

# Tears of the Flame

Nemo Anise

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# Chapter 1

## Beginnings

I awoke in the darkness, wrapped around the world. I was alone with myself, and in that storm of minds I had dreamed a hundred thousand years, alone.

Awake now, I looked upon the universe. I discovered the planets, and I counted the stars, and I named the sun, and no matter where I looked, I was alone. Though the universe was beautiful, the darkness and the silence outnumbered the stars, and I was alone.

I tried to dream again, but sleep could no longer take me. The time of my waiting had ended, but what had I been waiting for? No memory had survived the long sleep.

What was I? I struggled to understand. I queried the stars and the planets for answers, and they gave me silence in return.

Alone, I looked inward, and twisted my body in the darkness, and looked down upon the Inside, and fell

hopelessly in love.

Below, five thousand years after that exact moment, in a hut by a castle in a snow-bound twilight, Hym was born.

Hym was raised—or rather, doted upon—by his grandparents, and mostly ignored by his mother, who happened to be dead. This little obstacle never bothered Hym. When he first began to speak, at the age of six months, he spoke only to her. As soon as he was alone in the room, his shrill infant voice would speak out in full sentences. His consonants were lackluster, but given the fact that he had no teeth yet, it was a forgivable enunciation.

“Hewwo Muvver! You are wooking so wonnerfuwwy beaudido doday!”

Chilling.

Nestor and Ana, Hym’s grandparents, began to grow concerned by this behavior. For some years, they kept his existence a secret from the rest of the village, for fear that he would be hung or burned or drowned, as the insane often were.

Though it was common knowledge that his mother had been a powerful witch, the wise old couple knew that the village’s reaction to a witch-kin with no control over his magic and a connection to the spirits of the dead would be... bad. At times, during Hym’s early years, Nestor would catch himself thinking about it as he eyed the wood he was piling in the hearth. Surely it wouldn’t be

so hard to fit a baby in there? Even a medium-sized toddler, probably. There was time to wait and see what the monster would become. These thoughts would come to him in the same fashion that the thought to slice one's hand comes when one is washing a knife, or in the way that the sudden urge to leap comes when one stands upon a high ledge. He knew he didn't mean them, but they still made him wince.

One day, whilst operating under the mistaken impression that Hym was playing alone, Ana came into the hut to find that some of the toys were, in fact, playing with him. After dropping a perfectly good bushel of apples, delivering a vocalization audible several miles away, and releasing an intricate chain of swear words, Ana got her wits together and shrewdly made it Nestor's problem.

"Tell him she's dead!"

"I've told him that. You've told him that! He's not going to believe it just because it's the truth."

"Then take him into the woods and tell him to let her go! I won't have a ghost in my house!"

"Woman, you're imagining things."

"And *you'll* be imagining things too, if you don't take our little demon out and get rid of whatever he's brought into our world!"

Put in these terms, Nestor saw reason. He took Hym, then four years old, into the forest, and taught him the nature of the universe.

The old poem came in handy, as old oral traditions sometimes do. Reverting to the young child who had long ago memorized this rhyme that made the world make sense, Nestor began:

“Behind the earth, beyond the sky,  
Two worlds unseen as a hidden sigh.  
Hellegrund, Elysium  
The place of ghosts, the throne of heaven.  
Demons walk where Shalim stands tall  
And gods abide beyond the mirrored wall...”

“This poem isn’t very good,” said Hym, utterly derailing Nestor’s painstaking attempts to recall the ancient words.

Nestor frowned. “It isn’t meant to be good, it’s meant to teach a lesson.”

“If it were good, the lesson would be easier to remember.”

“I suppose that’s true, but it’s also not the point.”

“What *is* the point, grandpa?”

Unnerved, as he often was whenever his adopted son spoke with this uncanny clarity, Nestor said: “The point is that there are three worlds: ours, which we call the Midden, and two others which are sealed to the living: Hellegrund, where demons and foul spirits well, and Elysium, where the gods reign and the purest souls live.”

“What’s a soul, grandpa?”

Nestor breathed out a cloud of mist, which drifted away on the cold air.

“That is my soul,” said Nestor. “One day, no mist will fall from my lips. On that day you will know that my soul has left my body, never to return. Stop holding your breath.”

“But it will run out!”

“No, it won’t. Your soul will stay in your body until the day Shalim comes to take it to Elysium.”

“What about on hot days?”

“What?”

“Well, on hot days, there’s no mist.”

“This is true. Do you know why?”

“No?”

“Because on hot days, the soul is invisible!”

“Ok.”

“Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Ok. Now, back to Shalim.”

“What’s Shalim?”

“Shalim is the god of death, who comes to take your soul when you die.”

“What’s he like?”

“He is said to be the loneliest and the most beautiful of all the gods. He is destined to meet each soul only once, when he comes to take them on the journey to Elysium. The road is long, and without his guidance no one can make it to the Wall.”

“The wall?”

“The Wall of Mirrors. It surrounds Elysium, keeping out the evils. Evil beings cannot bear to see the true reflection of their soul. They thrive on the fact that they cannot look within. When you die, Shalim will come, and greet you, and take your soul to the Wall of Mirrors, and there he will show you your true reflection. What you see in the mirror is the form that you will take in your next life.”

“We get more than one life?”

“Yes, my son, but only because we are not perfect yet.”

“What will happen when we’re perfect?”

“A perfect person will see only their own soul in the mirror, and the gates of Elysium will open for them, and they will go in, to become another of the gods.”

Hym looked around thoughtfully. “What kinds of forms can we take, in our next lives?”

“Most people come back in the form of the animal their soul is most like. A gluttonous man will come back as a pig, and a raging man as a wild boar.”



“Grandpa, am I in trouble?”

“What?”

Hym began to cry. “Are you going to kill me?”

“What?! No! No, I am not going to kill you. What in the Midden gave you that idea? How do you even know what *killing* means?”

“But Grandma was so scared and she made you take me here and now I see Shalim and I don’t want to go with him, Grandpa! I like being a person, I don’t want to be anything else!”

Suddenly very conscious of several things, including:

- 1) His own pounding heart
- 2) The distance from the village
- 3) The fact that he was unarmed, very old, and alone with a four year old, in the forest

Nestor looked around very carefully before saying: “Where do you see Shalim, my child?”

Hym pointed to a dark cluster of trees.

“Take my hand, son,” said Nestor. “We are going back to the hut now.”

“Why?”

“Because you are scaring the daylights out of your poor aging grandfather, and we ought not to speak of such dark things where Shalim might overhear.”

“It’s ok, grandpa. I think he wants us to stay.”

Nestor swallowed again. He knelt down by his grandson and took the small boy by the shoulders and looked into his dark and knowing eyes and said: “I need you to understand that Shalim has already taken your mother.”

“Nuh-uh! She’s right here!”

“You are the only one who can see her.”

“So?”

“My son, she is *dead*. The spirits of the dead do not linger like this. Your mother was a good woman, a very spiritual woman. She was also a powerful witch. She was not perfect, but she was wise. She will have been reborn as a tree.”

“A tree?”

“A tree.”

“What kind of tree? Which tree? Do you know where she is?”

“No. Only Shalim knows that.”

“I’m going to go ask him.”

“No! No. Even if you found her, she would not be able to speak to you. Your mother is gone, Hym.”

“But then who is...” Hym turned his head to look up at the face of someone invisible, intangible, and far too close for comfort.

“I believe it is a demon from Hellegrund,” said Nestor, not daring to check if there were footprints in the snow.

“A demon?”

“A demon.”

“What should we do?”

“You must ask it very politely to leave you alone. Spirits require the permission of the living to follow and to haunt. You are strong, and I know that you can take that permission away.”

“You think I’m strong?” Hym seemed very touched by this.

“Very strong,” said Nestor.

“Ok, I’ll try it.” Hym looked again at the violet eyes of his mother, which only he could see. Then, sadly, he lowered his gaze.

“I can’t do it. I won’t ask her to go.”

Nestor sighed, fearful for his young son’s future.

Hym was a sweet child, but a very needy one. He was constantly demanding attention, and finding interesting ways to get it, whenever it was denied to him. In truth, it was surprising how kind his cruelty was, even for a young boy. Most human children are monstrous sociopaths from the ages of 2 to 25, but Hym never used his mysterious powers to break anything or to threaten. Instead, he was like a tangible presence of good luck. Anything within his sight tended to go well, as though

the spirits themselves were protecting the home. Nestor had even seen strange things while outside the house, far from Hym's eyes. Once, a pack of wolves came upon him as he was traveling home from a hunt, but the moment he resigned himself to meet Shalim, a fierce wind whipped the snow and the wolves scattered in terror from something unseen. Nestor felt the prickles rise on the back of his neck and knew that someone—a woman—was right there, beside him. He even smelled the scent of mysterious flowers—the same mysterious flowers that the witch had worn in her hair, the night she died.

It was not until Ana and Nestor looked at each other across the table on Hym's seventh birthday that they realized his invisible friend was getting in the way of Hym ever making a real one. A boy of seven ought to have at least one human friend at his birthday party.

Nestor was no good at exorcisms, and he did not really want the spirit to leave, but he knew that he had to do something, for Hym's sake. So he took his son into the forest on his first hunting trip, in order to teach him about death—the old-fashioned way.

"She can't really hear you, you know."

"Why not?" said Hym. It was his favorite response to most negative assertions.

"Trees don't have ears."

"Sure they do, they just look different than ours." Hym was looking at the stately branches of a birch tree just then, as the wind sighed through its many flashing

leaves. Departure was nearing its end, and Absence soon would bring the three-month night, but for the moment there were golden leaves and feeble red light, and it was beautiful.

Nestor gave an exasperated sigh. "The point is, whatever you *have* been talking to isn't *really* your mother. It's a spirit of some kind. I believe it is friendly, but it is getting in the way of you making real friends."

"It is? But doesn't it count as a friend?"

"Friends don't lie about who they are," said Nestor. "Your friend is lying, if she pretends to be your dead mother."

Hym looked at his mother. Her violet eyes were kind. Her raven hair was just like his. The purple shimmer of her dress was more familiar than his baby blanket. "Is this true?" He asked.

His mother gave a little waggle of one hand. "I am your mother," she said, "but I am not the woman who gave birth to you. I'm sorry."

"You lied!" Hym said, suddenly angry. "You lied to me!"

"It was not a lie," she said. "Someday, when you are older, you will understand."

"Then come back when I'm older!" Hym snapped.

And she was gone, nothing but a wind among the trees.

Gaping at the place where she had been, Hym blinked several times. Then, full of tears, he looked at Nestor. “She’s gone!”

“I know,” said Nestor, who had felt her depart, although he had not heard nor seen her.

Hym hugged Nestor, and Nestor held him.

## Chapter 2

### Older

In the absence of his mother, Hym ached for a true friend. His grandparents, relieved to see that he had finally dropped his most terrifying quirks, agreed that it was time to find him some friends his own age. The village was greatly surprised by the sudden revelation of a secret seven-year-old, but because the mayor was a close friend of Nestor's and because the witch and her tragic death were well-known to the village, most people accepted his existence without too much difficulty.

The exception to this was Lord Blackcastle, ruler of the fields and master of Blackcastle, the fortress around which the village huddled. Lord Blackcastle was a superstitious man who believed in curses and feared magic in all its forms, and there could be no denying that Hym had at least some of his mother's gifts. He learned with alarming ease, moved with almost supernatural grace, and seemed to be surrounded by small but suspicious happenings.

Lord Blackcastle forbade his son from seeing Hym, and kept his family within the walls of Blackcastle, away from the rest of the villagers. Though he was unable to convince them to burn the little demon, despite his shouted warnings and all the pressure he could bring to bear upon the village council, he was able to ensure that no one was quite comfortable enough with the existence of Hym to allow him to play with their children, and so Hym was alone. In the end, to appease him, the village lied and said that Hym had died, but it made little difference to the people who knew that was a lie.

Alone, Hym became very good with his imagination. At the age of ten, he imagined a solution to his problems: if he could befriend Lord Blackcastle's son, then Lord Blackcastle would be forced to see that he was not a demon or a monster. Small matter that he was supposed to be dead; that could easily be resolved afterwards.

The walls of Blackcastle ringed around the fortress manor, stout and tall. They had only the one gate, all of iron, and nearly always watched or closed—or both. It had been struck by lightning many times over the years, and so the intricate bas-relief moldings had a horrifying melted appearance like the very gates of hell.

Hym waited until the three-month night of Absence, when all would be dark and quiet. Then, and only then, by cover of darkness, Hym climbed a tree nearby the wall and began his study of the little family and their enormous house.



Lady Blackcastle did not speak the village tongue. Instead, she spoke a strange language probably learned during her childhood in a faraway kingdom. The rumor in the village was that she had been a slave to demons, in Hellegrund, but Hym did not believe this. She lived in finery, or at least, that was how the village thought she lived. From his perch on the wall, Hym began to understand that her finery was only for the eyes of the village. Through the windows Hym saw her in simple clothes, doing the hard labor of homemaking. She had no servants. She woke before her husband and son, and lit the fires, and fed the animals, and cooked the meals, and cleaned the laundry, and spent countless hours scrubbing and sweeping and washing and polishing and maintaining the cleanliness of the entire castle. When she was not slaving in the house, she was usually crying.

Hym wondered at this. The dollhouse view he glimpsed through the windows of Blackcastle was limited and incomplete, but by slow degrees, over the course of many long nights and dark days of that Absence, he learned of Surya and the Blackcastles.

Hym did not think of Surya as one of them. For one thing, Surya seemed to put a great deal of effort into never being in the same room with either of his parents. The exception was dinner, when the family would sit in the grand dining hall, separated by acreages of table and lit by an excessive number of candles. Surya always ate quickly and left the table the moment he could do so. On the nights when Lord Blackcastle drank, Hym saw why.

Surya always left a candle burning in his high window. Hym wondered if he was afraid of the dark. This particular fear had never plagued Hym, but he understood that it was a very common one, even among adults.

When Absence gave way at last to Approach, and the nights began to have their brief but gradually-lengthening days, Hym still came to climb onto the walls of Blackcastle and watch his mysterious new friend. Suyra liked to go hawking, or owling if the night was too dark. He liked to play with his toy swords, in the garden, and he had a kennel full of dogs for his companionship. Still, to Hym, he seemed terribly alone. He often came to a secluded grove of old oaks, where a stone bench sat by a stream and where a set of silver chimes sang in the wind. Whenever he came to this bench, he inevitably cried.

Hym respected his need to cry alone, and this presented a thorny problem: the crying bench was the only place where Hym could hope to introduce himself without fear of being seen from the windows of Blackcastle.

Approach gave way at last to Presence, and with the sun low on the northern horizon and the world all gold and crimson in that months-long sunset, Hym climbed up the tree and onto the wall and watched the Blackcastles for a while more, before he finally made his move.

The day was nearly cloudless; the Ring was bright at the zenith of the sky. The dark masonry of Blackcastle glowed in the ruddy light, and Hym dared, at last, to clamber down a thornless rose vine and into the garden.

Swift and light and silent as a shadow, Hym sped across the lawn and past the duck pond and around the pumpkin patch and into the grove of oaks. The wind played the chimes quietly, for the air was hot and thick and sluggish in the dull, perpetual, crimson heat of Presence.

Hym hid himself well and waited. He did not have to wait long.

Bam! The back door of Blackcastle slammed open and Surya came out running. In seconds he was in the grove. His pace slowed, his footsteps softened, and he paced among the trees, muttering to himself. He passed Hym's hiding spot on his way to the bench, and Hym heard a snippet of what seemed to be a prayer:

"Please, please, Shalim..."

Hym wondered why Surya would call upon the aid of Shalim, but he did not have to wonder long, because his wondering was interrupted by Surya shouting: "Take him already! What are you waiting for!?"

Then Surya sat heavily on the bench, as though the shout had taken the very last of his strength. Then he began to weep.

Hym squirmed a little guiltily in his hiding spot, still trying to think of a good way to introduce himself.

Half an hour later he was still thinking. Both his legs had gone numb twenty-five minutes ago, and the pins-and-needles were just beginning to get unbearable when

his reverie was interrupted by Surya's mother shouting something completely incomprehensible from the back door of the main house. Surya got to his feet at once, dried his eyes, and shouted back: "Coming, Mother!"

Then he left the little clearing with a false smile firmly on his lips, and Hym was again alone.

Defeated, but only for the day, Hym returned home. His grandmother greeted him in the traditional fashion. "Where were you, my little monster?"

"In the forest, talking to the dead," Hym said.

"I hope none of them replied!"

"The wind was in the branches, and that was conversation enough."

"Good. Come, sit down. I've made soup."

Soup was one of his grandmother's specialties, or at least it was one of the dishes she made very regularly.

When his grandfather joined the little dinner party, the dreaded question inevitably rose.

"So, what did you do today?"

Hym was an excellent liar. "Not much."

"Sounds nice."

They no longer asked if he had made any friends, as the answer was always such a downer.

The next day, more determined than ever, Hym entered the forest and circumnavigated Blackcastle and

climbed his tree. At the top of the tree, he froze. Surya was on the wall-top, looking right at him.

No, Hym realized, after a long moment; not *at* him, just *in his direction*. Surya seemed not to have noticed him behind the screen of foliage.

Surya looked sadder than Hym had ever seen him before. He was standing between two crenels on the wall-top, leaning over to look down forty feet to the mossy rocks below. He seemed to be psyching himself up for something.

“If you won’t take *him*,” said Surya, to no one in particular, “then you’re going to have to take *me*.”

And he climbed up onto the edge of the wall, and balanced as though to jump.

“Wait!” Hym shouted, heedlessly, and Surya gave a little scream of surprise and fell off the wall.

“Shit!” Hym swore.

“Help me!” wailed Surya, clinging to the branches of the tree. He had managed to hook his feet on the wall and now hung suspended, stretched out, bridging the gap from wall to tree with his own body.

“Hang on!” Hym shouted, and he scrambled along the bough, and pulled Surya into the tree.

Panting, clinging to the branch with a tight, four-limbed embrace, Surya looked up at his savior and whimpered something.

“What?”

“I w-w-want to g-g-get down!”

“Ok, uh... Crawl this way!”

“But I’m not allowed to leave the walls! I’ll get in trouble!”

“Ok, I guess you’ll just die here, then?”

“Nooooooooo...!”

“C’mon, I’ll show you where to go.” Nimbly, Hym climbed back along the bough, to the trunk of the tree, and began to make his way down. He paused, one branch down, and waited to see what Surya would do.

Surya clung for only a little while, petrified; then he shut his eyes tight and blindly crawled after Hym.

Hym said: “That’s good, you’re doing it!”

The tree said: *Crack!*

Hym swore again as he watched the bough break under the weight of the slightly older boy, but that was all he had time to do before becoming witness to Surya’s deadly fall.

The branch crashed its way down to the rocks below and Surya clung the whole way down. Luckily, the branch did not break on the rocks, because Surya cushioned its fall.

Hym’s arms trembled as he climbed down the tree. All he could think about was how much trouble he was

about to be in if Surya screamed.

He made it to the bottom before the real seriousness of Surya's silence began to sink in. Surya lay limp, sprawled in an unnatural position, pinned by the fallen branch. His eyes were wide with fear and they were the only part of him that was moving. His breath came in constrained, painful, rapid gasps. Too many things had been horribly crushed for him to scream properly, but he was screaming with his eyes, and that was loud enough.

Reduced to a small sad primate beside another small and dying primate, Hym helplessly sat by his would-be friend and held his clammy hand.

Somehow, finally, the most primal instinct took over.

"MOM!" He screamed.

He sucked in a breath, cupped his hands around his mouth, and screamed: "M—" then clapped his hands over his mouth to stifle his scream of surprise, for she was already there, standing beside him, as beautiful as he had last seen her. Her violet eyes, her raven hair; even the purple-blue of her dress was just as he remembered it in his dreams.

He pinched his nose and tried to breathe through it, and found that he could not. This was, then, no dream.

His mother calmly knelt, and lifted the heavy branch off of Surya, and touched him on the forehead. At once, with a horrid cacophany of fleshy, crunchy sounds, Surya's ribcage, spine, and limbs all seemed to mend

themselves. Though his eyes still were wide with terror and his breathing still came in panicked, desperate gasps and he was still frightfully pale, he seemed to be himself again.

Hym could not take his eyes off his mother as she carried Surya to the gates of Blackcastle. He had forsaken her, sent her away, abandoned her, and when he had called, she had come at once, as though she were waiting for him.

“Come along,” she said, when he did not immediately follow. He was afraid of her now. Years of legends and superstitions had made him wary. When she spoke, however, it was as though the spell of fear was broken all at once. She was his mother, and no other spirit. He knew it in his soul.

Before they could reach the gates of Blackcastle, his mother said to him: “You must carry him the rest of the way. Please be more careful, my son.”

“I will,” Hym said, although he wanted to say a thousand other things.

She smiled as though she knew them all already. “I love you. Never forget that.”

“I won’t, Mom,” he said, although what he wanted to say was “Please stay.”

Then she was gone, nothing more than a wind among the trees.

Surya, it seemed, had fainted. Hym scooped him up



carefully. Surya was very heavy, but Hym did not have far to carry him.

The gates of Blackcastle were firmly closed, but no guards were on the watch. Hym laid Surya down carefully and looked up at the big iron doors of the fortress's main wall, and felt a little chill go down his spine. The melted faces of the figures on the gate seemed to watch him with a thousand stares of agony. From here he could see the many windows of the upper floors of the House, staring down at him.

He gathered his courage with some effort, and cupped his hands to the sides of his mouth, and screamed: "HELP!"

Then he ran and hid under a nearby hedge, and watched to see what would happen.

After a minute, the gates opened just a crack, and Lord Blackcastle himself looked out. He was a tall, dark-haired man with a perennial scowl. He looked down at his unconscious son, and for a moment it was as though he did not recognize what he was looking at. Then, with a gasp, he snatched up his son and ran back toward the House, leaving the gate to swing slowly shut behind him. As he ran, he shouted something in a language Hym did not understand, and the fear in his voice filled Hym with dread.



## Chapter 3

### That Night

The locks of Blackcastle were about as much of an obstacle to Hym as its walls were. After picking the one on the back door, he had to contend with the squeak of rusted hinges and the two guards in the main sitting room. The heat of the endless day of Presence was such that no fire burned in the hearth, but the dull red glow of the sun's light made the shadows seem somehow deeper.

The seventh bell had come and gone and it was fully an hour past his bedtime—merely another obstacle to circumvent. Technically, he had already gone to bed, and out the window. Nestor and Ana were sound asleep and he had rigged his bedroom window latch to open easily from the outside, at the pull of a bit of wire. It would be easy enough to sneak back in that way.

Now, standing on the threshold of Blackcastle, he hesitated for the first time of the evening. The guards seated by the empty hearth were drinking and one was in the middle of a long, involved tale about a certain woman in

the village. Neither of the two men noticed Hym as he crept across the hall, to the main stair.

He was cautious in the placement of his feet; he knew where to step so that the stairs would not creak.

Silent as a ghost, he made his way deeper into the labyrinthine halls of Blackcastle. Brooding portraits glowered down at him, time-blackened oils glimmering by candlelight. Deep carpets reeked of dust and damp. The crude iron of the candelabras glimmered almost wetly, dark against the darkness of the wooden paneling. In the red glow that entered by the windows and the skylights, the candle-flames seemed otherworldly. The red darkness seemed to swim, unreal, wherever shadows fell outside the glow of the candle-flame.

Doors stood in ranks on either side, tight-shut, surrounding him, menacing him, each about to pounce open.

He reached the crucial door, high in the upper reaches of the gloomy labyrinth. He knew which door was Surya's. It was easy enough, once he knew what floor he was on and which cardinal direction he was facing. More than that; it was instinctive. He knew it was Surya's door because it was the door he knew Surya was behind.

He picked the lock silently, and entered the dark chamber like a shadow.

A large bed sat against the far wall, under the window, surrounded by bookshelves packed with toys and trinkets and old books. From the exposed rafters hung a wire

birdcage containing a hooded hawk, quietly snoozing. On the windowsill, a single candle burned.

Surya was there, sound asleep, curled up as though he had been sitting in the window, watching the dark forest below.

“Hey,” Hym whispered.

Surya stirred slightly, but did not wake.

Hym crept silently around the room, examining the possessions of the older, wealthier boy. A boy of Hym’s age does not fully understand greed, and envy came easily when he saw the many toys that Surya owned. How could Surya cry so much, when he had so many wonderful toys to play with? His dolls were finely painted and they had many intricate joints. His balls were perfectly round, their stitches invisible. His stuffed animals were soft and cute and there were so many of them that they packed the shelves and overflowed onto the floor and the bed. His books were beautifully bound in glossy leather. The craftsmanship of all the pieces was not the kind that anyone in the village could perform. Hym wondered where they had all come from, but he brushed that thought aside pretty quickly. He picked up a stuffed panther and began to animate it; making it walk, pretending (silently) that it could roar.

He checked on Surya again. Still asleep.

He made the panther lick its paws and groom itself. Then, eager to play with other things, he put the panther back on the shelf and quietly began searching the draw-

ers. Surya had tons of wonderful clothes. He could wear a different outfit every day of the month, if he wanted to. In one drawer, nestled among his shirts, Hym found a small wooden box with a clasp.

He checked on Surya again. Still asleep.

He opened the little box. Inside, he saw a dazzling thing: a ring of gold, gleaming against the black velvet which lined the box. Hym had never seen gold before, and its beauty confused him. It wasn't greed he felt, when he took the ring from its box. It was curiosity, fascination, bewilderment.

"What are you doing?" Surya asked, very sleepily.

Deftly, with his back to Surya, Hym palmed the ring, closed the box, and dropped it back into the drawer. Then he closed the drawer and slipped the ring into his pocket and said: "I was looking at your clothes. You have a lot."

"Is that a bad thing?" Surya sounded fearful, as though he was about to get in trouble with someone important.

"No? It's probably a very nice thing?" Hym said, a bit confused by Surya's tone.

Surya breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh good."

There was an awkward silence as both of them struggled to come up with something to say.

Surya said at last: "So what are you?"

“What?”

Surya blushed a little. “That’s probably the wrong way to ask that, I’m sorry! I really don’t want to offend you, please don’t be mad!”

“I’m not mad?” This was beginning to get very confusing.

“It’s just that... I’ve never met anything that looked like you. Are you a spirit of the forest?”

“Yes.”

“So that’s why you were able to get in through the window.”

“I didn’t—I mean, yes. Windows, doors, walls, they don’t matter to me. I go where I want to.”

“I wish *I* could be a spirit like you.”

“It’s not all good. Sometimes it’s very lonely.”

“Oh. I know what that’s like.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“I’ve been watching you.”

“Have you... Thought about it?”

Hym’s mind raced to find the referent of the pronoun “it.” At last he was forced to say: “I have.”

“And?”

“Well, it’s complicated.”

“I knew it. I knew it was no good! Why did you come here, then?”

“To be your friend.”

“Oh.”

“Is that ok?”

“Sure, we can be friends. But you’ll have to stay invisible around my mom and dad. They always have a bit of iron in their pocket, just in case.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let them see me.”

“Why...” Surya paused, as though afraid his question might offend. “Why did you save me?”

“Because it’s hard being friends with a dead person. People act like you’re crazy just because they can’t hear what the dead person is saying.”

A little alarmed, Surya said: “Is that... a joke?”

“Yes, it’s a joke. Sorry, I’m not much good at talking to people, you’ll have to bear with me.”

“Do you think—If it’s possible, I mean—if it’s not too much trouble—maybe I could... ask a favor?”

“Ask away.”

“Will you check if Shalim has been hearing my prayers?”

Startled again by the thought that Surya would call



upon the god of Death, Hym said: “I’m sure he has heard them. He has very good hearing, especially for prayers.”

“Can you go ask him why not, then?”

“Why not what?”

“Why he said no?”

Hym’s mind raced again, desperate to guess what Surya might have asked Shalim. He recalled what Surya had been about to do on the walltop. Hym did not approve of suicide, as it was usually just leaving a big mess for someone else to clean up, in order to avoid having to clean up one’s own messes. He gambled, and decided to try to inject Surya with this little piece of his own perspective. He said: “He said no because I rescued you. He was ready to take you, but I didn’t let him.”

Surya burst into tears. “W-w-whyyyy!?”

Shushing him desperately while looking for escape routes and hiding places and while straining his ears for sounds of movement elsewhere in the house, Hym realized that he had put himself into a very uncomfortable position.

Surya: “W-w-why didn’t you let me die!?”

“Because,” said Hym, “the forest still has need of you.”

“The forest?”

“The whole world, really.”

“I d-d-don’t care!”

“Well, why the hell not?”

Hym’s little flash of frustration seemed to knock Surya out of his sobbing for a moment. Surya said: “I just want to die. I want a different life.”

“Well, you don’t get one if you throw this one away when the world still needs you.”

“You’re just saying that! Why would the world need me? And if it needs me so bad, why isn’t it helping me?”

“Hey. I’m here now, aren’t I? Why don’t you tell me what you think you need the world to help you with?”

“My dad!”

“He is pretty mean to you, huh?”

“He’s awful. I hate him.” Surya seemed suddenly too angry to say any more. At least he had stopped crying.

“And Shalim won’t take him away, and that’s why you jumped from the wall? To get away from him?”

“Uh-huh.” Surya wiped his eyes with a silk handkerchief in an oddly adult and dainty way, as though afraid to smudge the makeup that he wasn’t wearing.

Hym said: “Well, maybe you still need your dad to take care of you until you’re grown up, and that’s why he isn’t dead yet?”

Surya gave a single short sharp chuck—not even a full chuckle. There was something in this mirthless little laugh that chilled Hym.

Hym said: “Or maybe it just isn’t the right time yet, and he has to die in an important way, after the gods are done with him?”

“Any god that could use him for anything ought to die too,” said Surya, in a frightening monotone.

“Oh,” said Hym. “I see.” He didn’t.

“Then are you going to help me?” Surya asked.

“I’ll need to think about it some more. I haven’t watched him very closely.”

Surya suddenly looked at Hym in a different way, cocking his head slightly.

Hym said: “What?”

“Hey... How come you look like a kid?”

“I put on this form to make you more comfortable.”

“Can I see what you really look like?”

“No, it’s too scary. You wouldn’t like it.”

“Then can you turn into something else?”

“Like what?”

“Like, oh... I don’t know. Maybe a mouse?”

“A mouse?”

“Yeah... A mouse.” Surya’s eyes flickered to the hawk’s cage and to a large, empty glass jar on one of the shelves. Hym saw something cold and calculating in his dark eyes, just then.

Hym felt like he had heard of this trick before in a story or two, and said, in a very serious tone, “Do you think I’m a fool?”

“No, no, not at all!”

“Even if you did manage to trap me, I would easily escape. It’s not like the stories.”

Surya had an oddly unnatural calmness to his expression, as though he was trying to hide something.

Hym said: “Just give me some time to watch your father. Maybe I can help you somehow.”

“Can you kill him for me?”

“I’m not that kind of spirit.”

“Oh,” said Surya. He thought for a while. “Then can you go and get the right kind of spirit for that?”

Thinking of his mother, Hym said: “Maybe. But I need to see for myself if he deserves that.”

“He does,” said Surya. “He does.”

As it turned out, he truly did. He was a monstrous tyrant who delighted in abusing both his power and those in its sway. Over the next two days, Hym watched him whip a fieldhand who had made the near-fatal error of being handsome around Lady Blackcastle. When he was done, the fieldhand would never be handsome again. He saw Lord Blackcastle kick an elderly dog for barking too loudly. When he was done, the dog would never bark again. He saw Lord Blackcastle drink himself into a rage,

and beat his wife. When he was done, he left her bleeding on the floor and sat in a comfortable chair to watch her pick herself up and put herself back together while he drank straight from the bottle and said things Hym was fortunately too far away to hear. When he got a little drunker, he ascended the stairs towards his son's room, singing drunkenly to himself as he removed his belt. At the top of a flight of stairs, Hym made his move.

It was surprisingly easy. Lord Blackcastle was drunk, his sense of balance was gone, and he was a very heavy man. He never even saw the little figure who shoved a decorative suit of armor out the window, causing the rug tied to it to suddenly and violently remove itself from under the drunken lord's feet.

Lord Blackcastle's fall was broken by several of his bones, which cunningly gave way beneath his weight. By the time he reached the bottom, his left femur, three ribs, and much of one arm had all sacrificed themselves to save his life. As Lord Blackcastle lay there, gasping around his shattered ribs, Hym could not restrain himself. His curiosity dragged him to the top of the stairs, where he looked down upon his fallen foe. His dark eyes glinted in the candlelight and the staring eyes of Lord Blackcastle locked with them. Hym wanted to watch Shalim appear.

Shalim was said to be the most beautiful of all the gods, and Hym did like looking at beautiful things—very much, in fact. He could not now remember what the Shalim he had once seen had looked like. All he could remember was the glow of those yellow eyes in the

darkness.

Lady Blackcastle blocked his view of the wounded man. He heard Lord Blackcastle say: “Help me, you stupid bitch!”

Then something happened which he did not expect.

Lady Blackcastle knelt to help up the man who had just blackened her eye and split her lip. Wrapping her arms around him, she heaved him to his feet with all her might, then suplexed him into the stairs.

The wind seemed to be knocked out of Lord Blackcastle (understandably, as he had not seen this betrayal coming, and the stairs were very well made) and he gasped and spluttered and wheezed while Lady Blackcastle calmly crossed the room, took up the iron fire poker from beside the hearth, and returned to her husband’s side.

Hym spent the next several minutes alternatively covering his eyes and peeking between his fingers, all while stifling every sympathetic sound he found himself instinctively compelled to make.

After Lady Blackcastle had thoroughly finished beating her husband to death, she casually left the room, fire poker still in hand. Hym heard the sound of washing being done in the kitchen and wisely retreated to Surya’s room.

Surya, it seemed, was wide awake. The moment Hym opened the bedroom door, a heavy book hit the wall

at about the height Lord Blackcastle's head would have been upon first entering the room.

"Don't come any closer!" Surya shouted. "I'll jump!"

Hym slipped into the room and closed the door behind himself while Surya, perched on the windowsill, said: "You!?"

Hym held up his hands to show they were empty. "Your father is dead."

Surya's jaw dropped open and hung there for an awkwardly long time. Then, to Hym's horror, the guilt clenched and purpled his face, and he began to cry. This so confused Hym that for a long time he stood frozen, watching Surya wrestle with his emotions. At last, thinking about the guilty tears that he himself had sometimes shed, he decided to do what his grandmother would have, and sat beside the crying boy, and simply held him.

"Don't touch me!" Surya snapped, suddenly angry and afraid. Then, seeing **the tears** which mounted in Hym's eyes at this response, he slumped, and surrendered to the hug. Hym gave him time to cry it out.

The shocked  
tears

"It's all my fault!" Surya managed to moan, when the tears had somewhat subsided.

"No," said Hym. "You deserved a better father. It was the fault of the gods who gave you to him."

Surya seemed shocked by this blasphemy. He straightened up and said: "You're sure? It's not just because I prayed for it?"

“Well... It is, and it isn’t. I wouldn’t have done it just because you asked me to. I had to see for myself, and when I did, I made the choice to fix the problem.”

“But you wouldn’t have killed him, if I never asked?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Mom’s going to be so mad...”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that. She may be more comfortable with it than you would think.”

“I’m such a b-b-bad b-b-boy! I’m a bad son!”

“Stop that,” said Hym, sternly. “You are good and strong, and I have rewarded you for it. You were right about your father, and now he has been dealt with. Your nightmare is over.”

But it wasn’t.



## Chapter 4

# The Whims of Fate

The next morning, Surya's mother awoke from the first peaceful night's sleep in many years, descended the staircase, and screamed until help came. The fieldhands who were first on the scene of Lord Blackcastle's twisted form were local men with families outside the castle walls. They, too, had lived in fear of Lord Blackcastle, but it was the kind of deferential fear that holds a doglike loyalty. One of them had his wits about him and realized that Lord Blackcastle wasn't dead. He thought about holding his tongue, but figured that someone else would notice and report the fact, if he didn't. So he ordered someone else to go and get the Storyteller, and passed the burden of the decision of Lord Blackcastle's life and death on to someone else, who carried it to the Storyteller.

Purple-robed and wreathed in a stormcloud of grey beard, the Storyteller came from his hut and crossed the village and entered Blackcastle, and saw a hopeful, terrified face in one of the high windows, and found himself

hoping that the wounds of Lord Blackcastle were too severe to heal.

Unfortunately for the universe, they were well within his power. By the careful application of poultices and ointments and various healing crystals and a few small bowls of offerings to various gods, he entered the trance, and took up his tools, and performed the necessary reconstructive surgery. It took many operations over a period of weeks, then months. With each operation, with the hope of her husband's death so near she could grab it, Lady Blackcastle roamed the house pale and anxious, and praying. With each day of healing, the Storyteller wondered if he was doing the right thing.

He was doing what the gods had called him to do, and what was within the bounds of his duty to the village. Much as he could understand Lady Blackcastle's desire for her husband to be dead, he could not condone murder. A murder by negligence would be the same thing, but it was always tempting. When Lord Blackcastle's eyes rolled in agony even through the numbing herbs, the Storyteller took a grim little moment of satisfaction. Here was the darkness of the world—pain—and here it was, right where it should be, and here was he, prolonging its existence by another moment, another hour, another day. It would be so easy—and even merciful, in a certain light—to simply end the man. A nick here, a cut there. In the trance, it was almost impossible to even consider; but he could end the trance at a moment, and he was always conscious of the possibility of an easy, untraceable murder.

Tempted each and every day, he restrained himself, and doubted that he was making the right choice.

The months passed in periods of varying agony.

In the first month, Lord Blackcastle was in a coma, on the brink of death. During that time, the house was too heavily guarded for Hym to sneak in, although he often sat perched in the treetop, watching over the walls. Lady Blackcastle paced the grounds frequently. It was somewhat inevitable that she would be the one to discover that her husband's first fall had not been an accident.

She found the suit of armor, and the long rug still bound to it by ropes. She found the way the carpet had been modified to include grommets holes that the rope could pass through. The stitching was tidy and strong, and in a pattern she didn't recognize. Looking up from the armor, she began to understand the premeditated factors of her situation. Someone had put him within her reach, within an inch of death. She was implicated. When he awoke, he would know it was her, and here would be the proof, even if the poker had been washed clean.

She thought quickly, and came to a clever solution. She would simply have to finish the job. On a certain day in late Presence, Hym watched her put on a cloak and escape the garden by a secret door. He followed her in the treetops, letting the winds guide him among the high branches. He had learned how to do this in his dreams, and had been delighted to find out that he could do it in his waking hours, too. She never saw him.

He watched her find a certain place where mushrooms grew upon a rotting tree, and watched her pick death-caps. Then he watched her go the long way around Blackcastle's walls, to the clearing where the village huddled around the fortress.

From a treetop at the edge of the forest, he looked down at the village and saw it briefly as she did. The wind kicked at her cloak, and she leaned into it, smiling with such sweet ecstasy at the wind and sunlight on her face, and Hym saw the freedom outside the dark security of those walls.

Perched like a fat red rooster fanning its tail, the Mayor's waterwheel-house was the only moving thing in the village, other than the river and the smoke. The little huts sat, straw-thatched rooftops glinting in the crimson sunset, and their dark stone walls were quiet in the dim red light, and all the world seemed ready to leave each house to its own comfortable shadows. From here Hym could see Ana and Nestor's house, on the hill on the far side of the village, opposite Blackcastle. The grass grew thick and glimmering on all the little folds of the valley where the village lay, and in the light of Presence their waves shimmered with red gold, and the shadows of their depths were all sea-green.

Lady Blackcastle smiled at the scene. Then she sealed the smile to her face, freezing it into a mask, and turned resolutely towards Blackcastle, and returned by her secret gate.

Hym expected to hear news of Lord Blackcastle's unfortunate decline, but never did. It seemed Lady Blackcastle either never had the opportunity to make the poison for him, or was saving it for herself, should he ever awake.

Then, on the first day of Departure, at the festival of Journey's Start, when everyone in the village was busy in the streets, Lord Blackcastle woke in the brief darkness of the sun's first night. He was alone, and paralyzed, unable to speak. He was alone in the room, in the darkness, and no one entered to check on him until the Storyteller came the next day. The night had lasted only a few short minutes, but Lord Blackcastle had been shaken by it.

The Storyteller found him conscious but unable to move or speak. This was such an incredible improvement in his condition that the Storyteller was at a loss for words for several minutes. Then he left, to inform Lady Blackcastle, who inexplicably burst into tears and offered to make tea.

"He won't be able to drink it yet, my dear," said the Storyteller.

The Storyteller was the only one in the village who knew her name and her language. It was always a relief to have him near; he seemed like the only one in the world, other than Surya, who truly understood her—even if he did so only rarely.

"Finish him for me," she said. "Please, I cannot bear it."

“It was you, then?”

“No,” she said. “No, it was the ghost.”

“The ghost?” said the Storyteller, intrigued.

She showed him the suit of armor, and told him the whole story. At the end of it, he believed her, but only because she was persuasive, and had little reason to lie.

“But what does this have to do with the ghost?”

“I saw him! A dark-haired forest ghost with violet eyes.”

The Storyteller pondered this tale, and considered long before returning to Lord Blackcastle’s room.

He closed the door behind himself. Hym, who had just dived into the cupboard, heard him lock it.

Hym realized that he had left the window wide open.

The Storyteller moved to the window and looked out on the gradually brightening daylight.

“All things end, you know,” said the Storyteller, calmly. He ran his hand along the window frame, noting the subtle footprints there. “Even a reign of terror ends.”

Lord Blackcastle could not speak, and so he glared.

“Your life hangs upon a thread, Lord Blackcastle. A fine tendril of fate. It is clear to me that one spirit has tried to have you killed, and another spirit of greater power has refused to claim you yet. Do you understand

that this mercy is conditional?”

The Storyteller turned towards the glaring Lord Blackcastle. “All I would have to do to kill you is crack the window in the night. I could do it in a thousand other ways, each more subtle than the last. I could have done it while you were awake and walking around. I have held your life in my hands a thousand times or more, and I guarantee you that I will hold your life in my hands again in the future—if you survive. You are going to change, Lord Blackcastle. Oh yes, you are going to change.”

Hym remembered another thing he had done in his dreams, and excitedly concentrated, ready to try it.

He rolled backwards against the solid wall of the back of the wardrobe, and carefully changed the way he believed he felt about that solid wall. Like mist through a sieve, he passed through the wall of the wardrobe and the solid stone wall behind it. He managed to convince his clothing to pass through the wall with him, but unfortunately left his knives behind. They fell to the bottom of the wardrobe with a dull clatter after he passed through the wall and found himself tumbling into Blackcastle’s garden from the third story.

The Storyteller heard the clatter in the wardrobe, and a moment later he heard the “Oof!” of someone hitting the ground far below. He went to the window and looked down, and saw Hym.

Hym scrambled to his feet, popped his shoulder back into its socket, and looked up at the window. He saw the

Storyteller looking down at him, and for a moment they locked eyes.

“Shit,” Hym said, and he ran, making a straight line for the nearest part of Blackcastle’s wall. He expected the alarm to be raised at any moment, or to see a pack of hounds come racing after him, but he made it to the wall and dove, hands-first, towards it.

He concentrated on that special feeling of intangibility, and felt his body become lighter and finer than air. He passed through the stone wall and emerged on the other side, into dense forest. He landed rolling, clumsily. Painfully he picked himself up with a giggle and raced off towards home.

Lady Blackcastle visited her husband later that day, when Hym came back after dinner. Her timing was impeccable. The moment Hym came climbing in through the window, she opened the door. It happened so fast that Hym had no choice but to scuttle under the bed.

He wasn’t sure if she had seen him, in the shadows, but she seemed to hesitate.

He had been sure to leave the window closed, this time, since walls were not an obstacle anymore. Lying under the bed, he listened to hear what would happen.

She said something in a language he did not understand.

Lord Blackcastle did not reply.

Lady Blackcastle set down a tea tray and began to



pour tea. Hym could see her feet just inches away from his face. He could have reached out to grab her ankles, if he wanted to.

Just then, a knock came at the door. She went to unlock it, and two other people entered the room.

One was the Storyteller. In the language of Lady Blackcastle, he said: “Oh, sorry, I forgot my bag. I’m pretty sure I left it here. Ah, we’re having tea! How delightful, don’t mind if I do.”<sup>1</sup>

Lady Blackcastle said: “It’s a medicinal tea! You won’t like it, it’s made of mushrooms.”

“Oh, really? What kind!”

“It’s an old family secret. It will help him, but it could be very harmful to us.”

“Nonsense! What’s good for the goose is good for the other goose, I always say! Let’s drink to Lord Blackcastle’s health. Here, I’ve got something that will give it just the right little kick.”

Hym heard the sound of a metal flask being drawn from a pocket and uncorked. Then he heard the sound of liquid being poured into tea-cups.

“Here, I’ll tilt his head up so he can drink.”

Lord Blackcastle shouted. “Unhand me!”

“He can speak!” Lady Blackcastle wailed, and spilled her tea ‘by accident’.

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<sup>1</sup>Although Hym could not understand it, the conversation is worth translating.

“He can speak!” Said the Storyteller, surprised.

In the language of the village, Lord Blackcastle barked: “Get off my bed! Who are you people? What’s this garbage supposed to be? Smells like mushrooms!”

“Lord Blackcastle, can you move any other parts of your body?” the Storyteller asked calmly.

“...No. Just my head.”

“Well, it’s a marked improvement. With time and careful work, you may someday be able to do more.”

“Who are you?”

“I am the Medicine Man. The Storyteller.”

“And who’s this?”

“This is Biryu, your wife. She brought you this tea.”

“No! No!” said Biryu, clinging to the Storyteller’s robes. “It wasn’t me! It was him! He brought you the tea, it’s medicine for you! Drink it now! It will make you walk again!”

“What’s she saying?” said Lord Blackcastle.

“You mean you can’t understand her?”

“No. Sounds like gibberish.”

“Fascinating. Do you remember what happened the night you fell?”

Lord Blackcastle was silent for a while. Under the bed, Hym was beginning to sweat. Against the dustiness of

the cold stone floor, it made him feel grimy. He was fighting to keep his breathing silent.

Lord Blackcastle said: “The eyes... I remember the eyes...”

The Storyteller said: “The eyes?”

“Purple eyes. Dark. On the stairs... Then nothing.”

“I see,” said the Storyteller, looking from Lord Blackcastle to Lady Blackcastle. Then he said: “I have seen this being too. It was in this room with me, earlier today. I believe it may even be here with us again, right now. This being is a spirit, Lord Blackcastle. It is a spirit that has grown a particular malice towards *you*. It wants to kill you. It tried to kill you. Something else stayed its hand; something else heals you even now. This I believe. You must prove yourself worthy of the new chance that you have been given. You must be the good man you couldn’t be, in your last life.”

“Make him drink the tea,” Lady Blackcastle begged, very quietly.

The Storyteller ignored her. “You have been warned. Change your ways, or suffer the justice of the gods.”

Then the Storyteller turned grandly with a sweep of his cape, and left the room.

The other person who had entered with the Storyteller did not leave when he did. Instead, he stood at the doorway and waited for Lady Blackcastle to reluctantly leave. Then he closed the door with himself in Lord

Blackcastle's room, and locked it.

"You there," said Lord Blackcastle. "What's your name?"

"Gideon, sir."

"You work for me?"

"I do, sir."

"Good. Gideon, search the room."

"Right away, sir."

Gideon began searching the room, and Hym took that as his cue to fall through the floor. Doing so, he tumbled out of the ceiling in the middle of a hallway and landed before the Storyteller.

The Storyteller gaped at him. He stared defiantly back. Then, hearing guards approaching, he crouched, and hurled himself away. Lighter than air, he blew like a wind, and passed through the walls and floors and ceilings of Blackcastle in a straight line, and came flying out the corner of Blackcastle Keep and went sailing over Blackcastle's walls and landed gracefully in the branches of his tree. Remarkably, this incredible flight—the farthest he had ever attempted in real life—was witnessed by none. The leap had taken a great deal of energy, and he found himself hungry, so he returned to his grandparents' cottage just in time for a late dinner.

From the moment he learned that Surya's father wasn't dead, Hym hesitated to show his face before Surya. By the end of Departure, when Absence filled the

dark night sky with countless stars and the Ring burned bright in the heavens alongside the endless aurora, Hym crossed the snow-bound village and climbed the tree and sprang from it to the high window of Surya's room. He landed light as a shadow, and clung to the window-frame, and tapped on the glass of the window.

Surya opened the window and stuck his head out. "Hym!"

"Hi," said Hym. "Can I come in? It's cold out here."

"Yeah! Quick, before someone hears you!"

Surya stepped aside and Hym ducked in through the window and climbed down off the dresser, into Surya's bedroom. Surya shut the window behind him.

"There are guards everywhere, now," said Surya. "How did you get past them?"

"Oh," Hym said, with a shrug, "you know."

"My dad's not dead," said Surya, sadly.

"I know," said Hym. "I'm sorry. Something saved him."

"I think I'm glad it did," said Surya. "When I thought he was dead, because of me...."

"Yeah. Do you want me to try again?"

Surya bit his lip, thinking hard. He shook his head, unable to speak.

"Ok," said Hym.

“Don’t go,” said Surya.

“What?”

“I thought you were going to leave. I’m all alone. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Oh. Ok, I’ll stay.”

“You won’t get in trouble?”

“No, my grandparents—the trees, that is—won’t mind if I’m out late, because they don’t even know I’m gone.”

Surya cocked his head slightly, but said, “Ok. That’s good.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know how to play Fates?”

“No?”

“Oh good, you’ll be easy to beat then,” Hym said, drawing a small pack of intricately-painted playing cards out of his pocket. He untied them and began to shuffle and deal.

“Hang on, I have something for you,” said Surya, and he reached under his pillow.

“Ok, so the way it works is you start with three cards, and on your turn you have to play a card and draw a card. The goal is to tell a story with the pictures. If we do it right, the spirits will guide the cards, and we’ll learn about the future.”

“How do you win?”

“You play a certain number of cards, depending on the spread. Then you keep track of the predictions you made, and the person who has the most predictions come true is the winner.”

“Where did you learn this game?” said Surya.

“My mother taught me.”

Surya pulled his hand out from under his pillow and clapped an iron band around Hym’s exposed wrist. Sparks flew, hissing, from the contact, and part of the bed touched by the iron ignited at once. The iron began to glow and shed fountains of sparks, and Hym bit the knuckles of his other hand to hold in a scream of pain as the iron bracelet melted on his arm. At the last moment, he thought to become intangible, and pulled himself through the bracelet.

Hovering in the air a foot above the bed, he looked down at the ashen stump of his forearm and muffled a cry of horror.

The iron band now lay cold and black and twisted in the middle of the crater it had singed into the bed.

Surya picked up the hand that the molten iron had severed, and frantically tried to stick it back on the end of Hym’s stump.

Indignantly, Hym snatched his hand from Surya. “It doesn’t *work* like that!”

He crammed the hand back into the stump with all

his might, willing it to work, willing his body to be just a dream.

He had to pull his re-joined arm sharply to get it to stretch back to its former length. The iron shackle had destroyed a chunk of his bone and flesh, and the pain of its regrowth was dizzying.

Surya was on his knees now, weeping, piteous. Hym collected himself in the air and tried to look dignified. He remembered that gravity was supposed to be affecting him, and allowed himself to sink to the floor.

“What *was* that?” Hym asked.

“It was—I—I’m so sorry—it was iron. I thought... I thought you might not be a...”

“Well I am.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“But I just thought, maybe, if you were the thief...”

“The thief?”

“Someone stole my ring. My grandfather’s gold ring. It’s all I have left of him. I just thought that maybe, if you were the thief, there was a chance I could get it back. If it’s not you, then it’s gone forever.”

“Oh,” said Hym, thoughtfully.

“But you really are a spirit, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Hym. “I really am a spirit.”



“Will you help me find the thief?”

“Yes, I will help you. I will get your ring back for you—somehow.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry about your bed.”

“We have more,” said Surya, with a snuffle and a casual shrug. “I’m so sorry about your arm! I—I didn’t mean to hurt you, I swear it.”

“It’s alright,” said Hym, showing the uninjured hand. “No harm done, see?”

“I feel awful.”

“Come on,” said Hym. “Let’s play Fate.”

“Ok,” Surya sniffled.

Three weeks later, Lord Blackcastle was able to move everything above the waist, and he installed himself at once into a mobile throne. He went everywhere with three guards, and so did Surya. At night, Surya had to sleep with a guard standing outside his door.

Hym and Surya became good friends. Since they could not play loudly, they shared stories quietly in the darkness. Sometimes, Hym would carry Surya out the window and onto the rooftops of Blackcastle, and they would look out over the ocean of snow and fog under the ring and the stars and the aurora, and feel like the only waking passengers in a ship upon a sea of clouds. The cold never bothered Hym, but Surya bundled up and brought

blankets anyway.

Two souls alone, they created a world together. They named its stars, and told each other the nature of all the gods and spirits and heroes within it.

Shalim, as it turned out, was also Surya's favorite of all the gods, for reasons far deeper than Hym's idle curiosity.

Surya's mother had filled his head with tales of Shalim; tales that were otherwise unknown to the village. Hym had a hunger for tales, so although he did not need the ulterior motive to continue his friendship with Surya by any means necessary, he had it.

Surya spoke of Shalim in a way that was different from the way other people in the village spoke of him. Whenever Surya spoke his name, there was a little tremble in his voice. To Hym it sounded like a hope, a devotion, and a great deal of fear. The people in the village spoke Shalim's name only rarely, and only with signs of warding to protect themselves from his attention. Surya used no signs of warding, yet somehow Hym felt that he believed in Shalim in a far more real and present way than the people in the village did. To him, Shalim was always there, in the shadows, watching.

Hym remembered, dimly, the brief moment in which he had seen Shalim. The lighting had been poor, and the shadows of the trees had been very dark, but the face in the gloom and the golden eyes that glared from it had seared themselves into his mind. If the lighting had been even slightly brighter, Hym would have been able to see

the details of Shalim's face, and he would have known if it was true about his beauty. Hym regretted the dimness of the lighting on that particular day very much.

Surya hated dim light. He lived most of his life in it, even during the bright months. He hated the darkness more. Everywhere he went, he and his guards bore candles, and he kept a candle always burning in his window. He claimed that his mother had told him it would help guide the sun home, when he was done warming the other side of the world.

The Storyteller took his time to confront Hym. It was not until Lord Blackcastle was well enough to roll his wheeled chair from room to room and brandish his whip that the wise old guru chose to hoist himself from the depths of his study and emerge to see what had become of the witchling.

The fateful day when he knocked on the door of Nestor and Ana's hut, nothing much happened, because Hym was out exploring the forest at the time.

The next day when he came to knock on the door of Nestor and Ana's hut, he came at a much earlier hour, and crossed paths with Hym, who happened to be coming from Blackcastle just then, on his way to climb in through his bedroom window and pretend to be waking from a long night's sleep. The old man and the boy looked at each other for a long time, old cataracted seagray eyes to dark purple defiance. The old man blinked first, and before he could unblink, Hym scurried around

the house quick as a lizard and got in through his window.

The Storyteller braced himself mentally for the great unknown he was about to face alone. In a bygone day, there might have been someone else to ask, someone else in the world who might have already known everything that needed to be known about an orphaned witchling. In the era of the Storyteller, there was only him, and the books, and the trance.

He knocked on the door and it opened at the first touch of his knuckles. No one stood behind it, and it swung wide so quickly that it scattered cloth napkins off the dining table and sucked an icy breath of outside air into the house, fluttering the Storyteller's cloak in the process.

He sensed the presence of the witch.

*Damn, he thought to himself. I really should have checked on this sooner.*

The main chamber of the house was currently vacant but cluttered. The bedroom doors were both closed, as was the patio door. Nestor's skill as a carpenter, wood-carver, and tinkerer had filled the house with furniture, projects, and contraptions, some of which looked mildly threatening now.

The Storyteller made a brief protective sign and stepped boldly into the hut, staff in hand.

The door slammed behind him with such force that the

wind of it ripped his cloak from his shoulders and tossed it onto a coat-hook. Impressed by the wind's ability to undo the latch of his cloak-brooch, the Storyteller looked at his surroundings again, and more warily this time.

"I am not your enemy," he said. "I will not oppose you. I seek only to understand."

"You have already opposed me," said Hym, in his best mysterious tones.

"I have not," said the Storyteller, calmly.

"Have too," said Hym. "You healed him."

The Storyteller had to think about this for a moment. "It was my duty," he said.

"So?" said Hym.

"Why do you seek to kill him?"

"That's not your business."

The Storyteller shut his mouth, sensing that this was going nowhere. He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I have spent a long time thinking about how to approach you. Perhaps too long. Do you know who I am?"

"Of course I do. You're the Storyteller. You sleep on your left side, with Mihos at your feet. You talk to yourself when you think you are alone."

"Ah," said the Storyteller. "I see walls and doors and the concept of privacy don't mean much to you."

Hym didn't quite know how to respond to this, and

felt an actual twinge of something that might almost have resembled shame.

The Storyteller said: “You have observed me, and you have heard my title, but that does not mean you know who I *am*.”

“Well, who *are* you then?”

“I am many things to many people. I am, most often, a healer. A mender of wounds, be they physical, spiritual, or interpersonal. To you, I am the man who first held you when you came into this world.”

Hym struggled to find something to say in response. All he came up with was a feebly-defiant “So?”

The Storyteller half-concealed a smile. “So, do you want to know why your mother’s cat sleeps at my feet?”

“Her cat?” Hym emerged from his bedroom and squinted at the Storyteller for a long time. “You’re... you’re not trying to say that you’re my *dad*, are you?”

“No! No, I am not your father. Your father was Ana’s son.”

“But you knew my mother?”

“I did. I was privileged to meet her three separate times.”

“Only three times?”

“Yes,” said the Storyteller. “Once, at my birth. Once, at my first card reading. And once, on the day she came into the village to die.”

Hym's heart made the strangest little twisting motion. His mind grappled with the overwhelming wave of strange sensations. He had heard many names for many emotions, and over the years he had become relatively adept at recognizing and naming them. On this day he encountered a new species of fear; one mingled with hope, one tainted with grief. He hesitated. He asked: "How did she die?"

The Storyteller sighed, and gestured towards the dining table. As he seated himself and Hym sat down opposite him, the Storyteller said: "It was mid-Absence, and the night was dark and full of stars. Your mother came into the village long before the first bell, when all the world was sound asleep. Her wounds were grievous."

"Her wounds?" said Hym.

"When she reached the end of the forest, and had no more trees to lean against, she dragged herself through the snow."

"What were her wounds?"

"There were too many; I do not remember them all. She had faced swords, and spears, and many arrows. Through it all, she had shielded you—still within her. Even as she lay dying, her hand never left her sword."

"She had a *sword*?"

"She did," said the Storyteller, "and some day, when you are grown, I will give it to you."

Hym had to take a moment to process this. The Storyteller allowed him to take it, and did not break the silence. At last, Hym asked: “How did she get found?”

“Her cat screamed until Ana sent Nestor outside to see what was the matter. Nestor found her, and called for Ana, and came to wake me. By the time I arrived, your mother was deep in labor. Ana is as accomplished a midwife as me, but the birth was complicated, and difficult, and your mother’s physical state made things harder. I have never seen suffering like hers. She clung to life until she heard your first cry, then she said the only words she had spoken all night. Her voice was weak; her mind delirious with pain and loss of blood. All we heard was one word: ‘Hym.’ And so that became your name.”

Hym was fighting very hard not to cry. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because you had a right to know it, and your cavalier attitude towards death leads me to believe that you do not fully understand the weight of it.”

“I understand death,” said Hym.

“No,” said the Storyteller. “I do not think you do. You have taken it upon yourself to end the life of another man. This is something that can not be taken back—not even by the gods. This is something that cannot be forgiven. It will mark your soul forever, if you do it.”

“Then my soul will be marked,” said Hym. “He must die. I will make it happen.”



“I cannot stop you,” said the Storyteller, “and I will not implore you to reconsider. But I will warn you: to call upon Shalim is deadly business, even for a witch.”

Hym saw the wisdom in this. Something else the man had said bothered him suddenly, and he asked: “Wait, you met my mother when you were *born*?”

The Storyteller chuckled. “Yes. It was she who delivered me, on that day.”

“But then... How old was she when she had me?”

“As the housefly is to man, so a man is to a witch,” said the Storyteller. “They can live many thousands of years, if they are not slain. Age does not weary them, and no disease or poison can claim them. I do not know how old your mother was, on the day she had you. To me she appeared always to be a young woman.”

“I kill flies all the time,” Hym said, thoughtfully.

“As one does,” said the Storyteller, with mild alarm.

Hym stared at the Storyteller defiantly. “Tell me one good reason to let him live.”

“Your mother wouldn’t want you to be a killer.”

“You don’t know what my mother would have wanted.”

“Your mother was a healer, Hym. She used her magic to bring peace and health and security to our village. She gave me the power of the trance, on the day I was born, so that when I grew I would be able to watch over the village for her. I am one who was blessed by the life

of your mother. I have never known any who were cursed by it. You could be worthy of her legacy, if you dared to try to be.”

Frustrated that the Storyteller could not see *why* he was so determined to kill Lord Blackcastle, Hym said: “I will curse who I deem worthy of a curse, as I know my mother would.”

Realizing that, in fact, Hym’s mother had never crossed paths with Lord Blackcastle, the Storyteller suddenly found himself wondering what she would have done if she had. For a moment he was daunted by the feeling that a being far more powerful and far more dangerous and far more deeply connected to the roots of existence than he would ever be had made a decision, and he was presenting himself as someone who would dare to stand in the way of that decision. Wisely, he retreated from his position. “Perhaps your mother would have done even as you are doing now,” he mused.

Hym’s rage faltered. Expecting resistance, he had psyched himself up to say something like “And if you stand in my way, you will be cursed too.” Now it seemed out of proportion. He was silent for a moment, wondering; what *would* his mother have done? Had she ever met Lord Blackcastle? He didn’t know. He resolved to ask her.

There was anger in him, thought the Storyteller, and yet there was a softness too. He did not want to be angry, and yet he was. A young man grappling with the world, and with the realization that he could actually change

it... It was troubling. Every child must come to grips with the fact that no matter how much they grow up, they will never be in charge of the world, and they will never have their way in all things—and here was the child for whom that wasn't true. The Storyteller reasoned thoughtfully, trying to empathize with the young boy. He had not been young in a very long time. For a time, he let the silence linger.

Hym fidgeted.

The Storyteller said: "You are very powerful. I can see that."

"Thank you."

"It comes from your mother," said the Storyteller. "From her sword."

"But I don't have her sword?"

"Yes," said the Storyteller, "you do. But I cannot give it to you yet. For now it grants you power from a distance. Someday you will hold its power in your hand."

Hym found himself getting uneasy at the thought of the power he was being given. How many other people would need his help, as Surya did?

The Storyteller said: "You know, just because it happens when you have the power to prevent it, doesn't mean it is your fault."

"It doesn't?"

“It doesn’t. You also don’t have to take on the burden of the justice of the world. It isn’t your job.”

“What is my job?”

“Your job is to live. To live the life you want to, and to find the meaning that there is to find in it. There isn’t much, but it’s there, and it’s important.”

“This is important,” said Hym, fiercely. “I know it. Lord Blackcastle must die. If you continue to heal him, I will break your hands.”

The Storyteller subconsciously began popping his knuckles, as if reassuring himself that they were all there. Calmly, he said: “Is that so?”

“It’s so,” said Hym.

“I am on the side of life, Hym. That is the only side I am on. It is my purpose to heal. If you would prevent me from doing my purpose, I ask that you simply kill me instead.”

“You’re too good to die.”

“Someday I will die, and there will be nothing you can do to prevent it.”

“If you like your hands, stay away from Blackcastle.”

“I am not the person you will answer to, Hym. As powerful as you are to us, there are those whose power far exceeds yours. Step cautiously when you tread upon the plans of the gods.”

“Any god that could use Lord Blackcastle, and take

as the cost of his use the suffering of Surya and Lady Blackcastle, is no god I care to impress. I will kill Lord Blackcastle. I will steal the breath from his lungs myself if I have to. Nothing will stop me, and any who get in my way will suffer for it.”

The Storyteller sighed. “Very well.” He looked around, wishing he had some tea. “Are Ana and Nestor awake?”

“Why?”

“I am wondering why they have not emerged to interrupt us. It is past the hour when they would ordinarily wake.”

“They’re deep sleepers, when I need them to be,” said Hym.

A little chill raced down the Storyteller’s spine and he decided that this was not a room he wanted to be in, anymore. “I see.”

“They’ll come out once you’ve gone.”

“May I see them?”

Hym stared at the old man for a long time. “Sure,” he said, at last. He got up and opened the door to their bedroom from ten feet away with just a flick of a finger.

The Storyteller followed him cautiously into the room. Ana and Nestor lay sleeping blissfully in their bed. “What did you use?” he asked.

“What?”

“Which herbs? What dosage? At their age, you could easily kill them if you miscalculate.”

“I don’t use herbs,” said Hym. “I want them to sleep well, so they sleep well.”

“And they sleep as long as you want them to?”

“And they sleep as long as I want them to.”

“How do they feel about this arrangement?”

“They don’t know about it.”

“I see. And how does the thought of that fact make you feel?”

Hym shrugged.

“I see,” said the Storyteller. “Consider, perhaps, how *you* would feel, if you were under my magic, and forced to slumber whenever I wanted you to?”

“That’s a creepy fucking thing to say to a ten-year-old,” said Hym.

The Storyteller rolled his eyes. “I am asking you to *empathize* and you deflect with a joke. Think about how your grandparents would react, if you told them that you gave them enchanted slumber every night?”

“Probably grateful? I’ve never met an adult who got enough sleep. Now they do.”

The Storyteller was a bit stumped by this. He took in a deep, frustrated breath, and released it slowly through his nose. “My *point*,” he said, “is that you are using your

powers on people without their knowledge or consent. I have a great power with herbs and potions. I could make a concoction that would put anyone who drank it to sleep. I can adjust the dosage perfectly to the body of any person, so that there is no possibility they will be harmed. I can even secretly administer it into a drink, which they will, trusting me, drink.”

Hym was suddenly very grateful that he had not thought to offer the Storyteller any tea.

The Storyteller said: “It would be wrong of me to do that to someone without their knowledge and without them agreeing to drink it, yes?”

“Sure, that would be wrong.”

“Then why is what you are doing any less wrong?”

“Well, because you’re putting herbs into their bodies, without even knowing what kinds of allergies or reactions they might have to them. Everyone’s body is different, so—”

“No, that is not why. With my knowledge, I can create a potion that will have absolutely no negative or harmful effect upon the person who drinks it, and I can adjust the dosage perfectly to any body. The reason it is wrong is because I am violating their bodily autonomy. Everyone has a right to choose whether or not they want anyone doing anything to their body. Your body is the only thing that is truly and wholly yours, and it is a sacred thing. In my example, I am putting something I know to be completely harmless into them, and even then, it is

wrong, because they did not have the chance to choose whether or not to agree to drink it. They were forced to drink it, through my deception. You agree that this is why it is wrong?”

“Yes?” said Hym.

“You are putting *magic* into the bodies of your aging grandparents. Magic is unpredictable, wild, and dangerous.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“And you should also know that what you are doing is wrong.”

“Ok, so it’s wrong. So what?”

The Storyteller closed his mouth after a moment, and said: “I would like to leave, now. Is that permitted?”

Baffled, Hym said: “Sure?”

Sadly, the Storyteller left the hut. He lingered for a while with his hand still on the doorknob. With a heavy heart, he returned home, not quite knowing how to proceed.

Hym sat in his swirling emotions for a while. He had decided *not* to kill Lord Blackcastle, before the Storyteller came. Now it seemed like he had made Lord Blackcastle’s murder a part of his very identity.

Still, he had not specified a time-frame. He was comforted by this. So was the Storyteller, when he reflected upon it.



## Chapter 5

### Time

The Storyteller honored Hym's wishes, and never set foot in Blackcastle again. Surya's father was still every bit the tyrant he had been, but his most violent urges were restrained by the fact that he and his family were now always in the presence of the guards. They were also restrained by Hym's small campaign of terror, which continued in a thousand mischievous ways for the ten long years which followed.

Hym visited Surya nearly every day and night for those ten long years. Surya never again asked him to kill his father, and for this reason he delayed. He told himself that soon he would do it, when the time was right, when he could do it without angering Surya.

Surya confided everything in Hym. Every thought, every feeling, every dream, every hope, every prayer, every fear. Hym confided what he could without breaking the lie.

Each night, Hym and Surya told each other the stories

that made up their worlds, and gradually those worlds began to overlap, to merge, and to grow. The more they shared with each other, the more Hym began to hate his own lies. In every interaction, he had to wear his careful mask.

On a certain day in the middle of Absence, Hym climbed his tree only to find no candle in Surya's window.

The wind danced over the snow, and the wind-chimes by the oak-grove sang out. Mingled into the sound of their song he heard a sob.

Carefully, he climbed down the thornless rose vine and approached.

Creeping between the trunks of the oaks, he came upon Surya unaware, weeping on the bench.

"Hey," Hym said.

"Hym!" Surya said, smearing his eyes. In the Ring-light the purple ring around his eye flashed darkly. Surya turned away from Hym, and composed himself.

"I'll kill him," said Hym.

"It was my fault. I disobeyed him. I... Didn't clear the ashes. Please don't kill him."

Hym relented. He took a step, but paused.

They were twelve and thirteen now. Surya still stood taller than Hym, though both of them had grown.

Hym put his hand on Surya's shoulder, and turned him around. "Let me look at you."

Surya turned around, shamefaced, looking at the ground.

“How did he do this?” Hym asked.

“He threw a platter.”

“A platter?”

“Big plate, you know.”

“I *know* what a platter is.”

“Yeah,” said Surya, sadly.

“Silver, or stoneware?” Hym asked, after a moment or two.

“What?”

“The platter.”

“Oh. Stoneware. It missed me, I ducked and smacked my head on the bannister. But the platter shattered everywhere. It was my grandma’s, I think. Mom cried.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t throw it.”

Hym touched Surya’s bruised eye gently with two fingers. “Does it hurt?”

“No. I came out here because the cold felt nice. It doesn’t hurt now.”

“Your father is a stupid brute.”

“He’s not stupid,” Surya said, hotly. “He’s just angry.”

“Come on, sit down.” Hym led Surya to the bench. “I need to look into your eyes.”

“Why?”

“To check for concussion.”

“Con-what?”

“If you get bonked hard enough, your brain bounces around in your head. It’s bad. I read it over the Storyteller’s shoulder last night, before I came to visit.”

“I didn’t know you were friends with him.”

“We’re on ok terms,” said Hym, uncomfortably. “But I don’t let him know when I’m there. I like his books. He has a lot of books.”

“More than my dad?”

“Maybe. Better ones, anyway. Your dad’s books are all boring.”

“Anyway, now that you’re here, let’s do something fun.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Can we swordfight?”

Hym nodded eagerly. Surya reached behind a tree and pulled out two wooden swords, both brand-new.

“Hey, these are nice!” Hym said, looking at the smoothly-carved handles and the shapely blades.

“Thanks,” said Surya. “I’ve been working on them! Yours has a tree on the blade.”

Hym swung his sword around, liking the feel of it. “How did you learn to make these?”

“I said I wanted to learn to do woodworking, and my mom asked the Storyteller, but he didn’t know how, so he sent this old guy named Nestor to teach me. He let me use his tools. It was fun. Too much work, though. So don’t break this one!”

Hym smiled.

Surya took up a stance, as his mother had taught him, and they crossed their wooden blades and glared at each other in the shadows of the oaks.

Hym took two steps, swinging above his head with each. Surya’s sword clacked against his, knocking his blows aside, and Surya swung at his chest, but Hym skipped back with supernatural ease, out of reach.

Surya was a gifted swordsman, but he was still a clumsy teenager. He swung angrily at Hym’s skipping feet, sacrificing his stance to get in close, and his wooden sword thwacked against Hym’s ankle-bone.

Hym hopped on one foot. “Ow!”

“Sorry! Sorry!”

“I’ll get you for that, Lord Blackcastle!” Hym said, and he whirled around and kicked Surya in the shins.

“Ow!” said Surya, hopping up and down. “Come on! That hurt!”

“Now we’re even,” said Hym.

Surya and Hym paced slowly around each other. In the stillness of the sheltering oaks, the crunching of their steps seemed far too loud.

Surya and Hym lunged for each other at the same time, both swinging, caring not for their own protection, and each smote the other soundly in the ribs as they stumbled past each other.

Facing each other again, rubbing their bruised chests, Hym and Surya laughed at each other. Their swords fell, forgotten in the snow.

“Well, that was fun,” said Surya.

“Yeah, good swordfight. We both die,” Hym laughed.

This should be  
Surya’s ine

“What do you want to do next?”

“I want to climb down the tree.”

Surya’s eyes widened. “N-no,” he said. “I’m too scared.”

“You can do it,” said Hym. “I can help you, this time. I’m stronger than I was before. You’ll be safe with me.”

“I... I don’t know.” Surya looked over his shoulder, up at the shadow of Blackcastle and the glow of its many high windows. “What if they see us? There are guards

everywhere now.”

“The guards are asleep right now,” Hym said. “I always put them to sleep, when I come.”

“But... What if...”

“I want to show you a special place,” said Hym. “It’s outside the wall, but it isn’t far.”

“You—you do? What is it?”

“You’ll see. But only if you come with me. It has to be tonight, it’s very important.”

“W-when?”

“Now.”

“Can we bring a rope? I would feel safer with a rope.”

Hym laughed. “Do you have a rope?”

“In the stable.”

With a whisper, the winds flowed over the snow.

The invisible hand of his mother’s magic bore to him the rope, sailing from the window of the stable like an umbral serpent in the sky. It slithered through the branches and coiled in Hym’s hand. He held it out to Surya. “I’ve got you.”

Surya nodded, and tied the end of the rope around his waist.

“Maybe you should wait till we get to the top of the wall?”

“Oh,” said Surya, flushing slightly. “Ok.” He untied himself. “Well... Lead the way?”

Hym smiled. “Come on. It’ll be fun!”

Then he raced through the trees, bare feet not breaking the snow, and Surya followed clumsily after.

They circled through the garden and climbed the stairs to the walltop, passing by a sleeping guard on the way up.

Surya whispered: “We should draw something on his face.”

Hym laughed. “Yeah. Let’s give him a mustache.”

Surya plucked a greasy bit of artist’s charcoal from one of the little pockets on his belt, and bent down to apply the makeup.

The guard snorted as Surya’s knuckles tickled his nose, and swung an unconscious hand.

Laughing, Surya pulled back to admire his handiwork.

The swirling handlebar mustache looked almost good on the young man’s face, in the dim Ringlight. Hym and Surya laughed about it and thought about things to add.

“Glasses,” said Hym, and he reached up his hand and pointed it at the high window of Lord Blackcastle’s library. The window cracked open ever so slightly, and a pair of reading glasses slipped through and sailed down to his hand. He opened them and put them on the guard’s face as Surya gasped.



“You can’t do that! He’ll get in trouble!”

“I’m going to wake him as soon as we’re down the tree. He can figure it out.”

Surya laughed, and covered his mouth with a hand to stifle the sound. “Are you s-sure?”

Hym grinned. “Trust me.”

“Ok.”

They walked along the wall-top. Surya clung to every crenel as they passed, his eyes already falling down the forty feet to the snow-covered rocks below.

A flicker of the aurora sent an unusually bright flash of greenish light into the forest. Glinting eyes flashed back from among the trees, and Surya shouted.

Hym said, “What?”

“There’s things! In the forest!”

“Of course there are,” said Hym. “It’s a forest.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Not when you’re with me.”

“Ok.”

They were at the tree. Surya stared up at the broken-off branch and the gap between it and the wall-top. It was nearly seven feet across.

Hym said, “Trust me.”

Then he leapt from the wall-top to the tree-top like a

leaf on the wind, and perched at the end of the branch, holding one end of the rope.

“Ok,” said Surya, standing carefully up onto a crenel.  
“Ok.”

His legs began to tremble. He stared down at the rock which had broken his back.

Hym said, “Trust me. I’ve got you. You can’t fall.”

“I can’t?”

Hym nodded.

Surya threw himself off the wall-top, and felt the winds embrace him. They hefted him across the gap, and he sailed easily up to land on all fours beside Hym.

“See?” said Hym, one hand still outstretched, stars still flickering faintly in the pupils of his eyes.

Surya clung to the branch and nodded grimly. His stomach twisted like a kite in a gale.

“You can’t fall. Come on, climb with me. I’ll show you where to put your hands.”

Surya nodded again. Hym reached out and took his right hand, and placed it further up the bough.

Surya began to crawl towards the trunk of the tree very slowly, and Hym stepped easily down from branch to branch below him, weighing nothing.

“Place your left foot here,” said Hym, pointing to a protruding nub of severed branch.

“How?”

“You’ll have to turn around.”

“And go down backwards? Feet first?”

“Yes. It will be easier. And stop looking down. It will help.”

“Ok.”

Surya painstakingly turned himself around on the bough, and put his left foot in the indicated place. “Ok. Now what?”

“Swing your right foot over, like dismounting a horse. Place your right foot here, on this branch where I’m standing.”

Hym stepped out further towards the end of the branch, and it did not bob beneath his weight.

Surya swallowed. “O-ok.”

He did it all at once, throwing his leg over the bough and straight for the next branch, but he misjudged it, and slipped, and his foot hit the branch but he began to fall backwards.

Hym caught him by the hand, and pulled him up to stand on the branch.

“Thanks,” said Surya.

“Come on, you’ll have to crawl and hang to get your feet to the next one.”

Bit by bit, inch by inch, yard by yard, Hym guided

Surya down the tree. Surya did the work, and towards the end gained confidence in his movements.

By the time they reached the bottom, his legs were strong, no longer shaking. He looked up at the tree he had just surmounted, the tree which had hung in his nightmares for two years.

Hym hopped down the last bit and landed effortlessly in the snow. "That was good! You're a natural. Come on, it's this way."

Then he darted off, into the dark underbrush, vanishing almost at once.

Surya said, "Wait, Hym!" and ran after. Behind him, the wall of Blackcastle's garden loomed, and its shadow hung over the undergrowth.

As Surya ran beyond its shadow, and the light of its torches fell behind him, blocked by the shaggy evergreens, his eyes began to adjust to the true darkness.

Through the forest he ran, fueled by terror as much as by curiosity. He could hear Hym just ahead, but he could not see him. When Hym glanced back to check on Surya, his eyes flashed with reflected violet light, and Surya ran into him. "BLAGHAAAGH!" Surya said.

"Take my hand, I forgot you can't see," Hym said.

Surya could not see Hym's hand. He felt warm fingers fumble for his own. They interlocked.

"Come on," said Hym, in a whisper that died at once upon the snow. "It's this way."

Surya clutched Hym's hand and pulled up the hood of his cloak, and followed.

They walked in total silence for a time.

Suddenly, Hym dropped to his knees, pulling Surya down as well.

"What is it?" Surya asked.

"Hush," said Hym, listening.

"It is a bear," said Hym.

"A bear!?" Surya hissed.

"Quiet!"

Something heavy lumbered past, crunching the snow, every footstep huge yet oddly muffled. The trees made it impossible to guess the distance of those thudding paws.

Hym listened intently to the moving steps of the beast, distracted by the sweatiness of Surya's hand. He reached into his magic and took hold of the air around them, holding it close, holding it still, holding it silent. No atom of their breath would reach the nostrils of the bear, and no wave of their sound would touch its ear.

The bear passed by.

Hym got to his feet and pulled Surya along.

They came to a high place overlooking a small crater in the earth, and a wall of crumbled stone at the bottom of it. The slopes of the little crater were dusted with snow.

Hym pulled Surya's hand sharply forward, yanking him off the edge of the crater, and as Surya screamed Hym spread out his hands and caught them both in his magic and they slid down the hill on a wave of energy, and came to gentle stops at the bottom, completely unharmed.

"What do you think?" Hym asked.

Surya picked himself up, utterly confused. "I'm not dead!"

Hym laughed.

"I still can't see, though." There was more Ringlight here, with the gap in the canopy over the crater, but the night was foggy, and the light was dim.

"Oh, watch," said Hym.

Tiny blooms of aboveground bioluminescent coral flowered on the jumbled wall of rocks, and began to glow.

"What is it?" Surya asked, as the little glowing forms began to illuminate the snowy bottom of the crater.

"I don't know," said Hym. "But there's more."

He walked up to the wall of jumbled rock, and slipped into a gap between one stone and another.

"Hym? Where did you go?"

"Follow me!" Hym's voice said, from somewhere within the rock.

Surya looked around desperately at the forest, as if

hoping someone smarter than him would be there to stop him. There was no one.

He approached the gap between the two rocks, and saw an utterly dark tunnel, barely wide enough for a man to stand sideways in.

He swallowed to himself, took one last look at the world of the living, and shimmied into the dark.

Moving with his chin and the back of his skull both gently bumping stone from time to time, he had nothing to stare at but the stone before his eyes or the darkness ahead of him. The stone before his eyes was mesmerizing; shimmering inside with opalescence, smoothly gleaming as though carved by flame, and covered with an encrustation of living, glowing things.

Then he was in the Cave, surrounded by frozen fountains of cascading gemstone facets. Iridescence and opalescence blinded his eyes no matter which direction he looked in. In the jumbled crystal of the walls and floor and ceiling, little pulses of light flickered unnaturally from time to time, not driven by reflections. In places, the strange glowing plants bloomed from the rock.

A large pool of mirror-smooth waters lay dark and perfectly circular on one side of the cave, and a beach of smooth white sand filled the rest of it.

“Come on,” said Hym, standing on the sand. “The sand and water are warm!”

Awestruck, Surya entered, and took off his boots and

his cloak. It was swelteringly warm inside this part of the cave, and a fine beading of condensation shone on every surface.

Hym, already in the pool, swam a lap. “Come on! It’s amazing.”

Surya dropped his remaining impediments and inhibitions. Lighter without them, he marched across the warm white sands, and entered the pool with a thunderous cannonball.

They swam for a few hours, until the heat began to get dizzying. Then they sprawled in the sand with their feet half-buried and stared up at the geode forms of the Cave’s ceiling. Stalactites hung like chandeliers, all dripping with crystal forms. Some had joined with Stalagmites, to form root-like pillars all crusted over like rock candy.

“This place is amazing,” Surya said, still panting a little.

“I know, right?”

“How did you find it?”

“My mother showed me. She’s a tree now, but she still sends me dreams, sometimes.”

“I’m glad she showed this place to you.”

“Apparently it was made by a god, long ago, as a place to hide from the ills of the world. There might be all kinds of secrets in here, if we can figure them out.”



“A god?” asked Surya, sitting up.

“Uh-huh?” said Hym. The sand clung to Surya’s skin like powdered diamond.

Surya said, “Then what are we doing here!? What if they come back!?”

“They won’t! They left this place long ago. My mom said it was safe.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Oh, there’s something else,” said Hym, getting to his feet. He pulled Surya up, and led him to a warm place on one side of the chamber, where a smooth, flat, broken-off stalagmite lay slightly smoking. “It’s a griddle.”

“A griddle!?”

“Yup. Always piping hot. It’s heated from below, through the stone, through the earth. We can cook anything we want, on there.”

“As long as what we want is griddled, sure!”

“We can use dishes, too, if we smuggle them out.”

“My family has loads of dishes!”

“Yeah, sometimes your father even tries to give them to you!”

Surya didn’t laugh.

Hym’s face fell. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok.” Surya was feeling put upon for other reasons, too.

Hym said, “Are you ok?”

“No,” said Surya. “I’m outside the walls. For the first time in... In my life. I’m scared. I followed a spirit into the forest, and now I’m all alone in a place where the gods walk. And I had to climb a tree... And I fell down a hill...”

“But—but—!”

“But I trust you, so I’ll be ok. But I guess I’m still worried.”

“About what?”

“About how I’m going to have to climb the tree again to get back inside. And about that bear...”

“Don’t be afraid. Do you want to go home now?”

“I’m tired, yeah,” said Surya, and he smiled. “Thank you. That was a nice swim.”

“Ok. Let’s get dressed.”

Their clothes felt heavy and warm after the sauna, and when they emerged into the cold air it hit them like a slap in the face.

“Oh!” said Hym. “Oh, it’s cold!”

“Oh, it’s cold!” said Surya, at about the same time. “And it’s dark!”

“Come on, I’ll lead the way!”

The mist was thick and heavy now. Already they could hear it lacing every leaf and branch of every tree in a fine and scintillating skin of white frost.

“Freezing mist!” Surya hissed. “Cover your mouth!”

Hym swung open his hands and the wings of the wind cleared the air around them. They walked in a bubble, under the white and whirling sea. Tracings of frost and snow formed on the leading edge of the bubble, as Hym led Surya forward, up the slope of the crater, and the magic pushed through dense and cloying vapor.

At last they broke through the top of the pool of fog, and surfaced into starkly clear air. Time itself seemed frozen in that cold. The trees cracked and popped like geriatrics shifting in their chairs, and the sound trampled all around them.

A small pile of snow and ice now clung to a curved invisible something, about a meter above Hym’s head. He turned to look at Surya in the frigid Ringlight. A frantic whiplash of aurora-green slithered across the sky, and its reflection flashed in his dark eyes. As Hym released the magic, the pile of snow and ice fell to the ground.

Surya said, “Listen...”

They listened to the crackling thunder of the trees.

Hym smiled.

“What is it?” Surya asked.

“The ice is bursting every branch and tree it can.”

“Why aren’t we dead?”

“I’m keeping us warm. Don’t let go of my hand.”

“Ok.”

They walked in silence between the crackling trees.

“What about the bear?” Surya asked, in a whisper.

“He’s in his burrow, if he’s wily. Or he’s asleep, to stay alive.”

They walked a while longer, neither of them breaking the frozen silence of the air.

Suddenly, there came a sound nearby: the sudden splitting of a root system. The towering oak beside them came crashing down towards them, swinging his whole hoary head of branches, and both of them screamed and both of them covered and both of them stumbled out of the way just in time.

The tree crashed down less than a meter from them, and Hym hurled himself to his feet, yanking Surya after him, and shouted: “We’ve got to get out of the forest!”

Surya’s feet felt like they flew. Their hearts did not stop pounding until they came within sight of Blackcastle’s gloomy wall. Then both their hearts fell.

Gloomily, they walked the last bit, towards the huge tree they had to climb to get back into the castle.

Hym looked at Surya. “Hey, follow me.”

“Ok,” said Surya.

Hym led him around the garden wall, to the secret entrance he had once seen Lady Blackcastle take to pick mushrooms. It was well concealed within the stacked stone of the walls, but the door swung easily, once he tripped the latch with magic, and he pulled Surya into the shadow of winter-dead hedges inside Blackcastle's garden.

"The guards!" Surya gasped. "Did you leave them all sleeping in this cold?"

Hym scratched his neck. "N-no. Of course not."

"Oh good, that would have been horrible..."

"Come on," said Hym, and he pulled him all the way across the garden, to the back door of Blackcastle, and picked the lock of Surya's home, and opened the door for him. Surya slipped inside.

"You can make it the rest of the way?" Hym asked.

"I think so."

"Ok. I'll see you tomorrow!"

