddenly, the Brood-Mother breaks off. The beast shrieks in confusion, flight-path unstable, obstructing her own incoming minions. She dives right into some of them, multiple harpies dropping low enough to be trampled as a result.

What’s going on? Conrad tries to wrap his mind around it, but can’t really think of...

Then he puts the puzzle pieces together. A single girl stands near Primrose, holding a dagger in her hand. The blade **won’t have hurt the large beast.** Scratched it maybe. Regardless, that’s enough!

The poison from Carrot’s dagger affects the animal, making it drowsy and disoriented. Effect **won’t be as strong as with a man,** not with **the beast’s large size,** though **it’s strong enough to affect her flying and judgement.**

A protective wing of minions swoops to block another fireball. A failure, as their ordered path is off, the monster not estimating this incoming threat accurately anymore. She managed to dodge the fireball itself, barely, but following explosion forces the creature lower, starting to dive into the herd of horses.

Only a bit lower... **If only the** Brood-Mother would drop just a little lower, she would be caught in the stampede! No matter how large she is, those wings will not be sturdy enough to take so many hooves. And her leathery skin may be sufficiently durable against piercing attacks **to stop Lisette's arrows**, Conrad knows enough about battle against armored opponents to understand the effect of pure blunt force where piercing fails.

Yet, he bites his lip in frustration. It requires great effort on the creature's part, though she manages to recover, pushing horses aside to rise up again, right before she would be engulfed. Another fierce howl of bitter fury rips the skies. The enraged monster lifts her head up high, determined to wreck every one of these pests until their last bone snaps inside her beak!

A dark blur cleaves through the air. The frenzied Brood-Mother **doesn't** even give it a second thought, attention caught by a ball of water buzzing around her head like an annoying fly, constantly trying to nestle around her head. Until that same head suddenly **smashes down from the force of an enchanted arrow piercing through the animal's neck**, tearing her flesh asunder.

Disbelief in her eyes is all which **is left. That one girl... With her puny**, harmless bow!

The ball of water with five glowing lights in it returns to that same **girl...**

Blood soaks out of a wide gash, left by **Lisette's** armor-piercing arrow. Blood equally shoots in the **monster's** eyes from unlimited rage at this turn of events. **If only those annoying lights hadn't distracted her in this disoriented state!** That tiny bitch who sent out that arrow *will* pay. She *will...*

A strong vibration flows instantly through the creature, wing caught in the stampede. Her cry no longer one of anger, but of sheer panic. The tempest storms in all directions as if they just received a myriad of conflicting orders. And the eerie cry suddenly fades, leaving only the cracking of brittle, hollow bird bones, as the Brood-Mother disappears beneath the wall of smashing hooves.

"Conrad, up ahead!" Adrian calls out, unaware how their plight is going.

The unicorn turned again, navigating the last hills. Ahead of them, a large forest looms. The herd heads straight for it.

"Into the forest!" Conrad gives directions.

The Brood-Mother is gone, and the harpies are lost on what to do without her guidance, yet they're still a threat. Only no longer an organized one. Flying around at random, some break off and fly away, while others start to fight among themselves in fresh confusion.

The forest isn't far ahead. Wild horses slow down, as they won't head inside. Their territory is the steppes. Meanwhile, Conrad instructs to keep the pace up.

When the wagons ride to the front, they pass the unicorn. The animal seems serene, in control of the situation. Conrad instantly knows he was right to head into the hills and follow him. **They didn't end up here on accident. He brought them here, to escape the tempest.** Somewhere in the back of his mind, the man expected this. If the herd was truly panicked, they would not have dashed straight towards the harpies.

He gives a nod towards the unicorn as they pass, vision meeting when a subtle **lowering of the animal's head follows. Then the herd picks up its own pace** once more as they head off, seeking distance from the confused tempest.

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The wagons come to a stop, their own horses in desperate need of a breather and calming down. Conrad instantly jumps off to check the well-being of everyone else, hoping all faces are accounted for and filled with cheers of victory.

He lowers forward, leaning on his knees while taking a couple deep breaths. Good, everyone is here, and with no injuries at first sight. He subsequently turns to Luna, about to give her a stern lecture. Strength in his voice fades quickly and turns mellow once noticing she already wet herself in fear during their flight. She learned her lesson. **"Don't run off alone too far anymore, okay?!"** At least the first couple words showed enough anger to drive the point across.

"And you..." he plops his hand down on Selena. **"Don't run off into danger either. Or I'll give you a spanking next time."** He pats her a couple times before taking the girl in his arms. **"...But good job. You kept your cool and protected your family. I respect that a lot, and you make me proud."**

She also helped keep Eris safe inside the wagon. He can't deny her work with the spear was helpful. Without her, neither Adrian nor Silvermoon would have even arrived in time.

"That said, no running off on your own next time," he lets go and chops his palm on her head. "And for you four," he heads towards the rear wagon. "I only have words of praise. You've done well," he gives them all a good hug.

Carrot grins at him when he approaches.

"Alright, I'll admit," he remarks before hugging her tight. "I had my doubts about that poison of yours, but it saved our asses."

He gives a wink to his daughter once everyone calmed down. "Great shot there. Quite amazing what a children's bow can do when enchanted."

"So..." he turns to Eris. "Any idea where we are?"

Conrad doesn't expect immediate danger, or Silvermoon would not have led them here, though there might be a couple troubles to watch out for.

"This is Flower-Tree Nursery, home of the dryads" she replies, completely at ease.

"Nursery? Dryads?" Conrad only knows confusion. Nursery is not a term one would usually associate with a forest. And dryads? What are those?

Eris points at gigantic redwood trees around them. "These can be inhabited by a spirit of the land, a dryad. Then they become a flower-tree, a dryad's home."

"They're not dangerous?" Adrian asks the obvious question.

"Oh, no. They are very friendly," Eris eases his worries.

"Why is it called a nursery?"

"That's a story from a long time ago," she begins.

Though the man has to wonder exactly what a long time would even be in terms of someone who can grow as old as a millennium.

"A group of children ran away from Eralthyr, in search of adventure. But it was the middle of winter..." Eris tells her story. "So when night fell, they began feeling really cold."

Conrad lets his eyes glide over Eris' outfit. Don't exactly need much of a winter if that's their preferred style of outfit. Definitely pleasing, yet chilly.

“The children entered the forest and would not have survived the night from cold. The dryads looked after them, keeping them all warm until morning, when their family came searching.”

“And that’s why it’s called a nursery...” Conrad fills in the end of the story. It’s a nice story, and who knows, it might even have happened.

“That’s why it’s a tradition for parents to come visit here with their children, in honor of the dryads by playing with them.”

“Which means you came here before?” he asks.

“I did, two years ago,” she confirms. “We’re less than a day away from my home.”

That’s good to hear. With them now strayed from the path as a result of the harpy attack, it would be troublesome if Eris had no idea how to get to the city. Might actually be a shortcut?

“They’re so tall!” Roderik runs up to the nearest tree and tries to see how far his arms can reach around the trunk. Not even a fraction.

Moving around with the wagons won’t be an issue inside the forest. There’s no actual path, though there’s enough spacing between the trees to maneuver around, and not much undergrowth. Biggest issue is finding their way inside the forest. Not that the place is huge enough to be a big deal if they were to stray, probably, yet it could make the difference in reaching Eralthyr a day sooner or later. And with both wagons damaged from the Brood-Mother’s assault, Conrad would rather not rely on them for too much longer without an opportunity to make repairs.

However, Eris doesn’t seem worried about becoming lost, only smiling mysteriously when Conrad mentions it.

Suddenly, a light appears from behind a tree, buzzing around the newcomers at a distance.

“Lisette, is that one of yours?”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t recognize that one.”

Now she mentions it, that light does feel different. Yes, feel... Conrad can’t really describe it. Only that, somehow, there’s an aura of unfamiliarity about this one. As if to proof her words, all five of Lisette’s spirits reveal themselves and approach the

newcomer. Makes it all the more obvious they're different. Even the type of shade they cast with their light source is different.

"Whoa," Eris remarks. "Five?!"

"Oh yeah, you haven't seen them yet," Conrad mentions casually.

Eris knew by now Lisette was blessed by the spirits during birth, though she had no idea how many. Hasn't even seen them before.

"M-hmm," Primrose feels an opportunity to do some bragging. "I taught her how to materialize them in her element."

"Can you?" Eris asks curiously.

A couple of Lisette's spirits answer, as she forms a ball of water. Though this is still about the best she can do. At least it's quick and easy to make now.

"I never heard of housing five spirits," Eris still finds it hard to believe. "But if you want more control over them, I'm convinced father can help you. He's a spirit user."

Primrose's golden eyes sparkle energetically at the mention. "Can I meet him too?!" she revels in the opportunity to learn more about a type of magic almost entirely gone from their native lands.

"Sure," Eris smiles.

"So, what is this other light? It feels different," Conrad asks about the foreign spirit buzzing around.

"That's an unrooted dryad," the young druid answers. She explains him the life-cycle of dryads. How they are a kind of earth spirit, different from the ones Lisette has. "They are born in this form, a vibrant light, a lifeform of energy, until they grow old enough to root. That's when they seek out a matching tree."

Always a well-aged redwood. They bond with the tree, taking on a physical shape where the dryad will spend the remainder of life in unison with it. In that form is also how they give birth to new dryad spirits.

"Which means, this is a baby dryad?" Lisette asks.

"Or closer to our age," Eris explains. That being about the age where they will soon take root.

It's also the source behind her lack of worries about getting lost in this forest. Dryads live aplenty in here. If necessary, they will help guide the way, as this one seeks to offer.

"We only have to follow it?" Conrad asks.

The girl nods. That's all there is to it. Thus, their group prepares their wagons after a quick damage check, while Lisette's spirits play around with the young dryad.

*

It's not very easy to see where one is going in here. As a result, Conrad simply leads their horses by hand, walking in front. Wouldn't want a wheel to get stuck between a set of roots. "If dryads are earth spirits, and they're different from Lisette's, what are her spirits then?"

Eris tilts her head, wondering about that same mystery. "I have no idea. I only know of earth spirits. Dryads and leprechauns. But I've never seen these."

"Leprechauns? They don't steal underwear, do they?"

"No...?" Eris chuckles at the question. Where did that rumor come from?

"You can't communicate with them?" Conrad tries a different angle to find out more about his daughter's peculiar power.

"I can talk with the dryad, but not with these."

"Not noble enough?"

Eris moves her head ambiguously, pondering more about this herself. "No, that's not it. It's really odd. It feels like they're not connected to any nature around us, as if they don't really belong here. So I can't establish a connection with them in turn. Maybe Father can explain more? I really don't understand it."

If he's a spirit user, that might be a good idea. Not that Conrad worries about those spirits. He did see them help with taking out the Brood-Mother. Even so, they do involve his daughter. Information about their origin and peculiarities would definitely be appreciated.

The young dryad flashes close to Conrad's face, drawing his attention back from the thoughts he was lost in.

“Right. I’ll follow, little one. Don’t worry.”

With the dryad guiding the way once more, he asks about her kind.

“How do we know which redwood has a dryad spirit housed in it?” They all look the same to him. I mean, as much as trees can look different.

“You’ll see,” Eris replies teasingly.

“What’s this smell?” Carrot asks.

She’s right, there’s a sweet odor welling up inside the forest, and it grows stronger the further they go.

“You’ll find out,” Eris keeps teasing, clearly holding a good idea already.

“Wha~, over there!” Luna points out. She takes a couple steps forward, only to remember the scolding from earlier. Clearly struggling to contain herself, she stays with the group, bouncing on her feet in excitement.

Through the trees, Conrad can spot what caught her attention. “Damn, those are big!” he remarks, marveling at the beauty which unveils itself. He doesn’t even need to ask what they are. So *this* is what a rooted dryad looks like. He should have known, considering the name of this forest. Flower-Tree Nursery.

Giant vines run along the redwood, covering half of its surface. Huge flowers in various colors decorate the trees. The buds are currently closed, though there’s still plenty of their color visible. This redwood has all red flowers, while the one next to it is all blue. And a yellow one just up ahead. Those petals have to be as tall as a man. No, the closer they get, the more Conrad can estimate the flowers are even taller. They would be gigantic when opened. Even now in their closed state, they are a beautiful sight, with the outer ends of their buds coloring the trees.

Source of that sweet odor is no longer a mystery either. Some of those buds release a dense liquid. It leaks out continuously and forms swamp-like pools around the trees.

“What’s that stuff?” he asks.

“Dinner,” Eris smiles at him. “We’ll stay here for the night. The dryads will guide us for the remaining part tomorrow.”

The dryad acting as a guide joins her kin, buzzing around them, where a couple other earth spirits already linger. All of them begin to play, flying around in a group. It actually appears like they play tag.

Conrad approaches one of the numerous pools. Dinner, Eris said. This stuff does smell good. **“This is edible?” he asks.**

Eris scoops some up with her fingers and licks over them. Then she offers those same fingers to Conrad.

He smiles at her. Alright, if that’s how she wants to play... He grabs her palm and places her fingers in his mouth, slowly licking them clean of remaining liquid. Eyes intensely locked with the humored girl’s.

“Mm...” he gives his impression unwittingly. “This stuff is good.” So it is edible. However, what is this stuff even for? Why do the dryads release it? Where does it come from?

“It’s fine to take a twig,” Eris reaches for a low-hanging one. **“They won’t mind.”** She breaks it off, and more of that liquid runs out of the twig from both broken ends.

“It’s throughout the entire tree?” Conrad asks.

Eris nods. Every branch, every root, and the entire trunk has that dense liquid flow through it. She explains its purpose. It benefits the redwood, and it’s essential for the dryads. For the tree, this juice acts as a souped-up source of energy. To be chosen by an earth-spirit means to form a union with it. Through the power of the spirit, the tree will produce this liquid within every fiber of its being, strengthening the tree’s **health and** lifespan while boosting its tenacity.

For the dryads, this liquid is an investment in their offspring. When a new dryad is born, it has no tree to call a home for the entirety of its youth. Yet, even as an energy being, it still needs to find a source of external energy to sustain itself.

A pair of young dryads drop into the nearest pool, submerging entirely in it. A light glows through the translucent liquid. It pulses.

“That’s how the young feed,” Eris takes the side of Conrad, explaining to him. **“The day they take root, they will slowly expend their energy into the creation of similar liquid,**

helped by their chosen tree through the ley-lines its strong roots can reach, sacrificing themselves to their offspring.”

“You’re certain they won’t grow angry we’re snooping their children’s food?”

Eris laughs at Conrad’s question. “No, they won’t. There’s always plenty left over. We gather it for our own use as well. It’s very nutritious, so we don’t need all that much for our needs.”

“And Carrot?” he asks, unsure if they need to touch their stock of asters.

“According to our books, anyone can eat this. Including everyone on the other side of the Misty Woods.”

Carrot curiously scoops some on her own fingers and takes a cautious lick. “Tasty,” she licks them clean.

Another dryad twirls around Conrad, encouraging him to not hold back.

Alright then, dinner it is.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 10



The Siren's Song

It shouldn't be long before Eralthyr shows up on the horizon. Eris turned into a mixed bag of emotions. On one hand, she seems happy to return to her home, and eager to show it to her companions. On the other hand, she appears nervous, constantly flicking through her blonde hair while twitching her ears.

Conrad doesn't bring it up. She's a runaway. For what reason, he doesn't know. Even if she's okay with returning by now, any kid would feel nervous when about to face their angry parents.

An odd feeling encompassed him the entire day. They will finally reach their intended destination. With some hurdles along the way, that final stretch is gradually closed as the wagons' wheels turn while a humble breeze guides them forward. Today, a part of their journey will come to an end. What awaits them afterwards, he cannot even begin to guess. A new destination? Or maybe a goal?

After leaving Flower-tree Nursery, they joined up with the river once more, following that elevated crack in the ground in the shape of a large rock wall. The final oasis is about to be left behind. No need to take rest here, or stock up on water. Conrad can already feel it from **Eris' mannerisms. The city is nearby.**

The oasis opens up, and Conrad has to shield his eyes from bright light shining in them. Excitement wells up from all his companions. **Their destination right ahead. Eris' home. A capital hidden from the rest of the world for a thousand years. Home of the druids, Eralthyr.**

Nobody says a word. Only the weight of a girl felt, **pushing into Conrad's back** while she uses him for support to peer over his shoulders. A floppy ear bouncing against his head makes it obvious that presence has to be Carrot.

No wonder the girls are silent. He **doesn't really know what to say either. He has** witnessed plenty beautiful sights in his life. Some humble, such as the lavender fields of Milgard. Others more of a mystical kind, such as the dryad forest they came from. And this is yet another sight he will never forget.

Surrounded by a large, blue lake, the city of Eralthyr rises to prominence as a marvel of nature. It faces the oncoming outsiders head-on, built against the tall rock wall they have followed since entering these lands, turning into a wide plateau behind the city.

Starting from the rock, the largest construct Conrad has ever seen covers the city. A massive siren, carved out with intricate detail. Her wings spread out wide, protecting the city underneath from numerous waterfalls which flow down from the plateau, like a mother sheltering her nest. **The siren's** feathers carved to act as canals, guiding water into aqueducts and smaller streams, running wide throughout the city, until they reach the outer wall and flow into the lake. From there, water merges into **the river Conrad's** group followed for days now.

As they get closer, it's easy to notice how the city is built in rising layers. Eralthyr is about as tall as it is wide. Each upper layer smaller than the one below. Color pallet is a three-way contrast of the bountiful water's blue, joined by a lush green of plenty of trees and plants, with architectural constructs in a bisque stone. The city has walls, yet only half of them visible. The other half is green with vines.

“Look, it’s like the forest we came from!” Carrot points out.

She’s right. Multiple groups of redwoods decorate the city. Their tall trunks rise above the walls, with color a fine match for the bisque architecture surrounding them.

“Some of them are bonded with a dryad,” Eris adds with pride, overjoyed to see everyone excited about her home.

A single bridge connects surrounding land with the city, extending across the lake. The bridge is so long it will take the wagons about half an hour to pass. A couple small fishing boats can be seen on the lake.

Roderik’s attention slowly turns upwards as they reach closer. Eyes constantly fixated on the gigantic rock sculpture protecting the city. Conrad can only chuckle at the boy’s response. No surprise his apprentice finds it hard to turn away. Eris was right when she described sirens as having the wings of a harpy, but the body of an Alma.

And that protective mother covering the city with her wings **doesn’t** exactly wear anything. Both breasts sculpted with perfection to show their round curves. In bust proportions, she would be somewhere just below Primrose, well-rounded, while not huge. Though **in actual size, with how large that carving is, it’s hard not to notice them.**

“She’s so pretty...” Lisette looks up as well, marveling at the majesty of her stony presence, where even the tiniest feather in those massive wings has an appearance of thousands of fine barbs lined into its surface. Roderik is more interested in the equally impressive details found in the texture of her nipples, carved to an idealistic realism, soaked in eroticism.

“That’s one breathtaking home you have here,” Conrad compliments Eris, feeling his arm tugged by the girl as she latches on.

Still, that one doubt is on **the man’s** mind. How will they be received? His lovely druid wife ensured him they would receive hospitality, yet now this moment of truth approaches, **he can’t help feel** increasingly worried. They will find out soon enough. The bridge had numerous guard posts, though none of them were actually guarded. Makes sense, with how effective the Misty Woods are at keeping out any strangers. Even so, the gate they approach, at the city wall, certainly has a couple guards. And multiple curious faces already peer from various windows and corners at these strange outsiders.

The guards take up position to block the gate. They have a fine set of armor and carry a halberd. Plenty of decorative cloth adorns their outfit.

Conrad readies the reins to slow down his horses, expecting a round of questions about who they are, what they're here for, and how they even reached the city. Until he can feel an encouraging hand tap on his shoulder.

"Keep going," Eris whispers him, while she stands up, using her man's shoulder as steady support.

The guards lower their head and step aside once they notice Eris standing tall and with confidence radiating from her. Once past the gate, the girl sits down again, to take the side of Conrad in clear view of all curious onlookers.

"Are you someone of importance around here?" he asks her.

She wraps her arm around his and grins. "Possibly?"

Conrad shakes his head. Women... Impossible to get a clear answer from them.

"Look! A siren!" Carrot and Lisette both point out at the same time.

He follows their pointed fingers, and can't really believe he didn't notice until now... The girls are right. There's a siren. Multiple sirens, actually. And more than that, this city has a characteristic which blends in so well he didn't even spot it till now.

