

# Lucid Death

1: DEPARTURE

by

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*Dedicated to Miles and Miranda*



# 1

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## DREAMS AND FLAME



THE heat is getting to me. I do not have time to confirm the connection. I do not know if you are even hearing this. There is not much time left.

The fire rises higher. Our hands clench his, and the fire rises higher. There is not enough moisture left in our body for Hym to cry, and the fire rises higher.

Whether you can hear me or not, I must tell our story. It is your story too — the story you never lived, because I left you behind.

It begins with a young man. At the moment, he was dreaming. . .

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AMIC — DREAM # 2,537



FVEN now, the golden eyes of Death were watching him. Each blast of spray threatened to take me off my feet, but I clung to the wheel in the flickering darkness. I spotted Hym on the foredeck, wrestling with the Shadowhands. The Shadow's four-handed monstrosity was losing for now, but this was a battle we could not win. Even now, one of its many hands had locked onto one of Hym's ankles, and its bladelike head was probing for a pinning blow. There would be more like it in a moment, and the Shadow herself would be close behind. "Make a door!" I roared, my voice nearly lost in the howling of the storm. Hym lost his footing on the rocking deck of the ship as it crashed through a mat of ice. The Shadowhands fell on top of him, two of its hands latching on. Hym struggled with the upper hands, keeping their bladed fingers away from his face. There was no time. We had strayed too close, and the Shadow was here. I felt her, above us, and a cold thrill of dread flooded through my veins.

I sensed the pressure of her will twist the dream, and as the ship tilted crazily into the sky, rising towards the screaming maw of the storm, I hooked my elbow between the spokes of the wheel and reached desperately for Hym's outstretched hand as he slid my way.

"AMIC!" Hym screamed as he fell. The ship was lifting out of the waves, rising into the sky, into the Shadow.

I caught his hand and yanked him towards me. My cloak whipped around us in the gale. "MAKE A DOOR!" I roared again. Hym clung to my arm and concentrated. Behind us, the boards groaned as they were wedged apart. A wooden doorframe squeezed its way between them as it extended from the deck. I released the wheel. We fell, even as the ship continued to rise. We slammed into the blue wooden door, and tumbled through it, and landed heavily in tall grass.

Hym sat up, laughing wildly.

I wanted to be stern. My fear for him burned, and my first instinct was to rage at him, to shout at him until he understood the danger he had blundered into. Something within me, some instinct — some fear of my own — steadied me.

Time was running out. The Shadow would find him, it was inevitable. There would be no point in making him hate me, no point

in tempting him to rebel. I could not control him, and I did not want to. He had enough of that in the waking world. Events would simply need to progress more quickly.

Hym, still laughing in the grass, looked at me. His face fell slightly.

"What's wrong, Amic?" He asked. The look of concern on his face was so undeserved that it was almost painful to me. I did not know what to say. It is said that none can read my face.

Hym, slightly cowed now, said: "I won't let her get that close again, Amic. I'm sorry." I said nothing. I got slowly to my feet and looked around the new landscape. We were in a vast valley of rolling grass, walled in by multicolored hills and mountains. Fish were swimming through the sky above us, as huge and lazy as clouds on a calm day. To the north, a forest flowed into the hills and piled high beyond them, climbing into the sky until it faded with the haze of distance.

I had to know that he was ready. I had to know that if the time came, he would survive. All I could ever hope to give him was a chance, but I needed more than a chance. I needed to know. Not knowing was unbearable.

I closed my eyes, and felt the looming shadow of a castle behind me. I remembered swords and iron, fire and hate. With a slight effort of will, I believed in the castle.

"Amic? Are you doing that?" Hym asked. He was watching the stone walls rise behind me, towering into the sky. The shadow of the castle fell over us.

"Yes," I said. I sensed the tingle of the old familiar dread. The Shadow was already approaching. "We must keep moving." I turned toward the black stone walls of the castle and led the way. Hym followed.

Around Hym, words did not come to me. Around me, Hym's tongue rarely ceased. I think we affected other in the same way, but in different directions. Lately he had been more uneasy in my presence, perhaps because I had been more anxious in his. Still, each night we came together, here in the space of dreams.

I looked upon him with a pang of guilt. We reached the great iron door of the castle. "The Shadow is coming," I said. "You must pass through." "Will you come with me?" Hym asked. He looked at me as though afraid that he had angered me somehow. The look made me

angry — at myself. If I had been wiser — if I had been like my mentors, like my masters — I would have known what to say.

I did not know what to say. The look in his warm brown eyes was such that no reasonable man could have resisted the urge to protect him.

An unreasonable man, I resisted.

"I will follow shortly," I said.

This seemed to please him, but not entirely. He seemed worried that he had somehow upset me, and frustrated that he did not know how to undo what he had done. He had done nothing. I was now frustrated because I could not even explain this.

"Are you mad at me?" Hym asked. "No," I said. My tone was very stern and strained, I heard it even as I said it. I tried to shake myself out of it for his sake.

I smiled. "No," I said, more softly. "You have not angered me. Now go. The Shadow is coming. I will catch up to you soon." He passed through the door. I wondered once again if I would ever have the wisdom of my mother and my mentors.