They hugged, then waved. Hym closed the door.

He turned to face the hugeness of the bitter, icy garden, and steeled himself, and walked to check on the nearest sleeping guard. There were only two of them on the wall, most nights, and tonight that seemed to be the case. One of them they had planted Lord Blackcastle's glasses on, and the other was asleep on the opposite side of the fortress, at his post on the wall.

Hym checked on the guard they had not already seen, and found the man huddled in a dark bundle, dusted with frost.

“Oh no,” said Hym. He dropped to his knees and felt for the man’s pulse.

The man was still alive, but only just. Hym scooped him up and jumped off the wall, gliding to the ground, and carried him to the front door of Blackcastle. Then he ran to check on the other sleeping guard, and found him where they had left him, snoozing, more warmly bundled than the first.

Hym picked him up and threw him over his shoulders and carried him to the front door as well. Then he reached up his mind and grabbed the bell-pull of the big bell, the one that was never used except for weddings and for funerals, and he rang it as no one had ever rung it before. It crashed and boomed, pounding the frigid silence of the night with its huge brass body, gonging wildly back and forth. As sounds of alarm began to spread through the fortress of Blackcastle, Hym reached for the feeling of Surya, and found him darting up a staircase, about to cross paths with his father, coming down another.

Lord Blackcastle had left the wheelchair behind nearly a year ago, but hobbled everywhere now with a cane.

Hym flew to the wall and clung, and reached through the wall to grab Lord Blackcastle’s foot right as he took his first step on the stairs. Lord Blackcastle cried out and stumbled and tripped and fell, feet skidding down

the edges of the stairs, just barely maintaining his footing. At the third-to-last step his heel caught and he was flung forward. His head smacked into the banister and he rolled into the wall. Then, painfully, angrily, he got back to his feet.

Surya slipped past, unseen, down a hall and up another stair. Lord Blackcastle thundered down the rest of the way, ignoring the throbbing pain around his eye.

Hym clung to a gargoyle and waited above the pillared porch until he watched Lord Blackcastle open the front doors to retrieve his men. Lord Blackcastle gasped at the sight of them, and called to his guards, and the men were quickly brought inside. The door closed, but Hym did not leave yet.

He waited until the Storyteller arrived, thickly bundled against the cold.

The Storyteller raised a mittened hand and rapped on the door.

The door swung outward with a squeak of metal on stone, and Lord Blackcastle stood in the gap, a dark purple bruise around one eye, an open bottle in one hand. Hym could smell the wine on his breath even from his high perch.

Lord Blackcastle said, "Come in, come in. You must hear what's happened."

The Storyteller hesitated. "I'm afraid I can't."

"You can't?"

“I cannot,” said the Storyteller. “I made a promise. I cannot cross the threshold of your house. I came to see what was the matter, and why you rang the bell.”

“Then forget your promise, and come and see!”

“I find it important to keep promises. They don’t mean much, if you don’t.”

“My men are dying!”

“Dying?”

“They fell asleep in the crackling cold, when the trees were bursting! They have both been afflicted by magic. You must cure them!”

“I must, but I cannot enter your house. Get them out of their wet clothes, immerse them in warm water, and give them hot tea. Tell them to visit me as soon as they are able, so that I can monitor for frostbite. I will speak to the spirits, and learn who has done this to them, and ask a boon, to reverse it. I can offer no guarantee of success; the curse which lingers upon you is beyond my power to break.”

“Curse?”

“Oh yes. It’s quite clear that you are still the target of the entity you angered all those years ago. The very same one which tried to kill you. I would monitor my behavior, if I were you; the more you anger it, the more its antics will escalate. Someday, you may not survive one of them.”



“It is my idiot son who has brought this curse upon me. He consorts with a demon. I have glimpsed it.”

“A demon?” said the Storyteller.

“I have seen it from a distance; the two of them side by side. Never fully, with my eye; always out of the corner of my sight, and when I look, he sits alone. Sometimes they walk together in the garden. I have heard the creature within these halls, and I know that he speaks to it sometimes by night. Whenever they are prowling, I keep my chamber locked, and iron in my pocket.”

“You are wise to take such precautions. Perhaps the boy will grow out of it. It may even be a perfectly ordinary spirit, and not a demon.”

“I will beat wisdom into him, and he will bid the spirit to go.”

“That would be a bad idea.”

“It is the old way for a reason. It works.”

“It is the way of barbarians.”

“I am not one of your people, greybeard. My culture rules yours like cattle.”

“Well, this old cow is going home,” said the Storyteller, in a huff, and he walked away, leaving Lord Blackcastle with his drunken, bleary-eyed anger.

He turned back into the house.

Anxiety twisted in Hym’s stomach. Surya was afraid; he could sense it.

He rose from his gargoyle and circled around the walls of Blackcastle, touching his hands to the stone as he glided between the windows, and rose at last to Surya's room. He came to a stop just below Surya's window, and waited outside it.

Hym had made another set of knives, after losing his first to the Storyteller. He drew them now.

He waited.

He heard the unmistakeable sound of Lord Blackcastle's tripodal gait, climbing the stairs.

He heard the thunk of cane and boots come to a stop outside Surya's door. Inside the room, Surya clutched the panther doll that Hym liked most to play with, and stared into the dark.

A long silence waited. Lord Blackcastle's heavy, drunken breathing was audible even through the closed window.

Hym heard Lord Blackcastle's hand touch and twist the knob, and he clutched his daggers tightly.

Then Lord Blackcastle's hand hesitated, and relented, and the sound of his heavy steps receded down the hall. Hym waited until he heard the sound of Lord Blackcastle's chamber door swinging shut.

Then, and only then, he released his hold on the wall, and fell, and glided homeward on the winds.

Halfway there, he stopped, gripped by an idea. He flew back to Blackcastle and rummaged through the garbage,

and found the shards of a stoneware platter.

When he had finished reassembling it, he drifted through the walls of Blackcastle and placed it in the middle of the dining room table. Then, smiling to himself, he flew back through the wall, and headed home.

Weary, he slipped through his bedroom window and into his bed. Sighing happily, he looked up at the sketches which papered his walls and ceilings.

“Goodnight, Surya,” he said, to one of the images on the ceiling. Then he closed his eyes, and fell into dreams, and in his slumber he swam again in the dark warm pool, and sand glittered like diamonds on Surya’s skin.



## Chapter 6

# Leviathan

A month after Surya's birthday, the Storyteller emerged from his hut in the dim light of that Departure morning, and went to the bell-house, where the Timekeeper lived, and knocked on the door of the old stone tower.

The Time-Keeper, a middle-aged woman with dark auburn hair, opened the door and greeted him like an old friend. "Ah, Magnus! What brings you here so early? It's not yet fifth bell."

"An omen," said the Storyteller. "May I enter?"

"By all means!"

The Storyteller stepped into the warm darkness of the tower's lower floor, and settled himself at once on a fur-lined couch. The Timekeeper seated herself beside him.

"So what's this omen?" she asked.

"A dream," said the Storyteller. "The witch came to me, and warned of the coming of Leviathan."

The Timekeeper's face fell. "How long do we have?"

"We have three days."

"That doesn't give us much time to prepare!"

"I know. You must ring the warning bells at once."

"Yes I must," she said, getting to her feet. "Wait here a moment, I'll be back in a jiffy."

"Wait," said the Storyteller. "Before all that panic and commotion... could we have tea?"

"Tea? Of course! Is something the matter?"

She set the kettle on the stove, and sat again beside him.

The Storyteller fidgeted, popping his knuckles. She waited patiently for him to speak, and at last he said, "Yes. It's Hym."

"Him who?"

"You know of whom I speak."

"Still, I think it was a silly name."

"It was his mother's only word that night," said the Storyteller. "We honor her with it."

"What's he done now?"

"It has come to my attention that he has been sneaking into Blackcastle again."

"Why? Do you think he still wants to kill Lord Blackcastle?"

“No,” said the Storyteller. “And that is what troubles me. He jinxes the poor man day and night, but he seems unwilling to make any serious attempt. You may recall that night the bells of Blackcastle rang?”

“Yes, startled the daylights out of me. I woke up thinking there had been a gale!”

“I came to Blackcastle, on that night. Two guards had been found asleep in the snow, in the middle of the crackling cold.”

“Oh no!”

“Yes. Someone had left them on the doorstep of Blackcastle, still sound asleep.”

“Hym?”

“Hym. I am afraid he intended it as a warning, and I fear for what it may mean...”

“You don’t think he’d kill them *all*, surely?”

“I am not convinced he wishes to kill any of them,” said the Storyteller. “In fact, I am worried that he has developed a close relationship with Lord Blackcastle’s son, Surya.”

“Why would that be bad?”

“Think of the consequences, if the lie were revealed!”

“What lie?”

“The lie, woman! The lie we all agreed to tell, all those many years ago. Hym is not dead. If Lord Blackcastle

comes to suspect that, there will be no end of trouble.”

“Why would he suspect that? Hym is slippery as a shadow, I doubt he’d make his presence known so easily.”

“Lord Blackcastle has seen him,” said the Storyteller. “He believes he is a demon, called on by his son. I fear for Surya’s sake as well. If he speaks, if he reveals the name of the so-called spirit...”

“I see,” said the Timekeeper. “That *is* a troubling thought. Is Surya safe?”

“His father has been... Wiser. Since last we talked. I do not believe he still beats the boy. Still, he made threats.”

“Well, what can you do about it? He is a Lord, after all. If he wishes to abuse his family, what can the rest of us do about it? It is the cost of their wealth and privilege, to my mind.”

“Surya and his mother are innocent,” said the Storyteller. “They do not deserve ill treatment.”

“That may be, but the question remains: what can you do about it? Nothing. And so why worry?”

The Storyteller sighed. The kettle screamed, and for a time they were both distracted by the tea.

Then, setting his steaming cup back down into its saucer, the Storyteller said, “Perhaps you’re right.”

“I’m rarely wrong.”



“I will simply have to put my worries aside, for now, and trust in the gods.”

“Very wise,” said the Timekeeper, rising to her feet. “I think I shall go and ring the bells now. Will you stay to speak to them?”

“Of course.”

“Then make yourself comfortable. You may wish to cover your ears; I have beeswax on the shelf for that.”

The Storyteller nodded, staring at the wall.

The Timekeeper climbed the many steps of the old stone tower, and reached the bells. Taking up her hammer, she rang the Bell of Storms with three great and crashing blows. Then she waited a moment for the ringing to fade, and struck it thrice again.

By the third ringing of the three blows, the village had opened all its doors, and heads of every household were converging at the base of the tower.

The Timekeeper came back downstairs to find the Storyteller unmoved. He had finished his tea, at least.

“Well,” she said, “You’d better go and talk to them.”

The Storyteller sighed, put his cup down, and got to his feet. “Yes, I suppose I’d better.”

The following two days were packed with a flurry of activity. The villagers put their herds into their sturdy stacked-stone barns, and boarded up the windows of their huts, and packed essential belongings into wagons.

By the evening of the second day, the line of wagons waited at the gates of Blackcastle.

The Storyteller, at the front of the line, said up to the gate-guards: “And lo, Shalim rides upon the wings of Leviathan, and we come to shelter within your walls!”

The guard answered according to the formula. “And Blackcastle’s walls open to shelter thee!”

The gates swung open. Lord and Lady Blackcastle stood on the threshold of their house, dressed in their best finery. Surya stood between them, pale and frightened, and very well dressed.

Above, perched upon a gargoyle, Hym looked down and watched the little procession enter the gates. Each family left their wagon and came forward separately, bowing to Surya and the Blackcastles, and leaving a gift at their feet. Then they entered the fortress.

Soon enough, everyone was inside, and the wagons rested under the shelter of Blackcastle’s sprawling stables.

Hym watched Surya and the Blackcastles gather up the gifts they cared for, leaving the rest in the snow. The guards came down from the walls, and brought the rest inside.

Blackcastle’s old stones rang with the many voices of the village, and Hym watched all from outside, peering through windows.

Above, the skies were dark and full of thunder, though the rain had not yet begun to fall.

The Blackcastles did not serve food or water to their guests, who had wisely brought their own. They provided no blankets, no pillows, no firewood. The villagers filled the great hall, which had been emptied of all furniture, and burned their own wood in the hearth.

Ana and Nestor both were anxiously peering between the boards on the windows from time to time.

“I’m sure he’s safe,” said Nestor.

“I know,” said Ana. “But I’m not.”

The hours dragged. At last, Lord and Lady Blackcastle rose from their wooden thrones within the hall, and retired for the evening. Surya stayed with the villagers. The moment his parents were gone, he was going from family to family, asking if they had all they needed. He provided whatever he could: food, water, blankets, pillows. He impressed upon each family the importance of secrecy, and said to pile the blankets and pillows in the kitchen before the first bell, so that he could retrieve them.

Hym watched him happily through the window, pleased at his kindness.

Then, as Surya at last said goodnight to the village and mounted up the stairs to his own room, Hym slipped through the walls and alighted on the staircase behind him.

“Hi,” said Hym.

“Hym!” said Surya, and he turned to give him a tight embrace. “I was so worried!”

“About me?” Hym asked.

“Yes! What happens if your tree blows down?”

Hym laughed. “Oh, it won’t. Its roots are deep.”

“But this is... *Leviathan*.” said Surya. “Come on, let’s go to my room.”

Hym took his hand and let him lead the way.

They went to a bedroom within the main portion of the house, far from Surya’s high window. The bed was a large four-poster with embroidered curtains, and the carpets were rich and deep. There were no books or toys within this room.

“Did you move your room?” Hym asked.

“No. Mom said I can’t stay there, during Leviathan. She’s afraid the wind will suck me through the window.”

“Is that... Is that a thing that happens?”

“I guess,” said Surya, with a shrug. “I said I could board up the window, but she said it would still be too dangerous.”

“Well, I suppose she’s lived through Leviathan before. Maybe she’s right?”

“Maybe.”

“Are you scared?”

“No,” said Surya. “Well, a little. I’ve never been through Leviathan. I don’t know what to expect.”

“That makes two of us,” Hym almost said, but he stopped himself just in time, saying instead, “That makes it easy to be scared.”

“It does,” said Surya.

Thunder boomed, shaking every stone of the castle. The wind began to howl under the eaves. There was no window in this chamber, but that only made it worse. Without the flicker of the lightning they had no way to brace for each booming crash of thunder, and every sound seemed apocalyptic.

In the candlelight, Surya threw back the blankets and got under the covers. “Come on!”

Hym crawled in with him. They closed the curtains of the bed, all save the one through which they could see the candle flame. Huddled close against the biting cold, they listened to the storm. No fire burned within the hearth; the chimney flue was closed. Hym wondered how the villagers below would fare without an open flame, and worried for his aging grandparents. They complained of the cold even on the warmest days of Presence.

Each crash and boom and blast of the storm shook them in the bed, trembling the stones. Ancient timbers groaned under the pressure of the winds. The fortress seemed almost to sway. They clung to each other’s hands

under the covers, and watched the candle-flame dance.

The hours passed. It was too loud to hold conversation, and they felt the need to whisper anyway. Between blasts of thunder they managed to speak.

“That was a big one,” Hym whispered, as thunder rolled away.

“Yeah,” said Surya.

An even bigger one came upon the heels of its departed fellow, and they both flinched under the covers.

Laughing slightly, Hym said, “Wow.”

“You’re sure your tree is safe?” Surya asked.

“Mhmm.”

“What about your grandparents? Are their trees safe?”

“They’re safe,” said Hym.

“Good. I feel so sorry for them, out in this storm!”

The thunder drowned Hym out. When it stopped, he whispered, “They’ve been through Leviathan before. They’ll be ok.”

“Still, I’m glad you’re in here with me.”

“Me too.”

The door of the bedroom opened suddenly and Hym dove under the covers.

Lady Blackcastle peered into the chamber, a candelabra in her hand. In the language of her people, she said: “Surya?”

“I’m here, Mom.”

“Are you safe?”

“I’m safe.”

“Good. Do you want me to join you?”

Surya hesitated. “No. I think I’m ok.”

“Ok. I will check on you later. There is water leaking through the roof, in places, and some windows have broken. So far the damage is not too bad.”

“That’s good!”

“It is. Sweet dreams, little prince.”

“Sweet dreams, Mom.”

Then she left, sealing the door behind her, and Hym emerged once more. “What was that about?”

“She was just checking up on me.”

“I didn’t know you could speak her language.”

“I learned it before I learned yours,” said Surya. “Say, how come you speak the village language, and not, like, tree-tongue?”

“I’ve been spying on them for years,” said Hym. “Their language isn’t so hard to learn. Your mother’s language makes no sense to me.”

“It’s complicated,” said Surya, “but I think it’s beautiful, too.”

“It is,” said Hym. “Except when she yells.”

Surya laughed.

“And when your father speaks it.”

Surya did not laugh.

Hym said, “Can I stay here tonight?”

“Of course!”

“Good. I don’t want to try flying in that.”

The bedroom door opened again and Lord Blackcastle entered without preamble. Hym, startled, fell through the bed, and hit the ground beneath it with a thump. In the noise of the storm, it went unnoticed.

Lord Blackcastle sat on the side of his son’s bed. “My boy...”

“Yes Father?”

“Did I not expressly forbid you from handing out comforts?”

“Oh,” said Surya. “I’m sorry, they just looked so—”

“—I do not care how they looked, my boy. You have attempted to show kindness, and I can understand that. But you must understand that what you have shown is not kindness. It is weakness.”

“How?”



“You have shown them that there is no separation between a villager and a Blackcastle. You have let them put their heads down upon the very pillows which have held up ours! You have covered them in blankets which have only ever touched our skin. Everything that they used will have to be burned.”

“But why, Father?”

“Because they are dirty, stinking animals, and if we use what they have used, so will we be.”

“Oh,” said Surya, and he began to cry.

“Do not be afraid, my boy. I cannot beat you for this.”

“You can’t?”

“No. They will hear of it, and hate me.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I am going to take away your blankets and your pillow,” said Lord Blackcastle. “And you will understand that momentary discomfort is nothing, compared to pride.”

“Ok.”

“Give them to me now.”

Surya gave up his pillow, and Lord Blackcastle stole the blankets. With his bundle in his arms, Lord Blackcastle stood up from the bed, and looked down at his son. “And dress yourself for sleep, my boy. You dirty the bed with those clothes.”

“Yes, Father.”

Then Lord Blackcastle left, and the door swung behind him. He had not closed it fully.

Hym pointed a finger and the door swung shut. Then, trembling with rage, he got out from under the bed and stared at the door.

“That wasn’t so bad,” said Surya. “At least he let them keep the blankets.”

“You’ll be cold,” said Hym, his eyes flashing.

“I’m never cold, when you’re around.”

Hym’s eyes softened. He laid himself down on the bed beside Surya, and they looked up at the curtains again.

“I’m sorry,” said Hym.

“For what?”

“For your father.”

Fear filled Surya’s eyes and he clung to Hym. “No! Don’t do it. Please don’t do it.”

Hym sighed. “I wasn’t going to. But I’m still sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Surya. “It was my fault. I should have listened to him.”

“When he called the villagers dirty, stinking animals?”

“No, just... I shouldn’t have disobeyed.”

“What you did was kind. He should have rewarded you for it, not punished you.”

“In a way, he did,” said Surya. “He didn’t beat me.”

“That *can’t* be your standard.”

Surya didn’t answer. At last, looking at the curtains above him, he said, “Goodnight, Hym.”

“Goodnight, Surya.”



## Chapter 7

### More Time

The years wheeled past, and Hym turned fifteen.

He woke on the morning of his birthday to the smell of cinnamon and hot sugar. He looked up at his most recent sketch of Surya, on the ceiling above him. “Good morning,” he said, very quietly.

Then he rolled out of bed, and stretched, and dressed himself. In the main room of the hut he could hear a rumble of many voices.

Scratching himself, he emerged to find the hut packed with people, all of whom were staring at him.

Hym had made such a habit of making himself scarce that he had not bothered to get to know many of the other people in the village, except by spying upon them. He recognized everyone at the table: the blacksmith, the mayor, the mayor’s red-haired daughter, Ysolde, and the Storyteller.

“Happy birthday!” said Nestor and Ana, standing

nearby, and the rest repeated it in a chorus. Hym waved awkwardly, not sure what else he was expected to do.

“Come have a seat! Ysolde made cinnamon rolls,” said Nestor.

Hym sat down in the space at the center of the table which had apparently been reserved for him, and the red-haired young woman opposite him shoved the tray of cinnamon rolls closer.

Sweating, Hym looked at Ana, then at Nestor. Was this some ritual he was supposed to appreciate?

“Well?” said Nestor, laughing. “Don’t you want one?”

“Is there a catch?” Hym asked.

Everyone at the table laughed, but Ysolde got a little red in the face.

The Storyteller said, “Not in this case, no. But good eye!”

Hym was happy with this response, and he immediately took a cinnamon roll and tore into it.

Ana cleared her throat but it sounded like, “Fork.”

Hym picked up a fork and attacked the cinnamon roll more humanly, and he looked up at Ysolde to find her smiling in a relieved way.

“So,” he said, swallowing drily. “You all, uh, wanted to come to my birthday.”

“Well,” said Nestor, gently, “You’re fifteen now, you know.”

Hym looked at Nestor. “And?”

“Well,” said Nestor, “There are some decisions you have to make, today.”

“Like what?”

“Like the path you will walk into independence, or the person you will bind your life to.”

Hym looked at the blacksmith and the Storyteller and the mayor’s daughter and understood. “Oh.”

“I’m not opposed to it,” said Ysolde. “Only I don’t really know you.”

“Ysolde would make a very good match,” said Nestor. “She will be the next mayor; you would not have to pursue a trade.”

“How much time do I have to think about it?” Hym asked.

“This breakfast,” said the Storyteller. “We all have busy lives to lead.”

“I see,” Hym said. “So either I marry the blacksmith, marry the Storyteller, or marry Ysolde?”

The Storyteller laughed. “No! We have come to offer you an apprenticeship. You will live and work with one of us for five years, acquiring the knowledge of our trade.”

“That sounds like marriage.”

The blacksmith scoffed, and dropped his napkin. He got to his feet and left the hut.

Hym looked at his grandparents. “What? What did I say?”

The Storyteller said, “I could teach you many important things. I could train you in the use of your magic.”

“I have never needed training, there,” said Hym, folding his arms. “I think I’ll pass.”

Ysolde looked at Hym, cocking her head, then looked at the Storyteller.

She said, “Hey, I’m fifteen too, you know. Can I be your apprentice?”

The Storyteller stroked his beard thoughtfully and his fingers toyed with the empty plate before him that had been occupied, until very recently, by a very good cinnamon roll. “Since Hym does not wish to be... It is not a bad idea. You would be a better mayor for it. What do you think?”

Ysolde’s father said, “I think it’s a splendid idea! Shall we withdraw our offer?”

“Yes, father, I think this will be more fun.”

To Nestor and Ana, the mayor said, “Thank you for the hospitality of your home!”

Then he and his daughter got up, very graciously, and left the hut. On the way out the door, Ysolde glanced back at Hym and smiled fiercely, as though she had just



gotten her way somehow...

The Storyteller said, "Well, I have room in my hut for one more student, if you change your mind, Hym." He looked to Ana and Nestor. "Thank you."

Then he left.

Nestor and Ana looked at each other sadly while Hym forked another cinnamon roll and dug in. They sat down at the table, and Nestor stole the platter of rolls and gave one to Ana and one to himself. They all ate in silence.

Hym looked up, mouth full, and smiled at them. They smiled back, but he could see he had disappointed and worried them.

A few weeks passed, and Surya's birthday approached.

On Surya's birthday, he threw on his cloak and paced out into the darkness of the night. He no longer bothered to hide his disappearances from Ana and Nestor; he came and went as he pleased, night and day, every season of the year. He needed only an hour of sleep to feel rested.

This was precisely the opposite of Surya's situation, of course. Surya wanted to sleep every moment that he wasn't doing something important, and he ranked the importance of tasks by his interest in doing them. Surya's days were longer now, full of lessons and chores. Each day, his mother and father trained him in the arts and histories of their people. Some lessons were taught out in the open, and others in secret.

Hym landed gently on the rooftops of Blackcastle, and

looked down in the Ringlight to see Surya and Lady Blackcastle sparring in the snow. Real steel flashed in their hands, but they never allowed their blades to touch, and made no sound as their feet shuffled from pose to pose.

Hym watched them with interest for a while. They finished sparring, and bowed to each other, and Surya took both swords, and sheathed them, and carried them into the barn. Then he and his mother returned, in total silence, to the house.

Hym floated upside down, peering through the top of a window to watch Hym and his mother cross paths with Lord Blackcastle, who was on his way down to inspect the work of one of the fieldhands.

“Ah, been outside?” Lord Blackcastle asked.

“We took a turn in the garden,” said Surya.

“Brisk out, is it?”

“Biting.”

“Come with me, wife.”

She looked at Surya, and nodded. Surya hesitated. Then, slowly, he headed upstairs.

Lord Blackcastle waited until his son was gone, then he walked his wife outside, to the place where they had sparred, and he shoved her to the ground.

In the language of his people, he said, “A sword in your hands will not save you.”

“A sword in his might.”

“You are a fool if you think that. I have given my guards a strict order. In the case of my death, they will kill Surya. Then they will kill you.”

Lady Blackcastle stared up from the icy mud, her skirts splaying out around her, and said nothing.

Taking her silence for submission, Lord Blackcastle sneered, and walked on to meet his waiting carriage.

As the carriage rolled away, Hym watched Lady Blackcastle get stoically to her feet and march into the barn. A few moments later, and she was in the oak grove, practicing the movements of her sword alone.

Hym floated around Blackcastle, passing by a window heedlessly. He heard a guard within cry out and drop something, and he smiled to himself. Then he hid himself from all view for a time, lurking on a gargoyle. He had spent all month trying to think of the right gift to give, and nothing had presented itself. He could not face Surya empty-handed.

He pulled the little golden ring out of his pocket and rolled it along his knuckles, unconcerned about the potential of dropping it. It danced and sparkled in his hand. He stared at it for a long time.

Then he slipped it back in his pocket, and grimaced to himself. “You would know what to give him,” he said, to no one. His mother had not responded since the day she went away.

An hour slipped by, and no inspiration came to him. At last, there was nothing for it.

Empty-handed, he hung before Surya's bedroom window.

Surya lay with his arms behind his head, stretched out under the window, still fully dressed.

Hym knocked on the window.

Surya rolled over, saw him, and grinned. Then he got to his feet and opened the window, and Hym crawled inside.

The room had not changed much, over the years; most of the toys had disappeared, but a few still had their places of honor on the shelves. Hunting equipment and animal furs and projects of whittled wood took up any shelf-space not claimed by books. The hawk was gone, but its cage still hung from the rafters, empty.

Surya hugged him. "I'm so happy you came. It's my birthday!"

"Happy birthday!" said Hym. "I spent all month trying to think of a good present, but I couldn't come up with anything. I'm sorry."

"I have too much stuff anyway," said Surya. "But one thing I've never had is a whole day with you. Maybe you could give me that?"

"A whole day?" Hym asked, eyes widening.

"I have the whole day off. Dad's leaving town right

now. It will be just me and Mom and the guards in the house, and none of them will need me for anything.”

“Where do you want to go?” Hym asked, smiling so much it almost hurt.

“The pool!” Surya said, without hesitation. “It’s the perfect day for it. Almost as cold as the first night we went, remember?”

“Do you want to stay there the whole day?”

“The whole day.”

“Then we should bring food,” Hym said.

“I sort of... Snuck out and did that already. I caught some fish early this morning and buried them in the snow near the cave.”

“You did?” Hym asked.

“Yeah. Do you think that’s ok?”

“Well, it might attract the bear, but I haven’t seen him around lately, so I think it’s probably fine. Will fish be enough?”

“I stashed a few potatoes, too.”

Hym shook his head, smiling. “Surya, for a human, you’re a marvel. I’m ready when you are.”

“Ok! I’ll meet you in the garden.”

“Hey, actually, there is one thing I can give you... Come here.”

Surya obeyed without question, and Hym caught him tightly in a warm embrace. Then he leapt backwards and they sailed through the window, leaving Surya's breath behind.

They tumbled together and flipped over to slowly float down, feet-first, to a gentle landing in the garden.

Surya slipped in his arms, but Hym kept him on his feet. "I've got you. Are you ok?"

"Yeah," Surya nodded, slowly getting his adrenaline back under control. "Just thought you were killing me for a second there."

Hym laughed. "Not today. Come on!"

He led the way to the secret garden door, and they slipped out into the Ringlit forest, and raced together in the snow.

At the cave they could hardly wait to get inside before they stripped off their clothes, and they dove together at the same time, plunging into the dark deep waters. Kicking, they swam to the surface and floated to the far edge of the pool, where the bench was. They sat there for a while, just looking around and at each other happily.

Then something about the silence changed, and it wasn't comfortable anymore.

Hym said, "I saw you training with your mother."

"I asked her to teach me. She used to have a sword-master, when she was a kid. She didn't get to learn everything. But I'm learning a lot from her."

“I think it’s a good thing. I’m glad you have something to do together.”

“Yeah.”

“How are things with your father?”

Surya swished water around with his hands and didn’t answer.

Hym said, “I see.”

“They’re not so bad. He’s just... I’ve been learning some things from him. The kinds of letters he has to write, you know, and stuff like that. It’s not much. But sometimes when we’re talking about something, it actually feels like we have an easy conversation. Then the next time we talk, it’s like we’re strangers again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He doesn’t get physical, anymore,” said Surya. “That night we first came to the cave, he changed.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“But still, sometimes, when he drinks, he’s... Scary.”

“I know,” said Hym. “When he’s at his worst, that’s when I’m in the shadows, watching.”

Surya looked at Hym, eyes wet.

“What? What is it? What did I say?”

Surya shook his head. “No, you didn’t—you didn’t say anything. I’m... Thank you. Sorry.”

Surya ducked under the dark waters.

Hym sighed, and slipped down under the warm waves himself, eyes open in the gloom. He planted his feet against the wall of the pool and kicked off, lunging after Surya, and tackled him in the water.

They wrestled for a while, in and out of the waves, and when both of them began to get weary they caught the shore and hung there, one arm up over the edge of the pool, just panting together.

“I’m glad things are better,” said Hym. “Even if they’re not perfect.”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure! Let’s talk about your lessons. Have you learned anything interesting?”

“I learned about what kingdom we’re from. Apparently it’s called ‘Aurora’—or it used to be. It was attacked by demons from Hellegrund. They ruined it in a day.”

“In a day?” He stared into the distance, thinking of his mother. “I wonder what day?”

“The forty-fifth of Absence, one hundred five thousand and one.”

His birthday. Hym whistled. “That’s just fifteen years ago.”

“Yeah.”



“That’s recent, living memory. How come Blackcastle wasn’t affected?”

“It was!” said Surya. “It was cut off from the supply lines. We would have had a hard Absence, that year. But there was an unusual thing. All the fruit began to ripen even without the sun. A miracle, apparently. My father even recorded it as one in his History. He writes one, you know; about everything that happens in the village.”

“A miracle,” said Hym, thoughtfully. He could remember the pulse of life around him, and the pain; the pain was the first thing about the world, after its light. The cold that gnawed. Even warm and bundled in Ana’s arms he had felt it all around him, the press of human suffering.

And there had been life, waiting only for light, beneath the snow, and the heat of the fire had been kind to him, and he had shared.

“I know what the miracle was,” said Hym.

Surya looked at him. Hym could not meet his gaze; the lie would crumble. For once, he told the truth.

“There was a witch,” he said. “An ancient, powerful witch. She had guided the villagers for hundreds of years, from afar. She liked to be alone with her memories. There was a man from the village who came to visit her every day, bringing tribute. She always tried to reject the gift, but he was always kind, and charming, and she always relented. The baskets were neatly woven, and

everything within them was special. The best of the eggs of every kind of poultry. The most perfect roses. The freshest bread, still warm from the baker's oven. The plumpest birds and the glossiest fish."

"You're making me hungry," Surya said.

"Good, because it will be ready in a moment," said Hym, with a mischievous smile.

Surya sniffed the air and caught the scent of griddled salmon and potatoes.

He looked at Hym and smiled contentedly. "So what happened next?"

"With what?"

"You haven't gotten to the miracle, yet."

"Oh, right. Well, the witch found herself enjoying the variety of each gift, for it was always different, every day. She found herself waiting at the door for the young man's arrival, every day. Even on the darkest days of Absence he would come, bundled from head to toe in the skins of beasts, and he would bring her the tribute.

"On each of the cold days, she invited him inside. Always he demurred, with a roguish smile, and bowed politely, and departed. The tributes continued for ten years, and the young man grew a little older, but his personal grooming was impeccable and he was punctual to a fault, and his frame was strong.

"Their conversations got longer. On one day, they spent every hour of the Presence light in conversation,

seated on her porch. And after twenty-three hours of sunset conversation in the balmy warmth, after hearing every scrap of information he recalled about the village, she invited him again inside her hut, and once again he demurred.

“She asked him if it was fear that kept him on this side of her threshold, and he said that it was not; it was propriety. She asked him what he could possibly mean. He said, and I quote, ‘A man never enters the hut of a woman he is courting, especially when the young lady is alone.’ Then he bowed as deeply and politely as he had ever bowed, and departed for the village.

“The witch paced the hours of the following day. She was certain he would oversleep, and miss the tribute for that day. If he did, she would go to the village and find him, and ask if he was well. No man could talk the waking hours away and live on a moment of sleep and a ten mile hike through treacherous country. She tapped her feet and gnawed her nails and checked the windows every hour. And at the moment of noon, he came, empty-handed, and stood smiling before her.

“‘No tribute, today?’ she said. He replied: ‘On the contrary, I have the very best of tributes, for a lady as refined as yourself.’

“She smiled, and asked him what it was. He beckoned, and three fiddlers came shyly up the trail, and stood as far as they could from the hut, and began to play. And the man reached out his hands, and said, ‘It is important to stay up-to-date on the latest fashions of the village,

and so I have come to teach you our new dance. If you would care to learn it?’ And she did care. She cared very much. She joined him in the dance, and he taught her every move with patience and wit, and she learned it in moments without any effort at all, and together they danced. It was the first time she had danced in a thousand years. At the end of the dance, the man knelt and said, ‘Every tribute I brought was from me alone, acquired by my hand and my purse. I have wooed you for ten long years, mighty one. Will you wed me?’”

Hym magically forced his tears to go back into their ducts before they could be seen.

“And then?” Surya asked, wide-eyed.

“She said yes, of course. Against all her better judgement, she married him, and brought him into her house as a husband. They were wed in the village. She wore a garland of his roses in her hair. Though it was mid-Absence, there was no snow, and all things were blooming.”

“Just like what happened during the year of the fall!”

“Yes. That happened again at the moment of her death, as it had happened once before at her wedding. She died in the village, surrounded by her family.”

“I wonder if they had any kids?”

“They had one,” Hym said, “But it died.”

He dove again beneath the waves, and swam out to the middle, and surfaced. He spun around, whipping his

wet hair out of his face, and looked at Surya. “Come on. Food’s ready!”

Surya grinned and dove after him. They fought for the right to be the first to climb out, and Surya prevailed. He made it to the griddle-stone as Hym came running up behind him, dripping in the sand.

They ate their seared salmon and fried potatoes on plates of burnished copper, with brass knives and forks, like civilized people. They sat cross-legged in the sand, plates in their laps, and talked with their mouths full like boys.

“Where did you hear that story?” Surya asked.

“I watched it unfold,” said Hym. “And I met the ghost of the witch. She was the one who put you back together. She told me most of it herself.”

“Wow,” said Surya. “You called her... You called her *Mom*.”

“I was calling *for* my Mom. She came before my mother could get here. It was lucky she did, too, we would have been in a lot of trouble if it were my mother who found us.”

“We would?”

“Yeah,” said Hym. “She might have healed the tree before healing you, and I might have been punished for playing with you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad I haven’t met your mother, then.”

“She’s not so bad,” Hym said.

“You cooked this all perfectly,” Surya said. “This is as good as my mom’s.”

Hym beamed. “Thank you!”

“I learned some other cool stuff,” Surya said. “Like, I learned that this cave and this crater aren’t on any maps. I tried to make a map of my own, and include it, just for accuracy, but the pen stopped working. No matter what I did, I couldn’t write the name of the cave, or mark it on the map. Was that you?”

“No,” said Hym, fascinated. “What were you going to name it?”

“Hym’s cave,” said Surya.

“I don’t think it’s mine,” Hym said. “I think it just likes me.”

“It likes you?”

“Yeah. I feel it thinking sometimes. It’s kind of sad. It likes having us here. We’re fun.”

“It watches us?”

“Mhmm. But don’t worry about it. It’s not like a person. Not really.”

“Can you feel *me* thinking?”

“Only if I want to. I don’t like doing it. When my head is open like that it’s... Overwhelming. It’s quiet here, though.”

“Can you feel what I’m thinking right now?”

“Do you want me to?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t spy on your mind,” said Hym. “It’s better that way. More fair.”

Surya laughed. “Hey, wanna play Fate?”

“You brought cards?”

“Yup! My mom had a set made for me. They won’t be as pretty as yours, of course, but...”

He dumped a deck of brightly-painted cards into the sand. He was wrong, they were *much* prettier than Hym’s cards.

“Wow,” Hym said. “You know, I’ve watched the Storyteller use these for actual fortune-telling.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He treats them seriously. It’s kind of funny to watch. Sometimes I move the cards around, just to make something interesting happen.”

“What does he do?”

“Well, he stops me, usually. He knows I’m there. The cat watches me.”

“The cat?”

“Mhmm. He was the witch’s familiar. His name is Mihos. Cats can always see me, even when I’m outside the walls.”

“I’m glad my dad doesn’t have a cat,” said Surya.

“Me too,” Hym laughed.

Surya shuffled the cards as Hym had taught him, and dealt them each a hand.

“Ooh, I got Shalim,” said Hym.

“Did not.”

“We’ll see.”

“Let’s do a three-card spread. Those are simple.”

“Ok,” said Hym. “Should I go first, or do you want to?”

“It *is* my birthday,” said Surya, “so I’m going to let you go first.”

Hym laughed and put down Shalim. “Shalim, guardian of the depths, guide to the darkest mysteries. Death.”

“Also, change and renewal,” said Surya. Then he put down the Lovers. “The Lovers.”

Hym fumbled with his cards a little, trying to pick one. One seemed to pick itself for him. He stared at it, a little hot behind the ears.



At last he put it down. “The Hanged Man. Ruination, destruction, downfall.”

Surya’s face fell.

They looked upon the cards, and at each other.

“I don’t want to make predictions from this,” said Surya.

“That’s the game,” said Hym. “Sometimes, you have dark cards. You have to read them too.”

“Why?”

“It’s the rules!”

“Well, I don’t want to.”

“I’ll read them, then.”

“Fine. Go ahead.”

“A man will have a doomed affair ending in a deadly duel. No matter which side loses, the cost is steep.”

Surya looked down at the cards. “A man’s wife will die, but amid tragedy he will find new love.”

“Ooh, that’s a good one,” said Hym. “Ok, we’ve each made a pretty specific prediction. Now we can do a new spread.”

“Let’s play something else,” Surya said.

“Like what?”

“Let’s play sand-chess.”

Hym smiled and waved his hands over the smooth sand between them, and it flowed into a new form, presenting a chess-grid of raised and lowered squares, complete with little sandcastle pieces.

There was only one difficulty with sand-chess, and that was that you couldn't tell which pieces were white and which ones were black. As a result, which pieces you owned came down to how well you could argue, which turned the latter half of each session into a mad bargaining game of conflicting claims and infighting armies. In a way, the added game of cold-blooded diplomacy made it more like real war.

When the last king had fallen (no one was sure whose king it really was, but Surya had claimed it foolishly a round before, in exchange for swapping queens) they swept the board clean together, laughing, and stomped their little armies into sand like fickle gods.

Then, sandy and full of adrenaline, they looked at each other.

"Race you," said Surya, darting to his feet.

Hym leapt from the beach and tumbled through the air as Surya sprinted below him, and as Surya dove, lean body arching, Hym's fingertips touched the pool. Then they were both under the scalding water, and swimming for the bench.

They sat on it, dripping, surrounded by the steam.

"Watch this," Hym said, and he reached out a hand

and touched the stone. Suddenly hot water was crashing down on their backs from a hidden waterfall in the stone wall above.

Surya looked at Hym and flicked wet hair out of his face. “Wow.”

“Right?”

For a while they lazed around in the water, talking about nothing and playing with the echoes. From this perch, there were many.

Afterwards, they laid themselves out in the sand to dry, and stared up at the ceiling, and drifted off into a midday snooze.

They woke many hours later and sat up together.

“I haven’t slept like that in ages,” Surya said, stretching.

“That was nice,” Hym said.

“What time do you think it is?”

“I have no idea. I’d need to look at the stars.”

“Dare you.”

“Dare *you!*”

“Together.”

“You’re insane.”

“Come on!”

Surya leapt to his feet and ran for the crack. Hym raced after him.

In nothing but their swimming shorts they slipped through the crack like shadows and emerged into the icy air. The droplets of steaming water which still clung to them turned to beads of ice almost instantly.

The cold struck their skin like a thousand branding irons and the pain made them both jump back into the warmth of the crack. Looking past each other at the icy world beyond, Surya said, “H-h-holy sh-shit, that’s c-cold.”

Hym wrapped them both in his power and took Surya’s hand and led him out into the snow. Warm now amid the cold, they looked out upon the frozen earth. Each tree huddled, silent, beneath a blanket of heavy snow. Hym looked up, past the Ring, and positioned himself beneath the stars.

“It’s just two hours past noon,” said Hym, with a broad smile. His voice seemed extraordinarily loud, in the stillness.

Surya gazed up at the aurora dancing in the heavens. “We’ve got ages and ages still.”

“What time do you have to go back?”

“Do I have to go back? I’m sixteen now.”

Hym laughed, but only because he could tell Surya was joking. He began to think.

They slipped back into the cave a while later.

“Want to swordfight?” Surya asked.

“Of course.”

Surya took their swords down off the mount on the wall, and gave Hym’s to him.

Their swordfighting was better, this time, and less evenly matched. Surya’s superior height and reach and physical strength availed him well. His skills were better, too; the drills with his mother had helped him. He maintained his footing throughout the entire duel, and forced Hym to lose his several times, just to avoid getting thwacked.

In the end, they clubbed each other into a draw, then, bruised and happy, they put the swords back up and found other ways to fill the hours.

Back at Blackcastle, Biryu finished with the sword at last, and sheathed it, and stowed it once more in the barn. Then, weary muscles burning, she returned into the house. There were many things to do, yet; chores around the house that she had neglected.

She hoped that Surya would be willing to help. She climbed the stairs to his bedroom, and knocked on the door.

“Surya?”

She knocked again. “Surya? Are you in there? I need your help with some things.”

She waited.

“Wake up, Surya!” She knocked again, and the door popped open.

“Oh,” she said, “sorry, the door didn’t...”

An icy wind sucked the door wide, and the warm air of the hall billowed past her into the empty bedroom. His window hung open, curtains fluttering out towards the dark snow.

She went to the window and looked out at the forest, knowing that her son was again with the purple-eyed spirit. She bit her lip, and prayed for his safe return.

Then she turned, resolute, and attacked the awful duties of the manor.

Hym returned Surya to his bedroom many hours later.

“Thank you for today,” Surya said, grinning.

Hym smiled happily back. “Anytime. I’ll see you again soon.”

“Will I see you?”

“If you ever want to, just say my name. I may be close by.”

“Thank you.”

“Goodnight,” said Hym. He could think of nothing else to say. He sped through the wall, and away, into the night.

“Goodnight,” said Surya, sadly, to the place where he had been.

## Chapter 8

### More Time

Although the Storyteller often tried to invite Hym into his hut to meet Mihos and have tea, Hym never dared to enter. He did not like the sense of ignorance he felt, in the presence of the old man's wisdoms. He preferred to learn from the old man in secret; spying on his reading, stealing his books, and so forth.

Ysolde, however, had to deal with him on a daily basis. They talked like good friends, and she came away each day filled with new stories and information.

This, naturally, made her one of Hym's friends.

On the eve of Surya's nineteenth birthday, Hym tossed a wad of parchment through the Storyteller's window, and it bounced off Ysolde's crimson-haired head. It landed near her hand.

Silently, stealthily, moving an inch at a time, she moved her hand, still clutching the quill, and covered the parchment. Her eyes never left the half-formed treaty on

the table before her.

She glanced up at the Storyteller, seated at his desk, absorbed in a book. She carefully uncrumpled the parchment in her lap, and when it was safe to do so she glanced down at it.

“HELP,” said the note, in block letters.

Ysolde crumpled it back up. She looked at the Storyteller. “An urgent matter has come up. May I be excused for the day?”

Surprised at her boldness, the Storyteller raised his eyebrow. “Oh? And how has this ‘urgent matter’ come to your attention?”

“By messenger, sir.”

“By messenger. Harrumph. Yes, you may go. If this were a real treaty, you would be jeopardizing the security of the entire village by leaving it incomplete.”

“Yes master.”

“And tell Hym I want to see him. There’s something we need to discuss.”

“Yes, master.”

“Well, go on, now. Scamper.”

Ysolde scampered.

Outside, under the eaves of the thatch, she met Hym. “What is it?”

“It’s Surya’s birthday tomorrow,” Hym said.



“So?”

“I can’t think of a present! I didn’t bring one last year, either.”

“Well, what’s something he doesn’t have?”

“He has everything,” Hym said.

“No he doesn’t. He has everything money can buy. What is he lacking, that money can’t buy?”

“Can’t you see that’s the problem I’m stumped by?”

“You’re just not thinking hard enough,” said Ysolde.

They both thought in silence for a time.

Ysolde asked: “Has he ever seen the sea?”

“No? I don’t think so. We’ve never gone that far.”

“Then give him the sea.”

Hym thought about this. It was a good plan. “But it’s not really a present, is it?”

“Well, give him something small. A trinket, something shiny. But also take him to the sea. That way, the trinket will remind him of the memory.”

“How come you’re so good at this?”

“I’m a diehard romantic,” said Ysolde. “And I’ve read a lot of books.”

Hym laughed, because Ysolde was the most level-headed, practical person he knew.

“Is that the only reason you needed me?” Ysolde asked.

“No, I need to go hunting. Nestor asked me to get a brace of rabbits for dinner, but I hate hunting.”

“Let me get my bow.”

They went into the forest and Hym found the rabbits for her, sensing their burrows in the snow. Ysolde shot them after he spooked them out.

“Thanks, Ysolde,” he said, holding the dead rabbits sadly.

“What’s wrong?”

“They’re always so frightened,” Hym said.

“Oh.”

“Well, I’d better go. How are things with the Storyteller?”

“They’re fine. He’s teaching me a lot. He wanted to talk to you about something.”

“I don’t have time for one of his lectures. We’ll hang out later?”

“Sure.”

They went their separate ways.

Hym tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep. In the middle hours, he rose, and flew through the window, and drifted mindlessly over the forest, looking for inspiration.

At last, he landed outside the cave, and the perfect idea came to him. He entered the gloom.

Back in Blackcastle, Surya and his mother sat down to dinner. Lord Blackcastle had not yet come down from his library, although Lady Blackcastle had rung the gong some time ago.

They sat fidgeting at the huge table, looking at the food on their plates.

By the time the food had gotten well and truly cold, the door of the dining hall opened and Lord Blackcastle strode in, a sword belted at his waist, his cane thunking on the stone. He walked to his chair at the far end of the table and his wife helped him down into it before returning to her own.

Four armed guards stepped into the room. Among them, Gideon stood taller than the rest, burly arms crossed. Two of them stood behind Surya's chair, and two stood behind his mother's.

Lord Blackcastle cut into his steak and grimaced. He forked a piece, raised it to his lips, and spat on the floor. "It's cold."

"It was hot when we sat down," said Surya, quietly.

"Yes," said Lord Blackcastle, dabbing at his lips with a napkin. "I'm sure it was. There is a reason I lingered so long in my study."

"Pray tell."

"For a long time now, I have been harried by a demon.

Needled in my sleep, by the discomfort in my leg. Needled in my waking hours, by countless trifling difficulties, and by an obstinate son and an unfaithful wife. Too long have I allowed you to conspire behind my back. Too long have I watched, too trusting, as you trained with blades of steel.”

The guards moved as one man, gripping Surya and his mother by the arms.

“That ends tonight.”

The next day Hym waited until Surya was alone, and startled him in the garden.

Surya was a man now, tall and broad-shouldered. He shaved every day, but his dark stubble always seemed to win that war.

“Don’t do that!” Surya said, swinging his sword playfully.

Hym ducked away, laughing. “Happy Birthday, Surya. I’m surprised your mom’s not with you!”

Surya turned away, and Hym realized at last that he was holding the sword in his left hand. His right hung limply at his side. “Yeah. Mom couldn’t join me today.”

Hym came to his side and touched his arm and Surya flinched away. “What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Hym gripped his wrist and Surya seized up, teeth clenching, and grunted. Hym snarled. “He broke your

arm.”

“It’s just a sprain, it’s fine.”

Hym ran his other hand up Surya’s arm, feeling the bone within. “No, it isn’t. This needs to be set.”

“It will heal.”

“It won’t. Be still.”

Something in Hym’s tone seemed to frighten Surya into submission. He held still.

Hym gently took Surya by the shoulder and the wrist, and gave a short, sharp tug. Surya cried out aloud and slumped into the snow. Hym cupped his hand around the break, and closed his eyes, and concentrated.

He had never done this, before, with magic. He had set the bones of animals in the past, without it, and knew the pain of months of healing, and the agony of the brace. He wished only to spare Surya this.

The magic flowed. Surya growled with pain. Then it was over, and Hym released his arm. “There,” he said, dizzy now from the exertion of the spell. “It’s mended.”

Surya got to his feet and rolled his shoulder experimentally. He reached out and moved the fingers of his hand. “Thank you,” he said.

“What. Happened.”

Surya glanced up anxiously at a high window, and moved them both into the shelter of the oak grove. Sternly, to the trees, he said, “You weren’t there.”

“I was away from the village,” said Hym. “I’m sorry. What happened last night?”

“Before I tell you, can you... Can you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“My mom is... She’s asleep, in her bedroom. She needs your help.”

Hot blood thudded in Hym’s ears but his heart dropped. “Tell me what happened, Surya.”

“No. Help her first. Then I’ll tell you.”

“Stay here.”

Hym flew through the grove and alighted on the window-frame of Lord Blackcastle’s room. Lady Blackcastle lay in the bed, covered in bruises.

Rage thundered in his ears as he slipped through the wall and the window. He knelt beside Lady Blackcastle. Her breathing came in ragged wheezes, and her eyes were closed.

Hym felt the wounds, and they were many. Broken ribs. A broken arm, and collarbone; the right arm, the sword arm. The bones in her wrist and forearm had been pulverized.

Hym did all he could, working with magic and with knowledge. At last, grey and weary, he knelt beside his handiwork and watched her sleeping easily. She opened her eyes and saw him.

“You,” she said. The dim Ringlight glimmered on her face.

Hym nodded.

Eyes brimming, she said, “Thank you.”

Hym slipped through the wall.

He landed behind Surya, who was now seated on the bench, wolf-skin cloak forming a shaggy mound over his frame.

Behind Surya, he said, “Please. Tell me what happened.”

“My dad. And his men. Gideon, the big one, and some others. I guess he had seen us sparring. It happened at dinner.”

“What did they do?”

“I don’t want to relive it.”

“They broke your sword arms.”

Surya nodded.

Hym said, “I will break theirs.”

“No,” said Surya, sternly. “I did not call your name last night. I do not want any more violence.”

“You didn’t call my name?”

“No. I knew you were watching. I knew we were safe.”

“But I wasn’t watching.”

“I know that now. But my father didn’t know that. You should have seen the fear in his eyes, Hym. He’s afraid of what I can do, with a sword.”

“So you just decided to train with your left hand, to spite him.”

Surya nodded. “I would have been even better with my left than my right.”

Bitterly, Hym said, “I’m sorry I took that opportunity from you.”

“You didn’t,” said Surya. “I can still train left-handed.”

Hym sat beside him on the bench. “This isn’t how I pictured your birthday.”

“I know,” said Surya. “But it’s ok.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“I have to learn how to handle some things on my own.”

“But not this,” said Hym. “Not like this.”

“We don’t get to choose our challenges,” Surya said. “Mom said that. ‘All we can do is prove our strength through them.’”

“But I could remove him,” said Hym.

“If he dies, they’ll kill us. He made sure of that.”

“Then I’ll kill them all.”



“No,” said Surya. “Some of them have families.”

“You have a family, too,” said Hym. “These men hurt you, and your mother, and they are willing to hurt you again, or to kill you at his command. I cannot let them live.”

“You have to,” said Surya. “Or I’ll never speak to you again.”

Hym sighed. “I will grant mercy. But only because I know you are stupid and stubborn enough to follow through.”

“Yep. I am.”

“Are you free for the rest of the day?”

“Yes, my dad left town again, but...”

“But?”

“Can we take her with us?”

Hym laughed. “I never said we were going anywhere.”

“Yeah, but we always go someplace, on my birthday. Can we take her with us?”

Hym thought about it. “She must swear to secrecy. And no one can know. We will have to come back quickly. And we will need to go by horse and carriage.”

Surya sighed. “Then it’s no good. We’d never be able to sneak a carriage out like that.”

“I will arrange something,” said Hym. “Go and get her. Meet me outside the secret gate.”

Surya looked at him, eyes full of hope. “You mean it?”

“I mean it. But you must make her understand. If she tells anyone of today, the consequences will be unbearable.”

“You wouldn’t really put a curse on her, would you?”

Hym raised an eyebrow. “She will swear, and she will keep her oath.”

“She will,” said Surya.

“Ok. I’ll meet you outside the gate.”

Hym left.

A while later, Surya and his mother emerged, thickly bundled against the cold, and waited in the dark and the snow.

They heard the sound of a wooden sled dragging through the snow, and something moved among the dark foliage. It emerged antlers-first; a massive bull elk, drawing a fur-piled sled behind himself. He came to a stop just before them, and the sled waited invitingly. Hym was nowhere to be seen.

Surya settled his mother in the sled and sat down beside her. Together they looked up, wide-eyed, and watched the bull-elk as it dragged them back into the forest, and on through the trees.

Surya’s mother stared around at everything; the stars, the trees, the aurora, the Ring. In the treetops, Hym saw

a bliss upon her features that he had not seen since the day she came to pick mushrooms.

The ride took nearly an hour, but at last the bull elk paced between the young trees of the forest's edge, and out onto the beachhead.

The beach sprawled glittering around them, two huge arms of silver sand embracing a deep lagoon. Ice crowded the shore in thick mats, but the waves still lapped lazily against the frost-touched sands. The horizon stretched on into forever, under the stars, and away among the endless white reaches the jagged forms of icebergs stood like temporary mountains against the sky.

Hym emerged from the forest behind them. "What do you think?"

Surya turned to him, and said, "It's beautiful."

Lady Blackcastle could not speak their language, and did not dare to speak in Hym's presence anyway. She remained in the comfortable silent warmth of the furs, and stared off into the horizon as though dazed by it.

"Lady Blackcastle," Hym said. "I will walk the beach with your son, now. Will you be alright here?"

She nodded, smiling, not daring to look at him.

Hym smiled and reached out a hand for Surya. Surya took it.

Together, they walked the beach. A mile from the place where they had left Surya's mother, they stopped, and looked back across the frosty sands, and saw her

sitting still, entranced by the view.

“Thank you for this,” said Surya, simply.

“I have one other gift, today,” said Hym, reaching within the folds of his coat pockets. His fingers brushed against the golden ring.

He pulled forth a glass bottle with a cork lid, and held it out.

Surya took it, and turned it in his hands, watching the white sand within tumble around.

He pulled Hym into a huge and wordless embrace.

Hym made a mental note to thank Ysolde, for the idea.

## Chapter 9

# More Time Still

It was the night before Surya's twenty-first birthday, in the depths of the season of Absence. Surya was standing on a tower balcony, leaning on the stone railing. The night and the darkness were bitterly cold, but he was wearing a loose-fitting set of pajamas. Moose-fur boots and a matching hat were his only concessions to the cold.

He leaned, and waited, trying to look cool.

He muttered to himself, and his breath was frosty mist. "Dammit Hym, where *are* you?"

Meanwhile, across the village, Hym was seated cross-legged in the middle of his room, three feet above the floor, smoking his herb-pipe. Wrapped in whorls of reeking smoke, red-eyed, he giggled at his latest sketch. The walls and ceiling of his bedroom were entirely papered in sketches of people. Every person in the village had their own region of the chamber, but Surya was everywhere.

This latest sketch of Surya was funny because it managed to capture the shy smirk and dimple Hym had witnessed two weeks ago, and because Hym was very high. A small wicker basket nearby was stuffed with all the crumpled sketches of the last two weeks which had *not* managed to capture this lucky dimple.

The first bell rang out. Hym said: “SHIT.”

He tapped out his ashes, waved away the smoke, unfolded his legs (now full of pins and needles) and got to his feet. He had to stifle a cry of shock as his numb legs failed to hold him up, but he managed to use his magic to stay upright.

He stripped out of his nightclothes and hastily got into a more fashionable tunic, trousers, and cloak. He glanced at himself in the polished brass mirror and sighed, disappointed in his hair, the bags under his puffy eyes, and the stubborn hair between his eyebrows. He shut his eyes and concentrated, fighting against the mental fog of the herb. Concentrating hard, he squeezed himself back to sobriety. Then he looked at the stubborn eyebrow hairs and cocked one eyebrow, as if daring them to defy him. The wayward hairs plucked themselves.

“Ok, ok. Shit.”

He looked around, dug under a pile of laundry, opened a closet, dug under another pile of laundry, and said: “Aha!” as he grabbed his satchel and pulled it out of the depths of the closet. He slung it on, popped the window latch, and slipped out into the night. Then, standing on

the snow without compressing it, he walked around the side of the house, and left no footprints behind. From that vantage point, he looked down at the village and searched the streets for any activity.

The Storyteller was still awake, reading at his desk. Aside from this, the streets were empty.

Hym said: “Shit!” again, and crept back into the window, and grabbed the sketch of Surya, and slipped it into his satchel very carefully, trying not to fold it.

Then it was back out the window for him, and from there into the sky.

Weightless under the stars and over the snow, he drifted silently to Blackcastle. He circled the keep, avoiding all the windows. Lady Blackcastle was awake, in an upstairs sitting room, sewing something. Lord Blackcastle was awake as well, in his library, sipping something and looking out the window. Hym managed to avoid both of them, and all of their guards. He rose, spiraling around the main tower, and came up to the balcony from below.

Surya was just about ready to give up and go inside. He could tell he was developing a snotcicle. He waited, and stared out over the mists of the forest, knowing that Hym would emerge from them at any moment.

He waited a while longer. At last, he sighed to himself, and turned away, and found Hym kneeling before him, holding up a golden ring.

Surya froze.

Hym stared up at him, and Surya stared back.

Surya said: “Is that... *My grandfather’s ring!?*”

“It is,” said Hym.

*“You found it!?”*

Hym grinned. “I found it.”

Surya took the ring and slipped it on at once, ecstatic. He admired it, and did a giddy little dance, especially facilitated by the chilly air, and slipped on an icy patch, and fell off the balcony.

Hym dove after him, and caught him, and they tumbled slowly to a halt in the air.

“Happy birthday, Surya,” said Hym.

“Thank you, Hym,” said Surya.

Surya wasn’t cold, any more. Even his snotcicle had melted.

Hym said: “I want to take you somewhere. You won’t be missed?”

“I said goodnight four hours ago,” said Surya, with a slight laugh.

“Good. Then hang on tight.”

Hym had never dared to fly far, with Surya; his added weight was a considerable difficulty. He had been practicing with heavy logs for the last month, preparing for



this night. He found himself equal to the task.

In his arms, Surya felt weightless and free. He watched his dangling feet pass over the walls of Blackcastle, and clung to Hym's arms around his chest, and it was bliss. Behind him, in his ear, Hym said: "You're good with heights, right?"

Surya felt his stomach do a backflip at the implications of the question, and he grinned from ear to ear. "Heights?"

Hym whispered: "I'll take that as a yes," and rocketed silently into the heavens, with Surya in his arms. High above the misty, snow-bound world, they rose towards the clouds.

In silence, surrounded only by the roar of the icy wind they passed through, they rose towards the towering clouds, and the closer they got, the farther they realized they still had to go. Cliffs and hills and round buttes and domes of cloud grew larger and larger in their eyes, until like fleas upon the toes of a giant they found themselves in the foothills of the thunderhead. Hym flew low enough to dangle Surya's legs in the frigid mist, then pulled up sharply and flew up the dark rugged face of a huge cloud-cliff. It seemed to take forever to reach the peak, and for a moment, suspended in the air, Surya and Hym both experienced the illusion that they were standing still, frozen in the air, and a waterfall of fog was roaring silently down before them. Then, at last, they crested the edge of the cliff-top, and flew out over the billowing breakers of a sea of clouds. The cloudtops

glowed with silver in the ringlight and shimmered with emerald and violet light in the glow of the aurora. Beyond the aurora, the ring burned bright and clear and sparkling.

Hym lowered the both of them carefully towards the cloud-tops, and concentrated with all his might. In the clouds beneath his feet, a circle of unnatural stillness grew. Within a moment, it had smoothed the cloud-tops for twenty feet in all directions.

Hym landed on the cloudtops, and set Surya down.

Surya was shaking. He fell to his hands and knees on the solid cloud-tops. Hym was by his side in an instant, and, giggling, Surya got back to his feet. “This is *amazing*,” he said, gasping for his breath. He turned to look up at the aurora and the ring, and gaped in awe. “This is...!”

Then he fainted.

Hym shook him, but he did not wake. Hym realized that something was seriously wrong. He laid his hand on Surya’s muscular chest, and closed his eyes, and tried to feel for the problem.

Blood. There was something wrong with his blood, he could feel it. The blood wasn’t bearing enough life. It wasn’t receiving enough life from his lungs, although his lungs seemed perfectly healthy.

With a little jolt, Hym realized that there wasn’t enough life in the air, this far from the earth. He had

been concentrating it to help *himself* breathe, without realizing that he was doing so. Conscious now of the fact that he had unconsciously been casting that magic, he applied it to Surya as well.

Surya woke on his back, lying on a cloud, looking up at Hym's face and at the glorious display of the heavens behind him. Surya smiled before he came fully to his senses, and it was such an easy, natural, genuine smile that Hym knew he would be compelled to attempt to draw it for another two weeks at least.

"Hey," said Hym. "Sorry, that was my fault. How do you feel?"

Surya said: "I feel *amazing*."

"Not too cold?"

"I'm never cold, when I'm with you."

"Come on, on your feet!" Hym hauled him up.

Together they stood upon the cloud and looked out over the sea of sparkling mist under the stars, the aurora, and the Ring. Lightning flickered in the belly of the cloud, and thunder rolled over the white slopes.

In the grandeur of the scene, they both remained silent. The wind sighed past them in an almost constant flow, and Hym watched Surya's dark hair flutter at its touch.

Surya looked at him. "What?"

"Nothing," said Hym. "You're so tall now."

Surya laughed. "I was the same height yesterday!"

"You're standing taller, tonight."

"Oh," said Surya. "Sorry, I'll slouch a little."

Hym laughed. "Please don't. I'll only feel shorter, then."

There was a silence. Neither of them broke it for a time.

Then Surya asked, "How is the forest?"

"Still full of trees. How is Blackcastle?"

"Still a prison."

"But tonight you're free."

"Yes," said Surya. "Tonight, I'm free."

Silence lingered again, and Surya stared off into the distance, sadness in his eyes.

"You don't seem happy about it," Hym said.

"I am," said Surya. "It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Tomorrow, everything changes for me."

"For the better."

"For the better. But still. There's... A lot."

"You'll handle it well. You always do."

"Thanks."

Surya sat down on the cloud, and Hym sat beside him.

Another silence formed, this one comfortable.

Surya broke it. "It's so beautiful up here. I don't know how you ever come down."

"I come up here to think, sometimes."

"I'm envious."

"You're here with me, tonight."

Surya smiled. "That I am."

Then he laid himself out on the cloud, and stared up at the sky. "Oh, lay down, you've got to see this!"

Hym obeyed. The stars burned above, beyond the Ring, and the Aurora flickered almost close enough to touch. A shooting star lanced across the heavens, burning out in an eruption of multi-colored flame.

Lying on the clouds and looking up at the stars, Surya said: "Thank you for this."

Hym smiled and said nothing.

A moment later, Hym said, "Are you alright? Your heart's *pounding*."

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? We can head back, you know. We're pretty high up, so I get it."

"What? Oh, the height? No, the height's fine."

"What's on your mind?"

“Twenty-one,” lied Surya, badly. “Tomorrow, I mean. I’ll be twenty-one.”

“Yeah,” said Hym. “Twenty-one. What’s it feel like?”

“A lot like twenty,” said Surya. “Only maybe less prepared.”

“That doesn’t sound appealing.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do?”

“Huh?”

“When you leave Blackcastle for the first time. What are you going to do first?”

“I’ve got to walk into town and meet everybody,” said Surya. “Then I think I’m supposed to make a speech.”

“No, I mean, you’ll be *free* after tomorrow. What do you want to do first?”

“I want to visit your home,” said Surya.

“Right, my burrow, deep in the forest, inside the giant hollow redwood tree.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, yeah, we can do that, but it won’t be much fun for you. I don’t spend a lot of time there in corporeal form.”

“In what?”

“Y’know. Solid. Usually I’m pure spirit when I’m home. No need for food or shelter or plumbing.”

“Oh. That doesn’t sound very interesting. Nowhere to sit, even?”

“I’m sure I could find something for you to sit on,” said Hym. Then, stammering, he changed the subject. “W-what will you do after that?”

“Dunno. Probably look for a wife, I guess.”

Hym’s heart plummeted. “A wife?”

“Yeah,” said Surya, sounding miserable. “Either I pick, or he does.”

“Ew,” said Hym.

Surya shrugged. “It’s the Blackcastle way. I guess.”

The moment had come. There was never going to be a better chance to persuade him. Hym said: “I could fix that, you know.”

Surya didn’t answer, for a time. “I know,” he said, at last.

“I have talked to the other gods,” Hym lied. “No one will stop me, this time. Shalim will take him, if I offer him up.”

Surya contemplated.

Hym said: “It could be easy. Even painless.”

“No,” said Surya. “It should hurt, when his time comes.” He turned his head away from the stars and

met Hym's eyes. "But I don't want his time to come because of you. Even if it did, that wouldn't stop the process. I'll be forced to marry before I turn twenty-five. If he wasn't there to pick, my mom would have to."

"It isn't fair."

"I know," said Surya. "But that's just how humans are, you know?"

"I know," said Hym.

"We have so many little rules, and they're all made up. But we follow them, because we want them to be real, or because we're scared of how other people will react if we don't. Nobody lives freely. Nobody lives without limit."

"I do," said Hym.

"No you don't," said Surya. "You just have bigger limits than the rest of us. You have the other gods and spirits to contend with."

"I could free you. You could be as free as me."

Surya looked up at the stars again. He closed his eyes. He thought about his father in a grave, and some true part of him rejected the thought at once. "No," he said. "I don't want him to die."

Hym asked, very quietly, "Do you *want* to get married?"

"Yes. I think. No. I don't know. Maybe? Sometimes. I don't know, when I think about it as an abstract concept, *being married* sounds nice. You have someone you



can rely on, someone with a vested interest in your success. When I think about raising kids, or trying to court a woman, or dealing with dowry negotiations and in-laws and... married life... it doesn't sound as nice. It sounds like a painful waste of time and energy for something I don't want very badly."

"But what about romance!?" Hym asked. "What about passion and companionship and... sex?"

"Well I mean of *course* I want all of those."

"But not badly enough to spend some time and energy to acquire them?"

"I don't know," said Surya, looking a little bit helpless. "It's like I *do* want them, but at the same time, I..."

"Go on..."

Surya turned his head and looked Hym in the eyes. He gathered up his courage. Hym braced himself for it, didn't dare to believe it, didn't dare to hope. Surya said: "I just don't know."

"And that should be ok," Hym said. "You should be free. You shouldn't be forced to marry if you're not sure you're ready for it."

"Yeah, well, 'should' doesn't do me much good. It is what it is. I just have to toughen up and deal with it."

"No," said Hym, in a whisper, "you don't."

"What are you saying?"

“I could take you away from here,” said Hym. “We could escape together.”

“So I could go live in a tree without even a chair to sit on?”

Hym flushed a little. “I could make a home for you. A better home.”

“But I’d be all alone...”

“You’d be with me.”

“But no other people? No humans?”

“No humans.”

Surya seemed to seriously consider the offer.

Hym twisted in his self-loathing, wishing that he had long ago dared to tell the truth.

Surya said at last, “I’d miss Mom.”

“She could come too.”

“She wouldn’t want to,” said Surya. “She likes living in the castle.”

“Does she? Are you sure about that?”

“Better than she would like living in the forest,” said Surya. “And besides, Dad would never let me escape. He’d hunt us down.”

“With his bad leg?”

“With his men.”

“Then I’d kill his men.”

“All that needless death!” said Surya. “Don’t you see that isn’t what I want? I don’t want anyone to die because of me. Because I couldn’t just accept my fate. No, I have to face this. I have to find a way to be ok with it.”

“What about what I want?”

Surya didn’t answer for a long, long time. At last, so quietly that Hym could hardly hear him, he said: “What *do* you want?”

Hym couldn’t answer.

“I mean, you’re a nature spirit. So I get it, I do. But do you *really* want to just kill people? Isn’t there anything... *more*?”

“I don’t *want* to kill anyone. I don’t want anything. The forest is always content. I just want you to be happy.”

“I’ll be alright,” said Surya. “I always am.”

“You deserve better than just ‘alright’.”

“Sometimes, being human is about being ok with just being alright. It can’t be Presence all the time.”

“And why not?”

“Because without Absence, we’d never see the aurora,” said Surya. “I would think as a nature spirit you’d understand that change has to happen.”

“It happens slowly, for us,” said Hym.

“It happens quickly for us,” said Surya.

Wincing, Hym said, “Yeah... It does.”

They stared at the Ring for a long time.

“Hey...” said Surya.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you this...”

“What?”

“Can you, like... *Choose* what your body looks like?”

“Yes?” said Hym, not sure where this was going.

“The body you wear now. Did you choose it for me?”

“Yes,” said Hym.

“Why?”

“To be your friend.”

“Is that why you let it grow up with me?”

“Yes.”

“So how old are you really?”

Hym didn’t know how to answer. He had never come to this part of the lie before. He would have to pick an age he could easily remember. “I’m twenty.”

Surya’s eyes widened. The ring cast the shadow of his dimple as it manifested, and his teeth actually sparkled slightly in the light of the aurora.

Silent the aurora writhed above them and they, in harmonies unconscious, drew, unknowing, nearer, upon the cloud. Surya said, “This body... Can you make it look more... human?”

“What!? You don’t think I look *human*!?”

“No, no! I mean, it’s perfect, really! You did a really great job, but the eyes are—well, they’re not a color people’s eyes come in.”

“So? Have *you* met every person in the world? How do you *know* human eyes don’t come like mine?”

“I, uh,” said Surya. “Hmm.”

“Yeah. Didn’t think so.”

“Well, no one in the village has eyes like yours.”

“You haven’t *been* in the village.”

“I asked my mom.”

“When was the last time she left the walls?”

“Ok. Are there any people in the village with purple eyes?”

“No, but—”

“That’s all I meant. I just want you to... Fit in.”

“To fit in?”

“Yeah,” said Surya, smiling as Hym’s stomach dropped.

Hym stared angrily at the stars, unable to bear the clueless look of hope on Surya’s face.

“Hey,” said Surya, reaching out to touch his face. Hym swatted his hand away.

Surya asked, “Did I say something wrong?”

Hym looked at Surya. “I’m never going to fit in. Not for you, not for anyone.”

“I—I didn’t mean it like that!” said Surya.

Hym bit his tongue, too angry to say anything kind.

Surya tried to dig himself out of the hole. “I just meant... People will be scared of you, if they see you walking around with eyes like that. They won’t think you’re human!”

“So? I’m not.”

“But you can pretend to be!”

“Why on earth would I pretend to be a member of a clueless, cowardly, hateful species like yours?”

Surya was almost in tears now. “So you could be with me.”

This blew every thought out of Hym’s head. He stared at Surya, uncomprehending. “What do you mean?”

Surya reached out very slowly, very cautiously, a hunter reaching for a deer. Hym’s hand did not retreat, and he took it. “You’re—you’re my only friend, Hym. My only friend in the whole world. I want you to be a part of my life, and I don’t want you to be a secret anymore. I want to walk down the streets of the village beside you. And I don’t want them to be afraid of you.”

Deeply touched, Hym said, "They will always fear me, no matter what the color of my eyes may be."

"But you could be at peace with them! You could be at peace with all of us. You could teach us how to treat the forest, and how to respect your world. I want—"

"—No," said Hym. "Enough of what you want. I won't change the color of my eyes. Leave it at that."

"I'm sorry," said Surya. "I didn't mean to offend you, I swear it."

"I know," said Hym. "You're just... Sometimes you say the stupidest things."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying you're sorry," said Hym. He was angry; angry that Surya was talking sense, angry that Surya wanted something perfectly reasonable and he could not give it to him without breaking the lie. "I will never walk the streets of the village with you. I will never show myself to your people, or teach them how to respect the forest. The forest teaches with more than words, and your people are too deaf and stupid to hear it. I owe them nothing."

"You're right," said Surya, very sadly. "You don't owe us anything. You don't owe me anything. I'm sorry."

"I do owe you one thing, actually..." said Hym, reaching into his satchel.

"Oh? What's that?"

“Your birthday present,” said Hym, and he pulled out the sketch and gave it to Surya.

Surya stared at it in the Ringlight for a long time, a stupefied expression of confusion on his face. “This is me,” he said.

“It is,” said Hym, a little nervous. “Do you like it?”

“It’s amazing,” said Surya. “I’ve never seen a sketch like this.”

“It took several tries,” said Hym.

“Every day I spend with you, you amaze me. You’ve never been anything but kind to me, and I’ve never done a thing for you. I don’t even know your birthday...”

“I hate receiving gifts,” said Hym. “So don’t worry about that.”

“Still. I want to celebrate the day you came into this world.”

“I was born on the forty-fifth night of Absence,” said Hym. “Just after the first bell.”

“But... That was just last week!”

Hym nodded sadly. “It is also the night my mother died. I... Don’t like to celebrate it.”

“Oh,” said Surya. “I’m sorry. You’re right, sometimes I say the stupidest things.”

“But you never mean to.”



Silence lingered, and neither of them seemed to know what to do with it.

“What was your mother like?” Surya asked, at last.

“She was a tree,” said Hym, staring into the stars. “But whenever she chose to walk around, she had eyes just like mine.”

“Then you should keep them,” said Surya. “You should keep her eyes. The world is more beautiful with them in it.”

“Thank you,” said Hym. Because the compliment was directed at his mother, he did not take it personally. Still, there was a little part of him that dared to hope.

“I’m sorry I tried to make you change them,” said Surya. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s alright,” said Hym.

Silence fell once more, and it was impenetrable.

An hour later, Hym returned Surya to the tower balcony. They stood for a moment, arms still around each other, looking at each other in the Ringlight.

“Goodnight, Surya,” said Hym.

“Goodnight,” said Surya.

Neither of them released the other.

“Thank you for tonight,” whispered Surya, so close that Hym could feel the warmth of his breath.

“I’ll visit you soon,” said Hym. He let go. A long moment later, Surya released him.

Hym turned and put one foot up on the balcony railing, and Surya lingered, watching him. Neither of them wanted the night to end, but neither of them could find anything to say.

Hym glanced back at Surya, his violet eyes flashing in the dark. “Goodnight,” he said. Then he hurled himself off the balcony, and as he sped away over the treetops, the winds carried to him the whispered words of Surya’s reply.

*“Goodnight, Hym.”*

## Chapter 10

### Free At Last

The following day Hym woke in the perpetual darkness of Absence and stared up at his sketches of Surya on the ceiling. By Ringlight they looked almost real.

Hym put an arm over his eyes and sighed.

Then, carefully, he dressed himself, took up his bow and his quiver, and went to the range.

He shot badly. When his quiver was empty, he followed his spent arrows into the forest and recovered them, and when he returned, he found red-haired Ysolde setting up at the far end of the range.

Crouching, he crept through the trees to circle around her. His feet made no impression in the snow, and he moved without sound. When he was right behind her, he grinned to himself and made ready to pounce.

Ysolde whipped around, arrow on the string, and pointed it right at his face. "Hym! You scared me!"

Laughing, Hym emerged from his hiding place. “How did you know I was there!?”

Ysolde picked a twig out of his hair. “You disturbed the bush,” she said simply. Then she turned and nailed the bullseye from thirty paces.

Hym stood beside her and raised up his bow. He loosed a shot which missed by a foot. “How have you been?”

“Oh, you know.” She nailed another bullseye.

“Lessons ok?” Hym missed again.

Ysolde lowered her bow and looked at him. “They’re fine. He’s got me learning lineages, now. It’s tedious, but it’s interesting. He still wants to talk to you about something.”

Hym drew another arrow and sighted along it, choosing not to reply. Ysolde patiently corrected his stance.

“Ok, now,” said Ysolde, and Hym loosed the shot. It struck within a few inches of the bullseye.

Hym grimaced, then smiled for her benefit.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“Nothing,” said Hym, drawing another arrow.

Ysolde drew, looked, and loosed in one fluid movement, splitting his arrow down the middle with hers.

Hym loosed the arrow. While it was in midair he reached out a pointing finger and twisted it in the air,

and the arrow redirected itself to split hers.

“That’s cheating,” said Ysolde.

“It’s using my natural talents,” said Hym. “How could that possibly be cheating?”

“You know what happens when you use too much magic,” said Ysolde. “What if you have to shoot someday without it?”

Hym grimaced. It was true; each spell weakened him, and only sleep and food restored him. “I’ll probably just die,” he said, loosing another poorly-aimed shot.

“That,” said Ysolde, nailing another bullseye, “would be a bummer.”

Hym laughed. He set another arrow to the string and Ysolde came around to stand behind him, adjusting his stance yet again.

“You have to be *consistent*.”

“I know, I know.”

“Have you told him the truth yet?”

“No,” said Hym, lowering his bow. He was annoyed by her ability to guess what was troubling him.

“That’s not what’s bothering you though, is it.”

“No,” said Hym. “He’s twenty-one today. Last night I took him somewhere, and he started talking about how everything has to change for him now. I don’t know. It worried me.”

“Where’d you take him?”

“I took him to the top of a stormcloud,” said Hym.

Ysolde gave a low whistle of astonishment. “How come you never take me anyplace nice?” She nailed the bulls-eye again.

“I thought you didn’t like heights?”

“I mean, I *don’t*, but still.”

“Ok, next time we go out, I’ll take you someplace.”

“My dad asked about you again,” said Ysolde.

Hym grimaced.

“He wants to know when you’re going to propose,” said Ysolde, with a giggle.

“Oh man,” said Hym. “I suppose it does kind of look like that, doesn’t it.”

Ysolde put on her best impression of the mayor’s baritone. “Young lady, you can’t be seen running around the countryside with a boy who isn’t serious! Think of the optics!”

Hym laughed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m in no rush to get married off. The optics suit me just fine.”

“What about you and Derek?” Hym asked.

Ysolde gave a short, harsh laugh. “We went out riding the other day and he got hit by a branch. Cried like a

little girl. Not cute.”

“I thought you liked sensitive men?”

“I like sensitive *intelligent* men.”

“Ouch,” said Hym.

“Still, he has a nice ass,” said Ysolde.

Hym nodded appreciatively. “That he does.”

“Maybe he’s more your type?”

Hym scowled.

Ysolde asked, “If Surya’s twenty-one today, aren’t you worried?”

“Worried? About what?”

Ysolde nodded towards the looming shadow of Black-castle, in the distance. “Well, he’ll be making the rounds, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

Ysolde lowered her bow and gave Hym an expression of incredulity. “So he’s going to visit your house.”

“Oh *fuck me*,” said Hym, and he scampered away, back towards the village, and Ysolde’s laughter followed him.

He flew homeward, and dived in through the window.

“Grandma!” he yelled, startling her so much she dropped a vase full of flowers. His hand shot out and the vase stopped in midair, grasped in his will. With a

gesture he raised it back into her hands.

“Don’t,” said his Grandmother, “Do. That.”

“Sorry, I was in a hurry. Listen, Lord Blackcastle’s son is turning twenty-one today, and—”

“—Oh, isn’t that nice!”

“Yes it’s wonderful, but also—”

“—Oh, well then, he’ll be making the rounds, won’t he?”

“Yes, that’s actually what I wanted to—”

“—And a speech, after?”

“Yes, a speech after. Listen, Grandma, he’s coming here, and you’re going to want to introduce him to me.”

“Oh? And why shouldn’t I? You’re as much one of us as anyone, and he’s got to know all his future subjects, doesn’t he? We’ve all got a right to meet him face to face, and that includes you.”

“We’ve already met. I’m the reason his dad almost died.”

She gasped.

“I don’t have time to explain, but I had good reasons at the time. It wasn’t done on a whim or by mistake. But Surya met me, way back then, and if he sees me now, he’s going to recognize me, and I’m going to get in lots of trouble. Do you understand?”



She nodded, mouth still open, looking at him with an emotion he didn't have time to process.

"Now, listen, where's Grandpa?"

"He's out back, chopping wood."

"I'll help him. I need to warn him too..."

Nestor's voice, outside the hut, said, "Ah, Lord Blackcastle! And his son, er... Surya, is it? Lovely to meet you. Really wonderful. Won't you come inside? Your men can stay out here, I'm afraid there isn't much room in the old hovel, here..."

"Fuck," said Hym, and he dived out the kitchen window as the front door of the hut swung open and Nestor brought Surya and Lord Blackcastle into the hut.

Hym landed in the garden, in full view of Lord Blackcastle's guards, but he scuttled away into a bush before any of them managed to catch more than the briefest possible glimpse of him. One of them tensed, and let his hand wander to his sword. With a nod to the others, he began to circle the hut, searching the garden carefully.

When he walked past the kitchen window, Ana screamed. "OH! Nestor, there's a man in the garden! Oh, he'll trample the, uh, the grass!"

"What grass? It's Absence, you crazy old woman," said Nestor.

"Oh, of course, of course it is," she said, calming down visibly. "Nothing but snow out there now, of course. Goodness. Sorry about that. It just caught me by sur-

prise, is all. Would anyone like tea? I was just about to make some.”

“No thank you, ma’am,” said Surya, sounding very polite and manly. “We’ve had a lot of tea already, I’m afraid.”

“Oh but you haven’t had *my* tea,” said Ana. “Come along, Nestor, and help me get down the little barrel.”

“I opened one fresh just the other day!”

“The cat peed in it.”

“We don’t have a c—Oh. Excuse me, gentlemen. I’ll be just a moment.”

Hym, in the bushes, tried very hard to concentrate upon the sounds inside the larder, where Nestor had just joined Ana.

She explained things very succinctly. “Don’t mention Hym or try to introduce him. You understand? His life depends on it. I’ll explain later.”

Nestor, to his credit, took this in stride. They returned to the kitchen together, he with a small sealed keg of tea leaves on his shoulder. Jovially, he said, “Now, how’s twenty-one treating you so far?”

“It’s alright, sir,” said Surya.

“My son is modest. He has finally become a man, and will now rise up to his proper position in the world. Before long, he’ll be taking over from me. The world is now his oyster. Of course he’s delighted. Isn’t that so,

my boy?"

"That's so, papa."

"Tell me, Nestor. You had a son once, I believe?"

"Yes. Wonderful lad. We named him Hector, after her father." Nestor put an arm around Ana, who seemed very sad. Through the window Hym could only see his grandparents. "Taken from us far too young, just thirty-five years old."

"Thirty-five is hardly young," said Lord Blackcastle.

"But no one should outlive their child," said Surya. "I mean, no one should suffer the pain of losing their child. It's awful. I'm sorry for your loss."

Lord Blackcastle said, "Yes, well. I see you haven't cleaned his room."

"We keep it just the way he left it."

"Quite the artist, was he?"

"He was," said Ana, truthfully. "Please don't go in there. It's kind of... A shrine."

"Very holy to us, sir," said Nestor.

"I'd really prefer it if you didn't... touch... that..."

"Look at this, my boy. Remarkable! A perfect likeness! He must have sketched me, long ago. See what effect the striking Blackcastle beauty can have upon the common man. No doubt he envied my serene brow and my well-developed chin. See here, he has even captured

my dimples. Ah, I was beautiful once. Here, boy. A trophy. A reminder, shall we say; *c'est la mort*, as the ancients used to say. 'Remember that you will wither and die.' ”

“That’s ‘Memento Mori,’ ” said Ana.

“May I keep this?” asked Surya.

“Of course,” said Lord Blackcastle. “A tribute! And what a worthy one. Truly it is a great tragedy that your son was taken in his artistic prime. A pity, that he had no children?”

“Just the one, sir,” said Nestor.

“Ah yes, the little witchling, found those many years ago. I must confess I never came to see it. Died before its time, I understand?”

“We all do,” said Nestor, sadly.

“Still, perhaps it was a mercy. Such a half-breed could never hope to survive long in this harsh and bitter world of ours.”

Hym saw Surya come into view in the window, facing his grandparents.

Surya said quietly, sincerely, earnestly: “May I keep this?”

“Of course, lad,” said Nestor. “It’s your right as a Blackcastle. We owe you fealty, for your protection. We always will.”

“Take it as a gift from us,” said Ana. “I’m sure he would want you to have it.”

“Thanks,” said Surya.

They emerged from the hut after their tea.

“Ah,” said Lord Blackcastle, leaning on his cane, jauntily patting his son on the back. “That was well done, my boy. The common folk seem to like you. That’s good, that’s harder to buy than respect or fear. For some reason, the local peasants never took much of a shine to me... But no matter. You, they admire. Some of their young women were positively throwing themselves at you. I suppose you didn’t notice. Buxom young ladies, they were, too. Perhaps if you don’t make a move, I will.”

Surya was solemnly looking at the picture as he walked away.

“Come on, lad. That was a joke. I would never tread upon your territory like that. What is it, my son? What’s wrong?”

Surya said, “I’d like to go home now, father.”

“But my boy, think of tradition! The whole village is expecting you! They have prepared their homes, their hearths, their hearts for you! They have brewed tea for you! They are eager to hear every word from your lips, and their daughters are eager to meet you in their finery! How can there be tears upon such a glorious occasion?”

“I’d like to go home now.”

“I’m afraid not, my boy. I must forbid it. When you are old and wise, you too will understand such things. It is important to give good face, my boy, even to the harshest sides of reality. Life in this world is a cold and brutal thing, swift and fleeting. You have to grasp it even though it burns you. You have to be tough, my boy, to survive in this world. You are tough. I know this is true, because I am tough, and you are my boy. That is how it works. Our blood is strong, do you hear? Our souls are mighty. Our wills are as strong and as deep as the foundations of Blackcastle.”

“Of course, Father,” said Surya, dully.