Each of these levels of the city have their own sub-level. A ground floor, where the Alma live, and an upper floor, where sirens live. Well merged with all surrounding greenery, huts and platforms are built into treetops, with lush gardens onto practically every rooftop. A network of hanging bridges made out of vine and wood connect them all. Some of those bridges reach to the ground level.

It's hard to score a glimpse of the sirens, as most are curious, yet cautious. Peeking from their huts or behind a tree, to peer down onto the wagons. He did spot a wing earlier, though the owner now seeks the comfort of her humble dwelling. Definitely sirens, even if it's hard to gain a good view.

"Told you they live here," Eris playfully sticks the tip of her tongue out.

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The young druid guides them through the lower levels, continuously heading upwards. Her guidance more than helpful, as this place doesn't have a strictly laid-out ground plan. It feels easy to run lost in here. Yet, it's a place where Conrad wouldn't mind running lost in. Regardless, they are here for a reason, and all curious stares don't exactly make for a good mood to have a casual stroll.

Eventually, they reach the upper level, where a single, large building is situated at the base of the giant, carved statue overhead. A trio of divine grounds are marked with an arch, dedicated to Life, Valor and Justice. Well maintained and abundant with offerings.

"Stop here, please," Eris instructs, stepping off the wagon. "We've arrived."

"This is your... home?" Conrad asks.

Eris nods and leads them through the main building's gate, into a large inner court, spacious enough to house multiple redwoods. Dryads definitely took root here, as large flowers adorn them, and those sugary pools could already be smelled from outside the gate.

Adrian can't help join Roderik as they both gaze upwards, situated right beneath the breasts of the siren. "Now that's more like it," the man murmurs. "So much better than those creepy birds."

Though her proportions could be a size larger to really suit his tastes. Doesn't matter, at least the dream is safe. Already determined to have a good stroll around those canopy areas tonight.

...

A man accompanied by a pair of servants comes out of the large building. He tries to keep his composure and refined mannerisms, even if the man is clearly in a rush.

Conrad wants to offer a greeting, though the person of status is ahead of him.

"Eris! Where have you been?!"

The servants hold their position at enough distance to offer a sense of privacy while the man they serve rushes forward.

In front of Eris and her companions, he comes to a stop, recomposing himself. Only now did he have enough free state of mind to notice these newcomers are not of his own people. "You are... not from around?"

“We come from the other side of the Misty Woods,” Conrad explains.

“I brought them here as my guests, Father,” Eris speaks with no hesitation.

The man closely observes everyone present, various thoughts clearly shooting through his mind, though none revealed out in the open. Then he sighs and formally introduces himself.

“My apologies for such an unrefined reception. I am Eldrin of House Faynore, Watcher of Eralthyr. I bid you welcome in our city. As a guest of my daughter, you are naturally my honored guest as well. Therefore, I humbly offer my services and hospitality to you and your entourage.”

“I am Conrad, from Bournesse.”

The man’s eyes widen. **“Oh... Such as the legend.”**

“Yes, my sister Cloe and I were named after the legend.” Though Conrad didn’t mean to draw parallels, simply stating his country as origin. With them as outsiders, it would show some form of respect to give his host that much information at a minimum.

“Please, follow me,” the man instructs.

He guides them to a part of the inner garden, sheltered from wind and with a good amount of shade from the looming trees and the large siren carving hanging above. A stone table decorates the place, with stone seats surrounding it. The pair of servants quickly gathers comfortable cushions and places them on the unusual chairs.

“Please, take a seat,” the man offers. His eyes constantly switch between Conrad and Eris. It’s clear he has words for his daughter, which would make plenty of sense, though decorum seems to obstruct him.

Thus, Conrad throws him a lifeline. **“I’m certain you would like to talk to your daughter. We will gladly wait, taking in the beautiful scenery while enjoying a short rest from our journey.”**

Eris may not really like him bringing her up as a topic, yet it has to be done. This is her father. The man clearly hasn’t seen her in over a month or longer. Eldrin is obviously relieved to find her returned safe and sound. Even if they have family issues, she should exchange a word with him.

The man hesitates, to happily take the offer afterwards. “Eris, where have you been these last months?!”

Conrad keeps quiet where he found her. This should be her place to talk.

“I lived in the Misty Woods.”

“But... Why?! What have I done to you, my dear daughter? To run off like this...”

Eris shows annoyance at the question. Why can’t he understand? “You really don’t know?!” she asks.

“Eris, please, you have to explain. I have no idea!”

She pulls up her nose and turns away, annoyed her father doesn’t understand in the end.

Eldrin sighs, aware she doesn’t want to talk about it for now, shifting his attention back to Conrad. “You have my gratitude for escorting my precious daughter back here safely. There are plenty of dangers out there lately, especially with the harpies...”

“Yes, we ran into those.”

“Dear me! I hope you managed to escape unscathed?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. With some help from a unicorn,” Conrad replies.

“Oh? How unusual... Then again, this is a highly unusual meeting. I understand now how you got here, with help from my daughter, though, may I inquire what brings you to our lands?”

“The Faceless.”

Eldrin rises instantly from his seat, hands firmly placed on the stone table. What he heard is nothing other than shocking to him. Face turning to a worried ponder, stern, observing his guests again only once he shows signs of calming down. “What is your story?” he asks.

Conrad explains the same story he told Eris. His past, and the eventual betrayal of Grimald. A man who is nothing but a mystery known as the Faceless. “The world we know and love is descending into chaos, heading for the demise of many of its peoples,” he adds. “Please, if you have any information, we need to know.”

Eris’ father sinks back onto his chair, sighing deeply, a single hand rubbing over his forehead. “I was afraid this day would come,” the man replies with a fragile tone that

suddenly sounds decades older. He shakes his head, meek in appearance. **“I’m sorry. I advise to drop this issue. Let it go, and return home, to your families if you have them. You are of course free to stay for as long as you wish, but answering that question is...”**

“You cannot tell us?”

The man lost all vigor he had earlier from seeing his daughter again, replying demoralized. **“There’s no point. Therefore, it’s better not to burden oneself with this knowledge, and simply spend our remaining time among loved ones.”**

“But...” Conrad leans forward, placing his own hands on the table, trying to insist. **Surely, they didn’t come here to leave empty handed?!**

“Prophecy cannot be overturned.”

What does he even mean?! What prophecy?!

Suddenly, a third voice announces its presence, female and serene. **“Then why not tell them?”**

Conrad looks up towards the trees. A siren sits elegantly on a branch, wings folded and partially covering her **naked front, giving a sense of modesty even if she doesn’t wear any clothes.**

The figure lets herself tumble backwards, wings spreading wide with an audible flap, and she touches down onto the ground, closing her wings straight away. They could barely spot anything of her main body in that gracious roll. **“Allow me to introduce myself, Conrad of Bournesse,”** she reveals their conversation was heard from the very beginning. **“I am Sylvië of the West.”**

She took **place right next to the old man, who doesn’t seem** surprised at her sudden presence at all. He extends a hand to her and adds to her greeting. **“Sylvië may still be young at the vigorous age of fourteen, however, she is already representative to the sirens in our city. Sylvië’s mother recently handed over her status as Matriarch of the Western Grove. Which makes her the youngest Matriarch ever.”**

Conrad has no idea about particulars, though he gathers she’s an individual of stature, like this man. Her position clearly visible in that she can stand right aside him as equal. He rises from his seat and gives her a courteous bow befitting a Lady. **“It’s a pleasure to be graced with your beautiful presence.”**

She offers a courtesy in return, pleased by his words of flatter. Then she turns her attention to Eldrin. “If the prophecy cannot be avoided, they might as well know. Besides, who ever said it was?”

The man doesn’t seem convinced. “The oracle cannot be wrong. The origin of their words is divine.”

Sylvie doesn’t lose her calm and offers an instant rebuttal. “The origin will be, while the oracle itself is still made up of fallible mortals.”

“You’re saying they might have misinterpreted the message?”

The siren smiles at her colleague’s words. “I made no such conclusion, yet you just did.”

The man grumbles, pondering over their short exchange of words.

A fourth voice throws herself into the conversation, coming from the young, runaway daughter. “If they leave, even if they don’t get their answers, I will go back with them.”

Her father rises up again, strength returning to his words. “Eris! You cannot! Think about your duties. Besides, we all missed you. I missed you! Your sister did, and your soon to be...”

“Hm!” Eris promptly interrupts him, that annoyance from earlier returning. “I will *not* accept the marriage.”

“Eris, everything is arranged already! True, he’s no longer a young man, but he has status. And he’s always been close to you.”

“No, he’s *not*!” she bursts out in emotion, lips shivering with anger, tiny hands squeezed tight. “Not after he insulted Mother!” She tries to contain herself. That decorum part of her education hard at work. Though the girl finds it excruciatingly hard.

Her father appears shocked by her words, unaware what she talks about. “My daughter, **that can’t** be true. Surely, you misunderstand his words. He has always been a friend of our family and respected your mother. He even...”

“He even tried to court her! Before you asked her hand,” Eris breaks decorum again by interrupting her father.

Once more, Eldrin is left in shock. How does she know that?! Yes, his daughter's soon-to-be groom had an eye for the young woman Eldrin took as his wife. But, he never told her as much...

"He told me," Eris reads her father's confusion. "And he *hates* you for it."

Her father falls silent. What is she saying? As long-term friend to the family, the desired groom would do no such thing. However, he can't find even the strength to put it into words. What if...

"Father!" Eris beckons Eldrin's attention. "He called her a *whore!*"

Eris has no issue with the concept of an arranged marriage. It's only the normal way of life for most of them, in particular for one of her status. Regardless, not in an eon worth of time will she marry someone who treads on her mother! One who called her a whore out of petty feelings of spite she passed him over in favor of an older, established man.

Conrad can see Eris' father sink back onto his seat, face left pale. This conversation leaves everyone quiet. That she puts it out in the open like this only drives her point harder.

"Oh... Father, about this matter," Eris starts to calm down. "I bring happy news."

Her father lifts his head, staring absentmindedly at his daughter. Now what?! What more can she say than what was already spoken?

"I am pregnant."

Conrad can witness the facial muscles of her father pull tight before turning to paralysis. Right before a pair of arms swing around him, coming from Eris.

"And this man I love is the father."

Adrian silently whistles to himself at the family drama playing out around the stone table. Now, he finally understands how it must feel for Conrad when he gets them thrown out of another inn by sleeping with the owner's wife.

The lower jaw of Eldrin shivers from loss of all strength, holding his forehead in disbelief.

"Your daughter speaks truth," the siren addresses him. "I can sense it from here. She carries a child. I knew it from the moment she walked past the entrance."

"Why didn't you mention anything?" he murmurs weakened at Sylvië.

“It was not my place to speak.”

Conrad is uncertain what to do or say. Until a friendly nod from the siren encourages him all will be okay, and there’s no need to hesitate. Thus, the man grabs his courage and opens his mouth. **“It’s true. She carries my child, and I fully intend to take your daughter’s hand in marriage. With your approval, naturally...”**

Eris hugs him tighter when she hears those words.

...

A full two minutes passed while her father is left in deep thought. Eventually, he finally lifts his head again and stands up with renewed vigor, facing his daughter while lifting both arms up in a sign of dismay and anger.

“Fine, have it your way! I shall make all necessary arrangements to cancel your already arranged marriage, and prepare a new one with the father of your child. What other choice have you even left me with?!”

The young girl squeezes hard in the palm of her man, who latches on in relief.

“As stubborn as your mother...” Eldrin mumbles as he turns around.

“I do believe she takes after her father in that sense,” Sylvie winks at Eris.

About to leave, Eldrin turns his face halfway, addressing his guests for another important matter. **“I need time to consider your request for answers. Please grant me *that* much. As already promised, my servants will be at your every hand as a sign of our hospitality.”**

After a nod from Conrad, **Eris’** father throws out his final words before he takes his leave and heads back inside.

“Don’t forget to see your mother and sister. They were worried.”

*

With Eldrin gone, Conrad turns to the returned-runaway. **“Are you sure you don’t have anything more to tell him?”**

She doesn't really know what to respond. Clearly, the girl is not left untouched by this short moment of family drama. At least, he has a good enough picture why she ran away. "I don't know what else to say," she mopes.

Sylvië approaches the girl and folds her wings around, giving her the siren version of a hug. "Don't worry, dear. Your father already made up his mind on all issues. Both the family one, and the reason for our guests' visit. He only needs a night to let it all sink in."

Eris makes ample use of her offered comfort and seeks the siren's bosom, while the siren representative offers more words to ease the girl's mind.

"You know how stubborn he is. Stubborn, but reasonable. That's why it took him so long to recognize your discomfort at the choice of groom. He *will* accept your choice, I can assure you that."

She shifts her attention to Conrad, wing moving and touching his cheek. They are barely visible, though tiny, slender fingers are hidden underneath her plumage.

"What a fine choice for a mate," she praises the young druid, turning her eyes next over the various girls present. "Yet, one who cannot be monopolized."

As wings slide alongside Conrad, a naked body is pressed up to him.

"Not that such has to be a deal-breaker," she speaks in her typical, serene voice.

If she is representative of sirens in her mannerism, they have to be very seductive in nature. Quite mature as well, in both her choice of words and open flirtatiousness. Then again, such is to be expected from someone groomed to be in a position as her. Celeste and Charlotte were not much different when performing their duties.

Sylvië shifts her attention to Roderik, just a bit smaller than her in stature. "Oh, what a cute boy."

Once more, she wraps her wings around, with full intent on greeting them all in a manner traditional for sirens. Though whether the eroticism is traditional, is a different matter. The siren is not exactly shy, and uses her folded wings to nudge the boy's head towards her chest of fourteen springs young.

Selena laughs out loud. "Hah! Roderik wants to get lucky!"

Sylvië brings her mouth closer and whispers for only Roderik to hear. "Is that so...? You wish to get lucky with me?" An erotic chuckle leaves her mouth when she can feel the

face buried in her cleavage inadvertently nod. She subsequently goes on to greet the others.

Right when she wants to leave, Conrad tries to catch her attention, unsure how to call her. Does she have a title? Though the siren rejects formalities.

“You can simply call me Sylvië, like close friends.”

“Sylvië, what’s the relationship between your people, and the Alma?”

It would be nice to acquire a better understanding on her position in this city. She seems to be around equal to Eldrin, though that could be appearances if she is his young mistress. Regardless, this siren is definitely close to Eris’ father. Establishing good relationships with her might prove helpful. And a casual chat is always a fine start. In addition, it will help alleviate the last remnants of heavy mood surrounding them. Eris definitely can use a boost right now.

“The Alma and us, we have a mutually beneficial relationship,” she explains.

“What kind of relationship?”

“We are all female, you see. The Alma grant us many children. It’s our tradition those children return to our roost, our natural home. Until they are old enough to mate.” She offers a courtesy again. **“I am Sylvië of the West, so my home roost is in the Western Grove, beside the Abyss.”**

“Abyss?” Conrad asks her.

“A wound in the earth, deeper than the eye can see. Where no man or siren ever set foot, other than one exception a very long time ago.” She smiles at Conrad. **“I believe that one exception was from a faraway place called Bournesse.”**

“You said the relationship was mutual. What do Eris’ people gain out of this arrangement?”

Sylvië walks around Conrad and leans against him from behind. Her downy feathers brush against his arms. They feel as soft as a young chick’s. She flirts by standing up on her toes to try and reach closer to his ear, blowing in it.

“Sex. Lots of wonderful, gratuitous sex.”

Then she turns around and flaps her wings open, flying off.

*

The servants will guide everyone to their guest quarters, while Eris reaches for Conrad, not letting go of his arm. **“I’m going to see Mother and my sister. Will you come?”**

Of course, he will. They’re practically family at this point. Though after meeting Daddy, he’s not feeling very secure about meeting Mommy now. A mother can be very protective of her children. A big hurdle has already been cleared with her father, the Watcher of Eralthyr. This will be another hurdle. Meeting her sister, on the other hand, **won’t** be all that much of a stress-fest.

Adrian lingers when the children leave with the servants. Should he stay or not? **With the position Eris’ father has, her mother should be an important figure as well.** Minimal level of courtesy would require a greeting. **That’s how it goes in most places.** Though he already assured himself that woman will be off-limits. Their meeting here is too **important to risk it by flirting with the local boss’ wife.** And additionally, Eris is involved. After that outburst concerning her mother, best not to let lusts take over for this once. Regardless, at least the greeting part should be done.

He looks sideways. A girl showed up, standing next to a redwood. She has the same hair color as Eris, though hers is a lot wavier. **Dress-code is... Well, he’s just glad at this point he isn’t into kids, or he would swoon over her right away.** Alma females and their clothes... Almost as outrageous as the sirens and their complete lack of clothes.

“Greetings,” the young girl steps closer.

“Ah...” Eris turns to her. **“Melissa.”**

The girl offers a gracious courtesy, together with her full name. **“Melisande of House Faynore.”**

Wasn’t that the same house as Eldrin? Which means she has to be Eris’ sister.

Conrad and Adrian introduce themselves in turn.

“I was just about to go seek you,” Eris gives her sister a hug. **“And visit Mother afterwards.”**

The girls spend time chatting, with an occasional glance to both men standing around. With Melisande touching her sister's belly, it's obvious what they talk about. Until they eventually start giggling.

"What...?" Adrian asks why they suspiciously stare at him.

"Melissa is curious about your blonde hair. Only women are blonde here."

"It's pretty common where I come from," he replies, pride taking a soft beating.

"Oh, don't worry, she wasn't mocking you," Eris laughs, walking up to Conrad again, whispering to Adrian in passing. "She's still available, you know?"

Adrian glimpses at her sister again. She's acting a little shy. Does she have an instant crush on him? Is it the hair thing? He doesn't really know what to say in a situation like this. She's a kid... Still, hurting her feelings isn't enticing either. "Well, you know me. I've got a thing for older women."

"She may be older than you imagine her to be," Eris replies.

True, it's hard to say with these Alma folks and their ridiculous lifespan. And he has to admit, these sisters have a beautiful complexion. Melisande will definitely grow up into a lovely woman. If only she had a couple more years to her. Actually, makes him more curious what their mother looks like.

"Who is the oldest of you two?" Conrad asks, listening to their conversation.

Neither sister returns a concrete answer, twiddling their thumbs and feigning ignorance. While Eris sticks out her tongue to Adrian, keeping him in doubt about her sister's age. "I'll be off to see Mother then," she turns more serious, reaching for the hand of Conrad.

"Then I'll offer our other guest a tour," Melisande takes a couple steps towards Adrian.

...

When Eris and Conrad head off, Adrian wants to follow them at first, though he stops after reading Melisande's face. "Does that tour include the sirens' quarters?"

"If you'd like," she laughs.

"Alright, lead the way."

The girl smiles while walking in the opposite direction of her sister.

“You know,” Adrian mentions casually. “Maybe you’re more mature than your appearance hints at.”

He has a good idea where Eris and Conrad are heading, if he read her sister correctly. **And if such is the case, there’s no need for him to be around, he has no business there. That moment should be for those two only.**

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Conrad understood by now where his young druid wife leads him. An enclosed area, surrounded by flowers. A personal shrine to Cloegandr decorates the place, turning it into blessed ground. A marker present at a very specific location. A grave marker, located right before a redwood bonded with a dryad.

“Hello, Mother,” Eris squats down on her knees in front of the marker. She caresses the memorial stone. **“I’m sorry for running away, and making Father and Melissa worried.”**

Conrad takes place next to her, remaining silent.

“I’m sure you were worried too, with me living in the Woods. But I *had* to run away. I had to defend your honor. No way was I going to marry *that* guy.”

She latches on to Conrad, starting to lose her refined composure, turning more casual. **“Look, Mama! I found someone else instead. He’s a good man. I know he’s not from around, but he’s trying to make a better place for everyone. That includes us!”**

She places a hand on the ground, another on her belly, glow of magic radiating as vines appear. **“Can you feel it, Mama? I’m going to have a baby! I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl. What would you like? I don’t mind either way.”**

She releases her magic and holds the memorial stone again, caressing it. **“Could you whisper in Papa’s ear tonight, when he sleeps? Make him a little less angry? He didn’t show it, but I know he was... Of course, he was... With all trouble I caused. Oh, and tell him to explain about that prophecy tomorrow! I want to know about it too!”**

The girl turns a somber serious. **“It’s important. I can feel it is. The harpy Brood-mother, your incident, what Silvermoon told me about the shadow he once saw... But**

above that, I just *know*, Mama. The Woods told me, the animals. Something is out there. Something bad and evil. We *need* answers. So please, convince Papa.”