Duty which was once the sole purpose of my being had become, because of him, a burden. With my own will I would have gone with him, and kept him in places of peace. There was still too much to teach him. It was not right to keep him from the lessons he would soon need to survive — no matter how the teachings made me despise myself. I twisted the dream. Behind me, a red door with golden fittings rose up. I shouldered my way through it, and entered a barren stone hallway with a glass floor. Looking down through the floor, I could see Hym enter the gauntlet I had made for him. Hym looked around his own strange hallway, examining the many mirrors which showed faces that were not his own. The ceiling was lost to shadows. Warm torchlight flickered on dry stone and the peeling gilt scrollwork of the mirror-frames. "Amic?" Hym said. His voice echoed endlessly in the dark corridor.

He looked again at the mirrors, but now, under the pressure of my will, they had become portraits of copper-masked men in military regalia, and their eyes and masked faces turned to watch him as he walked. He broke into a run.

The hallway lined with portraits seemed to stretch on forever, but

he could see, at the end of it, a red door.

I pointed a hand. One of the paintings swung out from the wall and barred his path. Hym stumbled to a stop, drew his sword out of his pocket, and began to back away.

I hardened my heart, ignoring his fear. I pressed my will into the dream. Hands of canvas and paint separated themselves from their painting and reached out to grasp the edges of their frame. As the soldier pulled himself out of the painting, he gained dimensionality and realism. By the time his leather boots were on the floor he was almost wholly real.

Hym backed away, sword at the ready. He heard the sound of three more soldiers emerging from their paintings behind him.

The soldier before him drew a longsword with a rasp of steel on steel. Hym roared and charged and swung his blade in a vertical blur of steel that the soldier parried while delivering the tip of his own blade to Hym's right shoulder. Hym clenched his teeth at the pain of the cold steel.

Hym slowly looked up into the masked face. His eyes had filled with fire. The soldier's eyes widened behind the copper mask. The soldier yanked his blade out of Hym's shoulder and backed away into a ready stance. Hym's left hand tensed into a clawing grasp and he punched it forward. The soldier flew, impaled by five spears of will. He landed heavily a dozen yards away and Hym turned, flinging his blade. The blade whirled as it flew, and stuck in the chest of one of the soldiers, and brought him to earth. The other two soldiers sprinted forwards, swords upraised, and Hym reached with an open hand and his sword sprang from the corpse and flew back to his palm with a slap. He deflected the first blow, and swung his free hand, crushing the left-most soldier against the wall with a thought. The soldier before him swung again, and their blades clashed, and locked together. The soldier tried to force him down, but Hym stomped the ground, launching himself up with enough force to overbalance the soldier, who stumbled backwards, trying to regain his footing — too late. Him fell upon him, sword first, and sank the blade deep into the mask.

The soldier who had been slammed against the wall was back on his feet. He lunged. Hym leapt away, yanking his blade free from the corpse. In midair he brought his vertically-angled blade across his torso, deflecting the lunging stab. A moment before landing, he whirled in the air, blade out. With a single well-aimed stroke, he split



the man, and the soldier's head rolled backwards off his neck. Hym landed facing the collapsing soldier. He looked around at the corpses. I made great effort to bring as much of the reality of gore and blood into the dream as I could muster. Exposing him to it now was the best way to make sure it would not unnerve him later. Violence is never clean, never tidy. There are always unintended consequences. There are always expanding waves of ramifications, echoing through time.

Hym gave himself just one moment to appreciate the ruined bodies of the soldiers, then he turned again, back the way he had been running, and immediately froze. Before him stood a black-bearded man in an iron brace. He wore no armor, but in his hands he held a long, thin whip. This man's lips stretched back in a cruel grin, baring narrow, mottled teeth. The wind whipped around him and beyond him there were flames, and the screams of a village. Hym stepped backwards almost without meaning to, and the man with the whip closed in. Hym turned, gripped the handle of the door which had appeared behind him, and plunged through the frame. On the other side, he shut the door and closed his eyes, hard. Behind him, the door disappeared. I sighed inwardly. In the crucial moment, his fear had overwhelmed him. He still was not ready. Hym opened his eyes. Like any other member of his species would be, Hym was terrified to find that the sky had moved from its traditional position above his head to a new one beneath his feet. He forgot his sword, and it disappeared as though it had never existed at all. He stood on a narrow sandstone bridge. Stone blocks had fallen out, and stars glittered through the gaps those stones had left behind. He walked above the mouth of the black velvet Void, which grinned with ten trillion sparkling teeth. Hym felt the bridge wobble beneath him like a board balanced across a chasm. The stones were loose, but dried vines like skeletal fingers held the bridge together for the moment. At the other end of the path was a circle of white light: the palace of the Father. Hym went to take a step, but the stone he placed his foot on instantly gave way. A strong hand grabbed him by the arm, and he did not fall. He watched the stone tumble into darkness. "I am here," said I. He would have enough to fear, when he awoke. It would have been cruel to continue the test. Secretly his fear pleased me; it placed me in the perfect position to comfort him. He has changed me enough, through our time together, that this secret surge of pleasure filled me with guilt. I pulled him back, onto firmer ground, and released his arm. Hym reached out and took my warm hand. Blood and muscle have a natural warmth. In the dream world, I have blood and muscle, and my warmth is his to hold.