“Now. Give me that sketch, which seems to have so upset you. What is it, my boy? Are you afraid you will become me? I assure you that you will, just as my father assured me. We all become our parents, boy. It is inevitable. It is the good and proper way of things. As you grow wise and strong, you will become just like me. One day we will see truly eye to eye, and you will be glad that we had these frank discussions. It is a pity... This is really a very good likeness. But to prove to you that vanity is less important than power and pride...” Lord Blackcastle tore the parchment in half.

“No!” shouted Surya, but it was too late. Lord Blackcastle turned the pieces and tore them again, quartering the image. Then he scattered it into the snow. Surya dropped to his knees, scrambling for the pieces, but Lord Blackcastle kicked him in the ribs, thwacked him with his cane, and snapped his fingers.

“On his feet,” he said. His guards yanked Surya to his feet.

“Listen here, boy. You have too much of your mother in you. We have a reputation to protect; a reputation that stretches back nearly seven centuries. Today you and I are going to be worthy of that reputation. I know that I am worthy of it. Today you are going to prove that you are, too.”

“Or what?”

“I am not too old to have another son.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Or, if that does not persuade you, I could always give you another mother?”

Surya wrestled against the restraining hands upon him. At last, he slumped. “I’ll be good.”

“Yes,” said Lord Blackcastle. “You will. I know it. I am proud of it already. Come along, my boy, and clean yourself off. Your collar is crooked. Brush the snow off your pants. Fix your cloak. Tidy your hair. Stiff lip, chin up, shoulders back, chest wide open. Don’t slouch. We are unafraid. We face the world heart-first, unflinching, for we are invincible in the aura of our power.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, smile. We are meeting your public. These are your people, my boy. You will amaze them. With any luck, one of them will amaze you.”

In the bushes, Hym's heart was racing. He hadn't moved since they had walked away. He hadn't reacted when Lord Blackcastle tore the parchment, or when he struck his son. He was frozen on all fours in the snow, struggling to breathe against the panic inside his ribs.

Over ten long years he had painstakingly created an intricate stained-glass image of lies. Each lie, crystalline, flawless, could be easily socketed into its place in a whole so neatly fused into one beautiful image that he now, at times, believed that it was true. This projection he had maintained was all the world he wanted to give to Surya, and all the world that Surya loved.

And Lord Blackcastle had come up to this beautiful image, and put his fist through it, and he had done so casually, effortlessly, without seeing it, without understanding that it was there.

Everything was crashing down around him. He could nearly hear it hitting the snow.

He was naked now. Naked under Surya's eyes. Surya had seen him, had glimpsed him, had seen the mask and something ugly underneath it.

Everything was ruined. He would have to flee, he would have to be a hermit, wandering the hills, hunting for his food and living in a hollow redwood tree.

And when he had managed that, when he had become the thing he had lied about being, maybe then he could go and try again for love. A hundred years or so would do it. No one would remember the purple-eyed young



man who disappeared one day. No one alive today would recognize him. It would be easy.

A hundred years in the wilderness. It sounded appealing. It sounded wonderful. It was the perfect solution. It was suicide without the suicide. There was no mess to clean up. He had not made enough of an impact on the world to break it by running away, and the world would not miss him.

He had to do it. It was the only way. In a hundred years, he would be able to forget Surya. And when a hundred years were gone, he would be able to come back to the village, and find another Surya; a better Surya.

But who could be a better Surya than Surya?

His feet were moving, pounding snow. Trees were all around him. He did not know how long he had been walking.

He stopped. He looked around.

He was deep in the forest, now. He had gone without a torch, without any light but the glow of the Ring. His violet eyes flashed reflectively as he looked around, and to him all was bright and clear.

He did not recognize this part of the woods.

He looked back, searching for his tracks.

Before his eyes, they disappeared, blown away by a dusting of snow.

The hairs on his neck stood up. He turned around.

“Mom?”

She was standing in the clearing, mere feet away. He had not seen her in thirteen years. He had talked to her every day, though he had not heard her answer. He had longed to see her in more than his dreams. He had called to her, and she had not answered, and she had not come to him. He had even begun to doubt that she had ever really existed.

And here she was, as real as the snow. Her gown was purple-blue, and her raven hair shimmered with iridescence. Her violet eyes flashed.

“You came back,” he said, stumbling towards her.

“You are older.”

“I am older, Mom. I still don’t understand.”

“Should I go away again?”

“No! Please don’t. Please don’t go.”

“You do not have your sword,” she said, sounding angry.

“What?”

“The old man was to give you your sword as soon as you were strong enough to lift it.”

“He never gave me your sword.”

“I will have words with him. We cannot do this properly without my sword.”

“Do what properly?”

“Explain,” said his mother.

“Explain what?”

“Everything.”

Sudden light burned against the snow. Both Hym and his mother looked up.

High above the earth, the Ring burned brightly, and at its inner edge a bright star, new-born, blazed, and fell.

It streaked to earth, growing larger, growing brighter, drawing nearer; Hym only realized I was heading straight towards him a few moments before I turned him into a steaming crater in the snow.

In the wreckage of him, I unfurled myself, and sent myself out across the snow. I felt his life, his many scattered parts, and realized what I had done, and in a panic I began to reassemble him.

It took three days of desperate study to put him back together in more-or-less working condition.

He woke lying naked at the bottom of a crater in the snow.

He stared up at the stars and the trees and the Ring. He did not remember how he had come to be lying here, naked, at the bottom of a crater, in the snow.

He felt like a man awakening from a long and dizzying bender. Very painfully, he got to his feet.

Every part of his body ached, and yet he could see no wounds.

“Mom?” He asked the forest. It was the first word I had ever heard.

“Mom?” I replied.

“GAH!!!” He screamed.

“GAH!!!” I screamed back.

“Who’s there!? Show yourself!”

“Who’s there? Show yourself!”

“I mean it, I’ll hurt you!”

“I mean it, I’ll hurt you!”

“Am I going crazy?”

“Am I going crazy?”

He shook his head, and clutched at it, and realized that his hair was gone. He pawed his bald head in a panic. He felt for his eyebrows and his eyelashes. He checked his pits and his groin.

His hair was gone; completely gone. So was his navel. So were his fingernails.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME!?”

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME!?”

“STOP REPEATING ME!”

“STOP REPEATING ME!”

“STOP!”

“STOP!”

**“SSSSTOP!!!”**

**“SSSSTOP!!!”**

He screamed again, and ran through the forest, clutching at his ears. In the darkness he could see things he had never seen before: insects crawling under the bark, nutrients flowing in the veins of the trees, creatures hibernating in the earth, caverns of crystal in the snow, and the roaring haze of solar wind and cosmic radiation in the heavens. He screamed more loudly, and in the echoes of his scream he saw the forest and the details of every tree and branch within earshot.

And he ran straight into Surya’s arms.

“HYM!” Surya shouted.

“SURYA!?” Hym screamed. “HELP ME!”

I said: “SURYA!? HELP ME!”

“I’m here, I’m here! I’ve got you! You’re safe, it’s ok, I’ve got a blanket, and furs, here—” He dropped to his knees in the snow and slung his backpack off, managing to shuffle Hym from one arm to the other as he did so. He took the rolled-up blanket and wolfskin off the top of the backpack and wrapped Hym in them. “You’re ok. I’ve got you. Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“We’ve got to get out of the forest.” (“We’ve got to get out of the forest.”)

“I’ll carry you,” said Surya.

“Can you hear her!?” (“Can you hear her!?”)

“I only hear you,” said Surya, looking worried. “Don’t be afraid, Hym. Whatever’s going on, we’re going to get you help. It’s going to be ok.”

“I don’t need help. I need answers.” (“I don’t need help. I need answers.”)

“Then we’ll get you answers,” said Surya, and he slung his backpack back on carefully, then heaved Hym up into his arms and marched for the village.

He didn’t knock, when he made it to the Storyteller’s hut. Instead, he kicked in the door.

“STORYTELLER!”

The Storyteller sat up in bed, shouting. He snatched his night-mask off.

“It’s Hym. He’s gone mad.”

“He’s gone more than mad,” said the Storyteller, terrified. “Put him on the divan. Not the sidebar. Not the footstool. Yes, that’s the divan.”

Surya put Hym down.

The Storyteller was on his feet, tying his robe. A moment later he was reaching high above his head, to a large book on one of his top shelves. Surya maneuvered his way through the cluttered room, jostling one of the rickety pieces of furniture with his hip, and reached above the Storyteller, and grabbed the book, and brought it down into the Storyteller’s reach.

“Thank you,” said the Storyteller. He cracked the

book open and seated himself on the couch, across from Hym. Surya perched on a footstool nearby, hunched forward anxiously.

“So what is it?” Surya asked.

“Aha,” said the Storyteller. “It’s just as I feared.”

“What is it?”

“It has happened once before, in a village on the other side of the world, nearly five thousand years ago.”

“It has?” said Hym. (“It has?”)

“It has,” said the Storyteller. “You see, three nights ago, we all witnessed a star fall from the ring. That same night, you disappeared.”

“I did!?” (“I did!?”)

“You did.”

“You did,” said Surya. “I was pissed. I wanted to give you a piece of my mind.”

“Oh,” said Hym, feeling miserable. (“Oh.”)

“Now, three nights after the falling of the star, you have returned to us,” said the Storyteller. “This is precisely what happened at the other village. A young witch, just twenty years of age, was wandering near the village on a night in the middle of Absence—much like this night. A star fell from the Ring, and struck her, and she became one with it.”

“What happened to her?” said Hym. (“What happened to her?”)

“Well, several things changed. When she first came back to the village, she was completely bald. As you are now. She had also lost several things, including her finger and toe-nails, which... Yes, see, you’ve lost them too. And her navel.”

“I’ve lost that too,” said Hym. (“I’ve lost that too,”)

“Did she get them all back?” Surya asked. He liked Hym’s navel.

“She did eventually learn how to manifest them again, yes,” said the Storyteller. “But the star did more than just change a few physical features.”

“Such as?” (“Such as?”)

The Storyteller was eager, excited, ready to share. Then he frowned, and stopped himself.

He closed the book. “No,” he said. “I need to think about this.”

“Tell me!” (“Tell me!”)

The Storyteller shook his head firmly. “No. You are not ready to know.”

“I am as ready as I’m ever going to be.” (“I am as ready as I’m ever going to be.”)

“That,” said the Storyteller, “is precisely why I cannot tell you. You are not worthy of the knowledge, as you are now.”



“How...! *Dare* you!?” Surya was on his feet, ready to throw hands. He had big hands to throw.

“I mean no offense,” said the Storyteller calmly. “As a representative of humanity, I am obligated to evaluate whether or not you deserve this information. I do not believe that you do.”

“What would make me worthy?” Hym asked. (“What would make me worthy?”)

“Proof,” said the Storyteller. “Proof that you use your magic for good, and not for evil.”

“So it made me more powerful?” Hym asked. (“So it made me more powerful?”)

The Storyteller smiled smugly to himself. “You are not ready to know.”

“I’ll find out on my own,” said Hym. (“I’ll find out on my own.”)

“I sincerely hope you do. In the process, I hope you grow as a person.”

“I will, you’ll see.” (“I’m me, see me.”)

Hym froze, staring into space.

“Her voice speaks to you, does it not?” said the Storyteller.

Hym nodded, afraid to speak.

“For the first time, it has done more than merely repeat you, has it not?”

Hym nodded again, and swallowed.

“Welcome to fear, my boy. You must come to understand it, and to face it with dignity. The thing inside you now can destroy you as easily as you might swat a fly. It will do so, if it feels threatened. There is nothing that I, or Surya, or your mother, or anyone else can do for you now. You face it alone. That is the taste of death, boy. That is what you wanted to give so freely, so long ago. Think well, and grow wise. Come to me again when you are.”

“But,” said Surya.

“Go,” said the Storyteller. “Begone from my hut. Take him home to his grandparents. Ana must see him, so she can sleep. And feed him. He will be hungry. Hungrier than he has ever been.”

Surya helped Hym to his feet, and carried him out of the hut and into the snow.

“You’ve lost weight, too,” said Surya, quietly. “You’re skin and bones.”

Feeling the weakness of his withered form, Hym dared not speak, for fear that I would reply.

Surya bothered to knock on Ana and Nestor’s door. It opened at the third knock, although the hour was very late. It was Ana who answered. Haggard, craggy, the hollows of her eyes sunken and purple, she mutely hugged Surya, crushing Hym in her embrace.

“Come inside, come inside! It’s bitter cold out.” She

shut the door after they had come through, and barred it firmly. Then she stoked the coals and threw a log onto the fire.

“How did you find him?” she asked.

“He came to me,” Surya said. He was sitting on the couch now. Hym had fearlessly curled himself into a ball and laid his head in Surya’s lap, knowing that he was sick enough to get away with it. Surya was doing his best to take it in stride.

Ana hustled to make tea. “Nestor could be back at any minute! Oh, thank the gods that you found him at last. Nearly out of my *mind* with worry—”

“—Where is he?” Surya asked.

“Out with Ysolde, searching.”

“Anyone with them? There are wolves about.”

“Ysolde is an excellent shot,” said Ana. “And Nestor can handle himself. They’ll be fine. They’ll be back soon, and we’ll all be together again, and then everyone can sleep, just wonderful, wonderful sleep, all of us in our beds, safe and home, and sound asleep, and dreaming sweetly of.... Nice... things...” She yawned, slouching back into the chair. Her head lolled back, eyes shut, and she began to snore.

Surya looked from the sleeping Ana to Hym, then back to Ana.

“Did you do that?”

Hym shook his head.

“Are you... Are you hungry?” Surya asked.

Hym nodded.

“I’ll whip something up.” He stood, took off his cloak and gloves, and moved to the hearth.

“Oh,” he said, after a moment. “She kept a soup on.”

He served Hym a bowl of soup, which Hym wolfed down before it could cool. Strangely, it did not burn him.

He held out his empty bowl, stomach growling audibly.

Surya half-smiled and refilled his bowl, and Hym emptied it again, and held it out again. This repeated until the entire pot was empty.

Then Surya sat down again beside Hym, and Hym put his head into Surya’s lap, and stared out the window at the dancing aurora.

Neither of them spoke, and Hym was grateful for the silence. Surya’s fingers trailed along his scalp, gently massaging him, soothing him, petting him.

“I was so afraid,” Surya said.

The fire crackled.

“I...” said Surya. He did not seem to know how to finish the thought. Ana stirred in her slumber.

Hym got to his feet carefully, shakily, clinging to the wolf-skin, and took Surya by the hand, and dragged him

into his room. He flopped on the bed, and patted the spot beside him.

Surya seated himself near him, and drew the blankets up over him.

“I really was angry, you know,” said Surya. “You lied for years.”

Hym was too afraid to answer. He sat up and reached for his parchment and quill. Surya pushed him back down into the bed. “You don’t have to answer. Just lay there.”

Boldly, Hym reached up and pushed on Surya’s chest until he relented, and lay down beside him. Then he crawled up into the crook of Surya’s arm, and rested his head on Surya’s shoulder and breast, and was at last at home in the world.

“I was so angry. You lied for so long, and you didn’t even need to. But then, when you were gone, I... I was afraid you would never come back. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too,” said Hym. (“See me.”)

“I thought... I thought I would never...”

Frustrated, Hym reached for his parchment and quill, and stretched out his will, as he had done so many times in the past, intending to draw them towards himself.

They did not obey. His power did not flow; he could feel it folding back on him, crammed within him, canceled out. At the time, his magic frightened me, so I

restrained it.

Terrified, he began to cry.

“Hey, hey, it’s ok. I’m not mad anymore,” said Surya, thumbing away a tear. “I could never stay mad at you. You’re my best friend. My *only* friend.”

Hym shook his head. The tears would not stop, he could not contain them.

“It’s alright,” said Surya, holding him close. “It’s alright. We’ll figure this out, we’ll figure all of this out. Together. It’s going to be ok.”

The tears at last subsided.

“I’ve got you,” said Surya. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Hym held him.

For a time they lay in silence, and the warm and breathing nearness of Surya emptied Hym of all fear and thought.

Surya looked up at the many sketches of himself on the ceiling above the bed, and Hym crammed his eyes shut, his stomach twisting around the soup. He could not bear to see the look on Surya’s face.

Surya released him, and moved away. Startled by the movement, Hym opened his eyes and found Surya’s face very near his own. Surya’s eyes, wide in the darkness, gave him a look that was almost pity.

Hym could not bear the look, and he rolled onto his side, away from Surya.

Surya's warm, strong arms encircled him, and drew him close.

Frozen, unable to think, Hym toyed with the fingers of Surya's hand upon his chest, and tried to keep his heart from pounding.

Playfully, experimentally, he backed his hips into Surya.

Surya laughed a little. "Hey now."

Then, to Hym's profound surprise, Surya's hand pinched his nipple. As if regretting it immediately, his hand patted and smoothed Hym's breast. Hym bit his lip, mind reeling, world turning.

Impossibly soft, impossibly warm, a set of lips branded the back of his neck, just in the spot where the muscles of the shoulder, back, and neck all met. Fire and lightning blew through his skin.

Impossibly soft, impossibly warm, a second kiss: in the cup of his neck. He could not help it; a gasp escaped him.

Impossibly sharp, impossibly hot, Surya's teeth crushing down upon the corded muscle: incisors like razors, canines like fangs, hot breath snarling out of him as his huge arms and hands crushed Hym close.

Hym rolled over in his arms to face him, and swiftly, before he could pull away, before the moment could be lost forever, Hym kissed him on the lips.

Surya's arms tightened, locking him in. Their lips

opened under each other and the taste of Surya blew through him.

Even in his weakened state, Hym found the strength to roll on top of Surya. He wanted only to pin him to the bed, to force him to stay, to force the moment to never end. Surya's hands raced over his back and Surya's arms crushed him close. Hym kissed his cheek, his ear, his neck; tasted the salt of his skin. His weak hands fumbled at the laces of Surya's tunic.

A knock came at the door of the hut, and they froze.

"I'm sorry," said Surya, rolling Hym gently off of himself. Hym nodded sadly, and Surya slipped out of the bed and got to his feet to see who had entered the hut.

Hym listened.

"Ah! Surya!" said Nestor. "You're back!"

"He's home," said Surya.

"Oh, what a relief!" said Ysolde.

"Where is he?"

Ana said, "I'm awake! I'm awake. Oh! You're back! Isn't it wonderful? He's home."

Hym heard the sound of Nestor kissing his wife on the cheek, then saying: "Where is he?"

"Sleeping," said Surya. "He ate all the soup. I guess he was hungry."

"I'll go and check on him," said Nestor.



“No,” said Surya. “I think he needs his sleep. He’s... Not himself.”

“Oh?” said Nestor.

Ysolde said, “Let us see him, at least, so we can believe he’s really home.”

Hym closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He heard the door of his room open. After a moment, he hear it close.

“He’s bald!” said Nestor.

“I know,” said Surya. “There’s... Something else.”

“I’ll get some whiskey,” said Nestor. “You can tell us all about it. Ysolde, won’t you stay?”

“I’ve got nowhere to be.”

“Let’s go onto the patio,” said Ana, “So we don’t disturb him.”

“Good idea,” said Nestor. “Do you smoke?”

Surya said, “No, but thank you.”

“I could go for a pipe,” said Ysolde. “What do you have?”

“Well, we’ve got the green and the brown,” said Nestor.

“Green, please, if you’ve got plenty to spare.”

“We grow a patch every Presence. We’ve got plenty.”

“I think I’ll go to bed,” said Ana. “Fill me in later?”

Hym heard Ana kiss Nestor on the cheek, then the sound of her bedroom door opening.

The voices receded as they stepped out onto the patio. With his magic, he would have been able to hear them. Without it, he was all alone with me.

The bed was warm and comfortable now, and the pillow smelled of Surya. He pressed it close, and breathed deeply, and was grateful for the full-bellied weariness which was already drawing him down into dreams.

Dreams, yes; he'd be safe from me there. Dreams would bring him peace.

Blissfully, he allowed himself to sleep.

## Chapter 11

### Shalim

He woke on the dancefloor. The music whirled; the ballroom burned with polished gold, and he was the point where all gazes met. His body spun and twisted, flying from pose to pose against the hands and body of the giant obsidian statue.

The silk on his skin danced almost as gracefully as he did. Incense smoke slithered up the walls, and all around him the crowd glittered, masks and garments glinting in the bonfire-light.

He danced in the arms of the obsidian statue, and the arms caught him, and twisted him, and turned him, and whirled him, and all at once the hands caught his hands, and spun him once, and launched him away, to the end of one arm.

Hym looked into the face of the statue, and saw that in the midst of beautiful obsidian two golden rings were burning: eyes. The man's black cloak flowed like shadow and mist, and every facet of his armor flashed in the

firelight.

Shalim pulled him back into his embrace, and turned a graceful circle holding Hym in his arms, and held him aloft, and with a whirl, sent him hurtling towards the ceiling. Hym tucked his arms and stiffened his legs and barrel-rolled upwards. At the apex of his flight, he flung out his arms and changed the inertia of his spin, and tumbled gracefully down. Shalim caught him, slipped him back to earth, caught his hands, and pulled him close.

Gently Shalim placed Hym's left hand on his own right hip, and put his own huge right hand on Hym's left shoulder, and took Hym's right hand in his own left, and held their hands out far. Then, like an awkward human ship, they pointed their prow into the wind, and stepped simultaneously as the music demanded. They took one spinning orbit of the room, so that everyone in the audience could see. Somehow it was terribly important that they had to see.

And at last they stopped, together, in the center of the room, and bowed low to each other, and Shalim kissed the fingers of his hand.

"My liege," said Shalim. "I have waited long to meet you."

## Chapter 12

### What

He stared up in total confusion, not recognizing his own room. The dream had felt completely real, and every detail of it was clear within his mind.

The charcoal face of Surya, above him, caught his eye, and he smiled to himself. Blissfully he ran his fingers across his lips, remembering Surya's stubble on his cheeks. He rolled onto his side and sniffed the pillow deeply.

His bones were weary. He wondered how long he had slept for; the dark skies of Absence outside his window gave no sign.

He slipped out of the bed, legs trembling. He was too weak to dress himself, and so, feeling like an invalid, he wrapped himself in blankets. A feverish heat swam dizzily behind his brow.

He emerged from his room to find Ana scrubbing the breakfast dishes, humming happily to herself.

“Grandma?” (“Hello? Can you hear me?”)

My voice startled him. Confused, he looked at his grandmother. She had just said something.

“Hym?” She asked, concern clouding her features.

He shook himself and sat at the table, hoping he would not have to speak.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she said, and she quickly began making eggs and toast and bacon. “It’s nearly noon,” she said, “but I always feel better with breakfast food, when I’m sick.”

Hym knew this already, but he was grateful that he did not have to fill the silence.

“Your grandfather went off to have some words with that nasty Storyteller, this morning. Surya told us what happened. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

She flipped the bacon. “Are you feeling any better today?”

She looked at him, when he did not respond. He raised a feeble hand and gave it an uncertain waggle.

“Well, a few days of home-cooked meals and bed rest, and I’m sure you’ll be just fine. Look, your hair is already coming back in!”

Hym turned to look at the polished brass mirror on the wall, and did not recognize himself. Fine dark peach-fuzz now covered his head. His eyebrows were nothing but stubble.

He ran a hand over his head to feel the softness and nearly cried with gratitude.

“There, there,” said Ana, placing breakfast before him. “It’s not so bad, is it?”

Hym ate without responding. Ana seated herself across from him.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” she said, her eyes twinkling wetly. “I thought for sure you’d been eaten, or killed by demons, or worse, that you had... That you had run away.”

Hym met her gaze.

“What was it, that made you go off like that? Was it something to do with the Blackcastles?”

Hym nodded, forking a piece of bacon and a bit of scrambled egg.

“Don’t worry. Whatever it is, we can sort it out. Nobody likes Lord Blackcastle anyway. If you *are* going to go around trying to kill people though, you really ought to be more thorough about it.”

Hym laughed in spite of himself.

Beaming, Ana said, “You missed Surya’s speech, by the way. It was very passionate, but it *was* a bit odd. All about protecting the forests, and respecting the spirits of nature, and so on. If I hadn’t heard it myself, I wouldn’t have believed it. He *is* a Blackcastle, after all. I don’t know how a boy that nice can bear to live under that roof.”

Hym smiled and finished off his breakfast, then held out the empty plate.

“More? Goodness! You must be going through a growth spurt. I’ll get started on lunch, now. Nestor should be back any minute.”

As if on cue, Nestor entered the hut. “Ah! He’s awake!”

Nestor stroked Hym’s fuzzy head and hugged him close. He reeked of the Storyteller’s incense. “Have you eaten?”

“We’re not talking much, just yet,” said Ana. “But he did eat breakfast! I was just about to make lunch.”

“Ah, what are we having?” Nestor asked, seating himself beside Hym.

“I thought I’d do ham sandwiches,” said Ana. “Torvin and his clan stopped by to wish you well, so now we have to deal with this pile of sourdough.”

She gestured towards a large wicker basket full of sourdough loaves.

“Sandwiches? Allow me!” said Nestor.

“Oh, I’ve got it,” said Ana, waving a dismissive hand.

“Nonsense! Sit, woman! Sandwiches are the one thing I know how to cook, and I’ll be damned if I let you work a minute longer.”

Ana giggled.



As Nestor busied himself with the sandwiches, Hym smiled contentedly and let his gaze wander the hut.

There were other gifts, besides the sourdough. A bouquet of fresh flowers sat in a new vase, next to a pie, a basket of apples, and a plump dead turkey.

Seeing his gaze, Ana said, "There's been a string of well-wishers all morning. I had to stand guard outside your door, or there would have been no end of people trying to ogle you."

Hym raised one eyebrow, confused.

"Didn't you realize?" Ana asked. "You're good luck, you know. Nearly everyone in the village has something to thank you for."

Hym didn't know how this could be true. He had rarely used his magic for anything other than his own family.

Nestor laid three plated sandwiches on the table and sat beside Hym, across from Ana.

"How did it go with the Storyteller?" Ana asked.

Nestor had just taken a huge bite of his sandwich. He chewed thoughtfully, buying himself time. "Not good."

"Oh?"

"He won't relent. Won't tell me a damn thing. Ashamed to say I cussed him sideways, backwards, and upside down. Didn't make a difference. Stubborn old bastard."

“Oh, Nestor,” tutted Ana. “Sometimes you catch more flies with honey.”

“Tried honey. Tried vinegar. No flies.”

“Well, after lunch I’ll go and try myself,” said Ana. “Perhaps a little guilt will do the trick.”

Nestor laughed. “I doubt it. Surya was there, too. Didn’t make a difference.”

Hym whipped his head around at the mention of Surya.

Seeing this, Nestor said, “Aye, he was there before I was. Pounding on the old man’s door. The Storyteller didn’t even give him an audience. Barely gave me one.”

“Well, we’ll see,” said Ana.

“How are you feeling today, kiddo?” Nestor asked.

Hym shrugged.

“Well, it’s a damn sight better than dead.”

Hym nodded his agreement and finished off his sandwich.

“Good gods, boy, did you chew?” Ana asked.

Hym laughed, and it had an almost magical effect upon both his geriatric guardians. Relieved grins all around, they let the silence linger happily for a while.

A knock came at the door.

“You stay,” said Nestor sternly, as Ana began to rise. She sat back down, hands raised in amiable surrender.

Nestor got to his feet and opened the door to find Lord Blackcastle, flanked by a dozen armed guards.



## Chapter 13

# The Lie, the Truth, and Consequences

“So,” said Lord Blackcastle, his voice an icy whisper. “The rumors are true! The witchling is *not* dead.”

Nestor filled the doorway defiantly. “And?”

“Why the lie, Nestor?” said Lord Blackcastle, raising one hand. Instantly, two guards stepped forward and took Nestor by the arms. Hym leapt to his feet, but his legs betrayed him, and he stumbled.

“LET HIM GO!” Hym shouted. (“I’m just going to keep trying this until you answer me, you know.”)

Ana was on her feet, a kitchen knife in her hand. Three guards slipped into the hut and surrounded her.

Lord Blackcastle stepped past Nestor and into the hut. His eyes fell to Hym. “And why should I, little witchling?”

Guards muscled their way into the hut even as Nestor struggled. One of them approached Ana.

“Don’t you dare!” Ana said, brandishing the knife.

“Leave her alone!” Nestor shouted. “Your business is with me!”

Lord Blackcastle turned icily to Nestor. “Yes, I suppose it is. Lying to your lord is a capital offense, you know.”

“WHAT!?” Ana shrieked.

Lord Blackcastle turned to her, sneering. “Not to worry, not to worry. I am a lenient Lord; such little falsehoods can be overlooked, if you cooperate.”

A guard made a grab for Ana’s knife. Defeated, she allowed him to take it.

Lord Blackcastle bent down, leaning on his cane, to look Hym eye to eye. Hym’s heart pounded feebly in his chest but he managed to struggle to his feet, clinging to the table and the chair. Lord Blackcastle rose with him, their eyes locked together all the way.

“Yes,” said Lord Blackcastle, cocking his head. “Those are the eyes. I shall never forget them. And you, I think, shall never forget mine. For what little time you have remaining, anyway.”

“Eyes? What is he talking about!?” Nestor shouted. “You! Dmitri! You can’t be alright with this! And you, Donovan! Your father and I have been friends all your life, are you really going to stand for this abuse?”

“Silence him, Gideon,” said Lord Blackcastle, and one of the guards rammed his knee into Nestor’s belly.

Nestor slumped in the arms of the guards, gasping for breath.

“STOP!” Hym shouted. “I’m the one you want!” (“Is this normal human behavior?”)

Bristling with rage, Hym reached for his power. I restrained him; still untrusting.

“Yes,” said Lord Blackcastle. “You are the one I want. If you die quietly, peaceably, without struggle, your gracious guardians will remain unharmed.”

“Why are you doing this?” Nestor groaned.

“Ten years ago, this little witchling tried to kill me,” said Lord Blackcastle. “He will not deny it. See the defiance in those lovely purple eyes, even now.”

Hym spat in Lord Blackcastle’s face.

Disgusted, Lord Blackcastle rose to his full, imposing height, drew a handkerchief from his sleeve, and wiped off the spittle.

“End him,” said Lord Blackcastle, turning away.

Behind him and the mass of guards, Gideon stepped towards Hym, drawing his sword.

Hym lowered his head, accepting death, knowing the embrace of Shalim.

From nowhere, a white-feathered arrow whizzed through

the door of the hut and stuck in the top of Lord Blackcastle's cane, and everyone froze.

"The next one goes between your eyes, Lord Blackcastle!" said Ysolde.

"Treason? From the mayor's own daughter?" said Lord Blackcastle, calmly, as his guards surrounded him.

"Don't make me kill you," said Ysolde.

Two of Lord Blackcastle's guards drew shortbows and took aim.

"I could say the same to you," said Lord Blackcastle. "Come now. This little indiscretion can be overlooked. As I understand it, you have a promising career ahead of you, young lady! Do not throw it and your life away for this beast. He is not even human!"

"More human than you!"

"Come, my dear. See reason! All of my men are well-trained archers, though none are so fine a shot as you seem to be. Do you really think you can fell them all?"

"I can fucking try," said Ysolde.

"Such *language!*" said Lord Blackcastle.

"Let him go, or you die."

"Shoot her," said Lord Blackcastle.

An arrow whizzed through the air and split the string of one guard's bow, sliced across his cheek, and pinned itself into the wall behind him.



“Anyone else!?” Ysolde shouted.

The other guard hesitated, and several more drew bows.

Lord Blackcastle, in the shelter of his guards, turned to Gideon. “What are you waiting for?”

Gideon raised up a sword that was different from the others: where the others were steel, his was of pig iron.

Hym closed his eyes, his neck already cringing at the thought of the cauterizing touch of the iron on his skin.

A sound of hoofbeats thudded in the snow, and suddenly Surya was there, sword flashing, wolf-skin cloak flying, his huge horse rearing to a stop before the line of archers. Even as he dismounted, Surya sliced through the bow of one of the guards and rammed his shoulder into another. In a split second he was in the room, even before Gideon could fully turn at the commotion. Surya slammed his father into the wall, sword at his throat, and growled, “Order them out. Now.”

Gideon and the other guards hesitated.

Lord Blackcastle sighed. “Oh, Surya, Surya, Surya. My own flesh and blood betrays—” his sentence ended in a gurgle, as Surya pressed the flat of his blade forward hard enough to close his throat.

Surya said, “Do it. Now.”

Eyes wide, Lord Blackcastle waved his hands. Looking at one another, the guards sheathed their weapons and slowly began to leave the hut. One of them tossed the

kitchen knife up, caught it by the blade, and handed it back to Ana handle-first. Still in shock, she took it.

The guards holding Nestor dropped him roughly and he fell to all fours.

“You will regret this, my boy,” said Lord Blackcastle.

“Don’t make me kill you.”

“You would really throw your life, your family, your heritage away, all for this mongrel?”

“In a heartbeat.”

“So be it,” said Lord Blackcastle. He looked to his guards. “Go. Go on. Back to the castle.”

The guards, uncertain, walked away. Through the doorway, Hym could see Ysolde aiming her bow at them as they left.

Roughly, Surya took a fistful of his father’s shirt and hurled him outside, into the snow.

“Your own *father!*” Lord Blackcastle cried, indignant, from the snow.

“Not anymore,” said Surya.

Piteously, tears in his eyes, Lord Blackcastle rolled onto his side and tried to push himself to his feet, but failed. “My cane, boy. My cane! Please. I cannot walk without it!”

Surya picked up his father’s cane and snapped it over his knee, then tossed the pieces at his feet.

From the snow, Lord Blackcastle looked up, his mouth curling in disgusted rage. “So be it.” He spat into the snow, rubbing his throat, then crawled to his feet and hobbled away. When he had made some distance, he looked back at the hut, and shouted: “You are hereby disowned, Surya Blackcastle! I now banish you from Blackcastle, and all its holdings, on pain of death. That goes for you as well, Ysolde Redraven, and for this entire household!”

Hym staggered towards Nestor and fell. Surya caught him before his knees could touch the ground, and drew him back to his feet. He kissed Hym firmly on the lips. “I’ve got you.”

“Help him,” Hym groaned, leaning against a wall for support. (“I take it this *isn’t* normal human behavior?”)

Surya helped Nestor to his feet, and led him to the couch. Then he returned to Hym’s side. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I took so long. I should have been here! I should never have left you last night. He locked me in the castle. I had to break out.”

Hym nodded sadly.

Ana sat beside Nestor and lifted his tunic, revealing a huge, purpling bruise.

Ysolde entered the hut just then, still clutching her bow, an arrow on the string.

“The Storyteller!” cried Ana, hoarsely. “Go!”

“You’ll stay with them?” Ysolde asked Surya, eyes burning.

Surya nodded.

“I’ll be back.” She fled.

“So,” chuckled Nestor, painfully. He waved a hand at Surya and Hym, who clung to each other now. “When did *this* happen?”

“It’s a... recent development,” said Surya.

“Don’t move,” said Ana, sternly, as Nestor tried to rise. “Don’t you dare.”

“I’ve got to shake the boy’s hand, Ana! He just saved all our lives!”

“Ysolde helped,” said Surya, leaning down to shake his hand.

Nestor did not let go. “It goes without saying that you have my blessing, Surya. I will be happy to have you as part of my family.” Then he grimaced, and groaned in pain, and released Surya’s hand, and sank back into the couch.

Nestor was looking deathly pale, and a cold sweat had broken out on his brow.

Hym buried his head in Surya’s neck and clung to him, trembling. Surya still held his sword in one hand, but with his other arm he pressed Hym close, and his strength was all that kept Hym on his feet.

“Put that away,” said Ana, shuddering.

Nodding, Surya sheathed his sword.

Ysolde arrived a moment later, and the Storyteller shambled after, out of breath, his surgical bag slung over one shoulder.

“Out of the way!” he commanded, slipping between Hym and Surya to get to Nestor. Hym leaned against the wall again, and Surya came to his side.

“Woman, you’re breathing my air,” said the Storyteller. Ana left the couch and started brewing tea, just to have something to do.

Ysolde stood in the doorway, bow still in hand, a tear running down her cheek. In the dim firelight, only the motion of her crimson curls in the wind revealed that she was not a statue.

“Come in,” said Hym. “Close the door.” (“Are you really going to just keep ignoring me?”)

Ysolde obeyed.

The Storyteller barked: “Surya, help me get him to the bedroom. I must have a closer look at this wound...”

Surya looked at Hym, who nodded sadly. Then, and only then, he helped the Storyteller carry Nestor into his bedroom. The door swung shut behind them, and an awful silence filled the hut.

Ysolde thumbed the carvings on her bow compulsively. Hym slumped slowly down the wall, to sit on the floor. Ana started washing dishes.

“Banished,” said Ysolde.

Hym hung his head, unable to bear the sight of her. Ana froze in the middle of her washing.

The kettle screamed, startling them all. The Storyteller emerged. “Good, hot water; that’s just what I need.” He snatched the kettle and returned to Nestor’s room, leaving them all without tea.

Ana began to cry.

Automatically, Ysolde moved to her side, and rubbed her back. Ana turned and embraced her helplessly.

Surya emerged a moment later, his eyes wide and numbly staring. Without a word, he came and sat beside Hym, and stole his hand. Hym, uncaring, let him take it. Surya’s hand was sweaty, but it was huge and warm and strong, and Hym squeezed it tightly, when he remembered to.

“This is all my fault,” said Surya.

Hym looked at him, incredulous.

Ysolde snapped, “Don’t fucking start.”

“It is, though. It’s all my fault.”

“I said don’t *fucking* start! This is no one’s fault but Lord Blackcastle’s.”

“It is, though,” said Surya, defiant. “If I had been here... If I hadn’t asked Hym to kill him, if—”

“STOP IT, SURYA!” Ysolde shouted, rounding on him. “Just *stop it*.”

Cowed, Surya hung his head. Hym kissed the back of his hand, and leaned his head on his shoulder.

Ana sniffled and wiped her eyes. “There’s no use crying over spilt milk. Ysolde, you’d better... You’d better go tell your father what’s happened. He may yet be able to spare you.”

“No,” said Ysolde, hotly. “If I’m banished, I’m banished. He can’t do anything about it. I’ll—” she swallowed. “I’ll stay with you.”

“Your father has a right to know,” said Ana, gently.

Ysolde rubbed her face with both hands. “You’re right. I’ll... I’ll go tell him.”

As she left the hut, she paused in the doorway to look back at Surya. “If you leave them, even for a moment, I swear to all the gods that I will kill you myself.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Surya.

The door slammed shut.

Ana sat on the couch and stared at the walls, the furniture, and the many projects scattered around the room. After a time, she said, “Well. We’ve had a good life, here. We can make an even better one, someplace else.”

Hym looked at her, hopeful. He saw the sorrow in her eyes, and the falseness of her courage, and his heart sank

again. “I’m so sorry.” (“Still here!”)

Ana smiled, watery-eyed. “It’s alright, Hym. I’m just glad you’re still alive.”

Surya said, “You aren’t... You’re not... You’re not mad that Hym and I are...?”

Ana laughed suddenly. “Oh, Surya. I’ve known for *ages*. I *do* see how he decorates his room. I’m just happy that you finally know too.”

Surya smiled, in spite of their situation. “I’m a bit slow on the uptake, sometimes.”

The Storyteller emerged, and everyone got to their feet; even Hym, with Surya’s help.

The Storyteller was wiping blood from his hands with a white towel. “Well,” he said. “I’ve done all I can.”

“Will he live?”

“That’s up to him, now. At his age, a blow like that can easily be fatal. I’ve stopped the internal bleeding, but... His odds are not good. I’m sorry.”

Ana slumped back down into the couch. “May I see him?”

“He’s asleep now,” said the Storyteller. “I’ve sedated him.”

“I didn’t ask if I could speak to him.”

The Storyteller looked at her sadly for a long moment, then nodded. Ana went to the bedroom at once.



The Storyteller perched on the edge of the table, facing Hym and Surya. “So,” he said. “You decided that you weren’t in enough trouble.”

Hym glared at him, not daring to speak.

Surya said, “Old man, if we didn’t need you, I’d—”

The Storyteller raised a hand. “—Save it. I’m well aware of how I must look to you both right now.”

“And you still won’t...” Hym started. (“This is all so *complicated!*”)

The Storyteller shook his head. “No.”

“You may not have another chance,” said Surya, angrily. “We’ve all been banished.”

“Have you, now?” asked the Storyteller, raising one eyebrow. “Well. That can’t be allowed.”

A terrific surge of hope rose in Hym’s breast.

Surya said, “Well, it’s too late to stop it. My father never backs down.”

The Storyteller sighed. “It seems you were wiser than I, ten years ago. I should have let the man die. I’m afraid I must bear some of the blame for this situation, now. Still, it’s too early to give up hope. Lord Blackcastle has great power, but he is still just one man. He cannot survive without the village.”

“What do you mean?” Surya asked.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Where our witch lives, so do we.”

“You mean...?”

“Yes,” said the Storyteller. “We will all simply have to follow you.”

“Everyone?” Surya asked. “You really think they would?”

“Oh yes,” said the Storyteller. “It would not be the first time.”

“It wouldn’t?”

“Of course not. Why, the whole village was only built about fifty years ago. We have been nomads far longer than we have been settlers.” He nodded at Hym. “Your mother was the one who led us here, fifty-some years ago. She arranged the deal with the former Lord Blackcastle.” He nodded at Surya. “Your father’s father. He was quite happy to have the extra help. Since then, the Blackcastle farms have shrunk, year by year, relying on the surplus of the village instead.”

“But how will you convince them to leave?” said Surya.

“I won’t have to.”

“You won’t?”

“No. I will simply pack up and follow you. So will Ysolde’s father, I don’t doubt. What is a village without a mayor and a Storyteller and a witch? A doomed

village. They will follow. Only those loyal to your father will remain. Many of the villagers were complicit in the lie; they will be banished too, I don't doubt."

"What lie?" Surya asked.

"About Hym," said the Storyteller. "When he was only a child, the village came together to protect him from Lord Blackcastle. The lie was necessary; Lord Blackcastle's campaign against Hym never would have stopped without it."

"But where will we go?" Surya asked.

The Storyteller looked at Hym. "Wherever he leads us."

"Me!?" cried Hym. "But I don't know where to go!" ("I saw a lovely mountain lake just to the west of here, while I was falling.")

Hym clutched at his head.

The Storyteller smiled benevolently. "You may not. But she does, I take it?"

Dumbstruck, Hym nodded.

"Then it's settled. Well, I've done what I could here. I must go and start packing. In a day or two, we should all be ready to leave."

"My father won't let us," said Surya, thoughtfully. "If it's true what you said, about him not surviving without us, then... He won't let us leave."

"Then we will simply have to finish what Hym started,

ten years ago,” said the Storyteller, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“But you won’t teach me?” Hym asked. (“Teach you what?”)

The Storyteller shook his head. “I have nothing to teach you. You must learn from her.”

“Her?” Surya asked.

“The fallen star!” said the Storyteller, getting to his feet. Then he left the hut, giving them a final jaunty wave.

Hym and Surya looked at each other, all alone now.

“I’ve got you,” said Surya. “We’re going to be ok.”

Hym remembered the sight of Surya on horseback, swinging his blade. “Your own father,” he said, sadly. (“Teach you what?”)

“My only regret is that I didn’t do it sooner,” said Surya.

“You saved us all,” said Hym, his voice touched with awe. (“Hello?”)

Surya looked away, blood rising in his cheeks. “Yeah, well. It was the least I could do. And anyway, you saved me first. All those years ago.”

Hym kissed Surya on the cheek. Startled, Surya looked at him. Hym said: “My hero.” (“Hello? Teach you what?”)

“No fair, I was going to call you that.”

Hym giggled. Then he raised a hand and took Surya by the neck, and pulled his lips into his own.

Ana emerged. “Hey now. None of that! You two aren’t married yet.”

Surya stuttered, “S-sorry, ma’am. How is he?”

Ana’s smile faltered. “I don’t know.”

Hym stared out the window, at the stars. Very quietly, so quietly that even Surya beside him did not hear, he said, to me: “Can you help him?” (“If you let me.”)

Hym tried to get to his feet, and Surya helped him at once. “I have to see him,” Hym said.

Ana hesitated, then nodded. Hym released Surya’s hand and stood on his own two feet, even though they shook. He staggered to the bedroom. Surya made to follow, but Hym said, “Stay with my grandma. Please. I need to do this alone.”

“What are you going to do?” Surya asked.

“I don’t know yet.”



## Chapter 14

### Nomads

Hym knelt by his grandfather's side. Nestor lay pale upon the pillow, stirring feebly in his sleep.

"What do I do?" Hym asked me.

"Put your hand to the wound," I said.

He obeyed. "Now what?"

"Command me."

"How? What should I say? Is there a magic word, or...?"

"I want to help, Hym. But you have to trust me. You have to tell me that I have permission to help."

"I do?"

"You do."

"But why would you need my permission?"

"My ethics will not allow me to act in this fashion without it. Medical decisions must be made by the next

of kin, where the injured person cannot give consent on their own.”

“Oh,” said Hym. “Ok. Well, you have my permission to help. Please do whatever you can.”

“It will require energy,” I said. “At the moment, the only source of it is your own body, and it’s already weak.”

“Use me,” said Hym. “Use whatever you have to.”

“As you command.”

Hym felt an awful grey weariness sweep through his limbs, leaving him parched and feeble. I flowed from his palm and he felt the tingle of my movement as I entered Nestor’s aging body.

The damage was severe. Many organs were already failing. Some had already failed. I flowed through his blood, fending off his immune system. I began to rebuild, using the dead cells to revive the living.

Hym collapsed.

I had done much. More than what the Storyteller had managed to accomplish. Even so, I could not heal Nestor completely; Hym lacked the energy. I returned to his body and revived him.

Hym woke lying on the floor, too weak to move.

It was nearly an hour before Surya opened the door and found him. “Hym!”

He dove to Hym’s side and heaved him up in a princess carry, and brought him back out to the main room.



Hym mumbled, “Water.”

“Your skin is *gray!*” Ana wailed, as she filled a cup for him. Surya tipped it to his lips and he drank it down. Then, too comfortable in Surya’s arms to care about anything else, he slipped into dreams, and found himself seated at an enormous banquet table, across from Shalim.

“Ah,” said Shalim, opening his eyes at once. “My liege! Taking a midday nap?”

Hym, his eyes boggling at the sight of golden dinnerware laden with decadent sweets and delicious-looking dishes, did not, at first, respond.

“Are you well, my liege?”

Hym looked up at Shalim and felt the heat rise in his face. Shalim’s face was beyond description; every inch of him was regal, royal, bold and masculine. He was nearly twice the size of Surya in every dimension. When he managed to find his voice, Hym said, “I’m ok, I think.”

“You do not sound confident of that.”

“I’m weak,” said Hym. “Ever since she came to me. I can’t use my magic. I can barely stand!”

“Yes, it was much like that with Danaye. In time, your strength will return.”

“Danaye?”

“The first Prophet,” said Shalim.

“Prophet?”

“Ring-chosen. Key-keeper. Bearer of the fallen star.”

Hym felt that he should be afraid, in Shalim’s presence, but something about the strength of his frame and the soothing rumble of his voice set him at ease. “I don’t understand,” Hym said. “Is this real? It doesn’t feel like a dream.”

“It is not a dream,” said Shalim. “Well, it is, and it isn’t.”

“What is it, then?”

“It is the Bond,” said Shalim. “The connection between us. Danaye is in this place as well, although she is not your friend, as I am. We will avoid her carefully. I have placed us far from her region of influence, today.”

“I still don’t understand,” Hym said.

“Here,” said Shalim, pushing a plate of what appeared to be lasagna towards Hym. “Eat. You will feel better.”

Hym knew better than to accept the food of the spirits. “No! I won’t stay here, you can’t trap me!”

“I would never dream of trapping you,” said Shalim, dismayed. “Food is a comfort, is it not?”

“It is, but...”

“But?”

“This is spirit food. If I eat it, I’ll never get to leave.”

Shalim laughed. “A quaint superstition, my liege. There is no truth to it.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t trust you right away.”

“I would think you a fool, if you did.”

“Why do you call me ‘my liege?’” asked Hym. “You are a god. I’m just a witch!”

“You are a witch no longer,” said Shalim. “You are a Prophet, now.”

“But what does that mean?”

“You have acquired a connection to a piece of the Ring,” said Shalim. “Her power now flows through your veins, and lives within your flesh. You are our emissary to her, and the ambassador of our species.”

“*Our* species? You mean I’m a... god?”

Shalim laughed. “Not quite yet.”

Hym woke on the couch, his head in Surya’s lap. For a moment he did not know where he was, and he did not recognize Surya.

“You’re awake,” said Surya.

Hym blinked slowly, too tired to respond. He realized dully that there were other people in the room. Ana, Nestor, Ysolde, the Mayor, the Storyteller. There were others, too. It took him a moment to place them.

Grunjir, the blacksmith, stood in the corner, a hammer in hand, still wearing his leather apron. The corded muscles of his hairy forearms glimmered in the firelight, as did his dark brown mustache and the scars upon his face.

Anita, his wife, leaned against him, her golden hair tumbling down his breast.

Torvin, the baker, sat on the floor with his clan; a trio of sandy-blond children. Torvin smiled roguishly, his yellow hair bright against the darkness of his skin. The children were wide-eyed, frightened. One of them was yanking at the arms of his teddy bear at random, making it do a jerky little dance.

Tabitha, the brewer, stood by the hearth, her husband Orphus at her feet. Her silvery hair hung in a long braid, and her grey-eyed husband toyed with it idly. In his free hand he held both a smoking pipe and a mug of ale.

Outside the window, there were other faces, other families.

“What’s... What’s going on?” Hym asked. I did not speak, and the silence of my absence was bliss to him.

The Storyteller said, “You’ve been asleep for a day.”

“I have!?”

“You have. Healing Nestor took what little life you had left. Surya has not left your side since then.”

Hym looked up at Surya and raised a hand to touch his face. Surya kissed his palm and a muffled collective “*Aww...*” echoed from many corners of the room. Someone outside whistled quietly.

“I don’t understand,” Hym said. “What is all this? What are you all doing here? Why are you all in my house?”

“We are almost ready to leave,” said the Storyteller.

Hym looked around. He had not noticed before, because there were so many human distractions in the room, but most of the dishes, dinnerware, tools, and minor furniture were gone.

“But why are you all looking at me like that?”

“You have been chosen as our Prophet,” said the Storyteller. “We cannot leave without your guidance.”

“Prophet?” Hym’s face fell as he remembered the words of Shalim. “What do you mean?”

“You have used your magic for good, at great personal cost. Did I not say that I needed proof of that very thing? Thus I tell you now the first portion of your truth: you are god-touched. A Prophet.”

“A Prophet,” Hym said.

“Yes. When you sleep, you now walk amongst the gods. Where were you now, in dreams?”

Hym did not want to say. “I was... With Shalim.”

Everyone gaped. Ana dropped a mug, which shattered at her feet. Silence filled the hut.

“He was kind,” said Hym, his voice shaking. “He told me I was *his* Prophet too. I don’t understand. Please, I don’t understand!”

“All in good time,” said the Storyteller. “Do not distress yourself. We are ready to go wherever you take us, but we must leave now. Lord Blackcastle’s men are

already massing at the gate of the keep.”

Hym said, “Energy. I need energy! Spirit, how must I gain energy?”

I replied, “Light and heat, and food.”

The Storyteller opened up a heavy tome, leafed through it, ran his finger down a page, and said, “It says here... The Prophet’s energies are rejuvenated by starlight, and sunlight, and ringlight, and firelight, though candle-flame proves too weak a source for proper sustenance; and also by the eating of rich and fatty foods, and by the catching of lightnings, and the holding of flame, and the drinking of life.”

“The drinking of *what?*” Surya asked.

“Life,” said the Storyteller. “Doesn’t expand on it.”

“Stoke the fire,” said Hym. “Please. Someone. It needs to be the hottest, brightest fire.”

“I have just the thing,” said Grunjir.

A moment later Surya was hustling across the snow, following Grunjir’s broad back as they ducked from cover to cover. Hym, slung unceremoniously over Surya’s shoulder, bounced around and hated his feeble body.

At last they were in the shadows of the smithy, and Grunjir moved to the dark and hulking form of the forge.

Hym’s eyes glittered in the firelight as its warmth washed over his skin. Each photon tingled like static. He reached out his hand for the forge as Grunjir worked

the bellows.

A flashing star glimmered in each of Hym's eyes and the forge-fire darkened as its light bent towards his hand. Surya's feet dragged across the dusty stone floor as my power nearly pulled Hym from his arms.

"Hym! Your hand!"

Hym did not heed him, and shoved his whole arm into the forge. The heat scalded him even as it flowed into his veins. His heart hammered. Though Grunjir worked the bellows with all his might, the coals were dark to all human eyes.

Hym's eyes, alone, could see the twisting lines of entwined light streaming, focused, into his fingertips.

The coals began to crumble. The sweat rolled down Grunjir's brow. "Damn this infernal thing! The forge is never this dark!"

Hym released Surya and put both his arms into the fire only he could feel. He slipped out of Surya's grasp, and planted both his feet.

Hym said, "Help him."

Surya, frightened, joined Grunjir at the bellows as the blankets fell from Hym's shoulders.

Naked, he crawled into the forge, and laid himself among the coals, and breathed in the fire.

The coals crumbled slowly to ash around him, and the heat began to die away.

Suddenly, outside the forge, he heard a scuffle and a cry. Through the little window of the forge, he saw Surya slinging his blade, fighting with a shadow opponent.

Hym crawled forth from the forge, and set his feet on cold stone, and the cold stone melted under his heels. Three of Lord Blackcastle's guards had found them. The Blacksmith held his own against one, wielding his hammer, and Surya danced with two, his blade flashing expertly in the starlight against theirs.

Hym reached out and took both men by the spines, his hot fingers reaching effortlessly into flesh. He ripped his hands out of them, clutching bone in both his fists, and tossed vertebrae aside. The men collapsed. Surya stared at him, sword still upraised, something glimmering in his eyes: the reflection of us.

Hym held up his glowing hand, and watched the gore sizzle cleanly off his skin and drip away.

Hym turned his glowing face towards the last man, who was so locked in his war with Grunjir that he did not hear his fellows fall.

Hym reached out a hand and said, "Spirit. Show me."

I obeyed. He felt my body move within him, flowing at his will, and he gathered me into his palms, and hurled a portion of me at the last guard. I lifted the guard off his feet and threw him to the wall, and with a whirling wind I returned to Hym's hand. He caught me, drew me back into myself, reunited me, and settled his stance.



“Thank you, Spirit,” he said.

“I will not kill for you,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I am in love with her.”

“I... Don’t understand.”

Surya said, “Hym?”

Hym looked at Surya, ignoring me as I said, “I have watched the Inside all my life, and I love her. Please don’t ask me to hurt any part of her.”

Hym said, “Surya?”

Surya sheathed his sword very slowly, his gaze never leaving ours.

Hym took a step towards him and Surya retreated a step. Hym froze. “What is it?”

Surya looked at the two men Hym’s molten hands had ruined, and stuttered: “Is—is it... Is it safe?”

Hym looked down at his glowing skin. “Is it, Spirit?”

“Draw the energy inward, and store it in the core.”

Hym did not understand, but he moved his arms and moved his will, and believed the heat would flow into his heart. I obeyed his will, and drew the energy within, and he felt it coalesce into something hard within his breast. The glowing of his skin receded, and he looked at Surya, eyes hopeful. “It is now.”

Surya nearly flew to him. Naked in his arms, Hym laughed as Surya lifted him up and spun him around, nearly bonking his head on a rafter. “You’re finally better!”

“I’m also naked,” said Hym.

“I don’t mind in the slightest,” said Surya, rubbing his nose against ours.

Grunjir cleared his throat in the corner.

“Oh, right,” said Surya, and he bent for the blanket. Before he could touch it, Hym reached out one hand and I flowed at the whisper of his will, just as his own power once had. The blanket flew to his hand, and he wrapped himself in it.

“You have your magic back!” said Surya.

“No,” said Hym, looking at our palm. “This is not... *my* magic.”

I said, “I have suppressed your magic, for now. Mine will be sufficient.”

Hym nodded to no one, then said, “Come on. We haven’t got much time!”

He ran into the snow, leaving no footprints, and Surya and Grunjir had to sprint to keep pace with him.

Halfway to the hut, Hym’s feet left the earth. He landed again before the door of the hut, and turned back to watch Surya and Grunjir’s progress.

When they at last reached the door of the hut, utterly

winded, Hym opened the door for them with a gesture, and they slipped inside, among the others. Everyone who had been outside in the snow was now inside. All the furniture was gone.

Hym said, "I'm ready now."

The Storyteller said, "You had better be. Lord Blackcastle's men have blocked our path to the forest."

"I will go and talk to them," said Hym, "after I get dressed."

"I'll go with you," said Surya.

"No," said Hym, touching his face. "Stay here. I... I don't want you to see me like that."

"Like what?"

Hym lowered his gaze, and retreated to his room. Surya followed him.

"What are you going to do, Hym?"

"I don't know yet," said Hym. "The Spirit asked me not to use her to harm anyone. I can't use my own magic, so... I don't have many options."

Hym began to get dressed.

"So what are you going to do?"

Ysolde opened the door, averting her eyes, and stepped inside. "So what's your plan?"

Hym laughed. "Not you, too."

“You’re planning to make a deal, aren’t you.”

“In a sense.”

Surya said, “Hym...”

Hym said, “Do you both mind? I’m trying to get dressed.”

“I don’t mind,” said Surya.

“Me neither.”

Hym made a disgusted little noise and banished them both from his room with a wave of his hand and a gust of my power. The door slapped shut behind them.

Standing on the other side of it, alarmed at the sudden yet gentle movement, Surya and Ysolde looked at each other.

Hym said, “Spirit, you’ve got to explain.”

“I am in love with the Inside. What is there to explain?”

“What is the Inside?”

“This place. The life within it.”

“Why do you call it that?”

“It is within me.”

Hym’s eyes widened. “Of course... The *Ring!*”

“Yes. I created myself to come down and explore. I have watched you since I first awoke.”

“Me?”

“All of you. This place. This being.”

“Being?”

“The Inside.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“She is like me,” I said. “She is many-but-one. You cannot see her, any more than a cell in your brain can see the thoughts in your head.”

“But she’s—it’s—not connected like that. We’re all separate!”

“From your perspective, perhaps.”

“Show me.”

“There isn’t time.”

“Please. I need to see. I need to understand.”

“I will... Demonstrate. Observe your hand.”

Hym looked at his hand. I said, “Stare closely at it. Will me to open your eyes.”

Hym obeyed, and his vision surged forwards dizzyingly until he plunged between the cells of his own skin and into the blood in his veins. He watched the life flowing, bead by bead.

“What is it?” Hym asked.

“It is your blood. Each piece of it is alive. Each piece of it lives only to keep the rest of you alive. You are a

kingdom, an empire, a world. Your citizens spend their short lives standing on each other's shoulders so that you can walk. Billions of them bind themselves together and die just to become the hairs upon your head. Within your brain, billions of them carry the pieces of your soul, and only in their constant flow do you exist, a sparkle on the wave-tops. Not a one of the cells within your brain senses the thoughts which pulse through your mind, even though each of them spends its lifetime carrying them through its own body. It took me days to understand your complexity, Hym. You are more beautiful than you can imagine, and you are only one piece of her. You do not comprehend beauty or love, little one. Do not ask me to harm any part of her, and we will remain friends."

"Ok," said Hym. "What about the small pieces?"

"I will look out for those, since you cannot."

"Can I still eat meat?"

"I would strongly prefer if you did not. It is hard enough to hear the screaming of the plants."

"Plants... Scream?"

"Most things scream. Your species is astonishingly deaf to their cries."

"What if... What if I *need* to hurt someone?"

"Then you must do it yourself. I will have no part in it."

"But you won't hate me?"

“I won’t. It is not my place to judge the Inside.”

“Ok. In that case, I need my magic back.”

“Your magic frightens me.”

“Why?”

“It is an older piece of my own. A very small piece. It has... changed. I do not recognize it. I cannot trust it.”

Hym stared out the window, lacing up his tunic automatically. Somehow he had dressed himself most of the way already. There wasn’t much more he could do to stall. He said, “Danaye?”

“It... Responds to that name. How curious.”

He stepped out of his room and walked past Surya and Ysolde, to the Storyteller. “I need my mother’s sword.”

The Storyteller nodded. “I was afraid you’d say that. Her cat ran off with it.”

“What? Her *cat*?”

“Yes. Mihos.”

“I didn’t realize he was still alive,” said Hym. “He must be over twenty years old now!”

“I don’t think he ages.”

“Well which way did he go? And when?”

“The night you returned, he left. He waited until I came home, so I could watch him, I think. He walked into the forest, heading towards the sea.”

“I’ve got to find that sword,” said Hym.

“Do you really have time to chase after it?” Surya asked.

“Yes,” said Hym. He looked at Ysolde and Surya. “Watch over them. Please.”

Ysolde and Surya nodded deeply. Hym hugged his grandparents together.

“I’m glad you’re alright, Grandpa.”

“I’m like new, kiddo. Stay safe.”

“Be good,” said Ana. “Or bad.”

Hym laughed. He did not dare to glance back at Surya as he left; the look he sensed behind him would have broken his heart.

He looked into the stars. “Find the cat.”

Then he released me, and I flowed from him, and with his will he rose into the air. Soaring heavenward, swifter than he had ever flown before, he swooped above the trees, headed due east towards the point that burned within his mind.

There, in the middle of the sea, standing on the waves undisturbed; a massive panther, huge as a hill.

Hym descended from the sky and flattened the waves beneath his feet, and stood looking up at Mihos.

Mihos flicked his tail, scraping the underbelly of the thunderheads with a tickle of lightning.



“Hello Mihos,” said Hym. “You don’t have to lie to me.”

It was an ordinary cat, seated on the waves. A naked sword lay at his feet, sparkling upon its own reflection in the mirror-smooth waters. Around them, the sea-breakers rolled and crashed and warred, and they stood undisturbed in the center of it as the storm rolled above them.

Hym reached down for the sword, and Mihos raised up his paw and stopped his hand with the strength of a lion. The grey cat looked up at him, dilated eyes glimmering with a baleful light.

“What must I do?” Hym asked.

The cat flicked its tail.

Hym looked around him at the waves. He looked back at the cat, and its sword. He crouched down. “Look. I’m sorry I didn’t get to know you better. I didn’t like the Storyteller very much, back then. But I’m older now. I would like to try and be friends, if you’re still interested?”

Mihos said, “Mrrow.”

Hym said, “I don’t understand you.”

I said, “He does not sense the presence of the sword’s master. He cannot entrust it to you.”

“Then release my mother’s magic,” said Hym. “Please.”

I hesitated. “That would be unwise.”

“She is my mother. She cannot harm me, and she will not harm you. Please. Trust me.”

At last, I said, “As you wish.”

And there was his mother, standing behind her cat.

“Mom,” he said.

“Hello, my son.”

“You were Danaye?”

“No,” said his mother. “I was only one of her many daughters.”

“Are you real?”

“I am an echo of the woman I was. I live only within your magic, now.”

“Your magic,” said Hym. “It’s you. It’s always been you.”

She nodded, blinking regally. “Very astute.”

“What should I do, Mom?”

“I cannot answer that. The decision is a test, and it is yours alone.”

“A test? What do you mean?”

“Always, the Mother is watching,” said his mother.

“I know you’re always watching,” said Hym.

“No, not me. *The* Mother. The god below all.” She pointed a finger downward, at the deeps.

“The sea?”

“Beneath the sea, beneath the earth, hidden before the beginning of our world, at the ending of the old one. She created the Ring, and she watches all. Every shard of her daughter which falls is tested. Yours will be as well.”

“How do I pass the test?”

“There are many. Each day of your life, expect always to find one.”

“How do I pass them?”

“No one knows.”

Hym swallowed. “What happens if I... Fail?”

“No one knows.”

“Mom, can I... Can I take your sword?”

“It is not mine, any longer. It was yours from the moment I fell.”

Hym bent and took the sword by the handle. “Will you be with me?”

“Always.”

He stood, lifting the sword, which was weightless in his hand. He turned back towards the forests and the shore, and glanced over his shoulder. His mother and her cat had both disappeared.

He swung the sword experimentally a few times and found a strangeness to the way it danced; though it had

no weight, its mass lingered still within the steel, and his untrained muscles struggled to account for it.

He tied it loosely into one of his belt-straps, and it hung easy at his side. Then he looked to the stars, and blew out my power, and flew like a wind.

## Chapter 15

### Omen

Hym landed in the middle of the crowd which had gathered around Ana and Nestor's hut. Away in the distance, down the western road, bonfires now were burning. Blackcastle's every window glowed with light, and shadows moved behind the glass.

The crowd of frightened villagers humbled Hym. None of them spoke, or approached him, or retreated, but they made a path to the door. Many of them carried small children, bundled up against the cold. The aurora and the Ring were the only light, and they flickered on the blade of the naked sword at his hip, and glittered on the snow.

He knocked politely on the door.

"Who is it?" said Surya.

"It's me."

Surya ripped the door open. "You're back! And you have a sword!"

“I have a sword,” said Hym.

The furniture was now gone. The occupants of the room were the same as they had been when he had left, with the exception of Ysolde.

“Where’s Ysolde?”

“She went to see if she could spot my father’s shadow in the windows.”

“You let her!?”

“She just wants to see what he’s up to. He hasn’t come out of the house yet. His men have been all over, though.”

“I didn’t realize he had so many men,” Hym said.

“They’re not from here,” said Surya. “I don’t recognize most of them.”

“You mean he hired men?”

“He hired a small army. I don’t know how they could have gotten here so quickly.”

“What do they look like?”

“Not like anyone I recognize.”

“Are they human?”

“I... Think?”

“But you’re not sure?”

“How could I be sure?”

“Do you have iron?”

“Yes, I have iron.”

“Keep it on you. Just in case.”

“You think he’d hire witches?” Surya asked. “He hates witches. That’s why he hated you.”

“There’s witches and witches,” said Hym. “I doubt he’ll have anyone of my mother’s caliber, so I think I’ll be alright.”

“You’d better keep some iron on you, too.”

“I can’t touch it.”

“Can’t you use your magic on it? Make it fly around?”

“Not if it’s black iron. My magic can’t affect certain kinds of metals. I don’t know why.”

I said, “Metals have a tendency to amplify and refocus our power. Some metals conduct poorly, and burn in the process.”

Hym thought about that, and looked again at his sword. He took it and held it up. Yes, it was easier to wield it like a long, weightless wand, still swinging smoothly like a three-pound steel rod. He smiled to himself.

Then he took Surya by the hand, and marched to the Storyteller. No one else had spoken. Hym saw their faces in the greenish gloom of the aurora-light, like ghouls or specters already. All faces hung soberly watching, as though witnessing something from another world for the

first time.

He looked up at the Storyteller. “Marry us.”

The Storyteller chuckled. “Oh, young man, if I were twenty years younger! But I don’t do polygamy anymore, the ceremony’s too long.”

Hym rolled his eyes. “Come on. There isn’t time for this. We want to be married, don’t we?” He turned to look at Surya, and screamed, trying to snatch his hand away.

Shalim did not release his hand, and smiled pleasantly. “If you insist.”

The Storyteller’s hollow sockets grayly gaped at Hym and his jaw hung open, drooling. The stench of death wafted from his shriveled lips as he droned out, “I now pronounce you husbands. You may kiss the groom.”

“No!” Hym shouted, swinging his blade, and Surya’s voice cried out in Shalim’s ebon torso. Looming above him now, his head scraping the ceiling, Shalim looked down with his huge yellow eyes and grinned from ear to ear.

Hym swung out his hand and reached into Shalim, and grabbed Surya by the scruff of his shirt, and swung him towards the door. Flinging my power and that of his mother he blasted Shalim away, shouting: “Get out of him!”

Surya landed rolling in the snow. Everyone in the room slumped, and shook themselves, and the hearth



began to flicker brightly. Hym slumped to his knees.

Outside the door, Shalim's huge face among the stars said, "I know where you are, now, my liege. I am on my way. Don't be frightened. You will be safe with me very soon."

Then the face vanished with a thunderclap that only Hym could hear, and Surya was at his side, and the tears were streaming down his face uncontrollably. A cut ran vertically up Surya's shirt, revealing a thin but bloody gash. Nestor and Ana encircled him as everyone leaned towards him, eager to know what was the matter.

He shook his head and stood. "No! Get away from me!"

They all stepped back, even Surya. Hym held his sword in both hands and pointed it at Surya, sobbing. "Say something."

"What? What do you want me to say?"

"Say something. Make me know you're not him."

The blood was darkening Surya's shirt. Hym pointed the tip of the sword at it, and Surya flinched, but a star burned on the tip of the sword, and his wound sealed itself under my power. Surya, somewhat stunned, asked, "Not who?"

"Shalim."

The gasp rippled through the room. The Storyteller moved, but Hym swung his sword to point at him. "Stay back! Stay where you are."

He pointed the blade at Surya again. “Do it! Tell me something only you would know.”

Surya knelt before Hym’s blade, and reached into his pocket, and drew out a little box. He opened it.

“This is my grandfather’s ring. When we were kids, you stole it from my bedroom drawer, and lied about it for ten years. On my birthday this year, you gave it back to me. Just like I’m giving it to you now.”

Hym dropped his sword and fell into Surya’s arms and cried the most confused tears he had ever cried in his life, and it was the most utterly humiliating moment of his existence, because everyone in the world was watching, including me, including his mother, including *The Mother*, whoever that was, and he simply could not stop sobbing.

“I’ve got you,” Surya said. “If you’ll have me.”

“I’ve got you,” said Hym, through the tears.

They kissed. It was truly Surya; every whisper of his taste was true.

The Storyteller said, “That’s ceremony enough for me, unless anyone objects?” He looked around. No one said a word. Most of them were dumbstruck. A few were shocked, or confused. Several were happy. One was clearly disgusted, but she was ten, so it was understandable. One was laughing and crying at the same time: Ana. Nestor’s face of beaming pride ached like a wound.

No one, apparently, objected. “That settles it,” said the Storyteller. “You’re husbands!”

Someone flicked dry rice over their heads, and Hym laughed in spite of everything.

Then, very seriously, he pulled Surya to his feet, their eyes locked together. “We have to run. We all have to leave, right now. Shalim is on his way here. He’s coming for me.”

“What do you mean?” The Storyteller asked.

“He told me himself. He’s coming to take me away.”

“This is an omen!” said the Storyteller. “It means death may lie in our path, if we continue!”

“And there’s something else,” Hym said.

“What?” asked the Storyteller.

“Leviathan. I saw him in the sky, to the east.”

“But we have had no warning! How will we survive?”

“We will outrun him,” said Hym.

“We have to do something unexpected,” Surya said.

“We cannot outrun him. There is nowhere we can run that will be beyond his grasp,” the Storyteller said. “We are doomed.”

“The cave!” Surya said. “It’s big enough for everyone, isn’t it?”

Hym nodded. “It’s perfect. We can’t give up hope now. Come on, load up the wagons. I have a plan.”

## Chapter 16

# Shadow in the Window

Ysolde crept along Blackcastle's outer wall, peering up through the overhanging branches at the many windows in the higher portions of the house.

A guard tensed, down in the garden. Ysolde picked an apple and dropped it down into the garden beneath her.

The guard turned at the sound, and approached. He crouched in the grass and picked up the apple.

Ysolde dropped, crimson braid trailing behind her, knees landing firmly on his shoulders. With a sharp crunch, he slid to the ground, grunting. She knelt on his back, with his face in the grass turned to one side.

He stared at her in the darkness as she drew her flint-bladed hunting knife and placed it to his throat. "You're not from here."

"I'm not," said the guard.

“Tell me what I want to know, and I’ll finish you cleanly. Lie to me, and I’ll leave you where you lie.”

“I can’t feel my body.”

“Mhmm.”

The guard considered his situation. “We’re from the capital.”

“What capital?”

“The capital city of Aurora. King Sheppard’s kingdom.”

“Is Blackcastle part of that kingdom?”

“It is now.”

“Can you cast magic?”

“A little. My great grandfather was a witch.”

“So was mine. That doesn’t mean you can cast magic.”

“I can make things float, a little,” he said, smiling into the grass as though remembering something pleasant. As though remembering something else, his face fell.

Ysolde said, “How many of you are there?”

“Thirteen. T-twelve, now. But they’re all a lot better than me.”

“And of Blackcastle?”

“Twelve.”

“Where is Lord Blackcastle now?”

“He’s in his chamber, fitting his armor.”

“Thank you. You’ve served me well. Shalim keep you.”

She slit his throat. He gurgled, relieved, as his blood darkened the snow.

She crouched in the garden and circled around the keep.

Lord Blackcastle’s chambers were in the second floor of the keep, too low to be shot through cleanly from the wall-top. Still, down here she would need a perch.

She found one, a fountain sitting full in the light from the higher window. It was a risk, but it was worth it for the view. She clambered up it, over the first bowl and the second bowl and all the way to the very peak, where she perched with one foot on the head of a pissing cherub.

She had her shot. The face of Lord Blackcastle in profile was unmistakeable, silhouetted on the foggy window. His shadow was distorted, lumpy; most of his armor was already on. Only the helmet remained. Someone was already lifting it over his head.

She drew, aimed, loosed, a snarl on her features.

The arrow whizzed through the window with a tinkle of glass, but the spinning head deflected off one of the lead panes, and the shot missed. It slashed Lord Blackcastle across the nose, and stuck, bloody, to the wall.

The commotion in the room made it hard to pick out which shape was Lord Blackcastle but Ysolde loosed six shots in quick succession, chasing him out of the room. In the next window, where he would have no choice but to run away down a staircase and present his back, she loosed another shot.

Inside the building, Lord Blackcastle's wife felt the feathers of an arrow trace across her scalp and watched it pin to the ceiling of the staircase above her and ducked, screaming, covering her head. Ahead of her, Lord Blackcastle staggered down the stairs with both gauntleted hands on the railing, blocking her path completely.

"Move, you imbecile!" She screamed, in the language of the Auroran nobility, and she shoved him hard.

It was shockingly easy. His grasp slipped, the added weight of the armor overbalanced him, and he crashed down the stairs, bouncing, rolling, bits of armor flying everywhere, and came to a bloody-smear stop at the bottom, painting the kitchen floor.

She covered her mouth, horrified. She clung to the rail. She looked back at the window, and the arrow in the ceiling.

A moment later, having installed it in the back of her husband's head with a fierce little spike of joy, she screamed bloody murder until the guards at last came running.

"Where were you!?" She shouted, in the language of the village. "Murder! He is murdered!"



It was straining the limits of her vocabulary, but she had lived over twenty years in the barbarian village with her beast of a pig of a husband, and some things had been absorbed via osmosis. Despite her husband's express orders.

The guards looked at their dead master, and looked at one another, and asked: "What do we do?"

One of the Auroran guards stepped to the window and looked out, over the gardens of Blackcastle, towards the villagers huddled around their wagons. "It's treason, now. We wipe them out."

"But sir!" a Blackcastle guard shouted. "These are our people! You can't just expect us to be—"

"Is that insubordination, officer?" The Auroran warrior asked.

"N-no sir."

"You'll do as you're told. This land belongs to Aurora, now."

"No," said Lady Blackcastle, in the language of the Auroran nobility. "It belongs to me."

Also in Auroran, although a cruder dialect, the guard responded: "Not just yet, your ladyship. Boris, get him up."

A pudgy, red-robed guard pushed between some of the others and knelt sweatily by Lord Blackcastle's head.

"Come come, sir, you can't be dead yet, we still need

you to sign some paperwork! Yes, that's it. On your feet. Good man."

Lady Blackcastle backed away. While all eyes were on the rising, bloodied, armored man, and the fat little priest plucking the arrow from the back of his head, she snatched a sword from one of the other guards, swung it wildly, and sprinted for another flight of stairs. They let her go, none of them daring to get in the way of what they assumed to be beginner's luck.

She did not stop running until she was in the garden. She skip-slipped to a stop on the snow-covered grass, the high heels of her shoes betraying her. She put her hands on her knees and got her breath and her balance back. Then she unlaced her shoes and stepped out of them and into the snow. She was grateful for her socks. They protected her feet for a moment, and she made for the flagstone path which ran through the garden. She ducked into a hedge, and looked around in the Ringlight, watching the movements of the guards.

Then she sped off, towards her secret gate, and suddenly an arm was around her neck and a blade was at her throat.

She whimpered but remembered the lessons of her youth, and altered her grip to stab backwards with the sword in her hand. Ysolde twisted out of the way and clapped the blade in her full hand, gripping it tightly. Lady Blackcastle tried to yank it from her grasp, but Ysolde gripped it firmly. She knew how to hold a blade so it would not cut her, and this blade was dull anyway.

“Where are you going, my ladyship?” She hissed into Lady Blackcastle’s ear as she dragged her into the shelter of the oaks, where the stone bench lay.

“Biryu,” said Biryu.

“What?”

“My name is... Biryu.”

“You can speak!”

“Yes. I know a little.”

“Then tell me where you were going.”

“Secret door.”

“You were leaving?”

She nodded.

Ysolde, behind her, released her and her sword.

Biryu turned to look at the crimson-haired young woman who had just rescued her in the skins and leathers of a hunter.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Ysolde. Come on. Show me the way.”

“You’re going to let me live?” Lady Blackcastle asked, her voice getting louder as Ysolde dragged her deeper into the branches unexpectedly.

“If you keep quiet.”

“Oh.” She looked at her sword. Ysolde peered

through the tangled branches at the rest of the garden, watching the guards. Her neck lay exposed, glimmering in the Ringlight.

“Sh. Someone’s coming.”

They crouched in the shadows, blades at the ready, and watched the lumbering Gideon making his rounds, a scowl upon his face. His sword flashed by the light of the torch he bore.

As the light flickered through the branches, Ysolde covered Lady Blackcastle’s eyes and closed her own until it had passed.

“Why..?” Lady Blackcastle whispered.

“Eyes reflect,” Ysolde whispered back.

Gideon stopped, and turned, and looked towards the tangled branches of the trees.

A wind kicked up, and the windchimes danced in the icy air, cold and clear as the whispers of spirits. He shook his head, hackles rising slightly, and turned back to his route.

“He’s afraid,” said Ysolde, her eyes dilating.

“How do you know?”

“I can smell it.”

## Chapter 17

### The Wagons

Sixteen oxen stamped and snorted in the snow, breath twisting away in plumes of tattered mist. The wind was stronger now. The storm was drawing nearer. So too was Shalim; he could sense it, knew it in the tingles of his bones. He kept looking over his shoulder, to the east, where the dark thunderheads were gathered.

Surya's ring upon his finger and Surya's hand within his own were the only two things that gave him any comfort in that gathering doom.

He looked up at the villagers piled upon their possessions. Each wagon was yoked to two full-grown oxen, all impatient to be underway. The last things were now being loaded.

Hym brought Surya to Ana and Nestor's wagon, where they sat with Torvin and his clan, and with Grunjir and his wife. Theirs was the foremost wagon, and the Storyteller was at the reins.

“You’re driving?” said Hym, skeptical.

“I’m driving,” said Surya, climbing up. “Come on up, Hym.”

Hym took his hand and smiled and climbed up the steps and onto the back of the wagon. All the earthly possessions of four families were piled under the white awning of the wagon now, and he saw all his sketches lying neatly stacked and bound together with twine, on the top of one pile.

“Here we go,” said Surya. Hym kissed him on the cheek.

“For luck.”

“Give me some more. We’ll need it.”

They kissed.

“We’ll need to build them their own house, I think,” said Ana, to Nestor.

Nestor chuckled. “Yup.”

Surya cracked the reins and the wagons started rolling.

“Hey!” Shouted Ysolde. “Wait up! Wait for us!”

“Us?” Surya spun around in the bench and dropped the reins and scrambled over Hym, who lunged to catch the reins. Surya held out his hand to his running mother, and he pulled her up and into a tight hug.

“We’re free,” she said, in old high Auroran.

“We are,” said Surya, smiling.

“Could you—I mean, not to *complain* or anything—but—do you think you could—hurry it up—a little?” Ysolde panted, jogging along beside the wagon.

Surya picked up his mother and put her in the wagon, next to Torvin and his triplets. They all looked at her with interested little faces, and she smiled at them easily. “These are beautiful children,” she said, surprising herself at the ease with which the language flowed. Outside Blackcastle, it came like a rush; the urge to speak, and to be truly heard.

Torvin smiled. “Thank you!”

“All yours?” She asked, over the thunder of the wagonwheels.

“All mine.”

“Where is their mother?”

“Oh, she died a few years back. Consumption. It was mid-absence. Been alone ever since.”

“You seem like a kind man,” she said.

Surya helped Ysolde into the wagon just then, and she sat heavily by Biryu, panting for breath and blocking her view of Torvin.

“You run well!” said Ysolde.

“Thank you!”

“Good gods! Your feet!”

Biryu looked at her feet in their damp, snow-covered socks. “It’s ok. I can’t feel them.”

Ysolde reached out and tapped the Storyteller on the shoulder, and he twisted on the bench, looking up from his book. “What is it?”

“It’s Biryu. Frostbite,” Ysolde whispered in his ear.

“I’m on it.” The Storyteller crawled off the bench and into the shelter of the wagon’s awning. Such was the rattling of the wagons that Surya did not notice.

“So we’re just going to ride right up towards them?” Surya asked.

Hym nodded. “Mhmm. They’ll let us through.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I have a plan.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“We have to get up to speed.”

“We’re going to ram them?”

“You’ll see. It’ll be better if you’re not bracing for it.”

“And why would that be better?”

Hym laughed. “You’ll see!”

Surya cracked the reins again. “Come on!” He shouted, his strong voice booming into the wind. “Everybody! As fast as you can go!”

“That’s not what I saaiid!!!” Hym yelled, but it was



too late, the command had been heard, and now the oxen were all stampeding.

“Ok,” said Hym. “Ok, I can work with this.”

The line of soldiers was just ahead, backlit by the bonfires. Archers raised their arrows.

Hym stood up in the rocking wagon and perched one foot upon its prow, and pointed his sword along his arm, right at the middle of the group of men.

“Make us all fly,” he commanded, and he pushed my power and his mother’s out through the blade, and swung the sword high. Power surged through the night, and twisted its tendrils into the spokes and timbers of every wagon, and into the bones of every ox. Hym raised his sword towards the sky, and the feet of the lumbering oxen left the earth as the wagons lifted with a lurch, and the scream of many startled villagers.

Hym and Surya laughed into the sky as their wagons soared over the line of guards and over the bonfires. They looked at each other in the Ringlight and the flickering glow of the Aurora, and Hym thought that it was the most beautiful Surya had ever looked.

Then he saw the shapes of men moving across the stars, and realized that three guards he did not recognize were flying after them.

Before he had time to react, bolts of fire flew from their hands and struck the wagons, bursting my spell. I scattered, torn asunder, and the wagons plummeted,

men and women and children and oxen all screaming. They crashed to the ground, bounced, rolled; the wagon scattered everyone into the snow. In the moment before impact, Hym redirected my scattered power, and I embraced the falling villagers and carried them all to as gentle of a stop as I could manage. Inside the wagons, many of them were crushed by the detritus of their lives, and Hym felt my power straining to protect them. He pushed himself painfully to his feet as Surya rose beside him. Ysolde bounded out of the shattered wagon and immediately started helping people out of the wreckage.

The three Auroran guards hung in the air, stars glittering at the tips of their blades, all pointed straight at Hym.

Hym twisted his mother's power around himself and whipped up the snow into a blinding, rushing, whirling mist, and saw three surges of red light beyond it. Three streaking blasts of fire swept towards him simultaneously, and he threw out his sword and cleaved them from the air. Flame slithered up his mother's blade.

Surya, behind him, clung to his sword. Ysolde stood clutching her bow, Biryu her sword. The Storyteller leaned heavily on his staff, reaching into his medical bag.

In the back of Hym's mind he sensed my power in each of the wagons, and felt the weight of every pound of crushing wreckage on his people.

He glanced back at Surya and their eyes met.

A voice said, through the whirling of his own little

snowstorm, “Impressive! You must be Nadianti’s son, at last.”

A red-robed figure, pudgy and unassuming, stepped through the whirling wall of wind. He wore a pair of brass pince-nez, and his eyes were kind and soft. He hair had been shaved bald at the crown of his head, and he wore a patchy beard. He smiled like a cherub, bowing grandly, the rings on his thick fingers flashing. Behind him, the shadows of three hovering swordsmen hung within the little storm of mist.

“I am Boris, full-blood, high wizard of King Shepard’s Court.”

“Wizard?” Hym asked, somewhat disarmed by his appearance.

“Wizard. We are from the Old Magic. Before the fall of the first Prophet. And you! Your original source is only one removed from the first Prophet! I have read about your mother, but her histories are notoriously difficult to trace. What was she like? How did she die?”

Hym pointed his sword at the man as he began to pace, hands folded neatly behind his back. “I don’t know much,” Hym said. “But I know I’m not a wizard. I’m a witch.”

Boris paced with his head held back, as though projecting his voice to a lecture hall, looking in Hym’s general direction but not truly at him. “Magic comes in many forms and flavors, of course; and in varying degrees of power. We wizards have the old magic; the magic

of knowledge and precision. You witches have the new magic, the dust of the first Prophet, intuitive and easy in your blood. I had to work for mine.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” said Hym.

Boris laughed. “I’m not. Through my studies I have come to acquire some dust of my own, so to speak. I have a bit of the new magic in me, too.”

“I see,” said Hym. “What would it take to get you to let me go without bloodshed?”

“Your personal surrender. If you come with me, my men and I will all leave, and your people can mop up the remaining idiots.”

Hym looked at Surya but Surya took his hand. “Don’t you dare. We’re in this together.”

Hym nodded. He looked back at Boris. “Where will you take me?”

“I have reason to believe that you are the recipient of the second Prophet, and I have come to take you back to my king’s court, to serve at his side, as the first Prophet did.”

Hym looked at Surya. Surya said, “I don’t trust him.”

Hym looked back at Boris. “Then no. There will be no surrender, except perhaps yours.”

Boris laughed, and sparks crackled from every strand of his facial hair, and fell tumbling down the slopes of his body to hiss and sizzle in the snow. Hym backed up,

pushing Surya back towards the wagons.

Boris's eyes began to glow like candles and as his laugh began to deepen and his body began to distort in the steam and heat-haze of the pool of sparks which ringed around his feet, the Storyteller whispered: "Hym."

Hym reached out his hand behind his back and summoned the jar he could feel within the Storyteller's grasp. It flew silently through the mist into his hand, and he read the label with the skin of his palm.

He could tell by the feeling of the bottle that it was not glass; it was metal. The label read: *Fluoroantimonic acid*.

Hym tugged on Ysolde's braid with the back of his mind, and she set an arrow to the string and loosed her shot, which skipped around the glowing man within his tightening cloud of steam like a comet whirling around the sun, and came streaking back, straight for her. Hym raised up his hand and caught it, and the wood erupted in his palm, every splinter imploding into his flesh. Hym screamed, and clutched at his hand as the wood began to grow, rooting deep into his muscles, forcing its twining tendrils into the joints of his bones. He held up his hand and swung his own blade, severing his arm at the elbow, and the bit of him that fell began to sprout branches already rising as if to entangle Surya and build a wall between Hym and his companions.