Conrad holds closer onto Eris. Her heartfelt words don't leave him untouched. If her mother really listens, somewhere, wherever it may be, then he hopes she does help.

...

With the grave visit finished, he finally asks her the biggest question on his mind right now. “What happened?”

That list she gave... He doesn't know specifics about the Brood-mother, though her father did mention the harpies were not acting normal lately. What the unicorn communicated with Eris feels obviously related as well, somehow. More importantly, she mentioned her mother in that list. Why?

“Around three years ago, Mother went to visit Helena of the South, Matriarch of the Southern Grove, to renew the agreement for our cities and investigate strange rumors. The Matriarch was acting weird for a while already, but no trouble had occurred so far. Mother never returned, and we lost contact with the Southern Grove.”

“They turned hostile?”

“We don't know. Father sent an expedition, to search for Mother when she didn't return. The southern sirens were all gone, their roost abandoned with signs of a large struggle.”

“Did they find your mother?” Maybe she's only missing, and there's a chance she might actually be alive? Small it may be.

“They did find her,” Eris shoots down that hope. “At the border of the Misty Woods. Her...” The girl swallows, trying to find the strength to put it into words. “Her face was missing. Gone. Stripped.”

Conrad asks no further. He knows enough. Only left hoping neither she nor her sister had to witness that scene.

*

Leaving the private cemetery, they bump into Eris' father.

“Oh, you hadn’t left yet?” he murmurs, apparently about to visit his wife himself, possibly to seek her advice on these current issues.

Eris turns away, unsure what to do or say. Her father isn’t really certain how to respond either. He did ask to give him a day, so bringing up the same topic is not an option.

“Have the servants been helpful?” Eldrin breaks the awkwardness.

“Oh yes, definitely.” Not that Conrad really needed them so far, he did notice there’s always someone around, in case he has a request. And they respectfully bow every time he passes. Eldrin wasn’t kidding when he said his servants were at his guests’ every hand.

“You show us a lot of hospitality,” he remarks. Yeah, they brought the man’s daughter back, yet she also got knocked up early along the way. And they appear to bring what is considered bad news here, with that prophecy thing. To still show such levels of hospitality is remarkable.

“Of course, I do,” the man doesn’t really understand why Conrad brings this up, only for reality to set in afterwards. The world this outsider comes from is falling into decay, according to his guest’s own words. Traditions no longer upheld, values openly tread on rather than striven for, virtues left under a pile of dust. Naturally, his guest would be surprised. Thus, Eldrin explains.

“There’s a dynamic between guest and host, which should be understood and retained at all times. That dynamic is one of an unwritten covenant, where both parties seek to gain. Maybe it’s to strengthen an existing relationship. It might be to establish a brand new one. Or perhaps it could be a reconciliation event.”

In particular with that last case, the dynamic between guest and host is all the easier to understand.

“A guest steps into this meeting with the intention of peace, sacrificing first-strike capability, opening themselves up through a willful act of vulnerability. To step into the domain of the host, is to show trust this host will not take advantage of that vulnerability and commit an act of betrayal when we are at our weakest.”

A host must understand this at all times. A guest steps right into the den of the unknown, into the host’s realm of power. Once allowing a guest into one’s domain,

taking on the role of host, it is a duty to not betray the expectations which naturally come with it.

“That is why we offer drinks, food, our most comfortable seat, and our best effort at providing entertainment. Because such is the essence of acting out our respective roles of guest and host, the true meaning of hospitality.”

Which is also why betrayal is the gravest offense one can ever make. For betrayal makes even the possibility of reconciliation, peace and co-existence a quickly dying dream.

Conrad nods at **the man’s** words. He can grasp them so easily, yet it’s so quickly foregone, taken for granted. That covenant no longer understood.

With the conversation at an end, he brings up something quite different. **“Eris, maybe it’s a good idea to let your father have a feel?”**

She tilts her head, not really understanding, until it clicks what Conrad talks about. **“Oh... Right...”** she murmurs. Hesitating when she notices Conrad waits for her to make the offer.

She turns to her father and opens her mouth. Silent, and afraid of rejection. **“Father, if you want to... Would you like to feel the baby?”**

Her father stares at Conrad, and back to his daughter. **“Yes... I would love to.”**

He steps closer and places his hand on Eris’ belly, the girl resting her own palm on top. That familiar light follows, of her magic flaring up, with a first smile appearing from the man.

“Still so young...” he utters. **“Yet, so full of life already.”**

The somberness on Eris’ face fades, her own smile returning.

...

“There’s a small request I would like to make,” Conrad asks after the father-daughter moment is over.

“Certainly. What can I do?”

“It concerns my daughter, a member of our group. She has spirits housed within her. Five of them. And Eris told us they’re not earth spirits.”

The man's eyebrows frown. No earth spirits? And five, no less?! "Very peculiar," he responds. "Take her to the inner garden an hour from now. I will be there."

Conrad thanks the man and lets him head to his destination, the cemetery.

*

Lisette enters the inner court with her father. Primrose joined, always curious to learn about these spirits, or any source of magic she isn't familiar with. Eris joined as well, equally curious.

Eldrin awaits inside the large and well-maintained garden.

"Lisette, could you show the man your spirits?"

The girl nods to her father and calls forth her spirits, five colorful lights buzzing around, gathering at her hands where she shapes a ball of water.

The Watcher of Eralthyr observes in wonder as he sees the ball of water move around, taking a spin around him, powered by all five lights inside.

"Primrose taught me how to shape them into an element," Lisette explains.

The fox girl grins and twitches her ears at being mentioned.

"They are so different," the man observes closely. "I have never seen such spirits before. They are so... ethereal."

Eris mentioned something similar, how they were detached from regular nature surrounding them. Seems like her father is not familiar with these either.

"So, you don't know what they are?" Conrad asks.

"I'm sorry, I have not the slightest idea."

Right before Conrad can sigh from disappointment, another voice calls out. "I have seen one..." With a flapping of wings, the siren Sylvië lands from wherever she was listening in on their conversation.

"You have an idea about their origin?" Eldrin asks.

"Maybe. I don't know what they are, or where they come from. But I have seen one, once." She gazes in fascination at the lights as they change the ball of water into a cube, revealing level of magic control has improved.

“Where?” Conrad asks.

“The Abyss, right next to the Western Grove, my home roost.”

The cube now turns into a cylinder, physical shape retained for longer than Lisette has ever done before.

“I was brave, yet foolish, back then,” the siren explains. “I did what was taboo among our roost, and blindly dove down the Abyss, determined to reach the bottom.”

“You reached there?” Primrose asks.

“No, I couldn’t even catch a glimpse. Eventually, I felt the strength in my wings began to fade, so I tried to fly back up. I didn’t make it in time, and fell down once more, drained of all remaining strength. During that fall was when I encountered such a spirit. Then my vision blackened. Once awoke, I found myself back at the top of the Abyss.”

She turns her attention to Conrad. “Maybe there’s significance in that location, maybe there is not.”

That’s about the most they will gain as information about their origin, the spirits themselves too much of a mystery. Thus, Eldrin changes the angle of their discussion. “You had a great teacher, to already be capable of forming these shapes.”

Primrose twitches her ears again, happy to be praised.

“Very impressive, young girl,” the man continues his praise. “Especially since you’re not a spirit user yourself.” Then he turns towards Lisette, making her an offer. Revealing he is indeed a spirit user, as Eldrin releases a pair of earth spirits. Two young, unrooted dryads who have chosen him as a companion. “What we can do with spirits depends how strong our connection is. For example…”

He extends his hand, and the spirits follow his command, turning into a fiery butterfly. Fire strong enough it can be felt by all present. It’s about as intense as one of Primrose’s fireballs. Advantage is that he can let it fly around on whatever path desired. Though it wouldn’t have the explosive effect the little mage has. It definitely succeeds at capturing her attention.

“I usually only let them guide the way at night, or light some firewood during cold winters,” the man jokes about the limited practical use. He turns his attention back to Lisette. “Your connection is remarkably strong already, though you struggle at letting

these five work together. No wonder, as even holding two earth spirits is rare. From what I can see, while these spirits are different, they function very similar. What worked for me, as a means to strengthen our connection and union, should also **work for you.**”

“What will I be able to do?” Lisette asks.

The man shakes his head. “I have no idea. These spirits are too much of a mystery. You will have to discover their limits yourself.”

Conrad encourages his daughter and Primrose. “Maybe next time you two can take out a brood-mother together on your own.”

“You took her out!?” the siren suddenly interrupts.

“Yeah, when the harpies attacked us. We hurt the beast enough to drop her, so she was trampled by a stampede of wild horses.” Conrad starts to foster second doubts. That was not a bad thing to do, right? They’re not going to reveal the Brood-mother was some crucial part of their habitat’s lifecycle or whatever?

“She’s really gone?!” Sylvië asks again, overjoyed this time.

“Completely flattened.”

A heavy burden falls from the siren. “Finally, that monstrosity is gone! Maybe our lives can turn to normal now.”

Noticing Conrad can’t follow, she explains for him.

“We have no idea where the Brood-mother came from. The harpies used to be friendly to us. In fact, they listened to our commands, followed our song. Until the day that bizarre creature showed up, three years ago.”

“You should have mentioned this earlier,” Eldrin adds. “We can’t thank you enough! Tempests have been harassing our city caravans and gatherer groups. With the source of their corruption gone, hopefully they will calm down and their relationship with the siren groves can return back to normal.”

He extends his arm for Lisette to follow. “I will gladly offer your daughter my knowledge and teachings on spirits. We’ll commence right away.”

“Can I stay and watch?” Primrose almost begs.

“Of course, you can.”

Conrad gives a gesture of gratitude to both Eldrin and Sylvië. Then he leaves these two children in their care so Lisette can focus on her training.

*

Midnight has covered the city in its blanket. Roderik turns around in his sleep, starting to grow restless. A tune is stuck in his mind, delving into the land of dreams. It tugs at him, drawing him out of his usual fantasies of heroism and bravery. Lulling him like a bedtime song, yet waking him by drawing attention to the purest of vocals.

His eyes open, fatigue already gone. Man, that bed feels so soft. What do they use as filling? Whatever it is, this stuff works wonders. Though the boy lifts himself up from its soft comforts. Only sensation left is a mysterious trance, body and mind entangled in a trap of vocal chords. Faint, somewhere distant, yet as clear as the starlit sky.

The boy rises from his bed. What's that song? Where is it coming from? He starts to look around.

Right... He's in one of the guestrooms on the upper level of the city. Maybe Conrad heard it as well? That enchanting melody...

Roderik turns to the other bed in **the room. It's empty. The mess of sheets reveals someone slept there, until not long ago. Conrad isn't here... How odd. Did he go for a walk? Or maybe he went to the girls? Nah, that won't be it. Lisette and Primrose were tired from spending the rest of the day on that training session. And the other girls were equally tired from running around the city when Eris and Melisande took them along for a tour through all levels, showing off their home city. A luxury they didn't have back in Sakai, where robbers and thugs lurked in the shadows, and staying inside the brothel was safest.**

Conrad mentioned as much before going to sleep. That he would give the girls a good **night's rest. That's why he spent** the night here, in this same room as Roderik, chatting with the boy about a variety of topics.

But he's gone now... Outside.

Roderik almost falls over when entering his pants. **No need for a shirt, it's warm** enough in these lands. Pants will do for modesty.

He steps out of the building. Quite large, with good quality accommodations, and attention for peace of mind through plenty of greenery. Even at night, some flowers bloom and a nice smell is secreted. Though **the boy's attention wanders off to that other** source providing peace of mind. The song stuck in his ears. He can still hear it. So, it **wasn't a dream at all?**

The boy closes his eyes, focusing purely on his ears.

What a beautiful voice. He never heard anything like it. As if a divine maiden came down from the afterlife to sing her sweetest song and charm the cosmos. **It's coming** from a higher area, where the sirens reside.

If memory serves him correctly, there should be a bridge leading up nearby. He doesn't even question if he should go or not, whether guests are even allowed to. Simply drawn by the beauty and serenity of that crystal-clear soprano voice.

Memory didn't fail the boy. There's the bridge, made up out of wooden planks tied by vines. It leads up to a redwood's trunk, where a platform is built around. From that platform, other bridges extend, leading higher.

Roderik holds his muscles tightened, peeking over another platform. Other people are **here, and he didn't even** notice them till now, too enchanted by that sung melody. Pupils dilate wide, trying to take in as much light as possible. Ahead of him, to his side, is one of those numerous roof terraces. A garden with even a tiny pond. Within that garden, he can enjoy a fine spectacle play out.

A pair of sirens play around with an alma man. One holds him from behind, while the other pours a jug of alcohol over their bodies, licking it up. Roderik can spot their naked bodies, covered in alcohol, a nearby set of torches reflected on **the booze's** thin surface layer. It makes their skin look all the smoother.

Finally aware of his surroundings, he can hear them laughing and partying. In fact, he can hear others, coming from all around.

The boy's head starts to turn, unsure what direction to face first. How could he not have noticed? Look! **There's another roof terrace, another garden**, with a couple on it! And on the other side he can witness a much larger group.

Another bridge, another platform. This time, he can spot a siren sitting on a handrail. A man takes her right there, between her accommodating legs, in sight of multiple others. Yet another siren bends over that same wooden railing, enjoying a different man behind her as he delves into her depths, an alma woman pouring alcohol over their merged genitals. She has the face of a third siren between her legs, stimulating the woman with devoted effort of a tongue.

Roderik **doesn't really** understand the full intent of this monthly ritual of the night. A pact between sirens and alma. With the latter requiring restraint within their marriages, or their numbers would explode to unmanageable proportions, considering their venerable life-expectancy. A hard struggle for most. To endure their natural lust for hundreds upon hundreds of years.

Thus, this pact was established and regularly renewed for as long as their people and history can remember. The sirens relieve them of that lust with dedication, for there is no need to hold back with them. With alma women happy to join in to relieve their own desires. While the all-female sirens can pass on their own lineage in turn, with added benefits of satisfying their levels of **sexual hunger, naturally high because they've always** been reliant on seducing outsiders, taking any opportunity which arose.

The boy can feel an erection push into his pants. No matter where he faces, a massive orgy takes place throughout the entire city. Even from this spot, where he can enjoy a glimpse of the lower levels, a lustful celebration of foreplay and sex plays out all around.

He so wants to pull out his hard shaft and give it a good tug. More than that, he wants to play around with one of those sirens, rub it over their bodies, and stick it in!

Yet, he doesn't stop to join them, and releases his erection after a couple strokes over his pants. He can't forget it. Even now, with all these temptations around, he simply can't draw his mind away.

That voice, he can still hear her. Sure, some other sirens also sing. But that one he heard from all the way in his room, she stands alone on top, drowning out all others with her vocal enchantment. He *must* reach her. Even only a glimpse will do.

...

A platform, with a single man surrounded by a pair of mature sirens. Roderik recognizes the man. It's Adrian, turning his ethereal dream into carnal reality. Though this is not the boy's end destination. There is one more bridge. And he can hear it... That is where she is, this beautiful songbird tugging him with an unseen leash, from down into his bedroom all the way up here.

...

The bridge leads to a dead end. It must be the highest spot in the entire city where anyone can go, just below a wing of that giant, naked siren protecting this city-wide orgy, basking it in her approval. On top of a platform, built in the tallest redwood, on the highest level. Home to a rooted dryad, her red flowers reach up to the platform, wrapping around it. A thick stream slowly runs down from the only bud which is still closed, filling a pool and spilling over the platform. Sugary sultriness spreads out through the air, reaching the boy's nostrils.

And there, he finds the source of that enchanting melody.

Sylvië of the West sits on a branch of the redwood, overlooking the platform. While directly facing the boy, she sings in words Roderik does not understand, yet with a meaning which reaches him nonetheless. Tranquil, soothing, like a daydream, while as rich as the ocean of stars he can see in the distance from underneath their large, siren-shaped canopy. If Roderik had to compare it, that large lake surrounding the city, with starry light reflecting on it in the dark of night, would be a fitting metaphor for the rhythmical, gentle waves reaching his ears.

The boy's mouth falls open in wonder as Sylvië spreads her wings out wide while she sings a crescendo. Nearby torches light her naked body. The young siren's head is tilted up, chest pushed forward, even those little wings as ears which are her Alma father's heritage spread open. While her main wing's plumage gives their full surface area, pointing out as far as they can stretch. She looks nothing less than divine to the boy.

The shadow play of light **emphasizes her delicate curves, the girl's nipples point at an upwards angle, not the least bit of shame present at revealing them.** On the contrary, she revels in baring her girlhood, accentuated in the best way possible. How she openly shares her entire body with every spectator must surely be the secret behind the matching beauty of her song.

Sylvië finished her hymn dedicated to Life and lowers her face to the platform. An applause appears from where she stares at.

Roderik goes one step higher, curious who she might have graced with her song.

It's his mentor, Conrad. And the man is not alone. Another pair of young sirens has joined him, one around each arm. They applaud together with him, **though it's hard to hear with their soft feathers acting as a cushion.**

The sirens to his either side are quite touchy, constantly shoving their bodies against Conrad. A wing seeks his back, while the other girl rubs her chest against his. That same aura of sexual drunkenness present as permeates throughout the entire city, enhanced by the sugary odor of the rooted dryads' pools and the surrounding flowers' red passion.

Sylvië lowers her wings, though **doesn't close them, enjoying the man as he is charmed by every feminine curve of her body.** While she seems to equally enjoy the other two sirens tempting him for their share of attention.

Roderik rubs over his pants. The inside is sticking wet already. What happened to this city?! **It's like it transformed** when day turned to night. Back in Sakai, their guest quarters were isolated from the more tantalizing areas. But here? **There's no escape from temptation. It's all around him, no matter where the boy looks.** Even if he were to close his eyes, it would be impossible to avoid, through the soft background chorus of sexual gasps and exhales seducing every tiny corner of the city.

With that wonder of a song finished, he can now hear other sirens sing. Others moan. Others tempt. Even if he could resist these chains of lust binding him, and crawl back to his bedroom, he would not be capable of any sleep. It would be far too late. All which awaits at the guest room would only end up as a long, lonely night of unbearable longing.

The boy's eyes stay focused on Sylvië when he gives a stroke over his erection. Everything about her is pure perfection. Her wings look so soft and fluffy. She has a

round, cutesy face, showing her true, young age, even if she acts all mature. Her breasts are nothing less than gorgeous. Present, yet not dominating. A subtle budding which fits her plumage in softness. Her tummy one of matching roundness, making the girl seem all the more fragile in its squishy exposure. And her Alma legs, they run down so smooth, starting from that little triangle at the top where her beauty all joins together. A triangle where Roderik can witness a sultriness which makes his erection almost burst in his pants, released pheromones from that beautiful delta reaching all the way towards him, to tug on the boy as hard as her song already did.

Sylvië gives a flap, and she comes down from the branch, descending towards Conrad, falling straight in his arms while the other sirens make room.

What is that place they are in? It looks like a bed, though its shape is different. Lowered in the platform, and circular. Large enough for Conrad and all three sirens, with a bit of room to spare. **And it's not elevated, like a bed would be.**

Another step higher, and the boy can peer **inside its depths. It's a giant bird's nest.** Entirely filled with the same substance which made his bed feel so soft and cushioned. Feathers from sirens. Down feathers in particular, such as covering the inner side of the **siren's wings.**

Sylvië wraps her own around Conrad and starts to move up and down. That same voice as earlier reaches Roderik. This time not a serenity of song, but the abundant passion of lust, as the boy can observe the fourteen-year-old in the act of lavish sex with his mentor.

Roderik dives his hand in his pants. This is not fair... The entire city is screwing around, and here he is, stuck with only his hand. Still, **forget about the others... All he can think about is how he envies his mentor.** He would happily forego all this orgy has on offer, if only it meant *she* would grant *him* that ride instead. How he wants to feel her down feathers again, similar to how she embraced him earlier today as a greeting. Only both of them naked, that succulent pussy he could see moments ago offering him that same, wet love it now grants his mentor.

“*Nn~*” Sylvië lets out her appreciation of the cock caressing her on the inside, likewise caressing the ears of an eavesdropping boy.

Roderik's hand strokes harder, second one joining, squeezing around his base. Her sexual exhaling alone is enough to make the boy steaming hot with lust. He wants to fuck her so bad!

He turns around, slipping down one of the stairs, masturbating while his eyes are closed. Only listening to Sylvië's voice as she reaches a new height. The cock raging inside of her makes the siren orgasm. While Roderik is left imagining she rides him instead. That *his* meat makes her gasp so adorable and filled with yearning.