"I apologize for my tardiness," said I, while I walked beside him on thin air. "You're always late," Hym said, but smiled. "My only flaw," I replied. Hym smiled. "Where to now?" "As always, that is up to you." "I'd like to see what's through that light," Hym said. "Ah. Well, I do not think this bridge will get you there. Or at least, it will not be there by the time you get there." I pulled him off the ground and into the crook of my left arm. I pressed him close enough for his hair to tickle my jaw. It was nice to have a jaw, in the dream world, for precisely this reason. I pointed my hand at the distant light, and pressed my will into the dream. In response, the bridge, the sky, and all the universe collapsed like a telescope, and the circle of light rushed to us. "I must leave you here," I said. "You should be safe here, you are on the waking edge of things, anyway." "Thanks for the rescue," Hym said.

"I think you would have managed without me, given time," I said. "I must ask: why did you run from the man with the whip?" "He would have beaten me." "I doubt that." "I believed it, so it would have been true. Right?" "If you believed it, yes. It would have been true." "Well, I believed it." "That is a belief that I think you should challenge, next time." Hym had a complicated reaction to this statement. I saw a spark of pain. He believed that I did not understand his struggle, his fear. This spark of pain caught something, and lit it, and became a flash of anger in his eyes. He blinked it away. He did not want to be angry with me, or to have me see that he was angry with me. He transmuted the anger into his idiosyncratic cheeky defiance. "Where are you going?" "There are things that need doing. Even demons cannot dally in dreams forever, you know." "I know. Will you stay with me anyway?" He looked at me. No reasonable man could have resisted the look in those warm brown eyes.

An unreasonable man, I resisted. I withdrew my hand from him. "Not tonight, I am afraid." "Goodnight, then," he said. He seemed sad to see me go. Hym stepped through the light, and the changing dream scattered us. Hym's mind chased a line of memory. He knew that the dream was near its ending, and there was a place he wished to visit before it faded. He was lying in the snow. He was lying in a hole in the ground, in the snow at the bottom of the hole. Smoke still rose from some of the coals of the tumbled trees in the vicinity. Hym picked himself up out of the snow. His ears were ringing. His hands were numb. He could not think.

The sensations of his body came back all at once, in a jolt of renewed experience. It felt like the wave of relief when a sudden pain ceases.

He heard a ringing in his ears, followed by his own voice, making sounds. He was muttering the ending of a line of poetry he had begun before the sky fell. Now, in the aftermath of the falling sky, he said the final few words while gathering his thoughts. He did not remember falling asleep here. He felt a three-day hunger that was starting to become desperate. His muscles trembled, and he sweated in the snow. He shambled up the slope of the crater and stood numbly on the edge of the pine forest. To paint the scene, one would need only two colors: the dark brown of pine bark and the pure white of winter. Still lost in the memory, chasing the dream, Hym stumbled towards Surya. Watching him from a distance, an emerald flame of jealousy roared to life within me. He saw the mouth of the cave through the trees. He staggered towards it, feeling the fever work its way into his bones. Ten feet from the mouth of the cave, he collapsed.

A figure moved inside the dark cave. As Hym looked upon it, it began to take the form he expected: that of a well-made young man. The firelight beyond him illuminated his form, and the subtle facets of his skin caught the light, and glowed with it, and gleamed with it. He was tall, strong, a shape of gentle edges and sturdy curves, well-displaying the spoils of a successful hunter. The furs he wore were clean and well-trimmed, not like the matted barbarian garments of the Heartland. Hym reached for Surya, for the Surya of his dreamworld, for the memory he represented. He woke.

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AURORA



HOPE has been described in many ways, by far better minds than mine. It has become something of a cliché, something people who live in the light can joke about.

Those who live in the light do not know hope. They know only the dread of what will come after the light fades.

Hope is a thing that only exists in darkness. It is a living thing; fragile, hard to shelter, harder to foster, harder still to spread. Those who have lived in darkness know hope.

Hym, like me, began his life in darkness. For Hym, hope was the only reason to live. To show you the man he will become, I must show you the darkness and misery he came from.

Do not fear, gentle reader. We will move quickly through the shadows, and I will not leave your side.

The straw prickled our face. Hym did not have to open our eyes to know he was back in the real world. As he woke, Amic faded from my consciousness. I, Aurora, woke with Hym, and looked out through his eyes. Awake now, Hym lay in prickling straw. We were numb with cold. Slowly, painfully, mindful of many bruises and slowly-healing cuts, Hym gathered our sore limbs together and, trying to bring life back into us, he rubbed them until they burned. Our stomach growled angrily, hollowly. He rolled onto our back with a weary grunt and stared up at the four little walls of our room. It was not much of a room. Whenever there was a gust of passing wind, the walls would rock, the wood would flex, and the barn would give forth a thousand creaks and groans. The pitch-blackened walls of the cell stank of tar and other things. Jammed into the gaps and cracks were rat skins and bits of wool — a half-hearted attempt to keep out the long cold of Absence. In one corner of the dirt floor, our masters had made for us a bed of second-hand straw. In the other corner sat a wooden bucket with a lid. To come back to this ugly place after the wild freedom of his dreams was as painful as a midlife crisis. Hym lay in the straw and tried not to think.