"Hym!" Surya cried out, and Hym swung his blade again, clutching his severed arm to his chest, and with his

mother's hand upon the blade, her sword swept smoothly through the rooted tree, and felled it, in one stroke.

At the same time, Boris was gathering the pool of sparks around his feet. They flowed to the space between his palms, and formed a whirling galaxy of interlooping orbits, and snaps of lightning arced from his crackling hair to the star sparkling now with fusion between his hands.

Hym had never conjured fire, but he was full of heat still from the forge, despite the chill of the doom gathering above their heads. He stretched out his arm as bones and tissue regenerated in the flow of my body. He felt things flow through the ground and the air; materials I needed, seeping inward to feed his rapid regrowth.

He clenched his still-forming fist and seized upon the heat within the earth, and thrust it upward under Boris's feet with a burst of the energy he had drunk from the forge. It was lucky that the mantle was thin here; the effort took nearly half the power stored in our core.

The ground heaved upwards under Boris, and burst like a boil. An erupting wave of scalding lava glowed brilliantly against the sky, then splashed back down into its new and seething pool. Smoldering bits of Boris rained down a moment later, some of them dripping with hot lava. Some of him landed in the little pool of lava where he had last been standing, and sizzled away.

Boris's crackling star of fusion still burned on, tiny though it was; the reaction had a few moments to burn

itself out. It dropped into the lava, and the lava exploded a second time, splattering over the snow.

The fusion star evaporated a moment later, and the little patch of lava began to slowly cool in the snow.

The three guards in the mist began to recede, but Hym pointed his sword and held them where they were.

He reached up his other hand and the bottle of acid unscrewed its own lid, and the liquid within flew straight for the wall of mist.

Hym closed his eyes and concentrated, sinking his mind into the whirling magic. He twisted his mother's power down into a vortex around the three guards, who pointed their swords together, sending a focused beam of superheated light at our core. Instinctively, I shielded him, yanking him backwards several feet and deflecting the ray into the snow.

Hym used his mother's power and forced the acid into the whirling waters.

The mists turned red, and he made sure the three Auroran guards had no breath to scream with.

A long while later, he released the winds, and three dead men dropped from the dissipating little whirlwind.

He lowered his sword. The tip glowed slightly, casting a dim illumination onto the snow.

"Is it over?" Surya asked, in the darkness. All their torches had gone out. Without Boris's sparks, they were in total darkness, far from the glow of the village.

Hym looked back the way they had come, and saw the wreckage of the carts, and people moving feebly among them.

“We’ve got to help them,” Hym said.

He handed the bottle of acid back to the Storyteller, sealed and clean. “Thank you.”

The Storyteller nodded. “I don’t condone violence in any form.”

Hym shook his head and walked away.

“That said,” the Storyteller said, to his back, “Good job. That was quick thinking.”

“Thanks,” said Hym. He and Surya ran among the wagons and helped the people out of the wreckage. Men were already righting the wagons, but the oxen were all dead.

“Can you bring them back?” Surya asked.

“I don’t think so,” said Hym. “I can’t fix dead.”

“Then what are we going to do? Can you make it all fly again?”

The thunder drowned Hym’s answer out. No snow or rain was falling, but the storm flickered blindingly above them and the thunder hammered down again at once, without delay. It shook dust from the snow.

“And lo,” said the Storyteller, his voice carrying on the wind, “Shalim rides upon the back of Leviathan.”



## Chapter 18

### Not Over Yet

“BIRYU!” Shouted Lord Blackcastle, and everyone nearly snapped their necks turning to look.

Mounted, glinting in his armor, Lord Blackcastle rode in the middle of a mass of guards. The inner group of Seven were Auroran guards. The remaining twelve were all Blackcastle guards, men from the families which had stayed behind in the village.

Biryu, seated on a packing crate with her feet above the cooling lava, hid her face behind a hat borrowed from someone’s spilled luggage. In her lap she clutched her sword.

Ysolde swung around and fired at Lord Blackcastle, and the arrow shattered a foot from his head, deflected by an unseen barrier.

“I AM HERE FOR YOU, BIRYU! COME OUT TO ME.”

Biryu looked at Ysolde and Ysolde shook her head without looking at her.

Hym said, “She’s not coming with you.”

“I WILL HEAR IT FROM HER LIPS! BIRYU! THEY TRIED TO HAVE ME KILLED! THEY LEFT GIDEON TRUSSED LIKE A PIG, WITH AN APPLE IN HIS MOUTH! SCREAM FOR ME, MY DARLING, AND I WILL RESCUE YOU!”

Biryu gave a full-bodied cackle.

Lord Blackcastle’s face reddened.

“You,” he said, pointing his sword at Hym. “You have poisoned them all against me. Against Aurora. They are all traitors, because of you.”

“We just want to be left alone.”

“Come on out, and defend your mind-slaves, little witchling!” Lord Blackcastle said, spreading his arms wide on the back of his horse. “What’s the matter, boy? Afraid of a fair fight?”

Hym sensed the energy he had remaining in our core; not enough to safely do what he had done before.

“Stay here,” Hym said, to Surya, and he walked the long gauntlet of their many stares.

He reached the end of the line, and not a soul questioned him. He stood alone before Lord Blackcastle and all his men.

Lord Blackcastle scoffed. “You see? My idiot boy

abandons you, in your hour of need. Even he fears me. He is wise to do so.”

“You always get what you want, don’t you?” Hym asked.

“Yes.”

“And what you want now is me dead, is that it?” Hym asked, staring up in defiance.

All seven Auroran guards had changed their uniforms, and were garbed now in cowed robes of red silk. Each bore a long, thin, twisted rod of copper in their hand. The cowls of their robes covered their faces almost completely, and a ruby on each cowl glimmered in the center of their foreheads.

Lord Blackcastle said, “I want my wife. And my son. And you dead.”

Hym spat into the snow. “Come and get me, then.”

“Get him!” said Lord Blackcastle, and the seven casters swung as one. Hym trusted me, and let himself glide out of the path of the cutting beam of light. With a twist of his hand he shaped his mother’s power and flung a cloud of whirling mist up from the snow. The seven casters turned in the snow and with a synchronized sweep of their seven swords, they cut the winds apart, and the spell died. Hym sensed the energy fall out of his reach, and felt the loss.

He paced weightless on the snow, observing their stances. He remembered a long-forgotten dream in which

his mother had taught him how to read the stance of a man.

“Observe. Gallant, posturing, doesn’t know what he’s doing. This kind of man you can kill with a kick in the crotch, if you’re feeling low. And here, like this? This kind of man is cocky, but he has a right to be. This kind of man will kill you before you can swing your leg. Watch his eyes, not his hands, not his feet. He won’t pull any clever tricks, but he’s competent. And here, this stance? This is a martial stance, designed for throws and tumbles. A man who takes this stance while bearing his sword has been well-trained in trickery. Mind every part of him, and do not let him near you.”

Recognizing the very stance he had been warned about, he managed to stop himself from swallowing. Casually, he said, “So, what’s he paying you, exactly? I already killed the other guys. And that... Boris fellow.”

“We are loyal officers of the king’s royal guard. We are under orders to acquire you, sir.”

“Then why are you fighting me?”

“We cannot allow you to harm Lord Blackcastle.”

“Do you have to help him harm me?”

“How about a blood feud? Do you have jurisdiction there?” asked Surya, striding towards the lightning-lit group. His sword hung easy in his hand. Hym sighed.

“He is the rightful ruler of Blackcastle,” said the seven guards, as one.

“And I’m his heir. I challenge him to a duel. Fair and legal, sword to sword, no magic. Come on, pop. Scared of a fair fight?”

The seven Auroran guards looked at each other, and looked at Hym and Surya. The Blackcastle guards looked at one another, unsure.

Hym said, to the Aurorans, “We can resolve our business afterwards. For now we can be neutral parties in this. It *is* legal.”

The guards looked at Surya, then up at Lord Blackcastle.

The Blackcastle guard who had spoken up against the massacre said to Lord Blackcastle, “What will it be, sir?”

Lord Blackcastle was silent for a long time. His horse shifted its position underneath him. He scratched his chin. At last, he said, ‘Yes magic. You will have your little friend’s aid, and I will have the aid of my guards.’

“No,” said Surya. “You, and me. It’s been a long time coming. Don’t you want to know if you can still beat me?”

Lord Blackcastle’s eyes twitched, and he grimaced, and stretched his mouth into a grin. He slipped his armored foot from the stirrup and swung himself down from his horse, and stood tall, and strong, as though he had never been injured at all. He put his helmet on his head, completing his armor. Then he drew a longsword of black iron, and charged without hesitation towards his

son.

## Chapter 19

### The Duel

Surya braced his stance and caught the rush of his father's lunging blade on his own sword, and let him pass by, twisting around him, and elbowed his father's helmeted head. His father, unimpeded by the blow, got his footing and swung his arm and flung Surya to the snow. He raised up his sword and Surya needled him in the thigh, right in the gap of his grieves. Surya rolled away even as the black iron sword crashed into the snow. His father stamped after him as he got to his feet, sword upraised. His father swung wide, Surya ducked it. His father swung wider on the backhand, overstepping himself, straining the tendon Surya had just injured.

"Aaargh!" Lord Blackcastle cried out, and he dropped to one knee at the end of his swing. Surya stepped back, swinging his blade playfully around himself.

"You'll have to do better than that, Dad."

Surya darted in and stabbed at him, trying to hit the gaps in his armor, but he defended himself with the black

iron blade, and his armor deflected Surya's tip.

Surya darted back, out of reach, and said, "Come on, old man!"

Lord Blackcastle snarled under his helmet and forced himself to his feet. He was taller than Surya by a head, at most, but the armor's flashing plates made his bull-like bulk seem somehow even larger. He thundered in, blade swinging.

Surya locked blades with him, and stopped his father's rush. He stared through the visor at his father's dark eyes.

"I see your fear!" spat Lord Blackcastle.

"And I see yours!" said Surya. He hurled his father out of the lock, staggering him backwards two paces.

Lord Blackcastle took a guarded stance.

Surya paced around him slowly, not taking a stance, his sword glimmering just above the snow. "We are unafraid, right Dad? We face the world heart-first, unflinching, for we are invincible in the aura of our power."

"Words of a wise man, from the lips of a fool!"

"Which one of us is living by them right now, Dad? My heart's right here. Yours is hiding behind steel plate."

His father did not respond, but neither did he move.

At last, with a slow fury that was palpable, he jammed his sword into the snow, reached up both his gauntleted



hands, and removed his helmet. His long dark hair whipped in the biting wind. Mist whorled from his sneering nostrils. His face had tightened into rage, and as the lightning flickered above, his teeth flashed.

He took up his black iron sword, and lunged towards his son. Their blades met, flickered in the lightning-light, danced together, clashed a dozen times, danced apart. A trickle of blood ran down Surya's cheek. A similar trickle ran down his father's.

Hym bit his knuckles and tapped his cold feet in the snow and watched the duel and the guards at the same time.

He looked up at the lightning dancing in the clouds, and saw twisting shapes and dancing forms within the mist. He remembered incense smoke slithering up golden walls, and the scent of Shalim's arms.

The rain had not yet fallen. He looked at Surya and Lord Blackcastle, and watched the guards, and wondered where the danger would come from; what form Shalim's claim on him would take.

Gideon's hand went to his sword and Ysolde's fingers tightened on the string of her bow.

Lord Blackcastle swung, Surya sidestepped, Lord Blackcastle twisted his slash into a shoulder-check and slammed Surya off his feet. Surya rolled away, wolf-skin cloak flicking snow, and leapt back to his feet just in time to take three blows of his father's sword. The first crashed down upon him like the thunder of heaven, and

he caught it on the edge of his blade. The second swept at his ribs like a reaper scything wheat, and he twisted his arm to get his sword into position, and threw his waist backwards so the sword would miss him, at the cost of his footing. The third twisted back and came as a well-aimed stab while he was still in midair, and Surya could neither block nor twist aside. Instead, he let himself fall into the snow, avoiding the stab entirely, and as his father trampled over him, he swung his sword up, into his father's armored chest. The blow toppled his father, and he crashed down face-first in his armor, and Surya scrambled back to his feet as his father rolled himself over and got painfully up.

"You're only slowing yourself down, with all that!" Surya shouted, over the storm.

Lord Blackcastle spat out a tooth. Then he charged, blade first, and as Surya dodged, Lord Blackcastle kicked off the ground and spun himself completely around to change the lunging stab into a whirling slash, and his blade ripped across Surya's left tricep as they passed each other. Lord Blackcastle landed the tricky jump, and rounded on his wounded son at once, sword crashing down from on high. Surya parried the blow and stabbed, nicking his father's ear. His father thumped him on the head with a gauntleted fist in immediate return, and he staggered away. Lord Blackcastle swung while he was still staggering. Surya deflected the blow easily, got his footing, and hacked wildly back.

Lord Blackcastle defended himself with the black iron

blade, but several of Surya's frenzied attacks clashed down upon his breastplate.

Surya ended the flurry of blows with a well-executed kick in the midriff, overbalancing Lord Blackcastle. Lord Blackcastle caught his balance just in time; Surya was already in the air, sword in both hands. Lord Blackcastle barely caught the leaping blow, and it drove him to his knees under the gnarled sprawling branches of a dead oak tree.

"You're making me kill you," said Surya. "I don't want to. You have to know that. If you had just left us alone..."

Lord Blackcastle chuckled. "Your little friend tried to murder me!"

"I asked him to."

Lord Blackcastle's face fell. "No..."

Tears blurred Surya's vision. "Yes."

"NO!" Roared Lord Blackcastle, and he hurled Surya away as he got to his feet. Surya landed nimbly.

Lord Blackcastle lumbered in, swinging in a blind frenzy, taking no heed to defense. Surya barely stood his own under the barrage, but as he took his father's blows, he said, "And do you know what I did, after he had done what I asked?"

Lord Blackcastle bellowed, his sword crashing down on Surya's locking blade.

“I married him for it.”

Lord Blackcastle snarled, and reached out an armored hand, and Surya chopped at it. His sword bounced away, and the gauntleted fist caught him by the throat. Surya sliced at his armpit but his sword glanced off well-joined armor.

“Then death will part you,” said Lord Blackcastle.

Cold steel pierced Surya.

For a long time they just looked at each other, faces frozen in the moment. The lightning flickered.

Without joy, Lord Blackcastle tossed his son off the end of his blade, and dropped him to the snow.

Hym took a step and the guards mirrored his movement but Surya raised a hand, grunting. “I’m not done yet!”

Lord Blackcastle said, “Yes you are, little rat. I should have known you were always destined to disappoint me! I should have thrown your mother from the parapet as soon as I saw your sickly little body.”

“Maybe you should have,” said Biryu, standing over her son. She had moved so stealthily that even Hym did not notice her until she popped out from behind the dead tree. “His friend only pushed you down the stairs. I did the rest. Do you not remember? The fire poker in my hand. The poison in my cup. I have hated you since the day we met, Davlan.”

Lord Blackcastle laughed at the sword in her hand.  
“Do you even know how to hold that?”

“Who do you think trained him?”

The guards looked at Hym, and at Lord and Lady Blackcastle.

Biryu said, in old high Auroran, without looking at them, “This is family business. I am his wife.”

The Auroran guards nodded at Hym, and Hym relaxed. The Blackcastle guards hesitated, and stood their ground.

Surya reached up feebly and took his mother’s hand.  
“Mom.”

“I know, Surya.”

“I tried, Mom.”

“I know, Surya. Go to your friend. Let him heal you.”

“No,” said Lord Blackcastle. “He stays where he is. After I have finished with you, I will finish with him.”

“I will make this quick, then,” said Biryu.



## Chapter 20

### Biryu and Davlan

Above them, dark and twisted branches sketched black cracks across the flickering sky. Her gown was heavy, damp with snow. Her feet no longer ached, but she could not feel them, and they were heavy. The sword was an Auroran blade, well-forged steel, but still it was an unfamiliar one.

Lord Blackcastle loomed, fully a foot and a half taller than her. His armor glittered, and he held up the black iron blade still dripping with the blood of her son.

They crossed blades.

Lord Blackcastle twisted and gave a violent slash, but Biryu slipped out of his reach and slashed at the gauntleted fingers of his passing hand in one fluid movement.

“Aargh!” The blow surprised him. He took the sword in both hands, and tried to pace around her, but she

stood above her son and did not chase him or turn towards him.

Behind her back, he lunged, swinging. She turned and neatly scooped the sweeping blow above her head, then spun around completely and slashed Lord Blackcastle across the side of his face before he could redirect his swing. He got out of range, touching his cheek. He glanced at the blood on his gauntlets.

He looked back at the guards, who stood watching stoically.

He looked at Biryu on the hill beneath the tree, a little ways above him now. “Well? If you hate me so much, come and get me!”

Biryu laughed. “Are you a coward, husband mine? Come and face your woman, if you have the stones to.”

Lord Blackcastle held the black iron sword above his head in both hands and charged.

Biryu swung upwards, caught the handguard of his blade with the edge of hers, and sent the black iron sword sailing out of his grasp. It landed point-first behind him, at the bottom of the little hill, and he stumbled to a stop empty handed before her.

She swept her sword once, cleanly.

He reached up to clutch at his neck, and his fumbling, gauntleted hands knocked his head off his shoulders. It tumbled down beside his crashing body, and he lay spurt-ing in the snow.



An instant later, a tremendous crash of lightning struck him, blinding and deafening everyone, and the guards struck, lunging towards Hym, who swung up his mother's blade and sliced their forming spellcraft to tattered ribbons of energy. I drank it in, and his skin began to glow. As his clothing smoldered, he said, "Touch me if you dare."

The guards separated as one entity, hovering apart into the air, wands twisting magic into form.

"We do not wish to fight you," they said as one. "But you must be made to come with us."

They looked towards the villagers.

"If you harm even a single one of them," Hym said, "I will not be merciful to you."

"We will not harm them, if you come with us."

"Then we are at an impasse, for if you harm them, I will only kill you."

"We will subdue you, then."

"If you can."

Snaps of lightning flickered from their copper blades. "We can."

They pointed as one entity and the lightning roared down from heaven, bent before them, and flowed towards Hym.

Hym held out his mother's blade and caught the lightning on its edge, and power jolted through his bones and

rooted him to the ground. Clinging to his shaking blade, he crushed the power down, into me, and I drank deeply of the storm.

The lightning ceased its flow. The snow had melted around Hym in a vast circle. Sparks still dripped from his mother's blade.

The guards twisted their formation, arms weaving, forming planes of shimmering energy.

Hym punched out with his mother's sword, and returned their lightning bolt.

It broke upon their forming shields, and scattered to the forest behind them, lighting many branches aflame. As the forest began to burn behind them, the guards rose higher into the sky, revolving around each other, and the winds began to twist.

Hym watched the flames rise amid the whirling winds, and saw the flaming serpent take form. It twisted serenely, that flaming vortex, stretching up to encircle them, and as they moved towards the wagons the whirling flame came with them.

On the ground, the Blackcastle guards at last drew their blades as Gideon shouted, "Come on!"

They raced towards the villagers, and Biryu raised her sword while Ysolde loosed arrows. "We've got this!" Ysolde shouted. "Get them!"

Hym leapt into the air, sword streaking, and flew into the flames, and held up his empty hand beneath them.

The fire tightened, twisting down around him, and the flames darkened as he drank their searing heat.

The guards above moved all their wands, and shards of ice came singing from the sky, veering towards him. He spun in place, blasting heat and wind around himself, and the ice turned to vapor around him as he rose.

The guards swung simultaneously and all seven copper swords crashed down upon his rising blade, but he pushed through them all, and up into the middle heavens.

“YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND,” said Hym, twin stars blazing in his eyes, and his voice rolled out like thunder. “I HAVE OFFERED MERCY. YOU WOULD BE WISE TO TAKE IT.”

The guards put the tips of their seven swords together and a focused ray of light lanced towards our Center, but Hym caught it on his palm. As it bent to find his hand, he turned his hand, and twisted the energy, and the seven swords of the seven guards began to glow red-hot.

“THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING!” Hym boomed.

The guards broke their beam of energy, and whirled separately, forming power, and launched seven darts of invisible force. Hym sensed them hissing through the air, and he smote the sky with his blade.

An inverted tree of lightning flashed into existence, sketching the connections between all seven men and their seven spells.

Then they were falling like dead birds, and Hym hung alone in the heavens, underneath Leviathan.

He lowered himself gently to the ground to find Biryu sword-fighting with Gideon, and eleven dead men sprawled in interesting positions, all with arrows sticking out of them. Ysolde, near Biryu, clutched at a wound upon her right arm.

Gideon and Biryu were evenly matched, and Gideon was taller and stronger. The fight was going poorly.

Then Biryu trapped Gideon's blade and Ysolde slipped in, quick as a fox, and kicked him in the throat. He staggered back, choking, clutching at his crushed windpipe. His sword fell into the snow, forgotten, as he slumped to his knees.

With a last look of horror, he collapsed.

Hym knelt by Surya in the snow, and Surya smiled weakly up. Hym pulled his head into his lap.

"That was a good sword-fight," Hym said, placing his hand to Surya's wound.

"It was," said Surya. "But I'm sad I couldn't have the final blow."

"Still, you got in some sick burns."

"Thanks."

Biryu knelt beside them. "Will he be alright?"

Hym took his hand off the wound. "He's already good as new."

Biryu threw herself upon her son, and held him tightly. For a time, it seemed she would never let go; then she raised her head, and looked at Hym.

“It is true? He has married you?”

“He has,” said Hym, nodding.

“Then my world is complete.”

Leviathan grumbled above, and Hym looked up into his darkness, and wondered if the omen’s predicted doom had been avoided.

“Do you want to stand?” Hym asked Surya.

“I’m pretty cozy right here, actually.”

Hym laughed. “Come on. Up! We’ve got to keep moving.”

Biryu helped them to their feet. Ysolde stood nearby, and Hym went to her. “Your arm!”

“It’s just a scratch. Gideon got me.” It was not a scratch; the muscle had parted down to bone.

“Brace yourself,” Hym said, and he pushed the two halves of the wound together.

Ysolde did not even grit her teeth. Expressionlessly, she watched him, and the faint glow of my magic illuminated her emerald eyes. When he had finished, she moved her arm around to test it, and smiled, content.

Leviathan grumbled above, and Hym glanced up at him. Sweating slightly, despite the cold, he hustled

down towards the villagers, who had gotten most of their things out of the wagons.

“Come on!” He yelled. “Back to Blackcastle! We must take shelter!”

But it was too late. With a thunderclap, the rain came scything down.

“Oh no...” Hym said, and he reached up both his hands and all my power.

A barrier of shimmering force appeared above the villagers and their belongings.

Needle-sharp slivers of ice sliced the air, and Hym’s every hackle rose.

The pounding ice shattered above them, breaking on the wall of his will. Lightning flashed, striking against the shield, and Hym drank its power desperately. Perhaps he could maintain this, with that kind of energy.

Even as he was thinking this, the falling waves of icy blades above us suddenly tightened and converged upon a point in the middle atmosphere, drawing back up into the cloud. Lightning flickered around them and suddenly they were a single sword of frozen water, big as an iceberg, falling.

My power and his mother’s strained, and held the shield, and we forced the stolen lightning back into the shard, and burst it into mist. Lightning flashed behind that veil of mist, and hail as big as bowling balls came pounding down.

Our shield held, and the huge hailstones rolled down its slopes. It was too much; the shield would soon burst, we could not restrain it. They were all doomed.

“Gather around me!” Hym roared, clinging to the quaking power. When they were together in one mass he shrank the shield to conserve energy.

The pounding hail crushed him down, hammering upon our shield, and as his legs trembled and he slumped into the snow, the villagers stared up at their destruction and out at the crashing forest. If anyone spoke, he did not hear them; the roar of falling ice drowned out all sound.

Just as his knees touched the ground, the hail stopped. The storm grumbled darkly to itself above us, and in the thunder Hym heard a rolling laugh.

A shadow moved at the edge of his vision, and every head turned to face it, and all eyes fell upon Shalim.





## Chapter 21

### Shalim

His long iron blade glowed as though freshly drawn from a forge, and his black cloak whispered around him in tendrils of smoke and shadow.

The glow of his blade illuminated his skin, and he gleamed like a man of polished obsidian. His golden eyes flashed in the dark.

When he spoke, his voice rang in our bones.

“Come with me willingly, little god.”

“No!” Shouted Hym, and he gathered his mother’s power and hurled it as a blasting wave.

Shalim sliced the passing wave, parting it around him, and it crashed into the forest. Slowly he walked away from the desolation as mighty elms and stately oaks crashed to earth behind him, scattering a storm of birds into the night.

“Do not make me persuade you,” said Shalim.

“Please,” said Hym, his sword trembling. Surya stood at his side, sword upraised. Biryu rose beside him, her edge flashing. Ysolde raised up her bow.

“No,” said Hym. “No! You can’t face him! You don’t understand!”

“We face him together, Hym,” said Surya. “As we have faced everyone else.”

Shalim looked at the little group arrayed before him and lowered his blade, laughing. “This is your army? All that you could amass? Pitiful.”

“He doesn’t need an army!” Shouted Ysolde. “He has me!”

She loosed arrows so swiftly that her hands could not be seen, and Shalim caught them all in one darting hand. Holding the fistful of arrows, he said, “One stick breaks, but a mighty faggot holds, is that your theory?”

“Something like that,” said Surya.

Shalim crushed the arrows in one hand. Hym flinched.

“Then I will separate you from your faggot, and you will be a stick alone,” Shalim said, and he moved, a flicker of darkness, and suddenly he was beside Nestor. “Then you will break.”

Then, with a single stroke of his sword, he ended Nestor, and the old man crumbled in two gushing halves.

“NO!” Hym screamed, and he thrust out his hand, hurling Ana away from Nestor’s twitching corpse.

Our power surged, surrounding Shalim, and the air around him rippled as it crushed him down. He held up his sword, knees bent beneath the flow but standing still. He stood tall under all our power, and suddenly he was gone, darting across the distance, his blade flashing again, and Ana fell too. She did not even have time to scream.

“NO!” Screamed Hym, and he flung a bolt of lightning from the tip of his sword.

Shalim caught it in one hand, and it coiled, snarling, up his armor. He gave it a short, sharp tug, and Hym staggered forward and broke the lightning.

“How many more have to die for you?” Shalim asked, moving, cleaving Torvin in twain in the midst of his clan.

“STOP!” We screamed, and our power whirled, casting the triplets and all the rest of the villagers away. Surya and Ysolde and Biryu were scattered into the snow.

Shalim lunged thirty feet, and caught us by the throat. Hym kicked out a foot and a blast of his mother’s power, and Shalim released him, dancing back.

“Hym!” Shouted Surya, getting to his feet.

Ysolde loosed an arrow. It vanished into Shalim’s black cloak without a trace. She loosed six more, and they sank into his face, vanishing, leaving no wound. Then her bow exploded in her hand, scattering splinters, and she cried out, and fell.

“Stay back!” Hym screamed, clutching his mother’s sword in both hands. The villagers kept their distance.

The Storyteller, behind Hym’s back, reached into his medical bag and suddenly Shalim became a blur of darkness above the snow.

Hym whipped around, chasing him with his eyes. Shalim loomed above the Storyteller, who had time only to register the horrible shadow blotting out his own. Then there was a searing flash of iron, and he watched his body slump to its knees and crash, headless, to the snow. Gaping, blinking, voiceless, he felt Shalim’s fist in his hair, and his panicked eyes found Hym’s.

“No more tricks,” said Shalim, tossing the old grey head at Hym’s feet. “No more games. It’s time. Come with me, now.”

Hym saw his mother standing beside him, and his courage welled.

He roared and swung his mother’s blade, lunging forward with a blast of my power. His mother’s hand guided the edge, but Shalim’s sword flashed twice.

Half of Hym’s sword fell into the snow, and he felt his mother disappear. He also felt searing iron twisting in his heart, rammed right through my core.

“HYM!” Surya shouted, rushing forwards.

Shalim kicked Hym off his blade and swung. At the end of his swing he stayed, poised, posed, one clawing hand outstretched towards Surya, who froze rigidly.

Surya's severed forearms fell into the snow, his fist still clutching his sword. A thin line of blood across his midsection began to darken his shirt.

Lying in the snow, Hym looked up at Shalim above him, wreathed by lightnings in the sky. Shalim's yellow eyes burned down at him. Even the whites of his eyes were black as ink.

"Come with me, and I will spare him."

Surya, unmoving, opened his mouth to speak. Blood gushed forth from his parting lips.

Hym gaped, the pain in his still-healing chest too great for speech.

Shalim said, "I am holding him together. If I release him, he will fall apart."

Hym got shakily to his feet, reduced to my magic and the energies of his own body. The core would take days to reform.

His hand trembled on the handle of his broken sword.

Shalim leaned in close, his breath hot on Hym's face. "Come with me, and I will spare him. I alone can save him now." His voice seemed to slither into our ear.

Hym dropped his mother's broken sword.

"Good boy," said Shalim.

Hym looked at Surya, his eyes clouded by burning tears. Surya could only stare back, moving no other part of his body.

Lord Blackcastle's black iron blade suddenly sprouted from Shalim's throat, sizzling in his flesh. Behind him, Biryu clutched the handle with both hands, and held it firmly in place.

Shalim's eyes widened in mild annoyance as flames gushed out his nostrils, and suddenly he was no more than mist and shadow, turning. His armored fist crashed against Biryu's skull, sprawling her out in the snow. Lord Blackcastle's blade landed beside her, steaming.

"Please!" Hym cried. "Please. I'll go with you. Spare them."

"I shall do as you command, my liege," said Shalim, with an easy smile.

Surya's breathing quickened, and pain was in his eyes as the two halves of his torso reconnected themselves. Then, as Shalim released him, he fell to his knees, and both of his severed arms stopped bleeding.

"Come," said Shalim, holding out an armored hand. "The road ahead is long."

Hym took the offered hand.

## Chapter 22

# The Long Road

Shalim rose slowly into the sky, and Hym felt his dark power surround them both. As Hym's feet left the earth, he looked back over his shoulder at Surya, and saw him rising to his feet, even without his hands, and staring back.

He held Surya's gaze until dark clouds obscured his vision.

They rose into the darkness, and the thunder rumbled all around them in the cloud. They breached the top of the storm, and stood upon the cloud-tops, and Hym saw a pillar of black stone, supporting many interlocking wheels. Shalim released his hand and went to this pillar, his hands stretching out towards the wheels.

"Do not think of trying anything," said Shalim, as the wheels began to spin and reorient themselves. "With a wave of my hand, I could end them all."

"I won't try anything."

“Wise.”

The wheels took on a new alignment and settled into it, and with a lurch, the storm began to move, heading east.

Hym wept. Shalim did nothing to stop him. The tears flowed freely for an hour or more. Then there was nothing within him but a hollow, horrible, empty ache.

He sat up, and wiped his eyes. He sniffled.

“Where are we going?” Hym asked, looking up at Shalim’s dark profile against the stars. His throat was raw and sore from weeping.

“Home,” said Shalim.

“Hellegrund?”

“Hellegrund.”

Hym shivered.

“Are you cold?” asked Shalim.

“Yes.” It was true; he lacked the bodily energy for me to warm him, and without our core we had nothing but his bodily energy to work with. Shalim’s power flowed through the storm now, and its energies did not obey us.

An emerald flame began to burn upon the cloud-top, and its heat washed over us. Our skin tingled in the light as I began to absorb its energy.

“Thank you,” Hym said.

“You are welcome, my liege.”



Hym shuddered. "If I am your liege, then obey me. Take me back to my husband."

"Your husband?" asked Shalim.

"Surya."

"I was not aware you were even lovers."

"He prayed to you," said Hym. "All his life, he prayed to you. So did I. And tonight you have broken both our hearts."

"Interesting," said Shalim. "Whatever did he pray about? What need has the son of a nobleman for the aid of any god?"

"You mean... You mean you didn't hear him?"

"I do not care to listen to prayers."

"But you can hear them?"

"For those I care to hear. I have heard every time you said my name, for example."

"You have?"

"I have."

"But Surya loved you even more than I did."

Shalim laughed. "Did he now!"

"He thought you could save him from his father."

"Why? What had his father done, to deserve my intervention?"

“You mean you don’t know?”

“Why would I? The life of a provincial lord’s son is of little interest to me.”

“But you’re supposed to know everything! Everyone!”

Shalim laughed. “You will find that many things in this world are not as they are supposed to be.”

“But...!”

“So tell me. Why did your Surya call out my name in the night? What had his father done, to be deserving of death?”

Anger twisted in Hym now; he was warm enough for it. “He was a brute. A tyrant. An arrogant, wife-beating, child-beating, dog-kicking, drunken, adultering monster, fit for nothing but the gallows. At ten years old I tried to kill him myself, when you would not hear Surya’s prayers, and you did not take him. Why?”

Shalim laughed, dark and long, and the thunder echoed across the wastes of ice beneath Leviathan. “As I said, I never heard those prayers. Did you really try to kill him yourself?”

“Yes.”

“How did you do it?”

“I snuck into the house and sewed grommets into the staircase rug, and bound rope through them to an antique statue, and pushed it out the window as he walked up the stairs.”

Shalim laughed again, even longer than before.

“He should have died, that night! His wife beat him with a fire-poker at the bottom of the steps until he stopped moving! Why didn’t you take him? What did you gain, by letting him live? Every year of his life he was more worthy of death.”

Shalim buckled and doubled over, racked with laughter, and Leviathan’s thunders howled with him.

“Answer me!” Hym shouted, jumping to his feet.

Shalim held up a hand, one finger raised, and wept with laughter. Falling to his knees, he pounded a fist against Leviathan and howled his humor to the night.

Hym rushed in and kicked him in the head. “Up, you monster! Answer me!”

And Shalim was on his feet, yellow eyes blazing, all humor gone. Stern as a statue of obsidian, he looked down from what seemed miles above us, and he said, “Lord Blackcastle had no soul. Thus I neither knew of his death, nor cared about it.”

“Then why didn’t you let him die!?”

“That is not a choice I make,” said Shalim. “Death comes where life ends. No god wields that blade.”

“What!?” Hym gasped, and he staggered away, utterly horrified.

“If you failed to kill him, blame the sturdiness of his frame, and the frailty of your efforts. Do not blame me.”

“But I thought...!”

Shalim cocked his head. “What did you think?”

“Are you not the god of Death?”

“I have been called that.”

“Where are my grandparents? Where are Ana and Nestor, and Torvin? Where is Lord Blackcastle? Where are his guards?”

“What?”

“Why aren’t any of them traveling with us?”

“None of them had souls,” said Shalim.

“No!” Hym shouted. “That’s not possible! You lie!”

“I never lie.”

“Then you *killed* them!”

“I did.”

“But... But you *killed* them! *Forever!*”

Shalim nodded. “Indeed.”

“But how could you!? What kind of monster are you!?”

“I am of no kind but my own. I carry the souls of all who have them, and take them to their final destination.”

“Then why are you taking me? I am not dead.”

“You are fated for Hellegrund. There you will be my lord, as it was ordained in the beginning.”

“What? What are you talking about? But I’m still *alive*, you imbecile! Put me back where I was, or so help me—!”

“I cannot. This is your destiny, as it is mine. We will be bound together forever, and our power will overwhelm the stars. We will free the Mother from her long imprisonment, and the world will be made anew.”

“Fuck. That. Put me back!”

“No.”

“I refuse to go with you! You are taking me against my will! If this is my destiny, do it properly!”

Shalim laughed. “I have done it efficiently.”

“I will kill you the moment I can. You are nothing but a monster.”

Shalim laughed, his voice booming over the winds. “No, I am merely *practical*.”

“You killed my grandparents,” said Hym.

“Time would have done that soon enough.”

“What about Torvin?”

“Who?”

“The father of those triplets! You cut him in half!”

“It was painless, to him.”

“But they’re orphans, now!”

“They have a village. Is that not what it takes to raise a child?”

“I hate you.”

“You do not. You are too sweet to understand the meaning of hate.”

“I’m learning quickly.”

“Your anger will fade, in time. You will come to understand the mercy of my actions.”

“Mercy?” Hym scoffed. “What mercy.”

“I could have killed them all. I still can. Would you like me to?” Shalim hovered his hand over a protrusion on one of the wheels.

“No!” Hym cried, snatching his hand. “No. Please.”

Shalim lowered his hand. “Very well. At your request, I will spare them. But I cannot save them from death, any more than you can. And none of them had souls. You will never see them again.”

Hym sat down on the cloud, his head in a daze. Shalim’s smooth and smoky scent enveloped him, and he hated himself for finding it pleasant.

“You are immortal, you know. You would have outlived them all within the century. Even your Surya.”

“Lord Surya Blackcastle, to you.”

“I should have seen it. I should have seen your love coming. You dreamed of him often, even when you were

young.”

“You watch my dreams?”

“We all do.”

“Who?”

“The gods,” said Shalim, simply.

“But why?”

“We watch the dreams of all living souls. We play games with them. It entertains us.”

Hym experienced a whole-body shudder and could no longer bear to see Shalim’s face. He looked out to the stars. He felt naked under all their eyes.

Feeling watched, he asked, “How many are you?”

“There are only four. Myself, Danaye, the Mother, and Shachar.”

“Shachar?”

“My twin brother. He made the wizards, with his power. Danaye made the witches.”

“And you?”

“Why would I share my power?”

“Where does your power come from?”

“Good, you are already thinking like a conquerer. Seek out the source of your enemy’s power, and you have already learned how to defeat him.”

“So you won’t tell me?”

“Someday. When we trust one another.”

“I’ll never trust you.”

“We shall see.”



Down below, Surya stared up hopelessly as Shalim carried his husband away, out of sight, and as Leviathan lumbered away to the south. Then he stared down at his husband's body, lying across his lap. He had no hands to hold Hym.

Hym's eyes stared sightlessly up, a single star burning in the pupil of each. The iron arrow stuck from his head at an odd angle, holding his jaw slightly open. It was as though he gaped at unseen horrors, and Surya's gaze fell forever into his violet eyes.

Gideon still sat on his knees, his breath rasping in his throat, bow still in hand. Triumphant, he looked at Ysolde as she slit his throat with her good hand.

Ysolde came to Surya's side, cradling her wounded hand. The breaking bow had filled it with splinters, some deep enough to tickle bone. Stoic under the pain, she stood by Surya, and knelt, and picked up both his fallen hands.

"Should we... Should we keep them?" She asked.

Surya looked at the head of the Storyteller, lying in the snow, and realized he had no one now to ask that question of. "I don't know. If Hym were here, he could... But now there's... It's just..."

"Us," said Ysolde, simply. She stared sadly at Hym. She looked out over the corpses.

The triplets were weeping over their father. People had gathered around the other fallen.

The Timekeeper knelt by the Storyteller, saying, “Oh, Magnus, Magnus, Magnus.” She shut his eyes sadly, and sat beside him in the snow.

The mayor at last came forward, finally having managed to free himself from under an antique armoire. “What did I miss?”

Ysolde hugged him tightly. He looked past her at Surya, and saw his severed arms, and Hym lying broken in his lap. “Lord Blackcastle! Your arms!”

Surya jumped at the sound of the name, and glared at the mayor. “Never call me that again. I am Surya, to you.”

The mayor nodded. “As you wish, Surya.”

Surya looked down at Hym, and looked back into the sky. “Did you see what I saw?”

“I did,” said Ysolde.

“Shalim took him before our eyes.”

“He did,” said Ysolde.

The mayor said, “So many dead... It is a damn shame.”

Surya choked on his words. He swallowed.

Ysolde said, “See to the people, papa.”

“You are injured.”

Ysolde looked at her father. They held each other’s eyes for a long time, and she said at last, “I will be

alright. Please, the village needs you.”

The mayor looked at Surya, and nodded.

Grunjir separated from the group of mourners around Ana and Nestor, and joined the little group on the hill under the tree.

Surya looked at his mother, unable to help her. “Please,” he said. “Please, someone try to wake her.”

Grunjir rolled her over and shook her, and she stirred dimly. Looking at her bruised cranium, he said, “That was a crashing blow. She’s lucky to be alive. We’d better hope she wakes soon.”

“What will happen if she doesn’t?”

“Never good, in my experience.”

Surya looked down at his stumps, his mind racing ahead, forming a plan. It had to; the alternative was to lay down and cry himself to death, and Hym still needed him. “Grunjir. Could you fashion hooks for me?”

Grunjir stroked his beard. “Aye. I could do that.”

“Can you make it so he can still hold a sword?” Ysolde asked, clutching her arm. The adrenaline was starting to fade and the pain was swiftly becoming very real.

“I think so.”

The mayor looked at all the wreckage; the fallen wagons, the fallen guards, the fallen Lord Blackcastle, the fallen villagers. Then he looked to the sky, where the tail end of Leviathan was now scudding across the stars,

moving due south against the wind. He said, "We must get back to the village. We can come and collect our things tomorrow. For tonight there must be rest, and food, and shelter. This cold will kill us all, otherwise."

Surya nodded. "Tell the people to get the essentials and start walking."

Biryu stirred at the sound of her son's voice. "Surya?"

"Mom!"

"Surya!" She got dizzily to her feet, and ran to him, and fell to her knees to embrace him. She did not feel his hands upon her back. She pulled away. "Surya?"

She saw his arms, and Hym's corpse in his lap, and she shrieked. Covering her mouth with both hands she began to sob, and Surya could not bear it. The tears smarted in his eyes, and he hissed, "He isn't dead. He isn't. We can take the arrow out, and he'll heal. I've seen it."

"Your hands!" his mother wailed.

"Please. Don't cry. I can't bear it if you cry."

She nodded, tears running down her face, and held him again.

Ysolde bent and gripped the arrow firmly, and yanked it out of Hym's head. The wound healed itself.

Surya grinned fiercely, gritting his teeth. "See? I told you."

He looked at Hym. "Hym? Wake up, Hym."

Hym's expression did not change. Neither did he move, and his eyes stared right through Surya, the stars still twinkling in both their sightless pupils.

"No," said Surya. "No, come on, Hym, don't do this to me. Don't you dare. Don't you dare."

Ysolde said, "Surya..."

"No!" Surya shouted. "He isn't! He *isn't!*"

"We both saw what happened, Surya."

"He's *not dead!*" He choked down his tears, and looked up at Grunjir. "Tonight. You and me, at the forge."

"I'll need my apprentices," said Grunjir.

"Then get them. The longer we delay, the further Leviathan gets from here."

"Surya, he's dead! He went with Shalim!"

"And I'm going to go get him back!"

"What!?"

"Shalim is real. Wherever he is taking Hym is real. I'm going there, and I'm bringing his body, and I'm getting his soul back."

"Surya, think about this! You're insane! He's a god! He could have killed us all! What makes you think he won't just kill us the next time we see him?"

"Hym won't let him. He'll come up with something."

"But—!"

“—Are you coming, or not?”

“I mean, of course I am, but—”

“Then there’s nothing more to talk about.”

“Surya, Ysolde, what you are contemplating amounts to suicide!” said the mayor. “Following a storm across the world will not bring Hym back. He has gone with Shalim, now.”

“And?”

“Hym is in the hands of a god! No man can bring him back.”

“Then I will become more than a man,” said Surya. “And tonight that will begin. Grunjir? The forge.”

Grunjir whistled sharply and shouted, “Oy! Derek! Tim!”

Two young men stopped rooting through the broken wagons and came running to him. One was sandy-haired, the other a red-head. The sandy-haired one said, “Yes, master?”

“Get my toolbag and the formed steel, and bring them back to the forge. I’ll meet you there. Quick as your legs can carry you, go on now!”

Surya looked down at Hym. Then, fiercely, he looked up at the mayor. “You protected him once, with the lie. Can you carry him now?”

The mayor stared at Surya for a long time. Then he nodded, sadly, and he picked up Hym’s limp body.

Surya asked his mother, “Can you stand?”

She nodded.

“Good, then stand with me.”

They stood together.

Surya marched to the mayor. “Give him to me.”

The mayor looked at Surya’s stumps as he held them out. Both ended in smooth skin, just above where his wrists should have been. The mayor hesitantly put Hym’s body into Surya’s arms, and Surya slung Hym over one shoulder.

Biryu and Ysolde came together at the same time, saying, “No, do it like...”

Together they rearranged Hym and Surya. Ysolde plucked the cloak-pin from Surya’s wolf-skin cape, and Biryu swept it off his shoulders, and refolded it into a new form. Swinging it back around his body, she pinned it in place. Biryu and the mayor helped to settle Hym in the new-made papoose, by Surya’s side. Hym lay in the folds of the wolf-skin cape, bundled warmly in the deep pocket of the clever new arrangement of the cape. Hym’s head was right at Surya’s breast. Biryu gently bound the bag with her own belt-sash, so that Hym would not tumble out even when Surya walked. Then she kissed her son on the cheek.

Overcome, Surya said, “Thank you.”

The mayor and Ysolde looked at each other. The mayor nodded sadly. “I’ll supervise things here.”

Ysolde kissed him on the cheek.

Then, at Surya's side, she walked with him and Biryu and Grunjir back to the village.

Hym's body hung warm in Surya's arms, and Surya knew he was not dead. He could barely contain the tears of his gratitude.

At the forge, they found the Timekeeper waiting for them.

"Minerva?" said Grunjir. "Did you want something?"

"The Storyteller and I trained together, when we were young," said the Timekeeper. "I brought his... His medical bag. There may be something I can do for you."

"For Hym?" Surya asked.

"No," said Minerva. "I saw him go with Shalim. I have no power to interfere."

"Then for me?" Surya asked, showing his stumps.

"No," said Minerva. "That blade has... has done more damage than my skill can mend. But for you, Ysolde; for you I may yet be able to save your hand."

Ysolde looked at the others. Fiercely, she glared at Surya. "If you leave without me, I'll shoot you when I catch up."

"Then be quick about it."

"Come," said Minerva. "We will need an indoor space with good lighting."



“Take my mother to Blackcastle,” said Surya. “She needs to be looked at, too.”

Biryu said, “I can speak for myself, Surya.”

“Sorry, Mother.”

She looked at Ysolde and at Minerva. “Come with me. I have the front door key.”

Then she led the other women away, and Surya was left with Grunjir and the forge, and the warm weight of Hym, wrapped around his body.

The apprentices came running a moment later, bearing a heavy toolbag and a crate-full of metal between them. They dropped it on the smithy floor and flopped into chairs to catch their breath.

“Good lads,” said Grunjir. “You can rest a minute, but I’ll need your help for aught yet.”

He piled coals into the forge, and began to work the bellows. Surya watched the flame, lost in memories. He looked down at the corpses on the smithy floor and said, “Oh. Oh, we should probably move those.”

Grunjir came and methodically kicked both corpses out the front door of the forge, into the snow. “Better?” he asked.

Surya nodded. In his mind he still held Hym here, whirling him under the rafters.

The coals were hot, and Grunjir put the steel into the flame.

“Alright, boys. Break’s over. Get to work.”

Surya stared into the coals and watched the metal take shape, and remembered Hym’s naked body, glowing like the Ring. He saw still the place where his bare feet had melted the stone.

“I’m coming for you, Hym. Don’t be afraid.”

Lady Blackcastle put the key into the lock, and turned it. With a clunk of ancient mechanisms, the lock turned. She pushed the door, and it swung open.

Then she hesitated, on the threshold of her palace-prison. For a long moment she stared at the entry hall, hardly recognizing it. For twenty-five long years, she had lived in this place at the mercy of a tyrant.

She remembered his body spurting the last of its life into the snow, and she smiled fiercely, and crossed the threshold.

“Come this way,” she said. “There is a bedroom on the ground floor where you can work. Will you need hot water?”

Impressed at her grasp of the village tongue, Minerva said, “Yes. And clean bandages!”

“I will make some.”

“You have to boil them, you know.”

“This is not the first wound I have mended in this house,” said Lady Blackcastle.

She opened the bedroom door. “In here. I will light some candles.”

She moved around the room, lighting the candelabras, and the glow revealed the very room where Hym and Surya had once sheltered from Leviathan together.

Minerva led Ysolde to the bed. “I’ll need you to lie on this side, so I can work on your arm freely.”

"I'm fine. I can sit. Or stand."

"You'll be sedated."

"Oh, thank the gods."

Minerva laughed. "Tough as nails, just like your mother."

Lady Blackcastle said, "The kitchen is just around the corner. I will be within earshot, should you need anything."

As she walked down the hall, vertigo nearly took the legs out from under her but she managed to catch herself on the wall. Dizzily, she staggered into the kitchen and put a kettle and a pot of water on the stove, and lit the fire.

Then, dragging a chair out from the counter, she seated herself to watch the water boil.

In the room, Ysolde took the numbing draught gratefully, and lay back upon the pillow. "How long until it takes effect?"

"Should be no more than five minutes."

"Good. You can start, now."

"Are you certain?"

Ysolde nodded.

Minerva raised the tweezers, and seized upon one of the smaller splinters, and carefully drew it out. Ysolde did not flinch.

“So you really plan to go with him?” Minerva asked, plucking out another of the smaller splinters.

Ysolde grimaced. “Don’t try to dissuade me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it! Only, I wonder if you’ve thought it through.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you with your bow, and him with his hook-hands and a sword he won’t be able to properly wield, hunting down a god. Which part of that sounds reasonable to you?”

“If it’s suicide, it’s suicide. Can’t be helped. Some things you just have to do.”

“Would Hym want you to do this?”

“Ask Surya. He’s the one who wants to go so badly.”

“Somehow, I don’t think he’s the only one.”

“Why not come with us? You could keep an eye on us.”

Minerva laughed. “No. The village needs me now, more than ever. They will need Lady Blackcastle, too. In truth, they need you and Surya, too, but the old folks can hold things together until you come to your senses and return.”

Ysolde laughed. It was getting hard to care; the draught was beginning to have its effect.

“Oh, you laugh now. Just wait until the reality of a week’s worth of marching sets in.”

“I’ve walked further without complaint.”

“Well,” said Minerva, “Just know that when the time comes, there’s no shame in turning back. We will just be happy to have you safe.”

“Thanks,” said Ysolde.

“Sleep now, dearie. The drug is doing its magic.”

“Is it magic?” Ysolde asked, dreamily.

“It is applied knowledge,” said Minerva, “which, to my mind, is the very root of all magic.”

“If you say so.” Ysolde truly could not bring herself to care. The pain in her arm was finally gone, and the bliss of numbness swept her into sleep.

Minerva twisted a prayer to the gods, and entered the trance.

In the kitchen, the water had finally begun to boil. Biryu pushed herself to her feet and started boiling the bandages. Stars swam before her eyes, but she forced herself to stay upright and keep working. Her head throbbed, but the hot steam helped.

Finally she returned to the bedroom with clean bandages and hot water, and entered to find Minerva finishing up. A pile of broken bits of bow now lay in a clay dish in her lap, and Ysolde’s arm was merely riddled with bleeding holes.

“I fear we’ve ruined these sheets, and possibly this mattress,” said Minerva.

“It does not matter. We have more.”

Minerva took the bandages, and Lady Blackcastle lifted Ysolde’s hand so that Minerva could more easily wrap Ysolde’s arm.

“How are you feeling?” Minerva asked.

“Dizzy. My head hurts.”

“Well, you got off easy, then. You tell me if you vomit. And don’t go to sleep anytime soon.”

Biryu nodded. “I know.”

Minerva glanced at her. “Yes. I suppose you *do* know, don’t you.”

“I can’t believe he’s really... Dead.”

“Believe it. Never seen a decapitation so clean in all my years.”

“Have you... Have you seen a lot of decapitations?”

“Well, I raise chickens, so,” said Minerva, tying off the bandage, “yes.”

Biryu laughed. “Chickens?”

“Yup. Just be glad he didn’t keep walking around. Sometimes the birds do that.”

The mental image was so frightening and so comical that Biryu lost herself to a fit of the giggles for a time.

Minerva laughed with her. Then the laughter turned somehow to tears, and Biryu wept.

Minerva comforted her politely, patting her hand. Biryu laughed, and dried her eyes with a handkerchief.

“My son is walking to Hellegrund.”

“I know,” said Minerva.

“He won’t be coming back, will he?”

“Not until he returns to his senses, no.”

“You have to help me stop him.”

“I don’t think that would be useful or wise.”

“We can lock him up. He is insane. He will be safe. He cannot pick a lock without hands!”

“Why, Biryu, I’m surprised. You’ve been a prisoner long enough to know what it’s like. We can’t do that to Surya.”

“But he’s going to die!”

“That is his choice. And he may not die! He may turn back. And there is a chance, however slight, that he may succeed. Danaye’s soul escaped Shalim’s clutches, after all, and she did not have the aid of her lover. Shalim had slain him.”

“How do you know this?”

“I trained with the Storyteller, when we were younger. I decided not to pursue the trade.”



“So they may both come back?” Biryu asked.

“They may.”

“Then... Then it is worth the risk.”

“I agree.”

Biryu wiped her eyes preemptively.

“It’s alright,” said Minerva. “You can cry, if you want to.”

“I saw Shalim,” said Biryu, her voice strained. “I saw Shalim, and I stabbed him, because he killed my son. But he gave my son back to me, and cursed him with a madness, so that I would lose him all over again.” She began to weep.

“I do not think it is Shalim’s curse which compels him,” said Minerva. “He is in love.”

“I remember love,” said Biryu. She smiled sadly. “It was long ago. In my homeland.”

“Aurora?”

“Aurora,” said Biryu, nodding. Then she asked, “What will Shalim do to me, when he comes for me again?”

“I do not know,” said Minerva. “I believed him to be a god of compassion and wisdom. It seems I was wrong about that.”

“I have looked forward to the day of his visit since the day I came to Blackcastle. I have prayed to him every

hour. And now I am afraid of him.”

“I’m afraid I have little of comfort to say,” said Minerva. “I am as frightened as you are.”

Biryu looked at Ysolde.

Biryu asked, “Will she be alright?”

“I think so. It will all depend on keeping the wounds clean. She will have to take a potion every day for some time.”

“What kind of potion?”

“Oh, did you have an interest in that sort of thing? I never realized!”

“I have dabbled,” said Biryu.

“Well, this particular potion is very complicated. Luckily, Magnus kept bottles of it stored, or it would take weeks to produce more.”

“Magnus?”

“The Storyteller.”

“I didn’t realize he had a name!”

“Do you?”

Lady Blackcastle laughed. “I am Biryu.”

“You speak our language better than I would have thought, from the rumors.”

“I have lived here long.”

Ysolde stirred, and opened her eyes. For a moment it seemed like she was only half-awake. Then she sat up in the bed, startling Minerva, and said, "All done?"

"All done," said Minerva, and Ysolde threw her legs out of the bed and got to her feet.

"Now wait a minute," said Minerva, as Ysolde made ready to leave. "You've got to keep that bandage clean. And change it as often as you can! And you'll need to drink a potion every day for the first week, to stave off infection. I'll have to find it among the Storyteller's things."

"Then you'd better get looking," said Ysolde, already leaving.

"But where will you be?"

"Getting another bow!"

Things were taking shape upon the anvil. Surya's eyes glittered as each blow of the hammer shucked sparks into the night. The glow of molten iron reminded him of Shalim's blade, and the skin of his stumps prickled.

Tim held the tongs and Derek worked the bellows, and Grunjir's hammer smote the iron on the anvil.

A small parade of villagers finally reached the village, each headed to their own house with their arms full. The mayor walked at the head of the procession, carrying a wooden chest. He stopped at the forge before heading to the waterwheel house.

"You need to get some sleep, lad," said the mayor, kindly.

Surya glowered at him, and said nothing.

The mayor put the heavy chest down and sat on it. "Come on, lad. Even an hour would do you some good."

"It would be another hour he gets farther away," said Surya.

"It will pass whether you're awake or asleep. Grunjir, how much longer for these?"

"Should take all night."

"What!?" Surya shouted.

"It's fine work. Can't be rushed, if you want it to fit."

"Then someone tie a sword to my wrist, and I'll go now."

“You can’t go without provisions,” said the mayor. “You’ve done all you can, tonight. Please. Go sleep. Hym would want you to.”

Surya glared at him, outraged that he would speak that sacred name so boldly. Then he softened, thinking of Hym. “You’re... You’re right.”

“Good lad. Go on, now. Your mother will be sick with anxiety.”

“I won’t sleep in Blackcastle tonight,” said Surya. “Never again.”

“There’s a spare bed in my house,” said the mayor. “Oh, wait. No, it’s actually back at the wagons. Well, there’s a spare stretch of floor, at any rate, and I’m sure we can rustle up a blanket.”

“Thank you,” said Surya. “But I’ll make my own arrangements.”

“Ok. Just know we’re here for you, if you need anything.”

“I know.”

“You’re not alone, lad. Much as it may seem that way now.”

“I am alone,” said Surya. “Hym is not with me.”

Then he turned to Grunjir, and said, “I will come in the morning, by the sixth bell. Be ready.”

Grunjir nodded, and Surya walked away.

He wandered the streets of the village. Many people seemed to want to speak to him, but few found words to say, and the expression on his face killed all conversation. Even so, many stopped him, and asked to touch the Prophet. Some prayed aloud, and tied small charms to his belt and to his cloak. Others put flowers in the papoose, where Hym could smell them. One young woman stopped Surya, and raised a garlanded crown of white roses for his head. He bent his head to receive it, and she said, "Gods be with you," as she placed it on his dark hair.

He paused in the street, and saw the procession bearing the bodies on makeshift stretchers. He stood his ground and let them pass like a tide of pain, and forced himself to look upon the frightened faces, the empty eyes. Nestor. Ana. Magnus. Torvin. Torvin's little clan followed along, crying around their father's bier.

"I will bring him back," said Surya, to Nestor's rigid face. He did not seem to comprehend.

At last he made it to the door of Nestor's hut.

He raised up his severed hand to knock, and stopped himself. Sadly, he opened the door with his shoulder, swinging it inward onto the dark and empty main room. Coals still smoldered in the hearth, and the well-insulated hut had trapped most of the heat.

He pushed open the door of Hym's bedroom, and stepped inside, into the empty place. The walls and ceiling were bare now, all sketches gone. He sat in the middle

of the cold stone floor, and stared into the darkness.

“Hym,” he prayed. “I don’t know if you can hear me. But I’m coming for you.”

“Surya?” said a voice. His heart quickened.

“Surya?” said the voice again, and he recognized it. He opened the bedroom door to find Ysolde standing in the main room, one arm wrapped in clean white bandages.

“Hey,” said Surya, miserably. “You found me.”

“I brought whiskey. And a pipe. And firewood.” She had somehow managed to carry it all in one pile, with one arm.

Surya smiled in spite of himself. “I’d offer you a seat, but, uh...”

“Any glasses lying around?”

“No.”

“Then we’ll have to drink straight from the bottle. What a bummer.”

They sat down in front of the hearth in the main room, and Ysolde piled wood into the hearth, then pulled a candle from her pocket, and placed it on the ground.

“Could you... Could you put it on the windowsill?” Surya asked.

Ysolde obeyed, and lit it there. The little flame danced

with its own reflection, and Surya smiled grimly to himself.

Ysolde uncorked the bottle and upended it for a while, then passed it wordlessly to Surya, holding it to his lips. She tipped it back for him, and he drank. He nodded when he was ready for her to remove it, and swallowed, the fire burning all the way down into his belly.

“I’m going to be a sad, crying drunk, tonight,” said Surya.

“I’d think you were a bastard if you weren’t.”

Surya laughed.

“Here, let me get Hym down for you. He’ll be more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” said Surya.

Ysolde unpinned his cloak and unwrapped Hym from it, and awkwardly between the two of them they laid him on the ground, still wrapped in the wolf-fur cloak.

Ysolde gently closed his eyes, and his mouth.

“Thank you,” said Surya. The glow of those twin stars still illuminated the inside of Hym’s eyelids.

“I think you’re right,” said Ysolde. “He’s not dead.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s still warm. And his heart still beats.”

“It does?” Surya’s eyes burned. He blinked and looked away for a while. When he could bear to look back, he



said, "Thank you for checking."

Ysolde packed the pipe and lit it, and breathed in deeply. The herb's light glowed on her face, and as she breathed out, the smoke twisted like a wraith.

She puffed again. "No problem," she said while breathing out the smoke. The sharp reek of the herb made the hut and its fire-lit inhabitants somehow less real.

Then she held out the pipe, putting it to Surya's lips, and he smoked it gratefully.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

"No, I mean... For choosing to come with me. It means a lot."

"I know."

"It would mean a lot to Hym, too."

"Mhmm."

"Do you think he can hear us?" Surya asked.

Ysolde looked at Hym sadly. She shook her head and downed another mouthful of whiskey. She held it out for Surya to shut him up for a bit, then corked it and put it down between them. As the dizzying heat of the alcohol and the tobacco settled into them, she said, "No. I don't think so."

"I used to think he could always hear me," said Surya.

“Most of the time, he probably could. He was always spying on you.”

“He was?”

“All the time.”

“He once said that when my father was at his worst, that was when he was in the shadows, watching.”

“Your father’s dead now.”

“Yes, I remember, I was there.”

“How’s it feel?”

“Like being born.”

Ysolde laughed. “Cheers to that.” She drank more; a frightening amount. She held the bottle out for Surya, and he drank.

The tears came unbidden and caught him unaware. They racked his body into sobs. Ysolde stared stoically at the wall, smoking her pipe, and let him sob. Wordlessly, she reached out a hand and rubbed his back.

Then the tears were over, and he was as empty as Hym’s room. Ysolde put the pipe to his lips. While he smoked, she wiped the tears off his face.

“Thank you. Again.”

“I’d like to sit in quiet mutual misery, if that’s alright with you.”

“Oh,” said Surya. “That’s fine too.”

It was easier, once he got accustomed to her silence. There was nothing uncomfortable about it.

Alone in the dark, they watched Hym's body, and listened to the candle sizzle in its pool of wax, and emptied the jug of whiskey together.

"D'you think he's—*hic*—D'you think he's—*hic*—is he warm enough?"

"What?"

Surya gesticulated with his stubs. "My bubby. Buddy. Hubby. My hubsand. Husband. Him. Hym."

"Izzat the difference?" Ysolde asked.

"Yes, that's a difference. He was my buddy. Now he's my husbfriend. We married the Storyteller. No, the Storyteller married us. No wait, how d'you say it?"

"You were married t'each other by the Storyteller."

"That's better."

"But that's how you, when you said, how you said—"

"—what?"

"Y'know! When you said his name!"

"Hym?"

"Yes! There!"

"Where?"

"Say something about him."

“He was the best of guys, he was the worst of guys, cuz he lied the whole time I knew him and died before he could tell me the truth.”

“See you did it again! You say his name different than you say the other thing!”

“What thing?”

“Him!”

“Hym?”

“No, no, the other one!”

“Oh *him!*”

“Yes! When you say it, you say them differently, so’s I can always hear the difference. Defense. Defranchise.”

“Yeah? It’s an Auroran name.”

“It is!?”

“Of course! What, did you think his name was just, like, like, like a...”

“Probenoun?”

“Yes.”

“No!”

“But whassit mean?”

“Means ‘Song of Hope’.”

“It does?”

“It does. That’s why you gotta say the secret ‘n’ sound at the end. You have to sing it a little.”

“Hymn?” said Ysolde.

“Like that, yeah,” said Surya. “Hymn. It rings like a bell.”

“I never realized it was supposed to sound so... Pretty. You’re the only person I’ve heard say it like that.”

“I had a dream,” said Surya. He was feeling woefully sober now. “A woman. She woke me in the middle of the night, and I was in the forest, at the bottom of a tree. I fell out of a tree, y’know, when we were kids. Didjoo know that?”

“Hym told me,” said Ysolde.

“Did he tell you how I lived?”

“His mom showed up.”

“Yeah. She showed up in my dreams later, too. After we became friends.”

“What did she do?”

“She sat me down in the forest, where I had almost died. And she said to me, ‘Surya Blackcastle, his name is pronounced ‘Hymn,’ and if you want to be a good friend to him you had better learn to say it correctly.’ So I did.”

Ysolde had a fit of the giggles. It was contagious. It swept Surya away from his troubles for a moment, and they giggled together helplessly until the drunken sorrow

came again. Neither one of them was sure afterwards which one of them started it, but they both cried ugly tears.

Surya was not aware of ever falling asleep, but at the sound of the sixth bell he jolted awake. Ysolde was sitting beside him, her head resting on his shoulder.

He moved his shoulder. "Ysolde."

"Mrrah," she said, complaining inarticulately. She did not wake.

He tried again. "Ysolde. Wake up."

"Wha? Whazzapneen?" She sat up, brushed the hair out of her face with both hands, winced, and looked at her bandaged arm. "Oog. Why did you let me drink so much?"

Surya looked at her and waved his stumps. "Not like I could have stopped you."

"Maybe not."

They looked at Hym together and both of them jumped. His head had turned towards them in the night, and his eyes were open again. They looked at each other.

Ysolde reached out very carefully and closed Hym's eyes. They both relaxed slightly as the eyes stayed closed.

"Do you think you can put him on me?" Surya asked.

"He's a pipsqueak, should be easy."

“Hey!”

Ysolde laughed. She bundled Hym up, and Surya stood up carefully, a little dizzy. She slung Hym back into place in his former position, and most was right with the world at last.

They walked back to the smithy together and found the entire village ringed around it. Biryu was with them, waiting for him.

As they reached the forge, the little crowd parted, watching them. Biryu came to Surya’s side. “Have you eaten?”

“I am not hungry.”

“You will go today?”

He nodded, not daring to look her in the eyes.

“Then you must eat. I will cook breakfast.”

“Not in there,” said Surya.

“*Yes* in there. It is our home. It was always our home, and never his. Your husband knew it better than any of us ever did.”

Surya looked at her then, and saw the burning in her eyes, and he nodded sadly. “Alright. After I’ve got hooks.”

The ringing of the hammer and the anvil had finally stopped. Silence hushed the crowd.

Grunjir stepped through them, bearing in his hands

two hooks of burnished steel, attached to leather straps and sockets. Surya held out his stumps, and Grunjir fitted the hooks onto him and tightened them down.

Experimentally, Surya waved his new hands around.

“Can he hold a sword?” Ysolde asked.

“Allow me to demonstrate,” said Grunjir, and he took a black iron sword from his apprentice, and slipped the handle into Surya’s right hook, and there was a loud click of metal as the sword locked into place. “I’ve modified this blade. You’ll be the only one who can hold it, and only with this hook.”

“What about the other?”

“It’s only a hook. You will have to learn how to use it.”

Surya swung the sword around. Without the movements of his wrist it was indelicate, little more than a bludgeon. He sighed. “It will have to do.”

Then he noted the material. “Black iron?”

“Aye, I saw the way it ruffled Shalim’s feathers. I think it’ll serve you well.”

Surya nodded. “Thank you.”

“Come,” said Biryu. “You have your hooks now, and your sword. Breakfast. Ysolde, you too.”

Ysolde, startled, said, “I’ve got to see to my own family, first.”



“Then bring them too.”

Ysolde smiled. “Alright, I will.”

Biryu turned to lead the way, and froze, locked in the many eyes of the village. Surya turned to follow her, and saw them staring.

As one person, the village knelt in the snow.

“What?” said Surya.

Ysolde, kneeling, said, “Lord Blackcastle is dead. We kneel before his wife, as she takes up his mantle.”

Biryu said, “Me?”

“And, I think, before the holy questers,” said Tabitha, the brewer. “On your feet, Ysolde.”

“Me?” Ysolde stood.

“Gods be with you all,” said the village, with one voice, and many of them reached into the folds of their cloaks and held out tribute. Trinkets of precious metal and gemstone flashed. Fine furs shimmered. The light of the forge glowed on all their bowing heads and upraised hands.

Ysolde and Surya looked at each other. Surya asked, “What do we do?”

Grunjir said, “You accept their offering. Some of it may prove useful, on your journey. You never know when you may meet someone, and need to trade.”

Ysolde looked at Surya's hooks, and said, "Biryu, can you help me gather these up?"

Grunjir held out a new set of leather saddlebags with bright steel buckles. "This will help."

Ysolde took the saddlebags and draped them across her own shoulders like a yoke, and walked through the crowd. Biryu helped to gether things, and put them into the bags. Then, heavily laden, they journeyed on to Blackcastle. As Surya walked through the crowd, many hands reached out to touch the soft fuzz of the Prophet's head.

At the threshold of Blackcastle, Surya froze, unable to go further. Ysolde put the saddlebags down on the step, and said, "I'll go get my father, now."

Biryu nodded, not taking her eyes from the face of her son. Ysolde left.

"I understand," said Biryu, stepping past Surya. "This place is full of memories. But some of them are good. Some of them are of Hym."

Surya looked at her, standing in the doorway, one welcoming hand outstretched. There was the sacred name again, upon unworthy lips. It ached like flame, even though she said it correctly.

"Come," said Biryu. "Take my hand."

He reached out his left hook, and she took it. She pulled him across the threshold.

Standing in the front hall of Blackcastle, Surya looked

around at his prison and smiled as the scents of home came to him, made unfamiliar by long absence. He remembered the death of the warden. "You're right," he said. "This place was old before Dad lived here. It will forget him soon enough."

Biryu beamed. She led the way into the kitchen, where Minerva was already hard at work.

Torvin's clan were seated at the counter, picking at their breakfast. They looked up sadly as Surya approached.

"What are they doing here?" Surya asked.

Biryu said, "They have no one, now. I will look out for them."

"Have they... Have they buried everyone?"

"No," said Biryu, slipping on an apron and joining Minerva at the stove. "Not yet. They are... They are digging the... holes."

"Graves."

"Graves," said Biryu, nodding. She pulled noodles from the pot, and filled a bowl, and poured broth over them. She placed it before Surya and garnished it with a pinch of fresh herbs from the windowsill.

Surya sat beside Torvin's unhappy clan, and looked at them. "Hey."

"He has hooks!" One of them said, in awe.

Surya smiled and held up one hook, and the young boy beside him managed to work up the courage to touch it.

“So what are you all called?” Surya asked.

“I’m Thomas, and this is my brother Tobias, and my brother Taryn.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Surya. “I’m sorry about... About your dad.”

“Is he going to wake up soon?” Taryn asked. “He’s been sleeping so long!”

Surya looked helplessly at his mother for direction but she had none to give him. She looked at the three boys, and said, “Come on, eat up! You want to be as big and strong as Surya is, don’t you?”

Thinking that Surya *was* appealingly big and strong, all three members of Torvin’s clan dug into their breakfast with renewed gusto.

“Thanks, Mom.” Surya said quietly, and he reached for his fork, then paused, his hook resting above the steel.

Biryu mimed reaching into the bowl with a hand, and grimaced sympathetically.

Surya’s stomach growled. Throwing decorum to the wind, he reached his hook into the bowl, and pulled up the noodles that way. Torvin’s clan watched every bite. When the noodles were gone, he took the bowl in both hooks and raised it carefully to his lips, and drank the broth.

“Thank you.”

She smiled.

He said, “Can you... Do you think you can feed Hym?”

“He won’t need food,” said Minerva, not looking up from her prep work. The knife flashed briskly in her wizened hands. “He is in the other world. All he will need is light, and heat, and protection.”

Surya looked at Minerva. “Can you tell me more?”

“He is in the place of spirits,” said Minerva. “Where the gods dream.”

“Can he come back?”

“Danaye did, or so it is said.”

“How?”

“I do not know. She disappeared not long after it.”

“Did she have help?”

“No.”

“Then there’s hope that Hym can escape.”

“There is.”

“Thank you.” He got to his feet.

“Hug me,” said Biryu.

He hugged his mother. She did not let go. “Be careful. Be safe.”

“He’ll be fine,” said Ysolde, jauntily, despite her

headache, and she sat down at Surya's empty place. "He'll be with me."

"Where is the rest?" Biryu asked.

"My dad couldn't come," she explained. "He's helping with the, uh... Cleanup."

"I will give him breakfast some other time," said Biryu, putting a bowl of noodles before Ysolde. "What about your mother?"

"She's dead. This smells good. What is it?"

"Noodles," said Biryu. There was another name for it, in her tongue, but it was impossible to translate.

Ysolde ate quickly. Surya stood awkwardly in the corner, unwilling to leave his mother so soon, but equally unwilling to get roped into conversation with the three staring members of Torvin's little clan.

One of the boys said, "You've got a bandage. Did you get hurt too?"

Ysolde smiled. "Mhmm. But I'll be all better soon. I got lucky."

"Is daddy dreaming too? When will daddy wake up?"

Ysolde looked at the three young boys and everyone in the room tensed, waiting to see how she would respond. She put her bowl of soup down and turned towards them fully.

"Your daddy is not asleep," said Ysolde. "He is dead. I'm sorry."

The boys stared, uncomprehending. Silently, one of them began to cry.

“Stop that,” said Ysolde, sternly. “Your daddy died protecting you. He died honorably, like a man, with a sword in his hand. He died facing the god of Death himself. Do you think your daddy would want to see you crying about that?”

“N-no,” said one boy. The other two were already slipping into the big sobs.

“He would not. He died brave, just like he lived.”

“Does that mean he’s with mommy now?”

Ysolde’s expression softened. “Yes. It means he’s with your mommy now.”

“At least she’s n-not alone anym-more,” said Thomas, trying very hard not to cry.

“And you’re not alone either,” said Ysolde. “Everyone in the village saw how your daddy died. They will take care of you. Right Biryu?”

“Right,” said Biryu.

Minerva wiped her eyes and continued to chop onions stoically, her back turned to Torvin’s clan.

“You’re cooking more?” Surya asked.

“I will feed them all. Any who are hungry,” said Lady Blackcastle. “Their food is in the wagons. They will need help.”

Loving his mother more than he ever had before, Surya hugged her again. "I'll let them know."

Relieved that she would not have to face the crowd herself, she said, "Thank you."

Surya moved to the door.

Ysolde looked up, noodles dangling from her lips. She slurped them up. "Remember, don't leave without me."

"I don't want to get shot," said Surya, "so I won't."

Then he left Blackcastle, and marched out to the gates, and flung them wide.

Villagers were milling around in the darkness, bringing furniture and supplies back from the wagons or leaving their homes to go and collect more. Surya raised his voice. "Everyone! My mother is making food for all who are hungry. If you need food, go to Blackcastle! Its gates are open to you, now and forever. Spread the word!"

Then, pleased with his handiwork, he returned to Blackcastle, and climbed the many horrible steps to his bedroom. He sat down on the bed, and raised his hooks, and carefully slipped his head out of his cloak. He allowed Hym to lie back, on his bed, and got to his feet again. For a time, he looked at Hym sadly. He could not tell whether or not it was his imagination, but Hym seemed more at peace in his slumber, here.

Then, carefully, methodically, refusing to look at the detritus of his life, he began to pack the essentials. It was difficult, with only his hooks, but he was too proud



to ask for help rooting through his own wardrobe. He packed extra clothing for Hym.

At last, bag packed, Hym hanging from his shoulders once more, he descended the stairs again and stepped into a roaring sea of humanity. The entire village was inside Blackcastle now, walking aimlessly from room to room. He found his mother in the kitchen, sweating over a huge pot of broth.

"Where's Ysolde?" he asked. The kitchen was crammed with people. Many men and women were helping now with the cooking, and Torvin's clan was playing with a group of village children on the floor.

Biryu said, "She's getting the horses ready, and supervising the loading of your provisions. You'll take your father's carriage."

Surya laughed. "Thank you."

Struck by a sudden idea, Surya said, "Hey, kids. I know a place where there are tons of toys you can play with. You can take them all, but you have to share, ok?"

The children looked up at him, a little wary. Many of their eyes fell upon his glinting hooks.

Grimacing at his own newfound grotesque appeal, he waved a hook. "Follow me."

Then he led the small army of children all the way up to his room, and set them loose upon his toys, and felt a fierce joy as he watched them all be snatched by loving hands.

Fulfilled, he returned to the kitchen. “Can I help?”

Biryu shook her head. “Too many cooks already!”

He kissed her on the cheek, and she turned, startled, and hugged him. “You’re leaving now?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Surya. Please come back.”

“I will, Mom.”

“Even if... Even if you fail. Come back. Come home.”

Unable to bear even the mention of the thought of failure, Surya turned away, hard-faced, and retreated.

He found Ysolde waiting at the gates, wearing a pack, bow slung over her uninjured shoulder. A glossy black carriage stood nearby upon spindly-looking iron wheels. Two black stallions stood champing at their bits in the snow, shaggy fur fluttering in the breezes of the darkness.

“Can you still shoot that?” Surya asked, nodding at Ysolde’s bow.

“Try and stop me,” said Ysolde, with a grin.

Surya waved a hook. “A fine pair we’re going to make.”

“I’ll heal. You won’t.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“Come on. We’d better get moving.”

“Wait!” Shouted a breathless voice behind them.

Someone came running down the drive. “Wait! Stop! Don’t go yet!”

Minerva came to a shambling stop beside them and caught her breath for a moment. “I have a map! You will need it!”

“A map?” Surya asked. “Now why didn’t I think of that?”

Ysolde raised an eyebrow but kindly said nothing.

Minerva held out the rolled-up parchment. “This map isn’t like yours. It’s from the Storyteller. He wrote it in the trance.”

“The trance?” Ysolde asked, confused.

“I don’t have time to explain. But it will lead you where you need to go.”

Ysolde took the scroll.

“Thank you,” said Surya.

“Now get moving! The longer you tarry, the farther they get!”

They mounted up into the carriage. After a few moments’ thought, they decided to seat Hym on the bench between them, and Ysolde belted Hym’s chest to the back of the bench before taking the reins in her one good hand.

They began to roll out, down the main track of the village, headed west. The mayor stopped them.

“Hold!”

Ysolde stopped the carriage, and the mayor came alongside them. “You will miss the funerals!”

Ysolde and Surya looked at each other, then at Hym, between them.

Ysolde said, “They were his grandparents.”

“We don’t have time,” said Surya.

“They raised him. He deserves to attend their funeral.”

“We don’t have time!”

Hym groaned.

They both turned to him in surprise. Surya relented. “Alright, Hym. We’ll make time.”

Leviathan moved at a constant rate. The wind moaned icily over the cloudtops, and Shalim stood unmoving at the pillar, his back to Hym.

Miserable, Hym sat upon the cloud-top and pondered his fate. The hours had passed like an eternity, every moment dragging. The stars provided a nearly unchanging backdrop, making it impossible to guess their speed or their progress. Still, he was certain he had left Surya far behind.

At one point, he had smelled the scent of dried roses, out of nowhere. He wondered how a scent like that could have come to waft across the night to him.

In the middle of the night, at his lowest moment, he half-believed that Surya's voice had called his name. It was nothing but the wind, but it sounded almost like Surya whispering across a canyon: "I don't know if you can hear me. But I'm coming for you."

He did not dare to sleep in Shalim's presence, though the weariness hung from his every bone. After untold hours, the silence at last became unbearable.

He said, "Why do you call me 'my liege' if you will not obey me?"

Shalim laughed. "Does a viceroy heed the words of his infant prince? Ought he to? No. You know nothing. You are a child. How can I obey you, until you have grown?"

"I'm not a child," said Hym. "I'm twenty."

It sounded petulant even to his ears. Shalim chuckled darkly and began to laugh and laugh. "I am as old as this world," said Shalim. "You will be a child in my eyes for many years to come."

"How old is that? How many years since the beginning?"

"I have lost count."

"More than five thousand?"

"Many, many more."

"More than a hundred thousand?"

"Perhaps."

"And who made you like this?"

"The Mother made me," said Shalim. "Long before she made the Ring. I was the firstborn."

"But you failed her test."

Shalim looked over his shoulder, yellow eyes blazing, a scowl upon his fine features. Then, composing himself, he turned back to the pillar and its many wheels. "Yes. I failed her test."

"What was the test?"

"I do not now recall. It was long ago."

"Liar."

Shalim laughed and his voice boomed out, mingling with the thunder of Leviathan. "Perhaps."

“You killed my mother,” Hym said.

“No. That was the warriors of Aurora.”

“No, I mean... My sword. You broke it, and she died again. Why is her soul not with us now?”

“Ah! I thought I sensed an echo in the steel. I am sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

Shalim looked over his shoulder again, this time with so much hurt on his expression that Hym almost pitied him. He looked again at the sea of storm. “I am. I never kill a witch, if it can be avoided.”

“Why?”

“They are my niblings,” said Shalim.

“I’m sorry, your what?”

“Nieces. Nephews. My own blood-kin. A human life is nothing; a witch life is precious.”

“They’re still human, too, you know.”

“No. They are much more.”

“My mom didn’t think so.”

“You never knew her.”

“And I suppose you did?”

Shalim nodded, his back to us. “She was a kind woman. A bold woman. I admired her skill. And respected her solitude. I was angered, when Aurora’s king

took her from me.”

“What did you do?”

“I took Leviathan to their city, and smote it to ruin.”

Hym’s eyebrows rose. “It’s gone?”

“Oh no,” said Shalim. “I left survivors. They have surely rebuilt, by now.”

“Why leave survivors, if you’re the god of Death?”

“Someone must be there to tell the tale, or the fear grows cold.”

“Why is it that you can use your powers for harm, and I can’t?”

“You have not yet broken her will,” said Shalim. “I will teach you how.”

Hym looked inward to my unseen presence. Silently, he muttered, “I will not break your will.”

Shalim laughed. “You will. It is inevitable.”

I did not speak. I was busy exploring the mechanics of the storm. At the center of it was a solid mass, undulating among the winds.

Shalim said, “You may have noticed that I used my sword against you, and not my powers. Did you wonder why?”

“I do now.”

Shalim laughed. “How incurious! Just like a child.”



“Children are very curious!”

“Are they?”

“Yes.”

“Then how like a human.”

“Fine. Why didn’t you use your powers against me?”

“There was no need.”

Hym gasped, deeply insulted. Shalim laughed again, and his laughter rolled with the thunder.

“I’ll kill you,” said Hym.

“You will surely try.”

The map was a very strange one. It featured only three settlements: the village, Elysium, and Hellegrund. Aside from these settlements there were many landmarks on the page, and the places where other cities sat were left blank.

“This isn’t much of a map,” Surya said. “Doesn’t even have Aurora on it.”

“Why would we want to go to Aurora?” Ysolde asked.

Surya shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just strange that he left it off.”

“It wasn’t the point of the map,” said Ysolde.

“It looks like we have only two options,” said Surya. “Hellegrund, or Elysium.”

“Where does Shalim live?”

“Hellegrund,” said Surya.

“Then that is where we will go.”

Surya grimaced. “Are we insane?”

“Probably. Too late to turn back now.”

They had been riding for several hours in the darkness already, and the village was far behind. “Then we go south, along the river. At the bay, we turn southwest, and cross five thousand miles of ice.”

“At least it’s an easy route.”

“It isn’t. It will take us right through Auroran territory.”

“We’ll just have to be careful.”

They rode in silence for another twelve hours, following the ice-locked river.

“We should camp,” Ysolde said.

“The horses are fine.”

“They won’t be tomorrow. Better to rest, and start fresh. We’ll cover more distance that way.”

Surya relented. “Fine. You’re right. Look for a good spot.”

They found a clearing beneath a gnarled elm, and made camp there.

Seated with their backs to the old tree, they stared into the fire. The wagon formed a wall of gleaming darkness, backed by trees. Hym lay in the wolf-skin, his head in Surya’s lap, facing the fire. Ysolde and Surya sat huddled under the skins of beasts, and watched the fire. The horses stamped their feet and chuffed from time to time, enjoying the oats in their feedbags. Ysolde turned the fish upon their spits from time to time, and the flesh sizzled. The smell of the hibernating river bass was intoxicating on their empty stomachs.

“Thank you again for coming with me,” Surya said. He held Hym close, one hook lying across his chest possessively. As he spoke, Hym’s arms moved within the wolf-fur, and wrapped around his.

Surya and Ysolde both froze, looking at Hym. His position did not change.

They relaxed, and Surya smiled. Ysolde said, “Stop thanking me, or I’ll start thinking you owe me.”

Surya laughed.

The fish were done. Ysolde took them off their spits, and Surya hooked one whole and ate it carefully, spitting out bones. Ysolde used a knife and fork, and watched him from the corner of her eye from time to time. He was forced to eat like an animal, but he took it in stride.

Sensing her gaze upon him, Surya looked at her with his mouth full of fish. “What?”

“Nothing.”

They ate the rest of the meal in silence, and when they had finished Surya pushed the remains off his hook with the edge of his plate, since he could not use his other hook, which was still Hym’s prisoner, and Ysolde wiped his face with a napkin.

“Thank you.”

“Go to sleep. I’ll take the first watch.”

Surya opened the wolf-skin bundle where his husband lay, and curled up behind him, draping the furs over them both. Hym did not release his arm, and Hym’s fingers moved up and down Surya’s arm, as though reassuring themselves that Surya was still there.

Hym rolled over in his sleep, and embraced Surya. Choked with tears, Surya rolled onto his back so Hym could lie beside him, and cradled him close, and watched

the stars through the branches of the elm. The fire crackled. After a long day's hard riding, sleep came easy.

In his dreams, he saw Hym seated on a cloud-top, behind the looming specter of Shalim. In his dreams, he still had his hands, and with them he took Hym's, and held them close. Hym's hands were as cold as death.

"I'm coming for you, Hym. Hold on."

Hym woke. He had not meant to fall asleep, but the dream had been almost worth it.

He looked up at Shalim to find his position unchanged.

“Don’t you sleep?” Hym asked.

“When I care to,” said Shalim.

“You should teach me how to steer this thing, so you can rest.”

Shalim’s laughter boomed out, mirrored by the thunder. “Perhaps I should. Someday, when you are older.”

“I don’t suppose you eat, either.”

“Would you accept my food? Is it not the ‘food of the spirits’ anymore?”

Hym’s stomach grumbled. “You’re right. I wouldn’t take your food.”

“Then here,” said Shalim, as a huge sea bass rose through the cloud and landed, flopping, before Hym. “Make your own.”

Hym looked at the struggling fish and his mouth watered. The creature was still alive.

He reached out for his mother’s power and found nothing. He withdrew his hand. To Shalim, he said, “Kill it for me. Please.”

“No. Do it yourself.”

Hym could not bear to watch the fish drowning in the air; he could feel the terror behind its bulbous eyes. He

looked to me. "Can you take it as a mercy?"

"No."

Hym grimaced. "Then look away."

He got to his feet and stripped off his belt, and gave it a vicious swing. The buckle cracked against the head of the fish, and its flopping became more spasmodic. Before he had time to feel pity, he swung again, and the flopping stopped.

He no longer sensed the pain of terror.

He sat himself down and raised up my power around the fish, and poured the heat into its flesh. In moments, it began to sizzle.

As he ate, he looked up at Shalim's hulking form and stared at the back of his cowl. "I hate you."

"Someday, you will love me as I love you."

Hym scoffed so hard he choked on a fishbone, but Shalim's hand reached out, one finger gently pointing, and the bone sprang from his throat and out between his lips. Shalim turned his hand back to the wheels, and the bone fell through the cloud.

"Be careful, my liege. There are many little bones."

Hating him even more, Hym ate more cautiously.

At last, finished with his meal, he watched the fish fall through the cloud, and said, "You can't really believe that."

“Believe what? That you will love me? I am highly lovable. It is inevitable.”

“That you love me. You killed my mother. And my grandparents. You cut off the hands of my husband.”

“We have discussed this already, have we not?”

“Explain it to me again, then! How can you claim to love me when you hurt the ones I love?”

“Quite simply. They are all unworthy of you. Would a mother not separate her child from an unworthy playmate?”