A squirt of cum shoots over the edge, dropping to the ground below.

What a waste... When it could have been inside of her.

He sighs. No, it couldn't have been. In the end, she wants Conrad, not a mere boy.

All moaning stopped behind him. With a last stare of regret, he can spot the siren whisper to her chosen man, a nod returned to her. Followed by a kiss from her on Conrad's cheek. They're being all lovey-dovey.

The boy turns his sight away. Time to go back down these bridges, skipping the orgy. If he can't have *her*, there's no point in staying. It's going to be a very lonely night, yet so be it. As a proud warrior's son, he'll only have to endure.

Before he can reach for his pants to pull them up again, wind blows all around him with a gentle flap. He doesn't even have time to turn around when a pair of wings cover him like the softest of blankets.

"Hello, naughty boy," that same vocal beauty which led him here blows sensual music in his ear. "Come to play with us?"

Roderik can feel a single beat of his heart pump in fresh adrenaline at being caught, then it instantly settles at the comfort of the warm, feathery cocoon surrounding him.

"How did you find us?" Sylvië asks him.

"I heard the most beautiful song..."

"And you followed it all the way up here? In the middle of the night?"

"Yeah... All the way here."

"Past all my sisters, without stopping? Only in search for me?" her voice lowers, openly flirting.

“Yeah. Only for you...” Roderik cannot lie. As much as it embarrasses him to be so powerless, so enchanted, he doesn’t want to bring shame through dishonesty to the one who sung so divine. Even now, her voice is a symphony to his ears.

Her wing brushes over his penis, still recovering from its orgasm earlier. “You admired us? When your mentor and I were lost in the abundant joys of **mating?**”

He admits. Anyone could figure that out in this situation. Though he can’t even reach down for his pants to cover his embarrassment up. Her feathers feel too comfortable. Too warm and soft. She could pry anything out of him at this point, and he would tattle like a gossiping girl.

“Did you have me in your thoughts when experiencing pleasure? When you felt envy?” She subtly giggles when Roderik nods, wings slipping tighter.

...

“Listen... Can you hear that?” she whispers.

Yeah, he can. It comes from behind, where the large nest is with Conrad and her two sisters.

“Can you imagine what they do? Who is getting lucky?”

Yeah, he gets it. Not hard to piece together from all gasps, and that loud, rhythmical connecting of flesh. He can even imagine what position they’re in. **Getting lucky... True. That’s one way to say it.**

“Look...” she turns around, Roderik guided along with her, until he can peek aside. “Isn’t it beautiful? How they’re bathing in sex...” she utters in his ear.

Exactly how Roderik imagined it. He could hear it from the sound of the girl’s butt cheeks. One of Sylvië’s sisters is bent over the nest, resting on her wings. While Conrad bangs into her from behind. The second one plays with him from the side. All three fully surrendered into desire.

Sylvië shifts her weight continuously from one leg onto the other, rocking the boy gently in her wings.

“Once a month, we offer ourselves entirely to Life,” she explains, “But we don’t just have sex.” She brings her mouth so close Roderik can feel her lips on his ear. “We share sex.”

Sylvië places her cheek against the boy's and observes together with him while her sister enjoys a good fuck. "Sex should never be a selfish pursuit of pleasure. It is a gift, offered with both body and soul. Only to those we respect, or those we love."

"But... You could become pregnant," Roderik answers her, mind only half present, in a daze by what plays out all around him.

"Yes... I could. And I will. Many of us sirens will, this very same night. And we would love for nothing more. To birth new life into this world... We could not ask for a greater meaning to our own existence."

Her wing caresses his penis, erect all over again and showing its eagerness to become a part of the celebration of fertility which consumes the city of Eralthyr.

"Maybe your mentor will be lucky, and father a child with my sister he is enjoying right now." She spoons Roderik with her own naked pelvis, hips slowly moving in a sensual rotation, skin to skin, capturing the boy's mind and body. "Or maybe he will get lucky with me, and I will carry a daughter of his? Who knows? That's how we sirens live."

Roderik dreams away again. He wants so much to turn around and reach for her, completely entranced by her naked touch constantly brushing against his back, mesmerizing his senses.

"And you?" Sylvië whispers him, hug tightening. "Do you still wish to get lucky with me?"

"Yeah..." his voice picks up vigor. "I want to be lucky. With you. More than anything else."

Sylvië lets go of Roderik and steps past, heading towards her nest. One step ahead of the boy, she turns around and walks backwards, extending her wings invitingly to him while smiling. Every time he takes a step forward, she takes one further backwards, guiding him towards their downy love-nest.

She draws him forward with the sweetest words.

"Come... Let's get lucky, you and I, together as one."

Conrad stops banging into Sylvië's sister for as short as it takes to explain. "No need to hold back, kid. These winged ladies are an exception. You don't have to worry about consequences."

He doesn't have to explain more. With Olive and Pepper, the boy was expected to marry them. Similar to how Conrad will enter a marriage with Eris. Such is the normal way of life, when getting someone pregnant under times of peace. With only few exceptions, such as when a girl is a shrine maiden to Life, or those who work in brothels. And these sirens are a third exception. **Any children will be raised by their mother's home roost. That's** simply how it naturally goes for them.

As Conrad resumes pumping delirious pleasure into his siren partner, Sylvië reaches for a jug and sits down. How she manages to not drop it with those wings is a mystery.

"Have you ever tasted alcohol?" she asks

"No..."

She sits down on her knees and pours the content of the jug over her smooth breasts.

Conrad shakes his head with a smile. He remembers his first time of alcohol. **Someone's going to wake up with a headache tomorrow.**

Roderik stares captivated at Sylvië, leaning forward once he notices her inviting expression.

The alcohol stings his tongue. It's so bitter. It almost makes him want to cough. Why do people drink this stuff?!

Yet, he gulps it down. Eagerly tracing that liquid as it runs between her breasts, licking upwards. His tongue dives into the spongy softness of her left breast, hoping to create a path for the alcohol, so he has an excuse to glide further over it.

Sylvië grins and splashes the alcohol all over her bosom. **"Better?" she teases him.**

Roderik savors her fine tits, not even bothered anymore about any bitterness. The stuff easily flows down. She could pour out the entire jug and he would happily gobble it up with thirst. His lips smack over her flesh, plopping over a nipple, pushing the alluring knob into its cushion.

With a hard slap, followed by another one, his mentor finishes into Sylvië's sister. **The other sister already prepares herself, reaching for Sylvië from behind, placing her folded wings on the young Matriarch's hips, while she offers her rear to the adult male. Cutesy face glancing at him in open invitation to come entertain her now instead.**

Roderik can feel the breast he sucks on get pushed further into his mouth every time **Sylvië's** sister repeatedly bumps into her back, courtesy of Conrad resuming his good fun.

The siren representative rises higher on her knees, constantly feeling the bump of her sister. One of her tiny, well-hidden fingers **finds the bottom of Roderik's chin, lifting up** his face. She wants him to gaze. Observe the motions rocking through her, hips shoved **forward every time Conrad thrusts into her sister.** Sylvië's body already moving together with them in a rhythmical wave, as if she has sex herself.

She smiles widely at the boy, eyes softening in an erotic daze. A thin string of drool runs down the side of **the girl's** mouth. He can do so much more than merely stare. That, she can guarantee with absolute certainty. The thrust pushing into her body from behind a visible vow to the boy, that he can make her body bounce in a similar sexual union instead.

Roderik can feel **the girl's** wings closing. She gestures him nearer, skintight, hips connecting. **Sylvië's entire being promises** he no longer has to suffer.

"Let's give ourselves into lust and passion, all of us as one," **she blows enchanting words in his ear.** "For pure fun and pleasure... And to **make lots of babies tonight.**"

He can take her now. She wants him, to enjoy a good, heartfelt fuck. Make her sister behind her feel that bump as much. With the tempting prize of her fertility dangled right **in front of the boy's eyes,** openly allowed to take a bid at it. As many attempts as he wishes.

The boy takes in her smooth skin. She is slightly taller than him, so their genitals line up easily. Erection pointing upwards and already trying to shove itself into her dripping pussy.

Sylvië holds her breath when she feels the young, hard cock drive her lips aside. Breath released like the most intimate song into his ear, as a reward for feeling him slip deeper and deeper, until her lungs are fully emptied, and his rod is fully encompassed. Once the boy holds her tight, he smashes his hips with surprising vigor into her raw but soft vulva, only a couple years older than him.

A cocoon of plumage basks the boy in her affection, his arms holding on lower, firmly **gripping in the supple flesh of her lower cheeks, constantly shoving the girl's hips**

against his own. First pushing them away from him, to then smash right back into them. Away, and back together. Increasingly rapid. Increasingly passionate.

That beautiful voice which lured him here, the one he could hear reward Conrad with love for his labor, now showers Roderik with that same lascivious tune. Taking him in deep, to then draw back, so she can experience him entering all over again.

While her sister taken by Conrad can feel Sylvië mate, forming a group of four locked in reproductive unity, the remaining sister recovered from her earlier orgasm. She joins the luscious sex-train of four merrily chugging along, and makes it five, pushing her own **body against Roderik's rear**. Every time he pulls back, his bum finds closer contact with **the girl behind him**. Every time he leaves that contact, it's to delve into Sylvië's slippery depths all over again. The pelvis of all five closely connected in flesh and mind. A pair of raw penises sliding full-length into fertile pussy, while three pairs of soft breasts squish into skin. Lovingly cocooned in feathers and hugging limbs to create a single whole of pure, reproductive sex.

The siren representative gazes in **her young partner's eyes**, granting him a passionate kiss before releasing and moaning right in his ear. "Nn~... I so love a good fuck."

She tries to giggle when she can feel him thrust harder at her words, her sound abruptly ending by her own uncontrolled gasp of pleasure.

The girl's alcohol-covered skin sticks to him. He can feel her own fluids run down both **the siren's** inner thighs. The boy can sense his own cock is soaked in her flowing love.

"Want to... get lucky?" she repeats again, finding it hard to speak.

Roderik needs not think about the meaning of her words. A meaning which makes him bash furiously into her lower belly.

Right when Conrad gives his entry into the lottery that is Sylvië's sister, **Roderik lets out his own moan of orgasm, joining his partner's and the other couple's**. While the boy deposits his own ticket into the fertility lottery that is Sylvië's **womb**, testing his odds at scoring a lucky win.

...

The pressed-tight sex-train of five comes apart, the boy left wondering what his chances are when he can witness his wet cock reluctantly drawn back, its skin trying to linger inside the siren, no intent to ever leave.

The girl behind Sylvie makes room, and the siren representative angles her hips without needing to look back, as the hands of Conrad already latch on.

“Let’s make it a competition,” he winks at Roderik, driving his cock back into Sylvie while she gapes from ecstasy.

Roderik breathes heavily, recovering from her ample charms. The girl who was behind him nudges the boy downwards with her soft wings, his back sinking into the downy bottom of this giant love-nest. She grins at him when straddling his lap, rubbing his penis with her cleft, while she prevents it with an expert touch from growing flaccid.

No time for rest. Not with two other girls around who still hunger for his ticket.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 11



The Compendium Labyrinth

“You look tired,” Carrot mentions to Roderik the next day.

He yawns from fatigue. So tired, but so satisfied. In the end, neither he nor Conrad had any idea how many sirens entered that nest. They lost count, eventually. Doesn’t matter. The massive, raw-only fuck-fest that was last night is one to remember. He must have put it in more girls than most men ever enjoy in their lives, one after the other like a never-ending dream. Only, it wasn’t a dream. Every vivid memory still lingering in his body as much as his mind. A miracle he could keep himself hard for the entire duration, really. Maybe they put something in that alcohol to keep a man rock-solid and thirsting for more?

Their group in particular enjoyed high demand from the sirens, probably because they’re foreigners. Exotic goods. Definitely, more than one of his countless tickets are destined to be winners. What a great idea it was to visit this place. They should come here

more often, preferably when they have that monthly fertility lottery. Only the lingering headache from all that alcohol is a hassle.

The boy plays with a plume in his hands. It's a contour feather from Sylvië. She handed it over to him. Said it would make for a great lucky charm and writing tool, and Roderik should keep it close. He grins like a dork while placing it in a belt pouch. Not that he knows how to write, but hey, someday this can be his personal writing quill, with only the best of memories attached.

“Didn't get much sleep either?” Primrose asks Conrad.

“No, it was a kind of restless.”

Eris has to do her best to contain her laughter. As a local, she definitely has a good idea what played out last night.

Next month, any siren where someone scored a prize will return to her home roost to eventually give birth and nurture her child, while others come to the city in her turn. Most **don't stay here for longer than** their first full month.

*

After a good nap, it turned early afternoon. Eldrin told them to get extra rest, for some reason.

Conrad finished fastening his sword around his belt.

“Any clue why we have to be in full gear?” Adrian asks him when leaving the guest house.

“No, but I look forward to find out.”

...

Their entire group assembled in the inner garden. Stress levels have risen. Conrad taps his foot, Lisette fiddles around with her bow string, while **Adrian can't stop pacing** around. They all have one habit or other to deal with excess stress.

Finally, Eldrin appears from inside the main building. **“I spent the night deliberating on yesterday's discussion. My mind is made up.”** He gathers his thoughts first, leaving everyone in suspense. **“There's** a prophecy, as you heard yesterday. I will explain about it,

and all I know about the origin of the Faceless. This knowledge is only known by us Watchers.”

Conrad can feel a large burden drop from his shoulders. At last! He will acquire the answers he seeks.

“The story begins over ten lifetimes ago.”

Those words quickly sink in. Ten lifetimes?! But these people grow so old! That has to be close to ten-thousand years!

“A handful of our ancestors of ancient times, devoting themselves purely to the pursuit of knowledge, had reached the top of all possible information. According to our oldest stories, they had the answer to practically every question. All, except one. One question remained unanswered, outside of their grasp.”

It frustrated and infuriated them, for it was the one question they desired to know over all others. Now voiced by Eldrin.

“What happens when we die?”

Conrad can feel a shiver run over his back. **That question... He desired to know for a long time. He used to believe in myth, but... After all which happened... It’s just not enough. Not after all those he lost. A frightening possibility always gnaws at the back of his mind.**

Eris’ father continues explaining. **“They decided to pour all knowledge they did have, all means, into discovering the answer to that one elusive question. Unable to believe in myth, they eventually settled on a method to try and establish contact with their Creator. And they did succeed. By means unknown, they managed to reach deep enough into the center of the world, where they found the World Shaper, Cloegandr.”**

Where they asked... What happens when we die?

Eldrin sighs before continuing. **“They did not like the answer, and concluded there was no meaning to life at all.”**

Conrad bites his lip. He can’t exactly say he likes the direction of this story.

“Thus, this small group of our brightest minds set out with a new goal in mind. Immortality. If the certainty of death makes life meaningless, then they only had to reach immortality. Transcend their mortal chains. They delved too deep, sought too much

knowledge, and it left them with conclusions which should never have been made. Only immortality could remain as a path out of the all-consuming horror which is nihilism. With their long life-span, and all knowledge they had built up, they managed to vastly extend their lives, reaching as old as our current age.”

Though there was a huge price to pay...

“**Over time**, through experiment after experiment and dabbling in forbidden arts, they lost what made them our people, turning into beings no more than a shadow of their **former selves.**”

The old man turns to Conrad.

“*They*, are the Faceless.”

Their names, their memories, even their real face... All of it long gone. Only driven forward by their hunger to last, forever. For it is all they have left in a world without meaning.

“Eventually, they were banished from our homelands a very long time ago, for all crimes committed, including meddling into the corrupting arts of blood magic.”

Conrad remains silent, letting it all sink in. Their nihilism, he can grasp it all too well. **All those he loved...** Good people who struggled through life, and for *what?!* It all came to nothing once fate turned its uncaring back to them. Yes, that one answer those best and **brightest minds found doesn't really come as a big shock.** On a certain level, he already assumed as much.

Hate for the Faceless is what keeps him going. Grimald *will* pay for what he did, one way or another. And if those other Faceless stand in the way, they will pay with him! In that sense, it's not as different as what must have kept *them* going for so long. Sheer hate. For their Creator. For the act of Creation itself. For being cast into this existence of suffering, while having their only hope for a happy outcome snatched away.

Whatever... He cannot change the truth about this world. Whether there's even a Creator or not, or whether He looks out for them or not, **it doesn't matter.** There's nothing Conrad can change about it. What the man *can* affect is the world around him. As much as those Faceless may have gained near-immortality, they are still a part of the

physical world. They *can* be taken down. Though the story didn't give him a hint on how. *That*, is what he should focus on.

"What about this prophecy?" Conrad asks, hoping that part at least has more useful information. What did they even need their combat gear for?

"About that... Follow me," Eldrin turns around and begins to walk towards the main building.

*

They come to a stop in a peculiar room. It has one door, sealed with over a dozen locks and marks which indicate a magical enchantment.

"The prophecy talks about a time when an outsider shall visit us, and ask about the Faceless. It marks the coming of the Eternal Night."

"What's that?" Conrad asks.

"I do not know specifically. Only that life as we know it will cease to be."

Which certainly sounds ominous. Makes sense they would close themselves off, in hopes to at least delay it from happening by denying any outsider access.

"Is that why you had an alarm spell in the Woods?" Conrad asks. Primrose and Eris did detect one going off. Which would make sense too, after hearing this story.

"Alarm spell? I know of no such thing," Eldrin seems confused.

"Huh... Okay." Whatever it was doesn't matter anymore. "So, what are we here for?"

The Watcher of Eralthyr extends his hand to the strange door. "This door has a similar inscription as the prophecy in our olden tongue."

Conrad observes the mysterious door. There's an inscription above it in strange runic carvings. The runes seem familiar, somehow.

"Few can still read it," the old man mumbles.

His guest does not need to ask what it says. Eris already utters words he heard once before.

"For the last Serpent will ask about that which has no face, the forthcoming of the Eternal Night."

That's the same as what she said in the Misty Woods, when first hearing about the Faceless. The girl **didn't know about the prophecy**, though the inscription makes more sense now.

"What lies behind this door?"

"The Compendium Labyrinth," Eris' father utters more familiar words. "That is all I can say. None among our people would be able to tell you, for none would know. It is forbidden for anyone to enter here, other than those for who the inscription matches. **This place has been sealed for as long as I can remember.**"

Then there is only one path to take. To go beyond this door and find out what is safeguarded behind it.

"I have no idea if there are dangers along the path. Hence, why I asked you to come in full gear. Everyone involved should go with you."

Conrad nods. With all those locks, a magic enchantment, and a mysterious inscription foretelling his arrival, it's safest to assume there's no coming back before this place served its purpose. He observes the others in his group. None seem to hold any desire to stay behind. Though for some of the girls it probably feels more like a harmless adventure.

"We'll go in."

"Our people no longer have mages, as you call them." Eldrin explains. "We can't use that type of magic. I can open the regular locks, but that enchantment, you will have to deal with yourself."

Eris' father takes multiple sets of keys and begins to open the locks. Dust falls down every time another lock creaks and turns. **"Every Watcher throughout our lands held one key in possession. Last night, I had siren messengers gather them with their swift wings."**

With a loud clang they open one after the other, each lock screeching metal against metal as if the key could break at any moment.

The last lock opens and the man steps aside. What happens next is no longer in his hands. **"My duty as Watcher is finally finished..."** he sounds almost dejected, realizing the

opening of this door marks the end of an age, with only dark, prophetic clouds on the horizon.

Primrose steps forward. She can feel stress weighing down on her. It's overbearing, making her legs feel filled with lead. She is the only mage within all of these lands. Lifting the remaining enchantment is entirely up to her, with expectations of the man she loves on the line.

She observes the door with an enchantment **marker right on its middle**. It's so old... would she even have a clue how it works? Lately, she had so many reasons to doubt her ability. That forbidden blood magic, the druids' **power of nature**, **Lisette's spirits**, it was all so foreign to her. **The girl's** heart beats in fear. What if this will be another one on that **list**? What would they think of her, if she has to turn around and say... I'm sorry, I can't open it. I don't even understand how it works.

A warm touch over her bared shoulders snaps the girl out of her cold shiver.

"Don't worry. If it works, it works. And if this ancient magic is too primitive, it won't, and we'll find another way together."

The girl's chest breathes in deeply, and out again. Hairs on her foxy parts relax. He's always so nice... His words and touch manage to ease her mind all over again. This ancient magic possibly being too primitive, he said. She can peer right through his choice of words, though grateful for them nevertheless.