Before the fog of waking life could cloud them over, he focused on remembering the details of the dream. I helped him to crystalize the images and sensations into a memory. That little piece of the subconscious was valuable to me, especially as it was another memory of

the me I dreamt, each night, of being. A brief portrait of my young companion, for the interested parties: picture a twenty-four year old man with large dark eyes and waves of black hair. He is fine-boned and smooth-faced. His cheekbones are strong and broad, his eyes are hooded and always full of a faraway stare. There is a fire burning beneath the apathy. His brown eyes have an almost sullen look, but the dampened anger in them only thinly masks the silent and helpless look of a man whose powerful emotions do him no good. His skin was once a caramel shade. Now, after long years in the Heartland, a sickly paleness shows through. In the barn there was only one other Lutus, an older boy named Surya. Now that Hym was awake, he leaned over to the right wall of our cage, lifted our knuckles, and rapped softly on the dark wood. He listened, holding an anxious breath. There was an answering tap. He let out our breath in a sigh. "Not yet," Surya whispered. "Not today. Maybe tomorrow." "How did you sleep?" "Nightmares." "I know. Me too," Hym lied. Hym wanted to say something more. The moment stretched endlessly, a silence he could not fill. He could think of nothing to say.

Love is a complicated human emotion. Hym had loved Surya for many years, and even now he loved him still, in some ways. Even so, his heart no longer wholly belonged to Surya. This was not his fault — and it was not Surya's fault, either — but the fact remained. Hym's head and heart no longer lingered in the waking world. The world of dreams was all he longed for, and the friend he had made there seemed far more real, somehow, than the young man in the cell next to his. Yes, Hym cared deeply for Surya, and felt a strong sense of duty toward him. He was, however, no longer in love. He no longer felt the thrill of his presence, or the eager need to speak with him. Speaking to him, struggling to reach him in his darkness, trying to give him back his hope — it had become a dreaded task, a difficult thing. Hym had barely enough hope for himself, and in his heart of hearts he resented Surya for not even trying to acknowledge that he, too, was hurting. He, too, was struggling in the darkness. He felt guilty for this, because he knew that he, at least, had the escape of his dreams.

He had never told Surya about Amic, for fear that he would become jealous — not of the man who lived only in Hym's head, but of the escape Hym had which he did not. Amic had become a protective secret: a little golden treasure that could not be taken from him. Hym felt that Surya already owned enough of him that to keep this one small secret space was hardly a sin. After all — if not for Amic, Hym would have run out of hope and strength long ago, and there would have been

nothing, then, to give Surya.

When compared to the impossible fantasy of Amic, the grim reality of Surya seemed especially lackluster. Hym knew that Amic was not real, but real or not, Amic had been there for him when Surya had long since given up. He felt almost that Amic was a reflection of Surya's failings. Hym pictured himself sinking into a swamp with the two of them. Amic would have pushed him up even as he sank. Surya simply sank, clinging firmly, without a thought to how he pulled Hym down.

Yes, he was falling out of love. Resentment, guilt, and secrets had done that. He had not quite allowed himself to realize it yet.

With a guilty pang in his heart, he slipped away to the other side of his cage. He rapped lightly on that wall and listened, holding our breath again. Iblis was sobbing again this morning. She was what the Heartland people called an "Ahtés." She stopped her sobbing abruptly when she heard the rap. She tapped back. "Good morning," Hym whispered. "Good morning," Iblis whispered back. Her accent was brittle. The people of her land spoke a language like the cracking of wood, and she was not yet used to the full-throated, guttural, babbling waters of Hym's mother tongue. She was getting better, though. "Sleep well?" Hym asked. "Always," Iblis lied. The sound of rusty barn door wheels interrupted them. The door scraped hollowly against the side of the old building as it slid open. There was a slit in the door of our wooden cell, and Hym got to his feet and peered through it. I stared out angrily through his eyes, a silent observer of what was to come. We were in the first weeks of Absence, and the sun would not return until Arrival, two months from now. Outside the barn there was darkness and falling snow. There was also a lantern, and through its blinding rays Hym saw the shapes of men: black silhouettes against the snow. Today there were five of them. The first to step in out of the cold was their leader, Michael, who held the lantern high, and had a coiled bullwhip at his hip. Hym recognized him by his awkward gait, and felt an immediate surge of anxiety. Michael owned many slaves, and only visited our slave barn on rare occasions. This could mean only that there was going to be a witch burning. Michael had injured his spine long ago, and wore a metal brace which held it straight as a broomstick. His back was a fountain of constant, stabbing pain, and his only relief was to share its waters. With every step, the brace gave a rusty groan. The other four men followed Michael like loyal wolves. Their heads were down, submissive; their eyes were quick, ready to read their leader and obey. Perhaps the strangest thing

about the human species is the way a few submissive men can turn another, ordinary man into a swaggering champion. In the Heartland, they called this effect potus: the power, energy, and infallibility that a leader feels when he is surrounded by sycophants. It was something all Heartland men aimed to obtain. With this particular group of companions, Michael was the potem, the receiver of the potus. His followers were the potee, the givers of the potus. Of course, whenever he was around someone of a higher rank, Michael very quickly slid into the role of potee. Michael walked the length of the barn, glancing through the door slits to count his slaves and see who had survived another cold night. He paused at the second cage and slapped it with the butt of his whip. He spat in the dirt and moved to the next cage without so much as a flicker of emotion while two of his four companions opened the door and hauled out a young man — or rather, a young man's stiff corpse.