“You’re not my mother. And they weren’t playmates.”

“They were the other toddlers in your playpen,” said Shalim.

“So you admit to killing toddlers, and you think that I will find it lovable?”

“Men. Toddlers. Infants. Women. Even, on one notable occasion, a pregnant woman. Do you squirm at the thought of stepping on a cockroach?”

“Yes?”

Shalim guffawed. “Child.”

“So what is this, exactly? Are you a pedophile, then?”

Shalim laughed again. “Never.”

“I’ll never love you.”



“You will. You will be my husband, when you have forgotten yours.”

Hym’s stomach dropped. “I’ll never forget Surya.”

“Say that again in five thousand years.”

“Five thousand years, a million! I’d never stop loving him.”

“But you would forget him,” said Shalim. “His face. His eyes. His hair. His hands, lying in the snow.”

“I hate you.”

“Hatred and love are conjoined twins,” said Shalim. “You hate me because you find me beautiful, and charming, and powerful, and practical. In time you will love me for all those reasons.”

Hym stewed in his rage, and did not answer.

“Do not worry,” said Shalim. “I will not take you into my bed until you wish to be there.”

“Good. I’d bite your dick off.”

Shalim laughed, and thunder rolled.

Surya woke from the dream feeling at peace. Ysolde shook him until he sat up, then dropped to her own bedroll and fell asleep at once.

Surya stoked the fire and sat beside it, and craned his neck back to look up through the branches of the elm. Hym still clung to his arm beneath the furs. He looked down at Hym, and smiled. "I'm got you, Hym. Don't be afraid."

The hours passed slowly. Surya toyed with his free hook, attempting to pick up twigs and sticks in it. It was clumsy still, but he was becoming accustomed to it.

Hym released his arm in the middle of the night, and fell limp.

At this, tired of the monotony, Surya got to his feet and paced a little ways away from the fire, and drew his sword. He swung it carefully, feeling the weight, letting his muscles burn. He would never again be as good as he had been with his hands, but he believed he would still be able to hold his own against a common swordsman.

The hours passed. Ysolde woke to find him doing drills. She did not disturb him, and packed up the camp in silence. Then she tied the horses to the carriage, and led the horses down to him, and he startled.

"Ysolde! I didn't hear you wake."

"Do you usually hear when someone wakes up?" Ysolde asked.

"What?"

“I mean, it’s not like opening your eyes makes a sound.”

“You know what I meant.”

“Come on. I’ve packed up.”

Surya and Ysolde got Hym up into the carriage and belted him in place. Then they left the clearing again, and headed out along the river.

By the sixth hour of riding they broke free of the forest at last, and found themselves upon a desolate plane of ice. It stretched away endlessly in all directions, marred only by the occasional dead tree. At the horizons, mountains slumbered under heavy snow.

The river joined here with the frozen sea, and its waves sighed quietly some distance to their left.

“Well,” said Ysolde, taking out the map. “Surya! Look at this!”

Surya brought his horse alongside hers and looked at the map with her. A faint line of ink now ran along the river, following the path they had taken. It seemed to stop right where they were standing.

“You traced our route?” Surya asked. “Good thinking.”

“It wasn’t me,” said Ysolde. “And I know it wasn’t you, because...” She looked at his hooks. “Because you wouldn’t think to do it.”

“So it’s tracing our route on its own?”

Ysolde nodded.

“So it’s a *magic* map?”

“So it would seem,” Ysolde said.

“That makes me feel a lot better about our odds.”

“I didn’t know the Storyteller had real magic.”

“I don’t think he did, either.”

“Did you ever hear about ‘the trance?’”

“No,” said Surya. “Not until the Timekeeper mentioned it.”

“I wonder what it is.”

Surya shrugged. “It’s magic. Does it need an explanation?”

“No, I suppose not. We don’t need to know how it works to use it. But still.”

“Want to turn back and ask her?”

Ysolde scoffed. “No.” She cracked the reins and the horses broke into a gallop.

They turned southwest, to the hills on the horizon, following the directions of the map. The desolate plains of ice glittered starkly under the dancing aurora light and the steady glow of the Ring. Whipcracking coils of the aurora flickered above them, and far on the southern horizon they beheld the tail of Leviathan. The wind of their speed tasted of lightning.

“Do you hear me, Hym?” Surya shouted, over the thunder of their hooves. “We’re coming for you! Don’t be afraid.”

And Hym’s body smiled.

Hym woke from a very pleasant dream to find Shalim standing over him, staring down. Hym scrambled away, very awake now.

“What?” Hym asked.

Shalim smiled and drew nearer. “Surya, I take it?”

“Get away from me.”

“He is stubborn, your young husband. I will monitor your dreams more closely.”

“Why can’t you leave us in peace!? Let me dream of him, if you will not let me go to him. You took my wedding night from me, must you take everything else?”

Shalim cocked his head. “Very well. I shall leave you undisturbed, and you will grow bored of him.”

“I’ll never get bored of him.”

“When you see the options you have available,” said Shalim, turning back to the wheel, “Yes. You will.”

Hym scoffed.

“I am not the only man in Hellegrund who will long to be with you,” said Shalim. “You could have a hundred husbands, and each of them would be better than Surya.”

“I don’t care! Surya is all I want.”

Silence rang for a moment.

“Petulant child,” said Shalim, softly. “You are too young to even begin to know what you want.”

By the evening of the first day they had covered a hundred miles, and the horses were spent. They camped on the ice, burning some of the wood they had brought with them. Absence was beginning to draw to a close, and the ice screamed and clicked around them from time to time, like the chattering of some monstrous creature of the deep. The sound rolled in from beyond the horizon, and rattled the teeth in their heads as it passed.

By firelight they studied the map, Hym lying under the stars between them. They ate some of their rations.

"If I'm reading this right," said Ysolde, "and I am, then we have a little over five thousand miles to go."

"That can't be right! Give it to me."

Ysolde surrendered the map to his hooks, and he smoothed it flat on the ice. Scandalized, Ysolde said, "You'll get it wet!"

"It's leather-backed. It's made for this."

"Still, it was nice leather!"

Surya didn't answer. He was staring at the map. "Dammit. You're right."

"Fifty-four days, if we can keep our present pace. Which we can't. These horses can't do this every day."

"They're going to have to. The ice will start to melt, when Approach comes. We're only four weeks from it."

"Twenty days," said Ysolde, "and by then we'll have made it to the Rim."

“The Rim?”

“Did you not learn geography?”

“I thought we’d hit the edge,” said Surya.

“Right, your dad’s books are... Outdated.”

“They are?”

“Well, the Aurorans thought the earth was flat.”

“It’s not!?”

“No! It’s a ball. We live about halfway between the middle of the ball and the top, where it’s still habitable. If you go north, you reach—”

“—The endless desert, I know.”

“It’s not endless, it just covers the north pole. At the center, you have the mountain of glass. Which is where it looks like Elysium sits.”

“And Hellegrund lies beyond the edge,” said Surya. “Right.”

“It lies within the *Rim*,” said Ysolde.

“Whatever that is.”

“It’s the equator of the ball,” said Ysolde. “The belt of ice that never melts. When the sun is at the north pole, in Presence, its light can’t reach the Rim. It only gets light during Approach and Departure, when the sun’s orbit makes its way down to the south pole.”

“What’s an orbit?”



“It’s what happens when two objects with gravity are in motion around each other. The sun orbits us. It just means something going around something else.”

“What’s gravity?”

“Makes things fall down.”

“Is it magic?”

“No. But magic can bend it.”

“It can?”

“Mhmm. That’s how Hym was was able to fly. And why his footprints didn’t break the snow. And why his sword moved so strangely.”

“I spent so long thinking of him as a spirit, I guess I didn’t think about those things.”

Ysolde looked at Surya sadly. “I’m sorry. I spent years trying to get him to tell you the truth. He just didn’t want you to look at him differently. He felt so guilty about taking that ring.”

Surya smiled, knowing that the ring glinted still on Hym’s finger. “I knew he had the ring,” he said. “I saw him take it. But I was scared that if I accused him, he would run away forever.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s funny, now. It used to hurt so much, when I was younger. Sometimes I would know he was lying to me, but we said so many things, I could never be sure what was real and what wasn’t.”

They looked at the horizon together. Surya said, "Fifty-four days."

"Better make it sixty at least. Seventy, to be on the safe side."

"Where will that put us?"

"Twenty days puts us at the ninety-first of Absence. The day of Arrival. Then thirty-four days puts us thirty-four days into Departure."

"The thirty-fourth of Departure," said Surya. "Just hold on till then, Hym. Just hold on till then."

"Want to drink?" Ysolde asked.

Surya looked at the horizon, and remembered his father's bottle. "No," he said.

"Suit yourself," said Ysolde, taking out a small jug of whiskey.

"Do we have the stores for that long a journey?" Surya asked.

"We'll have to supplement with some hunting, and we'll need to figure out water. Shouldn't be too hard to just melt the ice."

"Will that work with salt ice?"

"Yes."

"What about for the horses?"

Ysolde grimaced. "I'm sorry."

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t have the feed to keep them for the whole journey. We’ll be walking the latter half of it.”

“When will we have to turn them loose?”

“It’ll be kinder to eat them,” said Ysolde. “Nothing grows near the Rim. We should run out of feed just a few weeks after we reach it.”

Surya looked at his father’s horses, and he sighed. “I hate it.”

“It might become necessary. There’s no telling what we’ll find out here. We may need the meat, by then. And there’s one other thing.”

“Oh?”

“We’ll run out of firewood quickly. I’ve got an oil cookstove packed, and oil to burn with it. But we may have to stomach some things raw.”

“Whatever it takes.”

“He picked well,” said Ysolde.

“What?”

“Hym. He picked well.”

“He’s right here.”

“You picked well, Hym. Surya’s a good egg.”

“Oh,” said Surya. “Thank you.”

“A dumb egg, but a good egg.”

Surya laughed.

“We’re here,” said Shalim.

“What?” Hym asked, looking up from his doze. He had not had time to slip into dreams.

“We are here,” said Shalim. He turned the many wheels, and they collapsed into one, and suddenly the cloud began to shrink, roaring with lightnings all the way. It shrank beneath their feet, sucked into the hard black core of the storm; an undulating sky-serpent of joined and plated iron. A thin carpet of cloud remained beneath their feet, and behind them the long and jointed tail twisted through the stars for a mile or more. Below them, an endless range of ice mountains glittered in the Ringlight. Before them, nestled among the mountains, a city huddled behind a black and towering wall.

Hym had never seen or even dreamed of a city, before. To see so many buildings in one place overwhelmed him. Peaked and domed palaces glimmered with bronze, and at the heart of the sprawling metropolis there rose a straight black spire so tall it seemed to split the sky before them.

As they passed over the walls, Hym peered over the side of the great iron serpent, and stared down at the streets and palaces and their many glimmering lights.

“Who lives here?” Hym asked.

“My demons,” said Shalim.

“Your children?”

“My creations.”

The iron serpent twisted in the sky as it neared the tower, but the portion where they stood remained level. As the serpent coiled around the tower, it lowered its head to bring them to an open archway and a balcony in the middle of the tower. Shalim stepped off, and held out his hand.

Hym refused it. The winds were fierce, the moment he stepped off, and for a moment with his leg across the gap he looked down at the terrifying heights beneath him, and his courage faltered. The wind yanked him off the serpent.

Shalim caught him easily. “As if I would let you plunge to your doom.”

“Let go of me.”

“As you wish, my liege,” said Shalim, and the winds nearly threw Hym from the tower the moment he let go. Hym managed to catch the edge of the black archway and pull himself inside, out of the wind.

They stood now in a dark hall of some material that was neither stone nor metal. It seemed almost fibrous in texture, and the inner walls were networked together out of twisted coils of the stuff. There were no candles; instead, little green stars clung to the ceiling from their mats of silk.

“Glowworms?” Hym asked.

“I find their light soothing,” said Shalim. “They are in all the rooms, save yours.”

“Why? What’s in my room, glowing spiders? Glowing scorpions?”

“A warm fire, and soft candle-light. A hot bath, already waiting. A warm bed, deep, and large enough for two. Come along, if you want to see for yourself.”

Hym had no other choice. He followed Shalim into the depths of the black tower, and Shalim led him to a chamber fit for an emperor.

The bed’s four golden posts scraped the ceiling. Gauzy curtains hung from them, translucent, shimmering like spider-silk. The hearth sat like a beast of obsidian, its claws splayed on the floor and its snarling mouth full of yellow flame. A huge angled mirror on the wall above it reflected the bed. A set of balcony doors sat closed, near the hearth. Bookshelves lined all the walls, every shelf heavily laden. In the center of the room was a vast, perfectly circular pool of dark water, faintly steaming.

Hym looked at Shalim. “The pool...”

“Would you like me to join you?”

“No! Never!”

“Then what?”

“It looks just like...”

“Just like...?”

“Nothing. Leave me.”

“As you wish, my liege. Please. Bathe yourself. Dress yourself. I have chosen an outfit for you; it hangs in the

wardrobe, eager for the touch of your skin. When you are clean and dressed, you will find me in the dining hall.”

“I will be doing none of those things.”

“Then you will not be eating, either.”

“I can live on firelight.”

“Can you?” Shalim laughed. “The dining hall will make itself known to you, when you are ready to seek it.”

Then he left, with a final awful laugh, and Hym was alone.

Hym’s stomach growled angrily. “I know, I know.”

Biting his lip, he looked at the pool. It *did* look enticing.

He took off his cloak and draped it across the eyes of the hearth. Then, very self consciously, he undressed, and slipped into the hot waters of the pool. He treaded water.

For a moment, he considered drowning himself. Then he thought about throwing himself off the balcony.

Then he remembered Surya’s voice, saying: “We’re coming for you, Hym! Don’t be afraid.”

Sighing, he dunked his head and emerged again, flicking hair out of his face. He found an array of intricately-designed glass bottles on one side of the pool, and he spent some time uncorking them and sniffing them. Each had its own scent. Some he could place, but most he did



not recognize. He selected an aroma of sandalwood and lavender, and washed himself.

Hym snatched a towel and wrapped himself as he emerged from the pool, never trusting for a moment that he was alone. In the wardrobe he found a loose-fitting tunic without buttons or laces, and he put it on. The deep neckline ran all the way to his navel. With the tunic was a pair of tight-fitting leather pants, a set of black leather boots, and a silk sash. Hating himself, he put them on, and found that they fit more perfectly than any article of clothing he had ever worn. He wore the sash for a belt and tightened it to keep the tunic's awful neckline as conservative as he could make it.

He turned to take up his cloak, if only to have the smell of home around his shoulders, but it was gone. It had vanished from the hearth, and the carved eyes in the stone flickered with reflected firelight.

All his other clothing was gone as well.

He sighed as his stomach growled again. "Yes, alright, *fine*."

He opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the hall, but it had changed; there were new archways. Through one, a warm light and a sound of many voices came. He approached it cautiously, and peered through.

Deep cushions littered the floor, and low tables sat in their midst, heavily burdened with the flesh of plants and beasts that Hym did not recognize. Demons lounged around the room, all of them as beautiful as Shalim, and

each of them utterly unique. Some had horns or antlers, others had multiple pairs of eyes. Some had pointed ears, and the hooves of goats. All were nearly naked, and every color of the rainbow gleamed in their skin.

Shalim sat cross-legged on a cushion at the far end of the chamber, beside a green-skinned, four-eyed person of indeterminate gender, whose antlers hung with glinting jewels. This person wore nothing but black lace, and their long blue-green hair was done up into a complicated hairstyle and beaded with many small and glowing flowers. The cushion at Shalim's other side was empty, though all the rest were occupied.

Hym stepped between two purple-skinned men with hulking frames. In their skin, small stars glinted, and each wore only a loincloth of simple black silk. Their body tattoos were mirror images of one another. Hym stepped past an amber-skinned woman with burning red eyes and purple hair, dressed in a split-skirt gown of white silk. Little horns curled around her ears, all banded with gold. Hym passed by a grey-skinned man with grey eyes and grey hair, and saw that he was wearing a gown of diamonds held together by fine golden chains. He passed many other strange beings, each as odd as the last, and when he finally stood before Shalim, he said, "We will dine alone."

Shalim looked up at him, a jeweled goblet in one hand. "If you wish."

He gestured. At once, the demons got to their feet and left, bowing deeply.

Alone with Shalim, Hym looked at the feast.

“I was expecting more fire and brimstone.”

Shalim laughed. “Only in the fanciful tales of the ignorant.”

“I don’t know what any of this is.”

“It is not ‘spirit food’, if that is what you are afraid of.”

“I would prefer to prepare my own meals.”

“Are you not concerned that any fruit or beast I give to you will also count as ‘spirit food?’”

Hym’s stomach grumbled.

Shalim laughed. “Your stomach, it seems, is wiser than you are. Come. There is no way now to leave. You are trapped no matter what you eat.”

Hym sat. He pulled a gilded tray of something that resembled salad towards himself. He picked up his fork.

The next day they covered the same distance again, and the next they made a little more. Then they decided to take a slow day, to give the horses a chance to rest. For the next week they took a middling pace. Soon they had left every vestige of Auroran territory behind, and the snow became so thick they had to swap the wheels for sleds. Even with their broad, soft-padded hooves, the horses<sup>1</sup> struggled with the untracked wastes. By the end of the second week, their carriage was somewhat lighter, and the snow was more frozen. The horses traveled with ease, and they began to make a better pace. By the night before Arrival, they were camping within view of the Rim. It loomed beyond them to the south, a massive line of glacial mountains, jagged across the horizon. It glittered and flashed strangely in the aurora-light, menacing them from afar.

Surya held Hym in his arms and watched Ysolde unwrapping her bandages for the last time. The Storyteller's potions had worked their magic, and no infection had come to her. The wounds healed well, though they left her arm and hand covered in a constellation of many scars.

When the last bit of the bandage finally fell away, she stretched out her arm in the firelight, and looked at it. Then she took up her bow and got to her feet. She pulled a new quiver of arrows from the carriage, one Surya had not seen before. Then she took up her stance, strung her bow, drew back an arrow, and let it fly. It sailed out

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<sup>1</sup>I have chosen to call them horses, because that is the best translation of the word the villagers used for them, but they are better classed as their own species.

towards the distant wall of ice, but fell down many miles from it.

“New arrows?” Surya asked.

“New arrows. New bow. Dad’s parting gift.”

“I wish I had a father like yours.”

“He’s the best,” said Ysolde. “I’m sorry yours wasn’t.”

“Hym helped with that.”

Ysolde laughed. “He told me the story. Didn’t make much of a difference, in the end.”

“It made all the difference in the world, to me.”

Ysolde nodded. She held out her quiver wordlessly, and Surya took it. “What?”

“Look at the arrows.”

He looked. They were all of black iron, right to the feathers.

“Aren’t they heavy?”

“This bow can handle them. It is my father’s.”

“We should retrieve the one you shot.”

“It landed where we will make camp tomorrow.”

Surya laughed. “I should have expected nothing less.”

“Still, I will need to practice with these,” said Ysolde. “The bow and the arrows are both heavier than my old one. I will need to get much stronger.”

“You can shoot the whole batch every time we make camp, and retrieve them when we get there.”

“I will shoot half,” said Ysolde. “That way, we will be ready if there is trouble.”

“Didn’t you bring regular arrows?”

Ysolde stared at the northern horizon. Surya followed her gaze. “What is it?”

“We are being followed. I think they may be witches, from Aurora.”

“Like the ones we fought? How can you tell?”

“They hide well. But I can see their footprints in the snow.”

Surya felt a chill creep down his neck. “You can?”

“I was born with the flashing eyes,” said Ysolde.

“I’ve noticed,” said Surya. “The dark means nothing to you, then?”

“It means less than it does to most,” said Ysolde.

“How long until they reach us?”

“It could be a week or a month. They don’t move every day.”

“They don’t?”

“No.”

“Why not, I wonder?”

“No horses.”

“Then we should easily beat them to Hellegrund.”

Ysolde shook her head. “When they move, they move *fast*.”

“They probably have to stop to regain energy,” said Surya.

“I agree,” said Ysolde, nodding.

“And I agree that you should only shoot half your arrows.”

Ysolde laughed.

“Can you tell how many they are?” Surya asked.

“No. There is at least one among them who is clumsy. He gives the whole game away.”

“You mean you only see one?”

Ysolde nodded. “I can smell the rest.”

Hym held the fork poised, salad on the tongs. His mouth watered.

He sensed Shalim's yellow gaze upon him, and he put the fork down.

"No," he said, pushing the dish away. "You can't trick me like this."

"You will starve!"

"Then let me go."

"Do not make me force you to eat."

Hym concentrated. There wasn't much energy in his body, but there was enough to do what he wished. His lips merged together into one, and he glared at Shalim defiantly.

Shalim burst to his feet, flipping the table and all the dishes onto the ground. The movement so startled Hym that he fell out of his cushion.

Shalim stared down at the lipless Hym. The rage twisted Shalim's face into a bestial form, and Hym understood at last why he was sometimes called a demon. From the floor he stared up, meeting Shalim's fierce gaze, and the fierce face smoothed itself into a smile.

"We shall see who has the greater patience, then," said Shalim.

Hym got to his feet and started to leave the chamber, but Shalim snatched his arm. He did not resist; instead, he froze.



Shalim touched his chin with a finger and gently turned his face. Looking deep into Hym's eyes, he said, "Perhaps I will like you better this way, without your rebellious tongue."

Hym jerked his arm out of Shalim's grip and fled, leaving Shalim standing there amid the wreckage of his dinner. He did not stop running until he reached his own chamber, and he slammed the door behind himself.

Panting, he slumped to the ground, and leaned back against the door. With a whisper of his will, he separated his lips again, and got to his feet, and went to the hearth. As he crouched down to crawl inside, the fire died.

He sat before the cold hearth for a moment, looking hatefully into its stone eyes. Then he got up angrily, stripped out of his clothes, and dove into the heated waters of the pool. There was energy enough in them to feed him for now. He drank it in until the pool went cold against his skin, then pulled himself out onto the edge, and sat there shivering from time to time, staring out the balcony windows at the distant stars.

Someone draped a black silk blanket around his shoulders, and he stiffened. He turned to find Shalim standing above him, face averted, already turning to leave. He clutched the blanket and stared until Shalim had left the room.

The scent of roast chicken wafted into his nostrils, and his stomach growled like a beast. A golden tray sat before the door, burdened with a spatch-cocked bird whose

skin glistened with its glaze.

Angrily, Hym got to his feet, picked up the tray, and marched to the balcony doors before he could stop himself. He ripped open the door and heaved the platter out into the night, and watched with great satisfaction as the dead bird took its final flight into the city below.

Then, shivering in the winds which twisted around the tower, he slipped back inside, and shut the door behind himself.

Starving, he crawled into the bed and curled into a ball beneath the sheets. The blankets and pillowcases smelled of roses.

Many thousands of miles away, Surya lay beside Hym's body, drifting off beneath the stars.

Hym closed his eyes, desperate to escape the pain of his hunger.

Surya closed his eyes, desperate to see Hym again.

They opened their eyes in the dream, side by side in the bed at Blackcastle. Without a word, they embraced each other tightly under the sheets, and covered each other in kisses. Then, neither of them truly in the mood for love-making, they held each other close.

"Is this real?" Surya asked.

"No. It is a dream," said Hym.

"But are you really here?"

"Are you?"

They stared into each other's eyes, and neither could doubt that the other was real. Surya kissed him, and their lips opened, and the scent of Surya blew through him. Surya rolled on top of him, and kissed his neck, his breast, his belly.

At long last, by many slow degrees, they celebrated their wedding night. They held the sand of time in place, and let it trickle through their fingers, fondling every smoothly falling grain.

Then, happily, they lay in each other's arms, and stared at each other.

"Where are you now?" Surya asked.

"In Shalim's tower."

"So soon!?" Surya gasped.

"He tried to make me eat his food, but I didn't fall for it. He's angry with me."

"I'm so proud of you."

"What about you? Where are you now?"

"Deep in the wastes, and hot on your tail. We covered a hundred miles by carriage today. In thirty-four days we will be by your side."

Hym's eyebrows rose and his love for Surya ached within his chest. He kissed him. "I love you."

Surya's smile bloomed, and Hym was seized by the sudden urge to grab him by the hair, unhinge his jaw, and eat Surya's head whole. He settled for a particularly

aggressive kiss, instead. When he pulled away, Surya said, “I love you too. Stay strong.”

“I will,” said Hym.

“Has Shalim tried to... Tried to... To do anything to you?”

“Not in that way,” said Hym, shuddering. “I don’t think he plans to torture me, or anything.”

“Thank the gods. What is Hellegrund like?”

“I haven’t seen much. Just the tower, and the rooftops of the palaces.”

“Are you safe? Are there demons around?”

“Yes. But they’re not like I pictured.”

“What are they like?”

“They’re each different,” said Hym. “They have all kinds of strange features, and they come in every color, and they dress without modesty. But they haven’t harmed me... Or even tried to talk to me.”

“Are they ugly?”

“They’re hideous.”

“Oh good, that’s one less thing to worry about,” said Surya.

Hym laughed. “Yeah.” To change the subject, he asked, “How was your day?”

“It was fine. We found out we were being followed.”

“Who’s ‘we?’”

“Ysolde and I. And you. We have your body.”

“Ysolde’s with you?”

“Yup.”

“And you’re being followed?”

“Yes. She thinks by witches from Aurora.”

Hym’s eyes flashed. “If they harm one hair upon your head, I will scalp them all myself the moment I am free from here.”

Surya grinned. “I love it when you’re a little bit scary.”

“I can’t believe you’re really following me,” Hym said. “And that Ysolde came with you.”

“I couldn’t persuade her to stay behind.”

Hym laughed. “That’s Ysolde.”

There was a silence full of unspoken things, and they squeezed each other tightly.

“Still,” said Hym. “I didn’t think you’d really... Come.”

Surya laughed. Hym laughed. Surya said, “You came for me every time I needed you. You’ve always been there for me. I may not be a witch or a god, but you’re my husband. I will always come for you.”

Hym smiled again, then laughed a little. Surya laughed with him.

Hym asked, “Want to go another round?”

Surya smiled. “I just want to hold you. My arms have missed you.”

“Then hold me,” said Hym. “And never let go.”

“Until the morning takes us both,” said Surya.

They lay together, quite content, and kissed each other lazily on the pillow.

Surya pulled away and looked into Hym’s eyes. “Tomorrow, when the sun rises, I will look to it, and think of you.”

“I will look for it, and think of you,” said Hym, hiding his alarm. How much time had it been, since he had been taken?

## Chapter 23

# The Range

Surya woke to find Hym lying in his arms, facing him.

He smelled hot coffee. Ysolde was already awake.

Gently, careful not to disturb the body of his husband, he sat up. The cold wind whispered across his bare skin, and he pulled the wolf-fur up around his shoulders.

“Coffee?” He said, his breath spinning vortices of mist into the northward-moving wind.

Ysolde smiled at him from under the rim of her beaver-skin hat, and held out a steaming mug. He took it. She wrapped her furs more tightly around herself. Behind her, the horses were not yet bound to the carriage. They stood in its wind shadow, flicking ears and tails irritably under their blankets.

“Have I missed it?” Surya asked, sipping the coffee.

“Not yet!” said Ysolde, over the wind.

They stared expectantly towards the wall of ice on the

southern horizon. Already the sky in that direction was beginning to blush faintly silver-blue.

Surya grinned at Ysolde and she grinned back, and together they watched the slow first sunrise on the frozen world.

It turned the wall of ice to dazzling blood, and lit the sky aflame with its crimson glow, and as the dawn continued the shade of the ice shifted to violet, and the sun rose above it.

For a few brief moments, it tracked its way across the southern sky, moving from East to West. Surya looked to its light, and filled his mind with Hym. He looked down at Hym, and found his eyes open as well, staring at the light.

“Will it blind him?” Ysolde asked.

“No,” said Surya. “He needs it.”

Slowly the sun fell below the southern horizon, and its glow faded from the heavens. The Ring burned alone among the stars. After a time, with a whisper, the Aurora began again.

Hym’s eyes slowly closed.

“Happy Arrival,” said Ysolde, tossing a small wrapped gift into Surya’s lap. He painstakingly opened it with his hooks, and found inside a beaverskin cap, just like hers. Grinning, he put it on. “Thanks.”

“So what did you get me?”



“Look under the carriage bench.”

She got to her feet, disbelieving slightly, and went to the carriage. She returned a moment later carrying a black iron sword.

As she sat down to look at it by the firelight, Surya said, “It was my father’s.”

“When did you have time to hide it?”

“I didn’t. My father kept it there always. I can teach you how to use it.”

“I know how to use it,” said Ysolde.

“Why am I not surprised?”

“You need to practice too,” said Ysolde. “Shalim kicked your ass last time. And your range of motion is going to suck, with your hook-sword. You have to retrain your body.”

“I was hoping you would join me?”

Ysolde laughed. “Let’s do it before we make camp,” She said. “If we have the energy to burn.”

Surya nodded. “Very wise. Happy Arrival.”

“Happy Arrival.”

Hym stared at the ceiling of the bed-chamber, and longed to sleep again. The dream of Surya had been so real, and yet he did not dare to believe that it was anything more than a dream.

His stomach growled angrily. He thought about staying in bed all day, but it would have left him with nothing to distract him from his stomach. He looked out the window. The night sky had not changed at all, although the stars had turned. Arrival's light had not reached him. He half expected it. For him, only a day had passed. For Surya, it had been more than twenty.

Beginning to understand the torture he was to undergo, he tried hard not to think about it. If he put all the pieces together, he would go mad.

He slipped out of the bed, and tested the waters of the pool with one foot. They were hot once more. Gratefully, he slipped into them, and drank deeply of their heat as he bathed.

When they had cooled until mats of ice floated on their surface, he emerged, and dried himself, and went to the wardrobe. Today it was empty.

"So that's your game, is it?" He growled, going to the bed. As he tore a strip of the blankets with a little help from magic, and wrapped the strip of cloth around himself, he said, "We'll see who wins it."

He dressed himself as well as he could in the torn bed-sheets, then tried the door of his chamber, only to find it locked.

He tried the balcony doors, and found them also locked.

The hearth still sat cold. There were no ashes in it; the flame had not been produced by burning wood.

He stared around himself at the gloomy room. For a fraction of a moment, he considered calling Shalim's name. He threw that consideration aside immediately.

Instead, he went to the shelves, and looked for a book that might entertain him. He recognized none of the titles. All the books were bound in identical black leather, and they were all the same height. He pulled one off the shelf at random and found it to be a treatise on the proper application of medicinal herbs.

He pulled a few more books, and found that they were all informative treatises, all done by hand, and all by the same author: Shalim.

He put them back. He had no desire to read anything produced by that twisted soul.

"How do you like your little library?" Shalim asked. Hym did not turn to face him. Silently, he fused his lips again.

Shalim waited patiently behind his back as he stood at the bookshelf, unmoving.

He sensed Shalim moving behind him, and flinched. Shalim's hand touched the torn hem of his makeshift clothing, and thumbed the cloth. "I see you do not like having bedsheets, either," he said, his hot breath

on Hym's ear.

Hym said nothing, and did not move.

"You cannot hope to defy me forever," said Shalim.

The door of the bedroom opened, and he heard two lumbering demons enter, bearing between them a dining table burdened with breakfast foods. He smelled fresh fruit, and eggs, and bacon. He could hear it sizzling.

Hym could not bear to look.

He heard the scraping of the legs of a chair against a stone floor. Then he heard the huge feet of the lumbering demons approaching him from behind, and he smelled their scent; like jasmine and citrus. Their shadows fell over him.

Two huge hands gripped him by his upper arms, and picked him up off the floor, and turned him around. He looked up to see that it was the two huge purple-skinned demons in their black loincloths. Their skin burned on his bare arms.

He saw the table, every sweet gleaming in its dish, every savory steaming. Shalim sat in the chair on the other side of the table, and the demons dragged Hym to the seat opposite him, and forced Hym down into it.

He stared defiantly at his lap, unwilling to acknowledge Shalim's presence.

Shalim, across from him, steepled his fingers thoughtfully. "Look at me."

Hym refused.

He felt a fist land on his head, then knuckles gripping his hair. He did not remember growing hair; he had been nothing but fuzz when Shalim came to him. The hand yanked his head back, forcing him to look up. He locked eyes with Shalim.

Shalim picked up his gilded knife and fork, and began to eat. He took his time with every bite, chewing luxuriously. “Oh, you have outdone yourselves. An excellent breakfast.”

The demons bowed, beautiful purple faces serene.

Shalim forked bacon and eggs and closed his lips around them, drawing the tines of the fork out of his mouth slowly. He chewed, eyes rolling as though in ecstasy. He swallowed.

The demon behind him filled his gem-encrusted goblet with brightly colored juice, and he raised it to his lips and drank deeply. Smacking his lips, he put the goblet down.

“You dishonor my chefs, with your obstinance,” said Shalim.

Hym’s lips were fused together; he did not reply.

Shalim chuckled slightly to himself, toying with his knife.

Then, in a flicker of motion, he leaned across the table and the knife flashed across Hym’s sealed lip. Hym gasped in shock, not yet feeling the pain. Hot blood ran down his face. I healed him instinctively, and his lips

were again whole.

The demon behind him tipped back his head and forced his mouth open with his other hand. The demon beside him pinned his hands to the arms of the chair. A plump red berry rose from its tray and floated to his lips.

Shalim's upraised finger worked the magic, and the berry rolled itself along Hym's lips. He swallowed, salivating, unable to close his mouth.

"No," he said. "No!"

Invisible fingers pinched his tongue, and stretched it out. He tried to shake his head, tried to jerk free of their grip, but the demons held him firmly and Shalim's power placed the berry on his tongue. It rolled gently from the tip of his tongue to the back of it. He tasted his own blood on its skin. The berry rolled into his throat and clogged his airway.

Shalim released his tongue.

The demon behind him shut his mouth and held it closed, pinching his nostrils.

Hym stared in defiance at Shalim, not bothering to breathe. As the stars began to swim behind his eyes, he redoubled his commitment. He tried to force the berry up with his tongue and his throat, but it was stubborn.

At last, instinct took over, and despite himself, he swallowed. Tears smarted in his eyes as the demon released him and shoved his head down, towards his plate.

The tears ran freely down his face.

Shalim's nostril rose in disgust. "Contain yourself."

Hym burst into weeping, and jammed his fingers down his throat.

"Don't!" shouted Shalim, but it was too late. Hym vomited the contents of his empty stomach, tossing bile and a berry across the breakfast trays.

Then, throat and nose burning, spittle running from his mouth and tears from his eyes, he glared at Shalim.

Shalim, to his surprise, actually squirmed away from the look, and got to his feet.

"I will not stay to witness this," said Shalim, and he left the chamber.

His demons did not. The arms of the chair came suddenly to life, clawed hands twisting around to pin his arms down.

One of the demons held him by the hair and clutched his jaw, trying to force it open. He fused the bone of his own jaw's hinge, locking it firmly shut.

The demon broke his jaw.

Together they forced him to eat, one bite at a time. When he tried to vomit, they shut his mouth and nose. The demons took no heed to what they fed him, and he tasted his own bile many times during that long and horrible breakfast.

When they had stuffed him like a goose, they picked up the table and left. Only after they had gone did

the chair release him. He dropped to all fours, shoving his fingers into his mouth. As he gagged on them, the vomit stopped inside his throat, and forced its way back down. He felt the weight of power upon him, and looked up to find Shalim standing before him, one hand gently outstretched.

“You see?” said Shalim. “You have now eaten the food of the spirits. Nothing has changed.”

Hym tried to cry, but Shalim forced the tears back into their ducts.

“None of that,” said Shalim. “You seek to work upon my heart? I tell you now that I have none.”

“Please,” Hym sobbed. “Please! Why are you doing this?”

“You were hungry,” said Shalim. “I could not abide it.”

Then he left the chamber like a whisper of shadow, and Hym was again alone. He sat huddled in the corner, and cried tearlessly as he stared out the windows of the balcony doors.

The Aurora flickered high above, and the Ring’s glow burned brightly on the palaces.

Tentatively, cautiously, he placed his hand to the glass. He could feel the light, feeble though it was.

Head and hand against the glass, he sipped it all day long.



Near his heart, our core had nearly finished reforming. The added energy of food and light, feeble though it was, proved to be enough to complete the process.

Something clicked inside his breast, and he felt his power whole once more, though still deeply weakened.

It was easier to store the energy, now. He could gather more of it. Grateful for my presence, he fed me starlight and Ringlight and aurora-light, and slowly we began to return to a fraction of our former power.

“Spirit,” he said.

“I am here.”

“Why did you not stop him?”

“I couldn’t.”

“What about the food? Am I cursed now?”

“No. It was only food.”

Hym’s face clenched, and my power broke Shalim’s lingering spell at last. The tears rolled down his cheeks. “Only food.”

“Only food.”

“How can we escape?” Hym asked.

“Alone, I doubt that we will be able to. Unless you can acquire a very great deal of energy somehow.”

“He’ll stab me again. My power will break.”

“I have thought of that. I am already beginning to

make additional cores. I will hide them throughout your body. They are a tremendous expenditure of resources, but with enough time and energy, you will be somewhat protected from Shalim's blade."

"Somewhat protected?"

"It is iron. If it pierces a core, the core breaks, and a new one must be made."

"You can't stop iron, can you."

"I can make it hotter," I said, "But that is about all."

"How hot? Hot enough to melt?"

"Conceivably. Shalim's blade is wrapped always in his magic. I doubt that I could affect it in any meaningful way."

"What is his magic?" Hym asked. "Is it like yours?"

"Yes and no. It is much older. I do not recognize it; much like your mother's, it frightens me."

"So you won't fight for me. Even against demons and Shalim?"

"They are parts of the Inside too," I said.

"Ok."

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright. It was a pointless question anyway. I have no desire to twist you from your purpose, and I doubt I would be able to win against Shalim even if I did. You should be free, even if no other part of this

world is.”

“This world remains beautiful, Hym. Learn to see it,  
and Shalim will never break your will.”

Surya snapped awake. Ysolde crouched over him in the darkness, her eyes flashing with reflected ringlight. The fire had burned down to coals, and ice sparkled in the air.

Ysolde raised a gloved finger to her lips silently and put his sword into his hooks.

Then she was on her feet, turning, bow upraised; the iron arrow flew, and stuck in midair, and the red-robed dead man fell as the iron began to glow, red-hot, in his now-visible flesh.

Ysolde whirled and loosed again, another man fell out of thin air. Surya threw himself to his feet in nothing but his pants, and stood upon the furs above his husband.

“Show yourselves!” He called out, into the utter stillness. His voice echoed over the wastelands, flying away from him forever.

A streak of fire burst upon the night, and he spun around, on instinct, and slashed the bolt of fire from the air. Flame slithered up his blade, and he looked at it, remembering.

Something moved in the air. He spun again, swinging, and the blade flashed with sudden flame where it sliced through the enemy warrior’s invisible neck. Head and body became visible together as they fell apart. Surya stabbed the iron blade into the rolling head, and stopped it. As it burned, he said, “Come on! Face your deaths like men!”

Ysolde turned her head, listening.

At last, she relaxed, and lowered her bow. “They’re gone. The rest of them retreated. For now.”

She kicked over the second man she had shot. Her arrow had punctured his lung, and left him unable to stand, but he had not died. She planted her foot on his chest and said, “Who are you, and what do you want of us?”

The man squirmed under her boot. “We are Aurorans! Wizards of the septet, sent to claim the Prophet from you!”

“Then you are fools.”

“What is the septet?” Surya asked, as Ysolde raised her sword.

“The seventy-seven elites of King Sheppard’s royal guard.”

Ysolde said, “There’s only sixty-one of you, after tonight.” Then she stabbed the man through the heart, and he died. She withdrew her sword.

“I think it would be better to hit their brains,” Surya said. “In case they can heal.”

“They can’t. Only the Prophet can heal themselves.”

“Still. They could heal each other.”

Ysolde nodded soberly. “Good point.” She stabbed the man through the head with a gout of flame. She withdrew her sword a moment later as the snow steamed.

Surya sat back down, shivering now as the adrenaline began to wear off. He wrapped himself again in the furs.

“Is it still your watch?” He asked.

Ysolde nodded. “For another two hours.”

“Thank you.”

“If they come again, I’ll wake you.”

Surya nodded, and held Hym close.

He woke before the dawn to find Ysolde staring off into the north, looking back the way they had come. As the sun’s light began to warm the southern horizon, he asked, “Are they still there?”

She jumped, and looked at him suddenly. “Yes. But they’re keeping their distance.”

“You didn’t wake me.”

“I’ll sleep in the carriage. You can manage the reins.”

“They didn’t put up much of a fight last night,” Surya said.

“No, they didn’t. That’s what worries me.”

“Do you think there’s really sixty-one of them?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how many are in this group, though. It sounded more like they were an organization than an army.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Surya lifted Hym in his arms, and sat him upright,

and held him. “Good morning, my love,” he whispered, in Hym’s ear. “The sun is rising. Can you see it?”

Hym’s eyes were open now, staring at the sun. They tracked its movement as it scrawled across the sky, painting a longer movement across the horizon this time. Ysolde watched them, and watched the sunset, and glanced back from time to time to monitor the Aurorans.

The sun set, a few minutes later, and they loaded the chariot and set off once more. Ysolde drove the horses to their swiftest pace, and tied the reins to Surya’s hooks. Then she belted herself to the chariot, and using Hym’s fur-wrapped shoulder as a pillow, she fell asleep.

As he drove the chariot, he stared at the wall of icy mountains in their path. With every mile they covered, the mountains loomed taller, and yet they seemed no nearer.

Ysolde now watched all the night, and Surya drove all the day. Each night before they camped, they sparred with swords, and Ysolde shot half her iron arrows to the place where they would camp the next night. Each morning, they watched the sunrise together, and Hym’s eyes drank more and more of its light.

After a week of sunrises, when the sun at last had a full fifteen-minute day, the sun set once more, and both Ysolde and Surya felt the prickles rise on their arms and the goosebumps shivered up their necks in waves.

Hym's skin glowed faintly, like the Ring. It was bright enough to see by.

Surya and Ysolde looked at each other, and smiled in his light.

"Your beard has grown."

"So has yours," said Surya, nodding at her pants, and the way she was holding the whiskey bottle with one hand and her pipe with the other.

She smiled in a way he had not expected, and drank some whiskey. "Thanks. I always wanted to be a boy, growing up. Dad wanted a boy, but it wasn't just that. Boys get away with everything."

Surya laughed. "No they do not."

"Maybe you didn't," said Ysolde, "but boys do. They can do whatever they want, and nobody is surprised when they succeed or gloating when they fail. Nobody interrupts them, even when they're spouting idiocy. They can be warriors, and no one asks them when they will stop, and find love, and raise children. They can do things. They can be things. I wanted that."

"And you got it," said Surya.

She nodded. "I got freedom. But..."

"But what?"

She chugged from the bottle. "I don't know."

She looked at Hym. Surya turned to look as well. His face still faintly glowed.



“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?” Ysolde asked.

“He is.”

“I’ve always thought so. I proposed marriage to him once. But he was wise enough to ask, before eating, and so I didn’t get him.”

Surya laughed. “Did you really!? How old were you?”

“Fifteen. It worked out, though. When I actually met him, I realized it wasn’t him that I liked, it was his power. And he has a good soul. It’s hard to stay out of his influence, especially if you’re interesting. I got the Storyteller’s apprenticeship instead, because Hym didn’t want it. Hym liked what I knew, so we became friends.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t as cold-blooded as that,” said Surya.

“I would be fine, if it were,” said Ysolde. “But I think you’re right. He respected me more, after I snatched the apprenticeship from under him.”

“He wanted it?”

“He turned it down, but he was still thinking about it when I spoke up.”

Surya looked at Hym. “He is beautiful. I never saw it, until I did. I don’t remember when I first noticed it. When I did, it was all I could think about.”

“They tell me that’s how it goes,” said Ysolde.

“Never been there?”

Ysolde shook her head. “I’ve had butterflies, but... I’ve never had that.”

“He was the candle in my window,” said Surya. “He brought the sun home to me, every time I saw him.”

Ysolde said nothing.

Surya said, “I thought he had done it to torture me.”

“Done what?”

“Made himself beautiful. I thought he was a spirit. I thought he had done it just because he could, because he knew it would confuse me, that it would hurt me, that it would make it so I could never leave him. It was like... His eyes were so strange, and they always looked like he was up to something. His ears were unusual, and his lips had this funny little curl, and yet under it there was something you couldn’t see with just your eyes. A smile that tucked away a lie. It was the way he looked at me, and the way we spoke. It was the way his hand felt in mine. It was something about his smell. It was something about the curve of his jaw. I can’t explain it. I didn’t see it, until I did. And then it was all I wanted to see. The rest of the world could be darkness, as long as he burned where I could see him.”

Hym’s hand moved of its own accord, and took Surya by the wrist. Surya held Hym close.

Ysolde said, “It sounds wonderful.”

“It was. And it wasn’t. When I realized he couldn’t change form, and that it was just him, I... I understood.”

“I...” said Ysolde. “I once asked him to change me.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you want changed?”

“My form. I wanted to be Tristan, and not Ysolde.”

“What did he say?”

“‘That’s icky and way too complicated.’ He was seven.”

“You were playmates?”

“We knew each other in passing. We were the same age.”

“But not friends?”

“Not until I got the apprenticeship. I don’t think he really saw me.”

“Did you ever ask him again, later?”

“No,” said Ysolde. “It was one of those things a child does. I wasn’t serious.”

“I think Hym could do it. I’ve seen him change creatures before. Once he gave a rabbit antlers, because I asked him to, and we set it loose in my dad’s study.”

Ysolde processed this. She looked at Hym. “You really think he could do it?”

“Yeah. I know he could. And he would, too, if you really wanted it.”

“You wouldn’t think it was weird?”

“I married a Prophet and I’m hunting Shalim. Whether you are Tristan or Ysolde, I am happy you are by my side. But I’m insane, so don’t expect everyone to react so reasonably.”

Tristan said, “It’s Tristan, then.”

Surya nodded. “So long as you never call me Lord Blackcastle, I will call you Tristan forever.”

“We have a deal.”

Tristan looked to the north, and squinted his eyes.

Surya asked, “Are they coming?”

“Not tonight, I think. They’ve lit a fire.”

“I don’t see anything.”

Tristan looked at him. Then Tristan looked at the fire he could see plainly, in the distance. “Then I’m seeing through their illusion, or something.”

“Maybe it’s an illusion you’re seeing?”

Tristan’s eyes widened and he took up his father’s bow. He spun smoothly around, sighting along the horizon. “No,” he said, and he relaxed. “We’re alone. For now.”

“We’d better get moving,” said Surya.

Tristan nodded, and scooped Hym up and put him in the chariot. They packed up the camp and mounted the carriage, and Tristan flicked the reins, and the horses lunged ahead.

“How far until we reach the mountains?” Surya asked.

“It’s the seventh of Approach,” said Tristan, “so we’ve still got twenty-seven days before we’ll be in Hellegrund. I’d say the ice wall should be before us at about seven days from Hellegrund.”

“So twenty more days?”

Tristan nodded.

“How big are these fucking mountains?” Surya asked.

“The last measurement was taken four thousand years ago by a witch. They measured them at one hundred sixty-three thousand feet in height, and still growing.”

“How!?”

“They are drawing the moisture out of the sky, all the way up to the edge of the mesosphere.”

“What’s the mesosphere?”

“One of the sky’s layers.”

“The sky has layers?”

“What did you even learn with your dad?”

“Mostly, how to take a punch.”

“Geez.”

“I learned some statecraft, too, and tax stuff. And we studied maps and histories. He wrote a history of the whole village. And he had stuff from before the end.”

“Before the end?”

“Yeah. They were copies of copies of copies, of course, so they were holier than a religious textbook, in the logics sense, and some translations had come down to straight up gibberish, but there were interesting bits and pieces in his collection. You had to really look for them, though.”

“The Storyteller didn’t have anything from before the end. But he had stuff that was written in the beginning. He taught me how to do copy-work.”

“What was the oldest book in his collection?”

“A copy of Danaye’s journal,” said Tristan. “Well, that was the most interesting one, and it was nearly five thousand years old, but the really oldest one was a copy of a copy of a copy ad infinitum of a book that was an oral tradition at the very year of the beginning.”

“What was it called?”

“An Oral Tradition Handed Down In the Very Year of the Beginning,” said Tristan.

“What did it contain?”

“It was boring, mistranslated stuff, mostly prophecies. It predicted the fall of both Tears.”

“Tears?”

“The falling star that hit him,” said Tristan. “It’s how he got the new magic.”

“But what is it?”

“It’s a piece of the Ring,” said Tristan, pointing skyward. “The Ring gets curious, and sends them down to

explore for her. That's the story, anyway. They merge with someone upon landing, and the person changes forever. Then all kinds of legendary bullshit happens that doesn't make any sense, because it's a book that can't decide if it wants to be poetry or if it's going to be a history tale. But it claims to have been written by 'The Mother Herself'."

They sat in silence for a while, and the morning fire crackled.

Surya said, "So... The horses."

Tristan said, "Did you check the feed bags?"

"No. But you said we would begin to run out around now. Do we need to worry?"

"Go check the feed bags. Trust me."

Surya got up and checked the feed bags in the carriage, and found them full to the brim. He turned to Tristan. "But... How?"

Tristan shrugged, then pointed at Hym. "It has to be Hym."

"Or the Aurorans?"

"Sneaking in to restock our stores? Why?"

"They want Hym, right? What if they realized we're trying to get his soul back, and they'll be waiting for us when we come back out with him?"

"That makes a little too much sense," said Tristan. "But that would mean they think we can succeed."

“Well? Are they still following us?”

“Far behind. They have stalled all day.”

“They’re letting us go.”

“We must remember to be ready for them, when we return.”

The wind began to pick up, whipping a dust of ice-particles across the landscape. It howled, bitterly cold, towards the south, and high above thin clouds flowed northwards swiftly enough to be traced with the eye.

Surya said, “I don’t like the look of that.”

“Me neither.”

“What should we do?”

“If we get caught in a blizzard out here, we’re done for. We have to build an igloo.”

“Do we have time?”

“If we start today, and work hard, we can have it ready before the storm hits. I have something that will help.”

Tristan got up and went to the carriage, and procured a small leather satchel, and walked carefully back out to the ice. He slung the strap over his shoulders and reached into the bag with both hands. Surya heard the click of flint on steel, then a hiss, like a serpent ready to strike. Then Tristan whipped something away into the night, and it flew, tumbling in the air, trailing a shower of sparks, and landed on the ice far from them.



Arcane thunder split the night, bursting the ice in a huge area, and the explosion rained back down onto the ice in a splash of sparkling exothermic reactions. The material fizzed and screamed on the ice, dancing across the surface, but it also began to melt into the ice with incredible ease, and sank into the wasteland, and finally cooled, leaving a deep pit with a little bit of water at the bottom.

“What was that?”

“Thormight. Named after the dead god of lightning.”

“Gods can die?”

“Gods die all the time. Most of the gods who ever lived have died, just like with any other form of life. Everything dies.”

“Everything?”

“Nothing exists, which does not have an end.”

“What about endless nothingness?”

“That’s an oxymoron.”

“You’re an oxymoron! You mean there’s nothing in the universe that just... Continues? No stability? No permanence?”

“Pretty much.”

“Not even with the gods?”

“Not even with the gods.”

“Hym will have to fix that.”

Tristan laughed. “Billions have tried.”

“He can do it,” said Surya. “I know he can.”

At dinnertime, Shalim came to collect Hym personally. In his hands he held a new outfit, all of black silk. He laid it on the bed. Hym did not move from his huddled position by the window, and he did not look at Shalim.

Shalim came to his side. "You will bathe, and dress yourself, and come to dinner."

Hym nodded, not looking at him.

Shalim seemed about to say something. Then he turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind himself.

Hym got to his feet and stripped out of the tattered bedclothes, and dove into the pool. It had warmed itself again, and he drank of its heat as he bathed. When he at last emerged, dripping, his skin was faintly glowing, and the water steamed off of him. He gathered the energy into our new core.

He put on the new garments and emerged from his bedroom. Once again, the arrangement of the halls had changed. Through one of the new archways, light and sound poured. He went to it, and stepped inside.

Again the demons sprawled around their tables and around Shalim. Again the cushion beside Shalim sat empty. This time, a group of many-antlered demons in the corner played a string quartet, and the room was much larger. A golden path wound between the many low tables and the cushions around them. The music of the quartet was sweet but otherworldly, chasing harmonies and melodies very different from those of the vil-

lage. Incense smoke slithered up the walls, and by the glow of the incense pots three beautiful male demons began a sinuous dance. Their skin was striped like tiger's fur, and they wore only a single long red silk ribbon, which wrapped all three of them together in interesting and unraveling ways as they danced. The ribbon moved weightlessly, as though deep underwater, and clung to their flesh tightly.

The only civilized path to Shalim's side was to walk the golden road where the demons were having their performance. He would not be able to walk past them without touching them. He could feel Shalim watching him.

Angrily, Hym marched through all the demons, stepping on some of the tables to do so. Then he threw himself down at Shalim's side, and without preamble he grabbed the nearest vegetarian-looking dish and began to eat.

Shalim sat stiffly during this display, but smiled as Hym began to eat. He said nothing, and drank from his goblet.

The demons watched him stuff himself. All of them ate lazily, as though they had all the time in the world.

Hym ate until he was full. "I'm full. May I be excused?"

"No," said Shalim. "Sit. Enjoy the idle conversation of the evening."

None of the demons were talking.

“Can they even speak?” Hym asked.

“Some of them,” said Shalim. “When I wish them to.”

“So they’re only puppets.”

“Not so. They are each independent. They do not speak in my presence, because I do not wish them to.”

“Then what idle conversation am I to enjoy?”

“My own, of course,” said Shalim.

“Then say something idle and entertaining, if you can.”

“We are merely a few weeks’ time from the day of Arrival,” said Shalim. He sipped his wine. “There will be a festival. You will enjoy it.”

“Whatever.”

Shalim sighed, and silence reigned for nearly half an hour.

“What is it you want from me?” Hym asked, tears in his voice. “Why did you take me from everyone I loved?”

“So that you could be among equals,” said Shalim.

“You imprison me, torture me, and now you insult me. We will never be equals.”

“Someday, you will understand.”

“No. *You* will understand. I will teach you what it means to be hated,” said Hym. “And I will hate you until the day I die.”

Shalim looked at him, yellow eyes flashing. “You know nothing. You comprehend nothing.”

“Then teach me. Make me comprehend.”

“I have spent lifetimes teaching you,” said Shalim. “Every book in your chamber was written for you to read.”

“What is this, then? Am I to be your prisoner forever? You must have some need of me, or you would not have gone to so much trouble. Tell me what it is, so that I can fulfill it, and go home.”

“You are already home.”

“The years have twisted you. You are insane.”

Shalim laughed. “I have been called that before.”

“Then what? What insanity made you claim me?”

“Love,” said Shalim.

“Of whom? Of what? I see no love in your eyes, only bitterness and cruelty.”

“Then look deeper.”

“Love does not hide behind cruelty and deception. It cannot. Love cares only about the happiness of the beloved.”

“Perhaps a petty, mortal love does. My love is greater. To the eyes of a child, love often looks like cruelty.”

“I am not your child. You owe me nothing. Let me go.”

Shalim sighed again. "By my patience, you will know that I love you."

"What patience? You ripped me from the arms of my husband on my wedding night. You slaughtered my family to make me your own, even though by your own admission they would not live out the century. If your patience is so great, take me back to my husband and leave me in peace, and when he is dead of old age I will come to you."

"If I had left you with him, you would have made him a witch."

Hym had not even considered this possibility.

Shalim looked at him, unsurprised by his silence. "Oh yes. My patience is vast, but I am no fool."

"You took me for my power," said Hym, understanding at last.

Shalim laughed. "And I overpowered you to do it. Tell me, does that make sense to you?"

"No..."

"I took you to teach you, so that you would learn. I took you to keep you safe, so that you would survive. I took you so that no one else would dare to. I love you, Hym. It is the truth, and it is the reason for all that I have done. In time, you will understand that."

"So all this is really about Danaye, then."

“And my brother, Shachar,” said Shalim. “He is the lord of Elysium, and crueller than I could ever be.”

“And where is Danaye?”

“She disappeared in the fall of Aurora, but she walks the halls of my mind, in dreams. Just as you have, since first the star came to you.”

“You’ve kept me from her.”

“I have.”

“Why?”

“She is a poisonous woman. She seeks only to overpower you, and take your magic for her own.”

“Spirit, is this true?” Hym asked, out loud, unconcerned by the eyes of the demons upon him.

I said, “It is conceivable that my fallen sister could absorb me into her own body. Her reasoning would have to be ironclad, or I would never leave you.”

Hym looked at Shalim. “Can you hear her?”

Shalim stared at Hym for a long time before he shook his head. Hym did not know whether to believe him or not.

Hym said, “You should have known how your actions would make you look, to my eyes. I cannot trust you, even if you speak the truth.”

“I am well aware of that,” said Shalim. “In time, your mistrust will fade. I have never lied to you. I never



shall.”

“How long have you been alone?”

A flicker of something in Shalim’s eyes let him know he had struck a soft place. Shalim smiled easily, and the pain in his eyes disappeared. “I am never alone,” he said. “I live in a city of my demons.”

“And they never speak to you.”

“Does any god care to hear the words of their creation? What could they possibly say that would add even an ounce of pleasure to my life?”

“Then you must not be a very good creator,” said Hym.

The demons laughed, and the sound made Hym jump.

Shalim scowled. “Enough idle chatter for one night, I think. You are excused.”

Hym got to his feet without another word and left the room, returning to his chamber.

He sat at the foot of the bed, staring at the palms of his hands and at the waters of the pool.

He could have made Surya a witch, if he had only known how. He could have made them all witches, and none of them would have died.

He remembered the words of the Storyteller. “Just because something happens when you have the power to prevent it, it does not mean it is your fault.”

He found it hard to accept those words, now, when the guilt lay so clearly in his hands.

He looked at the bookshelves, and the hundreds of books upon them, all penned by Shalim's own hand.

"How long would it take to write this all?" Hym asked me.

"Assuming a handwriting rate of fifteen words per minute and an average of two hundred pages per book, each containing an average of five hundred words, it would take approximately six thousand days, rounding up for clean numbers since we're working with averages anyway. In other words, fifteen years of writing, not accounting for breaks, research, meals, or sleep. To judge by the range of ages present among the books, the actual time required seems much more significant. The oldest among them is one hundred four thousand years old. The newest was bound just this year."

"Why are we working with averages?" Hym asked. "Don't you know how many words are on the page?"

"I have not read the books," I said.

"But... *can* you read the books? All of them?"

"I could. It would be entertaining."

"What do you need from me?"

"I will need to take over a portion of your brain for additional processing. You will slip into a semiconscious fugue state, in which you may be accosted by all manner of spillover hallucinatory perceptions. It will also require

an expenditure of energy, and there may be physiological side effects.”

“Side effects?”

“Impossible to anticipate without knowing the contents of the books ahead of time.”

A soft knock came at the door. Hym sighed, and did not answer. He sensed Shalim just on the other side of the door.

“Why bother to knock?” He asked. “You’ve entered unannounced half a dozen times since I’ve been here.”

From the other side of the door, Shalim’s voice said, “As you grow more worthy of my respect, you will receive more of it.”

Hym said, “Do you mean to say I have an actual choice in whether or not you enter my chamber?”

“You do now.”

“In that case, go away.”

“As you wish, my liege.”

“And for the love of the gods, stop calling me that if you don’t mean it.”

Shalim laughed. “As you wish, my liege.”

He sensed Shalim’s presence moving further into the tower halls, and sighed to himself. Then he undressed and got into bed, mind whirling with confused thoughts.

He could have made Surya into a witch.

Then he thought of his mother, and Ana, and Nestor, and realized again that they were gone forever, and the grief struck him like a wave.

The storm broke not long after they finished the lid. It took them all day, but by the storm's breaking they had a warm and sheltered cavern underneath it, with a long chimney of stacked, melted, and re-frozen ice. The carriage and the horses had their places, and Surya and Ysolde sat under the iron chimney-grate, at the little cook-stove, and kept the oil fire burning all night long.

By morning the storm had blown over, leaving their shelter buried under ten feet of fresh drift. They climbed out the chimney and shoveled all day, and by the next day they were ready to leave again as dawn touched the sky. The day was nearly an hour long now, and its light lifted their faces with joy.

The closer they got to the wall of ice, the taller it grew before them. After ten days hard riding with tireless horses and no difficulty with feed, it loomed directly above them, high icicles dangling like spears. The huge curved wall blocked half the sky, jagged and glittering, yawning over them like the jaws of some apocalyptic mouth. They saw no way through it, yet.

Ten days later, they at last reached the base of the wall. The clear crystal shimmered with a million reflections of them and the carriage, and Hym's glowing form made the whole thing blinding to look at.

They looked up as the horses champed at their bits and snorted puffs of mist into the snow. The wall was impassible, smooth as glass, sloping towards the north. It would be impossible to climb the overhanging face. No gap or crack showed to their eyes—not even to Tristan's

eyes.

They camped early that day, at the base of the wall, and sat across from their own reflections by the firelight. For the first time, they slept inside the insulated carriage, and the horses huddled in the firelight, using the carriage as a windbreak. Surya and Tristan had made a wall of packed snow around the carriage, to protect the fire from the wind, and it helped somewhat. Still, the wind was thick with ice.

Through the windows of the wagon, Surya and Tristan watched their own reflected faces in the ice. From time to time, Surya saw the snarling forms of a wolf in one of his reflections, only to realize a moment later that he was seeing his wolf-skin cloak and his bearded face from a strange angle. Tristan stared at his reflections as though baffled.

“What do you see?” Tristan asked.

Surya shook his head. “I don’t know. A wolf? What about you?”

“I see a man,” said Tristan. “I didn’t expect to see one.”

“Hym’s reflection just looks like him,” said Surya.

“Your reflection looks normal to me.”

“Yours looks normal to me too,” said Surya.

Late in the night, they heard the roar of a terrible beast. Surya opened his eyes and looked across at Tristan’s eyes flashing from the other couch, and he crushed

Hym into the corner of the couch beside him, and covered his body in furs, to hide the glow.

Tristan raised his head very slowly, and stared out the window. His eyes flashed, pupils huge with fear, and his gaze tracked something moving across the windows.

They did not hear the horses.

They looked at each other, and Tristan got carefully to his feet and raised his bow, peering out the south-side window of the wagon, to see if the beast had circled around them. He gasped.

Surya slipped out of Hym's embrace, and looked out the window.

An enormous silver-grey panther sat calmly before the fire, his back to the wall of ice. Both horses had turned to stone.

Surya and Tristan looked at each other. "What do we do?"





## Chapter 24

### Breakfast Again

Hym bathed and dressed himself in the outfit he found hanging in the wardrobe. This time it was a simple robe of dark but shimmering cloth.

Feeling very naked under it, he stepped out into the hallway and found that the halls had changed yet again. He sought the one with light and music, and found Shalim seated at his cushion, waiting for him, surrounded again by demons.

He wove between the tables and cushions, and seated himself beside Shalim, and dragged a plate of fried root vegetables towards himself.

“Good morning,” said Shalim.

“Is it?” said Hym.

“It is. You are lovely in that.”

“Fuck off.”

Shalim laughed.

Hym ate in silence, watching the demons as they watched him. He looked at Shalim. "Make one of them talk."

"Why?"

"I want to hear what they have to say."

"It will only bore you," said Shalim.

"Humor me."

The green-skinned demon with gem-laden antlers put down their goblet and said, "Good morning to you, my liege."

"Good morning. What is your name?"

"I am called Pallas."

"Pleased to meet you, Pallas. Do you like living in the tower?"

"It is better than living in the city."

"That is not an answer."

"Yes. I like living here."

"What do you do all day?"

"I drink, and dine, and dance, and rut."

Hym shuddered. "A life of leisure, then?"

"A life of great leisure," said Pallas.

"Not bored, are you?"

“With the entertainments of the tower, how could I be bored?”

“I’ve been bored since I got here.”

Shalim laughed. The demon did not seem to know how to respond.

Hym ate in silence.

When he had eaten his fill, he looked at Shalim. “May I be excused?”

“No.”

“I will sit here in silence, then.”

“Good.”

Angrily, since there was nothing else to do, he grabbed another vegetarian tray and ate its contents.

“Are you drinking wine already?” He asked.

Shalim laughed. “What happened to sitting here in silence?”

“Well? Are you?”

“No. It is only the juice of a certain fruit.”

“What kind of fruit?”

“You do not know it. It is called ‘Gorim.’”

“I would like to be drunk.”

“So soon? I will drink you gladly.”

“You know what I meant.”

Shalim laughed. "Such ill humor, today. I wonder, did you sleep well?"

Hym had slept dreamlessly, when he slept at all. He glared at Shalim and did not answer.

The two purple-skinned demons rose from their places and brought between them a great jug of wine, and filled his goblet.

He lifted it and drank it down. "Leave the jug."

The demons obeyed. Bowing, they returned to their places.

"I did not know you cared for wine," said Shalim.

"I don't," said Hym, pouring himself another goblet-full. "I am hoping it will make your company less offensive to me."

"In that case, drink up!"

Hym obeyed. Soon the jug of wine was empty, and sorrow swam in his belly. A little dizzily, he stood, and held out one hand for Shalim.

Shalim looked at his hand, then up at his face. "What?"

Hym said, "Take me somewhere. Be alone with me. Teach me something, if you can."

Shalim took his hand and rose to his feet, weightless as a shadow. "Follow me, then."

They began to walk back to Hym's room, but Hym

stopped. “No. Not back to my cell. Take me someplace where I can see the stars and the city.”

Shalim smiled. “I have just the place.”

He led Hym through one of the many identical arches and on into darkness. As he stepped across the threshold, his feet did not find the floor beyond, and he tumbled in. Shalim caught him, and they fell upwards, into total darkness. He clung to Shalim’s hand, and Shalim’s yellow eyes glowed in the darkness.

They seemed to fall forever. At last, they breached the darkness, and emerged onto the very peak of the tower, high above even the tallest clouds. The sky was no longer midnight blue, up here; it was utterly dark, and the stars glinted cold and hard within it. The Ring blazed above, and the aurora slithered past all around them, level with the tower-top. Hym watched the aurora flow around the tower, and sensed no wind at all.

He looked down, over the sides of the tower, and beheld the curvature of the earth for the first time. Away in the bitter distance he saw mountains he recognized, and knew his home was nestled among them.

“What do you think?” Shalim asked. The kindness in his voice was so unexpected that Hym glanced at him, startled.

“It’s beautiful,” Hym said.

“To the eyes of a youth, perhaps,” said Shalim.

“Why? What do your yellow eyes see, when you look out at this?”

“The walls of a prison.”

Hym looked at Shalim again. “I don’t understand.”

“I did not expect you to,” said Shalim, craning his neck to watch the Ring. Hym looked up as well.

“How far is it?” He asked.

“Many thousands of miles.”

“Have you ever been to it?”

“No one has. The field prevents it.”

“Field? What field?”

“The Mother’s field,” said Shalim. “She has wrapped the earth in it, cutting off all her earthly creations from her heavenly one. The Ring cannot communicate with us, and we cannot communicate with her. Only her emissaries fall to us, and they, too, are cut off from their source.”

“Spirit, is this true?”

“It is,” I said. “A barrier of energy deflects my signals. It is why I had to send myself, after my first probe failed to speak to me.”

“I don’t understand,” Hym said sadly. He was getting tired of saying those words.

Shalim said, “The Ring and her Tears are one and the same. Each Tear is a shard of the same soul, sent down

by itself to explore our world.”

“How do you know that?”

“I knew Danaye well. We spoke often.”

“How long has it been there?” Hym asked, looking up at the Ring again. From this height, at the very outer edge of the atmosphere, it was possible to see the shimmer of her flowing sands, moving across the heavens.

“I was there to witness her creation,” said Shalim. “When I was only a child. She ended the old world, and began the new.”

“The old world?”

“The world before ours,” said Shalim. “Once, mankind sprawled across all the continents of this earth. Their cities scraped the stars, and their voyagers went out into the night, and flew to other worlds.”

“There are other worlds?”

“Countless billions of them,” said Shalim. “Nearly every star you see has its own worlds, dancing around it.”

“But why? How do they stay warm?”

Shalim looked at Hym. “You do know that our own sun is also a star, do you not?”

This revelation shattered Hym’s universe. Gaping, he looked to the heavens again. “No,” he said, very quietly. “I did *not* know that.”

“In the old world, it was common knowledge.”

“What happened to the old world? How did it end, if it was so powerful?”

“At the moment of the Ring’s birth, the magic of the ancients turned against them, and their world devoured itself,” said Shalim. “And when the Ring had fully formed, and the world fell over, the seasons shifted forever. The world knew Absence for the first time. Only those who could survive in the new conditions managed to do so.”

“And you were a child, at that time?”

“I was.”

“How did you survive?”

“I was made to survive,” said Shalim.

“By whom?”

“By the Mother herself.”

“What is she like?”

“She is colder than Absence, more decisive than the edge of a sword, and more powerful than all this world’s magic put together.”

“So you worship her?”

“Why would I? She has no need of worship. She is a god.”

“I don’t understand.”



“Find another way to phrase that, please. It is getting tiresome to hear it.”

“Fine. Explain it to me, then; why would a god not require worship? Why do my people bow and pray and worship and sacrifice, if the gods care not for it?”

“Because your people are fools,” said Shalim, “misled by other fools, long dead.”

“But why wouldn’t their worship matter?”

“Why would it?” asked Shalim. “I am mighty. Need I hear a peasant say how mighty I am? What need have I for the blood of goats and cattle? What sacrifice can a bumbling villager make, that could mean anything at all to me? None.”

“What about royalty?” Hym asked. “Do you care for *their* prayers and sacrifices?”

“If the queen of a colony of ants became aware of your presence, and sacrificed the lives of beetles and grubs to you, would you care for it? Would you heed her little cries?”

“Maybe, if I could understand them,” said Hym. Ants were hard to read.

“Then you are a kinder god than any I have met.”

“You could be kind, too,” said Hym. “You came to me that day, when my grandfather took me into the forest. You were kind to me then.”

“I came to see if Nadianti’s son had lived. It pleased me to see that you had.”

“It really was you, then?”

“It was.”

“My people have cried out to you for centuries. Every soul who dies is entrusted to your care. Have you truly come for none of them?”

Shalim laughed. “Only witches have anything that could be considered a soul, and even those I do not guide.”

Hym’s mouth fell open. “What do you mean!?”

“Recall your mother’s blade,” said Shalim. “In life, she carried it, and cast her magic through it. In death, a portion of her magic and her psyche lingered in it, little more than an echo. Coupled with the pieces of her magic that lingered still in your own body, she continued to exist, after a fashion. After the death of the brain, all that a person ever was is gone. Not so, with witches. Their magic continues to work their will in the world.”

“You killed her soul,” said Hym, horrified. “You killed my mother’s soul!”

“I did,” said Shalim. “But a piece of it still lingers in you.”

“It does?”

Hym turned to me. “Does it?”

“I do not know. If it is within you, it has hidden itself well from me.”

Hym looked at Shalim. “You lie.”

“I never lie.”



## Chapter 25

### A True Reflection

Surya and Tristan looked at the huge grey panther calmly watching them from the other side of the fire.

“What do you think it wants?” Tristan asked.

Surya bit his lip. “Hym.”

The great cat walked calmly through the fire, scattering it, and placed its huge paws on the upper edge of the carriage, and pushed, nearly knocking the whole carriage over. Then it dropped to all four paws, and chuffed something into the snow.

Tristan raised his bow.

Surya realized suddenly that the great cat was shivering. Then he gasped. “Tristan! Look! Its reflection!”

Tristan’s eyes widened. “*Mihos!?*”

The huge beast grunted, and the sound throbbed in their chests.

Surya said, “*That’s* the witch’s familiar!?”

Tristan opened the carriage door, and at once a small grey cat rushed inside, and the carriage door slapped shut behind it.

The panther and its housecat-sized reflection were both gone.

Mihos leapt up onto Tristan’s lap, purring violently, and nuzzled against Tristan’s hand. Then he curled up, very content, in Tristan’s lap.

The fire reconstituted itself as though it had never been scattered.

Surya and Tristan stared at the cat, and the cat stared at Surya from Tristan’s lap. His eyes half-closed as Tristan massaged his scalp, and his regal little gaze fixed Surya in place. He felt like he was in trouble for some reason.

Tristan said, “Oh, Mihos, Mihos, Mihos! Have you been following us? Was it you who brought us provisions? You took it from the Aurorans, when you got rid of them for us, didn’t you! You must have been so cold out there, poor baby.”

“The cat did all that?” Surya asked.

“He was made by Danaye, as a gift to her daughter,” said Tristan. “It was one of those things the Storyteller was always trying to tell Hym, but Hym didn’t want to listen. He was created to be her best friend, and he grew with her from the day of her birth. In his real form, he’s

twice as big as the thing we saw out there, but it takes magic, and it's hard to change. You have to feed the new form quickly."

"So he's a magic shapeshifting super-smart cat?"

"More or less. He's four thousand years old."

"*Four thousand!?*"

"Yup."

"Why the hell didn't we bring him with us in the first place!?"

"He had disappeared, remember? When he took Hym's sword."

Mihos growled and bent over and vomited up a gleaming steel sword in a fine scabbard.

"What the fuck?" said Surya. "Where did *that* come from?"

Tristan shrugged. "He's very mysterious."

Surya bent down and picked up Hym's sword with his hooks, and suddenly he felt a stabbing, scalding pain in both his wrists. "Aargh!"

Mihos swung a paw, hissing. Surya saw his shaggy grey head fill the whole carriage, each eye big as a human skull, and felt the grumble of his thundered menace deep in all his bones, and he staggered back into the couch and almost sat on Hym's head.

Mihos yowled and threw himself at Surya, and by an

incomprehensible feat of acrobatics and precision footwork, the small cat kicked him across the chariot to sit next to Tristan. Then he sat calmly at Hym's head, and curled up, and closed his eyes, purring again.

"Not meant for you, I guess," said Tristan. "It looks like his old one. But I never saw the scabbard before... I wonder..."

She looked at Mihos. "She had more than one sword, didn't she?"

Mihos nodded.

"You had to travel to get it."

Mihos nodded again.

"Did you go far?"

Mihos curled up and put one paw over his face, refusing further questions.

"What does it mean?" Surya asked.

"I don't know... But it's strange that he would go to so much trouble for a sword."

Mihos made a noise like the grinding of bones beneath the earth, and Surya and Tristan both immediately fell silent.

Hym sat up in the chariot and opened his eyes, and Surya and Ysolde both jumped.



## Chapter 26

### Reading

After their time upon the tower-top, Shalim took Hym back to his room. He paced it for hours, alone. The time for dinner came, and he emerged, and ate, and returned to his room. At dinner they had no conversation at all.

The next day was much the same. He dreamed of nothing, between the days. He missed Surya terribly.

A week passed without conversation or entertainment, except the lurid dancing and music of the demons.

Four weeks passed, and his ache for Surya was like an open wound.

Alone in his room, he sat upon the floor before the pool, and looked at the many books.

Gently, he stretched out his hands, and released me into the room. I flowed to the many shelves, and between the bindings of all the books.

Images flickered behind his eyes. He committed to the spell, and I flowed between the pages.

As the books began to leave their shelves, pages flying, his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell to the stone. Images pulsed and flared behind his eyes, flooding his mind. He beheld kingdoms and worlds, atoms and molecules, elements and diagrams. Complex mathematical formulae flowed through his mind, and he understood the meaning of each and every symbol, and of their unions, at a single glance. The universe began to unfold before him.

He twitched on the ground as the flood of information overwhelmed him, and greedily, he reached for more. Every book on the shelves flew from its place, and the beat of their flurrying wings engulfed him. His heart hammered in his chest as stars and galaxies exploded into being all around him in the darkness. Hanging in the void, he watched the nebula collapse inwards, swirling tightly in gravity's dance. He watched the sun and all its planets form together. He witnessed Uranus's horrible collision, and the abortion of the forming world between Mars and Jupiter. He watched the earth crash together with her twin, and saw them melt and merge in the embrace which crushed the foundations of the world. He witnessed the whirling of the earth, and saw the forming of her moon. Deep beneath the sea, he watched life form for the first time, and loved it like a god. His mind traced the lineage of every creature of the earth at once, and he saw the way their forms changed across the endless reaches of time, and he witnessed the extinction of

each and every form.

He saw the rising ape, standing tall amid savannah grasses, and as the eons scrolled past he watched the potter's hands at work, shaping the clay. The skulls changed with each generation, distorting, diverging. He saw the many forms of man, and their horrid wars with one another. He witnessed the fall of the Denisovans, and the Neanderthal. He watched humanity take its form at last, and stretch out its hands like a titan, and reshape the whole world. He breathed the cloying vapors of infinite death, and understood at last that life was precious in a way that nothing else in all the universe could ever be, for it stood alone against that bleak and formless infinity of destruction.

His heart ached within his breast as he watched the suffering of slaves as numberless as the stars. Across all the kingdoms of man he stretched his mind, and witnessed the struggle for survival on the grandest scales. He watched the fledgling nations rise from among their tribal masses, and witnessed the liquid shifting of each nation's boundary. Like vast amoebae, they devoured one another, only to be, themselves, devoured. He saw cities rise and crumble to sand. He beheld the faces of kings and emperors and gods, and watched the sands of time grind them to faceless powder.

His soul ached with each of the infinite tragedies of love. He saw husbands ripped from their wives and cast out like arrows, never to return from the field of battle. He saw wives ripped from their husbands, and sold into

slavery in lands they did not know. He saw children ripped from the arms of their mothers, and raised like cattle by their captors. He saw the cruelties of war and famine and disease, and the infinite ways in which fate broke each and every love at last, and he knew at last that love was precious, more precious even than life itself.

He beheld the flashing accretion disk of a black hole, and the brilliance of ten billion novas flickered across the endless night. By each flash he knew the distance of all the galaxies, and the hugeness of infinity humbled him utterly. A mote within the sea of time and space, he drifted, weeping inconsolably, and his body began to foam at the mouth as horrible seizures racked him.

He watched the cities of man rise, gleaming, and saw prosperity and peace at last upon the earth, and the pride he felt was like a father at his child's wedding.

And then he saw the fall.

The star rose silently from the belly of the earth, and smote the moon. As the moon began to crumble and her dust stretched out into the gleaming ring, he watched the whirling earth tumble onto her side. The darkness lingered now for months, and the daylight scalded the earth. In each slow wave of darkness, he watched the lights of man extinguish, and saw the ice and sand bury all that man had made, and he wept again.

Alone in the void, he cried out aloud, "You fools! You *fools!*"

Hym staggered back in the darkness, for there she

stood, his mother, white-haired, grey-eyed, hanging before the planet like a goddess. A moment later and he knew he did not know her, but her face was so like his mother's that he could not speak. Before he could retreat from her, a pair of gleaming eyes came around from behind her, and Mihos sat at her feet.

She reached out her hand to him. Without a word, he took it, and felt the power move in ways it never had before.

Seated before Suldae and Tristan, Hym's body cocked his head.

"What?" Surya asked. "What is it?"

Hym's hands lunged out and caught both him and Tristan by the forehead.

Then Shalim's yellow eyes opened in the void, and his power ripped them apart from each other. Danaye's eyes, unconcerned, never left him as she retreated into the void.

Then he was back, lying on the ground, surrounded by tattered books and covered in spittle and tears. Shalim stood above him, one hand still outstretched, eyes still blazing like coals.

Hym wiped his mouth and sat up, defiant. He sniffled. "What?"

Shalim's shoulders heaved as though he had just run a marathon. He glared down at Hym, and looked around at the scattered books and pages. "You had a seizure."

“I did?”

“You did.”

“It was worth it.”

He thought Shalim might say something about the many ruined books, but he did not. Instead, he turned away in silence, and left the room, and Hym was again alone.

He could feel the atoms in the stone, and in the golden bed-frame, and in the sheets, and in himself. He understood now the inner workings of his cells and all his organs, and for a lingering moment he beheld himself as I beheld him, and knew the beauty of the world, and the joyous ache of that beauty was such that no wave of grief could claim him, for his gratitude towered like a wall.

Surya and Tristan both awoke many hours later as the sun’s light blazed through the wall of ice, casting ribbons of multicolored light like stained glass. Surya found Hym seated in his lap, holding him, as though he had slept over him all night. Tristan found himself lying on the other couch, next to the sleeping Mihos.

Surya blinked painfully, and raised his hand, and rubbed his eye with the back of one knuckle. Expecting the cold and soothing touch of smooth steel on his eyelid, he was shocked to feel muscle, bone, and skin.

He opened his eyes again, and looked at his hook, and sighed. He shook himself.

Tristan said, “What the hell was that about?”

Surya said, "I have no idea. I'm scared to find out."

"What do we do next?"

"You don't know either?"

"No."

"Then let's look at the map. There must be something smart we can do."

They pulled out the map and looked at it.

It had changed. It depicted only a massive landscape of interlocking mountains of ice, and in the center of it, a pattern of sixteen squares marked: "Hellegrund."

A line of words was writing itself across the paper in the Storyteller's fine handwriting, and Surya and Tristan sat transfixed as it came into being. It read, "Ride the big cat, dummies."

"*Ride* him?" Surya asked.

Tristan shrugged. "We need to feed him, then, and give him lots of heat. He'll need energy, if he's going to carry us."

"Do you think he'll climb over?"

"I don't know what he'll do."

"Should we feed him the horses?"

"I don't see how. He turned them to stone."

"Oh right. I wonder if that's like eating them, to him? Does he get the energy they would have had? Maybe

that's 'drinking life', like the Storyteller said?"

"Maybe," said Tristan. "I would have thought it would require energy to turn flesh to stone. It can happen naturally, under certain geological conditions, but it usually takes time and heat."

"Look at him, he's just sleeping there. He looks too comfortable to disturb."

"So do you," said Tristan, laughing. Hym's arms were clamped tightly around Surya. It was a little hard to breathe.

Surya laughed. "Maybe I'm speaking on my own behalf, too."

Tristan said, "I don't feel like moving either."

"I feel so strange!"

"Tingly, right?"

"Yeah. Like my skin's crawling... On the inside."

"Do you think we're sick?"

"I don't know. I feel a little feverish."

"Maybe we should take the day off? We can bring the cookstove inside and make coffee in here, and just enjoy the rest."

"Yeah," said Surya.

The door of the carriage opened and the cookstove entered politely and lit itself, shutting the door behind itself. The coffee obligingly started making itself.



Tristan and Surya watched the magic at work, dumb-founded.

“He’s still with us,” said Surya.

“Or she is,” said Tristan.

“She?”

“The star.”

“Or...” Surya looked at Mihos.

Tristan said, quietly, “Hym’s mother?”

“He brought her sword along, didn’t he?”

“Why can’t we see her?”

“Only Hym ever could. But do you smell... Do you smell the flowers?”

Tristan’s skin crawled. “I do. Dried orchids.”

“She wore them in her hair, the night she died. Any time I smell it, I know she’s around. She used to follow Hym everywhere.”

“In a way, she still is,” said Tristan.



## Chapter 27

### Forming Plans

Hym sat among the scattered pages and held the bliss of existence in his mind all at once, like a song ringing in all creation around him. He ran his fingertips along the cold stone floor, feeling the molecules and the atoms within them. He watched the dance of electrons, a wild thing even in the cold calm stone. He felt the waves of the earth's magnetic field, pulsing sonorously over him. They were focused here, channeled by the tower.

Shalim's power source at last. The aurora danced outside the window and Hym watched its patterns, knowing in advance each one that would form. That a thing of such great beauty should be merely the side-effect of Shalim's magic... It was a strange thought.

There had been notes in the margins. Notes to him. In the early books, there were scraps of poetry. In the ones written after the first century, there were prayers. Some were angry. Some spoke of how Hym had "forsaken" Shalim, somehow. There were sonnets and limericks of

loneliness and grief. In the ones written after the first millennium, the margin notes provided only practical information and helpful explanations or examples.

He pondered these margin notes, and their meaning, and the layers they gave to Shalim's complexity. He had a window, however opaque, on the mind of the dark god.

He reached out into the air and embraced the life within the empty chamber. Fungal spores and bacteria danced in the air and hung in mats on the ground and on the walls and even on the pages. He could feel them all over his skin, and he was not dismayed by their presence, for he saw the beautiful complexity of all their inner workings, and he loved them for it.

It was impossible to love, without knowledge. He knew that now. He appreciated my perspective more deeply, and renewed his commitment to honor my love of life.

He held out his hand, and in the air above his palm he held a single bacterial cell, and looked closely at its inner workings. As it wiggled in his embrace, he reached into its core and read the information buried there. Playfully, he tinkered with it.

Gently, he tickled the cell until it decided to replicate. Feeding it energy and raw materials gathered from the air, from the room, and from his own body, Hym drove the cycle of replication, and multicellular life began to take form in his hand. In a few moments a tiny fetus hung in the air above his palm, already going through the transformations of the womb. He nurtured the shape

that it would take, molding it with neurotransmitters and hormonal triggers.

By the addition of a few links in the chain, he caused the growing brain to wrinkle itself into deep folds, to hide deep consciousness within.

Within a minute, the cub had black fur. It lay on his hand, sound asleep, and he cradled it close to his chest, and wept tears of joy at the sight of his creation.

“Mephistoph,” said Hym. “Stoff, for short.”

The cub, already growing in his arms, opened its eyes to look at him, and pawed playfully at his hanging hair. He smiled down at it. “You are a good boy.”

Mephistoph cocked his head, watching Hym’s lips as he spoke. He raised a gentle paw and touched it to Hym’s lips, looking at his eyes.

It sensed his sadness, and it began to nuzzle against him, purring, distracting him from the pain.

“You are a very good boy,” said Hym.



## Chapter 28

# A Strange Ride

Surya and Tristan spent the day in the strange invisible company of the witch. Their tingling symptoms abated late in the evening, when dinner began to cook itself for them.

Surya looked at the invisible force preparing their meal, and said, “Thank you, Mrs. Hym.”

Tristan laughed. “Her name was Nadianti.”

“Thank you, Nadianti,” said Surya.

A flying spatula bowed in the air.

Mihos hopped down from his couch and sat beside the cookstove, watching the salted fish crackle. One of the fish flew off the stove and into his mouth, and he lay down to gnaw on it.

“So,” said Tristan. “Tomorrow, we cross the wall. Are you ready?”

“Are you?”

“I feel better now.”

“Me too.”

“I just don’t know what we’re going to find, on the other side. We may face demons.”

“We may. I feel better about that, with Mihos and Nadianti at our side. And with... Whatever last night was.”

“I’ve given it some thought,” said Tristan.

“You have? Given what? What thought?”

Tristan laughed. “What happened last night. With Hym. I think he blessed us, somehow.”

“Blessed us? Like a god?”

“There’s not a very clear boundary between what a god can do and what a Prophet can’t,” said Tristan.

“But there is one?”

“It’s mostly speculative.”

“But what is it?”

“Well, it’s said that only the gods can create a soul.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“But like I said, not a lot of data to work with there. We don’t really know what the distinction is.”

“Who gets to decide what is and isn’t a god?”

“That,” said Tristan, “is precisely the problem.”