Her fingers touch the ancient enchantment, energy flowing through them. Primrose tries to scan its composition, understand the makeup of this type of enchantment. It's old. Old doesn't even begin to describe it. Beyond archaic.

Her concentration strengthens. It's difficult, though there's a structure to it. She can grasp it, without actually understanding. Parts of it feel similar to the enchantments she's familiar with. Similar, yet different. Like a language which has gone through alterations over many generations. Most of its words foreign, and peculiar, yet some readable. And exactly as with a language, there's no need to read them all. As long as intended meaning is transmitted, so she can send the correct pattern of arcane energy through it.

Her mind made up, as **the girl's** body calls forth power few mortals understand.

...

The enchantment glyph begins to glow, until it crumbles into fine dust.

“It’s open...” Primrose can almost barely believe it herself.

Without a need to touch the door’s handle, the entire construct shakes, more dust falling down from all crevasses. And the ancient door turns with a loud creak on its tense hinges.

Primrose can feel the hands on her shoulders pull her backwards as Conrad takes the front, giving her a rub while passing. “Knew you would do it.”

Adrian joins him at the front, followed by Roderik. Selena taps her spear on the ground while holding the hand of her sister. Carrot takes the other side of Luna, dagger at her waist. While Lisette and Eris form the rear.

Eldrin wants to reach out for his daughter once he notices her taking a step forward, yet she grabs the hand of Lisette.

“As you said, Father. All those involved should go.”

The man grabs firmly around his set of keys. His daughter is right. He would rather she stays here, though as Watcher, he understands it’s too late for that. All he can do is leave her with his words.

“Be careful.”

*

A stale and dry atmosphere leaks from dark hallways. Air has been stagnant for who knows how long. It leads down a set of stairs, further into the rock wall this city has been built against. How far and deep it goes is a mystery. Light is not to be expected, so they take a set of torches, carried by Luna, Roderik and Carrot. While Primrose can use her staff to provide light. It doesn’t take long through these creeping hallways for the entrance to no longer be visible.

They carry on down the stone stairs and straight ahead for over fifteen minutes.

“Not much of a labyrinth,” Adrian mentions.

“For now,” Conrad hopes it stays that way.

Biggest risk he can think of are traps. Old burial places can have those, to protect the contents from looters. This isn't a burial place, probably. Still, that door was obvious enough in the architect's intentions. They didn't want just anyone to wander around here.

"Try not to touch the walls," Eris warns them when the air grows damp and stale. "Mold can be dangerous."

The hallway ends, and the first different architectural design unravels itself.

"An open area," Conrad warns the others once stepping out of the hallway. He can't see the walls yet, so better be cautious. Pitfalls or ravines are always a possibility. Even if they weren't present originally, a rift in the ground could always form over thousands of years.

Primrose increases the radiance of her staff, and the walls become visible.

"Seems empty," Roderik tries to ease the chill on his back through his own words of comfort. It does appear to be an empty room.

"Look, over there!" Selena points with her spear to the furthest end of the room. She doesn't seem very scared at all. Eager to go take a look. Until Conrad blocks the path with his arm.

"Well done, love. If anyone sees anything, always let us know, we'll check it out."

Selena is miffed she isn't allowed to take a closer peek herself, though excitement already takes over again. Besides, she got praised! The girl already brags about it to her sister.

Both adults reach what she pointed out.

"These guys don't look all that healthy," Adrian mentions casually. A pair of skeletons lie around this part of the wall. "Looters?" he asks.

"Nah, I'm guessing construction workers."

This place has been sealed tight. Doubtful any looters could manage to get in here. And workers' tools are present around them. A pickaxe on the left guy, which would make sense for looters as well. But the other one has a hammer and fine chisel for carving out inscriptions. A bunch of thugs with no other interest than looting have no need for such.

"Why would they leave their own workers behind?" Adrian wonders.

A good question. This wall has an unfinished decoration on it. What the hammer and chisel must have been for. Whatever happened here must have occurred during the final stages of construction. Worker accidents aren't rare, though leaving them behind? That's definitely odd.

Conrad feels over his neck. He just felt a drop of moist. Must be what makes this place damp.

"I doubt this was an accident," Adrian mentions, squatting down near the skeletons.

Conrad looks closer at what his friend points out, turning the skull around. He's right. This skeleton has the back of its head bashed in. Can't be from a cave-in. The ceiling looks fine. Leaking the occasional drop of water, yet otherwise fine. The man checks the other skeleton. "This one as well."

"Guess someone didn't like them very much," Adrian rises up again.

Definitely caused by a third person. These two were caught off guard, smashed in the back of the skull with a blunt object while they were working.

"There's more of them!" Luna points out, directing with her torch. She aims her torch towards the next hallway, obediently waiting like they were told to do, tugging on the arm of her sister so she doesn't head off in curiosity.

Conrad and Adrian approach the hallway though don't enter it yet. It's tall. They can't see the ceiling from here. Staying cautious is a necessity around this place, and that hallway hasn't been checked yet. Keeping distance is the wisest action to take for now.

"Check out the eye," Conrad mentions.

"Ouch... Looks nasty."

A chisel is lodged in the eye socket of one of the skeletons. Definitely not a natural position for it to fall in. That thing was shoved in there, by brute force, when the victim was still alive. The other one has the side of his skull cracked open, a large piece missing. The conclusion isn't hard to make for Conrad.

"These guys didn't hold back. All blows went straight for a kill."

They clearly took out each other.

"Sneaky little murderer among their group," Adrian joins his conclusion. One of this pair must have first taken out the other two, then they fought it out and killed each other.

One by getting stabbed through the eye, the other by having his head smashed open by a pickaxe. Still, that doesn't explain why the bodies were left here. A construct like this must have had more people working on it than four, even in its final stages. For some reason, their buddies decided to simply not bother finishing that mural and sealed the door in a hurry.

"Appears safe to me," Adrian peers in the hallway.

The pair of them want to head in and observe the skeletons closer, when Carrot suddenly tugs hard on their clothes.

"Stop!"

Conrad reaches for his weapon, followed by Adrian. They search around, unable to notice anything. What scared her? "What's wrong?!"

"Shh, be silent," Carrot whispers at them. The girl closed her eyes, completely focused on her sense of hearing. Large rabbit ears move to fine-tune their ability. Everyone stays as silent as those skeletons. "I can hear a faint noise. From that hallway ahead."

Conrad gestures everyone to take a couple steps behind, ready to draw his weapon. Carrot's hearing can be trusted. It's probably nothing dangerous, maybe she hears water flowing from an underground river. However, best to play it safe.

"It sounds like..." she tries to scan her memories for a match, "crackling?"

Then the girl seems to have found a match, her eyes quickly scanning around the room, observing both skeletons. She turns to the hallway again, taking in the other two victims.

"The ceiling," she murmurs.

They can't see it from here, too tall, too dark.

Selena takes over her sister's torch and throws it as far she can into the hallway, dropping right next to the furthest pair of skeletons. Its fire flickers, yet doesn't dim, quickly picking up again once it finds steady ground.

"Huh..." Conrad murmurs. There must be an underground river nearby. There's moist running down the wall up ahead. The entire ceiling around that part is covered in some type of fungus.

“Berserker mushrooms!” Carrot recognizes them. “Stay away from them! They’re popping spores!”

Eris steps aside Carrot and takes a peek herself. “She’s right, don’t breathe! If they detect vibrations, they release spores in the air.”

Conrad curses at this turn of events. So **that’s what took out the workers**, and why their construction buddies didn’t **bother recovering the bodies!** Carrot must have heard the dry crackling of their spores being released. Those things are going to spread and eventually reach right here. They will all kill each other in induced madness if they breathe them in, exactly as those four workers did.

“Fire!” Eris yells out. “Use fire!”

That torch Selena threw earlier flickers stronger. Something invisible is continuously caught in its fire, burning up.

The room lights up with a glow of orange as Primrose gathers energies into her staff. The group dodges aside when **she readies herself to shoot it out. It’s not a detonation** type, as that would potentially blow lingering spores away towards them, but a particularly large ball of simmering heat, its energies not as condensed as usual. Spread out for maximum scorching-potential. The girl uses her own dagger simultaneously to block the fire, as she cannot dodge aside like the others can.

With just enough force to propel it forward, **she shoots it off at a slow pace. The ball’s** diameter wide enough to scorch the walls of the hallway ahead, both spores and mushrooms vaporize under its heat as the air itself seems to burn in shimmering fire from all searing spores. Then the ball dissipates as it spreads its fire all around.

The air is hot to breathe, though manageable.

“You think we got them all?” Conrad asks.

“I can’t hear any more crackling,” Carrot confirms.

Eris touches the ground and uses her magic, vines leading ahead into the hallway, seeking contact with the ceiling. “**The source is gone,**” she backs Carrot. Then the girl turns to her rabbit-eared friend. “You knew about berserker mushrooms? That’s impressive!”

“Sure is,” Conrad gives those ears a playful rub.

“E-he,” Carrot hides her shyness, still recovering from all adrenaline. “I worked with them a couple times. First time they had to tie me up or I would have hurt myself. Very tiny amounts make more courageous, while larger amounts turn you crazy.”

Disorienting poisons, paralyzing ones, now berserker fungus. Sure wasn’t the run-of-the-mill bandit life that girl had.

“Explains some of the encounters we had in the army,” Adrian gives a pat on the back of Carrot and Primrose for a job well done.

Back in their army days, it did happen occasionally when fighting bandits that the enemy seemed to be driven by an uncontrollable fury. Rushing into battle unafraid against superior forces. If they received a small dose of this stuff, it would explain why.

As the group heads through the hallway, still feeling lingering heat against their skin, Conrad takes a last glimpse at the pair of scorched skeletons. They were very close to reaching their final resting spot right aside them.

*

The hallway leads to another room.

“It’s so big,” Lisette meekly observes, not very comfortable in here. Not after what happened in the previous room.

The air isn’t damp in here, so a similar spot of mushrooms shouldn’t be an issue. Though that doesn’t mean other threats couldn’t be present.

“Let’s chart out this room, but let’s mark the entrance first,” Conrad suggests.

This dark area is too large to explore without a marker. With it being pitch-black, there is too much risk of disorientation. If there’s more than one hallway leading in here, it would be problematic if they lose track which one they came from. Plus, they need to return through here eventually. All the more important to indicate the right path leading back outside.

“I’ll place an enchantment,” Primrose puts her magic to work.

It's the same kind of spell as used during the time she was a tool for the bandits, simply cast on a stone of the entrance. Not much energy is placed into it, conserving her strength for who knows what other challenges await, but it will last for the entire day.

The group splits in half to check out the spacious room, one heading clockwise, the other counter-clockwise.

"That's a lot of statues," Conrad utters to himself. They're stone soldiers, lined up along the side of the room. A quick look at the opposing side, where Adrian makes a tour, shows it has similar statues. Same type, same amount.

Roderik keeps a close eye on the nearest statue, not daring to turn his back to any of them. "These won't come alive, will they?"

"Nah," Conrad tries to ease the boy's mind. It might be possible, with the right magic. Regardless, the architects of this place would have to pour in a lot of magic to keep such an enchantment going for so long. Surely, that's not possible. Unless they had some kind of means to store magic long-term maybe, and activate it via a mechanism? "Is it possible to store magic?" he asks Primrose.

"In crystals or gems, yeah. That's what makes my dagger and staff work."

Right... So that's a thing. But they would still need some kind of convoluted mechanism to have it all work out. What idiot architect would waste so much time and effort in...

Click

An instant thrill runs through Conrad's mind at the sound of a contraption activating. "Ah, fuck..."

A quick overview around shows it's Roderik who stepped on a pressure plate. A metallic clang near the hallway reveals a small portcullis sealing the exit. A similar screech of metal against stone indicates the other exit in this room has been sealed off as well.

"Get away from the walls!" Conrad yells out.

"I'm sorry..." Roderik whimpers.

"It will be fine, kid. We'll deal with it," his mentor gives the boy an encouraging slap on the back.

No need to feel any blame. Running away from the wall, he can already notice multiple pressure plates give underneath him. If not his apprentice, someone else would have **activated whatever mechanism is at work. It's almost a miracle they didn't activate any** sooner. Though the architects probably placed them all in the second half to ensure any invaders were inside before the gates close.

The entire place rumbles hard enough Conrad hopes the ceiling doesn't cave in, dust falling everywhere. Primrose shines her staff as bright she can, in hopes that whatever will happen is spotted just that bit earlier.

The rumbling stops, last pieces of dust falling down.

"It's over?" Roderik gains renewed hope his worst nightmare isn't going to happen.

"No, sorry to say. It's only **beginning,**" Adrian crushes that hope.

Glyphs light up along the walls. A sword moves on one of the statues. Difficult, wrecking itself loose. The stone soldier takes a step forward, its weight echoing in the room.

"This is not good..." the man scans around, noticing all statues do the same.

"We got to move!" Conrad yells out. "Or they'll surround us all at once!"

He runs towards one of the statues, determined to seek a fight. Taking them all on simultaneously in the center of the room is a death sentence. However, one or two at a time could be doable.

The stone warrior lifts its sword for an overhead swing and smashes down.

"Don't try to block!" Conrad yells at the others, dodging the incoming blow. The force behind that living statue is far too great to try and block with muscle.

He flicks his tongue when noticing the statue stopped its sword right before hitting the ground. Trying to have them smash their own weapons onto the floor, a wall or even each other won't work. **And his own sword strike couldn't dent the damn thing!**

Primrose shoots a fireball at a statue, though **it doesn't** even try to dodge. The warrior slashes at it with ferocity while taking the blast head-on. **To the girl's dismay, it didn't do much other than scorch it, most of the blast's energy lost to surrounding air. And heat doesn't stop those things either.**

Vines shoot out of the ground to latch around a stone warrior's legs, yet his movements are too powerful, snapping the vines after a short struggle. At least its weapon was dragged aside, helping Adrian as he tries to deflect, sparks flying around from friction. Blocking is impossible, and even deflecting won't work easily without help.

"Use your enchantments!" Conrad gives the order.

They managed to rush past the stone soldiers, through the opening both adults created, though the first statues already close the distance.

"Try and keep them grouped together! Follow the wall!"

If they can manage to lure the walking statues in a circle movement, it would help with managing the incoming assault, though not all statues have the same pace, making it impossible to keep that tactic working to perfection.

With his thumb on the enchantment, Conrad slashes at a soldier. Its stone sword gets sliced off, while the thing doesn't stop moving, trying to punch instead with the stump that remains. Another slice needed to drop the arm.

A piercing arrow shoots through the head, and the damn thing still keeps coming.

"The legs! Aim for the legs!" Adrian calls out.

Roderik takes a slice at a leg, covering Carrot. His sword manages to cleave about three quarters of its rock, with that last quarter sturdy enough to keep the leg attached. A retaliating sideways sword-swing about to smash the boy.

Selena drives her spear in the leg, separating that remaining quarter through fiery sparks of enchanted metal. The stone giant tumbles sideways while its swing misses Roderik by a hair's width.

"Don't they have a core!?" Conrad shouts towards Primrose while she shields Carrot with her protective dagger.

"They are powered by an outside source!" she returns.

Conrad quickly takes in the glowing glyphs. Those have to be related somehow. Unfortunately, they're located too high to reach most of them. Only Lisette's arrows can reliably reach, and she doesn't have enough of them to take out even half the number of glyphs. Running out time could be an option, but that one is far too risky. Their own armor-piercing enchantments won't last long enough to take out all giants either.

“*Shit!*” the man curses to himself. His thinking made him lose focus for a short moment, and a soldier reached within striking distance, its weapon readied. With a slower paced one already approaching from the middle of the room. It will be hard to dodge both!

Conrad braces on his leg and pushes himself hard, throwing his entire body sideways, towards the ground. **It’s the only** path remaining to dodge that first swing. Already noticing the second soldier lift **its weapon to strike when he’s down.**

But the overhead swing completely misses him, trajectory swiftly changing vector with brutal force, slashing at a fireball which passed right behind it.

“They respond to heat!” Primrose shouts.

Conrad forces his body to move, pushing himself up with all strength he has while swinging at the stone colossus’ leg. **Another one falls** to the ground disabled. An arrow pierces its wrist when the soldier still tries to strike its sword at Conrad from the ground.

They don’t have much time left. Their enchantments will be about halfway their expected duration with the amount of work they have to do, and Lisette will run out of enchanted arrows soon!

“There has to be a main source!” Primrose adds to her previous observation. It can’t be only the glyphs. Those are merely relay points, channeling this room with energy for the soldiers to feed on.

“Can you find it!?” Conrad yells.

“Primrose tries focusing energies into her staff, taking the risk of closing her eyes. Meanwhile, Roderik and Selena act as decoy for the nearest soldier, unable to stop them all.

“Prim! Watch out!” Luna shouts at her.

The young mage **doesn’t open her eyes and relies on her dagger, lifting it towards** where she can hear stone turning to take a strike at her.

The sword smashes itself to pieces on her barrier.

“I can’t locate it!” she opens her eyes again. **“The glyphs interfere!”** The room is covered with too much arcane energy. Trying to find the source is like trying to identify the origin of a fire when the entire house is already ablaze.

“I’ll find it!” Eris provides a glimmer of hope for an increasingly dire situation. “But I need time!”

No point in asking her how she’ll do it, or how much time she needs. They will simply have to make it happen. Conrad makes a quick decision, overlooking the battlefield. They’re currently near a corner. “Run to the furthest corner and do it!”

He doesn’t wait for a response and dashes at the closest threat, creating an opening for Eris. “We’ll keep them distracted!” he gives the others their instructions. “Luna! You follow her!”

He has no idea what Eris intends to do, so Luna can act as her eyes and ears in case something goes wrong.

The druid runs to the opposite corner as fast as she can, where she seeks contact with the ground. Vines tangle around the girl. This rocky ground is far from optimal, and there are no strong ley-lines passing nearby either. She will have to pull out all the stops to make use of what little power lingers in these depths, cocooning herself into vines for maximum tuning with nature.

Vines dig deep into the ground, tracing as far as is needed, following the contours of this room. Nothing is visible as source. Yet, it can’t be far. Not with the large amount of power required to keep this mechanism working. She cannot detect arcane energies to any level like Primrose can, though she can feel out the entire room physically, vines acting as her extended limbs.

Nothing under the floor... It has to be higher. Up the walls then.

Conrad can spot the vines crawl up the walls all around, digging into every fine crevasse, seeking out a nearby room, an object, an anomaly, a source.

A sudden scream reaches his ears. **The man’s** heart sinks in his shoes. Did someone get hit?!

He searches around, noticing it originated from Luna. A warrior approaches Eris and her, sneaking around the dark outline of the room, closing the distance as if it has a mind which can reason. Luna can run, though Eris is stuck in her cocooned state, the statue attracted to warm energy radiating from her magical entanglement.

Selena breaks off and rushes towards her sister, followed by Conrad and the rest, as their plan to keep remaining soldiers occupied quickly falls apart. At a minimum, they bought some time. Now all they can do is hope Eris can finish her search fast enough.

Selena's spear dives reckless at the warrior. Far from disabled, yet she managed to lure its attention away from her sister and Eris. The rest of the group easily takes down the isolated giant.

Conrad turns towards the oncoming soldiers, trying to keep hope alive through banter. **"We really need to have a stern talk later about running off!"**

Eris is aware of the presence of her friends. She's too much in a trance to hear or see anything, yet she can sense them, through all vines underneath their feet. She almost finished searching the walls. Nothing unusual. Nothing which could house whatever **magical core is at work. Surely, it won't be above them?! If it is, she won't reach there in time... If only her vines had the strength to bind those giants, or break through the glyphs. Alas, they lack the power. Not with such a weak ley-line she has to tap from. Even this much pushes her to the edge.**

The girl's senses focus. What's this? A diversion in the shape of a small room, somewhere high on the north wall. Its walls extra-sturdy **enough her vines can't even** find a single crack to crawl through, unlike the rest of the room. A hidden area?!

The ball of vines untangles.

"I found it!" Eris proclaims with vigor. She points at a spot in the room, a part of the furthest wall.

Primrose gathers a fireball, everyone making room for her. She blasts it forward, though **it can't break the wall, too much energy lost to the open area. Same problem as with the stone giants. "If only there was a big enough crack," she mopes in growing** despair. Then she could blow a part of the wall to smithereens from the inside. That would work!

Lisette's last piercing-arrow flies through the sky, smashing with its enhanced power and momentum through the sturdy stone.