I had by this time become quite accustomed to death, even human death. Hym reacted the same way he always did, however — with a sudden pang in his chest. Michael continued his review of the slaves. He made a tisk tisk noise in his throat when he looked into Surya's cage, then said, "This one's not far from the Father's court." His voice was sibilant. It filled the room with subtle menace, like the leathery coiling and uncoiling of a viper. One man asked: "Should we take him to the Brothers?" Michael twisted his bony fingers through his black beard thoughtfully. After a long time, he said: "No. Put him with the sweeping crew today. The Brothers can have him tomorrow." The largest and stupidest looking slavekeeper asked: "What if he dies?" "Then the Brothers will miss out on his pretty face," Michael said with a cruel, lazy smile, and he moved on to our cage. Through the little window of the viewing slit, he and Hym locked eyes. Hym backed away, blinded by the lantern but still staring. Michael imagined defiance in the stare. Although he pretended to hate defiance, Michael lusted for it. There is (apparently) no fun in torturing someone who does not resist. What was really in Hym's eyes was a combination of hate and fear. He could not understand what the slavekeepers were saying, but he knew they were talking about Surya.

"Why, hello. . ." Michael said. The whites of his moist eyes were the color of day-old oatmeal. "The little monster is up already! Pull him out." Hym backed away from the door and braced himself against the far wall. It would do him no good, but the instinct was hard to resist. A red-haired man named Gideon slid back the bolt, knocked the door open, and came towering into the cage. He filled the doorframe,

completely blocking the exit. He was wary. On his wrists and forearms were crescent-shaped scars. He was three feet taller than Hym and a foot and a half wider.

Gideon lunged suddenly and Hym tried to bite him but wasn't fast enough and didn't spot Gideon's other arm, which took a fistful of our hair. He dragged us out of the cage and threw us so that we rolled and sprawled and lay in the dirt on our back, looking up at the five men. Hym's heart began to pound. Our hands ached from where Hym had caught himself on the cold dirt floor. The lantern light stabbed at our eyes and made the men seem even more like giants.

As though it were made of silk, Michael toyed with the long bull-whip. He stroked it, and he fondled it, and he pulled it through his fist, grinning as though the sensation of the braided leather was the purest form of pleasure he had ever known. The leather creaked as he flexed it and made a slithering sound as it ran through his pale hands. Gideon and the other three men surrounded us like hulking apes, their four pairs of hungry eyes looking down at our body on the cold dirt. We were cornered. They would not let Hym escape.

"I saw the look you were giving me," Michael said. He flicked the whip lightly and it rolled out, unfurling across the floor like a long devil tongue, and licked at Hym's face. "You're a fool to think I won't answer that look every time. Whereas you, little devil dog, are a being of chaos and wickedness, whereas you are inconstant, changing, forever choosing new ways to resist the will of the Father — I," and here he cracked the whip for emphasis, "am a man of principle. I am consistent. I am always myself. You are hardly anything at all. I will teach that lesson to you a thousand times and not grow tired."

Of course, Hym understood none of this, which mattered little to Michael, who was really talking for his own benefit anyway. He was still a little raw from the last few times he had played potee. Principles or no principles, his dignity was only ever temporary.

Michael lashed out with the whip and Hym rolled away, onto his side, so that the lash fell on our back. He felt the blow shudder through his bones first. Only after the blow had come and gone did the sharp, stinging pain of the open wound begin to burn him. The whip had struck us right between the shoulder blades and he could feel the cold air of the barn through the hole it had torn in his ragged tunic. I could not heal him without endangering him, so I did nothing. I was getting used to doing nothing.



"Should we get him a new shirt?" "No. Let him freeze a little. One day won't kill him. It might even improve his attitude." "Where do you want him?" "Put him on the sweeping crew too." Wordlessly, Gideon yanked us to our feet by the arm and held us in place with a heavy hand. Another man came shambling up to us. This man's face was ringed by curly golden hair, and at some point in the past, one of his eyes had been gouged out. He wore an eyepatch whenever there were women around to see him, but for the slaves he let the open hole in his head breathe. He was younger than the others, but he carried the heaviest equipment. For a belt, he wore a heavy chain which was so long it was wrapped around him six times. Iron collars dangled from the chain.

This man unwound the first portion of his chain, opened the first collar, put it around Hym's neck, closed it, and locked it. The collar and its chain were so heavy that Hym's neck, shoulders, and back all ached within minutes of putting it on. By evening he would have a pounding headache.

The men dragged out more slaves. They attached Surya before us, and Iblis behind us, and two more slaves behind her. Hym had never managed to speak to the other two slaves, though he knew them by sight. Gideon took the end of the chain and pulled, and drew behind him a shambling line of dirty, weary slaves. He led us out into the snow and the darkness. As always, Hym braced himself for the cold. As always, the chill of the morning air still took him completely by surprise. I wished that I could warm him, but without his will I could not even do this. We shuffled along behind Gideon, the cold snow gnawing at our toes with its back teeth. Our rat-skin shoes did little to defend against the cold. Ahead, our little alley intersected a main road. A flame flickered on a tall iron pole at the corner, carving a hole in the darkness. Rough cobblestones glittered there.

Although it was biting cold, Hym breathed in the morning air with gusto. It smelled of snow, and woodsmoke, and was fresher than the stink of the barn.

Gideon took us to the corner and turned and followed the empty road. The two-story granite buildings on both sides were dark, every window shuttered, every door bolted. It was still very early in the morning.

Hym stopped minding his feet for a moment and looked up at the sky. Between the ragged edges of grey clouds, he could see stars shiv-

ering in the darkness of the morning air. The aurora — the Father's Chain — was twisting busily beyond those mists, like phosphorous behind a grey silk veil. Beyond all this he saw the Ring: a stripe of silver that crossed the sky from east to west. It sparkled like snow. I yearned for it like a distant home, and Hym dimly felt my yearning and mistook it, as he often did, for his own.