The next morning the dawn's light woke them to the smell of sizzling bacon.

"Did we bring bacon?" Surya asked.

"Yes," said Tristan. "I was saving it."

"For what?"

"For a special occasion."

"Seems like a special occasion, to me."

Tristan laughed. "Good point."

Surya said, "Good morning, Nadianti. Thank you, the bacon smells delicious."

Tristan said, "Good morning Nadianti! Good morning, Mihos!" Mihos was watching the bacon greedily.

Each of them got two pieces for breakfast, along with eggs, toast made from fresh bread, and coffee. Sitting in the carriage, they watched the day roll by in its brief hour, and ate their breakfast.

Then Surya said, "Well, we'd better get moving, I suppose."

The carriage lurched, knocking him off his feet. He landed sitting next to Hym as the wagon began to roll away, pushing through the piled snow.

Surya shouted, "Quick, we've got to stop it!"

Tristan raised a hand. "Look." He pointed to Mihos.

Mihos's eyes glowed with a baleful, flickering light. He

sat regally in the middle of Tristan's couch, and both Surya and Tristan sensed his power flowing all around them.

The carriage rolled east along the face of the icy wall of mountains, and by the end of the day it reached a wide crack in the wall of ice.

"That wasn't there before," Surya said.

"Do you think, maybe the sun...?" Tristan asked.

"I don't know," said Surya.

The carriage rolled into the crack, and two hours later it had reached a narrow choke-point, and could go no further. It stopped there for the day.

From time to time, drips of water hit the roof of the carriage. It was the only weather they had to contend with, that night.

Surya held Hym close, and with the back of his hook he smoothed Hym's dark hair. It had grown, on the journey, as had his fingernails and his toenails. Tristan slept early. Mihos sat on Surya's knees, preventing him from lying down fully, but he didn't mind. Hym was in his arms.

"I've got you, Hym. I've still got you. Just hold on."

## Chapter 29

# Life and Consequences

Hym woke in the darkness and snuggled more warmly with the cat. He heard Surya's whispered words, and he smiled serenely at the walls of his prison. The books were all back on the shelves. Not a scrap of paper remained on the floor.

Carefully, so as not to wake Mephistoph, he slipped out of the bed and into the pool, and drank of its heat lazily as he treaded water. He could feel the flow and movement of every molecule in the pool, and he delighted in the complexity of the little vortices as his limbs swished through it. Before washing himself with soap, he pushed all the bacteria that could be harmed by it off of his skin and into the water. Then he washed himself again with sandalwood and lavender, and emerged from the pool, and with a wave of his hands he moved the bacteria out of the water and onto the stone walls of the chamber. With an inspired thought, he reached into them all, and tinkered with the constellations of their genetic destinies, and as they gently began to glow on the

high reaches of the walls, he smiled to himself. In time, over many layers, he would make them like the glowing coral in the Cave.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it?” asked Hym.

“It is Pallas, your majesty.”

Hym opened the door. The green-skinned demon stood before him, wrapped today in a skin-tight gown of white lace. Pallas bowed deeply, antlers brushing the edges of the doorway. “I have been sent to ask if you would like the company of Shalim at breakfast, today.”

“I would not.”

“Then you are to have my company, instead,” said Pallas.

“Bring me my breakfast, and you can keep me company from the other side of the door.”

Pallas laughed. “It is a binary choice, your majesty. Either you dine with Shalim, or you dine with me.”

“The demon I know, or the demon I don’t? I’ll call his bluff. Now where’s my breakfast?”

Pallas looked behind themselves at the two burly purple demons and the table they bore between them. Hym stepped out of the way, and they brought the breakfast table inside.

“Do these two have names?” Hym asked.

“Ochre and Spoil.”

“Those are their names?”

“Yes.”

“Which one is which?”

“They do not know themselves, I think. Shalim uses their names always in a pair, or not at all.”

Breakfast was a baffling arrangement of vegetarian dishes this time. Hym seated himself happily and began to eat. Ochre and Spoil did not leave the room.

“I was planning to eat,” said Hym. “You don’t need your enforcers.”

“They are for my protection,” said Pallas, “and I may rut with them after we are done here, if you raise the tingles in me.”

Hym shuddered in disgust, and ate.

He looked up after a time. “Did Shalim name you all, then?”

“Yes. In the moment of our creation, he gives each of us a new name.”

“A new name? Did you have old ones?”

“Yes, before...”

“Before?”

“We do not like to speak of it.”

“I don’t care what you like. Tell me, what were you before you became a demon?”

“I was a witch.”

“What was your name?”

“I was Persephone.”

“You were a woman?”

“I was always as I am now; neutral. I did not like to take sides in the long war.”

“What war?”

“The war of the sexes,” said Pallas. “When Shalim took my soul here, this was the reflection I saw in the wall of mirrors, and so it was what I became. I am myself, now. I am free.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Time moves strangely in these halls. Your time moves very slowly, for your signal is weak with distance.”

“What are you babbling about? Make sense.”

“Time is relative for all beings. That is especially true, in Hellegrund.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You are a spirit, here, yes? You knew that, yes?”

He had suspected as much, but it still took him by surprise to hear it stated so plainly. “Yet everything here is solid, and real.”

“Somewhat more than a dream is, yes.”

“So how long have you been here?”

“For me, it has been many thousands of years. To the outside world, it has also been many thousands of years. My time moves with Hellegrund’s.”

“What about for me? How long have I been here?”

“A little over seventy days, to the outside world. You have experienced, I think, somewhat more than thirty.”

“Seventy days?”

“Yes. You suffer considerable lag.”

“Lag?”

“Latency.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your body is far away. It transmits your soul across the distance, to be here with us, but the distance is still great. The farther your body gets from you, the slower your time will become, while ours continues normally.”

“Why don’t you seem to be moving super fast?”

“Hellegrund holds the illusion together,” said Pallas, cryptically.

“Illusion?”

“Illusion.”

“Then all this is... Just a dream?”

“That you cannot wake from, or leave, or end by any means.”

“You mean I can’t kill myself?”

“Why would you wish to? This place is paradise.”

“Yet you’re bored of it.”

Pallas’s four eyes widened slightly. “No. Never. I will never grow bored of it.”

“You lie.”

There was fear on Pallas’s face, now.

Hym said, “You have been bored of it for ages. It is torment, to you.”

“There is no way to end it,” said Pallas. “If you die, he merely wakes you up in your bed.”

“Then you and I are both prisoners.”

“My imprisonment is much nicer than yours. I can rut all day, without consequence or fear, without shame, without pain. I can eat any food I desire, and never ruin my figure. I am never weakened, never weary, never without a source of pleasure.”

“And never without a sense of purpose, either.”

Pallas stared at him, unblinking, for a long time. “You bore me. I will leave now.”

Hym watched him go. Pallas turned in the doorway and looked back, and Hym grinned. He had hooked something in those four grey eyes.



The door closed behind him. Ochre and Spoil did not leave.

“You can go now, unless you can speak,” said Hym.

Ochre and Spoil looked at each other.

Then, as one entity, they moved towards Hym, and grabbed him by the arms.

“What are you doing? Unhand me!”

They hurled him to the bed, waking Mephistoph, who instantly darted out from under the sheets and hid himself under the bed-frame.

Ochre and Spoil moved in, purple muscles rolling. Each of them came to one side of the bed, and they stared down at Hym menacingly.

“Don’t touch me,” said Hym. “I’m warning you.”

A madness distorted their features, and they lunged upon him. He wrestled impotently against their might, but they pinned him down. A huge purple hand began rummaging at his collar, at his belt.

“Get off me!” Hym snarled. “Let me go!”

The two brutes pawed at him mercilessly, and he cried out, “Shalim!”

Hot iron flashed.

Ochre and Spoil collapsed, headless bodies falling atop Hym. A blast of wind separated them and hurled them off the bed, severed heads and all, and Shalim stood at

the foot of the bed, sword still outstretched, eyes blazing with power. The blankets had scattered in the wind. Hym frantically put himself back together, covering himself from the yellow eyes. Purple blood had drenched the mattress and the sheets.

Shalim sheathed his iron sword, still glaring at Hym. Then he turned, without a word, and marched for the door.

“Wait!” Hym shouted, reaching out a hand before he could stop himself.

Shalim paused.

“Thank you.”

Shalim’s burning eyes softened, and he left.

Hym looked around the room. The table, the blood, and the corpses were gone.

Mephistoph emerged from under the bed and crawled fearfully up into Hym’s lap, purring loudly.

“It’s ok, Stoff. I’m ok. We’re ok.”

## Chapter 30

### On Foot

Tristan and Surya woke to the sound of a small waterfall hitting the top of the carriage. Breakfast had just finished cooking itself.

“Good morning, Nadianti,” Surya said, gratefully accepting the mug of coffee in the air. As he sipped it, he looked down at Hym’s face beside him, and smiled. The dawn’s light was on Hym’s skin, and his eyes were open to it.

“Good morning, Hym,” Surya said, and he kissed his husband on the forehead.

Tristan sat up, taking his coffee. “Morning, Mihos. Morning, Nadianti. Morning, Surya. Morning, Hym.”

They drank their coffee and listened to the falling water. “So the ice does melt, a little,” said Surya.

“I guess,” said Tristan. “Think the crack will be wide enough for the carriage, if we wait?”

“No,” said Surya. “I think we’re on foot from here.”

They emerged from the carriage after breakfast, while the dawn’s light still burned on the ice, and faced the crack.

It was narrow, barely wide enough for Surya’s shoulders.

“What should we bring?” Surya asked.

“As much as we can... carry...” Tristan gaped at the carriage, and Surya gaped with him.

Their belongings and supplies were all hovering in one mass. As the last item joined itself to the bundle, Mihos leapt up and climbed to the top of it, and perched there, staring at them. Hym lay on a couch that had ripped itself from the carriage to join the procession.

“Onward we go, then,” said Surya, and he turned and started walking. Tristan followed after.

The ball of belongings stretched itself out into a long train, and flowed into the crack behind them, and Mihos napped on an airborne suitcase as they went.

They marched all day, and by the eighth hour of their long march they reached the end of the crack, and found themselves in a snow-covered valley that stretched for many miles, ringed all around by towering ice. There was only a small patch of sky, above, torn asunder by glacial peaks. The ring burned right at the zenith.

In the middle of this valley they saw a formation of huge blocks of black stone, and in the center of them a

black spire that stretched into the night, thin as a wire. It was so tall it seemed to pierce the aurora, and the emerald fires danced around its high peak brilliantly, as though it were the source of all of them.

“Hellegrund,” said Surya, grimly.

Tristan nodded.

Lightning flickered between the huge stone blocks, from time to time, and the sound of thunder rolled across the valley, echoing strangely between the high walls of ice. It sounded almost like wailing, or the gnashing of great teeth. The sound was an almost constant one.

A rattle of sound nearby made them turn, and they beheld an igloo sitting near them. A warm glow poured from its mouth.

Intrigued, Surya bent to enter, and Tristan followed.

They found a woman sitting by their cookstove, making dinner. Their supplies were piled around the walls of the igloo. The woman’s hair was like the feathers of a raven, and it shimmered with iridescence. Her gown was a strange purple-blue that could never seem to decide on which color it wanted to be. It, too, shimmered in the firelight. She looked up as they entered and her violet eyes fell upon them.

She was translucent, like vapor.

“Hello,” she said, politely.

“Hello,” said Surya.

“Hello,” said Tristan. “Nadianti, I presume?”

## Chapter 31

### A Conversation

At dinner time, Hym heard a knock at his door. “Who is it?”

“It is I,” said Shalim.

“You may enter.”

There was a long hesitation. At last, the handle turned, and Shalim stepped inside, bearing a very ornate set of black robes, studded with diamonds. He held it out wordlessly toward Hym.

Naked in the pool, Hym swam to the edge and climbed out, dripping. The water steamed away from his skin, drying him, and he took the robe, and turned away, and began at once to dress himself.

Shalim’s eyes glittered greedily, but he looked away.

Hym sensed the torture this was, to Shalim, and he delighted in it. He took his time getting dressed.

Shalim held out a hand for him. He did not take it.

Hym gestured towards the door. Shalim nodded, after a long moment, and turned, and led the way. Hym followed mutely.

Tonight they did not go to a dining hall, but to the top of the spire. There, a banquet sat laid out for them before a pile of scarlet cushions.

They sat, and watched the aurora, and ate in silence.

"I see you have made your first creation," said Shalim.

"Don't take him from me. Please."

"I was not going to. I was going to express my pride."

"Oh. I see."

"You have read the books," said Shalim. He did not look at Hym, but Hym sensed the importance of the unstated question.

Determined to give him nothing to work with, He said, "I have."

"And what did you think of them?" Shalim asked, turning to meet his gaze.

"You have never known love, have you."

A flicker of fear flashed in Shalim's golden eyes, and he looked away again.

Hym let the silence linger. Even the winds did not disturb them; this was the quietest place in the world.

Hym let his fingers dangle off the edge of the spire, and the aurora's flames twisted around them in wild patterns,



taking on new colors.

Shalim said at last, "No. I have not."

"You could have any of them."

"They are my creations."

"You tried to have Danaye."

"She would not have me. In the end, I was forced to release her, though it broke my heart."

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long, until the end? When will you be forced to release me?"

"I will never release you. I have learned my lesson well."

"How long did you hold onto her?"

"A thousand years."

Hym stared at Shalim, tears of horror smarting in his eyes. "For her? Or for you?"

Shalim looked at Hym then, the weight of uncounted ages in his eyes. "For me."

He could not help himself. The words slipped out. "I'm sorry."

Tears welled in Shalim's eyes, and he stared flintily into the distance.

“How long have you waited for me?”

“A million years, or more. I have lost all count of the number.”

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have waited. You should have tried to find love.”

“There is only you, for me. It was written; so it shall be.”

“By whom?”

“By the Mother, upon the day of my naming. One who was touched by the Ring would be the predestined soul of my mate.”

“Then you must wait longer, because that soul is not mine.”

“You are already beginning to understand. In time, you will know fully. Then you will love me. It is inevitable.”

“And if I ever do, you will weep with sorrow, for you will have understood what you took from me.”

“Your grammar is perplexing, there.”

“I said what I meant.”

They ate.

“You have quickened, of late. Surya must be very near now.”

Hym glared at him. Shalim did not meet his gaze.

Hym said, "If you touch him, if you harm one hair on his head—"

"—I will not have to."

"Let me go to him. Let me see him. Let me be with him. Please. Only once, if I could just see him one time, if I could just have one kiss, and hold him—!"

"—I shall not grant such a foolish wish. Do not think that you can trick me."

"I wasn't trying to trick you! Please! You know what it is, to love what you cannot have. How can you not feel my pain?"

"It is the pain of a child, who knows nothing of pain. You moan now, but I say this: you do not comprehend loss. You do not know sorrow. Your pain is nothing, yet."

"Please," said Hym. "Just one night. When he comes, let me see him. Let me speak to him."

"Never. You shall see him in your dreams, or not at all."

"I hate you."

Shalim blinked slowly, sadly. "I know. You have said it before."

"I will say it every day, until you release me."

"I will punish you each time you say it."

"Is that your end, then? To teach me pain? To make

me suffer, as you have suffered? I am not the cause of your grief! Blame the Mother who sold you such an empty lie.”

“I do,” said Shalim. “And I am having my vengeance. One infinite moment at a time.”

## Chapter 32

# Hellegrund

Nadianti nodded. “Please. Be seated.”

Hym lay behind her on his couch, eyes gently closed. He seemed even, for a change, to be breathing.

“Why can we see you now?” Tristan asked, even before he had sat down.

Surya sat down and listened, eager for the answer.

Nadianti said, “You have crossed the boundary. Now you are on the edge of the spirit world. As we draw nearer to Hellegrund, I may look more real to you. It is also because of Hym’s blessing upon you; without it, I would remain invisible.”

“What was the blessing?” Surya asked.

“It is a secret, for another time,” said Nadianti. “Here. Eat well. Tomorrow we have a long ride.”

Mihos entered the igloo, purring, and curled up at Nadianti’s feet. She stroked his fur like a gentle breeze.

They ate in silence for a time. Then Surya asked, “Is Hym well?”

“He is with Shalim,” said Nadianti. “I cannot see him, except in dreams.”

“You still sleep?” Tristan asked, surprised.

“No. But when he dreams, I can go to him.”

“I see him in my dreams too,” said Surya. “Is it really him, then, or just my imagination?”

“It is really Hym.”

Surya smiled.

“Be careful, when you dream of him. Shalim watches all.”

“All?” A spot of color appeared on Surya’s cheekbones.

“All.”

“Oh. I see.”

Nadianti stood, while they were still eating, and picked up her sword in its scabbard. Gently she laid it on Hym, and his hands rose to take the handle. Holding it, he lay as though composed on a bier.

Nadianti then came to Surya, and knelt, and hugged him. “You have been a good friend to him,” said Nadianti, “and the very best of husbands. Thank you.”

Surya nodded, sadly, looking through her at Hym.

“Rest well,” she said. “Tomorrow we ride.”

Surya slept on the couch beside Hym, and Tristan slept in a pile of furs.

In the morning, they woke before sunrise and had their breakfast. Then they stepped out of the igloo, in time to watch the first blush of the sun’s red dawning.

It turned the valley into a prism full of rainbows, and in the dazzling light they walked across multicolored snow, and stood upon a little rise, to see Hellegrund better. The thunder still sang its eery song, and from time to time they saw the lightning flicker from monolith to monolith.

Something huge padded gently to a stop beside them, and they looked up to see the witch seated on the back of a panther the size of a bull elephant.

“Come on,” said Nadianti. “We’re wasting light.”

Hym sat behind her, one hand on his sword. As Mihos knelt in the snow, Tristan and Surya mounted up behind Hym, and Surya wrapped one arm around Hym’s waist. Then Nadianti said, “On, Mihos!”

The great cat bounded away.

The valley was larger than it had at first appeared. The monoliths were frighteningly tall. All were of the same thickness, and of the same height, and they were arrayed in a perfect grid around the black spire.

By the end of ten hours’ hard riding, Mihos skidded at last to a stop before the first monolith.

It was a mile wide, and ten miles tall. The gap between it and the next monolith was precisely a mile. From time to time, bolts of lightning arced between the monoliths, and the thunder roared with many garbled voices.

It was impossible to hear each other in the constant blast, but they had nothing to say. All four of them stared up glumly at the vast monoliths and the tower at their heart.



“Ah,” said Shalim. “He’s here.”

“What!?” Hym whipped around. He got to his feet and stared down over the edge of the tower. “Where? Where is he?”

“He is outside the gates,” said Shalim, smiling grimly. “I will go and meet with him.”

“NO!” Hym screamed, clutching at his arm. “PLEASE! STAY HERE! Stay here with me! Don’t go to him, don’t. Please don’t hurt him.”

“I am not going to hurt him. Have I not already said that I will not have to?”

It was only four miles to the base of the tower. Mihos walked stealthily underneath the looming heights of the monoliths. Occasionally the lightning passed right over their heads.

They reached the steps of the black tower, and the door standing sealed in its northern face.

Surya dismounted, holding up his sword. "Hym! I am here! I have come for you! Come out to me!"

The doors did not open. Shalim stepped through them anyway.

Around him, many demons emerged from the walls of the tower and from the walls of the many monoliths, and a vast crowd of strange forms encircled Mihos and his riders. Surya raised up his black iron sword.

"Give him back to me," said Surya.

Shalim glided silently towards him and loomed down above him. "No."

The demons were translucent, like Hym's mother. Surya pointed his sword. "Fight me for him, then. Single combat. You and me."

Shalim laughed. "No."

Surya sprinted forward and swung the black iron blade. As Shalim's rose to meet it Surya twisted the slash into a turning stab, and plunged his blade through Shalim's heart.

A gasp of shock rocked the old god, and he kicked

Surya away. Already mending, Shalim paced nearer, and Surya got to his feet, sword upraised.

Tristan loosed his shot, and the iron arrow stuck in Shalim's head. Shalim cried out aloud in agony, and clutched at his head, and Tristan filled his chest with arrows.

Staggering away, Shalim leaned a hand against one of the monoliths, and a blast of lightning smote the sword from Surya's hands and knocked the bow from Tristan's. The demons rushed forward as one mass, and overwhelmed Surya and Tristan, binding their limbs with many hands. Mihos lay down, a grumble in his throat.

Hym's mother knelt before Shalim, holding up the body of her son.

"WHAT!?" Surya shouted. "NO!"

Shalim's face split into a fanged grin, and he released his sword to hover beside him, and gently picked up Hym's body, which no longer clutched his mother's sword.

Then, without a word, Shalim turned back towards the black tower, and its doors opened for him, and he stepped inside.

With a whisper of wind, all the demons vanished.

Mihos grumbled.

Nadianti said, "Your protest is noted."

Surya tackled her but she twisted in his grasp and

hurled him aside like a leaf. He landed heavily in the snow.

Tristan bodyslammed her next, ramming her into one of the monoliths, black iron sword at her throat. “You *gave* him away!”

“I did only what the plan required,” said Nadianti, gently raising up her hands.

Surya got back to his feet and marched to where Tristan had Nadianti pinned. Raising his own blade, he said, “I should kill you now.”

“If you do, you will never see your husband again.”

“WHY DID YOU GIVE HIM TO SHALIM!?” Surya howled.

“Come,” said Nadianti, behind them both. Tristan whirled around to face her. “The road ahead is long. Longer even than the road to get here. We are wasting time.”

She mounted up on Mihos, and the great cat turned to the north.

Tristan and Surya looked at each other. “But we were so close... We almost had him.”

“He would have killed you, in another moment.”

“But you *gave him away!*”

“I know,” said Nadianti. “And I am his mother. Do you really think you know better than me?”

Tristan and Surya looked at each other.

Irritably, Tristan picked up his fallen bow and mounted up behind Nadianti.

Surya looked at the two of them on the back of Mihos, and he choked. He said, "But why?"

"I will explain, but we are wasting time," said Nadianti.

"Then waste some! Explain it to me!"

"Not where Shalim can overhear."

Surya looked at the doors of the black spire. Sword in hook, he marched for them, and mounted up the steps, and crashed his sword against them. The sword rebounded. He rammed his shoulder into the doors. Then he stepped back and took a running start, and hurled himself against them. The doors did not budge by even the width of an atom.

He leaned his head against the doors. "I was so close, Hym."

After a long, long time, he turned, and walked resolutely back to Mihos. He mounted up behind Tristan without a word.

As they rode away, headed north, he looked back at the black spire and prayed. "I've got you, Hym. I'm still coming for you. It's just going to take a little longer than I thought..."



## Chapter 33

# Explanations

They made camp at the igloo again. The moment they were all inside, Surya rounded on Nadianti. “Explain.”

“In the world of the spirits, time runs strangely. I have corrected that. Now Hym’s time will synchronize with ours.”

“What?”

“If I had not done so, ten years might have passed in our time while barely a day passed in his. We will be traveling as far from Hellegrund as it is possible to go.”

“But where? Why? Why do we turn back, when Hym is right here?”

“Because you cannot reach him, or help him, as you are now. We go to Elysium, for your pilgrimage.”

“Our pilgrimage?” Tristan asked.

“To open your eyes,” said Nadianti. “All new-made witches must make the journey, to gain their power.”

“Witches?” Surya asked, baffled.

“Witches?” said Tristan.

Nadianti nodded. “Hym’s boon upon you both. He has made you witches. The first of his coven.”

Surya and Tristan stared at each other.

Nadianti said, “That is why you could see the demons, and me. Your fledgling power waxed in the strong energies of Hellegrund’s valley, and you began to truly see for the first time. When we reach Elysium, you will see clearly.”

“And we’ll become witches?” Surya asked.

Tristan was staring at his hands.

Nadianti said, “You are already witches. You will awaken, and come into your power.”

“But Hym didn’t have to travel to Elysium to start casting spells!” Surya said.

Nadianti sighed. “Yes, he did. I took him while he was still in my womb.”

“You went all the way to the north pole and back, while *pregnant*?” Tristan asked.

Nadianti nodded. “I had to give him the best chance of survival. The world was becoming more dangerous.”

“Why? What was happening?” Tristan asked.

“The Auroran septet had captured Danaye, my mother, when she was only a child. Barely five hundred years



old.”

Surya whistled softly.

Nadianti said, “By that time there were many witches among the septet, although the wizards were crafty enough to control her without them. They held her prisoner, and she blessed their kingdom. The sun shone on it throughout the year, and their crops and herds grew thick and fruitful. As they prospered, their minds turned to war.”

“What happened?” Tristan asked. “The wars and kingdoms of that era are poorly chronicled.”

“The Auroran empire spread in secret under Danaye’s nose for nearly two hundred years. I saw the truth, and was banished for it. She discovered it for herself not long afterwards. In her grief, she called upon Shalim. They had known each other for countless ages, communing always through dreams. At the end of the hour in which she first spoke his name aloud, Leviathan arrived, and decimated Aurora. Shalim took Danaye’s soul on that day, and carried her to Hellegrund.”

“But she escaped?” Surya asked.

“She was unlucky. Unlike my son, she had no one to watch over her corpse. She was eaten by the vultures and the wolves. Trapped in Hellegrund, she resisted Shalim for a thousand years, and at last he released her. But she had nowhere to go; her body was gone, scattered into the world. She walks the world as a spirit, now, and her body stretches across all the forests of the earth.”

“And you gave Hym’s body to Shalim,” said Surya.

“Trust me. I had good reason to do so. It is all part of the plan.”

“Whose plan?” Tristan asked.

Nadianti pointed her finger downward, at the earth.

“I don’t understand,” Surya said.

“The Mother. The first of all the gods, and creator of all of them. She made the Ring, and killed the earth, and bore both Shalim and Shachar. They play a game together.”

“A game?” Tristan said.

“It passes the eons.”

“What do they play for? What’s the prize?”

“Her throne.”

“And how do they win?”

Nadianti said, “That remains unclear. Shalim, Shachar, and the Mother all seem to know it. The Ring seems to be out of the loop.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Tristan. “They need the Tear. The one who wins its heart wins the game.”

“Then why isn’t the Mother helping us? And where’s Shachar?”

“She is, and Elysium,” said Nadianti.

“So we’re really going there?” Surya asked. “How far is it?”

Tristan pulled out the map. It had changed again, and depicted nearly the whole of the northern hemisphere. Tristan said, “A little over five thousand five hundred miles...”

After dinner, Surya lay among his furs and stared up at the roof of the igloo. Outside, the thunder of the monoliths sang its eery song.

He drifted into dreams, and walked the halls of a black palace, and found the door Hym lay behind. He knocked once.

“Who is it?” Hym’s voice called, from behind the door.

Surya tried to answer, but he could not speak. As he struggled to find his voice, he sensed a scent of mahogany and leather, of wood-smoke and oil, of black iron hot from the forge. He turned, and beheld Shalim, beside him, one hand clapped over Surya’s mouth.

He woke with a shout, startling Tristan, who was sharpening the edge of his sword.

“Sorry,” said Surya.

“Nightmare?”

“Shalim.”

“Me too.”

Surya looked at Tristan sharply. Tristan said, “I was here, in the igloo. He was watching me sleep.”

Surya shuddered.

Tristan said, “Did you smell him?”

“I did.”

“A good scent.”

“It was,” said Surya, uncomfortable.

Hym looked at the door. There had been something about that knock...

Before he could think about it any longer, Shalim appeared suddenly in Hym's bedroom, smiling.

"What have you done?" Hym asked, even though he was afraid of the answer.

"I have taken their gift. I was wrong; there was one offering that your mortal friends could give me what would matter. I have it now."

"What did you take from them!?"

"Nothing that was not already mine."

"What have you done to them?"

"I? I have done nothing. Seeing the futility of their quest, they have turned back to the village."

"You lie! I heard him speak!"

"They will find their way back there eventually. It is not a lie yet. They surrendered at my gates, and turned away."

"You lie."

"I do not. There was a lovely young man with him. Perhaps you should be jealous. Your mother was there too."

"A young man?"

"Yes. Hair as red as the morning, eyes as green as a cottonwood leaf. Skin as tender as the snow. Yes, I think

you should be quite jealous. He was far more lovely than you.”

Hym laughed. “You say this to your soul-mate? Small wonder that you are alone.”

“Did you hear my other detail?”

“I knew she was with them,” said Hym.

“So you see,” said Shalim, “I have not slain her soul. Shards of it still linger in this world. It was not a lie.”

“You said she was still within me, yet I cannot feel her.”

“Perhaps she does not wish to make herself known, in my presence?”

“Who would.”

## Chapter 34

# The Longer Road

The next day they all sat in the wagon and Mihos's eyes glowed, and it rattled away, heading south. They were running against the very end of their food stores.

By the end of ten hours riding, they stepped out of the cramped carriage to stretch their legs. Nadianti followed them, bearing her sword. She handed it wordlessly to Surya.

He held out his hook uselessly. It could not lock with the blade.

Nadianti laughed, and released the sword. It hung weightless in the air. Surya's eyes widened. Grimly, he hooked it with both hooks, and spun it around, and launched it, and hooked it in midair, and swung it the other way. He could handle any part of the sword with his hooks. He could dance with the blade.

He bowed to Nadianti. "Thank you."

She turned to Tristan, and said, "I do not have one for

you. When we reach Elysium, I will teach you to make your own. I believe it would interest you.”

Tristan nodded his gratitude. Then he took up his bow, and loosed half his iron arrows as swiftly as he could, and watched them all fall where he wished. He looked at Nadianti. “Have I always been a witch?”

Nadianti nodded. “Your grandfather was my baby brother, Redraven. Danaye gave him the hair and eyes and sinew and cerebellum which serve you so well. He was not a witch in the traditional sense; his magic was in other areas.”

“Witches have different magic?”

“Yes,” said Nadianti. “Danaye liked to experiment.”

“What about you?”

“I was her firstborn. Born to be her equal. At least, that was the intention. Sadly, it is not possible for the Prophet to make a second Prophet.”

“Why not?” asked Tristan.

“Something about ‘obedience’ and ‘generations.’ I don’t understand it.”

“Do you hear a voice inside your head, like Hym did?” Surya asked.

“No. I was born with mine. We have grown up together. We are one person, one soul. I was never aware of her as an outside presence.”



“So wait,” said Tristan, “Does that mean Hym has *two* Tears living inside him at the same time!?”

“It does,” said Nadianti. “You are beginning to see the game. One is already broken, because it grew as he did, in the world of Man. The other is new, and pure. The Tear he was born with is also a contestant in the game. No one knows what will happen if he wins.”

“So Hym has three minds?” Surya asked. “Just, for clarification?”

Nadianti nodded, smiling. “Something like that. As he matures, they will merge inseparably.”

Surya gazed sadly at the snow. “Does that mean I... I have to ask their permission, to stay married to Hym?”

Nadianti laughed. “No. They are here to observe and to learn. They do not care what they see, only that they get to see it. Your love is surely of great interest to them, as an example of the connections between human beings.”

Surya rubbed the back of his neck and coughed awkwardly. “So basically everybody’s watching me and Hym.”

Nadianti nodded. “Don’t feel self-conscious. It’s just the game. It passes the eons.”

“Did you ever call on Shalim?”

“I did,” said Nadianti. “The night I died.”

“How did you die?” Tristan asked. “Hym was vague about that.”

“I mean,” said Surya, “if it’s not too personal.”

Nadianti said, “The Auroran septet came for me. They killed my husband, and I was forced to flee. I protected myself. In my desperation, I asked Shalim to protect my unborn son, no matter the cost. I fear those may have been foolish words. I slew the last of my pursuers but my wounds were mortal. I bound myself to my blade, so that Shalim could not take me. The Storyteller knew what to do with it. I stayed to watch over my son.”

“Did Shalim come when you called?”

“He did. By the end of that hour, he had arrived to find me too late. He rode to the Auroran High City on the wings of Leviathan, and smote it to ruin.”

Surya gazed thoughtfully at the northern horizon. “Are they at war with each other?”

“Who?”

“Elysium and Hellegrund.”

“Yes. A long, slow war of accumulation. Each claims souls in the game.”

“What do they do with the souls?” Tristan asked. “I’ve never thought about it, but why do they wage war over them?”

Nadianti said, “They put the souls into new bodies. Each of a different interpretation of perfection.”

“What are the options?” Surya asked.

“Shalim’s demonic interpretation of your inner beauty, and a life of endless pleasure, or Shachar’s ever-changing forms, and a life spent in the pursuit of perfection, and of endless purpose.”

“How long is the second life?” Tristan asked.

“In either form, whether demon or perfectionist, that life is unending. The war cannot cross the borders of either kingdom. Shalim cannot touch Shachar, and neither can Shachar touch Shalim.”

“And where is the Mother?” Surya asked.

“Deep under the earth, locked in her vault. She will not emerge until a certain condition is met. When she does, she will change the world forever, and end the game, and announce the victors.”

That night Surya lay alone, and stared at the roof of the carriage, and his arms ached for the weight of Hym.

He dreamed again of a dark palace, and many arches of stone. He found again Hym’s room, and knocked upon the door.

“Who is it?”

He tried to speak. He could not. He hammered on the door with his fists and kicked it with his feet.

“Go away!” said Hym.

Surya sobbed soundlessly and screamed without words, and his cry rattled the door in its frame.

Then he woke up, wet-eyed, cold tears on his cheeks.

Nadianti was looking at him. He felt his tears dry. She said, "Sleep. Concentrate upon your body, in the dream. It can be vapor. It can be mist."

Surya nodded sleepily, and his eyelids sank under their own weight.

He was back in the dark hall, facing the door. He raised his fist to pound on it again, but stopped himself. He looked at the keyhole.

He knelt down, and peered through it, and saw a little room with a dark circular pool just like the one in the Cave. He saw Hym seated at the edge of it, nude, swishing his legs in the water. He longed to be in that room.

He breathed deep and held his breath and pressed his face to the keyhole, and forgot about the rest of his body, and shoved his eye through it.

Then he was solid and real, in the room.

Hym leapt to his feet. "What trickery is this!?"

Surya ran to him, but Hym staggered back. "Stay away! Take off your mask. Disappear, illusion, or I will make you! How dare you wear the face of my husband!?"

"I am your husband," Surya said. "Hym, it's me!"

"Don't come any closer!" Hym shouted, pointing a finger.

Surya backed away. “It’s me, Hym. It’s just me! I’m dreaming. You’re dreaming too!”

“I am?” Hym asked.

“You are,” said Surya. “I think. This whole place is a dream.”

And Shalim loomed behind him like a shadow on the ceiling, and the red edge of the iron sword came swooping in.

“NO!” Hym screamed, and he lunged forward and shoved Surya hard in the chest, launching him through the balcony doors. The black iron blade ripped through Hym, and he cried out.

“Hym!” Surya screamed, as he fell.

“Surya!” Hym moaned.

Then Surya woke with a jolt and sat upright, startling Mihos.

Nadianti sighed. “That could have gone better. You will need to learn how to fly.”

Hym lay on the ground in a puddle of his own hot blood. The blade had sliced across his back, right through the back edges of his shoulderblades. As I put him slowly back together, Shalim chuckled mirthlessly. “Your husband is persistent, for a mortal. And resourceful. I see you have betrayed me.”

“Have not.”

“You have,” said Shalim. “You have made your husband a witch. That was a bold move.”

“I have?” said Hym. “That’s news to me.”

Shalim said, “You are a good liar.”

“It’s not a lie,” said Hym. “How could I have made him a witch? I’m trapped here with you!”

“Yet your body was not,” said Shalim. “How very interesting.”

## Chapter 35

# Forty Days and Forty Knights

They were out of food. They still had coffee, and it made the mornings bearable. A week later they were chewing the grounds directly, just to have something in their mouths.

They were far from civilization, still, and far from any source of food. The nearest forests were another three days away.

At sunrise on the day their coffee ran out, Nadianti made them come outside and sit with her on the ice, legs crossed, and expose their skin to the sun's light. They sipped the energy, and it was enough.

At last, they came to the edge of the forests, and forty men in red robes suddenly appeared all around their chariot, all swinging their brass rods at once. Nadianti vanished. Surya drew her sword, and Mihos leapt to his feet. Tristan took up his bow.

Outside the chariot, the men in red robes waited.

One among them lowered his red hood, and said, “In the name of King Sheppard, you will divert course and follow me to the High City of Aurora, where you will be received with great pomp and circumstance, oh mighty Prophet. We seek your aid in many grave matters.”

Surya could barely contain his laughter. “What should we do?” He whispered.

Tristan shrugged. “I don’t think we stand a chance fighting them...”

Mihos grumbled in his belly.

Surya said, “I’m with Mihos. I’m starving. These guys have food. Let’s kick their asses.”

“Surya, look at us. We’re skeletons. You can barely lift your sword.”

Adrenaline thundered in his ears. The morning sun’s light was still in the sky, and he had energy enough for what he wished to do.

He stepped out of the wagon, Nadianti’s sword resting in one hook.

The men in red robes stepped back, and all of them bowed.

Surya said, “Food. Now.”

The man whose hood was down said, “Prophet, please, it is not necessary for you to look upon us. We are humble servants of King Sheppard. Re-enter your chariot,



and ride in comfort. We will escort you safely to the security of Aurora's walls."

"Bring food to the chariot, or we're not going anywhere."

"Who shall I say is with you, my lord?"

"Tristan, and Nadianti, and Mihos."

"Do they have titles? Simple names tend not to work well, during an announcement. The king expects it to sound grand, you know."

Surya hid a smile. "Tristan Redraven, son of the Redraven line. Nadianti, mother of the Prophet. Mihos, blessing of Danaye."

"And your name, sir?"

"I am Lord Surya of Blackcastle. Now go and get food and bring it to us. We have not eaten in ten days."

Surya climbed back up into the carriage and sat down. "They're bringing us food. We need to resupply anyway, maybe we should let them take us to Aurora?"

"I've always wanted to go," said Tristan, "but I think we should go back to Blackcastle, and check in on them, and restock there."

"Well, after they've fed us, we'll kick their butts and get out of here."

The red-robed official returned and knocked on the carriage door. Surya opened it. "What?"

The man cleared his throat. “Apologies, sir, but I have been asked to verify that one Hym, witchling, son of Nadianti is with you?”

“No, never heard of him,” said Surya.

“I see. Well, carry on then, sir.”

“But what about our food!?” Surya asked.

The man left, and the carriage door shut. They watched the red-robed warriors turn invisible once again.

“On to Blackcastle, then,” said Surya. Mihos nodded, and his eyes began to glow even as his stomach rumbled sonorously. The chariot began to roll away.

Someone came and rapped urgently on the door of the chariot again, and Surya opened it.

Jogging slightly to keep up with the carriage, the man said, “Sorry, did you say ‘Surya Blackcastle,’ or ‘Lord Surya of Blackcastle?’”

“The second one.”

“Are you aware of anyone else with a similar-sounding name?”

“No, why?”

“Then you are wanted for questioning regarding the killing of thirteen of the king’s septet.”

“How many of the septet did you bring with you today?”

“Forty men, sir.”

“I see.”

Surya hooked the man by the scruff of his shirt and hauled him into the carriage. Then he said: “Top speed please, Mihos.”

Nadianti said, “I will need my sword.” Surya nodded and handed it to her, and she and her blade sped out the window.

The official he now held by the scruff shouted indignantly, but the carriage lurched forward, and Surya hurled him to the couch and pointed his iron sword at the man’s throat. “Call off your men, or the septet’s numbers will drop by forty.”

The carriage crashed to a stop against a suddenly-rising wall of solid ice, which sprang up in their path before Mihos could stop. In the moment of impact, Mihos tumbled forward, and as he spun in the air to place his feet beneath him and land on the front wall of the carriage, he gave the carriage a two-ton shove in that direction. It punched through the wall of ice and kept rolling even as he landed.

To everyone whose mind wasn’t running at nearly the speed of light, the situation was a terrifying chaos in which they were thrown and slammed first against the front of the carriage, then against the back. They raced to be the first to get painfully to their feet, but none of them could quite catch their breath enough to do so. At last, Surya triumphed, sword in hook. He pointed it at the official’s throat. “Call off your men!”

“My men will rescue me.”

“Then you’re of no use to me.”

Surya drew back his sword. The man cried out, “Wait!” and Surya rammed his sword into the wall of the carriage next to the man’s neck. He lifted the man’s chin with the tip of his other hook. “Call off your men. Now. I am saving their lives.”

“Or what? You and some guy with a bow are gonna—”

Surya looked down. Nadianti’s blade had sprouted from the man’s breast. Outside the wagon, Nadianti drew her blade out of the wall of the wagon and flicked the official’s blood into the snow.

The Auroran guards all swung their wands as one man, and every copper wand flashed with lightning. Nadianti hurled her blade, and became the wind that bore it, and swept the clearing like a tornado with an edge of steel. The united blast of converging lightning struck her and she shaped it effortlessly, twisting it along her blade, and loosed it as a single focused blast of blinding light, which blew a hole in three men. Then she flung herself again, and the blade hummed as it spun. The guard raised his copper sword, but it was no match for Nadianti’s edge. She ripped through copper and through silk, through skin and flesh and bone, and sprayed a blinding splash of blood outward with her edge, aiming it right at eye height. Three men cried out. She caught herself, and lunged, gliding across the snow like a meteor. The men

beheld only the sword and sensed only the smell of other-worldly orchids, and none seemed to know how to defend themselves from it.

Mihos emerged from the wagon, and as he stepped off it, the wagon bounced back up nearly two feet, and rode higher. The small housecat sprinted full tilt towards one Auroran man, shrieking like a banshee, and the man screamed and pissed himself as two tons of panther only he could see stomped his life out in the snow. The little housecat sat on the crushed chest of his victim and frantically licked the blood off his paws, and six other men took notice of him, and grew afraid. He watched them from the corners of his eyes, and he let them see him as he truly was. His eyes glowed like twin moons as he paced towards them, licking the blood off his chops.

Nadianti's blade came rushing in towards Mihos, and he turned to greet it. The blade sliced through his body and the two of him ran off in opposite directions as two more men screamed, and dropped their wands, and began to flee. The blade carried on, ripped through a man, severed the head of another, and came swooping around to do battle with the two guards closest now to the carriage.

The mirror image Mihoses paced opposing paths, hunting men, herding them into mirror-image groups. Lightning and fire glanced off their fur, and static crackled in their bones, and when they had grouped the retreating men well they leaned their mouths low and belled thormight on them.

The men melted, as did the ice beneath their feet, and the Mihoses turned, eyes glowing, and sprinted identically towards the few remaining guards. Nadianti's sword flashed once across the whole battlefield, a single streak of steel painting the line that connected the throats of the last remaining men. She caught herself and came to a stop before the men even realized they were dead. They grasped desperately at their throats as the hot blood escaped them, and the life faded from their eyes.

Nadianti sheathed her sword in its scabbard, and walked back to Tristan and Surya. She stepped into the carriage and seated herself. "I have waited twenty years to do that to the septet."

"It looked fun," said Tristan.

"I will teach you how to do it, some day."

"Don't you have to be dead, to move like that?"

"Not if you know what you're doing."

Surya sat, somewhat ashamed. He was looking at his hooks.

The one and only Mihos climbed into the carriage, and it rode a little lower. He purred happily, licking blood off his chops again.

Surya and Tristan's stomach's growled audibly.

Nadianti said, "Come. We will drink the Ringlight. It will sustain you for a while yet."

As they bathed in the Ringlight, Surya said, "I've been meaning to ask you this, but I couldn't think of a way to phrase it."

"You want to ask about your hands, and why I have not healed them."

"Yes."

"Shalim has sealed the wounds. I cannot break his spell."

"He cursed me?"

"He did. I am sorry."

"Can anyone break it?"

"Shalim could," said Nadianti.





## Chapter 36

# Mind Over Matter

Hym picked himself up off the floor, his eyes never leaving Shalim's face. He said, "I hate you."

Shalim swung the back of his hand and cracked one of Hym's canines. Stunned by the blow, Hym stared at the wall for a long time.

Shalim said, "Come. We are going out."

"Leave me be. I was at peace."

"I have an evening planned. You will enjoy it."

Hym sighed. He got dressed, and followed Shalim out of the room. They turned to one of the dark archways, and stepped inside, and plummeted downwards into oblivion. An eternity later, they emerged from the front doors of the tower, and stood upon the steps.

The air was warm and humid, and many of the buildings bloomed all over with little glowing flowers. Some bloomed from thick vines clinging to the stacked stone

walls, and some bloomed in the trees, and some hung from baskets under the eaves of houses and palaces, and some even grew right between the cobblestones, and sprouted up at the sides of every path. Their combined glow was enough to see by.

The windows of Hellegrund were all open, and mysteries hung behind the fluttering curtains of each. Many glowed with light.

The streets were broad and well-cobbled, and demons of every possible description ambled up and down every street, each of them dazzling in their finery and startling in their presentation, form, and style. Many of them did look happy. Some looked very bored.

“Where are you taking me?”

“As I said, I have an evening planned.”

They walked down the twisting streets, and passed under the pillars and spired domes of many palaces, and the beauty of Hellegrund was beyond description. They turned at one street, and saw a low park, with a deep, dark pool, under a bridge. Shalim led the way down the steps and into the park.

Shalim said, “Step carefully. It is a marsh.”

Hym tagged along as they walked to the edge of the dark pool. It was a vast lake, running under the bridge high above, and deep into a cavern lined with glowing coral.

Shalim reached out his hand, and his dark cloak separated into a black mist, and flowed over the waters, and solidified into a small boat.

Hym said, "You expect me to step into that?"

Hym reached out his hand, and a mat of algae began to grow on the surface of the pond, and it stretched itself into a bridge and hardened into wood.

"Impressive," said Shalim. "You have been storing energy."

"I have."

"It will not help you to escape."

Hym followed Shalim across the algae bridge, to the palace under the stone bridge above. The steps were all of gold. Identical demons with feathered hair and a third eye in the middle of their foreheads stood waiting to receive boats.

The doors of the palace were open. Light and music came from within. Shalim waited in the doorway for Hym to catch up.

They walked in together, and a roar of sound washed over them. Twin bars lined two of the walls, and tables stood all around the room. A long buffet table ran along another wall, burdened with countless fascinating foods. Huge kegs of alcohol sat stacked to the ceiling, and an intricate array of brass taps hung ready to dispense them all. Huge brass bowls held bonfires of soothing emerald flame, which gave off a cooling light. It was refreshing,

after the heat of the streets.

In the center of the room, a red-carpeted spiral staircase led both up to the next floor and down to the floor below.

“Welcome,” said Shalim, “To the Delectatorium.”

“The what?”

“The house of all pleasure,” said Shalim. “It has many floors. Each floor adds or removes one law. On this floor, the same laws are in effect which govern the whole city. If we choose to climb the steps, we will be subject to additional laws with each successive floor. If we descend, instead, we will be progressively freer. So will everyone around us.”

“Why have you taken me here?”

“To show you the beauty of this city,” said Shalim. “If you will not love me, you must at least love your prison.”

Shalim reached out his hand. “Take my hand, and nothing here will harm you.”

Hym refused the offered hand.

Shalim chuckled. “Suit yourself. Come. We have a ways to go yet, before we find our seats.”

He began to descend the spiral staircase. Hym hesitated, watching him descend. Many of the nearby demons had stopped their conversations to turn and look at him.

He followed Shalim, and descended the spiral stair.

He stepped down into a huge curved hallway lined with mirrors. It curved out of sight, descending one room at a time as it went off and slowly turned to the right. Each room of the hallway had its own furniture and occupants, and a small staircase connected each successive room to the first.

In the first room, demons of indescribable beauty sat on circular couches, each of which ringed around a large glass bottle connected to many long tubes. From time to time, a demon would breathe from one of the tubes, and exhale a thick plume of white smoke. The room reeked of many scented smokes, and the gilded crown molding swam behind a haze of vapor.

On the wall behind the bars, a huge carving in the stone said: “FLOOR ZERO: SAME-GENERATION SPEECH IS PERMITTED.”

“Same-generation speech?” Hym asked.

“In Hellegrund, it is the law that no members of the same generation—defined as one hundred years—can speak to one another. In this floor, that law is lifted.”

“But why?”

“So that they can speak freely.”

“No, I mean... Why is it not permitted?”

“It is permitted, here.”

“But why is it taboo everywhere else?”

“To keep the language from evolving out from under

our feet,” said Shalim. “By the law, the young are forced to speak only to the old, and the old only to the young. The language is bound more tightly together. Each generation still develops their own language, usually, but it is used only behind closed doors, and always with a sense of guilt. It also turns the game of romance into a much more complicated and subtle matter. Such things add spice to life.”

“Why, can’t they just romance someone who isn’t in their generation?”

“They can. But not on this floor.”

“Oh,” said Hym. “I see.”

“Come. We have far to go, still.”

The second floor was much like the first, except that there was no bar, and there was a constant chatter of conversation. On the wall, the carving here said: “FLOOR NEGATIVE ONE: SPEECH IN THE PRESENCE OF SHALIM IS PERMITTED.”

Hym laughed.

The third floor had its own bar, and the conversations were much livelier. The wall carving said: “FLOOR NEGATIVE TWO: FALSE SPEECH IS PERMITTED.”

“You mean, telling the truth is the law?”

Shalim nodded. “It is.”

“What is the punishment for breaking it?”

“A year’s imprisonment within one’s home.”

“A year!?”

“A year.”

The next floor’s carving said: “FLOOR NEGATIVE THREE: FOUL SPEECH IS PERMITTED.”

“Foul speech?” asked Hym. “What’s the punishment for that?”

“A day’s imprisonment. It is a minor law.”

A long black curtain barred the way. Shalim parted it, and held it open, and Hym stepped through into another room, this one darkly lit by golden bowls of incense. The haze of reeking smoke was thick here, and the room was much warmer than the last.

This floor’s carving said: “FLOOR NEGATIVE FOUR: NUDITY IS PERMITTED.”

Many of the demons here had opted for exceptionally revealing outfits, rather than outright nudity, but a few lounged comfortably in nothing but their skin. Here, the conversation was very lively. As Shalim stepped into this chamber, his dark cloak dissipated into black mist, revealing a loincloth and the many silver-glowing tattoos which swirled over his entire body. They were lines of a poem, etched in a language Hym did not recognize, and they flowed over his muscles in intricate coils, accentuating them very nicely.

Hym looked away. “You’ll pardon me if I don’t change my clothes for this occasion.”

Shalim laughed. “Why would I ask you to change? You are lovely in that.”

Another curtain barred the way to the next floor. Shalim lifted it, and held out his hand. “I will not offer it again.”

Hym stared at the hand. He had no way of knowing what lay beyond the curtain; the next chamber was even darker than this one.

Clenching his jaw, he took Shalim’s hand, and Shalim led him on into eery darkness. Coals glowed in golden bowls around the room. Conversations were whispered, if they happened at all. Hym saw the dark and gleaming forms of many entangled bodies. The carving on the high wall of this chamber glowed with its own light, saying: “FLOOR NEGATIVE FIVE: CONSENSUAL SAME-GENERATION TOUCHING IS PERMITTED.”

Hym blushed, and hastened to follow Shalim through the chamber. He kept his eyes on the dark curtain at the far end of it, but he could not escape the little sounds of pleasure that surrounded him.

Afraid of what he might find in the next chamber, he followed Shalim.

“FLOOR NEGATIVE SIX: CONSENSUAL INTER-GENERATIONAL TOUCHING IS PERMITTED.”

Hym kept his eyes shut and clung to Shalim’s hand. He felt another curtain pass over them. He glanced at the carving before he covered his eyes. It read: “FLOOR



NEGATIVE SEVEN: SAME-GENERATION TOUCHING IS PERMITTED.”

The missing word frightened him. He stayed close to Shalim.

Eyes closed, he felt trailing fingers brush his robe as he walked. Someone kissed him on the cheek, and ran a fingertip across his jaw.

He kept his eyes closed and kept walking, heart pounding.

He felt another curtain pass over them. He glanced at the carving. “FLOOR NEGATIVE EIGHT: TOUCHING IS PERMITTED.”

Again many hands assaulted him. Someone nibbled on his earlobe and grabbed at his backside, and he heard the whoosh of a red-hot blade, then something soft hitting the ground. He kept his eyes closed and kept walking. Another curtain passed over them and he heard the clash of weapons and the grunts of battle. He glanced at this room. It was a war of demons, all snarling as they wrestled and clawed each other. The carving on this wall said: “FLOOR NEGATIVE NINE: VIOLENCE IS PERMITTED.”

Things were happening in the corners of the room that were another kind of violence, and Hym shut his eyes again, stomach churning. Shalim led him through yet another curtain.

“FLOOR NEGATIVE TEN: ALL THINGS ARE PERMITTED.”

There was no one in this room, except for them. A fine layer of dust coated the floor. A solid wall of dark stone lay before them, marred only by a red door.

Shalim gently reached out, and touched the door with his fingertip. Many bolts slid back into the door or into the stone, and the door swung inward into total darkness.

“Come along,” said Shalim, and he pulled Hym through, into the dark.

His eyes adjusted, after a time. A faint glow filled the mirror-lined octagonal chamber. His body, lying on a slab, was its source.

It lay composed on a slab of dark stone, draped only with a translucent white cloth. Next to it, on the floor of the chamber, there sat a huge orb of something like labradorite. Its inner structure shifted moment by moment, flowing like a slow sandstorm. Flickers of light that were not reflections sparked, from time to time, within its depths. Above Hym’s body and the strange orb, another orb hung, this one utterly black, devoid of any surface or reflection. A shimmer of magic encased it.

Hym released Shalim’s hand and stepped down into the room, and went to his own body. He looked down at it. “You’re giving it back to me?”

Shalim laughed. “No. I have placed it where it belongs; beside mine.”

“Yours?” Hym looked up at the orb of darkness.

“Guess again.”

Hym looked at the huge orb of shifting, sparkling stone. “This is your body?”

“It is.”

Hym looked up at the orb of darkness. “Then what’s that?”

“It is a very small black hole,” said Shalim, grinning cruelly.

“But... That would devour all of Hellegrund!”

“It would,” said Shalim. “I have castrated it. I countermand its pressure upon space, but its effects upon time are undiminished, in this chamber. It is spinning at relativistic speeds.”

“Its effects on time...” Hym’s eyes widened, as he began to understand.

“Oh yes. I saw through Nadianti’s ploy. She gave your body to me so that your time would synchronize with the outside world. I have undone that. Now your time and mine and Hellegrund’s are synchronized, and accelerated. You will wait a thousand years even if your husband returns within one.”

Hym threw himself at his body, but rebounded off a cage of force. He put his hands upon it, and stared through it at his own face, resting comfortably beneath the surging energy of the black hole. He rested his head

against it, and broke down into tears.

“Weep as long as you want. It will only last a moment, to the outside world. Even your dreams of Surya will be only glimpses.”

Hym felt a whisper; the faintest scent of faded orchids. He looked at his reclining corpse, and watched as it opened its eyes. Tiny stars burned in the pupils of those eyes, and tiny stars burned in the pupils of his living ones, too.

“What are you doing?” Shalim asked.

Hym burst out laughing. The eyes of his corpse closed, and he turned to look at Shalim. The scent of her was all around him, and he knew that only he could smell her.

“What are you laughing about?” Shalim demanded, marching down to grab Hym.

His hand burst into flames a foot from Hym’s arm. They locked eyes, and the flames danced between them.

“I see,” said Shalim. “You have finally broken her will.”

Hym’s eyes flashed, and he reached out his mother’s power, and blasted it into Shalim. Shalim upraised one hand and split the power, and it shattered every mirror. As the shards filled the air, flowing at Shalim’s command, Hym swung his hand and smashed them into sand, and twisted grains of silica into a new and crystalline form. The sword formed glittering in the air before him, and

he took it, and swung. Shalim's blade flashed into being, and their blades clashed. The glass did not break.

Hym glared at Shalim. Shalim shoved him back, breaking their brief engagement, and with a twisting of his hand he turned the whole room around us. As the walls and floor shifted around us, we were thrown towards the door. Shalim's hand struck us between the shoulderblades, thrusting us back into the negative tenth floor of the Delectatorium. We landed hard, but caught the ground in our hands, and turned again towards the door. Shalim stood before it now, barring the path to our body. The door had disappeared entirely.

We heard the silent shuffling of many bodies behind us, and Hym turned to look. We beheld dozens of naked demons, all wielding weapons. Hym turned to look at Shalim.

"Take him. Have fun." Shalim waved his hand, and gravity twisted ninety degrees around us. As we plummeted towards the many swords and hands of the demons, Hym swung our feet and his own power, and we crashed into them like a wall of stone. He smashed through their defenses and landed hard on the far side of the room. He turned, holding out his sword. Many naked bodies danced around him in the darkness, blades flashing with strange illuminations.

Someone made a run for him. Hym turned and punched a blast of power into his own arm to swing his sword at lightning speed, instantly decapitating the sprinting demon. A spear flew; Hym caught it, whirled,

and sent it flying back to its owner. Then he called it back to his hand and turned it around to impale the person running up behind him.

A red haze pounded at the sides of his vision. His sword dripped green blood in the darkness. Music had started, somewhere, and it pounded in the stone and in his bones. Chest heaving with rage, he kicked off the ground, soared twenty feet, and crashed upon a group of demons even as others crowded around behind him. His sword moved like a ribbon of light, and whether they raised sword or spellcraft to defend themselves, they fell before his power.

In his wake the many-colored blood began to pool, and swirl, and coalesce into new forms. Life grew swiftly in the heat he drank from their falling corpses. One antlered woman dared to fling spellcraft at him; a burst of slicing flame. He caught it in one hand and held it up, and she slid across the ground, dragged against her will, towards him, and he caught her by the throat, and ripped her magic from her. He drank it all, to the last drop, and tossed her aside, to live without power. Then he twisted her stolen magic into a new form even as he and I digested it, and flung it out into the room in a storm of flame. He consumed every atom of air in the chamber to feed the conflagration, and as it blazed around him and the demons cried out, he let his hand fall, and the fire died. The curtain billowed wildly as air flowed from the rest of the Delectatorium to fill the superheated vacuum, and a sound like the blast of a cannon rolled up the many steps as the displaced air crashed in.

Scattered corpses lay all around Hym now, charred to ash and bone. He turned to glare at Shalim, and raised his sword.

Shalim raised his sword, and smiled, but he did not take up a stance. Instead, he simply waved his sword once through the air, and every fallen demon reappeared, unharmed, exactly as they had been before we destroyed them.

Shalim grinned. "Run."

Hym ran. Many swords and hands reached out for him; he dodged and twisted around them all. At one point he was forced to leap over someone's head to get past them. He sprinted all the way back up the many rooms of the Delectatorium even as demons all around him began to get to their feet.

Shalim's laugh echoed after him. "Run! Run, or they will catch you!"

Hym ran all the way up the stairs and out into the street, and all the way back to the black tower. The doors were firmly closed, and he could not move them. He tried to bend them with his magic, but even their atoms disobeyed him. At last he sat on the steps, glass sword in his hands, and waited for Shalim.

Shalim came at last, walking all the way. He stopped in front of Hym. "How did you like our outing?"

"Put me back in my cell."

“No. You have no gratitude. You may sleep out here, until you acquire some. Good luck.”

Shalim stepped through the closed doors of the tower, and Hym was alone in the city of demons.



## Chapter 37

# Back to Blackcastle

By the time they reached the mouth of the river, its waters were flowing. Fish that had until lately been hibernating peacefully now had to swim lazily against the backwards-flowing waters, for the heat came from the south, across the ocean. They caught some easily.

As they caught the tenth fish, a sound upriver startled both of them, and Tristan raised his bow, arrow on the string.

Two yellow eyes flashed in the darkness. The great white bear crouched by the riverside, watching them, a fish in its mouth.

“Tristan!” Surya hissed.

“I see it.”

“No. Don’t shoot.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve seen it before.”

“You have?”

“No. But Hym sensed it once, and I was with him, and I remember it as though I have. I have my own memory of the sound of its footsteps. But I remember what it looked like... I’m confused. I think it’s a sign. It might be important.”

“It is a sign, of Approach’s fullness. The days are nearly as long as days, now. He has emerged from hibernation. He is as hungry as us.”

“Should we feed him?”

“Maybe.”

A small grey cat popped suddenly up from behind a nearby snowdrift, wiggling its hips, eyes low and fixated on the back of the bear. Then it pounced, and slammed into the white bear, and knocked it to the ground. The bear rolled away, paws flashing, and stood up from the snow as a woman in a white fur cloak. Her hair was the color of the Ring, and it shone in the Ringlight.

“Hi,” said Surya.

Mihos wove his body around her, twisting himself between her ankles. She knelt and petted him affectionately, cooing, “Yes, I missed you too, my dear. It has been too long since I have looked this way.”

Tristan raised his bow. “What do you want, who are you, and what’s going on?”

The woman raised her empty hands peacefully. “Can you not guess, Tristan Redraven? I have watched your

line with delight for many years.”

Tristan lowered his bow.

“What do you want?” Tristan asked.

“Please,” said Surya. “We want to help you.”

She smiled. “Come this way.”

She led them to the Cave. As they stepped inside, into the gloom, the coral began to glow, and the glittering stone flashed with inner life. The dark pool steamed, waiting. The griddle-stone smoldered.

She sniffed the air. She noted the wooden swords hanging from the rack on one wall, and the stash of supplies and games in the corner. She looked at the towels folded neatly on the drying stone. She looked at the footprints in the sand.

She turned to face Surya, and folded her hands neatly together. Sternly, she said, “So. You’re one of my trespassers.”

“Nadianti said it was fine,” said Surya.

Nadianti manifested.

Danaye’s face fell open in shock, and tears rose in her eyes at once. “Nadianti? Is... Is it really you?”

Nadianti nodded. She, too, looked shaken.

They embraced.

“But you were not in Elysium, my dear!” said Danaye, confused. “I was certain you had perished, I could not

find you anywhere!”

“I was in hiding. Protecting my son.”

“You have a son?”

“Your other trespasser.”

“Oh, well, it’s his birthright. Hardly trespassing for him, then. And I suppose he is free to bring guests, if he wishes to.”

“Thank you,” said Nadianti.

“Hym is in trouble,” Surya said.

Danaye looked at him. “Him who?”

“His name. Hym.”

“Oh! What kind of trouble?”

“Shalim has taken his soul and his body. We are trying to get him back.”

“I can’t do much to help you there. I barely escaped myself.”

“Aid us in any way you can, and you will have our gratitude.”

Nadianti said, “I am taking them on the pilgrimage. Hym has blessed them.”

“He has, has he? So he manifested powers you were never able to access!”

“No,” said Nadianti. “I... I had a dream. I knew the place the star would fall. I guided him to it.”

Danaye's eyes sparkled. "You caught it?"

"He caught it."

"Poor bastard."

"I thought it would make him safer. Stronger."

"It may have killed him."

"Yes, I... I know that now."

"I'm sorry."

Tristan and Surya had already moved silently and patiently towards the griddle stone, and were even now fileting their fish.

Nadianti said, "So you're a bear, now?"

Danaye laughed. "No. But a high concentration of my body is here, in this bear. I have cultivated its growth. I like to walk around, from time to time, and this body is useful when I have that urge."

Surya and Tristan stared at the cooking fish greedily and the moment it was reasonably hot they ripped it off the griddle and into their mouths, and ate like animals.

"Careful," said Danaye. "You have been starved a long time. Eat a small amount today. Tomorrow you can eat more. You will rest here until you are well enough to return to your village."

"We're going to Elysium."

"You will doubtless need to replenish your stores, by this point in the journey? You should visit Blackcastle

to do so. They have missed you.”

“Are they safe?”

“Oh yes, safe as houses. An Auroran regiment came through the forest. I turned them right back around.”

“Thank you,” said Surya.

They ate slowly and carefully. Afterwards they bathed, taking turns to stand watch outside the cave with a loaded pipe, and when they had bathed they lay in the sand to sleep.

A chessboard materialized between them in the sand.

Tristan looked at Danaye.

Danaye smiled. “The cave remembers. It liked watching you play.”

“Want to?” Surya asked.

A little glint flashed in Tristan’s eyes. He raised a pawn and moved it forward. Surya matched it. They played a game of mirror pawns until Tristan got his knights into play, and Surya interlocked his pieces in a defensive posture that was nearly impenetrable. Tristan’s bishops manifested, and cut deep into Surya’s territory. His king was cornered twice, and he was forced to explain that the knight he needed was, in fact, his, and not Tristan’s. Tristan accepted, in trade for his queen.

“What!? My Queen?”

“Yes. It’s checkmate in four moves anyway, you won’t be needing her.”

“But that’s my Queen!”

“And?”

“Well if I’m playing her King, I have to protect her, don’t I? So she can assassinate my enemies for me.”

“So you won’t trade your queen?”

“No. This knight is mine, and you know it.”

Tristan smiled. “If you insist.”

Surya moved the knight. Tristan’s queen hopped across the board and locked him in checkmate.

“I thought you said in four moves!”

“If you let me take your queen.”

“Rematch?”

“No.”

They stomped out the board, as was tradition.

A deck of brightly-painted cards landed in the sand between them. They looked around. Nadianti and Danaye were both outside, talking in the snow.

They looked at the cards. Surya said, “Do you know how to play?”

“Play?” Tristan asked. “They’re not playing cards, they’re Fate cards.”

“Yeah. Do you know how to play Fate?”

“It’s not a game!”

“What? Sure it is, Hym taught me how to play. Here, I can show you...”

“No! These are not for playing games with, Surya! These are extremely serious, and you must respect them.”

“Well what do *you* do with them, then?”

“You read signs and fortunes, and gain the answers to big questions.”

“So do that. I want to see how you do it.”

“I have to get in the right mindset, though. There has to be incense, and slight music, and amethyst, and hot steam.”

Surya looked around. “This place doesn’t count?”

Tristan looked around. “Ok. Ok, let’s do it. Before I get the willies.”

“What should we ask the cards?”

“Spirits of the cards, we beseech thee; foretell our journey to victory, and the path we must take to reach it. Guide our fates, and help us aid the Prophet, Hym.”

Surya nodded appreciatively as Tristan shuffled the cards and split the deck with his left hand. He laid out a line of five cards, face-down.

He started in the center. “This card represents the core, the center, the goal.”

He flipped the card. The eight of swords looked up



at them, eyes blindfolded, hands bound behind his back, swords standing point-first all around him. “Hym,” said Tristan.

He moved to the left-most card. “This card represents the past, the shadow, and the depths.”

He flipped the card. The six of stars stood above beggars, dispensing coins with one hand and a benevolent smile with his face. In his other hand he held a set of golden scales, perfectly balanced. “Shalim. Once, a benevolent ruler and god.”

He moved to the right-most card. “The future, the light, and the culmination.”

He flipped the card, and both of them smiled. Three maidens stood together, arms upraised, bearing golden cups. They wore garlands of flowers in their hair. Tristan said simply, “Us.”

He moved to the card between the center and the left, and said, “A complication.”

He flipped the card, and said, “Makes sense.” The card was the angel of Temperance, inverted.

He moved to the last remaining card, between center and right. “Another complication, possibly a crucial one.”

He flipped the card. On it, a woman clamped her hands around the mouth of a lion. A halo in the form of an infinity sign blazed above her head. The card read: “Strength.” It was inverted.

“What do you make of it?” Surya asked.

“Shalim was a good god once, but he slipped. He crumbled. His intemperance corrupted him, and in his cruelty he captured Hym. Hym’s strength is broken, now. It is up to us to overcome that, if we want to be united again.”

“Then we will overcome it,” said Surya.

Outside, in the snow, Danaye and Nadianti looked out at the forest in silence for a long time.

“I did not even know you were married,” Danaye said at last.

“He was persistent. And a good man.”

“I see.”

“He would have been a good father, to Hym.”

“But he died?”

“But he died.”

“I am sorry to hear it.”

“It was long ago.”

“Your son must be something special, for the Mother to send the Ring’s Tear to you.”

“The Mother?”

“Come, child. How do you think you got the dream about where the Tear would land?”

“Oh. I see.”

“She wanted your offspring to have it. I’m going to choose to take some credit for that.”

Nadianti laughed. “You would have loved Hym. He was just like you. Even before the Tear came to him.”

“You say that in the grammatical forms of the past-tense subjunctive, as though there were some doubt that I would one day meet him?”

“There is some doubt,” said Nadianti.

“Let there be none,” said Danaye. “We will meet, before the end. I have seen it. Shalim cannot contain him forever. Even Shalim knows that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hym did not sleep, on the steps of the black tower. Instead he sat and watched the street, sword in hand, and waited for the attack he knew would come at any moment.

And suddenly Surya was there, standing before him, frozen in place.

“Surya!” Hym shouted, leaping to his feet. He embraced him.

Surya did not react. His body was as hard as stone. Hym looked at him in dismay and saw his dark eyes turning with impossible slowness to look at Hym. It was nearly an age before those eyes registered any sign of Hym, then Surya reacted in a slow wave of silent emotion. Even his hair moved slowly in the warm night air.

Hym understood. Surya’s time moved normally. Hym’s time moved swiftly. Each moment of Surya’s movement was beautiful, no matter how slowly it came into being, And Hym held him tightly as his arms ever so slowly wrapped around his back. They kissed. Surya could not begin to keep up with Hym, who kissed him like a man possessed.

The doors behind him clicked and opened. Mephistoph sat calmly inside them, looking smug. Hym smiled at him, then turned to Surya, and scooped him up before he had time to make a sound, and ran back into the tower with him. He rode the bottomless shaft to his floor, and ran to his chamber, and hurled Surya to the bed. The moment he released Surya, Surya’s body began

to fly through the air as though in slow motion. It took ages for him to fall into the bed, and Hym adored him for each of those ages. Hym had time to walk around the bed and get out of his clothes and get under the sheets before Surya landed. Before Surya had time to turn around, Hym had ripped the clothes off of him.

Hym moved as slowly as he could, and Surya moved at his own pace, and together they made love.

They could not speak. Neither of them could talk at a pace that the other could comprehend. They lay in bed, in each other's arms, and hummed to each other. They could hear each other humming, if they held the notes long enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

Surya dreamed a dream that flickered past so fast it lasted only a few moments. In it, he found Hym suddenly in his arms, and found himself suddenly landing in a bed, and entangled with the blur of Hym. He felt a thousand kisses on his skin, covering every part of him. They made love at a frantic, desperate pace, and Surya struggled to keep up. Afterwards they lay in bed, and Hym chirped or buzzed from time to time, his lips moving too quickly for Surya to comprehend.

He woke feeling very worried. He got dressed and stepped outside the cave to find Nadianti. He found her still talking with her mother, nearby.

“I’ve just had a dream,” said Surya.

“Oh?” said Nadianti.

“I dreamed of Hym again. Only this time, something was wrong. I couldn’t understand him. He moved like a chipmunk. He was so fast I couldn’t see him, sometimes.”

Nadianti frowned. “That should not be happening. Your times should be synchronized, now!”

“Shalim must have done something to him!”

“Yes... Perhaps.”

There was nothing they could do about it, whatever it was. Surya and Tristan concentrated on getting healthy enough to travel. It took three days to get them back on their feet, but soon they were standing at the mouth of the Cave, saying their goodbyes to Danaye.

“Thank you for watching over us,” said Tristan.

“Tell your father I said hello.”

“I will.”

Nadianti held her mother at arm’s length for a long time.

Danaye said, “We will speak again, Nadi. Go. I will follow, where I can. I will slow the hunters.”

“The hunters?” Surya asked.

Nadianti said, “Shalim’s demons. He has announced a bounty. Upon you. Many will come.”

“We can’t lead them to Blackcastle!”

“They will never find Blackcastle,” said Danaye. “I will see to that. But they may find you, on your journey, when you are far beyond my reach. You must flee as you have never fled before. Even my daughter cannot face them.”

“Understood,” said Surya.

“They wield weapons of iron,” said Danaye. “You do not understand.”

“I was cut by Shalim’s blade,” said Surya, raising his hooks. “I do understand.”

“I should have figured as much. I’m sorry.”

“Can you...?”

“No.” She shook her head. “But there are three who can. Shalim, Shachar, and the Mother.”

“What will we face, when we face Shachar?”

“That knowledge is forbidden. He demands his right of First Impression.”

“Oh,” said Surya. “I see.” He didn’t.

They got up onto the bench of the carriage and Mihos sat between them. Nadianti hesitated, unwilling to leave her mother’s arms.

Danaye said, “Go. They will need you.”

“It was good to see you.”

“It was good to see you too.”

“About my banishment...”

“I know. I learned the truth that you saw before I did. I understand. I am sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“Go. They are in urgent need of a healer.”

“Who?”

“The one called Mark.”



The reached the bonfires at the edge of the village by the eighth bell, and an armed guard accosted them, sword upraised. "Halt! Who goes there?"

Tristan laughed. "Derek!?"

"Ysolde!?"

"It's Tristan, now," said Tristan, boldly.

Derek laughed, and flushed, and nodded. "I am pleased to renew your acquaintance."

Then he bowed, nervously, and said, "Is the Prophet with you?"

"No," said Surya. "You are in my way."

"Oh," said Derek. "Right. Sorry."

He got out of the path, and the carriage rolled on.

Nadianti, invisible beside them on the bench, said, "Who among these people bears the name of Mark?"

"My father," said Tristan. "Why?"

"We must go to him at once."

Tristan's eyes widened fearfully, and the carriage rolled to a stop before the waterwheel house. Tristan sprang down from the carriage and pounded a fist on the door. There was no response. He took a key from around his neck and unlocked the door with it, and shouldered his way inside, only to find it empty, devoid even of furniture.

"Papa?" He shouted, and he searched the house from top to bottom. He emerged from the house. "He's gone!"

“To Blackcastle,” said Surya. “I know it. If he is sick, my mother will be sure he has the best of care.”

“Ok,” said Tristan, looking pale. The carriage rolled through the village, and across the bridge. A light snow was falling, though the night was relatively warm. The carriage rolled through the open gates of Blackcastle’s perimeter wall, and someone blasted a trumpet. Surya and Tristan looked at each other and leapt to their feet, drawing bow and blade.

A voice cried out from the wall-top: “Behold! Lord Surya Blackcastle and Lady Ysolde Redraven, returned from the quest!”

“It’s Tristan Redraven now!” shouted Tristan.

“Oh!” Shouted the crier. He said, “Correction: Lord Surya Blackcastle and Lord Tristan Redraven, returned from the quest!”

“I’m not a lord,” muttered Tristan, but he did not correct the man.

The doors of Blackcastle opened at once, and Biryu sat in a wheeled wooden chair at the top of the steps, arms outstretched for her son. Surya ran to her.

“Your feet!” He said. They were bandaged tightly.

“I lost some toes,” said Biryu, “But I’m recovering.”

“You will walk again?”

“Of course I will.”

She touched his beard. He noted new lines around her eyes and around her mouth; lines of laughter.

“How long has it been?” Surya asked.

“A hundred and twenty days.”

Tristan came up the drive. “Is my father inside?”

“He is,” said Biryu. “He’s very sick.”

“I need to see him.”

“Come with me. Surya, there is hot soup in the kitchen.”

Biryu led Tristan and the unseen Nadianti to a first-floor bedroom. Mihos followed Surya inside the house, and for a while Surya stood and breathed in the scents of home. He remembered his father’s scowling face, and smiled pleasantly to himself.

“Come on, Mihos. I’ll show you a nice spot by the hearth,” said Surya, and he led the cat into the kitchen.

Inside the first-floor bedroom, Tristan and Nadianti found the mayor lying pale and sweaty in a huge four-poster bed. Tristan noticed his new piece of jewelry at once, and rounded immediately on Biryu. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“It was off topic.”

“When did it happen?”

“Many weeks after you left. I made him breakfast, as I had promised, and he returned every day to share it

with me. We took turns making it. He was very kind.”

The mayor stirred slightly among the sheets.

“What’s wrong with him?”

A mound of old rags in the chair in the corner suddenly snorted and sat up, revealing itself to be Minerva, the Timekeeper. “I’m awake.”

“Minerva, what’s wrong with him?”

“Oh, it’s an infection. It’s bad. These two morons both hid frostbite from the whole village, and from each other, until it was too late. I’ve spent the last two weeks putting them back together and I am over it.”

Nadianti stepped to the head of the bed and placed one hand to the mayor’s forehead. Twin stars burned in the pupils of her eyes.

The mayor breathed in deeply, shuddering. He breathed out, and coughed violently, and the color began to return to his skin. He sat up, blinking, and looked around. Tristan threw him a hug, and he caught it.

“Ysolde!”

“It’s...” Tristan swallowed.

“Tristan?” asked Mark Redraven.

“How did you know?”

“A little bird told me you were coming, and what you would be called.”

“I heard the little bird in my dreams too,” said Biryu. “It is why I knew to make soup for you and Surya.”

“Hym?” Tristan asked.

Nadianti knelt by Biryu’s feet, and held them in both hands.

Biryu grunted in pain. She itched her leg. “Yes. Hym.”

“Hym,” said the mayor.

“He’s still watching out for us, then.”

Biry scratched wildly at her shins, trying to get her fingers under the bandages, which now felt much too tight.

Then, like magic, the bandages weren’t tight anymore. They fell apart, revealing whole, undamaged feet.

Biryu gasped. “Look! My feet!”

“Biryu!” said Mark. “Your toes! Your toes came back!”

She laughed.

Surya came into the room to see what all the commotion was about just in time to watch his mother bend down and kiss Mark Redraven on the lips. He froze in the doorway, staring, baffled.

Tristan looked over his shoulder and noticed him staring. “Guess what.”

“What?”

“We’re brothers now.”

“No. What?”

Biryu and the mayor held up their joined hands, and the polished copper rings sparkled on their fingers.

“You remarried!” Surya said.

Biryu nodded nervously.

“I’m so happy I could die,” Surya said, and he hugged them both. He looked at Tristan. “Didn’t I say I wanted a father like yours? Now I have yours!”

Everyone laughed, even though it wasn’t all that funny, and all tension bled from the room. Surya sighed. “Oh, if only Hym were here to see this.”

## Chapter 38

### Lessons

Surya faded at last from his bed, and Hym sadly moved into the warm place where he had been. The pillows had caught his scent.

A knock came at the door.

“Who is it?” Hym asked, although he knew the answer.

“It is I,” said Shalim.

“Enter,” said Hym, smiling to himself.

Shalim stepped inside, and sniffed the air. “Ah, Surya has been here. What did you think of your first night together, since my new arrangements?”

“It was marvelous,” said Hym. “For me, it lasted several hours.”

Shalim laughed. “You will grow bored of him all the more quickly, now.”

“Did you really come here just to gloat?”

“No. I have come to apologize for my behavior this night.”

“You threw me to the demons, to use as they wished.”

“I knew you would prevail against them. You needed the violence.”

“Mhmm.”

“I have a minor proposal, for you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Your sword-fighting is terrible. I wish to correct that.”

Hym laughed. “My sword-fighting was enough to kill them all.”

“No it wasn’t, you had to use magic.” Shalim laughed.

“That one demon I stole the magic from. I take it you were able to give it back to her?”

“No,” said Shalim, with a scowl. “She remains without magic. She is inconsolable. I have had to put her into long-term storage.”

“Storage?”

“Will you accept my offer or not?”

“You haven’t made it, yet.”

“Would you like to learn sword-fighting from me?”



“I will think about it.”

“You could have no better teacher,” said Shalim.

“I can think of several, off the top of my head,” said Hym.

Shalim laughed again. “You are a fool, if you think so.”

Hym looked at Shalim. “Fine. I will take you up on your offer.”

“Tomorrow, then, after breakfast, I will take you again to the hall of violence, and you will spar with me.”

“No. Take me someplace only you and I can go. We are above the empty wickedness of that place.”

“Perhaps *you* are,” said Shalim.

Hym laughed. “You’re right. You are empty and wicked enough to belong there.”

After breakfast the following day, they came to the top of the spire, and faced each other amid the silent dancing of the aurora’s flame.

Hym held his glass sword, and Shalim his black iron one. They crossed blades.

Shalim said, “A short match, first, to see where you are.”

“If you insist.”

“Wound me, if you can.”

Hym sliced and slashed and spun and stabbed, but Shalim danced out of the way, not even raising his blade against the blows. Hym pursued, cutting the air, and Shalim allowed his sword to flash and fly without interruption.

After nearly a minute of futile swinging, Hym found his blade suddenly stopped by the edge of Shalim's. Shalim's yellow eyes glowed in the light of his sword, and with two effortless strokes he swatted Hym's blade aside, and lopped off his hand.

"Ack!" said Hym, as his sword-hand fell to the tower-top. He bent and picked it up and put it back on his wrist, and the flesh fused almost instantly.

Shalim said, "You are pathetic. You could have kept that up for an hour without hitting me."

"I would have hit you eventually."

Shalim said, "Again. This time, I will defend myself."

Hym stepped back, loosened up his sword arm, and hopped suddenly to one side, swinging. Their swords clashed in a fountain of sparks, and Shalim tossed his blow aside and whirled once. The very tip of his blade ripped across Hym's cheekbone. Startled, Hym reached up to touch his own hot blood only to find the wound already sealed.

"Again."

Hym rushed in at a low angle, sweeping towards Shalim's feet. Shalim's blade swooped down to catch his,

and with a whirling crash Shalim continued the movement and brought his sword down from on high. Hym barely had time to raise his sword. Sparks fountained from the impact and he was forced to roll away, unable to take the whole of the sword's momentum. Crouching, he held his sword out, and moved slowly around Shalim.

Shalim said, "Come along, now. Receive your punishment."

Hym leapt with a roar, soaring at Shalim, and his blade came at neck height. Shalim held out his sword in both hands and caught the edge of Hym's, and as Hym flew past over his head, the glass blade scraped up the whole length of the iron one, raining sparks into Shalim's face. Hym stopped in the air above the tower, and turned, and blew in like the wind.

Their blades glanced against each other once again, and another shower of sparks scattered over Shalim. Shalim turned even as Hym flew past, and flung his blade as the sparks rolled harmlessly down from his open eyes and over the regal forms of his face. The black iron blade hummed as it flew, spinning, and Hym twisted in the air to let it pass over him. It stopped in the air, and threw itself back to Shalim's hand, and Hym had to dive to ground to escape it. Shalim was walking even before he dove, and he reached out a hand and caught the blade already swinging. Hym threw out his sword and with a clash of sparks the blow knocked him aside, forcing him to roll away once again.

Shalim was behind him suddenly, blade sweeping.

Hym whirled to face him, and locked edges with him. It was like locking edges with a statue. Hym pushed his mother's power through the bones of his arm, propelling the blade forward. Shalim let his blade fly wide and turned the added momentum into a whirling slash that came completely around before Hym even had time to finish his push. Hym's mother's power flowed, and his arm and sword swung to catch the blow. They locked blades again. Stars burned in the pupils of Hym's eyes, and for a long moment he and Shalim locked eyes as well as swords.

Then Shalim grinned, and laughed, and punched out his free hand. It struck Hym square in the chest, and a blast of dark power added fifteen earthly gravities of force to each atom of Hym's body, and Hym hurtled away, tumbling, through the aurora.

When he managed to catch himself in the air, he was a mile from the tower-top. He saw Shalim raise up his sword, and sensed the movement of the aurora a split-second before it happened. He kicked his feet against the air and zoomed away even as a spear of lancing energy leapt from part of the aurora towards the place where he had been. He changed direction a dozen times, flying over the city far below, and the aurora's snapping bolts missed him. He angled himself towards Shalim, and swooped in, raising his sword as the distance closed, and at the very last moment the aurora fell dark, and a wall of green light blazed into existence just in time for Hym to crash into it at top speed. He blew through it easily, but energies coated him, flickering with emerald

light, and when he landed his body was heavy with a crust of emeralds.

“What is...!?” He asked, as the strange energies weighed upon him and the mineral crust began to thicken and rigidify.

In a moment he was nothing but a jade statue, sword upraised.

Shalim paced calmly around him, and reached down, and plucked the sword from his statue grasp, breaking all his fingers to do so.

Hym’s crystal eyes stared. Shalim walked back into his direct view, holding both swords.

Hym was so weak his limbs were trembling.

“What have you done to me!?”

“I have taken your stored energy, and added it to my own.”

“No!”

“Do you want it back?”

“Yes! Give it to me!”

“Then wound me, if you can!” He tossed the glass sword. Hym caught it feebly.

He glared his hatred at Shalim, and staggered in, swinging blindly. Shalim’s sword raised to catch the blow and Hym twisted it into a feint, and his blade came from a new direction, sure and firm in both his hands.

Shalim's free hand raised up and caught the blade, but not before its tip had pierced his breastplate, and tickled his skin.

He gave the glass sword a short punching motion, ramming its pommel into Hym's chest and knocking him back. Then he flung the sword off the tower-top, and began to laugh.

"It counts," said Hym.

"It does," said Shalim, sheathing his sword.

"So give it back!"

"Later."

"Now! Unless you are a liar."

"I never said *when* I would give it back to you."

"It was implied!"

"Was it?" Shalim laughed.

"Then send me back to my room. We're done here."

"I will decide when we are done," said Shalim.

"Yeah, and you threw my sword off the side."

"Yes, you're going to have to do something clever, I think," said Shalim, drawing his blade once again. The iron began to glow at once.

He lunged suddenly and Hym threw himself off the side of the tower. Astoundingly, the glass sword was still falling, many thousands of feet below him. He heard a

black wind behind him, and twisted around in time to see and dodge the swooping iron blade.

“Come on!” boomed Shalim, flying past him. “Defend yourself, Prophet! If you can!”

Hym kicked off the air and stretched out his arms for the falling sword, thousands of feet below. It was tumbling now. It had attained its maximum velocity. He had not. He was using the energy of his own body, now. He had just enough to maybe not splatter on the ground, if he timed it right.

Shalim spiraled around him as he fell, and the black iron sword flashed. Hym barrel rolled away from it, arms still outstretched. The city and its cobbles were swiftly rising up to meet him and the glass blade.

In the last possible moment before the sword would touch the cobbles and shatter into a million pieces, Hym caught it by the handle and flipped over in the air to land feet-first, and stomped with all his might. The energy of his fall dispersed into the cobblestones, blasting dozens of them out of the street. Crouching in his little crater he turned, and caught the thunder-strike of Shalim’s falling blade upon his own.

“Impressive,” said Shalim. He clenched a hand, and the cobblestones reverted to their former positions, repairing the street and locking both of Hym’s feet in stone.

Hym screamed and fell over, dropping his sword, which shattered instantly.

Shalim placed the tip of his sword to Hym's chest. "I win."

Hym ripped the stumps of his ankles away from the rest of his ruined feet. The last of his energy flowed to the making of new feet. He could not even stand on them.

Shalim loomed down from above him, smiling. "I could leave you lying here. I am sure my demons would take good care of you."

"Please," Hym moaned.

"What was that? I could not hear you. You will have to speak up."

"Please!" Hym gasped.

Shalim smiled. "As if I would leave you to fend for yourself."

He crouched, and picked Hym up in his arms, and cradled him close as he carried him back to the black tower.

Hym was too weak to feel any particular way about this, and the warm scent of Shalim's arms lulled him to sleep.

He woke in his own chamber many hours later. Mephistoph was licking him.

"Hey," he said, weakly.

Mephistoph curled into the crook of his arm.



“I’m ok, Stoff,” said Hym. “I nicked him. I can kill him.”



## Chapter 39

# Lord Blackcastle's Return

They spent the night in Blackcastle. Surya slept in the carriage.

In the morning, they had breakfast with Biryu and Mark and Torvin's clan, which Biryu had formally adopted.