Primrose could make a leap of joy, even if she's **far too stressed out. There's only** enough time for one more attempt before the remaining soldiers get here! Her energy

focuses in an all-or-nothing blast. She'll need it. Even from here, the little mage can deduct from that crack the wall is very thick and sturdy. No surprise, as it was built to last for millennia. All arcane energy condenses into as small but powerful a fireball she can summon forth.

"Watch out!" Luna yells out again.

Her sister is first to recognize the threat. It's a fallen stone soldier. It lied down disabled till now. Its arm moves once more, ready to strike at the little mage in reach, drawn towards the heat of her fireball. She can't block it. Her dagger already blocks the intense heat of that spell as she keeps pouring all she has into it. It won't be able to block the physical strike that is about to come!

Selena jams down her spear, sparks flying. Her mind trapped in shock.

It didn't work...

The enchantment in her weapon lost its power, the spear no longer capable of carving through!

Rumbling of stone fills their ears. A horrible sound. Signaling one of their own about to meet her end. The terrifying noise of a stony sword swing in motion...

...

Yet, it stopped. The sword points at Primrose, though **doesn't strike**. The stone colossus simply holds its arm in place.

A blue wall divides the vulpes mage from the weapon of stone. Its watery surface still ripples from all wind gushed forward when the sword was swung. Five lights shine within its liquid body.

With the stone soldier no longer capable of detecting the heat of Primrose or her spell, only detecting the cold of water, it stopped attacking.

The last traces of enchantment belonging to Carrot's dagger and Roderik's sword disarm the ancient giant, its weapon dropping to the ground.

A fireball blasts through the room, aimed right at the crack. Its condensed power buries into rock and stone, followed by an expansion of light when a powerful explosion blows a significant part of the wall away.

The girl cheers at her achievement. She got it! She...

Her smile fades. She got the wall alright, but behind it lies the power source. A large crystal. And it's still intact! It's damaged, and another blast would take it out, yet there's no more time!

Lisette points forward, and the wall of water changes shape. A thin spear of liquid shoots forward, its body shaped into the sharpest tip possible. It pierces the crystal, water expanding again once inside, smashing the crystal into a hundred pieces from within.

Conrad stands ready with his sword, enchantment run out, ready to do the impossible and deflect a blow which cannot be blocked. He breathes in and out deeply, holding in place. The statues... They aren't moving? Did it work?

Water runs down from the broken wall, five lights returning to Lisette. The girl breathes equally hard. Energy drained.

Conrad still tries to grasp what happened. Did his daughter do that?!

"Fuck yeah!" Adrian pumps his fist, still feeling the adrenaline.

"You okay?" Conrad asks his daughter.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Only tired."

"And your spirits?" They disappeared. Did she lose them? Are they gone?!

"They're sleeping inside me," she says. "We're all tired."

That lesson she learned yesterday from Eldrin gave her a large power boost, more capable of manifesting her bond with the spirits. Regardless, without much actual experience she can't maintain it for long.

"I should grow better with time," she takes some rest by leaning on her knees.

Conrad gives her a hug. "You did great already." Then he gives the other girls a hug, matched by a fist bump with Roderik and Adrian. They all played a crucial role in their survival.

"What about the portcullis?" Adrian asks, curious how they will get out of this room now.

"Lift it?" Conrad throws out an idea.

Roderik grabs the metal gate and puts his strength underneath it.

"Well, damn," Adrian mumbles. It actually moves.

The boy can feel himself working a wonder, not aware that without the magic crystal powering the portcullis, it has a mechanism which is not particularly much of an obstacle and can be easily lifted.

*

“Great... Another room?” Roderik grumbles.

“Obviously,” Conrad points out. “This hallway has to lead somewhere.”

Another dark room, with no idea how spacious it is. Light certainly doesn’t reach the walls, even if Primrose tries to expand her staff’s radiance.

“A library?” Conrad wonders out loud. Certainly, it gives the impression of one. He can notice several bookcases ahead. Pretty big too. The cases go on for quite a while.

“There’s an enchantment placed here,” Primrose points out. She indicates the ground. A circle is located there, with lines running away from it. The only line they can trace to a destination runs towards the wall.

“Can you tell what it is?” Conrad asks.

The girl bends through her knees, examining the ground. Trying to decipher the composition of this enchantment. Her face gradually turns to a confident smile when she rises again and prepares her staff. Tapping it twice into the circle to activate her magic.

The circle and lines glow up, torches placed just about everywhere start to burn a magical yellow. Their light not one of a natural fire. They must be powered by a similar crystal as the one they destroyed, this one meant for a far less dangerous purpose. Lighting.

“Whoa!” the children all cry out in amazement.

No wonder. Even both adults are lost for words. It’s a library alright. And one of a size which dwarfs any other there ever was. As far as they can see, the library stretches out to the horizon in all directions except the one they came from. Even up and down, it goes on and on in endless floors, visible from an open gap which runs through the middle, cleaving the library in half, with an equally endless set of bridges connecting both halves.

“Now what?” Adrian asks.

Conrad has no idea what to respond. It's almost as if this library fills out the entire rock plateau. **What the heck are they supposed to do in here? Find an exit? That's going to take a very long time with the size this place is. Hard to say how long. Days? Weeks? Months? And what if they're supposed to find something among these books? No, that's not even possible in a single lifetime. Even an alma's lifetime might be too short for that.** This feels eerily daunting...

A single pedestal stands ahead, in clear sight and elevated for extra eye-catching attention. Conrad approaches it after Primrose gives a nod she can't sense any magical trap. A single document lies on top of it.

The man's teeth grit together, nails pushing in his hands.

It's an unsigned blood contract.

He recognizes its design all too well. A magical pattern drawn on its paper. The piece of parchment is big, with tiny scripture on it. It's a language he can't read.

"It's our olden language," Eris stepped forward, taking a look at the document. "I haven't finished my studies on it yet, but I should be able to read most."

"Don't touch it," Conrad warns her. "Can you make out the contents?"

Eris spends time trying to decipher the archaic Alma language, eyes sometimes narrowing to ponder on meaning. She reads out loud as she deciphers. **"This room is the compendium of all knowledge, acquired by the... ones without a face? It grati... satisfies all questions. It holds all answers. All, except for one. We sealed this compendium, after expelling... banishing... its creators. Before you lies a test. Brave it, and acquire what you seek. Fail it, and fade into the Eternal Night."**

Eris' attention shifts to the blood contract itself.

"The condition on this contract is to solve a riddle in time, without pulling a single wrong book from the shelves," she explains.

"Hiding a tree inside a forest," Adrian utters to himself, turning towards Conrad. "Now what? Sign it?"

Conrad shakes his head and drags Eris away from the document with force. "Never! I'll never have anyone sign that accursed thing!"

They will simply have to find another way to acquire the information they seek. If necessary, with help from all the alma. Maybe, if they all work together, it can be done in a reasonable amount of time. His upper teeth bite into **the man's** lip as he overlooks the large library.

It doesn't matter how long it takes, that blood-enchanted document is going to burn unsigned, right now!

Attention is drawn when the ground starts shaking.

"What the...?" he turns around, facing the pedestal.

A single boy stands behind the others, right in front of the pedestal, with a siren quill in his hands.

Conrad runs forward and grabs Roderik by his arm while the entire place shakes. **"You didn't..."** he doesn't complete his sentence.

The quill has fresh **blood on it from the boy's** finger. The document signed with a red cross.

"You FOOL!" he shouts in anger at Roderik, wanting to give him a bash over the head, though Conrad holds himself in when he notices the kid shakes.

"It's the only way..." Roderik whimpers.

A part of the ceiling opens up and a large timepiece comes down, rolling around, sand beginning to run down.

"Fuck!" Conrad tries to contain his anger. Time started ticking for the boy. They have no other choice but to solve it now!

"There's plenty of sand," Roderik tries to seek affirmation. **"Plenty of time left, right?"** The timepiece is rather big, with plenty of sand in its upper compartment. Even if there's a constant stream running down, and quite fast.

Conrad loosens his fist while biting away his anger and gives a firm slap to the back of Roderik's head. **"You started it, so don't go shaking in your boots now. We'll get through this together."** He searches around for any other changes after the contract was signed and the time mechanism activated.

"These came down," Luna points at the wall.

She's right. Four bookcases are visible inside an alcove each. **Those weren't there** before the shaking began. The wall came down as part of the mechanism, revealing the four alcoves. A fifth one is partially visible, though its opening mechanism got stuck. These are clearly connected to this riddle or whatever.

"Don't touch anything," Adrian points out to the children. **"Remember what Eris read earlier, no book should be removed which isn't involved in solving this."**

They only have one shot at the riddle. If they fail, Roderik will pay the price.

"Let's deal with this wall mechanism first," Conrad tries to master his growing anxiousness. **"This fifth one should go down somehow or we're not getting anywhere."** He tries to bash against the wall, yet **that doesn't work.**

"Maybe we can push it down instead?" Adrian suggests.

"Worth a try," Conrad grabs the top and puts all strength he has in trying to shove it down, joined by Adrian. Sadly, it's quickly obvious it refuses to budge.

"I can hear the mechanism," Carrot leans against the wall, an ear pressed to it. **"It sounds different over here."**

Conrad tries to lift himself up on the wall, trying to look behind it. He can spot the bookcase, but **it's too hard** to face down where Carrot indicates something should be on the other side of the wall. Whatever it could be which sounds odd to her.

"Let me up!" Selena suggests.

Conrad lets her sit on his shoulders. From this height, she can comfortably glance over the wall.

"I see it! There's a piece broken. One of those wooden turning thingies!"

"A gear piece? Is it entirely broken? Or a part?"

Selena tries her best to explain an object she has only heard of before. **"Yeah, it's like a wheel with wooden bits pointing out. One of those bits is broken off and stuck in it."**

Conrad wants to ask her if she can knock it out of place with her spear, though he has no need to. Selena already uses her spear to poke around at the gear. **"Try and shove it out! Use leverage if you can!"** he can feel the girl wiggling on his shoulders.

"I'm trying!"

With a sudden noise, the wall shakes and comes alive.

“Got it!”

The entire mechanism rumbles and creaks as if it could get stuck any moment again, while the wall finally reaches the bottom.

“Did I do good?” she asks when jumping off Conrad’s shoulders.

The man gives her a quick kiss on the cheek before he rises again, partially meant to help control his own rising stress. “You did great.” Then he gives a quick kiss on the back of Carrot’s ear. “You too, great job for hearing where the mechanism was.”

“These are readable...” Adrian overlooks the book cases, reading the titles of the books on them. “It’s very old, hard to read, but it’s our language.” Or possibly where it originates from.

Only the fifth case is in that same language Eris read earlier.

“Let’s examine the titles,” Conrad suggests. “Eris, you take the fifth one. Remember, don’t touch anything!”

Roderik paces around with increasing stress levels. He tries to hide his shivering, though fear rises ever higher. Is it his impression, or is that sand level dropping faster than before? Time remaining is definitely far removed from what he first estimated. He’s of no use in this test, the boy understands as much. With these shaking hands, he would only mess up. His mind can’t even think straight. It feels as if his life is ticking away. All he can do is hold on to that quill, and hope it brings him luck.

“What do you make out of this?” Conrad asks the others.

“Still looking,” Adrian answers.

An uncertain voice answers from the third book case. “There’s one missing.”

It’s from Luna. But she can’t read? How would she know a book is missing?

“Look, the covers form a single picture, and one is missing.”

Adrian quickly takes a glance at what she points out. She’s right. This is a multi-volume index on vulpes medical practices from who knows how long ago, the rear cover of every volume forms a picture when all placed in order. And that picture is missing a book. Wait... About that missing volume, wasn’t that...?!

Adrian shifts back to the book case he observed himself. **Where was it again...?** “**Found it!**” he mentions. **Though he doesn’t touch it yet**, searching around first. A grin begins to form.

“**Got it!** This entire case is about architecture. Except the one about vulpes medicine which is misplaced. That has to be the key.” He turns back towards the case Luna found the missing book in, observing quickly over the titles. “**Yeah, that’s definitely it.**”

He reaches for the misplaced medicine book and grabs it. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife when he suddenly pulls it out, a couple eyes shifting to Roderik who can feel his own heart skip a beat.

The boy is **still standing...**

Adrian browses through the book. **There’s a single bookmark placed in it.** Strangely enough, the book only has text on one side of its pages. He slaps it close again, plenty of dust puffing out.

He gives Luna a pat on the back and a wink. “**Great job, girl. You got the ball rolling. I can take it from here.**” While he scours over another bookcase, Adrian addresses everyone present. “**Numbers. Find something in this library involving numbers. Don’t touch any books. Just find and report. Except Eris, I need her help here.**”

“**Alright,**” Conrad gathers the girls’ attention. “**You heard the man, let’s search for numbers.**” He gives a pat on Roderik’s shoulder. “**Come, you too. Never leave your fate in the hands of others if you can do work yourself.**”

Roderik gathers his remaining strength and stands up from quivering in worries. Trying to pump a measure of courage back in him. It will be fine. Look, Adrian seems confident he cracked the puzzle! **He had the courage to sign the document. Now he’ll just have to see it through, so his parents can be proud of their son.**

...

The group spreads out while Adrian is left behind with Eris, giving the girl guidance on what to do. “**You do the fifth bookcase, nobody else can read those titles. I’ll tell you what to look for.**”

“They are very old,” she hesitates, examining the back covers. “Many even older than that document. And in various dialects.” Regardless, she tightens her fist. Dialects or not, there’s no other choice. Even if she can only make out half of it.

...

The others spread out, trying to find anything to do with numbers. Thankfully, there don’t seem to be any traps or stone guardians in here. As long as they don’t get lost in this gigantic library’s countless aisles, they will be safe. Anyone other than Roderik.

“Found one!” Lisette shouts from further away.

“I got one too!” Selena’s voice joins her.

Conrad runs towards the nearest girl. She points at the side of an aisle. It has a number on it. The one next to it doesn’t, neither does the one after. None do, until he reaches Lisette, where another number decorates the aisle she looks at. The man starts to mumble... Could that be what they represent? But those total numbers would be unimaginable...

“Roderik! Can you check that aisle over there until you find a number? Count the cases in between!”

The boy nods and heads off, while his mentor searches the opposite direction of the apprentice, as fast as their legs allow.

“One... Two... Three...” Conrad counts all aisles he passes. “Ten...” he smiles. This tenth aisle is numbered, as expected. One number higher than where he began counting.

“There’s ten!” Roderik returns to him from the distance.

The boy can’t read the exact number on the aisle, unable to even count much higher than ten, though that doesn’t matter anymore. Conrad’s hunch is confirmed. However, these numbers alone aren’t enough. They need different ones than only these aisles...

“Over here!” Carrot comes running towards him. “Selena found something else!”

Conrad lets her guide him, arriving at the girl and what she found. Another smile forms right away. This completes the picture...

...

The group returns at Adrian’s spot, Conrad carrying a large document in his hands.

“We found a layout of the place,” he shows the document. “It was right next to the staircase leading up and down.” It’s a map. Not a one-to-one copy of the Compendium’s entire size, as that would be far too expansive, but a generalized overview how the library is ordered. “There are four types of numbers,” Conrad explains.

The first number on the map indicates a floor number, reaching over a hundred floors in either direction of up or down. The one they found the map on is marked as floor zero. The middle stratum.

Second number designates a block, with each floor divided in four blocks.

The third number indicates the aisle. These are the numbers Conrad discovered on the cases. With only every tenfold aisle marked. Even then, the numbers reach over a mind-boggling thousand. And that’s only for a single block.

Fourth and last number on the map marks specific book cases within the aisles, following that same pattern of only every tenth one.

“Perfect,” Adrian inspects the map. “We need five numbers here.”

“Isn’t that one too much?” Roderik asks worried. “We only have four.”

“No, five would be just right. Think about it. With four, we have floor, block, aisle and the right book case, but not a specific book within that case yet. We need a fifth number.” He turns back to Eris. “We already found four, one from each misplaced book in these four cases. She searches for the last one.”

Sweat runs down Eris’ forehead. She tries her best to read this archaic dialect, a task proving itself difficult. “Alma... language? Linguistics? I think...” she tries to make out the covers out loud. “Alma fishing... something. And this one is about our pact with the sirens.”

She can’t find any pattern in these books. They all seem to be about different subjects. Language, fishing, a local animal encyclopedia, and so on. Unlike the other cases, where every book was about a specific subject such as architecture or medicine.

Conrad takes a quick peek at the timepiece. Its sand level is at three-quarters. This is turning dire... The closer that sand gets to the tiny hole it flows down through, the narrower the time piece. That remaining quarter is only an illusion. Very little time remains.

He turns back to the bookcase, eyes flicking over it, hoping to find anything which can help Eris with identifying the misplaced book.

Then his eyes stop.

“What’s this?” he reaches out, staying just shy of touching. This book... It’s one of those with a small decorative picture on the back.

“I don’t know all words in the title,” Eris responds. “But the book is about farming.”

There’s no need to know the title, for Conrad recognizes the picture on the back. Of course she wouldn’t know that in her olden language. It would be far too obscure a word for these lands that don’t do any similar farming.

It’s a windmill. An olden design, very primitive, with similarities to the one in Milgard.

Another glimpse follows towards the timepiece... There’s no time left. He has to go with his hunch and the few titles Eris read out loud. His fingers grasp around the book’s binding to pull it out.

He was right. This has to be it! As he flips through the book, multiple pictures of windmills decorate its contents. “It’s a book about my home country. It doesn’t belong in this case which is all about Eris’ people!”

Adrian snatches the book and instantly flips to the bookmark placed in it. It carries a small number on it as well. Number four, completing a set of one to five. Then he flips the books in the right order, this one as the fourth. “We got all our numbers!” he proclaims.

Roderik wants to cheer, his voice instantly failing when noticing what little time remains. Sand almost gone from the upper compartment.

The man flips open the top book, with a bookmark numbered as one. Like all of these specific books, only one side has writing on it, the other side is left blank. He takes in the page number and starts running. “Floor eleven!”

Conrad follows him, with Roderik and Carrot trying to catch up. The others stay behind near the entrance, as they’re too exhausted from the fight earlier to run up a staircase for multiple floors. Or simply don’t have the stamina, as in Luna’s case.

Scaling the stairs leaves them heaving with fatigue, running as fast as their bodies allow. Every muscle straining to exceed its capabilities with a temporary adrenaline burst.

“Eleven!” Conrad calls out the correct floor, counting together with the others to make certain their numbers match. Miscounting now would be catastrophic.

Adrian flips open the second book and looks for the right number, immediately following with the third one, casting them aside afterwards. **“Block one, aisle thirty!”**

Conrad starts to foster second doubts. Only every tenth aisle is marked. So they follow that number? Or count every aisle instead?

No... It has to be every aisle. The map had them all numbered in its examples. Besides, there’s not nearly enough time left to go for a tenfold-longer run.

He passes the case marked with a three, dashing into the aisle. **“Thirty!”** he calls out, followed by Adrian. Both children lag behind, tired from the staircase, yet they hold up fine. All of them head into the aisle, rushing to the right bookcase, matching bookmark four.

They come to a stop. No need to call out any longer. The running part is behind them. All which is needed, is for one of them to dare and pick out the correct book, matching **bookmark five’s designated page number.** Once they pull out the book, Roderik’s blood contract should be complete.

*

The other girls still at floor zero don’t speak a word. They’re all far too stressed out, aware one of their own could meet his end here. The entire place eerily silent. Would they even see the others again? Maybe they really should have tried to go with them.

Nah, that would only have risked slowing them down. Still, they solved it... **This** puzzle! Adrian seemed so confident. **He can’t be wrong. It’s** impossible for him to be wrong!

Eris observes the last bookcase. What a stroke of luck Conrad picked up on that book from his own home. She honestly wouldn’t have figured out which one doesn’t belong in here. Though **he’s right. As she keeps reading the bindings, they’re** all about her own people. It’s almost embarrassing she didn’t figure that one out. **Maybe** because it was so obvious to her? Practically every book she ever read was about her land or her people, one

way or another. This must be what is described as something so obvious and normal you just don't think about it anymore, unless you're not from here.

Not from here... Those words echo in her mind.

The girl's expression changes, shifting into panic. Quickly, she turns around...

*

"Book fifteen," Adrian reads the page number matching the last bookmark.

Conrad starts counting, grateful the number isn't one multitudes higher. Any second now, that timepiece will run out.

"Fifteen!" he calls out, reaching for the book.

"Stop!" a tiny hand latches on to his arm.