As he always did on these awful mornings, he prayed to the Void.

Void, send me Shalim. Void, let Shalim take me.

I made note of his prayer, but could do nothing to grant it. Deep within me I felt the mind of Amic, coldly adding this prayer to his own mental ledger. The clouds and the cold and the snow and the darkness worked together to drape a heavy silence over the city. It was the stillness of velvet theater curtains hanging, gently swinging, waiting to open. Hym brought his gaze back down to earth. Ahead of us, the road intersected another, larger street. This avenue was already busy although it was still quite early. Small black wagons were moving through the gloom, drawn by weary slaves. The snow here had been trampled down to slush, and the dark cobblestones beneath came through, sparkling with the orange light of the streetlamps. The buildings on this street were large, and in many of them the bottom floors doubled as shops. From iron bars hung wooden signs painted with gaudy pictures.

In corners and shadows, vagrants huddled. Most of them were shadehaired, but a few were ordinary young men, men who had been thrown out by their fathers or who had fallen away from the army in disgrace. There were no women — they did not live long on the streets.

The vagrants cringed away from us and the other slaves with hate in their eyes. The slavekeepers did not even look at these men. If they could not be used, they did not exist. As always, we passed by a bakery with tall windows where, through the lensing of the many rippled panes of glass, we could see frosted mountains of cake and little armies of pastries lined up to taunt us. The shopkeeper, a tall, thin, bearded young man, was already moving around inside the shop and arranging his displays. The shopkeeper watched the slaves curiously as the line of them passed by. Hym felt as though the crooked-nosed shopkeeper was looking directly at him.

As always, Hym licked our lips and swallowed drily as we passed the shop. There would be no food until after the sweeping. Gideon

marched us north, toward the city center. Hym had seen it many times. Each time he saw it, he still felt fear like little rat paws crawling up his spine. At the center of the city a slender cliff of granite reached almost a mile into the sky. Every edge and face of this great stone had been carved. Thousands of people had lived and died in its halls, spending every waking moment whittling away at the stone.

Pillared arcades criss-crossed the structure's face. Arrow slits, eyelet windows, tall arches, and great stained glass monstrosities all competed for space on the walls. High spires of stone built upon themselves in grotesque excesses of statue-work, and gargoyles of every conceivable deformity leered and grimaced and loomed from their peaks. Long staircases zigzagged up some parts of the cliff or else spiraled around its towers or went diving into archways and long, dark corridors. Balconies like stuck-out tongues led back to open throats of stone. When it rained, the gutters of the tower emptied from a thousand snarling mouths and staring eyes, vomiting rainwater down in streams so long they broke into glistening diamond beads before striking earth. In some places, stalagmites had grown from these falling streams, and now the cliff was surrounded by spiked teeth of calcite. Lanterns clung to this monstrous tower from every ledge, balcony, and alcove, so that it swam out of the darkness like some undersea beast pocked by luminous parasites. Even with all this light, whole sections of the stone were lost in permanent shadow.

At the very bottom of the Cliff yawned a black tunnel wide enough for platoons to march out of it in formation. Above this tunnel was a balcony with a brass railing and a pair of large bronze doors, and above this balcony was a great circular window of stained glass, depicting a gigantic man seated on a golden throne at the center of a stylized sun. At the base of the tower there sprawled a courtyard flanked by two identical palaces.

Broad staircases led up to the pillared porches and tall iron doors of both palaces. Under ordinary circumstances, these palaces would have been terribly impressive. In the shadow of the Cliff, they almost disappeared.

A huge circle of dark stone filled this courtyard, and from the center of the circle rose an obelisk of black iron. The lights of the cliff turned the clouds above the courtyard blood red. Gideon led us to the courtyard. A heavy coat of wet snow had piled up on the stone circle and Hym groaned at the thought of sweeping it. Slaves could not be trusted with shovels, which would have made their work eas-

ier. The slavekeepers handed out brooms and assigned sections, then stepped away to joke and laugh and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes of foul-smelling herbs together. Though they seemed at ease, they watched their slaves with lancing, flashing eyes. Hym leaned heavily on his broom to push the wet snow away. Beneath the snow the circle of stone was carved. Although he knew the pattern, he always found himself enchanted by its intricate grooves, and worked not so much from fear or from necessity, but because he wanted to see the pattern come free from its burden of snow. He was so hungry that the work was a welcome distraction. The beauty of mindless work is that it leaves the mind free to wander. Sometimes that is also its ugliness. A dark thought was hunting Hym's mind and he was doing his best to avoid it, but it kept hounding him, cornering him, sneaking up through the tall grass of an unrelated idea only to pounce when he least expected it. Surya is leaving. It did not seem to matter where his mind ran to, this thought always found him. It made his heart pound as though he really were being hunted. He wanted to whisper something to Surya but he was wise enough not to. The slavekeepers did not permit conversation.

Hym watched his feet, stepping in Surya's footprints. Lost in thought, it took him a long time to realize that the footprints of one of Surya's feet were occasionally bloody. He looked up, his heart suddenly racing.

Surya was limping — badly. Frostbite killed many slaves.

Hym knew better than to point it out or to call for help. No doubt Michael and the others had already noticed the injury. They probably thought of Surya as expired anyway. His Choice was coming soon, and the Brothers would come for him in a day or two. The slavekeepers had gotten all the use out of Surya that they ever would, and no longer cared about his condition. Hym felt a terrible, chilling numbness at the thought.