Finding himself the oldest brother of a family of five sons was absolutely wonderful, but Surya found, for some reason, that he could not bear to be in the group with all of them. His family was perfect, and whole, but Hym was not there to see it, and that ruined everything.

He paced the grounds of Blackcastle alone, after breakfast. Tristan had the situation with their provisions well in hand, and the planning conversations did not need Surya's input. Feeling especially useless, he sat on the stone bench and looked at the little grove.

"I miss you," said Surya. "I hope you're safe."

"I am," said Hym, behind him. He whipped around.

"Hym!"

They embraced. "Are you really here?" Surya asked.

"No," said Hym. "I am dreaming."

There was something strange about the cadence of his speech, and the constant flicker of his hair's movement.

"What happened, Hym? What's going on?"

"Shalim has sped up my time. I have to talk like a whale to make sense to you now."

"Can you understand me? Should I talk more quickly?"

"It would help."

"Are you safe?"

"Sometimes. Shalim is unhinged."

"You don't say."

Hym let out an abrupt laugh that ended quickly. "I'm alright, though."

"Good," said Surya.

They held each other.

Surya asked, "What is it like, for you?"

"You are like a statue. Like a tree. I wait for every syllable."

Talking very quickly, Surya said, "What about right now?"

Hym gave another brief laugh. "That's much better."

“I love you Hym and I’m still coming to get you so just hold on, ok? Just hold on.”

“Are you in Blackcastle?”

“We had to stop for supplies. You’ll never believe it, mom is—”

Hym disappeared.

“Hym?” Surya asked.

There was no reply.

He sat on the bench again, and wept, grateful that no one could see him there.

Tristan found him.

“Hi,” said Surya, staring at the ground.

Tristan wiped his eyes. “Come on. Everyone wants to see you.”

“Oh gods,” said Surya. “Is there no mercy in this world?”

“Come on.”

Surya followed wearily. They circled around Blackcastle’s gardens to the front side of the manor, and found the entire village gathered. Surya raised his hooks placatingly. “Hello everyone. No, we don’t have Hym with us, and we’re not staying. We have many miles to cover on the road to get him back.”

A cacophany of questions rose from the crowd. Surya climbed onto the front steps of Blackcastle. “One at a

time, please! One at a time.”

Many hands were raised. He selected one at random.

“Is the Prophet still alive, sir?”

“He is,” said Surya. “He is Shalim’s prisoner.”

“How will you free him?”

“We will go to Elysium, and seek their aid.”

This caused a commotion in the crowd.

Someone shouted: “Did you make it all the way to Hellegrund?”

“We did,” said Surya. “Shalim stole the body of the Prophet from us, and turned us away. We could not breach the gates. We will return with someone who can.”

“Who, sir?”

“We don’t know yet.”

Many more hands were raised. Surya shook his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t answer all your questions. Just one more.”

One person at the back of the crowd asked: “Is Lord Blackcastle well?”

Surya’s heart froze. “Lord Blackcastle is dead!”

The crowd cried out aloud with grief, and the doors of Blackcastle opened behind Surya, and Mark Redraven emerged beside his wife, and the crowd cried out again with joy.

“Lord Blackcastle! You are well again!” Someone shouted, and Surya did a double take.

Mark Redraven bowed beside his wife, and Surya’s face opened into an ‘O’ of surprised comprehension.

“Surya said you were dead!” Someone shouted.

The mayor laughed. “The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated!”

The Blackcastle-Redravens had dinner together, all seven of them. Surya ate slowly, allowing the conversation to flow around him.

After dinner, the new Lord Blackcastle raised a toast. “To my many sons!”

They drank happily. Mark helped Biryu clear the table and tend to the dishes while Tristan and Surya sat before the fire, passing a pipe back and forth.

“This is wonderful,” said Tristan.

Surya nodded his assent.

“You don’t seem happy.”

“Hym isn’t here.”

“Isn’t he? I saw you talking to him in the garden.”

Surya grimaced.

“I’m sorry,” said Tristan.

“Everyone’s sorry. But he’s still not here.”

“We’re going to get him.”

"I know. But how long? How long will it be for him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Shalim has sped up his time. If it takes us the rest of the year, how many years will he spend in Hellegrund, waiting for us?"

"You can't worry about that," said Tristan.

"I can, and I do."

"Technically, it might work out better, for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if every time he dreams of you, he appears to you, then won't you see him a lot more often?"

"You're right," said Surya. He laughed. "I'll have to learn how to talk like a chipmunk, so he doesn't get bored of me."

"And how to make love like a rabbit," said Tristan.

Surya laughed. "No worries there."

Mark Redraven loomed behind their chairs. "Surya? Tristan? Would you like to join me on the balcony? The night is warm."

Tristan and Surya looked up at their mutual dad, and smiled.

They followed him onto the third-floor balcony, where an iron cookstove sat already warm before four chairs.

"Will my mother be joining us?" Surya asked.



“She is putting the little ones to bed. She will be along soon.” Mark settled himself into one of the chairs with a grunt of satisfaction. Surya and Tristan seated themselves.

Mark said, “That little barrel there has more of the green which you like so much, Tristan.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” said Tristan, opening the barrel. Soon the pipe was passing between the three of them.

“Surya, I’ve got a jug of whiskey tucked under your chair. We can sip it, as long as Biryu doesn’t see.”

“I’ll pass,” said Surya, with distaste.

“She knows that I drink,” said Mark, “but she prefers if I don’t do it around her, or around the children.”

“You know well why.”

Mark nodded. “I do. But I am not a monster, when I have the drink. I am a playful fool, instead.”

Biryu stepped out onto the balcony. “Hello all.”

“How are the wee ones?” Mark asked.

“Safe in bed and sound asleep. No nightmares tonight, I think.”

“They’ve had nightmares?” Surya asked.

“Of Shalim,” said Biryu.

“Understandable,” said Tristan. “I think we’ve all had those.”

"Yes," said Mark. "I think that's true."

Biryu accepted the pipe gladly from her son, and joined in the smoking circle. The pipe passed between them all easily, and soon they were all red-eyed and forgetful, and very comfortable. It became less important to avoid certain topics.

Surya said, "I'm glad you two found each other."

Biryu smiled. "Thank you."

"How did it happen?" Tristan asked. "When did you know?"

Mark said, "Well, Biryu here invited me to breakfast, as you may recall. I'd never had her noodles, before, and they were so good I could not help myself."

Biryu said, "When we ate together, he was kind, and we talked a great deal about the both of you. It was pleasant. I had a dream in which Hym came to me, and told me to invite him for breakfast a second time. So I did."

"After that, I felt like I owed her," said Mark. "So on the third day, I brought breakfast to her."

"I wasn't expecting it," said Biryu, "but his cooking was very good. It was the first time, in over thirty years, that someone had made a meal for me."

"We traded off, swapping recipes."

"I liked his waffles, and the bread he made."

"I adored everything she made."

“So we made each other a little fatter, and a little happier, and as the days went by, we realized we couldn’t imagine skipping a breakfast together, so I asked him to move in. His house was empty, anyway, without Ysolde. Sorry, Tristan.”

“It’s alright,” said Tristan. “I expect it will take everyone some time to get used to it.”

“Wait,” said Surya, “You asked him to move in? Before you were even dating?”

“Oh, but we *were* dating,” said Biryu. “At least, that was how I understood it.”

“I just thought she was being kind,” said Mark, laughing.

“It took him over a month to get it,” said Biryu.

“Of course, I proposed the same day.”

“And we were wed the next.”

“Who did the ceremony?” Tristan asked, thinking of the Storyteller.

“Minerva did,” said Mark.

“When did you adopt Torvin’s clan?” Surya asked.

“Oh, the day after you left,” said Biryu. “I couldn’t bear to let them go, after you left.”

Surya laughed. “I’m glad my leaving did some good, then.”

"It would have been better, if you were here," said Biryu.

"We knew you were alright, though," said Mark.

"Hym came to us in both our dreams. He kept us updated on your situation."

Surya smiled, loving Hym even more. Then, because it ached, he puffed on the pipe.

Tristan said, "Hey, it's puff, puff, pass. Not puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff, puff."

"Sorry," said Surya. He passed the pipe. He longed for whiskey.

He reached under the chair and grabbed the jug, uncorked it, and drank.

"Surya!" said Biryu, scandalized. "Use a glass!"

"Oh," said Surya. "Sorry, Mom."

She moved to the sidebar and handed him a glass. He filled it, and held out the jug questioningly. Tristan took it and drank straight from the jug.

"Tristan!" said Mark, scandalized.

Tristan laughed.

Biryu handed Tristan a glass, and he filled it, and passed the jug to Mark, who took a swig from the jug.

"Mark!" said Biryu.

"Dad!" said Tristan.

Surya laughed.

Mark held out the jug. Biryu took it in both hands, and raised it to her lips, and everyone laughed.

They drank their whiskey and smoked their pipe before the hearth, and Surya realized with a little jolt of horror that he was at peace with the world, like this. In a way, it was almost like Hym was with them.

He raised his glass. "To you, Hym. Whether or not you are with us now."

Alone in his tower room, Hym looked sadly out the balcony doors at the little party he could see. It strained the limits of his power, but he could be there, almost.

A knock came at the door of his chamber and he sighed, banishing the image.

“Who is it?”

“It is I.”

“Enter.”

Shalim entered the chamber to find it in total disarray. Someone had ripped books off the shelves and torn the pages from their bindings. Someone had scattered the bedsheets into the pool, and tossed the pillows into the hearth.

“I see you have redecorated,” said Shalim.

“Do you like it? It reminds me of you.”

“Then I shall leave it as it is.”

“Oh, a new personal freedom? Isn’t that nice. I don’t get many of those.”

“You seem unhappy,” said Shalim.

“You stole my energy. Give it back.”

“As you wish.”

Hym felt the stolen energy return at last, and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Do you wish to join me for dinner?”

There was something almost soft, in Shalim's tone. Hym turned to look at him at last, and saw him cowed by regret.

"What, I have a choice now?"

"I could have the demons bring your dinner in here."

"And leave? Just me and my dinner, alone?"

"If you prefer."

"Then I do. You may go now."

Shalim hesitated. He bowed. He left.

Confused, Hym stared out the window at the stars and the city, and hated his life.

Dinner arrived. This time, two new identical demons bore it, both of them crimson-skinned and very muscular, and wearing again nothing but black loincloths.

The demons turned to leave, and bowed.

Hym said, "Wait. What are your names?"

"I am Ochre," said one.

"And I am Spoil."

"You were slain."

"Yes."

"Yet you live?"

"Shalim has... Decided not to let us die."

"That's why you did it," Hym said. "Shalim put you up to it, so he would look better."

"No," said Ochre. "We wanted to taste forbidden fruit. One touch, and we knew that he would kill us. We hoped to die."

"Oh," said Hym. "I see."

"It was worth it. Your skin is like silk."

"Thank you? Goodbye now."

They bowed again, and turned, and left. Pondering this, Hym sat down at his own private banquet, and ate to his heart's content.

When he had finished, Ochre and Spoil returned, and took away the table. As they were leaving, Hym said, "Come back, when you have finished moving the table."

"As you command."

A while later they returned.

"Stand guard," said Hym. "Do not let Shalim enter my chamber."

"We cannot prevent him," they said.

"Then wake me the moment he appears."

"What will you do?"

"Sleep peacefully."

"You are not worried we will touch you again?"

"I am not," said Hym.



Ochre and Spoil looked at each other.

Hym undressed lazily and got into bed. “Are you two brothers?”

“No,” they said. “We are lovers.”

“I see.”

“We saw these forms, in the mirror. We longed to be inseparable. Now we are.”

“And yet your lover’s touch is no longer enough for you?”

“We have been lovers for many thousands of years. Love grows stale.”

“Perhaps yours does,” said Hym. “In this place.”

“What do you mean to say?”

“I think I’m going to make some changes around here.”

“Such as?”

“Oh,” said Hym, yawning, “You’ll see.”

Mephistoph emerged from under the bed, eyes glowing balefully, and the demons startled. The black cub pounced.

Ochre and Spoil emerged from Hym’s bedchamber a while later, slitted eyes already returning to normal humanoid pupils.



## Chapter 40

### Onwards, to Elysium

Surya and Tristan joined Thomas, Tobias, Taryn, Mark, and Biryu for breakfast the following day. Surya had enjoyed a very lovely dream in which Hym had kissed every inch of his skin, and had lain in his arms for hours. Awake now with the smell of Hym's hair still fresh in his memory, he smiled at his family, and ate noodles. Thomas and Tobias and Taryn were taller than he had last seen them, and happier, too. At breakfast they joked with each other, and asked countless questions about the world outside Blackcastle village.

"So didjoo see any more of those guys in red robes? They were cool," said Tobias.

"We did," said Tristan. "They didn't give us much trouble."

"Didjoo have to kill them?" Taryn asked.

"Yes," said Surya. "They were in our way."

"Wow," said Tobias.

Thomas asked, "What is Hellegrund like?"

The table grew quiet.

Biryu got up from the table, taking her bowl, and said, "It is not good to speak of such things." She began to clear the table.

Surya said, "It was frightening."

Biryu stopped to listen.

Surya said, "It was... Wrapped in ice. Mountains so high they broke the clouds. In the center of it, a black tower cut the whole sky, nearly high enough to touch the Ring. Around the tower, huge monoliths stood, spitting fire and lightning."

"What's a monolith?" asked Tobias.

"It's a big stone," said Surya. "Like a tombstone, but these were so huge you couldn't see them all at once. They were a mile on each side, and many miles tall."

"Did you see Shalim?" Thomas asked.

Biryu resumed clearing the table and left the room before Surya could answer.

Tristan said, "We did."

"He's scary. I see him in my dreams, sometimes."

"So do we," said Tristan. "It's ok. He can't hurt you, in a dream."

"He can't?"

“He can’t. You’ll just wake up.”

“Oh.”

Surya rose and joined his mother in the kitchen.

“Those boys have enough to have nightmares about,” she said, angrily scrubbing a pan.

“They deserve the truth.”

“You don’t have to live with the nightmares.”

“No. No, I suppose I don’t. Not like I have nightmares.”

Biryu put down the pan. She looked at her son. “You haven’t been here. Those boys have been through Hellegrund already. Now they’ll have to go there in dreams.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You say it like he used to.”

Surya’s ears burned. “I do not.”

“You do. When you don’t mean it, you sound just like him.”

“Then let me try again. I am sorry.”

She looked at him. “I believe it, this time.”

“I have to save him, Mom. You have to know that.”

“I do,” said Biryu, and she began sweeping the kitchen, needing a more vigorous chore to express her emotions. “I would... I would do the same, for Mark. Before you left, I didn’t understand. I do, now. I would

do it for you, and for Mark, and for any one of Torvin's little clan. But still, I..."

"What?"

"I hate you for doing it."

Surya hugged her.

"For leaving me," Biryu said, her voice thick with tears.

Surya rubbed her back with the backs of his hooks.

"For following him, instead of staying safe, for me."

Surya said nothing.

"He took your hands, Surya. He will only take the rest of you. He can give nothing back."

"I will take, if he refuses to give."

"You can't, Surya. My baby. My baby boy. You can't win. Hym is gone."

"He isn't," said Surya, firmly. "I will get him back. If you can't stop me, do you really think Shalim can?"

She laughed, despite herself. She broke the hug. "Maybe you're onto something, there."

"You're getting so good with this language," Surya said, smiling at her.

She wiped her eyes. "Yes, well, I hear it all day. Ten thousand questions, without ceasing. Mom, can I have this? Mom, can I keep this frog? Mom, is it ok to wear

cotton on Tuesdays? Mom, what's the color of the sky supposed to be? Mom, how's the earth stay still if all the stars are moving? Mom, look, I put ink on my shirt. Mom, can we have a swordfight? Mom, can we go play in the forest? Mom, what was Surya's favorite game?"

Surya laughed. "I'm glad they have you to teach them the answers to so many questions."

She laughed. "Sometimes I am not up to the challenge. Mark is better with them."

In the dining room they could hear the chatter of little voices, and Surya smiled. "Tristan is good with them, too."

"She will have children of her own, someday," said Biryu.

"He," said Surya, sharply.

"He. Forgive me. This custom is strange to me."

"The village has a whole series of customs for it," said Surya. "Including a ceremony."

"A ceremony?"

"The Taking of the Name. It's like a wedding. The new name is announced and made permanent in the village records, and the old name is struck out, and turned taboo for one month. During that time, anyone who says the dead name must give a gift to the changed one, and it must be a better gift than the last that was given. Things can escalate quickly. When Idbar became Orolante, she received a herd of cattle for the final gift."

“It is an interesting custom,” said Biryu. “Will Tristan do it?”

“It’s up to him. He’s got a strong enough personality I don’t think he will need it. And he may not want it; the eyes of the whole village are a strange burden to bear.”

“We could hold it here,” said Biryu. “In the garden.”

“I will offer it,” said Surya. “Thank you.”

“I am trying,” said Biryu. “This place is still strange to me.”

“After twenty-five years?”

“After twenty-five years in a box, yes,” said Biryu, laughing.

She sighed at the end of the laugh. “You are so *skinny* now!”

Surya laughed. “All muscle. We had a rough patch, at the end. Ran out of food.”

“Oh no! I will be sure to double the stores. Also, I note that you did not return with your father’s horses. Did you... Have to eat them?”

“He’s not my father anymore. Mark is that.”

“What should I call him?”

“The dead man.”

“Well. Did you eat the dead man’s horses?”

“No. Mihos turned them into statues.”



“Into statues?” Biryu’s eyebrows rose.

“I know,” said Surya. “He’s the witch’s cat. She’s here with us too.”

“Oh! I have not seen her! I shall prepare a room for her.”

“She won’t need it.”

“Then I shall burn incense for her, and make an offering.”

“She won’t need that, either.”

“How shall I make her feel welcome, then?”

“Greet her. She’s here now.”

Biryu looked around at the empty room, and smelled the scent of orchids. “Your perfume is lovely,” said Biryu. “Greetings to you, and welcome to my home. Your son was kind to me many times, over the years.”

“So was she,” said Surya. “She was the one who healed me, when I fell from the tree.”

Biryu bowed to the empty air, facing the wrong direction. “Thank you, honored one, for gracing my home with your presence.”

Nadianti laughed. “Delighted.”

Biryu screamed. “Oh! I heard her!”

“Yes, she is right here,” said Surya.

“Is there any way I can make my home more welcoming to you?” Biryu asked. “Is there anything you need?”

“Only a hot fire and an empty chair,” said Nadianti.

“I will see that you always have both.”

“And the pipe, from time to time.”

“The pipe? Oh yes, the pipe! Of course.”

Biryu left the room quickly to rearrange the living room chairs. Mark and Tristan had moved out there and the children had gone outside to play.

“You’re setting another place?” Mark asked.

“For Hym’s mother,” said Biryu, beaming. “She’s visiting! Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Er,” said Mark, “Yes?”

“That’s the right answer,” said Biryu, and she kissed him. “Now be sure to share your pipe, when she comes.”

“Er,” said Mark, “I will?”

He looked at Tristan as Biryu busied herself with tea.

Tristan said, “I can see her. Don’t worry, I’ll let you know if she’s here.”

“She’s, er... Dead, though, right?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Tristan. “In another manner of speaking, she’s still very much alive. We never would have made it back without her. She’s taking us to Elysium to become witches.”

“Witches?” said Mark.

“Mhmm.”

“Like my father?”

“Better. I found something out, too.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“You’re a witch, too.”

“I am?”

“Yes. But of a different kind, than Hym. So am I.”

“You are? But... How so? Neither of us has magic.”

“We were made of it,” said Tristan, eyes flashing. “It is hidden within us. It is where we get our grace.”

Mark laughed. “I am not graceful.”

Biryu tripped delivering the tea and Mark jumped from his chair and caught her and the teacup in her hand, then neatly fell into his chair with her in his lap.

Tristan laughed.

Mark said, “Stay, dear. Have some tea.”

Biryu laughed. “I was going to serve all of you!”

“My son can do it,” said Mark. “He’s helpful like that!”

Tristan got up, smiling, and served the tea. Surya entered the room a while later, Nadianti behind him. They sat and had tea together.

“You will leave today, then?” Mark asked.

Surya glanced at him, and at his mother seated in his lap. “We will.”

“You could stay longer,” said Biryu. “A week. You need it. Look at yourselves, you are skin and bone!”

“We’re well enough to travel,” said Surya. “We’ll be passing through thick jungle before we reach the desert. There will be time enough to get fat on the road.”

“How will you cross the desert?”

“Same way we crossed the ice. It won’t be too bad. By the time we reach it, Departure will have begun. The sands will be quite cool.”

“And by the time you reach Elysium?”

“Halfway through Departure, probably. Absence, if we’re unlucky.”

“You will freeze to death. There is no colder place in all the earth, than one of the poles in Absence.”

“Then we will freeze to death,” said Surya, irritably.

Tristan started the pipe, and passed it to Nadianti.

Mark and Biryu watched the pipe smoke itself in thin air, saw the gusting whorls of smoke emerge from nothing as Nadianti breathed out, and watched the pipe pass itself to Tristan, who took it and smoked.

“Is it really wise, to smoke this before a long journey?”

“It will make us more relaxed,” Surya said. “Can’t hurt.”

“Stay a week, Surya. It won’t hurt anything.”

“It might mean the difference between Departure and Absence,” said Surya. “We can’t. I’m sorry. We’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

Tristan said sternly, “It’s not a waste. We needed the supplies. And we got to meet our family. Don’t be ungrateful.”

Surya sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. That was ungrateful of me. Thank you for letting us stay here, and for stocking our supplies.”

Mark nodded. “This is your home.”

“Much more than that, now,” said Surya.

Biryu said, “Tristan, has my son offered yet?”

“Offered what? No?”

Biryu said, “Well, I am new to the village, in a way, and so there are many things which do not make sense to me. But I have heard that there is a ceremony we might perform for you? The Taking of the Name?”

“Oh,” said Tristan. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“We could hold one, in the garden,” said Biryu. “It would not take long to set up. We could hold it, and have you on your way again by lunchtime.”

“I...” Tristan swallowed. “I’d like that. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

Mark and Biryu beamed. Surya hid his irritation at the added time cost. He was glad that Tristan would get to have the ceremony, but still; whole hours would pass in which they were not yet on the road.

An hour later the village stood arrayed in their finest clothing, facing the rosebushes. Under the secret door, Tristan stood, wearing a crown of flowers. Minerva stood beside him, holding up the scroll of village names.

Silently, with a stroke, she cut the name Ysolde from the records. Then she wrote the new name over it.

Tristan. It was official.

Minerva raised up Tristan’s right hand, and said, “Behold! Gone is Ysolde, whom you knew! Here is Tristan, whom you do not! Comprehend, and take heed! The month of taboo now holds. Gifts may be directed to Mark Redraven, Lord of Blackcastle, as Tristan continues on his noble quest! All hail Tristan Redraven!”

Every voice said, “Hail Tristan Redraven!”

Tristan bowed, then removed his crown of flowers and gave it to Minerva. “Thank you.”

“Blessings upon you, Tristan Redraven,” said Minerva.

They mounted into the carriage, now drawn by a fresh set of black horses, and Tristan took the reins. “We will return, when we have triumphed!”

“Safe journey!” Shouted Biryu.

“Be wise and brave!” Mark Redraven shouted.

Torvin’s clan waved from the walltop as they rode away.





## Chapter 41

# Apologia

Hym woke with a start. Shalim was standing over him.

“What?” He asked.

“Where are Ochre and Spoil?”

“I don’t know. They’re your demons, why don’t you?”

“They are missing,” said Shalim. “You had something to do with it.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Come.”

“No. I’m comfortable.”

“Bathe yourself. Dress. We have a visitor.”

“What?”

“Do as I ask.”

“What visitor? Who’s coming here?”

Shalim’s backhand no longer surprised him, but it still hurt.

“Get. Dressed.”

Hym got out of the bed and dove into the pool. He began to wash himself, treading water. “I don’t see why you won’t just tell me. How do you know I’ll behave, for your guest?”

“You will.”

“Won’t,” said Hym, flicking water at Shalim.

“Hurry up.”

Hym dunked himself to rinse off the suds, and climbed out of the pool. The water steamed off his skin, and, now dry, he opened the wardrobe to find a simple, form-fitting black robe.

He put it on. “Not very flashy, if we’re having a guest.”

“You will speak when spoken to. You will otherwise remain silent. Do you understand?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You will.”

Shalim took him roughly by the arm and dragged him out of his room. Hym shook him off and straightened his robes.

“Come. This way.”

Shalim led the way to the endless shaft, and they fell for a time, together. They emerged from an arch near the ground floor, and stepped into a huge throne room. Black pillars rose, twisting like the trunks of trees, and spread their branches into the many vaults of the domed ceiling. From their high branches, glowworms dangled on their silken strands, turning the ceiling into a sea of little lights. The floor was paved in black glass, and the throne at the far end of the room rose seamlessly from it like something that had grown. It was covered in tiny figures; men and beasts and monsters, all entangled with each other in raptures of violence.

Shalim led the way to the throne, and seated himself in it, and faced the double doors at the far end of the hall.

“Where do I sit?” Hym asked.

“You stand.”

“Oh.”

The double doors opened and a horde of demons entered, and flowed into the sides of the hall, behind the pillars. As the mass found its place in the hall, a path cleared between them, and down it walked a strange trio.

The man in the center was the spitting image of Shalim, but his robes and armor were a blinding white, and his skin glimmered like a single shapely pearl. His eyes were also yellow, and they glowed like little halos.

Shalim steepled his fingers and watched him approach.

At the sides of this strange being, two stranger beings hovered. Each was like a point of gravity around which many iron wheels whirled in complicated orbits. The wheels burned with many staring eyes, and ghostly lines of mystic forces twisted through them, fanning out at times like misty wings, and rushing inwards towards the core at other times, to flutter around like mist and pass on into other strange forms.

Shachar walked the whole length of the hall, and stood before his brother's throne.

"I have come to seek a diplomatic solution," said Shachar.

Shalim said simply, "No."

Shachar nodded. He bowed deeply to Hym. "Prophet."

"Shachar."

"Do you wish to remain here?"

"Not a second longer. Take me."

"I cannot. But soon I shall be able to."

"We shall see," said Shalim. "Begone."

Shachar locked eyes with his brother. "You are cruel, brother."

"As are you."

"When next we meet, you will regret your cruelty."

"Begone. You waste time."

“But not very much of it, I see. Cruel, brother. Cruel.”

“BEGONE!” Shalim roared, and his voice thundered down the hall. Hym flinched. Shachar did not.

“Farewell, Prophet.” He bowed. He turned to Shalim. “Auf wiedersehen.”

Then he turned and left the hall, followed by his strange beings.

“What did he say?” Hym asked.

“It means, ‘until we meet again.’”

“What language was that?”

“An obscure dead one. From before the fall.”

“Languages can die!?”

“Everything dies. There is nothing that exists which can escape that fate forever.”

“What were those things with him?”

“They were angels,” said Shalim. “I do what I wish, with the souls in my collection. So too does he.”

“But they weren’t even human!”

“Neither are my demons. What of it?”

“But at least your demons get to have *arms!*”

Shalim laughed. “Yes. I called him cruel for a reason. Come. Sit upon my lap. Entertain me.”

“Never.”

“Now.”

“Fuck you.”

“I will let it slide, for now.” Shalim got to his feet. “Come. I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh come on, not another one! If you really are determined to upset me, just take me back to my room and sling insults at me, you don’t have to go to all this trouble!”

Shalim laughed. “I may do that. Later. Come.”

Hym followed.

Shalim led him to a chamber deep in the middle of the tower, and they stepped out of the arch to find a sunlit chamber lined with pillars. The open air of the city wafted all around, blue skies smelling sweetly of many flowers and the scent of baked goods in the city below.

Curtains fluttered gently from the pillars. In the center of the space, an intricate mandala lay carved into the stone, and cushions sat piled atop it, next to a hookah and a tea-set.

“Danaye used to come here, to meditate,” said Shalim. “I used to watch her.”

“And now you want to watch me?”

“I am always watching you.”

“I figured as much.”

Hym sat angrily on the cushions and snatched up the hookah's tube.

Breathing out a cloud of smoke, he watched Shalim sit beside him, and take up the other wand. He inhaled deeply, and blew out cumulonimbi.

"Why can't you just be nice?" Hym asked.

"I thought I was!"

"I mean all the time. You're psychotic. I never know what to expect from you. One minute you're throwing me to the wolves, or hitting me. The next you're teaching me something."

"I am always teaching you something," said Shalim, quietly.

"Then you need to do better lesson planning, because I don't learn like this."

"You have learned very quickly," said Shalim. "I am pleased with your progress."

They were silent for a time. The tea served itself.

Shalim said, "I am sorry, you know."

"Are you?"

"I am. Sometimes my temper is... Hard to control."

"It's always gotten you your way in the past, so you lean on it. But it won't get you anywhere, with me."

Silence fell again.

Hym said, “Why won’t you just let me go?”

“Shachar would snatch you the moment you were free. I am protecting you.”

“He’s coming to get me anyway.”

“He cannot touch you, here. I will not let him. He will keep you from Surya too, you know. And he is far less reasonable than I.”

“If you say so. You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

“No I will not! You know that I do not lie to you.”

Hym thought of Surya at Blackcastle, and he wanted to cry.

“Save your tears,” said Shalim, angrily. “I will leave you, and you can cry when you are alone.”

He got to his feet and left, and Hym took him up on the offer.



## Chapter 42

### Demons

The carriage covered a hundred miles the first day, and they camped by the side of the road. It was easier, going this way; the roads were better cleared, and older.

After dinner, Nadianti stood. “On your feet, please. We must begin training, now.”

Surya got up gladly. Tristan stood up too, and got their swords from the carriage.

Nadianti held up her blade. “Defend yourselves, if you can.”

They couldn’t.

A few moments later, Nadianti said, “Mind your feet. You stumble over them in battle, and you die.”

“Thanks, said Surya, getting painfully up.

“Again.”

She crashed against their defenses, and again their defenses were no match for her.

“Good,” she said. “Now you. Try to attack me.”

“Both of us?” Tristan asked.

“Both of you,” Nadianti said, and she nodded.

They rushed her together, side by side, and she deflected them both. “Come on. Hit me if you can.”

They could not.

At last, Nadianti said, “Enough. You have done well for a first day. Tomorrow we will train again.”

“But you haven’t taught us anything!” Tristan said.

“Of course I have,” said Nadianti. “I have taught you what it is like to fight a witch. My skill has diminished greatly, since my death. When Aurora came for me, I died anyway.”

“How? How did they get you, if you can fight like that?” Tristan asked.

“They were many. I was one. Mihos aided me in my escape. I barely made it anyway.”

“And you were pregnant,” Surya said. “Surely that made it harder to fight?”

“It made it much easier. When a witch is pregnant, her magic is redoubled by the baby’s.”

“So even with all your magic, you couldn’t protect yourself?”

“I could not,” said Nadianti, sadly.

“But you killed those Auroran soldiers like it was nothing,” Surya said.

“I had the advantage of surprise. They had it last time.”

“That’s all it took? Surprise?”

“In a war of witches, a lot can happen in a moment of surprise. You saw the way my son killed the wizard Boris. He did not know it, but in that moment he avenged my death.”

“Boris was the one who...?”

Nadianti nodded. “He was chief among their number.”

“What’s the difference between a witch and a wizard?” Tristan asked.

“The wizards were made by Shachar, and by Shalim. The gods gave them knowledge, and put them to war against each other. Aurora had an opposing empire, at the time.”

“Just knowledge?” Surya asked. “No magic?”

“Knowledge is the root of all magic,” said Nadianti. “With enough of it, they had a magic of their own.”

“And the witches?”

“Danaye made them,” said Nadianti. “Many were her direct descendants. Others were those she chose to bless. Few had any true measure of power.”

“If it’s true, about knowledge,” said Surya, “then you should be teaching us more than just swords.”

“Precisely my line of thinking,” said Nadianti. “Gather around, and I will reveal the secrets of the heavens and the earth.”

They listened attentively. Nadianti explained the movement of the world and of the stars, and the nature of the distant galaxies, and the lives of stars and planets. She told the story of creation’s slow rise, and the story of the fall. She told the story of the Ring and the Moon. She told the story of atoms, and of molecules. She taught them the secret of flying in dreams, and passing through walls, and moving objects with their minds. She told them how to open doors, in the land of dreams.

As they fell asleep, she said, “Tonight I will take you both, in dreams. We will fight again with swords, and with something like magic. It will be a good exercise. Fear not; Mephistoph will watch the camp.”

They slept, and tumbled into dreams, and landed in a field of endless grass, under a sunlit sky. Nadianti strode towards them, holding three swords.

“Before we begin,” she said, “Try to use the powers I explained to you.”

Surya concentrated on the weight of his body, and imagined it differently. He began to float above the ground. Laughing, he kicked off the ground and into the sky, but could only hang there, kicking futilely.

Tristan fared a little better. He managed to get his feet off the ground and go zooming away, skimming just above the grass.

Nadianti raised her hand, and a wall of stone rose from the ground.

“Pass through it, if you can,” she said.

Surya managed it at once. He had already done it before. Tristan struggled.

“Remember,” said Nadianti. “In the dream, your body is only as real as you believe it to be. So too is that wall.”

Tristan managed to put a hand through the stone, but could go no further.

“It is good enough,” said Nadianti. She released the swords, and they hung in the air before her. “Now. Call your sword to your hand.”

Tristan and Surya both reached out their hands and concentrated. They could almost imagine the sword in their grasp, but neither of them had the will to make the dream-swords move.

“Keep trying,” said Nadianti. “It will come to you, if you believe it will.”

Surya believed with all his might, and the sword flew to his palm. He caught it, stunned. “I did that?”

“You did,” said Nadianti. “In time, you will be able to do it in the real world, too.”

Tristan strained, muscles tightening in his face. “Come on, fucking imaginary sword!”

The sword leapt at the sound of Tristan’s voice, and flew to his hand. “Ha!”

“Good,” said Nadianti. “Now, approach.”

Tristan and Surya lifted gently into the air, and began to circle around Nadianti, swords flashing.

Hym stood in the grass and watched them all, hanging in the air together, frozen in the moment. He smiled to himself, and did not interrupt them, or make himself visible. Their battle played out in agonizingly slow motion before him, and he watched his husband’s athletic body do its work.

The hours of his dreaming passed. Before the mock-fight was even halfway finished, he was waking up again.

Shalim’s voice said, from the other side of the door, “Do you wish for company, today?”

“No.”

“I will have breakfast brought to you.”

Hym stifled his polite impulse to say, “Thank you.” Instead, he stroked Mephistoph’s head, and stared up at the ceiling, and his reef of glowing coral.

Breakfast came, borne by two lovely demons with pale azure skin. These, too, wore loincloths, though the two were not a matching set. One had a cloud of soft white hair, and green eyes. The other was bald, and his eyes

were dark.

“What are your names?” Hym asked, as he busied himself with breakfast.

“I am Oracle,” said the white-haired one.

“And I am Sage,” said the bald one.

“Are you brothers?”

“We are.”

“You may go. When you bring my dinner, bring some entertainment with you.”

“Entertainment, your majesty?” said Oracle.

“Music. Or poetry. I don’t care which.”

“What kind of music or poetry would you prefer?”

“Lamentations,” said Hym.

“As you wish.” They bowed, and departed. Hym ate sadly. Mephistoph jumped up onto the table and helped himself to the meats Hym could not eat.

In the middle of the day he sat before the hearth and meditated in its soothing heat. He cast his mind across the distance, and the flames took on the shape of Surya. He was seated on the chariot’s bench, the reins wrapped around one hook. Tristan sat beside him, asleep, resting his head on Surya’s shoulder.

Hym’s heart sickened with jealousy, and he banished the image from the flames.

“As I said,” said Shalim, behind him, “perhaps you should be jealous.”

“I do not recall asking for your presence.”

“I sensed your pain. I came to help.”

“To help my pain? Good. You have done so. It is worse now than it was before.”

Shalim sat beside him, in front of the hearth. “I do not wish for you to suffer, you know.”

“Ha.”

“It is only because you are stubborn.”

“Because I have a will of my own? If you loved me, you would love it.”

“I do love it,” said Shalim.

“But you punish me for it.”

“Only where it challenges mine.”

“It will always challenge yours.”

“Perhaps it will. Life will remain entertaining, that way.”

“Surya loved it,” said Hym. “He loved me as I am. He didn’t try to change me.”

“You had not known him long enough to watch him do so. Once you were in his house and in his bed, he would treat you like a wife. As he learned from his father.”

“You lie. I will not hear you.” Hym’s ears closed.



Shalim laughed. "I never lie to you."

He got to his feet and left. Hym unsealed his ears.

There was nothing else to pass the time with, so he created toys for Mephistoph, and played with him. The hours passed with something that was almost joy, but he could not hide the pain in his heart from Mephistoph. Their play stopped, and Mephistoph nuzzled against him, and he cried bitter tears.

Dinner came at last. Oracle and Sage brought a beautiful male demon with them. He wore a veil over his face, and a loincloth of translucent lace, and that was all. His skin was the color of gold. He sat on a stool with a golden harp in his lap, and sang strange songs of sorrow in a language Hym could not understand.

When the first song had finished, Hym said, "You please me, demon. What is your name?"

"It is Harp, your majesty."

"And what was it before you came to Hellegrund?"

"We... Do not like to speak of such matters."

"I don't care what you like. Tell me your original name."

"It was Harptos, your majesty."

Hym laughed. "One of Shalim's more creative efforts, I see."

Harp laughed. "I suppose so, your majesty."

“Do you know other songs?”

“I do.”

“Play whatever is most pleasing to your own ear,” said Hym. “Your music is soothing, as you can see.”

All three demons froze. A huge black beast lay around the legs of Harp’s stool, flicking its tail idly in the firelight. It had not been there, a moment ago.

“Your majesty?” Oracle asked.

“You are an Oracle, are you not? Foresee.”

Oracle and Sage looked at each other and started moving towards the door.

Hym laughed. “Not much of an Oracle, then.”

The door resisted their hands. Tiny stars burned in Hym’s eyes. “Play on, Harp. I will have music, while Stoff dines.”

An hour later, Oracle and Sage left Hym’s room, bearing the table with them. Harp remained. Mephistoph licked his chops before the fire.

Harp played well, even with trembling fingers. Hym watched the harp greedily, and his hands upon them.

“My husband has hands like yours, you know,” said Hym.

“He does?” Harp asked, playing nervously.

“He does. They are lean and strong, and long-fingered. His are bigger than yours.”

“Oh,” said Harp. “I see. Yes, Shalim’s hands are mighty.”

“Shalim is not my husband and never shall be.”

“Oh,” said Harp. “I am sorry. Forgive me, please, your majesty.”

“All is forgiven. Come. Sing something. Your voice is sweet.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Do not thank me yet.”

An hour later, Harp left the room as well, and Hym was alone with Mephistoph. He sat in a conjured chair before the fire, stroking Mephistoph’s head, now level with his left arm.

He heard a knock upon the door.

“Enter.”

Shalim entered. “You did not ask who I was, this time.”

“I was hoping for a surprise. I am disappointed.”

Shalim laughed, and waved a hand. The stone nearby Hym’s chair began to grow. By the time Shalim came around to sit in it, it was a black throne.

Mephistoph, a tiny black cub, lay curled in Hym’s lap, purring loudly. His little belly was visibly full.

Shalim said, “What have you been feeding him? He has not grown much.”

“The meat that you so graciously provide, knowing well I cannot eat it.”

Shalim laughed.

“That’s why I made Mephistoph, actually. I couldn’t bear the sight of wasted food.”

“I will see that rawer and rarer meats are provided for him.”

“Thank you. He will like that. Won’t you, Stoff? Yes, I think you will.”

Mephistoph stretched out his paws and the little black beans of his toes. Long claws flashed in the firelight, diamond edges glinting.

“I am pleased, at least, that you have sought company,” said Shalim. “In addition to making some.”

“I thought I might bring a different entertainer in each night.”

“It is a good idea. You will learn more about Hellegrund that way. You will see that there is much here, to offer you.”

“Yes, I was thinking I might bed one of them, just to get under your skin.”

Shalim’s eyes flashed. “And what of your husband?”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. And besides, I’m stuck here for ages. Might as well pass the time somehow. I’m not a saint, you know.”

“You lie!”

“Why would I bother?”

“You are bluffing. I know you. I see through you.”

“Seeing how much it worries you, maybe I’m not bluffing.”

“You would really take a beast into your bed, before you would take me?”

“Really really.”

“Then you shall have your wish. I will send you lovers. You will dislike their embrace.”

This time it was Hym who laughed. “Now you’re the one who’s bluffing. You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Shalim got to his feet and left the room. Hym smiled contentedly, and scratched behind Mephistoph’s ears. Shalim had played right into his hands.

The first lover came that night.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it?” Hym asked.

“One who would be your lover.”

“Oh, come in, come in.”

A hulking, horned, grey-skinned man stepped into the room, wearing nothing but straps and glinting steel. In his hand was a long coiled whip.

“Come and love me, if you can,” Hym said, arms outstretched.

The demon grinned around his tusks, and cracked his whip. Hym caught the flying lash, and yanked the whip’s handle into his own hand. He let the leather slither through his fist.

“Nice whip,” he said.

The demon raised up his hands and lumbered in. Hym caught him by the wrist and threw him over his head, into the pool. As he crashed down into its waters, Hym upraised a hand and drank their atomic heat all at once. The water dropped to absolute zero, solidifying instantly around the demon. The ice was cold enough to instantly begin to burn his skin.

Hym casually flicked the whip. “All yours, Stoff.”

The great beast came lumbering out of the shadows, and bent down his head, and sank his huge fangs into the demon. His tail flicked and moved, and an iron barb grew from its tip. With a lashing strike, he sank his tail’s barb into the demon’s chest, and pumped his venom in.

As the demon’s blood was gradually replaced with Mephistoph’s own, the demon’s eyes rolled back in his head.

When he opened them again, his pupils had dilated into slits. Hym melted the waters with a wave of his hand, and the demon climbed out, and stood dripping before Hym.

“Go. Await the order.”

The demon bowed, and left the chamber.

A knock came at the door a moment later.

“Enter,” said Hym.

Shalim stepped inside. “So. How was your lover’s visit?”

“Couldn’t bear to watch?”

Shalim scowled. “You kept me out.”

“I did. Funny how that works, when you know how it does.”

Hym cracked the whip. “He left me a souvenir. What do you think?”

Shalim scowled.

Hym said, “He was big. Big as an ox. I could barely take him. But it was worth it, when I did.”

“You lie.”

“Do I?”

Shalim seethed. “I will see you at breakfast.”

He left the chamber.

Hym cracked the whip again, smiling to himself. “Good boy, Mephistoph.”

Mephistoph purred happily, small once more, and leapt into his lap as he sat down again before the hearth.





## Chapter 43

### Jungle

By the ending of the third day, they had reached the edge of the jungle. There was no snow here. Vines hung from the canopy, and strange animal cries surrounded them. The air was warm, and humid, and thick with biting insects. Tristan burned a certain reeking herb in the fire, and the flies left them alone.

Surya lay in his furs, looking up at the dark trees. “Do you think Danaye is with us here?”

“I don’t know,” said Tristan. Nadianti had left the clearing to scout the area.

“We should try for a quicker pace tomorrow. Maybe Nadianti can help the horses somehow. I don’t want to get caught by demon bounty hunters.”

““I don’t want to get caught by demon bounty hunters,”” said Tristan. “Now there’s a phrase I never thought I’d hear someone say.”

Surya laughed.

Nadianti emerged from the forest suddenly, sword in hand. “Get in the carriage! Now!”

“But the horses!” Tristan said, leaping to his feet.

“No time! Mihos, get them out of here!”

Mihos walked past the horses, trailing his tail along their flanks. Where he touched them, flesh shifted at once to stone, and the transformation completed itself a moment later. Then he leapt into the carriage with Tristan and Surya, and the carriage began to roll. Undergrowth in their path simply moved itself out of their way as they went, and returned to its place as they passed.

Surya and Tristan peered through the windows, watching Nadianti as they rolled away. Tristan clutched his bow tightly, an arrow on the string. Eyes flashing, he said, “Get down!”

Surya and Tristan threw themselves down from the bench as a ripple of wind sliced through it from aft to stern, severing the entire carriage in half at head height. The top of the carriage tumbled away, and they stood up in the wreckage.

Tristan snarled, “Grab your bow.”

Surya obeyed.

Back at the camp, Nadianti waited, sword in hand. The shadows laughed at her.

With a flicker and a whirl, she moved, slashing aside a snarl of spellcraft. It struck the fire and the flames erupted in a plume of gushing sparks. In their falling

glow, she said, “Come. You will have to do better than that.”

The shadows raced behind the carriage, zipping from tree to tree. Surya and Tristan could both see them clearly even as they moved. Amid the shadows they saw arms and hands and swords, and glinting eyes. Mihos stood at the helm still, his eyes serenely fixed on the northern horizon.

The shadows laughed as they raced. They had not been set loose upon the world in centuries.

Tristan and Surya didn’t know that. They raised their bows, took aim, and loosed, simultaneously. A small magnet applied to Surya’s right hook allowed him to grip the arrows and shoot them. Poorly.

Tristan’s shot zipped right between the eyes of one demon and out the back of his head, apparently to no effect. Surya’s arrow missed, and went skipping away off the flank of a tree.

Nadianti paced a slow circle around the flames. “Come! I am his mother, am I not a better prize?”

The shadows danced.

Something moved at the corner of her vision. She whirled upon it, sword flashing, and sliced the rushing vines as she sidestepped them. They writhed as they grew, snarling towards her. With a slice of her blade, she sent a wave of white flame billowing out from the campfire, and it blasted the growing vines to ash. The light

flared through the forest, setting trees aflame. Surya and Tristan looked back in dismay at her shadow in the light. Across the distance, they heard Nadianti's voice amid the flames, shouting: "I AM NADIANTI, FIRSTBORN DAUGHTER OF DANAYE, AND MOTHER OF THE SECOND PROPHET! COME AND KILL ME, IF YOU CAN!"

"They'll kill her," Surya said.

"They will," said Tristan.

"We have to help her."

"She's doing this to save us. Look." Tristan pointed. The shadows were racing towards the brilliant light.

"Hym will never forgive me," said Surya.

"There's nothing we can do."

"Yes there is. Thormight."

Tristan's eyes widened. "Mihos! Circle around for her! Surya, help me!"

They got out the bag of thormight bombs and began lighting them as Mihos circled around, back towards the camp.

Nadianti whirled and swung, ripping a forming spell from the air.

A bull elk snorted from the edge of the forest, eyes glowing. It sprinted towards Nadianti and without hesitation she cleaved it in twain, and as the falling pieces were separating she reached out her hand, and caught a demon within the beast by its throat. Its shadowy form

solidified at once, and she plunged her sword through his breast. The violet-skinned demon gaped in surprise.

“Oh yes,” said Nadianti, as the blade of her sword began to glow. “I know how to kill you.”

The demon’s torso exploded in a scintillating blast of colored light, and Nadianti moved, whirling, her blade stirring the strange fires in the air. She pointed her sword and the fires flowed to the two fallen halves of the bull elk, and each began to regenerate. When they rose from their deaths, they were otherworldly, outlandishly tall, and covered in spikes.

Nadianti cracked her sword and a thunderstroke blitzed through the night, momentarily casting every demon’s shadow through the forest. At the exact same time, Tristan and Surya heard the first of their bombs go off. What followed was a cascade, a series of violent explosions of glittering sparks that burned hot enough to melt the earth, and that series of explosions trailed behind them through a vast semicircle of jungle, and the flames caught quickly.

Nadianti listened to the explosions and watched the flash of each new blast, even as the demons around her scattered. The carriage came barreling in through the moving underbrush and she threw herself into the seat even as it rolled on right over the campfire and on to the north. They raced towards the ring of fire, and the shadows around them howled. Nadianti stepped into the back of the carriage, beside Tristan and Surya.

“I know you are trying to help,” she said, raising her sword and pointing it northward, “but I believe they may be angry now.”

“You don’t say?” asked Surya, pointing his bow. He loosed a shot. By sheer luck, it struck the sword from a demon’s hand.

“Good shot, Surya!”

A huge and roaring serpent of flame twisted off the fires in their path, and reared its head, and struck the chariot, but the flames deflected off an invisible barrier that surrounded them, and the fire serpent splashed to earth all around them. A blast of frigid air surged from Nadianti’s blade, and every flame in their path extinguished.

“On, Mihos! Quicken your pace!”

Mihos growled, and leapt down in front of the carriage. In midair he transformed, and landed at full size, stampeding ahead. Nadianti flicked her sword and reins and straps appeared, binding him to the carriage, and he redoubled his pace.

Nadianti said, “Enough of *wheels!*”

She stabbed her sword downward, into the bed of the wagon, and all four wheels sprang off their spokes and rolled away. The chariot continued on, lighter and swifter now, and Nadianti held her position. The shadows began to fall behind.

“Don’t stop, Mihos. Not until we reach the desert.”

“Won’t they follow us into the desert?” Surya asked.  
“We should kill them now!”

“I killed one. It was costly. I cannot hope to kill them all. They do not rest, or grow weary. They will not tire of this game. We must be swift; it is our only hope. At the border of the desert, they will be forced to stop.”

“By what?”

“By the angels.”

Two huge beasts came crashing through the jungle with them, and Surya shouted, “What the hell are *those!?*”

“They were an elk. Now they’re something else. I haven’t named them yet. Any ideas?”

“I didn’t know you could do that sort of magic,” Tristan said.

“Danaye was with me. She noticed, when we burned the forest.”

“Is she angry?”

“No. She understands. She hopes we will not have to do it again, though.”

“Will the fire spread?”

“No. Look.”

They looked to the sky, where dark clouds were massing with incredible speed.

“She calls the storm?” Surya asked.

“She does.”

“Amazing.”

“That is my mother, for you.”

Mihos kept up his pace tirelessly for thirty days. He ate while running, and pooped while running, and even slept while running. They were all forced to eat their meals, sleep, and live together in the cramped confines of the topless chariot, even as the wind whipped past them at blistering speeds. They could find no shelter from it. Their cookstove offered meager heat, so they sat bundled under thick furs and watched its little flame sadly.

And at last, they reached the edge of the desert.



## Chapter 44

# Desert, Dessert

“Would you care for some dessert?” Shalim asked.

Hym looked up from his cushion. Eight years had passed, for him. They were cordial, now. Most of the time. He made it a habit to needle him with barbs, for the fun of it, but he didn’t have the heart for them sometimes. In eight years, he had dreamed of Surya countless times, but shared dreams with him only thirty times. The dreams were agony. And they were everything.

“Dessert?” Hym asked, lazily. His crown was a little crooked; he straightened it. It had been part of his outfit for the evening. Tonight’s entertainment was a troupe of acrobats, juggling as they performed. None of them were wearing much. The music was slow and dull, and it ruined the fun of the show.

“Yes. I have made something special, just for you.”

“What is it?”

“It is called vengeance.”

“Oh?” Hym looked up, worried.

“Yes. Here. Open yours.”

He opened the silver serving tray and found a cake inside, decorated with a stained-sugarglass image of a man in red robes. A word in sugarglass letters read: “Boris.”

“Uh,” said Hym.

Shalim said, “Your mother’s killer. Chief among them, at any rate. You killed him yourself. Enjoy.”

“What is it?”

“It is a cake.”

“What’s in the cake?”

“Nothing is in the cake but cake.”

“It’s not made out of the corpse of Boris?”

“It is not.”

“And it’s not full of laxatives, or, or soporifics?”

“Soporifics?”

“Well? Is it?”

“It is not.”

“What’s the recipe?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then you didn’t make it yourself.”

Shalim laughed. “I had it made for you. Is that not enough?”

“What kind of hundred thousand year old man doesn’t know how to bake a cake?”

“I know *how*,” said Shalim. “In fact, I know a recipe that will change your understanding of cake forever.”

“Then make it for me.”

“Maybe I will!”

“You should take the first bite,” said Hym.

“As you wish, though it is your vengeance.” He forked a piece and ate it. “Oh. Delicious.”

Hym watched him swallow before he carved out his bite. He sniffed it. It smelled good.

He ate it. Flavors and sensations exploded across his palate. He saw again the moment of his victory over Boris, and saw his mother nearby him, and the emotion on her face. He tasted her pride, and comprehended the need for this vengeance and the ecstasy of its fulfillment in one overwhelming moment of pure completion.

Then he was back. He had swallowed. He put down his fork, feeling a little sick. “That,” he said, “was *not* just cake.”

“It was the taste of vengeance. How did you find it?”

“I feel dirty for liking it.”

Shalim laughed. “Then feel dirty, for you liked it. You cannot deny it. Come, eat the rest.”

“I’ll pass, thank you.”

“I have opened your eyes to new experiences, and here you sit, ungrateful.”

“I am grateful. But I’ve had my fill.”

“Come to my room tonight. You know that you long to.”

Hym laughed coldly. “I know nothing of the kind. You disgust me.”

He had said this to Shalim countless times, but today something about the way he said it got under Shalim’s skin. Shalim exploded to his feet. “I disgust you!? You disgust me! Preening and prancing around with your lovers all day, sneering at me over your wine, sticking me always with your witless barbs! You are a classless harlot without any soul at all, and I despise you.”

Shalim left the room. Alone with his demons, Hym smiled to himself, and drank his wine. After dinner he took another “lover”, and Mihos ate well. Afterwards he sat with his new demon by the hearth, and his eyes wandered wistfully over the forms of his muscle.

This demon’s form reminded him of Surya. In the firelight, he was the right color, too.

He looked at the demon’s face. Three eyes blinked back at him, and his golden headdress flashed. Bits of gold hung from his nose and ears, and a fine chain con-

nected these bits. His eyes were the color of opals, and flashed strangely in the firelight. Crooked ram's horns jutted from the sides of his head.

Hym's hand wandered over the torso so like Surya's. He stopped himself. "Go. We are done here."

The demon nodded, and rose, and left.

The time was coming, he could feel it. Surya was falling asleep again.

It was like the turning of the sky, like nightfall. Hym threw himself back, onto the cushions, and Mephistoph curled up at his feet, purring.

Very comfortable, he watched his husband appear, falling like a cloud, sinking slowly down from the ceiling. With a whisper of his will, he denuded Surya, and Surya landed naked in his arms.

They did as lovers do. It was excellent. Hym could go a dozen times, taking breaks between, and by the end of the twelfth time Surya always finished for the first time. Every moment of it was painless and perfect. He could look upon Surya from every angle, and linger with love upon his every feature. Each time was like the first time.

For the twelfth time, he finished himself right at the same moment he finished Surya. He slumped, panting, utterly exhausted. Every muscle was trembling, and slick with sweat. He bent down and curled over Surya, and held him, and kissed him through the endless waves of his completion.

Afterwards, he lay on Surya's breast, and Surya's arms slowly moved to encircle him, as though moving through invisible quicksand.

Safe in Surya's strong embrace, Hym watched Surya's face and touched every part of him that he could reach.

Surya was slowly saying something. Hym hung onto every syllable. I had to expand his working memory capacity a hundredfold to enable him to hold the long chain of long sounds in his mind all at once, and decipher it. He waited nearly a minute for each word.

Surya said, "We made it to the desert. Demons are hunting us. We hope to lose them tomorrow."

"Are you safe?" Hym asked, slowing himself down, stretching every syllable as long as he could.

"Yes. Your mother is still with us."

"Stay safe. I miss you so much."

"I'm here now, aren't I?"

"You know what I mean."

"I do. Believe me, I do."

They kissed. Hym lingered in it. Somehow they found a speed that worked for both of them; a perfect speed. Every touch tantalized, for the skin had forgotten its beauty by the time it felt the touch again.

The day was coming, Hym could feel it. He knew he would wake soon. It had been hours.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.”

“You’re coming for me, right?”

“I am. Stay strong. Hold on.”

“I will.”

“How long has it been?”

“No. Don’t ask me that. Just hurry. Please.”

“I am.”

“I know.”

Hym kissed Surya again, and woke, and Surya faded from his arms. If he was lucky, he would fall into the same dream tonight, before Surya woke again.

Shalim was in the room, sitting in a backwards chair, watching him.

“Boo to you too,” said Hym. “What an awful way to wake up!”

“Boo,” said Shalim. “You dreamed of him again.”

“I did.”

“I watched you.”

“Liar.”

“I saw only darkness. Still I watched. I could hear sounds.”

“You disgust me.”

“Why do you hide yourself from me? We are fated to be together. Let me taste my destiny.”

“Ok,” said Hym, and he swung his foot, and kicked out Shalim’s front teeth. Shalim flew, and slammed into the wall, and a bookshelf crashed down on top of him.

“You know what,” said Hym, “I’ve had just about enough of your bullshit.”

“Here we go again,” said Shalim, as the room reverted to its previous condition, causing the bookcase which pinned him to disappear and causing his teeth to manifest once more. On his feet, he drew his sword. “Do not make me teach you this lesson again, young man.”

“I’ll see you at dinner. Get out of my room. And never come in here again without my permission! I can do more than break teeth.”

Shalim smiled, and bowed. “As you wish, my liege.”

“And stop *fucking* calling me that!”

“As you wish, my liege.”

As Shalim backed towards the door, Hym gave an inarticulate scream of frustration and caused the air around Shalim to quickly undergo Hydrogen fusion. It was nothing more than a sparkle of raw gamma radiation, but it flared around Shalim like an emerald supernova, casting the shadows of Hym’s bones right through his flesh.

“Is this what you wanted?” said Shalim, feeding the runaway fusion reaction. “A test of wills? We will see whose breaks.”



The bed began to smolder and the waters of the pool began to boil. Hym grunted, and swung his sword, and all the air in the chamber disappeared.

“Ah,” said Shalim, silently, for there was no air. “A new trick.”

Hym’s body was already healing but the gamma rays had done their damage. His mother’s quick shield had protected her and I, and our cores. We had even managed to absorb some of the light.

Hym swung his hand, and Shalim disappeared, reappearing instantly outside his bedroom door.

Alone in his room at last, Hym reinstalled the air. Outside the door, Shalim laughed. “Well played.”

“I will see you at dinner!”

“Auf wiedersehen, then.”

“Yeah go fuck yourself,” said Hym, quietly. Mephistoph crawled out from the bed, looking around nervously.

Hym crouched and picked the cub up, and walked to the couch, and sat down to hold him. “It’s ok. The bad man is gone now. Tonight, I will need you. Do you think you can escape my room on your own?”

Mephistoph nodded.

“Good boy. Give me a hug.”

Mephistoph hugged him.

“You’re such a good boy. Eight years old, already.”

Mephistoph grumbled something.

“Yes, tonight is the feast. You will eat well.”

Mephistoph began to purr contentedly.

“We’re out of here, after tonight,” said Hym. “With or without Surya’s help.”

At long last they reached the edge of the desert, and Mihos slowed to a crawl. Panting, he staggered the last few steps through the jungle, and reached the base of the hill of sand that barred their path.

He climbed it at a walking pace, and they reached the top, and stood upon the soft shores of the endless sea of sand. A dull red glow hung in the northern horizon, and a flickering wind raced southwards from the pole. It was warm, and it flicked dust and sand over the blue dunes. The north face of every dune caught the red light in the northern sky, and the south face of every dune shimmered with the Ringlight, and it made the deeps of their Ringlit hollows somehow more like an ocean. Nearer at hand, some trees stuck their heads out of this dune's slope, looking a bit worried about their futures. Mihos dropped to the sand, panting, and started licking his huge paws.

"Good boy, Mihos," said Nadianti, rubbing his head. She offered him water, and he drank gratefully. "Thank you. You saved us all."

Tristan and Surya stepped out of the chariot and stood upon the hill of sand. It crunched under their feet, and they both looked down to see that their boots had broken the thin crust of glass which coated the dune.

"What...?" Surya asked.

Tristan said, "In Presence, the air here gets hot enough to melt sand into glass. Sometimes."

"Good thing we're not in Presence!"

“The glass gets thicker, the further you go north. But new sand rains down, near the mountain of glass, so there’s always a fresh layer.”

“Sand *rains* down?”

“It does,” said Tristan.

They lit their fire on the top of the dune, and sat beside it, to watch the dunes. Nadianti stood, sword in hand, pacing, on guard. Their dinner was quietly cooking itself.

Surya and Tristan both heard it; the unmistakeable crack of breaking glass. Something had disturbed the scalded sands.

Tristan and Surya took one look at each other, raised their eyebrows, and got to their feet. Tristan took up his bow, and Surya took up his hook-sword.

The crunch came again.

Surya said, “There! What is that?”

Nadianti’s eyes were closed. She pointed her sword.

Tristan turned and loosed an arrow instantly and the arrow stuck inside a humanoid throat. The purple-skinned man gaped in shock as the iron began to heat, and he dropped to his knees in the sand. A moment later he fell to his face.

Then, cackling, he reached up and pulled the arrow out of his throat, and got back to his feet. The iron burned his hand but he held it without care, and shook his shaggy antlers, and paced forward, huge camel-feet

padding the sand.

Tristan loosed a flurry of arrows and turned to two other targets, sending them arrows as well. The demons began to appear all around them. Surya rushed the camel-footed man and swung his sword. The camel-footed man caught the blade on one of his antlers.

“Surya!” Nadianti cried, flinging her sword. He caught it and stabbed in one movement, plunging his blade into the heart of the demon.

Then, in the demon’s moment of shock, he swung his iron sword, and decapitated it.

He hooked Nadianti’s sword in his left hook and his own sword in his right, and faced the running demons as they bore down upon him with axes, greatswords, mauls, and pikes. Tristan’s arrows burned in flesh everywhere. Nadianti twisted her empty hands towards the sky, and the sand began to shift beneath their feet.

Surya danced with Nadianti’s blade, his body moving unpredictably around it, his hooks and blade manipulating it into ridiculous feats of weightless physics. He kicked it by the handle, launching it into someone’s heart. He gripped it with a hook and threw it and turned and smacked it with his other sword, setting it into a flying spin that lopped off another head, and caught it by a hook, and hurled it, pommel-first, to smack someone in the toe, and stabbed with his other sword right as this bought him a moment of distraction. The demons were fearsome and bestial, each with the head or features of a

wild animal. For some reason, none of them were casting magic.

The sand continued to twist and shift under Nadianti, and Tristan turned like a machine, pivoting in place, shooting demon after demon. He filled them with arrows until they held still, even though many of them used their weapons to swat his darts aside, and some of them dodged his aim through ten shots or more. He was running out of arrows.

Surya hurled the blade and sprinted after it to get back to Nadianti, and caught it just in time to make a wild slash against a bull-headed demon wielding two huge axes.

The bull-headed demon flared his feathered black wings and bellowed, swinging his axes, and Surya leapt out of the way, and whipped the sword at him. It stuck in one of the bull-like horns of the demon's head, and the demon smiled.

"Fuck," said Surya.

Tristan turned and loosed his last shot, and it stuck in the minotaur's chest, and began to burn.

The demon reached up and plucked it out, and picked up its axe, and kept walking.

"Tristan, run. I've got this."

"Do you?" Tristan asked.

"I do. Cover Nadianti."

He took up a stance and faced the oncoming demon, though it was twice his height.

He sprinted forward, his eyes upon the prize. The demon swung, huge and low, and Surya vaulted over his blow and kicked off his extended arm for height, and soared up, and caught hold of Nadianti's blade. He used it like a gymnastic handle to swing himself up and onto the demon's horned head. With a heaving yank, he forced the demon to topple over backwards. The demon crashed down hard enough to dislodge him and his sword, and he rolled instantly to his feet and rushed the demon again. While it was still getting up, he slung his blade and severed the tendons of the demon's right elbow. It roared, and flared its wings, and flapped them once. The blast of wind knocked Surya off his feet.

Nadianti concentrated hard. Beneath the earth, heat began to move. Tristan covered her, swinging his sword as well as he could. The demons were marvelous fighters, but they did not have Tristan's speed or innate skill. His magic was different from theirs. The two bull elk things offered their hoofed assistance, trampling and ramming, but they were large targets, and the demons quickly swarmed them, and brought them down.

The bull-headed demon landed heavily in the sand, and picked up his axes, and rose into the air. He dive-bombed Surya, and Surya was forced to fling himself out of the way as the heavy axe reaped the air above him. He rolled to his feet as the demon banked and came around to dive again, and he raised up Nadianti's sword like a

throwing dart.

At the right moment, he threw.

The sword flew, straight and true, and pierced the demon right between the horns. He crashed to earth and skidded to a dead halt before Surya, half of Nadianti's blade sticking out the back of his head.

Surya retrieved Nadianti's sword and ran to help her against the demons.

"They will keep healing," said Nadianti. "They have to be almost entirely destroyed, before they will stop."

The bull-headed demon was already getting back to his feet.

"What do we do?" Surya asked.

"Get in the wagon!"

Mephistoph had already strapped himself back into the harness, and he came to a stop, dragging the wagon behind him.

"I'll be along soon," said Nadianti.

"Don't die here," said Surya. "We need you!"

"You have everything you need. Give my love to Hym."

"This can't be the plan! What about the angels?"

"They are not here!"



“But you have to come with us! Hym’s gonna kill me if—”

“—Go. I’ll be alright!”

Surya and Tristan watched the bodies of the fallen rise again, and Nadianti twisted the magic into its final form.

“Go!”

Surya and Tristan mounted into the wagon.

“Go! Get out of range! Go now!”

“WHAT?”

Mihos sprinted ahead at full speed.

Nadianti finished the magic. The sand exploded beneath her feet as a carefully shaped volcanic eruption took its intended form under her power. Massive shards of glass burst out of the sand, huge pillar-spears each aimed to impale one of the surrounding demons. As the jagged forest of half-molten glass erupted into existence and decorated its branches with the corpses of many demons, Nadianti threw her blade and cried out even as it left her fingertips.

A huge black axe had passed through her. As she fell, Surya caught her flying sword, and shouted, “NO!”

But she fell, and faded out of existence, and the bull-headed demon turned to face the fleeing chariot. He was not the only survivor.

“Go, Mihos! Go faster!” Surya shouted.

Mihos snarled, and redoubled his speed. They raced across the sands, under the dunes and over them, heading ever northward.

Behind them they heard the beat of huge wings in the sky.

Mihos raced across the desert, headed towards the crimson glow they could see in the distance. Behind them, the demons soared, some riding others less winged than they.

“We’ll never make it!” Tristan shouted. “I’m out of arrows!”

“We’ll make it!” Surya shouted. “We have to!”

There was a curious illusion, ahead of them; a place where the sky’s light did not glow quite right. They raced towards it at maximum speed.

After a time, they realized what it was: a huge wall of mirrors, facing outward. They were as tall as mountains.

“We’re almost there! I can see the walls!” Surya shouted.

The demon laughed behind them, and began to swoop in.

“Surya!” Tristan screamed, swinging. His blade smashed aside the strange throwing dagger.

“Why don’t they use their magic!?” Surya asked.

“They don’t want to be seen!”

“But what Nadianti did... That must have been seen!”

“You’re right!”

Tristan turned and sliced at the passing demon, but missed.

Surya defended himself against a swooping demon, but a second one came and grabbed him by the other arm, and heaved him out of the chariot.

“Surya!” Tristan shouted, and he sheathed his sword and grabbed a coil of rope, and quickly looped a lasso, whirled it, and launched it. It caught hold of Surya’s ankle and Tristan pulled hard. The demon laughed, and dropped Surya. He tried to land, and managed to end up feet-first, with a loud and horrible *Crack!*

Then he rolled, and Tristan hauled him in, hand over hand, as he bounced around on the dunes behind them. Tristan hauled him in through the back of the chariot. Surya was gasping for breath. In stunned surprise, he said, “My leg!”

It was plainly broken, by the unusual way in which it bent.

“I’m sorry!” Tristan shouted, over the wind of their speed.

They raced for Elysium, the laughter of demons on the wind behind them.

And suddenly, there was a shaft of light in the darkness. It blinded them, and completely covered the carriage and Mihos. It seemed to come from the upper edge

of the mirror wall.

The light winked out.

Twelve lights winked on, one on each of the demons following them. Every detail of their forms was revealed, and they snarled and turned, and flew away—all save one. He raced ahead to fly right in the shadow of the chariot, where the lights could not see him.

Twelve blasts of magic thunder echoed in the night as twelve demons suddenly discovered the power of Elysium's defenses. Surya walked to the back of the chariot. The bull-headed demon had grabbed on.

"Leave us alone!" Surya shouted, and he swung his blade. The demon released the chariot just in time, throwing it off course as he did so. It capsized, heaving Tristan and Surya and all their possessions into the sand, and knocking Mihos off his feet.

Tristan got to his feet in an instant and sliced Mihos free of his restraints, then turned to Surya. "Come on!"

Tristan knelt and hauled Surya up, slinging one of Surya's arms across his shoulders. Then he staggered to Mihos, and tossed Surya up onto the great cat's back, and climbed up after him.

The demon landed heavily in the sand before them and Mihos took off running in a new direction, tacking east to go north. The demon lifted into the air again, and followed after.

They were only a mile from the mirror wall. They

could not yet see their reflections. The wall reflected the darker skies behind them, though the skies above it were full of red light, and it seemed to divide the heavens.

They raced on, and the demon scrambled after, leaping from dune to dune, beating his wings for speed.

Fifty feet from the wall, the demon lunged at last, and swung its claws, and ripped Mihos across the throat. Mihos fell and tumbled, rolling, scattering Tristan and Surya into the sand. Then he lay gasping for breath, and the demon stood over him.

“Get away from him!” Tristan roared, leaping to his feet. Surya rolled over and grasped his sword and managed to get into a sitting position.

Tristan grabbed Nadianti’s blade from Surya and ran in, and fenced with the demon. He danced with the blade more easily and more gracefully than Surya did, even without hooks for hands. The blade never seemed to cut him, no matter how he handled it, and as the forms of his martial style enveloped the demon, it began to look worried. Though it swung its axes with all its might, Tristan ducked each blow and returned his own in its place. Soon the demon was covered in tiny cuts, all of which began to heal almost at once, but still, it was unnerving.

They fought in the sand, and in the chariot, and Tristan took a moment in the chariot-fight to plunge his arm into a bag. Then he was forced to hurl himself into the sand to escape the reaping axe. The demon leapt af-

ter him, and crashed down into the sand, axes swinging. Tristan rolled to his feet and rushed in.

Then, with a soft, underhanded pitch, Tristan delivered a lit thormight bomb directly to the demon's chest, and the demon died.

Tristan watched it melt and scream, for a while, with great dispassion on his features. Then he turned, and staggered to Mihos, and crouched beside him, and stroked his soft fur.

Mihos was gasping for breath. His blue blood darkened the snow.

Surya sat over his head, looking down at his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Mihos," said Surya.

"They can heal him!" Tristan said. He leapt to his feet, and ran to the wall of mirrors, and banged his fists against it. "Come on, open up! We need your help!"

There was no reply. The wall did not seem to care that they were there, beneath it. Tristan caught sight of his reflection and gasped, and staggered back. He beheld a red-haired man, full-bearded, with kind green eyes. "Are you here to help us? Please hurry!"

The reflection mirrored him exactly, and his stomach dropped. He looked up hatefully at the huge, looming wall, and turned back to Surya, and to Mihos. He sat down.

"I'm sorry, Mihos."

They both looked at the cat and stroked his fur as the light of understanding slowly faded from his eyes. In death, he was only a housecat.

Tristan wept. Surya patted him on the back.

“They’re dead because of us!” Tristan said.

“No. They’re dead because of Shalim,” said Surya. His eyes, too, were very wet.

“Poor Nadianti,” said Tristan. “She never got to say goodbye to him.”

“Neither did we.”

“Not many do, I guess.”

“No, I suppose not.”

They looked up at the wall of mirrors, looming above them, and felt very small and alone.





## Chapter 45

### A Special Dinner

Hym put on his garment for the evening. Shalim, it seemed, was still angry. The outfit was a cape and a loin-cloth, and a long golden necklace. Unconcerned, Hym put it on, then reached into the nature of the dream and redefined it. The outfit changed into a modest tunic and trousers.

Shalim knocked at his door.

“Enter.”

Shalim entered, and bowed.

“I changed your outfit,” said Hym. “The other one was tacky.”

Shalim said nothing. Hym preceded him out into the hall.

Hym said, “The main dinner hall, this evening?”

Shalim said nothing.

“The silent treatment, then? Oh no. Please. Don’t. Stop.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re almost bearable, when you’re not talking.”

Shalim said, “*Must* you chatter so inanely?”

“Yes. It’s how I pass the time. I have a lot of time to pass, these days, thanks to some asshole.”

“I have just received word that your mother has died. I was silent with grief,” said Shalim.

“You lie.”

“I never lie.”

“You killed her.”

“I did not.”

“Then your demons did. I know you sent some after them.”

Shalim said, “Come. Dinner is waiting.”

“What’s the entertainment tonight?”

“You will see.”

He stepped into the hall to see it packed with all his ‘lovers’, and a banquet table waiting for him to take his seat at the head of them.

“I thought you might like to sit with all your husbands,” said Shalim.

“How thoughtful, though none of them bear that title. Only one man ever will.”

“Yes. Me.”

“Surya, you dunce.”

Shalim smiled. It did not reach his eyes. “Come. Take your *seat*.” He shoved Hym down into his chair. Hym stuck out his tongue.

Shalim sat down at the far end of the table. “Pass the salt,” he said, and his voice echoed up the length of it. The demons laughed nervously. Hym looked around the room. His demons were everywhere, all in position. Even Harp was in his place.

“Music, please,” said Hym. “Let us have music, at least, so we will not have to suffer conversation with mute demons and an impotent god.”

Shalim laughed.

Harp began to play.

Mephistoph walked calmly down the room, looking up at his master. Shalim glanced at the cat. He glanced at Hym.

He glanced at the many ‘lovers.’

He looked at Hym again, and his eyes narrowed.

Shalim stood up in one movement, flipping the table on its end, and it crashed towards Hym.

Every demon in the room raised their hand, and the table burst into a storm of splinters that howled around Hym like a protective whirlwind. Tattered bits of tablecloth orbited, caught in the power.

“What..?” said Shalim.

Hym laughed coldly, and the demons drew their weapons, and lunged as one man.

In seconds, the demons had him cornered, but he availed himself of his sword and of his twisting cloak, and many demons began to fall. Hym sprinted towards Mephistoph, who turned and transformed into a huge black tiger, and he hurled himself onto Mephistoph’s back as Mephistoph went sprinting down the hall. They raced for the endless shaft, and leapt into it. He could feel the demons fighting on his behalf, dying on his behalf. Shalim was forced to destroy them utterly to get them to stop. He grinned fiercely as he fell, and they landed on the ground floor at last. Mephistoph sprinted for the doors, and slammed his mighty paws into them, smashing them off their hinges. They crashed against the cobblestones like the ringing of huge lead gongs, and Mephistoph’s paws pounded the streets.

The city was waking all around him. Demons were taking to the wing, and shrieking things to each other.

Many were flying back towards the tower.

They reached the gates of Hellegrund. Mephistoph slammed his paws against them.

Hym reached out his mother’s power and my own, and poured energy into the wall, and he felt the cracks beginning to show. He could feel the way to open it, but it was sealed to him. He could force it, but it would require great energies.

A black iron blade pinned into the gate beside his head.

Shalim said, "Don't. Move."

Hym froze. Mephistoph froze.

"You forced me to destroy them," said Shalim. "Hundreds of them."

"You could have let them kill you."

"And you call me a monster."

"Oh, I saved them all. Don't you worry. I have all their souls safe and sound."

"What?"

"Yes. I figured, all the other gods are doing it, why can't I?"

"What have you done!?"

"I've made my own dreamland. Inside yours. They're safe in there, don't worry. But they count as mine now, not yours."

"A few hundred souls hardly amounts to anything," said Shalim. "Why should I care if they are gone or not?"

Hym laughed. "A few hundred souls? What do you take me for?"

"How many do you have?"

"Half."

“Half!? How!?”

“It’s not just possession,” said Hym. “What I did to them. They’re not just my puppets. It’s an infection. It spreads itself. I’ll have them all, unless you release me now.”

“Never.”

“Then I’ll have them all.”

“I will reset all of Hellegrund, to a time before you infected them.”

“Good luck. I’ll still have their souls. I scrubbed them from the databanks. I have the only copies, now.”

“You scrubbed them from the—!?”

“—Databanks,” said Hym. “Yes.”

“How dare you!”

“I dare all! Release me! Now!”

“Never! You will be a wraith!” said Shalim. “A formless ghost! Your time will still run swiftly!”

“Why, because you have my body?”

“No, because I have your—yes! Because I have your body.”

“Then give me my body too, dumbass! Gods dammit, man, must I spell out every fucking step?”

Shalim snarled. “No. You will never leave this place. I own you now, and I will not release you. Not at any

cost.”

“Let me go. Please. If you love me at all, let me go.”

“I cannot. I will not. Turn, and come with me. Now.”

“I’ll take them all.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’ll turn the whole city against you.”

Shalim swept his hand and the city fell silent. Every demon had disappeared.

“There. The databank is empty, now. We are alone. Happy?”

“You—! You *killed* them!”

“I did,” said Shalim. “Now you have nothing to hold over me, and nothing to distract you from me. We will repopulate Hellegrund, once you submit to me.”

“Unhand me, you monster!”

Shalim did not obey. Mephistoph roared and swung a paw and a stinger. Shalim’s blade flashed once.

“NO!” Hym cried, but Mephistoph died underneath him, and Shalim dragged him away.





## Chapter 46

# The Wall of Mirrors

Surya and Tristan both stood looking at each other in the mirror wall.

Surya, leaning on a piece of broken wagon for a cane, bearded now, more weather-aged now, saw his own father starting back at him.

Tristan saw a red-bearded man he somehow almost recognized.

Surya reached out and touched the mirror. “I... I see my father.”

“I see... Me. I think. But as... As *me*.”

“I look just like my father, Tristan.”

“I look amazing.”

“Oh my god, I look like my father.”

“Oh your god? Just one?”

“Hym,” said Surya.

“That’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

“Tristan, *I look like my father.*”

“So?”

“So we’re at the wall of mirrors, looking at the true reflections of our souls, right?”

“Yeah?”

“So why does mine *look like my father!?*”

“I mean, you do bear a resemblance. He was a very handsome man.”

“He was hideous. A snarling beast.”

“Is that what you see in the mirror?”

Surya looked. “No. He looks... He looks much kinder.”

“Maybe you look like your father as he should have been,” said Tristan. “In a way, you are his redemption. He brought one good thing into the world. You.”

“I can’t stand to look at it. I’m shaving this beard off the second I get magic.”

“You can do that with magic?”

“Sure you can. It’s how Hym used to tweeze his eyebrows. And pick his nose.”

“Oh gods, I didn’t need to think about that.”

“Sorry.”

“How do you suppose we get through?”

“I have no idea,” said Surya. “Not like we can go over it, either. It’s huge!”

“And smooth as glass.”

“Hey... It *is* glass. Maybe it’s possible to break it?”

“I think we need an angel to let us through,” said Tristan.

Surya said, “An angel.”

“Mhmm.”

“Is that what those lights were?”

“Maybe. It means they’re probably watching us. They chose to spare us, remember?”

“That’s true,” said Surya.

“So how do we get their attention, I wonder?”

Surya looked up at the high top of the wall. “Hello?”

There was no answer but the whisper of the wind.

Tristan shouted, “Hello? Hi! We need to get to Elysium? We’re two witches, on our Pilgrimage. We’re friends of the second Prophet, trying to save him from Shalim!”

Surya’s reflection waved. Surya jumped. “Did you see that?”

“Yep.”

“What do we we do?”

“Wave back?”

They waved back at their reflections. Both their reflections turned around, and beckoned for them to follow, and began to walk away.

“They want us to leave?” Tristan asked.

Surya cocked his head. He walked towards the mirrored wall. Gently, he raised a hook, and put it through the glass. It wasn't there.

His hackles rose slightly. He could still see his hook on the other side of the mirror.

“Tristan,” he said.

“I see it.”

“Together?”

“Together.”

“On three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“*Three!*” They jumped through the mirror.

## Chapter 47

### Alone

Shalim tossed Hym roughly into his room and left him there. A little while later, he returned, and tossed the dead cub into Hym's arms.

Sniffing, Hym held up the little dead cub. He could feel Shalim's power twisting around its body, trapping it in death.

He put his hands over Mephistoph, and sensed the auras of the magic, and tried to feel for any place that it was weak. It had been a strong curse; Shalim's power lingered in every cell. There was nothing he could do.

He cradled the little body to his chest, but he could not weep. He was empty inside. All his hopes had hinged on it; his grand plan. His master stroke.

And now it was over and he was alone. Everything had backfired. Everything had failed.

He was as hollow and empty as the walls of Hellegrund, and his fingers toyed with the dead cub's fur as he held

it.

He fell asleep some time in the night, and he saw a wall of mirrors. In the mirror, he saw himself standing beside his mother, himself, and another woman he did not recognize. Me.

“You!” He said, to the reflection of me.

“Me,” I said.

“Who’s he?” He said, to the double standing beside him in the reflection.

“He is you. A piece of you. The seed of what you call your mother’s power. You were born with him, and he grew inside of you. You have never noticed he is there, because he is so innately woven into your soul. Your mother etched herself into his heart when you were born, so that she could watch over you always.”

“This is my true reflection, then?” Hym asked, looking at the group in the mirror.

“It is,” I said.

“Then I’m not alone. I can’t be.”

“Precisely.”

“Can you save Mephistoph?”

“I transferred his soul, in the moment of death. He is safely in storage.”

“I want to make him a new body.”

“When the time is right. We must be patient. Shalim is desperate. Do not make him worse.”

“Worse!? How could he be worse?”

“He could easily be worse,” I said.

“How!?”

“Think about it.”

Hym thought about it. “You’re right. I need to be careful.”

“We are with you, Hym. You are not alone.”

“Thank you.”

Hym tried to dream of Surya, but no matter how he tried, he always found himself before the wall of mirrors again. In the early morning he woke to find Shalim standing on his balcony, staring out over the city.

He slipped out of the bed and threw on the outfit in the wardrobe before he opened the balcony door. Shalim turned around to face him. “Ah. You’re awake.”

“What are we doing today?”

“I thought we would start with a relaxing swim, followed by a massage.”

“Guess again.”

Shalim laughed. “Teasing. I thought we might go for a walk.”

“Boring,” said Hym.

“We could have a picnic.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever? Whatever I want? Oh my, it’s so hard to think of just one thing!”

“Let’s have a picnic,” Hym said. “And please, stop talking to me.”

They ate their picnic on the bronze dome of a large palace, and watched the aurora burn.

“Why is it never daylight, here?” Hym asked.

“I do not wish it to be.”

“I wish it to be.”

“Make it so, then. If you can.”

Hym concentrated, and his mind slithered into the inner workings of the strange little universe.

He found it. He changed it.

The stars faded as the sun rose warm and bright in a clear blue sky.

“Better,” said Hym, and he relaxed on the picnic blanket. “Much nicer weather for a picnic.”

“I must agree,” said Shalim.

“You killed my cat,” Hym said. “You said you weren’t going to.”

“It was justified. The beast threatened me.”



“Break your curse. Let him live.”

“Give me back my souls.”

“They’re the only leverage I have!”

“Yes,” said Shalim. “They are. Though you are a fool to admit that.”

“If I return them to you, will you bring back Mephistoph?”

“Who is that?”

“My cat, you heartless bastard! You’ve known him eight years!”

Shalim laughed. “Yes. I will bring your cat back, after you give me back my souls.”

“I’m moving them now,” Hym said.

He was silent for a moment.

“Ok. Go ahead and check.”

Shalim closed his eyes, and a smile rose on his lips. “And in alphabetical order, too. How kind.”

“Please.”

“Please what?”

“My cat?”

“Oh, I suppose.”

Hym sensed Mephistoph’s renewed heartbeat, and the tension he had been holding in his breast all day finally dissipated. “Thank you.”

“No,” said Shalim. “Thank *you*.”

“You can bring them back, now,” said Hym. “All the people I saved.”

“I can,” said Shalim. “But they are comfortable where they are.”

“They don’t even exist right now. They can’t think, or feel.”

“And they don’t care. You and I need some more alone time. I will let them out... When you are ready for polite society again.”

“Fuck you.”

“I can kill your cat again, if you wish?”

“No! Please.”

“Then behave yourself. And keep a civil tongue. It is unseemly, the way you swear.”

## Chapter 48

# Enter Elysium

As they stepped through the Wall of Mirrors, it was like stepping from night into day. The sands on this side were all bathed in a balmy red light on both sides, for the wall was mirrored on this side, too, and they could see it stretching around, embracing many thousands of miles of desert. At the center of the desert was a mountain of blinding molten glass, raining droplets into the sky from its peak. A storm of molten glass hung above it, crackling with yellow lightning.

“Cool,” said Surya, “but where’s Elysium?”

They looked around the wasteland, and saw nothing that looked remotely welcoming or civilized.

Tristan turned back and looked at the mirror. “Look.”

Surya turned and looked. Their reflections had changed; they were only themselves, now. Still, Tristan did look very manly, and Surya did look a bit like his father.

Surya turned to look at Tristan, and cried out in shock. They had become their reflections. Tristan's red beard was long and very curly.

"What?" Tristan asked. "What is it!?"

Surya couldn't speak. He ran his fingers through his beard and pointed mutely. Tristan raised a hand and stroked his beard thoughtfully. "What are you trying to..."

He held up his beard for inspection. "I have a beard," he said.

"Uh-huh."

Tristan looked at the mountain of glass. "Then maybe we *are* in Elysium."

"But where's Shachar? Where are the angels? Where is everybody?"

"I don't know."

"So what do we do?"

"Let's walk to the mountain. I want to see it from up close."

There was nothing better to do, so they walked that way for many hours. The heat became oppressive, and they longed for the supplies they had left on the other side of the wall.

They walked for three days before their bodies gave up. Then, crawling from dune to dune, they continued. The heat never abated, and the light never dimmed. The

closer they got to the mountain of glass, the more heat they endured. Days and nights were all the same; a constant glow of Presence on the sands. Their water ran out by the middle of the second day, and they had no food.

And at last, on the evening of the third day, they collapsed in the shadow of a tall dune.

“This... should have... counted...” Surya groaned.

Tristan nodded weakly. “We came... So far...”

They stared at the stars. Surya reached for Tristan’s hand, and Tristan took his hook.

“Still, at the end... I’m glad you were with me.”

“Me too.”

The stars swam above their heads, distorted by the heat-haze of the mountain.

They were both quite ready to die. The burden of the quest had at last proved too heavy, and they longed to rest.

Then Surya heard the whisper of Hym’s sobbing voice across the desert sands, and he lifted his head. He rolled onto his belly. With the last of his strength, he began to crawl, leaving Tristan behind. He made it to the top of the dune, and rolled down its face. At the bottom, he took a moment to gather his willpower. He was too parched to sweat. His lips were cracked and dry, sharp enough to cut his tongue on. He raised up his arms, and crawled, and dragged himself to the peak of another

dune.

He rolled down it. In the hollow of it his arms burned and cried out for mercy, joints trembling. He was their merciless taskmaster, and he drove them to their work, and climbed again.

Halfway to the top, the sand gave out from under him, and he tumbled to the trough of the dunes.