The man's fingers float right before the book, just shy of touching. Carrot stopped him in the nick of time. She's trying to listen. He can't even dare ask her what's wrong, too afraid to interrupt her hearing.

"The order is different?" she mumbles, trying to make sense out of what she can pick up. The voice of Eris, as she yells loud towards the higher floors. "Alma stack books from right to left...?"

Conrad's vision finds Adrian's for a split second. An "Oh shit" moment crosses both their minds.

He quickly recounts, from the right this time, pulling out the fifteenth book, its particularly thin binding the last string of hope.

...

Eris breathes for air from shouting, unsure if they managed to hear her. As she tries to breathe in deeply for another shout, Luna suddenly jumps up startled.

"It's burning!"

The blood contract caught fire. Its ancient, dried parchment swiftly turns to ashes as a wave of fire rolls through it. Right before the last grain of sand falls down the timepiece.

...

Roderik touches his own body. He's alive. His mentor holds a book, and he's still alive.

Alive!

He wants to jump up in joy, while his knees give instead, too tired and overcome with all fear catching up.

Conrad supports the boy with one arm, holding tight onto the book with the other.

He got it! He finally found what he left for, alone in the night, on that day ten years ago. His sought for answers are right here, in his hand.

Act 2 ~ Chapter 12



A Promise...

“One’s mortal life ends with death.”

That was the answer Cloegandr returned to those who sought him. The one answer among all answers, for the one question among all questions.

At first, it filled them with despair. For their remainder of time, it filled them with hate. Though their time was limited. Even after acquiring so much knowledge, even after extending their lives to a point where they are no longer alma, they were still mortal. Nothing but a shade of darkness, a mere shadow cast on the wall of what was once their former selves. Their lives already lasted for thousands of years longer than is natural. It would last for thousands more. Yet, they could feel their end slow and agonizingly draw near.

Thus, they concocted a plan. Their final act of hope. Their final act of revenge.

They would destroy it all.

And be reborn as a God themselves.

There was another one, filled with that same hate. A soulmate. The Second One, born as a natural counterpart to the divine deity. The Destroyer, Agmus. He no longer has a vessel in this world. Therefore, they will simply craft one. To control it themselves. To become His reincarnation into the physical world.

To accomplish such a feat, they will need immense power. They have thousands of years to bring their plan to fruition. Make all preparations, create their chosen vessel, and perfect the process.

Once all preparations are complete, they will sow the seeds of chaos, and harvest the bounty of death and decay. Until the day they harvested enough, and the vessel can be activated. Drawing forth the power of a God into the realm of mortals, as it shall similarly draw the ones without a face as His core. With them at the center, in control, as even the stars themselves shall fade into oblivion.

Become The Destroyer.

...

Conrad closes the thin book. Its language was old, though he could read it, written down in both his and the *Alma's* tongue.

“Found what you looked for?” Eldrin notices he is done reading.

“Yes... This will do,” he answers.

They walked out of the Compendium Labyrinth once solving the puzzle and acquiring the book. As the contract promised, he now has all he needs to know about these Faceless. He knows who they are, and what they seek to accomplish. Furthermore, it came with another piece of crucial information. One Primrose right now works on, together with Lisette.

“What will you do now?” Eldrin asks, already informed on the contents of the book.

“Put a stop to it.”

“That’s impossible,” the Watcher counters. “Catastrophe cannot be prevented. The Eternal Night *will fall.*”

A voice descends from the sky in her typical serene tone. “Then we will only have to lift it right after.”

Sylvie greets Conrad.

He nods at her, responding in spirit. “She’s right. If it comes to that, we’ll just have to undo it straight away before any damage is done.” He stands up from around the stone table. “But I don’t intend to let this disaster fall upon us to begin with!”

“How will you seek to accomplish such?” Eldrin asks.

Conrad waves the book at him. “According to this, they have two conditions required. One is sowing chaos, the other is a vessel of some sort. We don’t know enough about the last one, yet we can work with the first.”

“How?” Eldrin asks again.

“By overthrowing them, and restore our lands to what they were. A home for our people.”

The war between Bournesse and Gleaze, all destruction of their traditions and identity, it must be a part of this chaos. Even the Gleaze civil war decades ago, and the Hatori Tribe Wars which followed, will be a part of the Faceless’ plan already. They began in Uskandar, wresting its seat of power from the people by any means necessary. From there, they could spread out destruction through war, followed by cultural and societal rot through their Union.

“That will come with risks,” Eldrin warns him. “You’ll have to fight this Union in open rebellion. Which will feed the puppet-masters’ plan.”

“Only if we fail to restore our lands in time.” Conrad bashes his fist on the table. “Damn it, Eldrin! There’s no time to hesitate! If we do nothing, they win regardless. We must fight! It’s our only hope.”

“Eldrin,” the siren places one of her wings around the Watcher. “I would rather my future daughters have a chance, than to have none at all.”

The man ponders deeply, too stubborn to return an answer right away, though his choice is made.

*

Both wagons travel back into the Misty Woods, heading towards the Hatori lands. All damage by the harpy attack has been repaired and supplies stocked. Even though Eralthyr is her home, Eris joined the trip back, looking forward to find out what lies on the other side of the Woods.

“You managed to convince him?” Roderik asks about the Watcher of Eralthyr.

“Yeah, took insisting, but we have a deal.”

In the end, they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. That much should be obvious after what they learned. Yes, maybe current generations can afford to do nothing and sit on their ass, living out their lives in peace while the world further descends into cultural rot, spiritual death and ethnic extinction. Depends on how long it takes for their enemy to reach their goal. Though then his children or grandchildren will be the ones who have no other choice but to face the consequences.

“So, we go back to Sakai now?” the boy asks.

“Yeah, I’ve got preparatory work to do there. And it’s just the right place.”

Roderik ponders, unsure if he should inquire. “You believe we’ll ever reach the Sea of Salt?”

Conrad offers his apprentice a pat on the back. “With what we’re about to stoke, pretty good odds we’ll get there.” That patting turns into a quick flick over the boy’s head. “Just don’t ever sign a blood contract again, or you’ll see me angry for the first time.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t apologize to me.”

Roderik visibly wonders about those words, confused.

The man beside him sighs and shakes his head, as the boy still has so much to learn. “You left two pregnant girls in Sakai. Don’t tell me you forgot. That’s two children almost out of a father.”

Even though Roderik was chastised, he can’t help grin at that mention. He didn’t forget at all! In fact, he has been looking forward to see Olive and Pepper again ever since they departed. “You think I could see the difference already? You know, their bellies?”

“Nah, too early. But you’ll definitely have confirmation they carry your children.”

“Can we have our marriage right after arriving?”

Conrad laughs at the boy's eagerness, mentioning a small detail Roderik overlooked. **"And what funds will you plunder to pay for it all? Marriages aren't cheap.** You will have to carry the bill for food and drinks. If you want Olive and Pepper to be dressed for the occasion, that's even more expenses on top. And entertainment for invited guests as the final touch."

Roderik ponders deeply, trying to find a solution. **"I'll work for it!"**

That won't be enough. Not with what little time remains for life to stay relatively calm. For now, they can afford the luxury of a marriage. Though not for long, considering what plans are in store for the near future. The boy is lucky enough already his wives-to-be live in Sakai, where they will stay for a short while.

Conrad and Eris don't have such luxury. Their marriage is delayed until timing allows for it. Staying in **Eralthyr wasn't an option, and Conrad will** be very busy these coming weeks. The stakes are too high to gamble with available time. Marriage can happen once events take a turn for the better.

"You're in luck," he mentions to the boy. **"Normally, you would have to carry all expenses yourself as the groom."** Especially when taking more than one wife. He has to show his capability to provide for them. In this case, however, **he'll** receive a helping hand. **"You've been a good** aid during our trip. You were already rewarded for the cockatrice hunt, which **leaves one favor still unpaid."**

Roderik thinks hard. What has he done that warrants a reward?

His mentor already gives the answer. **"Without you and your overly rushed and foolish** decision to go sign a deadly contract in your own blood, we would still be in the dark about what is going on with these Faceless. As utterly stupid and brain-dead impulsive that act was, I will reluctantly admit **it did prove to be of great help."**

Roderik keeps his mouth wisely shut. He can feel excitement well up at where this conversation is going, though **his mentor wouldn't appreciate showing such elated** emotion openly. He would definitely give him a slap and tell the boy to show some actual repentance for acting the brave fool.

“I see you’re learning,” Conrad notices his apprentice tries to contain his excitement. “Good. But as I said, you’ll receive a reward suitable for the prize obtained. Consider your marriage expenses paid.”

With the young groom already dreaming about what clothes his wives will wear, the wagons reached deeper into the Misty Woods. Fog naturally rises, with the local ley-line no longer remembering them by now. **That won’t be an issue.** The barrier only works in one direction anyway. They will simply end up on the other side of the Woods regardless. By now, they’re at the exact same spot where Primrose and Eris detected some form of unknown magic, pulsing wide and far until it faded.

A single worry returns to Conrad’s mind once the earlier conversation reached its end. **It’s been with him since they left Eralthyr.**

Why?

Why did Grimald help him pass the Woods and reach the city? He damn well knew the intent of Conrad. To find out his background, their plans, and hopefully discover a weakness. A weapon to use against the Faceless. As he equally should have known what else Conrad would acquire from braving the Compendium Labyrinth.

And yet, he helped them get **there. It doesn’t make any sense!** Grimald is not the type to poke a stick into his own wheels. What did he say again on that night they met in Sakai? Something about them both benefiting from a cooperative relationship? Now, and in the nearby future... **Benefit, how? And how much exactly did he foresee of this future?**

*

A gust blows through the Woods, until it suddenly fades, air turning stagnant. **Conrad’s expression** is instantly drawn to the present and his immediate surroundings. The wagons stop as he jumps off, hand reaching for his sword, not hesitating to draw.

From the rear wagon, Adrian jumps off all the same, covering the other side. Remaining occupants in the wagons left confused, except one. Eris opens the cover and yells out.

“Something’s coming!”

Conrad already felt it on pure instinct. His senses which made him survive this long warn him in excess to be on his highest guard, hairs standing on end.

A razor-sharp presence rushes through the greenery, drawing right towards the wagons like a viper honing in on a kill. A glimpse of a shadow breaks through the side of the road, aiming right for Conrad with nothing less than a lethal blow.

Dull shrieking of metal against metal fills the air as Conrad deflects the incoming attack, pushing the source away from the wagons. The assault left him no room for a counter. Not that a counter would have worked regardless. What stands in front of him is a foe who fears no regular blade or even magic.

A Faceless. Not a puppet, but in person. A shadowy figure with barely a humanoid shape left, only a pair of eerie eyes all which remains of their former selves.

And these eyes... They are not Grimald's.

"You must be the one who placed the alarm," Conrad mentions, reality settling in quick. More trying to buy time for the others to figure out what is happening, than to actually acquire an answer.

"You know too much," a sneer is returned to him.

Which means his guess was accurate. This is the source behind that alarm. Either this Faceless, or one of his brethren, must have placed it. Knowing that anyone who seeks information about them would have to pass here, along this bottleneck. So they could wait and take out anyone who returns while potentially holding too much knowledge.

"I see," Conrad replies. **"A mangy mutt pretending to be a guard dog."**

The shadow loses its humored expression and turns to rage, dashing forward right afterwards.

Incoming strikes are hard and fierce, difficult to dodge or block. Yet, Conrad manages through his experience, while his mind finds confidence in the past. Odwin proved it could be done, to take their attacks, at least for a while! His mentor merely lacked the tools to turn defense to offense, so they had no other choice but to flee.

By now, Adrian reached his friend, swinging his sword at the enemy. As expected, he slashes right through, the Faceless bragging about his invulnerability with a taunting gaze.

“Roderik! Gather the girls and look after them!”

The boy wanted to climb off the wagon and join his mentor, though Conrad ordered him to stay away. He’s far too inexperienced for this level of opponent, as are the girls. Their best chances are to stay as a single group, at a constant distance with the enemy. Preferably keep the wagons between them.

The unknown Faceless observes the children as they form a group. His blackened, almost formless tongue flicks from left to right.

“Where you looking at?” Conrad taunts him. **“Need some kids to fight against? Are adults too much to handle for a mere mutt?”** He throws a quick nod to his friend. **“Hey, Adrian! This mongrel thinks we can’t handle him.”**

“We should teach him not to bite his Masters,” Adrian returns.

Human-like teeth appear and gnaw over each other, scraping loudly. With renewed hatred, the Faceless lashes out again.

Adrian’s sword swings down. The Faceless doesn’t even bother to dodge this time, confident in his defensive abilities. A loud, biting screech fills the air when it cleaves his side.

Confusion and fury are all which is visible from their shadowy opponent, drawing his attention to what just happened. **A pain... A sharp pain in his side. How could it be?!**

Conrad **doesn’t** waste the opening Adrian gave him and strikes his own sword past the lowered guard of his foe. Metal flickers in what little light comes through the canopy and **dives past the creature’s** vision.

Another loud shriek of pain fills the Woods when the man twists his sword, actually feeling resistance in the shadowy form.

It’s working... Their new weapon works!

The Faceless jumps back, holding his chest, struggling on his legs.

Conrad wants to rush in again, quick to refrain. That jab should have killed him. He aimed it straight at the heart. Yet, that vile thing still stands! Hurt, but he stands, and now keeping up a firm guard. Its eyes flick to the sword which just stabbed with what should have been a fatal blow.

The creature’s teeth gnaw once more in understanding of what happened.

A small archaic rune glows on the sword. It's the same kind of script which held the inscription above the door to the Compendium Labyrinth. The same type which Conrad has seen before in Gleaze, a decade ago, above the inner castle's entryways. Though none were still alive to remember it, those runes were a form of blood magic. A special kind of enchantment.

Fight fire with fire. Forbidden, that magic may be, Conrad had no qualms to make use of it when that little book from the Library held this one piece of information. A method to harm the Faceless. To make their shadowy bodies give shape. All he had to do was ask Primrose to turn that enchantment into a reality. Though it goes against her teachings, a task she was willing to do, considering what is at stake and who it involves. Its main ingredient a special type of blood, which defiles the Faceless' own blood magic granting them their shape and power.

Impure blood, born out of incest.

"I will tear you to pieces!" the Faceless screams. His fury knows no limits. *"How dare you!"* For thousands of years, he never felt any pain at all. Now, it stabs him like a gaping wound.

Yet, it didn't kill.

Conrad tries to keep his cool as best he can, even if **their best chance failed. He didn't** taunt his opponent for no reason. It was all meant to lead them towards that one opening. And it failed! Was the enchantment not sufficient? Did the enemy overcome its effect through time by growing more powerful? Or maybe... Maybe he expected too much of the known and familiar when fighting such an opponent.

He bites his own lip and curses on the inside. He shouldn't have banked on this creature having the same weak-spots as a regular alma. Going for the heart was a mistake. Just look at the accursed thing! Highly doubtful it even *has* a heart anymore.

Still, it felt pain. And his sword felt substance. Their enemy is definitely hurt.

Conrad and Adrian try to encircle, though the Faceless **doesn't** give them the chance to. With a ferocious bout of strength, he leaps into the air, clinging onto a branch where he pulls himself up.

His confidence returns. Fury under control. The Faceless reaches within his own body. For a mysterious object, dragged out of its dark depths. Leathery, rolled up like a document. He smirks... "It's been a very long time since I had the opportunity to use this..." He holds out the roll of leather. "Not having a face comes with certain advantages."

The leather unrolls, presenting a ghastly image.

"A skin?" Adrian murmurs.

It's a leathery skin, from some kind of animal. Eerie shape visible of what once held eyes and teeth. A preserved face, skinned from its original body.

The Faceless takes it with both hands and holds it in front of his own faceless mug. Then he presses it on, the piece of leather appearing as if it turns alive once more. Eyes of the shadowy creature blend into the eye sockets of the skin, as it becomes one with his body. A body that jumps back to the ground and quickly transforms. Arms bulge with fierceness into paws, thighs twist into rear animal legs. And his chest swells in proportions to match the mighty beast this skin once belonged to.

"A mantichore..." Eris utters, stunned to see a creature that should be long gone from this world. Then she shouts in panic. "It's a mantichore! Be careful of its venomous quills!"

Conrad takes a step back, legs ready to jump aside at any moment's notice. The beast standing ahead is as tall as him, yet far more muscled and heavy. A tail vigorously swung around, sharp quills visible at its outer end.

There's no guarantee this incarnation of a mantichore has the same deadly venom. Regardless, every cell in the man's body screams it could not be any different. The animal's roar, its natural posture, the almost majestic way it moves around like a large cat-like predator. As much as its origin is a foul desecration of life, that's as real a mantichore standing in front of them as it can ever get.

"Oh shi..." Conrad notices what is happening. "Dodge!" he yells out to the children when the mantichore rushes forward.

The beast's rear paws in the shape of a large lion grip into the earth and unleash a powerful jump. Conrad dodges aside once it passes overhead, tail swiping at him. Unsure

if he actually managed to avoid the tail or not. Something feels like it grazes his upper chest though he doesn't dare look.

With grace, the front legs of the animal catch the fall and instantly shift to a pounce.

The group of children is driven apart in panic, Lisette falling on the ground. Claws bash into the dagger shield of Primrose while she tries to protect Carrot. Meanwhile, the tail lashes out towards the other side.

Lisette won't be able to dodge in time, not even able to crawl up yet. It all happened so fast! The girl can feel herself get dragged across the ground, quills passing her eye-sight at far too close a distance.

Luna and Selena help her stand up while Roderik deflects a return swipe with his sword, almost knocked aside from the power in that tail.

As Lisette glances at her foot, it was Eris who used her magic from the other side of the manticore, dragging the girl away with vines around her ankle.

The animal roars, deciding on what direction to go, which group to target first.

Primrose tries to form a fireball. If she can hit it, great. If not, it should detonate and still cause some kind of damage. And if she doesn't have the time, heat should keep the animal at bay.

The manticore's tail swings wilder.

"Dodge!" Eris yells at Primrose.

With a wide swing, the tail turns towards their group and quills shoot forward. The little mage will be too late to dodge! Sight too obstructed by her own fireball to notice what occurs. Only noticing her body is shoved aside by Carrot as they both tumble on the ground. A spark flies from Carrot's dagger when one of the quills bounces off.

The beast lunges itself at the downed girls.

Down on the ground, the fireball is still under Primrose's control, its fiery energy blasting off. The manticore can't dodge while mid-jump and growls in fury when the explosion hits, sending the beast backwards and rolling over the ground.

Eris helps her companions up, hoping she doesn't see a quill sticking in an arm or leg.

"Careful where you run!" she warns them. Even receiving a tiny scratch from a quill on the ground would be fatal.

The animal is hurt from the blast, crawling up unsteady. Conrad finds an opening and rushes in, activating his armor-piercing enchantment. It will override the active blood-magic one, though they have no other choice. This beast has to go! And hopefully, the Faceless with it!

The manticore notices him approach and readies to strike its claws. The animal suddenly backs off with a quick pounce. Its eyes are focused on the glowing enchantment. While form may be beast, mind is still the Faceless. One of those few who once held all answers. **He recognized the threat of Conrad's enchanted weapon** instantly.

Angry and seeking to retaliate from a safe distance, the manticore prepares to swing its tail to shoot quills. Only left confused why the tail **doesn't move. Something grasps** around it. Vines curl around the quills, holding the tail in place as best as possible, while a sword chops down.

"Got it!" Adrian yells.

The manticore feels pain once more, its tail severed by that same type of enchantment it just dodged, unaware its back was now vulnerable to the other group, where Adrian took front.

With its main weapon gone, the beast can only rely on raw power and claws. Though still impressive enough on their own. It dashes forward on all fours, ignoring Adrian by swiftly going around, towards the exposed trio of Primrose, Eris and Carrot. Taking out the obnoxious little mages should make things far easier! Those enchantments will run out eventually.

With raw force, the animal pounces right at Primrose's barrier. Another annoyance to deal with, the Faceless will not be stopped by a mere barrier! All he has to do is reach with his claws over the invisible edge, and he can lunge himself right over to feast on little children.

His paws can feel the edge, claws extending as far they can, determined not to let go. This fight has been humiliating enough already! Time to place plenty of strength into its rear legs and pounce right over this barrier to turn the tide.

All power which can be mustered is sent **down the manticore's legs...**

And nothing happens...

The beast is bewildered. Why **doesn't** he move?!