As the morning drew on, a small crowd of people began to gather. Hym no longer minded them. When he had first been brought to the Heartland, their strange appearance had frightened him. Like all the men in the Heartland, these men were tall and pale, and they wore long beards. Their hair came in shades of yellow, brown, and red. There were only a few shade-haired, and they stood apart from the crowd — or the crowd stood apart from them. It was bad luck to stand too close. The women of the Heartland were more frightening, and they still unnerved Hym even after all the years of his enslavement.

They wore long veils of white fur which covered their entire bodies. There were no holes for their eyes or for their faces, and their sleeves were stitched shut so that even their hands could not be seen. Hym had once asked Claire how these women could see where they were going. Claire had said: "Mirrors, if they're rich. If not, they lean on their lovers." They looked like snow monsters. The pattern of the circle was coming through now. The group working the outer rim of the circle had already cleared out four of the eight reservoirs. In a few hours, Hym was working on the last circle of snow around the iron pillar. The pillar called his eyes like an open grave, but he kept his eyes firmly on his work. It was bad enough just to smell the patina of blackened gore. Then the work was over, and Hym had nothing to occupy his hands. Gideon pulled his slave chain back with the other two, under the eaves of the palace on the right-hand side of the courtyard. Hym stood and fidgeted in the snow. He popped his knuckles and the joints of his fingers until he couldn't milk any more noises from them, then kept trying to pop them. The circle was clear, and the image in the stone waited. Down the main street came a wagon drawn by two Ahtëm slaves. A long sheet of red lace covered the wagon and trailed behind it, and in the driver's seat was a shade-haired man with a long crimson whip. Hym smirked to see the naked envy on Michael's face — the red whips were a ceremonial honor given only to the very best slavekeepers. The wagon stopped in the middle of the circle and the man hopped down, then cracked his whip a few times. The two slaves hurried to uncover the wagon and began unloading armfuls of split wood.

The people in the crowd were very quiet, and looked at the black obelisk like hungry dogs. These were the people who came to every witch burning early and left every witch burning late. Hym thought of them as diseased; fanatics. He felt that they had a lust only fire could satisfy. More people would be coming soon, but they would not be as creepy as these early comers. The normal people would bring blankets to sit on and snacks to eat and jokes or gossip to share. They would laugh and point and eat until the show was over, and then they would go home. After they left, these early comers would still be standing in the snow, licking their dry lips, watching the ashes cool. By the time the piled wood had grown almost as tall as the palaces, the courtyard was packed with people standing shoulder to shoulder. Even so, no one stood on or near the stone circle. Somewhere deep in the bowels of the cliff there was the clash of a gong. The sound echoed from hall to hall and rang out a dozen stone orifices in a roar of sound. It hushed

the crowd, and silence fell. No one moved. The gong rang again, howling out of the dark tunnel, nearer this time. Deep in the shadows of the tunnel, two flames sprouted. These flames moved, darting up and down, and two more flames rose. These two moved, and gave birth to two more. The pattern continued until hundreds of lights shone in the darkness. As the torches procreated, the growing light in the tunnel revealed the shapes of a thousand armed and armored men. Black eyes in blank faces stared hollowly into the crowd as the soldiers approached. The light flickered on their grimacing wooden masks and glittered on their iron armor and cast itself in a million dazzling scintillations from the edges of their polished bronze swords. The mass of men and torches chanted as it approached, filling the courtyard with light and sound. At the head of the marching formation walked two men, holding between their shoulders a long wooden bar, from which hung a huge brass gong. When the soldiers were free from the mouth of the tunnel, everyone in the crowd began craning their necks to see the witch. Two soldiers dragged her at the center of the formation. She was a middle-aged woman with reddish hair who had fainted some time ago. She hung limp in their grasp, the shackles on her slender wrists jangling as they pulled her along. She wore a thin gown, but to the people of the Heartland this was immodest. Men began to jeer. The swarm of soldiers parted and surrounded the stone circle while the two men dragging the witch mounted the pile and bound her to the black pillar with thick rope.

The soldiers rang the gong a third time. At the sound of the gong, the two palaces opened their doors and a small procession of people came from each. From the palace on the left side of the courtyard came the Brothers. They wore red capes trimmed with white fur, and polished silver masks, and long beards which came down in fountains of curly white and grey over crude iron breastplates with sharp keels like the front of a ship. Hanging over beard and breastplate they wore golden chains and golden sun-shaped amulets. In the center of each amulet flashed a fat red ruby in the shape of a falling tear.