A disc of water slides underneath him, rear legs sliced off. Where did that come from?! And what are those five lights in the middle? Spirits?! Once, he knew all answers. Yet, those five are something he has never seen before. Impossible!

As a last-ditch effort, the manticore tries to pull itself over the barrier on its front legs alone, head sticking over, growling in confusion as much as anger.

Carrot's dagger slashes as hard as the girl can, carving the creature's face with a deep gash.

A man-like scream of pain echoes through the Woods. The animal uses what little strength it has to push itself away from the barrier. Shape turning irregular, filled with ripples like dark water. Then the animal returns to what it originally was, the Faceless. Carved face of leather falls to the ground, and the shadow who wore it holds onto his own faceless mug. A deep slash still visible in it, like a rip through the blackened void.

He hisses in seething hatred.

That girl... That one tall-ear... She got his face! And the enchantment she used... Why did she pick *that* one?!

Carrot pants from fatigue, all strength placed into her cut, legs shaking with fear and adrenaline. The dagger she holds has a single rune on it, glowing with a blood-magic enchantment. Why she picked that one? She had no idea what to choose. In the end, her opponent was both animal and Faceless, thus she picked the latter on gut feeling.

Badly injured and in need of recovery, the Faceless takes a last stare of sheer hate at those who defeated him, and he dashes away, seeking refuge.

...

Conrad observes the fallen skin of the manticore, followed by the enchanted weapon of Carrot.

She did it... Carrot found their weakness! The one spot where their new weapon will work to its greatest effect. Ironically, a stab in the face to a being **that doesn't really have one!**

"Back into the wagons!" he orders. **"We leave, *now!*"**

Sticking around is far too dangerous. Who knows what else that bastard has up his sleeve? Or any potential buddies hanging around... **In addition, his and Adrian's** enchantments have both already been activated. Seeking another fight or a prolonged one right away is a very bad idea.

As he climbs back on the wagon, Conrad takes a quick look around his collar bone. In the opening parts of this fight, when the manticore first attacked, **he wasn't** certain if he had dodged the tail or not. Only now does he have the state of mind and courage to inspect.

His clothes have a couple tears. It definitely hit. Did he receive a scratch?!

Examining closer **for injuries, he can't find any. Not a scratch to be found.** Then what did he feel? It was definitely more than his clothes being torn.

His hand lingers on the beads decorating his neck. Four of them, all in line, have chip marks in them. These took the quill...

*

"The horses need rest," Eris lays a hand on Conrad.

He would rather go on until they reach Sakai. If they ride through the night, it should be doable. That said, he can see the animals foam **at the mouth. She's right. Working their** horses to death would only make their situation worse. **"We set up camp here,"** he agrees.

By now, they're almost out of the Woods. By going off the path, they can camouflage themselves easily. Eris can help keep an eye out with her animals. The Faceless should probably not be able to track them.

A quick check from Primrose verifies nobody has any sort of tracking enchantment on **them or their equipment. The wagons and horses don't have one** either. And that bastard did choose to wait for them at the same spot the alarm was **placed. That's a pretty** reliable indicator **tracking isn't all that easy for them. He didn't know who passed, or where they** were. Simply waiting patiently for anyone to return like a good, obedient guard dog.

Everyone is still recovering from what happened. Carrot in particular is stressed out.

"What's wrong?" he asks the girl.

“Nothing...” she mumbles.

Conrad grabs her by the shoulders and squats down before her. “Carrot, love. What’s wrong?” She obviously hides something.

Shuffling her feet, the girl **isn’t** certain how to respond, messing around with her wrist.

“What’s this? Show me,” he grabs her wrist. There’s a scratch on it. Small, but visible. “Where did you get this?! From what?!”

“I don’t know... I can’t remember.”

Conrad tries to keep his calm. “It’s likely only a regular scratch,” he pats her on the head. “Come, let’s have Eris put herbal salve on. To make sure it doesn’t infect.”

...

“There, all done,” Eris smiles at Carrot.

“Told you all would be fine,” Conrad gives her another pat. “Now, go show your face among the others. They’ll be worried.”

When she’s gone, he turns to Eris.

“And? Did you find anything?”

“No. I’m sorry. I cannot give a guarantee... I’m sorry...”

Conrad gives her a hug. “I understand. Don’t apologize. You’ve done all you could.”

She can’t find anything unusual about Carrot’s condition. Though as she said, that’s not a guarantee. If the dose is too minuscule, she wouldn’t be able to pick it up, apparently.

“How long until we know?” he asks, trying not to let worry control his emotions.

“Next morning. If she makes it to next morning, she’s fine.”

The man scratches his stubble while breathing in deeply. This is going to be a very long night.

*

The young ones talked among each other for a while now. The fight from earlier this afternoon gave them a scare, and they’re surprisingly perceptive there’s still anxiety

lingering in the air. Though they calmed down somewhat by now. Observing in close proximity while Primrose and Lisette work on the enchantments. The young mage happy to show her abilities.

With a small prick in the finger by a needle disinfected with fire, Lisette donates a couple drops of blood. **A single weapon doesn't need more than a drop or two as the base component. Conrad and Adrian's weapons** are first to receive a new charge. The others can wait for now. Primrose does need a rest in between as this particular enchantment is a demanding one. It should grow easier as she builds up experience, but this entire blood magic thing is still too foreign for her to comfortably work with. The effect itself should improve likewise as her familiarity increases.

"Did it work well enough?" Primrose asks.

"It definitely did," Conrad assures her.

Even if it wasn't enough to take out their opponent, that bastard felt the effects. Their bodies of shadow have no actual form, resembling a thin liquid which will shape to whatever it needs. No weapon would be able to pierce, rip or slice. **Primrose's fire can only** affect their formless shape, while again, not their actual existence.

However, once that creature came in contact with the blood-enchanted weapon, its form stuck and could be hurt. Even regular weapons should be able to hurt the Faceless once enough of its mysterious body has been exposed to the blood-enchancement, forcing **him into the physical realm. At least, that's how it** was described in the book. How it actually works remains a mystery to Conrad. All he can do is count on Primrose and his own skill at handling a weapon.

"Here's our little hero of the day," Adrian lifts up Carrot, carrying her around under his arm, her legs wiggling in the air. **"Give her all a good pat or hug."** He makes a tour around the others, letting them mess around with her, before placing the girl down again.

"Sure is," Conrad confirms. **"Without her, we still wouldn't know where exactly to aim."**

If only they knew ahead of time. Then that stab at the enemy's heart would have been aimed higher, ending the battle before it really began.

The foliage moves. A wolf peers at the group. It's one of the familiar duo that accompanied Eris in the Woods, the other one also out there, nearby. Their presence is assuring. With senses far above Conrad's, they'll know if any unwanted presence is nearby. These two are not the only ones Eris has acting as guards. A bird of prey circles around the area to help observe, and who knows what else is out there.

"I brought your asters," Conrad comes back from the furthest wagon.

Carrot eats them with little appetite, thoughts constantly wandering.

"Still worried?" he asks.

"Mm..." she nibbles on her food.

"Come here, let me give you a hug," he wraps an arm around. "Everything's going to be fine. Hours passed already and nothing changed. We'll find some sleep, and tomorrow we'll be back at Sakai already by noon."

She shivers. He can feel it through the arm around her. He can even see it from her lips, when she eats.

*

It's the middle of night, covering the camp with silence matching its darkness. Somewhere in the back of his own mind, Conrad counts down the seconds towards daylight. Only a couple hours or so more. Even if they are only a short while ahead from now and nothing happened yet, chances look better with every passing minute.

He hasn't slept yet. Wouldn't be able to either. Nobody is asleep around them. Primrose works through the night on finishing the others' enchantments, joined by Lisette. Eris maintains her contact with the animals. And Adrian keeps himself at the ready in case action were needed. Roderik and the sisters should have some time to sleep, not actually with a task to do, yet neither is in the mood. They all long for that same daylight as soon as possible.

Which leaves Conrad and Carrot, both inside the same wagon, under the same blue-and-white blanket.

"It's not too cold?" he whispers to her.

“No. You feel warm.”

She hugs him while sitting on his lap. He took her in here when it came time to sleep. Underneath the blanket, skin to skin. He only wanted to hold her, while the girl had other plans. Shivering lips were silenced by asking for a kiss, followed by a night of passion.

“Did I do good?” she asks.

“Without a shred of doubt.”

“...Will you beat them now?”

Conrad kisses her rabbit ear and brushes through her hair. “Without a doubt. Next time we meet, that bastard goes down. We’ll take him down, together.”

“And the other baddies? The ones who hurt our world. Who hurt Mom and Dad... Those who took Cherry away.”

He places her head on his chest, caressing the girl over her naked back. “We’ll get them all. Promise.”

Conrad can feel tears roll over his chest, coming from Carrot. She’s trying to hide it.

“You believe my people will be saved once they’re gone?”

“I’ll personally take care of it,” Conrad tries to assure her. “And I have a good idea on how to help your people already.”

Even if they could magically stop the Faceless and their destructive plan right this instant, it would still be hard on her people suffering through starvation. Recovery won’t be instantaneous. He does have a plan in mind. One which should make it a little more bearable. Enable them to stand on their own feet again. “Remember Flower-tree Nursery? And the dryads?”

He can feel nodding by her ears bumping into him.

“Those produced a lot of that sweet-smelling honey. Didn’t that taste good?”

Another bump of her ears. It *did* taste good. To her own surprise, she could even digest it, as Eris had explained.

“Even a tiny bit of that stuff is good for a full meal. I’ve talked with Eldrin already, before we left. He agreed to supply it to us. We can feed your people with it.”

“Won’t it grow bad?” she mumbles, starting to feel fatigue catch up.

Conrad gently rocks her like a little baby. **“It won’t spoil if we preserve it correctly. I used to be a farmer kid, remember? I know a thing or two about preservation techniques. Don’t worry. Your people *will* be saved.”**

He will not allow them to walk the same path as the muroid and face extinction.

“Promise...?” Carrot asks

“That’s a promise. Hey, we’ll have little tall-ear brats someday. Got to look after them, right?”

A chuckle reveals she slowly calms down, mind more at ease.

Her eyes close as the girl falls asleep in his arms.

*

The light of dawn covers the camp with its rays. Eris is first to head towards the wagon where Conrad and Carrot spent the night. The others are awake, waiting.

She opens the back cover and stares at Conrad, sitting upright. His eyes are red with grief and anger, in his arms the lifeless body of a single girl, passed away in her sleep. Still hugging her with the white-and-blue blanket wrapped around them both.

Eris’ eyes cast downwards, lost for words. She runs off to seek a moment of privacy, unable to hide her tears. Roderik wants to go see what is wrong, in the back of his mind already knowing the answer.

Adrian stops him with a hand on the shoulder. **“Give them their moment for now. The time to pay our respects will come later.”**

*

An hour passed before Conrad crawls out of the wagon. Primrose is first to approach, waiting for him all this time. **“The enchantments are ready.”**

He nods at her and drops his hand down on her head. Not a rub, for he is not in the mood, simply a seeking of contact. **“Well done,”** he answers with his voice devoid of open emotion, contrasting with the expression all over his face.

The man's mind is made up. The girl can see it. They all can. Adrian already prepares the horses, detaching the front pair from their wagons, swords polished.

Primrose tugs at Conrad's sleeve. "I also fixed this..."

...

The horses are led away from the wagon, prepared with a saddle.

"I'm coming too!" Roderik steps up.

"You stay here," Conrad holds his hand out. "With the others. We will deal with this."

Adrian mounts one of the horses, waiting for his compatriot.

"No!" Roderik shouts with an outburst of anger. "I *will* come! I'm not a kid anymore! I deserve this much!" He steps closer, latching on to his mentor's clothes with strength in his fists. "That scum took one of our own... It's my *duty*!"

Seconds pass while the man stares at the boy. Then he turns around and mounts his horse. A single hand extended to Roderik. "Get on. We ride together."

The boy latches on and pulls himself up, while Conrad turns to Eris.

"I found him," she returns. "Thankfully, on this side of the Woods."

With a bird guiding the way once more, the horses flex their muscle and set out. One of Eris' forest companions found an unknown presence, far away, around where the battle happened, close to the magic barrier. It can't be anything else. Not in these woods.

*

The horses come to a stop. Riders jump off instantly. The bird has flown off. They know the routine. Their target should be around.

Conrad treads with quick pace towards an open area in the Woods and draws his sword, arms spread out. "Where's our little mutt now?! We know you're out there, why not show yourselves to your Masters?"

He slowly turns around on the spot, appearing casual yet boiling on the inside. "Don't worry, it's only us. The little girls aren't around, no need to be so terrified anymore! Or did your courage rot away together with your testicles?!"

Conrad begins to whistle, as if calling for a dog. "He~re, boy. Come get some biscuits!"

The bushes rustle and a shadow appears, unwilling to take such humiliation any longer. A hand still covers one of his eyes, a rip visible in the shadowy form where Carrot's dagger slashed him. He tries to get his own words out. **"This time you won't...!"** but his words don't finish.

A sword instantly jabs forward with fury, followed up in quick succession by a non-stop offensive. Runic enchantment already active from the first strike.

Conrad has no more words to spare, and can't be bothered by whatever his foe has to say. His target has been drawn out and will not escape again. That's all there is to it.

The shadow's defenses are clunky. A jab already reaching for his body, pain felt throughout. Any attempt to counter thwarted by his assailant's compatriot. Any defense crumbling by the duo of mentor and apprentice working as they do best, while a stab of Roderik's enchanted sword slashes his leg. A vibration runs through the Faceless' posture, leg shaken from being temporarily forced into physical form. Every time that pain returns, the effect lasts just that bit longer.

The boy is as focused as his mentor, sense of justice burning fierce. Regardless, he follows his lessons to perfection. Emotions can turn into a great tool in combat, though they should always be controlled. His mind in a trance of righteous fury. He frankly doesn't care if he falls here, as long as it means this bastard goes down with him, and he can face Carrot and his ancestors with pride. Though negligence will stand in the way of carrying out that justice. It will only hinder his search for retribution. Thus, he stays in control. In the shadow of his mentor, to dutifully pick up where needed or offered.

The Faceless experiences emotions he hasn't felt in thousands of years. Humiliation the dominant one till now, gradually overtaken by one he never expected ever again.

Fear.

His body hasn't felt pain in ages. Now, he can feel yet another blade carve his back as his retreat is prevented by Adrian slicing him over what once held a spine. The pain grows overwhelming, not used to it any longer. And that one scar burning between his eyes... That one strikes the worst fear of all.

His sense of immortality is gone. Every second which passes pushing that fear more to the front. Only left facing an outcome they always tried to prevent. Oblivion.

Human-like teeth gnash in growing frustration. Side of his mouth gashed open as **Conrad's sword finds its mark**. A loud screech echoes through the Woods of another scar which won't ever heal. Not even found worthy of another taunt anymore. Left realizing that further humiliating himself through begging won't change these men's minds. Nothing will. They are here for one reason only.

To put him down like a mutt carrying rabies.

The Faceless almost stumbles in continued retreat, his foot stuck in a root. Ability to shift through objects turns weaker and weaker. **That's okay**, he only has to last for a short while longer! **Those enchantments don't have a long duration**. Their mage can't be familiar enough with blood magic to make the result anything close to perfect. Any moment now, **it should run out... Any moment!**

The rune stops glowing on Conrad's sword. A snarky grin appears on his opponent's scarred and deformed mug. The Faceless' own blade strikes forward. Finally! The moment he was waiting for!

Conrad steps aside and trusts Roderik to deflect the blow. The loudest shriek of all fills the Woods for every animal in a wide area to hear.

A dagger is firmly planted inside the eye of Conrad's opponent. With a ninety-degree twist, the entire eye is gored while the blade mauls his shadowy insides. A suffering unlike anything felt before.

Remaining eye is left in shock. That dagger...! **It's the same one** which maimed his face yesterday, mercilessly shoved in his eye by the man in front. Keeping the weapon hidden till now on his back, handed over by Primrose before they left, while a fresh rune shines bright on it. Her best work, gradually growing more familiar with this type of enchantment.

He must flee...

It's the only choice left. Suffer utter humiliation in defeat, but *flee!*

One more hit in the face from that dagger, and he's finished! The Faceless can feel it. His body already begins to **fall apart**. **Physicalized and vulnerable to a degree it hasn't** been since forever, that physical form now disintegrating like mud losing shape.

One last trick. He has one last trick up his sleeve!

A roll of leather is dragged out from his body, throwing himself aside and falling right on it. Shape-shifting mid fall...

It's a harpy. Flight is his only means of escape left, now he still can, ability to shape-shift already weakened to such a degree he won't be able to hold it for longer than a couple seconds. **But that's enough!**

Wings use all remaining strength he has in an act of last-ditch desperation. A fresh stab poking through the gut **doesn't** deter him. This skin only has to last for what little it takes to create enough distance! To subsequently run with his tail between his legs.

Mind turns to paralysis, last straw of hope snatched in an instant when an enchanted arrow pierces the harpy's heart, **smashing right through the creature's body with what feels like the strength of an ox.**

The wagon comes to a stop. Lisette stands **on top of the rider's bench. Held in position** from behind by Luna, as she kept the girl stable for her armor-piercing shot. A pair of wolves instantly rush in from the bushes, one tearing the harpy by the throat, the other ripping off its face in a wild lunge.

The Faceless crawls over the ground.

He's escaping... Look...! He's moving ahead! He's still alive! Mind unable to comprehend what is happening, how his body has already been reduced to nothing but a cripple, dragging himself over dirt.

A spear plants his neck into the ground, where Selena leaves it in place. He's not going anywhere. No more last-second tricks. No more skin to wear.

Conrad steps closer and grabs the spear, unpinning it from the ground and slashing the blade across **his foe's** entire body. Without a word, he stands in front of the Faceless, drops the spear and grabs him by the throat. Only a short exchange left of eyes meeting a single eye.

And he drives Carrot's dagger through it for its entire length.

...

A deformed scream of agony enters their ears. It appears as if the Faceless slowly collapses into himself, scream growing increasingly distorted.

Something unexpected occurs.

Conrad let's go of his target's throat and takes a couple steps backwards, followed by the others. Dark energies swirl around their beaten enemy. And they seem to head towards a particular location. An area only a couple steps ahead. Energies which coalesce into a single dark ball, floating just above the ground. Its diameter about the length of a man. A powerful force radiates from it, drawing in the energy all around. The Faceless disintegrates, body sucked in as if it entered the gravitational pull of an almighty black hole.

Left blinded by Conrad, he screams out only a single word in a mixture of anger, terror and confusion at his body being drawn by an unnatural force.

"Grima-Id?!"

And every last trace of his existence fades, swallowed by the black void.

...

Conrad and Adrian take up defensive positions at the unexpected development. With not a clue what this ball even is.

With a gust of wind, the ball blows open and sucks itself, disappearing entirely. Leaving only a single presence directly where it hovered over the ground.

A single girl, unconscious.

*

Flames burn with life when the funeral pyre claims Carrot. A priest, accompanied by shrine maidens, carries out a ceremony in Leporid tradition. Primrose's grandfather had the necessary preparations made for her to be cremated in Sakai's temple to Life, according to her cultural rites. Most ashes will be scattered where she passed away, as is the norm for her tribe, while a small amount will remain here in an urn. So her body may find peace within the lush greenery and wildlife of the Woods, while her soul departs to be reunited with her parents and her Maker.

In a guarded room of the brothel, a mysterious girl still sleeps. Her grey-blue skin tone makes it clear she's from Uskandar in origin. How she is connected to the Faceless and that strange ball of darkness is nothing but a riddle. Primrose and Eris could not find

anything unusual about her. No remnants of that darkness could be felt. No traces of magic. Only a normal girl. Not even with a clue why she is unconscious, as she appears to be in good health.

The flames rise higher, as if ignited by a divine gust of wind, guiding Carrot to her next destination. For Conrad, all he can see is the loss of another loved one, forever taken away from him.

Soon, he will step onto the familiar fields of battle again. For these last months, a hope had rekindled maybe life was worth living again. That it took a turn for the better. A direct result of the people around him. Those he can share trust in. And those he can offer mutual love, his new family. But it was not to be. Not for as long as the Faceless exist.

Is history repeating itself?

If so, he **won't allow it...**

Under layers of grief, a fiery core of pure rage smolders anew, an agonizing thought permanently stuck in the back of his mind. One he read in that small book, found in the Compendium Library. The answer to that last question which drove his nemesis insane.

“One’s mortal life ends with death.”

End of Act 2: Adagio

Continued in:

The Longest Journey

Act 3: Nocturne