As these men entered the courtyard, Hym looked away. He hated the way they raked their greedy eyes over the line of slaves. From the palace on the right side of the courtyard came

the Sisters. They wore the same long white furs as the other women of the city, but over these furs they wore red lace veils which trailed behind them in long tails. The Sisters glided down the stairs of their palace and took positions on the circle, each of them standing be-

side one of the Brothers. Each pair stood over one of the reservoirs in the stone. Each of the Brothers carried a small metal barrel which looked very heavy. When they were in position, they extended this barrel to the Sister they were paired with, and together each couple held their barrel aloft. The Sisters were the only women in the city allowed to show their hands, though they were still required to wear white gloves, and many flashing rings on their gloved fingers. The soldiers struck the gong a fourth and final time, and the sound roared out over the circle. In the silence that followed, no one moved or spoke, or dared even to whisper. The time began to drag. A full minute after the ringing had faded, the red doors on the balcony of the Cliff cracked open. White-robed slaves slipped out to hold the doors, and a pair of Lutum slaves came forward, unrolling a long purple carpet. When they reached the railing of the balcony, they turned to face the door and bowed, putting their hands and faces flat to the ground. Two people came out of these great doors. The first was a woman covered in a long scarlet veil of lace. The tail of this veil stretched behind her, and two small slaves carried its end. This woman was visible beneath her veil. She wore black leather, which cinched and belted and corseted her into a wasp-like shape. The laces of her uniform began at her throat and continued to her waist, where they split and ran right down to her feet. Her waist was cinched down until her hip bones stuck out sharp against the black leather. Her elbows were bound together behind her back with a thick red ribbon. Fine silver chains ran from her wrists to her neck, and she walked daintily in heavy iron shoes. All her weight was on two points smaller than the tip of a knife. It looked like her feet were daggers. On her head she wore a mask, a crown, a tower of gemlike stained-glass. The mask had a painted face: eyes, lips, nose, frozen in perfect tranquility. From the top of the mask, scything, twisting blades of stained glass reached up, like flames, almost doubling her height. Light glowed from her skin, and burned through the stained glass so that her image was unimaginably transfixing. Behind the red lace of her veil, she seemed an otherworldly being. This was the Prophet. The second person to come from these great doors was a tall man in a golden mask and breastplate. He wore a thick grey

cloak embroidered with silver thread. His breastplate was beautifully molded into the shape of a powerful male body, and it had been polished until it shone like a golden mirror. On his face this man wore a golden mask ringed with a thousand golden feathers which rushed away from the center of the mask in a hundred layers, sweeping out to all sides so that his face became a radiant image of the sun. The

flames reached out in a vast circle, and at their outer edges they were crusted with diamonds, so that they flashed and sparked like fire. This was the Shepherd. This man came to the edge of the balcony and extended his gauntleted hand towards his people. He turned his head up and looked into the aurora. One of the Brothers stared up at the man in the golden mask and cried out, in a voice like wind through a cobwebbed attic: "Behold! A foul witch! A bride of Shalim, the Lord of Death, and a daughter of the Dark Mother! What is the Father's decree?" The Shepherd continued staring into the aurora and stood still, as though listening. The crowd held its breath. The aurora twisted and shimmered, dancing into and out of a thousand twining shapes of green and violet light. The moments dragged. He looked back down to earth at last, and in a quiet voice that filled the courtyard, he said — as he nearly always said: "The Father declares her guilty. Let the witch be burned." "As the Father commands," the Brother said, almost before the Shepherd had finished speaking. Then he turned to his fellow Brothers and Sisters, and together they unstoppered their silver barrels and knelt and poured the contents into the reservoirs. Oil splashed sluggishly into the reservoirs, and as the black liquid filled the reservoirs it ran viscously down the grooves of the circle, filling the pattern in the stone, beneath the piled wood. When all the barrels were empty, the Brothers turned and looked to the Shepherd once more. The Shepherd nodded almost imperceptibly. The Prophet raised her hand. The two slaves behind her came forward and lifted the red veil away from the front of her body, so that her hand was free. The fingers of her hand stretched and groped. Her fingertips scratched the skin of the morning air and molten light bled from it, pouring into the space before the palm of her hand. She clenched her fist around the light and it lanced out through the gaps between her fingers, growing brighter and brighter until we could see the shadows of the bones inside her palm. While everyone was watching this display, Hym half-crouched and began scanning the nearest members of the crowd. He looked at his slavekeepers, who were all staring at the Prophet. Hym interlaced fingers with Surya, and clenched his warm hand tightly. Surya emotionlessly allowed his hand to linger there for a moment. Then, as though noticing it for the first time, he pulled his hand away. Hym's heart died within him, drowning in his friend's despair.

Desperate to feel some level of control over his life, Hym scanned the crowd again, looking for a worthy victim of his pain. The man in front of us wore a large golden ring on his gloved finger. It was only hanging on by a knuckle and the air was cold. The man's fingers were



probably numb. Hym told himself a story very quickly about this man. This man was wearing a gold ring on the outside of his glove because he was an arrogant wealthy fool who trusted his status to protect him from even the pettiest of theft. Hym laughed to himself. Fate is the pettiest thief of them all, he thought, and Fate cares nothing for status. I heard it like a bell. As an aside, I do not know why humans insist upon assembling a story about their prey before striking, but I am firmly convinced that their instinct to do so is at the heart of many of their cultural endeavours. The Prophet opened her fingers. A gout of flame came billowing out of her palm, filling the entire courtyard with light and warmth as it surged across the distance and splashed into the pyre. Hym felt the light on our face and sensed the momentary blindness that the flash would bring, and in that moment he struck. He reached out his hand and deftly slipped the ring off the man's finger and into our palm, right as the black oil caught fire. For a moment, the carving in the stone became a burning image of a lotus-flower sun. Seconds later, the wood began to catch. Soon the fire was roaring, and the woman on the pyre began to scream. Hym could not hear her over the cheering of the crowd. In the palm of our hand he clenched the fat gold ring while he checked to see where the slavekeepers were looking. They, like everyone else in the courtyard, were still watching the flames. Hym popped the ring into our mouth and tucked it into our cheek.

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