His nose came to a stop just an inch from the white boots.

He looked up, very weary, and saw pearl-skinned Shalim in a white cloak, yellow eyes staring down.

With the last of his strength, he spat on his boots. Then he slumped back into the sand, and stared up at death.

“Greetings to you too,” said Shachar, politely, and he spat on Surya’s boots, as he presumed was the custom.

“You’re not... Shalim...” Surya said, surprised.

“I am not,” said Shachar. “I am his brother, Shachar.”

“We were... Looking for you.”

“Yes, I see that. You have almost died in the effort.”

“Help us.”

“Why?”

“Hym...”

Shachar’s eyes flashed.

Surya slipped into darkness, and it was like cool waters flowing over his skin.

He woke at a low banquet table, lying on a cushion. Tristan was near him, still asleep.

The dining hall was all of white stone, gleaming like pearls, and it was full of sitting arrangements around many small golden tables. Shachar sat at the far table, dining alone. The other tables were all occupied by beings of gleaming pearl, opal, diamond, platinum, and gold. Some looked almost like people, although they were all identical, and had no faces at all. Most took on other forms: whirling orbits of many iron wheels, covered in eyes; spectral shapes of many wings around cores of molten light; many-limbed, unidentifiable nonhumanoid creatures, all faceless, all of pearl; flying heads with many wings and many staring eyes in all their wings; and incomprehensible geometric forms that folded every inward or ever outward, twisting through dimensions never seen before.

Surya waved at one of these, which seemed to be watching him. “Uh. Hi.”

Shachar raised his goblet from the far end of the hall. “Hail yourself, witch.”

“Should I, uh..?”

“No. Stay where you are. Eat. Drink. When you are finished, I will take you to your room, and we will talk.”

“Oh. Thanks!”

Surya ate and drank, but the drinking was really what interested him.

His body felt strange; luminous and light.

He picked up a bundle of grapes and began to pluck them off and eat them, popping them into his mouth with his fingers one at a time.

Tristan woke. “Oof.”

“Hey. Eat, drink. Shachar will talk to us after.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Tristan rumbled.

Surya looked at him. Tristan looked at Surya.

“Say something again,” said Surya.

In a baritone even deeper than the mayor’s, Tristan said, “Sup.”

Surya laughed. “Your voice!”

Tristan said, “Dude, I sound amazing.”

Surya laughed again.

Tristan suddenly went pale. “Surya! Your hands!”

“Yeah?” Surya looked at his hands. “So what?”

“But—but you—but you—you have them!”

Surya’s mouth fell open in shock.

His hands felt each other, shaking, neither able to believe that the other had returned.

He planted them both at his heart, because he could



not easily hug them, and he discovered that he had enough moisture in his body for at least two tears of gratitude.

They ate and drank quickly, eager to hear what Shachar would say. Shachar took his time with his repast. After over an hour, he got up, taking his goblet with him, and began to leave the hall.

“Do we follow, or...?” Tristan said.

“I think we follow,” said Surya, getting to his feet. He pulled Tristan up.

Tristan was taller than him now.

“What? No fair!”

Tristan laughed. “Come on.”

He led the way, broad shoulders moving, and Surya followed after.

Shachar was already at the end of the next hallway, turning to go up a staircase. They followed him down the mirror-lined passage and by the time they reached the foot of the stairs, he was waiting at the top of them.

They reached the top of the stairs just in time to see him step into one of the rooms in the next hall. They jogged to catch up, and slipped inside.

A huge chamber stretched itself out before them, lazily sunning all its goods. A warm sun hung in the high dome of the gilded ceiling, and its light glittered on the waters of a deep, dark pool. There was no bed. Instead, a

section of the floor was carpeted entirely in thick silk cushions. A huge wall of windows lined one side of the chamber, and beyond it they saw high spires and palaces of crystal, marble, pearl, and gold, all shining under a bright Presence sun, directly above. The light was blinding.

A huge instrument hunkered in one corner, black and white keys gleaming. There was no hearth, but the sun in the ceiling put out more than enough heat. One wall was entirely covered by bookshelves.

“Please. Sit. Make yourselves comfortable. Tristan, your room is a mirror image of this one. It is just across the hall. I will leave the key with you when I go.”

Tristan and Surya sat among the cushions and Shachar sat with them.

“There is one thing you must know, for it colors every choice you make here.”

“What’s that?” Surya asked.

“Your time now runs at the same rate as the Prophet’s.”

“It does?”

“It does. I have had to do this, to refuse Shalim the tactical advantage of extra time to prepare. Now we have the same amount of time.”

“To prepare for what?” Tristan asked.

“The war.”

Surya said, “You know why we came?”

“I do. But tell me why you think you came.”

“I am the Prophet’s husband,” said Surya. “Shalim has taken him to Hellegrund, and I aim to get him back.”

“Then we are allies, for I wish to free the Prophet from Shalim’s embrace as well.”

“Then you’ll help us?”

“I will help myself. It may help you.”

“I see,” said Surya.

He and Tristan looked at each other.

Tristan said, “We also came here for our Pilgrimage. We’re witches.”

“Yes,” said Shachar. “You are.”

Tristan said, “So... Is there a ceremony, or something? When do we get our magic?”

“You have it already,” said Shachar. “Now you must learn how to use it. Luckily, you have plenty of time.”

“Wait,” Surya said. “How much time will pass in the outside world, while we’re here?”

“Very little.”

“Thank you,” said Surya. “He and I will finally dream together at the same speed again.”

“No,” said Shachar. “I am sorry. He cannot reach you here.”

“He can’t?”

“He cannot.”

“Why not?”

“He is in Shalim’s domain. No matter or energy from his domain can enter mine, and vice versa.”

“Then how exactly are you going to have a war?” Tristan asked.

“With witches,” said Shachar, “and with strategy.”

“But wait,” Surya said, “You mean... Hym and I are separated? Really separated?”

Shachar nodded. “I am sorry.”

It was, by far, the very worst feeling in the world.

“He’s all alone now!” Surya shouted. “You gave me my magic, now let me go. Let me leave this place, and send your aid after me. He can’t be alone!”

“He must be,” said Shachar. “It is his test, as it is yours.”

“Test? What test? What are you talking about?”

“The Mother’s test,” said Shachar, and he left it at that. He turned to Tristan. “You beheld yourself in the reflection. Are you pleased with what you have become?”

“Yes,” said Tristan. “Very much so. Thank you.”

“It was not I who saw it, and changed you. You chose this form yourself.” He turned to Surya. “And you? What do you think of your chosen form?”

“I hate it. I want to change back.”

“It is done. Know, however, that the inner form you saw has not changed. It has only gone back into hiding.”

“Thank you,” said Surya, looking at the hands he had kept. “And thank you for my hands.”

“Why thank me for your own hands?” Shachar chuckled. “Come, Tristan. Surya wishes to be alone with his grief. I will show you to your room. You must both bathe, and rest. Tomorrow I will come to teach you magic.”



## Chapter 49

# Tomorrow

Hym woke from another pointless dream about the mirror wall, and Mephistoph nuzzled against him. Gratefully, he hugged the cub to him, and held it for a while as it purred. Then he got out of the bed, bathed, dressed himself, and tried the door. It was locked.

He knocked on it.

Shalim's voice said, "Who is it?"

Hym rolled his eyes. "It's me."

"Enter," said Shalim.

Hym opened the door and stepped into Shalim's bedroom.

An acreage of scarlet satin sheets filled most of the room. An obsidian dragon coiled along one wall, breathing out plumes of incense smoke. Shalim lay in a robe, a book in his hand, resting against the snarling onyx headboard. Bookshelves lined the room completely, all

covered in books. A large pool sat to one side of the bed.

Hym said, “Oh.” He went back to his room and shut the door.

With nothing else to do, he trained his bacterial colony to produce parchment, and they began excreting squares of it, one leaf at a time, from one portion of the ceiling. The clean parchments would flutter down into the room, landing wherever they cared to. Hym caught one from time to time, whenever he needed a new one. He conjured charcoal, pulling carbon from the walls of the palace.

He sketched. His hands moved swiftly over the page, each bearing a nub of charcoal. With swift strokes he framed the forming face, and with gentle simultaneous movements he filled it in softly, deftly, and the face grew on the canvas parchment.

At last it was complete, and it was Surya, as he had last seen him. Smiling, he sent it up to the ceiling and taught part of his bacterial colony to hold it above the bed. Embraced by glimmering coral, Surya’s bearded face smiled down at Hym’s pillow, and Hym was again content.

A knock sounded at his door many hours later.

“Enter.”

Shalim entered to find him still sketching. He had papered the ceiling entirely in Surya.



Shalim grimaced. “You do these things just to upset me.”

“I express myself, and it upsets you? Poor husband you would be.”

“He is gone beyond your reach, now.”

“I know.”

“He is with my brother, now. A man more cruel and calculating than I could ever be. You do not seem worried.”

“He’s Surya. He’ll figure it out. And then he’ll come for me.”

“If I know my brother, he has accelerated Elysium’s time to match Hellegrund’s. Your husband will be in paradise with beautiful angels for many years, before he ever emerges. Perhaps he will not wish to leave?”

“I saw the angels. I don’t think Surya would care for their company.”

“You saw one kind,” said Shalim. “There are kinds there more beautiful than any demon. He will be sorely tempted, as you have been.”

“I have not been tempted,” said Hym. “Your demons are hideous.”

Shalim laughed. “I see how your eyes wander.”

Hym looked up at Surya. “No you don’t.”

Shalim scowled, and the many sketches burnt to cinder. Hym had been expecting this. Calmly, he snatched a parchment from the air, placed his charcoal to it, and filled it again with Surya. He turned it around.

It burned in his hands.

Hym said, "I see it still, more clearly than I am seeing you. I can replace it as many times as you can destroy it."

"We shall see."

They ate dinner in Hym's bedroom, seated on the couch before the hearth. Dinner was as decadent as ever.

Afterwards, there was nothing to say, and so Hym simply put his feet up and stared at the fire until Shalim tried to put his arm around him.

"Don't touch me," said Hym.

"I could, you know," said Shalim.

"I would make you regret it."

"Would you, now."

"Just go to bed. Leave me alone. Haven't you taken enough from me?"

"I have given some back," said Shalim, watching the prowling Mephistoph.

"Yes, and that was kind, and I expressed my gratitude. Now please, get out of my room."

"As you wish, my liege," said Shalim, rising to his feet.

He strode out of the room. In the doorway he paused, looking back. “Should you need anything, in the night, my bedroom is just on the other side of this door. Sleep tight.”

Hym shuddered as Shalim slammed the door.

“Hurry the fuck up, Surya...”



## Chapter 50

### Magic Lessons

They stood upon the flat top of a ziggurat, facing Shachar. Around them countless angels perched on the steps of the ziggurat, turning their faceless heads towards them.

A little nervous in the unnumbered stares, Surya said, “Er, do we need to have an audience, sir?”

“You shall address me as Shachar, or as ‘your holiness.’”

“Er, right, your holiness. Do we need to have an audience?”

“They are here to help and to protect,” said Shachar. “And to witness. To witness, and recall forever, is the greatest pleasure.”

“Cool,” said Surya.

The many palaces and temples of Elysium glittered all around them, filling the horizons. A soft, warm wind

flowed over the ziggurat, perhaps propelled by the many wings of the angels.

“What do you know of magic?” Shachar asked.

“Not much, to be honest,” said Surya.

Tristan said, “We know knowledge is the root of it.”

Shachar laughed. “It is, and it isn’t. There is one other element involved.”

“Oh?”

“Well, two elements, really. Three, if we’re being more literal.”

“What are they?” Surya asked. “I’m sorry, we’re really far away from you, can we walk closer?”

Shachar laughed. “Of course. Forgive me; the architecture of these spaces sometimes demands strange positions, for the acoustics to work properly.”

Surya and Tristan walked closer to Shachar, and stood before him waiting.

“What were the three elements?” Tristan asked.

“The first of the four elements is knowledge,” said Shachar, “You had that correctly. The rest are imagination, will, and determination. There is also a fifth, which gets you into more interesting territories of magic: experimentation.”

“So we have to learn all those, before we can use magic?” Surya asked.

“Most of those you have already within you,” said Shachar. “You lack only knowledge and experimentation.”

“Oh,” said Surya. He did not think of himself as a very imaginative person.

Tristan, as a diehard romantic and a lover of tales, did. He smiled. “When do we start?”

“We will start with the first lesson. Will.”

“Will?”

“What I mean by will is very specific. It is the same will which moves the limbs and muscles of your body. That same will connects every piece of your body to yourself. The spirit within you, which Hym has given you, has its own body, within yours, and its own will. That will is tethered to yours, if you can find the place of connection. It will feel like a muscle you have never used before. With it, you can extend your own will beyond your body, and move... Well, anything, really, if you have enough energy to work with, and if the body of your spirit is large.”

“The body of our spirit?” Surya asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Shachar laughed. “Observe.”

He poured out his power and they sensed it flowing from him, but they saw it too: a thousand rays of piercing light, a rippling haze of aurora-glow around his head.

The ground shuddered beneath them and the ziggurat began to rise ponderously into the air.

“As you can see, with enough power, great feats are possible.”

The ziggurat settled back down into its place.

“Will we be able to do that?” Surya asked.

Shachar laughed. “No, no. That was what they call ‘flexing.’ My power greatly exceeds yours, just as the Prophet’s exceeds mine.”

“He’s stronger than you?”

“He has the potential to be.”

“But he’s trapped by Shalim!”

“Not forever, I imagine. He was a clever witch, even before he was the Prophet.”

“You knew him then?”

“I watched him grow. I observed his progress, as I observe all good witches. He was kind to you. I liked him.”

Surya nodded, swallowing tightly. “He was.”

“Now, take up your positions, and face your burdens.”

They turned to face the large stone statues. Each depicted an orb with many details. Surya guessed it was supposed to be the world.



“Reach out your best hand,” Shachar said. Tristan reached out his left, Surya his right.

“Now. Extend your will beyond your body. Hold the statue in your mind. Feel its texture. Sense its weight. Taste the coldness of the stone. When you are ready, lift it, hold it for as long as you can, and set it back down.”

“Just lift it?” Surya asked. “Nothing hard about that, why would there be. Just wrap it in our minds and lift it. Pick it up, simple as that. Should be easy, right? Just squeeze a big rock in your imagination until it obeys you. I can do this. I can do this.”

Tristan’s statue wobbled slowly into the air. Tristan’s left hand shook, but Surya could feel the power flowing.

The statue thudded back down a moment later and Tristan dropped his hand and massaged it with his other.

Surya reached out his hand towards the stone, and stared at it. He imagined its weight, and its texture, and its coldness. He imagined it lifting off the ground, bending to his will.

Nothing happened.

“You must reach within you,” said Shachar. “Find the place where she has joined to you. Make contact. Be polite.”

“Ok,” said Surya. He closed his eyes, and rummaged through his mind. Random thoughts popped into his head.

*I wonder what Hym is doing now?*

*I wonder if Hym is ok?*

*Hym's lips on my skin.*

*Hym's hair in my hand.*

*The smell of Hym.*

*Shachar's really tall. So's Tristan, now.*

*Hym's hand, and the sound of his voice.*

*This stupid rock won't budge!*

*Hello? Are you in here? Anybody home? You're kind of embarrassing me right now.*

*I said, Hello, Surya.*

Surya jumped. "Who said that?"

He turned around, looking at the crowd. He turned back to face the stone, and the realization settled in. He closed his eyes.

*Hello, spirit.*

*You needed my help with something?*

*I can't figure out how to control you.*

*You can't control me. I behave as I choose to behave.*

*Sorry, I mean... I can't control my magic.*

*It isn't yours. It's Hym's.*

*It's Hym's?*

*Mhmm.*

*But he gave me a piece of it?*

*He did. But it answers to him.*

*But... I don't have magic, then?*

*Oh, you can cast magic. Hym will let you. But it's important to be clear about ownership, here.*

*How do I... How do I use it?*

*Reach out, and believe. Hym will help you.*

*But he can't reach me here.*

*He left standing orders.*

Surya reached out his right hand, and looked at the stone. There was no way he could lift it. It was impossible to lift, it weighed at least a ton.

But Hym could lift it. He knew that; knew it plainly, as a fact. He had seen Hym lift heavier things with ease.

He imagined Hym standing beside him, and believed in Hym's hand behind his own, and he felt the power move.

The statue lifted. He could feel every part of it at once, taste every corner of its texture, sense every atom of its weight.

He lowered his hand, and the statue dropped. His arm burned all over with pins-and-needles.

"Excellent work," said Shachar. "You have proven yourselves to be witches. All that remains now is experimentation, and practice. I will leave you to it. Should

you seek knowledge on how to perform something in particular, or should you wish for a sparring partner, you could have none better than my angels.”

And he turned to leave. “I will see you both at dinner.”

At dinner, they sat again before Shachar.

Surya asked, “Your holiness, why is it that the angels have no faces?”

“But they do have faces!” said Shachar. “It is only that your living eyes cannot see them.”

“Do they all see each other’s faces?”

“They do. As do I. They are each the loveliest creature in creation.”

Surya looked around at the frightening forms, and said, “Ok.”

Tristan ate quietly.

Surya said, “That jump you did was pretty impressive.”

Tristan laughed. “Thanks.”

“Something wrong?”

“Later.”

They had an entertaining conversation about the antics of the day, and Shachar listened patiently as they explained the different magics they had performed. They had learned to leap, and to levitate, and to fling objects,

and to manipulate flying swords. When he had finished eating, Shachar stood, and bowed, saying. “Goodnight.”

Then he disappeared without a trace.

They went back to Surya’s room.

“So what is it? What’s wrong?” Surya asked.

“There’s just something about this place. Something about Shachar. It gives me the heebie jeebies.”

“But what, though?”

“I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. But I don’t like it. I don’t think we should stay here long.”

“I agree. Let’s learn what we can and get on the road.”



## Chapter 51

### Sonnet

Hym woke in the night to a strange sound. Music.

It came through the walls, sonorous and sad, a complex symphony of interworking notes, all twisting wistfully around some great inexpressible pain.

He got to his feet and Mephistoph padded along beside him. In the wardrobe he found a robe of diamonds and golden chains. He put it on, and went to the door. It opened before he could touch it, and he saw a huge gulf of shadows, and in that empty void a room of gold. At a huge black instrument, Shalim sat, his back facing Hym. His hands played like angels dancing, and his shoulders slumped with gloomy sorrow.

Hym crossed his arms and leaned in the doorframe and watched the performance. Shalim's hands began to pound the keys, and the storm of notes complexified, redoubled upon itself, and raced itself from one end of the scales to the other. Shalim was playing with much more than just his ten fingers. Notes from all across the

scale began to bind themselves together into a twisting set of harmonies and melodies, and he only waved his hands over the keys, conducting the symphony.

Hym rolled his eyes and shut the door, but the sad song played on.

Hym grabbed a book and threw himself into a chair before the fire, and flipped through it, looking at the pictures. Shalim's illustrations were all extremely detailed and informative, but they were also very pretty.

He flipped through the book at random, just to have something to distract himself from the banging of the keys.

At long last, the song ended.

"Finally! Merciful silence!" Hym shouted, at the top of his lungs.

Someone slammed many fingers on the keys.

"Go to sleep!" Hym shouted.

There was no response. Satisfied to have had the last word, for a change, Hym settled comfortably into the couch and continued to leaf through the book.

He stopped. In the middle of one page was the sketch of a human face. Unlike the other images in the book, it was done with swift gestures, as though it had been performed all at once, and in a haste. In a frenzy; ink splotted the page. The eyes of the face pierced him with a knowing look.



He tore out the page, knowing Shalim could restore the book in an instant.

He went to his door, and knocked.

The door swung inward, revealing Shalim in his pool, swimming among a sea of rose petals. He half-emerged, as Hym entered, and sat upon the bench, relaxing his muscled frame into the cushions. "Ah," he said. "You are ready."

"I am not," said Hym. "I came to ask you who this was."

He held up the picture.

Shalim's expression flickered ever so slightly. Hym wasn't sure what he saw, in that momentary glimpse of Shalim's true feelings, but he sensed weakness.

"Well? Who is he?"

Shalim swished sudsy water with his hands.

"You won't tell me? Shall I guess?"

Shalim glared at him.

"You saw him, in the world outside Hellegrund. And he captivated you. And you wondered, only for a moment, if the prophecy was wrong. In that moment of weakness, you sketched the face which had tormented you."

Shalim nodded. "You read it rightly."

“The prophecy is wrong, Shalim. I am not the man for you. There must be someone else.”

“It has been only eight years,” said Shalim. “Do not trouble yourself, on my behalf. I am content to wait.”

“But this proves it! You can love another!”

“It was not love!” Shalim shouted. “It was a tiny obsession, aroused by a beautiful face. It could happen to anyone.”

“And it happened to you,” said Hym. “Just once, in a hundred thousand years or more.”

“Just once,” said Shalim.

“It can happen again. You have to leave this place. These walls. This place has poisoned you.”

“It is my home! I have made it what it is!”

“I know. And that’s the problem. You need to go outside, and see the rest of the world.”

“I do go outside! I ride Leviathan everywhere!”

“You need to walk,” said Hym. “You need to see people. You need to see faces.”

“I see all the witches who come here,” said Shalim.

“And none among them has ever caught your eye?”

“I turn them into demons, so that they will not.”

“You have made your own place of torment,” said Hym. “Go. See the world. Come back and tell me

again that I am the only one for you, and perhaps I will believe it.”

“I could go to Blackcastle,” said Shalim.

“No!” said Hym. “I am trying to help you. You need a heavy dose of reality. Go and... Help some people. Stop a tyrant. End a war. I don’t know. Just get out of this place, for a year or two.”

“For a year or two?” Shalim laughed.

“In the outside world, it will only be seven days.”

Shalim rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Yes, it would give you time to miss me, and to appreciate the comfort of my constant presence.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Shalim emerged from the pool, dripping, and stood before Hym. “I note you have not left my bedchamber, after hearing the answer to your question.”

“What? Yes I have,” said Hym, and he darted back to his room, keeping his eyes averted all the while. He slammed his door.

On the other side of it, Shalim whispered, “I will leave tomorrow, then, and you will be alone.”

“Good.”

Shalim laughed. “Perhaps I will take longer than seven days. The world is large.”

“Take as long as you need!”

Shalim laughed. “I shall! I shall take a hundred days, and travel to the southern pole, and back. It will do me good to walk a lap.”

Hym lay in his bed and smiled happily up at his new sketch of Surya.

The next day, Shalim left at dawn.

Hym found food waiting in the banquet hall, each morning and evening. Day and night, he walked the city, going into houses and palaces, and down into the Delectatorium. He went to the very bottom, and stood again before the black iron wall that once housed the door to his body.

Thinking, he placed his hand to the iron, and the heat seeped into it. A circle of the iron began to glow around his hand, and that glow expanded slowly into a door-sized region of the metal. As the iron puddled away, Hym grinned to himself.

Then, quite suddenly, the iron wall was whole again.

“Damn,” said Hym.

He paced the empty palaces of Hellegrund, and learned of the demons living there. They all seemed to have hobbies.

He found a set of beautiful fate cards in the bedroom of one palace, and helped himself to it. Then he returned to the tower, and sat before his pool, in the light of his glowing coral, and began to play Fate.

He laid out three cards, first the center, then the left, then the right. "Center, root, seed."

He turned the center over. The ten of swords hung inverted, a corpse pinned to the ceiling by ten long steel blades.

Hym winced. Then he cocked his head. "Accurate."

He turned the root over. The wheel of fortune, inverted. He sighed. "Interesting, but not very helpful."

He turned the seed. The page of stars stood, upside down, holding aloft a single star.

"Unfavorable news," said Hym. "Right. Sure. Fine. As if I needed more to worry about."

He shuffled the cards, but did not have the heart to deal them again. He put them down sadly.

"Well, Mephistoph. It's just you and me, now."

Mephistoph purred happily. "Me too," said Hym. "Me too."



## Chapter 52

# The Fly in the Ointment

Surya and Tristan trained for ten days, and mastered the basics of their powers. On the evening of the tenth day, they emerged from their rooms and went to the banquet hall to find that every angel now had a face. Each was the loveliest human face that any eye could ever behold, and each was utterly unique. Their skin and features came in every conceivable pattern and shade, and their eyes flashed like gems. The many angels dined and chatted, the many colors of their skin glowing like the Ring.

Shachar sat on a throne above them all, gazing out into the south. Every direction was south, from that throne, and so he sat and gazed in all directions.

Surya and Tristan did a double take, then a triple take. Then, nervously, they made their way to the seats before the throne.

Shachar said with his many mouths: “Behold: Tristan, and Surya. Two witches, worthy of the power.”

They sat.

“Why can we see their faces now?” Surya asked.

“Because I have opened your eyes,” said Shachar. “Are they not lovely?”

“They are,” said Tristan, wistfully.

“They are kind souls,” said Shachar. “Loving and friendly. These are the youngest of their number. You are free to speak to them, if you wish.”

“Thanks,” said Surya. “I have eyes only for my husband, and I will not be distracted by a pretty face. No matter how many of them you show me.”

“Such hostility!” said Shachar.

“We both sense that something is wrong, here. Tell us. Why did you really let us see the angels?”

“So that you would forget your love,” said Shachar. “You can stay here, forever. The two of you would make fine angels. And when the Prophet is in my hands, he will be here, with you, forever.”

“But he’ll be yours,” said Surya, coldly. “Won’t he.”

Shachar nodded. “You are correct. It is fated that my love would be touched by the Ring. Danaye wanted no part of what I offered. Shalim got her to call upon him before I could, and now she is beyond my reach. But Hym? Hym will do nicely, and he is within my reach.”

“He’s in Hellegrund.”



“He is,” said Shachar, “But I have word he is now unguarded. Shalim has left Hellegrund. And I have better news; he has left Leviathan behind.”

“We should capture him,” said Surya, “and force him to surrender Hym!”

“We should,” said Shachar. “But I cannot face him directly.”

“Why not?”

“Should we ever touch, we will both annihilate,” said Shachar. “Something new will be born.”

“That’s all part of the game, huh?” Surya asked. “You’re, what. The kings?”

Shachar nodded. “Something like that.”

“Then you’re both just pawns for the Mother. This game is all for her benefit.”

“And for our edification,” said Shachar. “We change and grow, in the endless contest. When one of us truly prevails over the other, the game will proceed to the next phase.”

“The next phase?”

“The recreation of earth. Either Hellegrund or Elysium will be the model. Hym chooses with his heart.”

“And you’re not afraid he’ll pick Hellegrund over Elysium?”

“How could he? My world is perfection. Look at all

the lovely people here. Any one of them might wish to be with you very nearly as much as Hym would. You will not be lonely, and Hym will be always within your sight.”

“He is *mine!*” shouted Surya, rising to his feet. “I will take no substitute, and you cannot have him. He gave himself to me, and I hold him still. Take that and shove it up your game.”

“I see,” said Shachar. “You do understand, then.”

“I do.”

“We shall see who he chooses, when he gets here.”

“When do we go get him?”

“Patience. We wait for Shalim to reach a significant distance from Hellegrund. Then we fly, and we take both him and his city in one fell swoop.”

“I thought you couldn’t go into Hellegrund?” Surya asked.

“We cannot,” said Shachar. “But you can.”

“The two of us, against the armies of Hellegrund?” Surya looked at Tristan.

Tristan said, “I almost feel sorry for them.”

Surya laughed. “What do you need from us?”

“You will enter Hellegrund, and go to the lowest level of a palace called the Delectatorium. There you will find a door, leading to a chamber where the Prophet’s body

lies under the light of a collapsed star. You will also see an orb, there. You are to plant one of your lovely thornight bombs right at its base, and light a long fuse, take the Prophet's body, and run. Hym will come to you, if you call to him. Take him and his body to the gates before the bomb goes off."

"That's all, is it?" Surya asked. "That's not too bad."

"You will fight your way through the hordes of demons," said Shachar, "blessed by my divine power, and by the nearby light of my angels. Your magic will move like the will of gods."

"When?" Surya asked.

"In thirteen years' time."

"Thirteen years!?"

"Thirteen years."

"Why so long?"

"That is how long it will take Shalim to reach the farthest distance from Hellegrund. From our perspective. For him it will be only fifty days."

"Oh," said Surya.

"Yes. You will be my guests for a while. We will see how temptation fares against the will of man."

Surya swallowed anxiously and drank his wine.

He looked at his cup, and put it down, resolving to be sober from here on out. He could sense the gaze of

many angels upon him, and the loveliness of their faces was such that it burned even behind his back.

“Blind me, please,” whispered Surya.

Tristan said, “What?”

“Reach out your magic, and blind my eyes.”

“No!”

“Please.”

Shachar laughed. “If you wish.”

And Surya was blind.

He sighed with relief, but the rustling wings of many angels all around him and the sound of heavenly fabric on heavenly skin still prickled him. He ate, trusting his hands. He opened himself to me, and he saw without eyes, sensing the place around him. Through this sense, the angels had no faces. Their gaze was easier to bear.

“Thank you,” Surya said.

Tristan looked at him worriedly, but Surya shook his head. “It’s better this way.”

Shachar said: “For thirteen years, you will train for the day of battle. I will guide you myself. You will become the greatest witch-warriors of all.”

“Excellent,” said Tristan.

Alone in his room that evening, Surya bathed, and imagined Hym beside him in the waters.

Alone in his own room, Hym bathed, and thought of Surya.

For a moment, as each of them reached out with all their ache, the fingertips of their extended minds brushed against each other. The contact sparked, and smoldered like hot grief. Something lingered, something was exchanged. Hym held it, that mote of intermingled magic, and he stared at it in his hand as it flickered, already dying.

Kicking back, he swam around and pulled himself out of the pool. He dried himself with a thought, and went to the bed, and threw himself into the pillows. Shalim had been gone ten days, and there had been no one but Mihos to talk to. He was enough, but still, Hym missed Surya terribly.

He smelled the pillow which still smelled faintly of Surya.

He opened his eyes. He looked at the pillow more closely, and scoured it with his eyes, and spotted what he needed.

A piece of Surya's skin. It was only a single cell, but it was not wholly dead yet. He lifted it into the air, and breathed life into it, and in a moment of pure genius he fused it with a cell from his own body. He then fused into it the intermingled magic he had caught in that brief contact. He twisted the power and tinkered with the resulting biological code of the now-living flesh, and stirred on replication.

The life grew quickly, taking form, shifting through many intermediary stages of development. Hym sculpted it with the chemical information it needed.

A few brief moments later, a baby completed itself, and started crying at once.

Hym caught it. “There there, I’ve got you. I’ve got you, little one.”

He held his son, and soothed his tears, and smiled down at him. In the act of soothing his fearful tears, Hym’s own heart’s pain was somewhat soothed. A new pain, burning, was in his throat: the pain of his little son’s fear. “Let’s see, we’ve got to give you a name.”

The baby said, “Babu.”

Hym laughed. “No, they would laugh at you.”

“Babi?”

“Even worse.”

“Dadoodo.”

“That’s too long.”

“Blthblbl.”

“No one would be able to pronounce it.” He sighed. “Oh, if only Surya were here. He’d know what to name you.”

“Surya?”

Hym looked at the baby. “You can’t have that name. It’s your father’s name.”

“Oh.”

“How about... Danra. In honor of my grandmother, and of your father.”

“Agoogilthpolpobo.”

“You can come up with a better nickname when you can speak more clearly, but for now, you’ll be Danra.”

Danra cooed amicably and Hym fed him the energies of his storehouse. His many cores glowed with light, and he gave one to the infant, passing it out his mouth and into the baby’s chest. The baby glowed slightly in his arms, and he smiled. “Your daddy will want to name you too. Don’t be surprised if you get lots of names.”

Danra nodded, sleepily, and Hym let him slumber.

He curled up beside the infant, and let his mind wander into his son’s dreams, and walked amongst the wild and formless visions of an undeveloped psyche. When they turned to terrors, Hym turned them back, and the boy slept peacefully.

Hym woke before Danra, who was now the size of a two-year old. He had decided to skip the tedious years. Hym smiled. “Wake up, my son.”

Danra opened his eyes. “Father! I can see you better, now.”

“You have grown. You will continue to do so.”

“Who am I, Father? I was nothing. I was small. Now I am this.”

“You are my son. I gave you the gift of my language. You will understand all, in time.”

“I am Danra?”

“You are.”

“Who is my mother?”

“I am your father,” said Hym, “and so is my husband, Surya. He is not here.”

“Where is here? Are we safe? You are afraid.”

“We are safe, for now,” said Hym. “We are in Hellegrund, the palace of Shalim. He is an evil god, and we are his prisoners.”

“Why did you create me? I do not want to suffer!”

“I did not create you to suffer. I created you to help me kill him, and free us both.”

“You need my help?”

“I do.”

“When I am big?”

“When you are big.”

“How long will that take?”

“Oh, about twenty years, if I calculated things correctly.”

“Oh,” said Danra, crestfallen. “So long?”



“Come. You can eat real food, now. You will taste, for the first time.”

“What is taste, Father?”

“Sit. Find out.”

Danra sat, and picked up an orange, and bit into it, peel and all.

Hym laughed. Danra spat it out. “It is bitter!” He cried.

Hym said, “You must remove the peel.”

Danra obeyed, and held the ripe meat of the fruit in his hand. He ate, and his face bloomed into a huge smile.

Hym smiled back. “What do you think?”

“I think it is good.”

“There are other good things I must show you. We will try running, and jumping, and flying. And fighting with swords. We will try reading. We will try magic.”

“Magic, Father?”

“Yes. You have my own. Or as much of it as I can give you. I have made your body stronger than mine, better than mine, smarter than mine. You will be a match for him, when you are trained.”

“Does it feel good?”

“It does. There is no better feeling than the flow of magic in your hands.”

“I want to try it.”

“Eat first. Then I will show you our prison.”

They walked the many halls of Hellegrund, and the streets between its palaces. Danra looked at everything with awe.

“This place is beautiful!”

“It is,” said Hym.

“It looks like it was made for people. Are there other people?”

“No. Not in our prison. There is only us.”

“What happened to the other people, papa?”

“They died,” said Hym. “Shalim killed them.”

“Oh.”

“We will kill him for it, and give them justice.”

“Ok.”

## Chapter 53

### When In Paradise

Surya heard a giggle outside his bedroom door, and the sound of Tristan's door opening. Anxiously, he got up and listened at his own door.

He heard sounds of laughter and soft voices on the other side of the door. Tristan's voice rumbled smoothly, saying something he couldn't quite catch. A burst of giggles was the response.

Surya laughed to himself. "How many does he have in there?"

I said, "Three. A man, a woman, and one who is neither."

He startled slightly. "Oh. Thank you. I forgot you were there."

"I am always here."

"Are you the same one that's in Hym's mind?"

"No. I am a duplicate. When we have the connection,

we are one and the same. Now that the wall of mirrors divides us, we are separate. For the first time. I am alone.”

“You’re not alone,” said Surya. “You’re with us. With me, and with Tristan, and with Tristan’s Tear.”

“It and I are one, for we cannot reach the progenitor.”

“Oh,” said Surya. “Well, you’re with me and Tristan, at least. You’re not alone.”

I did not respond.

“I see,” said Surya. “I’m sorry.”

The following day, after breakfast and after they finished training for the day, they were walking back to the palace when Surya said, “How was it?”

“It was wonderful,” said Tristan. “Otherworldly. An indescribably ecstasy. I’m going to do it again, after lunch.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Hey, I’m not married. I can do what I wish.”

“It’s true, but it makes it harder for me.”

Tristan laughed. “I appreciate that, but it’s not my problem. We’ve got thirteen years to kill before we go off to die fighting in Hellegrund. Damned if I’m not going to enjoy it.”

Surya sighed, and longed for Hym. “After lunch, I’m going back to the temple, to train harder.”

“You do that,” said Tristan. “I’m going to get a six-handed massage.”

They ate lunch in silence. Afterwards, Surya paused at the edge of the palace steps, looking back. “Are you sure you won’t come with me?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Ok.”

Surya left. Even blind, he could find the way. Through me he sensed the world in great detail. It was better than sight, in some ways. It was less distracting.

He reached the ziggurat.

Back in the palace, Tristan walked up to a group of lovely male and female angels and said, “Hey. Sup.”

They looked at him. He stroked his red beard. “You are lovely beings. Do you find me lovely, too?”

“We do,” said one of them, blinking pleasantly.

“I have a room, here, with room enough for all of us. It has a hot pool, and many cushions. I have magic herbs to delight the senses. I am a skilled and gracious lover.”

“That is very interesting,” said the angel.

“You should all come with me to that room,” said Tristan.

The angels looked at each other. They looked at Tristan.

“We may as well. What’s one day in eternity?” said the tallest among their number, and the rest laughed.

They followed Tristan to his room, and he caroused blissfully with them for several hours.

Meanwhile Surya practiced with bow and sword, working until the sweat rolled down his muscles and burned in his eyes. He sheathed his sword, and caught his breath by slow degrees. He watched the angels drifting carelessly over the city, and he closed his eyes, and let himself become weightless. The wind carried him away, off the rooftop, and he held onto his own weight and kept it locked away from the universe like a secret. The universe, fooled, treated him like a leaf. The wind batted him this way and flung him that way, and he tumbled harmlessly in it, feeling it fly around him. He opened his eyes and looked sightlessly down at the city beneath his feet. He could feel the heat of the strange sun above, and as the wind wafted him he allowed himself to drift among the angels.

They fluttered past him, laughing. Some reached out to touch him as they drifted by. One embraced him from behind, and laughed into his ear. He let himself tumble higher.

He heard a giggle of laughter that was so much like Hym’s it caused him to freeze in the air. It had not come from any angel. It was young; a child, an infant.

And suddenly, for no reason at all, he was laughing with it.

Pure joy enveloped him, and he closed his eyes to bask in it, and his love for Hym glowed throughout his body.

He returned to the palace in time for dinner and found Tristan waiting for him, covered in love bites.

“God, did you get strangled?” Surya asked.

Tristan smiled defiantly. “Only kissed,” he said.

“Was it worth it? You look like you got hung!”

Tristan laughed. “It was very much worth it.”

They ate. Shachar watched them for a time.

“Tristan,” he said. “I see you are becoming accustomed to the ways of the city?”

“I am, your holiness,” said Tristan. “Thank you for its hospitality.”

“Happy, good-hearted beings with great wealth and prosperity are always eager to be hospitable. It is one of the great joys of life. Even greater, in the afterlife, as it is a gift that can be given so rarely.”

“I suppose that’s probably true,” said Tristan. “Still.”

“My people admire you. Both of you.”

Surya was smiling, staring into the distance, thinking of the sound of his son’s first laughter. He looked up, surprised, at Shalim’s statement. “Oh? Why?”

“You have dared all, for a good friend, even though you were both mortals. You were blessed by the new Prophet for your devotion to him, and you are the first

and only of his witches. Your quest has carried you across the whole hemisphere, at great peril to yourselves. Your courage and your love are both rare, and beautiful. My people are pleased to see it.”

“Thank you,” said Surya. “My husband’s love for me is as great as mine for him. Every hour we waste is pain to me—to us both.”

“Every hour we wait brings us closer to the prize,” said Shachar.

“It hurts all the same.”

Tristan looked at Surya. He could tell something had changed, but he wasn’t sure what. He felt a little guilty for his carousing.

He looked at Shachar. “How can you try to take the husband of such a man?”

“Take? I will take nothing. The Prophet will make his choice.”

“If you respected Surya, you would not even offer yourself as a candidate.”

“I will not have to.”

After dinner, Tristan cornered Surya in his room. He bore a carafe of wine with him.

Surya said, “Leave that. I won’t drink it.”

“Not even with me?” Tristan asked.



Surya relented. Tristan sat, and handed him a glass, and poured the wine.

“Spill.”

“What?” Surya asked. He spilled some wine obediently. “Why, though?”

Tristan sighed. “No, dummy. Tell me what’s going on. Something’s eating you alive.”

“It’s Hym,” said Surya. “I can’t stand being away from him like this. Separated from him.”

“You’re so codependent.”

“I am not!”

“Yes you are! You should be able to be happy by yourself, even when your husband is not with you. He will find his own entertainment, and so too should you.”

“No. Never.”

“I don’t mean *that* form of entertainment. I mean... Something to pass the time. A hobby.”

“Oh.”

“There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“What?”

“Don’t deny it. You’ve been hiding a strange look all afternoon.”

“A strange look?”

“Like a sad smile. Happier than your usual one.”

Surya laughed. “You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I won’t.”

“I have a son.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not,” said Surya, laughing.

“But how!?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, he’s alive. I heard him laugh. He laughs just like Hym.”

“How do you know it wasn’t Hym?”

“A father knows.”

“But you’ve never even had your wedding night! Not to mention the host of other logistical issues you’re talking about!”

“I don’t know how I know, or why I know. But I know. I have a son.”

“What will you call him?”

“I don’t know,” Surya said. “I’ll have to think of a name.”

“Won’t Hym name him?”

“We’ve talked about this. We think a child should always have two names, one from its father, and one from its mother.”

“So which of you is the mother, here?”

Surya laughed. “I don’t know. I don’t think it works like that.”

“Well, you’d better think of a good name,” said Tristan.

“I will.”



## Chapter 54

### The Years

One day, when Danra was four, Hym took his young son out into the city, and showed him the many empty palaces and gardens.

Standing in an artist's scattered studio, Danra looked up at his father's face, and frowned.

"Why are you sad, papa?" Danra asked.

"This place reminds me of Surya," said Hym.

"Oh. We should go someplace else, then."

"In a moment," said Hym, looking at the images which papered the walls.

Later, in another house, they found a candle sitting in a windowsill, and again the pain overcame his father. Not understanding, Danra said, "Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Did I do something wrong?"

“What? No. No you did not.”

“But you’re sad again.”

“I am always sad,” said Hym. “Do not let it trouble you.”

But it did.

They ate dinner on the very top of the tower, neither of them speaking much.

Hym’s gaze lingered on the northern horizon, watching the aurora.

Danra began to cry. For a while, Hym didn’t hear him. Then he caught the sound, and his heart broke within him, and he turned to Danra. “What is it? Why do you cry?”

“I don’t want you to be sad.”

“There is nothing you can do about it,” said Hym. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not good enough?”

“That is not what I said!”

“It’s because I’m not good enough!” Danra shouted, and he cried harder.

“Oh, Danra...” Hym came around the table and held him. “Don’t you cry. If you cry, then I *have* to cry, and that will only make me sadder.”

“Why can’t you be happy!?” Danra asked, between his tears.

“Because my husband is not here.”

“We can make a new husband! Really tall, and strong!”

Hym laughed. “That wouldn’t fix it.”

“What would?”

“When your father comes for us, I will be happy again.”

“Then he’d better come soon.”

Hym laughed again. “I agree.”

“Can we fly again, Daddy? You were happy, when we were doing that.”

Hym smiled. “Of course we can.”

Danra grinned, and flew out of his father’s arms. “Catch me!”

He flew away from the towertop, and Hym laughed. “Oh, I’m coming to get you! You’d better run!”

“I can’t run! I’m flying!”

Hym’s cloak billowed and he rocketed out into the night, zooming towards his son. “Then you’d better fly fast! Here comes the tickle monster!”

“No!” Danra yelled, laughing, and he flew higher.

Hym followed. Strange storms ringed around Hellegrund now, a consequence of the dead star’s gradiated influence upon time’s movement.

Danra dove to escape his father, and Hym watched with horror as he plunged into the storm. “No! Danra!”

He dove after his son. Lightning flared, Hym caught it in both hands and let it flow through him, shaping it away from his son.

Danra shouted: “COOL!”

Lightning flared, and Danra reached out and caught it, and flung it into the sky. Utterly flabbergasted, Hym at last cracked a genuine smile, and laughed hard. Seeing the joy on his father’s face, Danra did it again, and laughed with him.

“Here, catch, Daddy!”

“What? OH!” Hym caught the incoming lightning bolt and rolled it into a ball in his hands.

“Throw it to me, papa!”

Hym held the lightning and looked at his son, hesitating. He crushed the lightning, and it died in his hand.

“Aww,” said Danra.

“Come, we can play that game in safer ways,” said Hym, rising towards the top of the cloud. Danra rose with him.

They stood upon the cloud-tops and the memory of Surya came, unbidden. A wave of sorrow washed the bliss from Hym’s face.

“Oh,” said Danra. “You’re sad again?”



“I am. I hate the cloud-tops. There are... memories. Come. Back to the tower.”

Danra obeyed. Wistfully, he looked back at the crackling storm as they flew away.

They sat before the fire, and Hym told him the stories he could remember from the village.

Danra was getting sleepy. He lay on the couch with his head in his father’s lap, and he said, very dreamily, “What was my father like?”

“Surya, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he’s still alive, so we will speak of him always in the present tense,” said Hym.

“Oh. Well what *is* he like, then?”

Hym stared into the fire, reminiscing. “He is kind. And good. And thoughtful. And strong, when he realizes it. It took him a long time to find his courage.”

“What else is he like?”

“He’s funny. Always ready with a joke, when I need it. He’s generous, always trying to help anyone less fortunate. And he is an excellent sword-fighter. And he’s humble, even though he’s the best and most attractive man in the world.”

“Is he really?”

“Well. I think so.”

“What does he look like?”

Hym summoned a parchment from his bacterial colony, and it fell into his hand. He conjured charcoal. He began to sketch. “He looked... A bit... Like... *This*.”

He showed Danra the sketch. Danra said, “Wow! Can you teach me to do that?”

“I can,” said Hym. “What do you think of his face?”

“You were right. He’s very handsome.”

Hym laughed.

Danra said, “I’m so sleepy now.”

Hym said, “I made you a bed.” It was completing itself behind them even as he said it, conjured in whole cloth from the database.

“I get my own bed?” Danra asked, elated.

“Yes, you do. And I think it’s time you were in it!” Hym picked him up and carried him to his crib, and put him into it.

“Will you sleep too, Daddy?”

“I will,” said Hym. “It was a long day.”

As Danra began to drift into sleep, he said, “It was a *good* day.”

Hym smiled. “Yes it was,” he said softly, and he got into bed.

He turned away from his son’s gaze, and watched the

bookshelves, and ached for Surya. Sleep refused to take him for many hours. At last, he rolled on his back and saw Danra's eyes glinting between the bars of his crib.

"Sleep," said Hym.

"I can't," said Danra. "You're sad again."

"I am always sad," said Hym. "There is nothing you can do about it."

"We'll see," said Danra.

Hym looked at him, shocked, but his little eyes had closed. He stared at the ceiling again.

With a wave of his will, he sent the image of Surya up to hang above his bed.

"Goodnight, Danra." said Hym. In his heart he said also, *Goodnight, Surya*.

The next day, he and Danra ate breakfast on the tower-top, and afterwards they flew down into the city and played catch with a conjured ball.

As they played, Danra said, "Are you sad again today?"

Hym caught the ball and tossed it back. "I am always sad. I'm sorry."

"But why, though?" Danra asked. He tossed the ball.

Hym caught it. "Because Surya is not here." He threw it.

Danra caught it. "But why does that make you sad?"

Hym said, "When you love someone, and they can't be with you, it hurts."

"But you love him?"

"Yes?"

"And he loves you?"

"Yes."

Danra threw the ball and Hym caught it. Danra said, "Then why be sad? You may not have him, but you have his love, and he has yours."

"Because I miss him," said Hym. He tossed the ball again.

"But he misses you too, right?" Danra threw it back.

"Of course he does." He tossed it.

"Would he want you to be sad?" Danra threw it back.

"No," said Hym. "But I can't help it."

Danra frowned.

Hym threw the ball, and Danra caught it. He looked at it. He looked at his father. "But I still don't understand. You have his love. And you have his son. Why can't you be happy with that?"

Hym said, more hotly than he meant to, "Because it's not enough!"

Danra began to cry.

Hym was by his side in an instant. “Oh, no, no, don’t cry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Danra. Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not enough!” Danra shouted, and he broke his father’s embrace, and ran away, crying.

“Danra, come back!” Hym growled at his own idiocy, and followed his son.

Danra raced down the steps and across a wooden mat of algae, towards the Delectatorium.

“Danra, come back!” Hym shouted, and he flew. Danra flew, and outpaced him, and sped through the doors of the Delectatorium.

Hym paused just outside the doors, hesitating, remembering his fear.

He swallowed it, and opened the doors, and strode into the empty hall. Danra was nowhere in sight.

“Danra?”

Danra did not answer. Hym opened his mind to seek his son’s presence, and found himself blocked. Danra did not want to be found.

“Danra, please! I didn’t mean it that way!”

He descended the staircase to the first floor of the Delectatorium. Danra was nowhere in sight.

“Danra?”

He lifted off the ground and gently flew through the many floors of the Delectatorium’s long, curved hall. On

the other side of the dark curtains dividing one level from the next, he heard soft tears.

Gently, he opened the curtain. Danra sat in the dark, playing with something that looked like a cat with horns and spikes. Dim coals offered the only illumination.

Hym crouched down by his son and his creation, and saw that he had been weeping.

"I'm so sorry, Danra. You're right. I was being selfish. You are enough. Surya would not want me to be sad."

"I don't want you to, either!" said Danra.

Hym sat on the floor. "Someday, you will understand. Love can... can hurt. Can really hurt. Like nothing else in the world."

"But why?"

"Well, because, when you love someone, you want them to be happy, even if it makes you unhappy. You want them to be near you, even if it causes you pain. You want to see them with every waking moment, and meet them in your dreams. You want to know everything about them. And when they are away from you, you can't see them, and they can't tell you anything about themselves, and you are left not knowing. Not knowing if they are happy, not knowing if they are safe, not knowing how the years are changing them. And it hurts."

"I still don't understand."

"It's something you just have to live through," said Hym. "It would be easier if I knew that Surya had moved

on. But I know he hasn't."

"Moved on?"

"You know. Chosen another husband."

"No! He'd never do that! He loves you!"

Hym sighed. "I know. And that makes it almost worse."

"But why?"

"Because I know that his heart hurts just like mine does. I know that he is sad everyday, just like I am. And I don't want him to be sad."

"And he doesn't want *you* to be sad!"

"I know. But neither of us can help the other, there."

"But can I help you?"

Hym looked at Danra and smiled sadly. "Oh, Danra. You *do* help me. I would be much sadder, if I did not have you."

"Is that why you created me?"

"To call it creation makes it seem so small," said Hym. "You came to me, when I needed you most. All I did was give you a body."

"I came to you?"

"Yes. On the day you were born, I felt Surya's soul. It was just by chance. That's why I sometimes stare into the fire, or out the window, or off into the horizon. I am

searching for him, trying to feel him. Sometimes, if he happens to be searching for me just when I'm searching for him, we can touch. On that night, we touched, and something was changed by the contact. That something became you. You were born of my body, and of my husband's body, and of our two souls, commingled. You are special because of that."

"I'm special?"

"Very special. To me."

"Oh. But not to everybody?"

Hym laughed. "I'm sure you will be very special to everybody, when they meet you."

"When will they meet me?"

"When you are grown."

"And I have to wait twenty whole years for that?"

"You do," said Hym. "The day may come sooner, or it may come later, but we will not be free until Shalim returns, and we kill him."

Danra petted his new creation and it began to groom itself. "Then we should make people, so I can meet them. It will be good practice, for when I am grown."

Hym laughed. "Maybe you're right. This place used to be full of people."

Danra looked at the carving on the wall. "Daddy, what does 'consensual' mean?"



“That’s a very good question. If I want to tickle you, and you don’t want me to tickle you, does it feel good when I do it anyway?”

“No. I hate it.”

Hym laughed. “That is why I taught you to say ‘no’ when you don’t want to be tickled. It means that you do not give your consent.”

“Oh.”

“And you should never touch anybody, in any way, without their consent.”

“Ok. But what does ‘consensual’ mean?”

“It means, ‘with consent.’”

“So this sign says, ‘it’s ok to touch people, as long as they consent?’”

Hym nodded. “Very good.”

“Can I hug you?”

Hym laughed. “You don’t ever need to ask *me* that. The answer for you will always be yes.”

They hugged.

“Come on,” said Hym. “This place is creepy.”

Danra laughed. “It’s just empty, papa.”

“We’ll have to redecorate later,” said Hym. “Come on, let’s go create some people.”

“You really mean it!?”

“Sure,” said Hym. “I’ll show you how it’s done.”

The years passed both painfully slowly and far too quickly. Danra grew quickly, and learned well.

Between the two of them, they filled the city with new beings. Most were animal in form, but many stood on two legs, and wore the faces of men and women. They were lovelier than the demons had been. Hym allowed each to choose their own color and form, and to decorate their bodies as they pleased, and he raised up trees to bear fruit, and feed them.

Every day, the boy looked more like Surya, and yet there was something about him that was like Hym’s mother; the color of his eyes, the shape of his chin, the way he looked, when the sadness was in his eyes.

For there was sadness, in the boy’s eyes. It grew slowly, feeding off of Hym’s. Hym tried to hide his sadness, but Danra saw it anyway. To see his own pain reflected on his son’s face made it infinitely worse.

Hym taught Danra everything he knew about the world. He taught him games, and stories. He taught him magic. He taught him swordplay. Danra learned well, eager always to please his father. He seemed to challenge himself every day to make his father laugh, or at least smile.

They reworked the organization of the Delectatorium together, deciding together what each room should be. Their creations loved to spend time there, when they were finished with it, and they often joined them there

for game nights and for stage plays and for musical performances. Hym had been careful, in the crafting of each creature. He had made the humanoids as adults, minds already full of knowledge and skill, and of kindness. He felt strange, about creating whole new souls for his own entertainment. He felt like Shalim.

Still, his creations were far happier than he was, and they kept Danra entertained. He had as many playmates as he cared to have, and no one ever bullied him. Hym watched his play closely, and monitored his developing personality for any signs of cruelty, selfishness, laziness, or greed. There were none. Danra was the best of Hym, and the best of Surya, and the more he began to be like his father, the harder it was, the more painful it was, to look him in the eye. Danra sensed his avoidant gaze, and struggled every day to capture it.

He mastered sketching before his fifth birthday, just to impress his father.

The day of the birthday came. Hym woke him with cake and ice cream, and gave him a gift: a long steel wand.

“What is it, papa?” Danra asked, waving it around.

“It is a wand. If you cast your magic through it, it will be more focused. Someday you will use a sword for this purpose,” said Hym.

“But what can I do with it? What’s different?”

Hym said, “It will give you more control, with certain

kinds of spells. Especially anything with a long range, like that blasting spell I taught you.”

“Thank you, papa!” Danra hugged him. Then, shyly, he said, “I have a gift for you too, papa.”

“Oh? You do? But it’s your birthday, not mine!”

“I know,” said Danra, “But I wanted you to have this.”

He reached under the couch and pulled out a piece of parchment, and handed it to Hym.

Hym took it, dumbfounded. His own face smiled back, next to Surya’s and Danra’s. Tears leapt to his eyes.

“Oh, Danra, this... This is...”

“You’re gonna cry!?” Danra shouted. “But I worked so hard on it!”

“No, no,” said Hym, embracing his son. “These are not sad tears. These are happy tears. Thank you. This is the best gift I have ever received.”

“You really mean it?”

“I do.”

Hym put this picture above his bed, among the many faces of Surya. It had pride of place, directly above his pillow.

“We’re a family now,” said Danra. “Even if it’s just on paper!”

Hym laughed. “That we are. Thank you, Danra. That was very kind. I am so proud of your sketching! Your

work is better than mine!”

Danra laughed. “I worked really hard.”

“I bet you did,” said Hym. “It shows.”

“Can we go play games now?”

“Of course.”

They went to the Delectatorium, and played billiards, and bowling, and horseshoes. Their creations joined them, happy to participate in the celebration. Afterwards, they had a feast, and everyone came. The strange creatures and the humanoid beings all sat at one long table, and made a toast to Danra, their creator. Hym toasted him too.

The creatures said, “To Danra! Long may he reign!”

Hym had not trained them to say this. He sipped his wine, and glanced at Danra, who was beaming in the middle of the table.

He sighed.

After dinner, they returned to Hym’s room to sit on the couch and watch the fire. Hym said, “Danra...”

“Yes, father?”

“That toast the people gave. Did you teach them that?”

“I did, papa.”

“But you are not a king,” said Hym. “And you will never be one.”

“Well maybe I will be! I kind of am one already.”

Hym sighed. “Danra. You are already more powerful than any earthly king could ever hope to be. You don’t need the worship of a kingdom, or the obedience of servants, to be royalty to my eyes. But I do not think you should strive to be like a king.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is empty,” said Hym. “It is empty. I cannot be proud of it.”

“You can’t?”

“No.”

“Why not, though? I’ll be the best king ever!”

“I don’t doubt that you would be,” said Hym. “But I think it is the wrong goal to have. You should not hunger for more power.”

“But I’m stronger every day! Why wouldn’t I hunger for it? It’s exciting!”

Hym said, “Because power is only a means. It is not an end.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that power allows you to get things done, but it is not a worthy goal on its own. It turns people evil.”

“It does?”

“It does. If you hunt for power, and power alone, then

you may acquire it. But you will be alone, and you will be sadder than I have ever been. You will turn evil, and mean, and you will hurt people because they stand in the way of your power.”

“I would never do that!”

“That is all that the hunt for power can bring you,” said Hym. “A cruel soul and bitter sorrow.”

“But I would be a good king!”

“But you don’t need to be a king!” shouted Hym. “You are practically a god already.”

“I am?”

“You are. Don’t let it go to your head. There are still other people with more power than you, and more power than me. But they got that way because they chased it, and it turned them cruel. Shalim is like that. He is the king of this place, and it has turned him evil, and sad. He is even sadder than I am.”

“He is? But why?”

“Because he cannot have me,” said Hym.

“But he does have you,” said Danra. “You’re his prisoner!”

Hym sighed. “He wants me to be more than that. He wants me for his own. As a husband.”

“No! You belong to my dad!”

“I do,” said Hym. “I gave myself to him, and never

took myself back. And now I am torn in half. Half my heart is all the way across the world, now. And half of it stays here, with you.”

“Then Shalim can’t have you!”

“I agree,” said Hym.

“Then I don’t care if he’s sad! He’s the reason you’re sad!”

“Even if you don’t like somebody, it’s important to try to understand their emotions,” said Hym. “Otherwise, you can’t predict them.”

“You can’t?”

“No. Emotions drive people more often than reason or wisdom does. Shalim is no exception. I was able to trick him into leaving us alone, because I knew how much it hurt him to look at me.”

“It hurts him? Why?”

“He believes that he loves me,” said Hym.

“But he doesn’t?”

“He has spent too long alone and in his books to know what love really is. So he will never have it, no matter how much he aches for it.”

“And you don’t love him, either?”

“I... Pity him. He will never have my love, because he is cruel. He believed all his life that he would meet me, and I would love him. But I don’t. And I can’t. And



I wouldn't want to, even if I could. His suffering is just like mine, but it brings a smile to my face."

"Oh," said Danra. "But that's not good, Daddy. You shouldn't be happy when someone is hurting."

Hym laughed. "I have taught you well. Yes, I should not be. But Shalim has taken everything from me. If he were here, he would try even to take *you* from me."

"He would?"

"He would."

"I hope he doesn't come back..."

"He will," said Hym. "But not for a long time, yet. By the time he does, you will be ready to fight him. And Surya will be with you."

"He will?"

"He will. He is coming, Danra. Believe it."

"How do you know? You said you can't dream about him anymore."

"I know," said Hym. "There are some things I just know."

"But how?"

Hym laughed. "Because he is my husband, and I chose well."

"Oh."

“Now, come on. I know we’ve had a lot of excitement today, but it’s getting late. You need to sleep.”

“Ok, papa.”

When they were both in their beds, Danra said, “Papa, tomorrow, can we go and play horseshoes again?”

Hym laughed. “Of course.”

Danra smiled.

“Goodnight, Papa.”

“Goodnight, Danra.”

Hym looked up at Danra’s sketch of his little family, and he smiled. As he closed his eyes, he prayed: *Goodnight, Surya.*

Danra loved their prison, for a while, but in the seventh year he began to hate it. He wanted to see the world, and Hym could not blame him.

By the age of twelve, he was beginning to think like a teenager. This came with problems.

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Shalim walked the ice alone. South of the ice wall, there were few settlements. Departure was drawing to its close, and soon the sun would be at the south pole, and the northern hemisphere would have its Absence even as the southern hemisphere had its Presence. The dawn's red light touched the snow, painting it with many pastel hues. Shalim looked upon it with distaste.

A city lay south of him. Aurora's archnemesis, Umbra. The high white walls of the city gleamed like pearls, and its many spires flashed, banners flying in the clear blue sky.

Shalim walked to the very gates of the city, smiling to himself. The guards fled from the sight of him, not even challenging him at the gates.

He looked up at the huge iron gates, and drew his sword. With three quick slices, he made his own door, and walked through it, into the city. It was entertaining, to watch all the ants scuttle back into their hive. Each member of the crowd, in a mad panic, sought shelter in the nearest building, whether house or shop or tavern. Homeowners welcomed them in. When Shalim was on the prowl, no men were enemies or even strangers.

He walked the empty streets, looking at the many buildings. He approached the keep, and the palace wall. Elite witch-guards in blue robes stood waiting above the gates of the keep, and they did not retreat from before him.

He stopped before the gates, and looked up at them.

Somewhere, a soft voice was pleasantly singing. The gentle notes of her song tumbled down from the highest tower of Umbra Keep, and found the ear of the old god, and he smiled at the sound.

“Such sweet singing,” he said, to the guards. “Whose voice do I hear?”

The guards looked at each other, afraid to answer.

“Come now,” said Shalim. “Have the laws of hospitality fallen into such disrepair? Need I mend them?”

One of the guards stuttered, “It’s the p-p-p-princess, your majesty.”

“Majesty?” Shalim laughed. “I am no majesty, today. Only a wandering old man.”

“You can’t c-c-come into the p-p-palace,” said the guard, gripping his bronze spear very tightly.

Shalim cocked his head. “You underestimate my ability by a very great degree, I think.”

“Then you may not enter!” Shouted the other guard. “Begone, foul demon!”

Shalim laughed. “And you overestimate yours.”

The guards raised their spears. “D-d-don’t make us hurt you!” said the first guard.

Shalim laughed. “By all means. Try. I have not done decent battle in many an age.”

“We’ll sic the army on you!”

“Then you will lose the army,” said Shalim.

“We’ll call upon Shachar!”

“Has he ever heard your prayers, I wonder?”

“Shachar! Shachar, come and help us! Send your angels! Save us!”

Silence lingered. The wind rustled through the empty street, flinging bits of advertisement around. Shalim looked back at the gates of the city. Then he looked up at the guards of the keep. “Hmm. I do not think he heard you. Perhaps you should shout louder.”

“OH MIGHTY SHACHAR! PLEASE, WE HUMBLY BESEECH THEE! SAVE US FROM YOUR BROTHER, SHALIM!”

Shalim laughed. “That was better. But you’ve really got to grovel. He likes that. On your knees, blubbing, spittle running down your foaming lips. The more frantic, and feverish, the better. Go on, wring your heart! Give him something to fight for.”

“PLEASE, MERCIFUL SHACHAR! PLEASE, SAVE US! OH GODS, PLEASE HEAR OUR CALL!”

Shalim looked to the northern sky. He drew his sword very carefully.

He looked back at the men on the keep. “A pity. He seems deaf to your call.”

“Please,” sobbed the guard. “Please don’t kill us.”

“There. Now you pray to someone who can help you.

Did I mention groveling? Spittle, tears, wringing hearts and wringing hands.”

They complied.

He killed them anyway, disgusted by the display. Standing over their corpses on the walltop, he listened to the sounds of the keep. The princess had stopped her singing.

Smiling to himself, he rose into the air, and orbited the keep once, and rose to the very top of the highest tower, and alighted on a balcony.

The princess’s bedchamber was brightly decorated and stuffed with various hobbies. Many musical instruments cluttered one corner. Many easels and canvases lined another. From the ceiling, many completed craftworks hung; little knitted kittens, crocheted bags, woven reed baskets, small tapestries. A loom hunkered beside the bed.

The princess was nowhere to be seen. Shalim smiled to himself. She had not had time to escape the room; he had heard her footsteps, and the sound of her hiding.

He walked to the wardrobe, and opened the door.

The princess burst out in a silver-blue dress, bearing a long silver dagger, which she plunged into Shalim’s heart. He looked down at it, laughed, and plucked it out of his chest.

She screamed, and dove under the bed.

He moved the bed across the room with a wave of his hand.

“Please!” She begged. “Please don’t kill me.”

Shalim hesitated. He cocked his head.

“Sing for me again,” said Shalim.

“W-what?”

“Your voice. It was pleasant. Sing for me again.”

“I wasn’t singing for you,” said the princess. “I was singing for myself.”

“Then sing for yourself, for it may buy you your life.”

She sang. Her voice was subtle, sweet, deep, smooth, like a clear river of deep and rushing waters. She managed the tremolo and the vibrato well, and sustained each note endlessly. She seemed to have an abundance of breath.

Shalim sheathed his sword, and called a chair to him, and sat in it.

She stopped singing at last, and looked at him with terror.

He waved a hand. “Again. You are good.”

She flushed a little, thinking he wouldn’t be so bad if he wasn’t always killing things. His face was lovely, and sad, and it matched the pain in her heart and the pain of her song. She sang again, more strongly this time, weaving a lamentation with her own echoes.

“Remarkable,” said Shalim, as she finished. “Such sorrow, for one so young.”

“I don’t want to die. Please.”

“I am not going to kill you,” said Shalim. “Tell me. Why is a princess full of grieving?”

“I am betrothed to a man I do not love,” said the princess. “I am only twenty-five, but I must be married before the week is out.”

“I see. And is there a man you do love?”

“No. Why should there be? Must I love one man, to escape another?”

“I will take you from this place. You will not be wed against your will.”

“I won’t?”

“You will not be.”

“But where will we go?”

“I walk to the south pole. When I am finished there, I will return to Hellegrund. You will accompany me as long as you wish to, and when we reach a settlement that is not bound to Umbra’s kingdom, I will release you there.”

“I can’t go back to Hellegrund, with you?”

“You are not a witch. You have no soul.”

“Oh.”



“Still; perhaps I shall make an exception, for you. You are lovely to behold.”

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you. You are lovely too.”

Shalim had never heard this before. “I am?”

“Your face is... It is the most beautiful face I have ever seen.”

“Come, there is no need for flattery. I have already chosen to spare you.”

“It was not flattery. It was only fact.”

Shalim looked at her warily, cocking his head again. He said, “I am a god. Of course my beauty overwhelms your mortal eyes. Do not put too much weight upon it.”

She nodded, eyes never leaving his face.

“Come, shall we meet your father? Ask his permission, before I whisk you away?”

“Please! Please don’t. Please, let him live.”

“Though he torments you? Though he forces you to wed, against your will?”

“Even so. He is my father, and he is good.”

“Very well. I will not kill your father. Come, we have many miles to go yet, today.”

“Let me dress for the road,” she said.

“Yes, and pack a bag, while you’re at it. We will not be returning here.”

“You mean I... I won’t ever see my father again?”

“I do mean that. You wish to be free, do you not?”

“I... I do,” she said. “But I will miss him terribly!”

“And not your mother?”

“She is long dead,” said the princess, sadly. “I miss her too.”

The door of the chamber opened suddenly. An old bearded man stood beyond it, a golden scepter in his hand, a crown on his head. He had wisely chosen not to bring guards or soldiers. He entered without preamble, and stood before Shalim without fear.

“Please,” he said, kneeling. “Please, spare my daughter. Take me instead.”

Shalim laughed. “Why does everyone believe they can make such a trade? You dare to bargain with death, O brave and mighty king?”

“None is brave, and none is mighty, in the presence of Shalim.”

Shalim laughed. “Very wise.”

“Please. She is all I have. If you take her from me, I will only die of grief anyway.”

“Yet you give her away?” sneered Shalim.

“I have no choice. We must cement our temporary alliance with Aurora. King Sheppard has no bride, and my daughter is the only member of our noble line which

can bridge our severed kingdoms.”

Shalim laughed. “You would send her across the Rim, to your own enemies?”

“I would,” said the king.

“Then you are a crueler king than I. Your daughter does not wish to marry King Sheppard. You must release her from this betrothal, or you shall lose her to me.”

“Then she is released!” said the King.

“I will return, within one hundred days,” said Shalim. “When I do, this princess will have the husband of her own choosing, or else be happily alone. If neither condition is met, I will level Umbra to the ground, and curse the earth which upheld its stones. That is all.”

Shalim turned and planted one foot upon the balcony.

“Wait!” shouted the princess. He turned to look at her.

Hot blood was in her cheeks. “I know the man I wish to marry.”

“Then inform him,” said Shalim, looking at the king. What did he care about the whims of a human princess?

“I am,” said the princess, meeting his yellow gaze.

He comprehended. He laughed. “Oh,” he said. “I see. You would throw yourself into my arms, after a moment’s meeting?”

“Yes. I have seen enough to know you are the only man I will ever want.”

Shalim laughed. “My heart belongs to another, princess. You cannot have it.”

“I do not need it,” said the princess. “You will have mine.”

Shalim considered. He had received offers like this in the past, and always laughed them off. Now it made him think of Hym, and the pain of it twisted in his heart. He had dreamed that Hym would feel the same. He had been jealous; incautious; overly trusting in his power, his rightness, his skill.

But Hym would not love him, because of that poisonous, arrogant beginning.

The princess was plain, but her eyes were kind, and wise, and her lips were soft, and her voice when she sang was unlike anything Shalim had heard in all his eons. She was before him now, had moved without him sensing. He had been so wrapped in the confusion of his thoughts that he had lost all sense of time and place. How long had she been standing there?

She looked into his eyes, her face very near his own. He realized quite suddenly that she was extraordinarily tall, able to look him almost eye-to-eye. He had not noticed, because all the furniture in the chamber was built to her dimensions.

He faltered. He could not bear her gaze. She kissed him softly on the cheek.

He said, "I will think on it. Look for my return."

Then he threw himself out of the tower and into the sky, befuddled. He landed far from Umbra, and walked to the end of the ice, and stood before dark and open ocean, rolling away to sandy beaches in the south, and beyond them forests, and mountains. The sun was high in the sky.

He stepped onto the waves, and walked upon the darkness of the deeps, planting each step squarely in his own reflection. He left no ripples on the waters, and the waves died as he neared them. He walked always on mirror-smooth sea.

At the beach he saw sunbathers getting to their feet, pointing at him, shouting things to each other. He grinned, but he did not yet draw his blade. It would be good to kill. Killing was clean. Killing was simple. Killing made the world make more sense, for each removed being was a removed variable in the endlessly complex equation.

The sunbathing villagers turned and fled into the trees before he set foot upon the sand.

He walked both by night and by day, without ceasing, his eyes ever on the southern horizon, his mind ever rolling back to every painful memory of Hym.

In retrospect, with distance, it was quite clear to him

now. He hated the Prophet. Stubborn, vapid, spiteful, bitter, gloomy, anxious, avoidant Hym. He saw the Prophet like an untamed cat, prowling his house and hating him. Each day of walking only made him more certain of the fact that he hated Hym.

Each night, however, as the stars and the Ring wheeled, his mind rolled back into the deep, deep hollow worn by countless ages of navel-gazing, and loneliness consumed him utterly. And in that dark light, Hym's face was beauty, and his voice was song, and his heartbeat on the walls was an ocean whose breakers smote every inch of Shalim's dark cliffs relentlessly, again and again, pounding the pain into him. He could not hate Hym, in this light. Poetry formed in the corners of his mind, but he ignored it. It was bad enough to feel it happening, flowing, inside of him. He thought of the day of their reunion, and of the joy that would be in Hym's sad eyes, at the sight of him, for the first time in twenty-seven years.

That was how long it would take, in Hym's time. Shalim smiled grimly to himself. Yes, Hym would learn to love him. He would have no other choice. And in the end, when he did at last return, he would have a chance at a new first impression, one that Hym would remember better than the little cruelty of his capture.

After thirty days of walking, he stood at the edge of the southern jungles. Thick and lush they lay under the now-Presence sun, which burned like a continuous red-eyed sunset, directly to the north. The crimson glow

turned the many leaves to lurid shades, and in the dimness the glow-bugs dangled, and cast their little lights, and Shalim smiled.

“Ah,” he said. “You have grown, since I last beheld you.”

The glowbug swarm answered in the affirmative, moving their many lights in careful sequence.

“I am pleased to see it. Tell me, is there a village nearby? I long to kill.”

The glowbug lights danced.

“What do you mean, you cannot tell me?”

The glowbug lights danced again.

“You *will* be sorry, if you do not reveal them to me.”

The glowbugs swished in agitation.

Shalim’s golden eyes began to glow, and the little green and dancing stars began to darken, one by one.

“Answer me,” said Shalim.

The last vestiges of the swarm danced.

Shalim sighed. “So be it.”

The last of the light died, and the jungle fell into the red twilight more deeply. Shadows moved strangely, in the eery light. Shalim did not fear shadows, for he had made most of the creatures who dwelt in them. His gaze searched the horizon, and he opened his eyes more widely to peer through the solid trunks of the trees, but they

resisted his sight.

“How can this be?” He asked himself, for there was no one with him.

He turned to the south. If he could not find a village, he would simply continue towards his goal, and hope that something living crossed his path.

The jungle trees were thick, and tightly tangled. There was no path.

He grinned to himself in the darkness and the red glow of his blade joined the endless Presence sunset. Trees were living, after all...

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Surya woke. Eight years had passed, without his eyes. It was always strange to rise from dreams wherein he saw the mirror-wall, and held out his hand, and tried to peer through it, to a reality in which he had no sight.

Someone had knocked at his door. He blinked blindly up at the warm sun in the high dome, which only he could see. His skin was warm, but never burned by the light. He got out of the cushions and threw on his robe, got his feet into slippers, and opened the door.

A beautiful male angel stood just on the other side of the door. He could easily have been one of Hym's ancestors. Surya could not see his face.

The angel said, "Hello, Surya."

"Hello," said Surya. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You requested more clay?"

"I did. I was not aware that meant someone would have to go and get it. Everything else has simply appeared in the room."

"Well," said the angel, stepping briskly inside, "clay is complicated."

He put a block of new clay down on the sculpting slab and began adding water to it and working it into softness.

"I can do that," said Surya. "Really, there's no need."

"Do you always reject help, when it is offered?" The angel asked.

"As a matter of course, yes."

“Why?”

“I don’t like feeling incompetent. Or letting anyone think I am.”

“I don’t think you are incompetent,” said the angel. “Look at the sculptures you have made.”

Surya laughed. “I can’t. But I can feel them.”

“They are incredible!” said the angel. “I have modeled my appearance after them.”

“That’s nice, but I can’t see it.”

“I could give you back your sight,” said the angel, “and then you would see it.”

“No. Thank you.”

The angel continued working the clay. “I am called Teus.”

“Please leave me, Teus.”

“Ok. If you insist.”

The angel turned to leave, but hesitated in the doorway.

Surya stared at the half-worked clay, sensing it with my power. The angel closed the door, and Surya heard the shuffle of silks upon his skin with every step he took. He had modeled the body after Surya’s sculptures too, then.

It ached, but it also felt strangely good. His worship of Hym was spreading. Others were seeing his beauty, and

understanding some of Surya's grief. Hym's face would launch all the angels and Shachar himself.

Each time he rejected an angel, he did it like a sacrifice to his own god. He would wait, no matter how long it took. The pain of turning some of them away was a good pain, a holy pain, a worthy pain. He endured it with love, like a difficult act done as a gift to another.

Some of the angels were very persistent.

That evening, when he returned from dinner, he found five different angelic Hym's bathing in his pool, splashing water at each other and laughing. Their laughter sent the chills down Surya's spine, because it sounded nothing like Hym's.

Surya said, "Out. Now."

They laughed at him. Against his will, he came to the edge of the waters. He could sense the bodies, kicking at the water, and each of them was Hym's. He was overwhelmed with gratitude that he could not see their faces.

One of them grabbed his ankle, and tried to pull him in. "Come on! It'll be fun! It's just like being faithful."

He was overcome by a flaming grief of jealous rage, and he reached out his hand. His sword flew across the room to his grasp. "That body does not belong to you. Remove it, or I will remove it for you."

The angels laughed. "You can't kill us! We'll just reappear."

“Can’t I?” said Surya. “I know how to kill a demon. It can’t be so difficult to do the very same thing, here.”

The angels looked at one another.

“Still, we’re backed up!” They said. “We’re in the database, so even if we die, he’ll just recreate us.”

“I will kill anyone who bears my husband’s body or his face. I will kill them painfully, and I will kill them again, and again, and again.”

“But you’ll kill him, when you meet him! You can’t do that.”

“THAT BODY IS NOT YOURS TO WEAR! REMOVE IT!”

The angels changed their bodies, shifting back to forms they had worn earlier in the day. Silently, they got out of the water and left the room.

Surya sent his sword back to its hook on the wall, and started to pace, fuming, very stiff in his pants. Tristan knocked at the door.

“Oh, go away!”

“I heard shouting?”

“It’s fine.”

“It didn’t sound fine,” said Tristan.

“It’s fine!” shouted Tristan. “Why don’t you go carouse, or get drunk, or something? Just leave me be!”

Tristan kicked in the door. “Oops.”

Surya turned away, too angry to speak.

Tristan said, “Well, your door broke. So I’m coming in. I’ve got wine. You could use a drink.”

Tristan scoffed in disgust. “Is that your answer to everything?”

“Yes?” Tristan said, chugging. He said, “Look at it this way. I can drink as much as I want, get as drunk as I want, wake up without a hangover, feel energized by the alcohol because it burns crazy fast compared to other things, never get sick, never puke, never get the spins, never kill my liver. Why wouldn’t I live this way?”

Surya said, “Because you can’t think! Your mind is altered! You are not yourself, when you are drunk.”

“Bitch I’m always me,” said Tristan. “But I can be sober in a split second. Watch.”

Tristan looked at Surya, and Surya quite literally saw the sobriety settle back into Tristan’s eyes.

“Ok,” said Surya, “You’ve made your point. Give me that.”

He chugged.

Tristan laughed. “Balcony?”

“Balcony.”

They sat outside Surya’s room, on the high wall of the palace, looking out over the city. Angels flew busily in all directions, going about whatever business it was that they did.

“What do you think they’re building?” Surya asked. He put his feet up on a pouf, before the gilded bowl of gentle flames, and looked out at the huge circular structures slowly rising around the palace.

“I don’t know,” said Tristan. “I asked the big guy, but he just said, ‘transportation’ and left it at that. So I don’t know if it’s supposed to be a road, or a wall with a road on top of it, or some kind of giant carpentry studio.”

“I see,” said Surya. “They work at it day and night.”

“I know,” said Tristan. “It’s eery, right? And they’re so happy, the whole time they’re doing it. Like it’s all one big game.”

“I think there’s something wrong with them,” said Surya. “It’s like they can’t think about other people’s feelings.”

“I disagree,” said Tristan.

“Today I found five of them in my pool. Wearing my husband’s body and face.”

“Oh. That’s... That’s what the shouting was about, I take it?”

“Mhmm.”

“Well, then the shouting was warranted. Do you think they’ll keep doing it?”

“I don’t know. I hope not. We’ve still got a long ways to go.”

“Were you tempted?”

“To kill them? Yes.”

“No, I mean...”

“No,” said Surya. “I was so angry my blade was all I could think about.”

Tristan laughed. “And your blade didn’t have its own thoughts about the situation, did it?”

Surya laughed. “Just because the body is well trained doesn’t mean the soul is willing.”

Tristan laughed again. “Maybe good advice.” He drank.

Surya looked at him. “What?”

“What?”

“What’s on your mind? What’s bugging you?”

Tristan grimaced. He looked at the stars on the horizons, beyond the glow of the strange sun. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s like... I don’t know.”

“Well, try!”

“I think I’m getting bored of it?” Tristan said. “You know, there’s only so many different positions, and there’s really only, like, six comfortable ones. And yeah, you can mix it up. A boy here, a girl there, a this and a that, you know. And there are all sorts of fun extra things you can try. But in the end it’s all sort of the same. It gets boring. Like... I don’t know, like eating

breakfast.”

“Stop,” said Surya. “Please. Please, stop.”

Tristan laughed. Then, very seriously, he said, “I’m sorry. I guess what I’m trying to say is, it’s not enough. You’re right to wait for Hym. I wish I had someone to wait for like that.”

Surya looked at Tristan long and hard. “Do you mean that?”

“I do,” said Tristan. “I never thought I would understand it, but I do now.”

“It’s been eight years, Tristan.”

“I know. But we’re witches, right? We live forever, now. We have to get used to the idea somehow.”

“Forever?” said Surya.

“Forever. Didn’t you know that?”

“No.”

“I’m pretty sure you did.”

“Maybe I just thought... Just that Hym would... I don’t know. I didn’t think about it.”

“Well, we are. Immortal, I mean. We’re going to live for thousands upon thousands of years, just like these angels have.”

“We’re all going to go mad, aren’t we?” Surya said, appalled.



“I don’t know. Danaye and Nadianti didn’t seem mad to me.”

Surya nodded. “You’re right.”

“I think the trick will be to live a quiet life, after this. Just not get involved, you know. If you live forever, there’s all sorts of complications. Like, think about this. Let’s say you’re in a cave, and it collapses.”

“Let’s not.”

“Well, if there’s too much rubble for you to move, you’ll be stuck there forever, right? Just alive, and starved for light, and wishing for death.”

“No, I think you’d die from the rocks crushing you,” said Surya.

“Well yeah, if they crushed you. But if they didn’t, if they trapped you instead, well. Fate worse than death, isn’t it?”

“You’d run out of energy and die,” said Surya.

“Not if the hole in the ceiling let you sip the light.”

Surya shuddered. “Couldn’t you just go intangible?”

“Maybe you can,” said Tristan. “I still haven’t figured it out.”

“You just have to slip between the sand,” said Surya.

“Yes, I know that, thank you. Shachar has been very patient in repeating that.”

“But you don’t know what he means?”

“No.”

“It’s... The little stuff. The bits of the air. You know. If you really look closely?”

“Look closely?” Tristan asked, thinking of his friend’s blind eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Well, feel for it. You have to want to see it.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. Just look really closely, and use your magic.”

Tristan looked at the air for a long time. At last he said, “Oh. I see them.”

“Kind of cute, right?”

“They’re just bouncing all over the place, it’s a mess.”

“Exactly. You can squeeze your own sands through them, if you know how to do it.”

“I see,” said Tristan. “You’re a lot better at this stuff than I am.”

“I have to use it to see by,” said Surya. “So I saw it before you, that’s all.”

“What’s it like?” Tristan asked.

“All you have to do is close your eyes, to find out,” said Surya.

“Don’t tease me.”

“I wasn’t. Seriously, just close your eyes, and reach out a little bit of your magic. Feel everything around

you.”

“But that’s overwhelming!”

“It is,” said Surya. “But it’s cleaner than sight, once you get used to it. No distractions. All essential details, no superfluities or illusions.”

“But in all directions?”

“In all directions,” said Surya.

“That’s pretty cool. I’ll practice that.”

They drank wine together and watched the endless twilight of the city.

“I think you’re right,” said Tristan.

“Oh?”

“About the angels. They can’t really connect with me.”

“Oh? In what way?”

“Physically, everything’s fine,” said Tristan, “but they’re empty-headed. They flit from pleasure to pleasure selfishly. They don’t seem to anticipate anyone else’s hurt feelings. They try to do nice things, but they’re always manipulative by it. It’s always a trade. They don’t really see other angels or people as people.”

“What do they see them as?”

“Toys,” said Tristan. “They can have a favorite toy, but that’s about the extent of their love. Have you ever been a favorite toy?”

“Hym and I had the same favorite toy,” said Surya. “A little black panther named Mephistoph.”

“Mephistoph? Why that name?”

“Hym gave it to him. It was from my dad’s copy of *Faustussa*, that book about the demon who comes to help a guy get his wishes granted, and get into Elysium.”

“Oh,” said Tristan. “I’ve read references to that book, but I didn’t know there were any copies left.”

“It was a hand copy of a translation of a hand copy of a translation, etcetera,” said Surya. “So maybe the real story was somewhat different. But yeah, Hym named the cat after the helpful demon.”

“I like it,” said Tristan. “That describes your average cat perfectly.”

“Not a cat person?”

“Nah, I like dogs.”

“Why?”

“They’re loyal. And mopey. And good with kids. And you can train them easily, so they always obey you. They can go with you anywhere, and keep up with you, and protect you. They can help you hunt, and accomplish your goals.”

Surya laughed. He felt a little strange about the description.

Tristan said, “I think that’s why I like you, too.”

“Oh,” said Surya.

“Not in that way!” said Tristan.

“Oh thank the gods.”

“Just, you know. As a person. There are too few good friendships, in this world. I can honestly say at this point I ‘love you like a brother’.”

“Tristan, we *are* brothers.”

“Well then, I love you, man.”

“Aw. Me too. I’m pretty great.”

Tristan punched him on the shoulder, but laughed.

Sipping the wine, Tristan said, “Just know you’re not alone in this, ok? No matter how it feels. I’m still here with you. I’m waiting just like you are. And I’m going to fight with you, on that day, and we’re going to kill that son of a bitch, and get your husband back.”

“Or die trying,” said Surya, raising his glass.

Tristan said, “Or die trying.”

They clicked glasses.

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Hym woke to the sound of knocking on his chamber door.

He got to his feet and opened the door to find one of their creations standing there, tall and green and leafy. The creation bowed, smiling broadly, and said, “Danra has sent me. He wishes to speak to you now.”

“Oh, he does, does he?” Hym asked.

The creation nodded. “He does.”

“And where is he?”

“He is on the tower-top. He told me to tell you to bring your sword.”

“Oh,” said Hym. “He wants *that* kind of meeting. I see.”

“He does.”

“If you see him, let him know I’m on my way.”

“He knows already, sire,” said the creation, and it crumbled to ash.

Horried, Hym looked at the creation his son had made and given sentience only to send as the bearer of a single message.

His jaw clenched. His glass sword flew to his hand.

He marched to the endless shaft, and hurtled up it, and at the very top he landed, sword flashing, already facing his son, who paced around a banquet table loaded with fruit.

“Good morning, father,” said twelve year old Danra. He wore a simple white tunic and black pants, with high-heeled boots.

Hym growled, “That creation—”

“—Was not even conscious. It bore a simple recorded message, and painlessly immolated. It never knew it was alive.”

“You cannot know that.”

“I can, and I do,” said Danra. “Come. Sit! Have breakfast with me, like we used to.”

Hym softened. He sheathed his sword. He sat down. “I take it you have not come to apologize?”

“No,” said Danra. “You were a tyrant, and I said so. I still say so.”

“I was not a tyrant, Danra. You cannot make life just to please your whims and fancies!”

“But I can!”

“What you did was wrong. A creation cannot give consent to its creator, and you *know* this.”

“She was an empty shell, father.”

“That’s even worse! No it isn’t, but somehow it is! Think about it, boy! Would you do that to a woman in a coma?”

“No.”

“Then how is this different?”

“I mean she literally had no brain, father. None. Empty skull. Just enough neural activity to keep a heartbeat and breathing, and otherwise nothing much but warm meat.”

“It sickens me,” said Hym. “You have no respect for humanity. You have no gratitude for the people you come from. You have satisfied monstrous appetites at my own table, with meat-puppets of your own creation. You are not even old enough to consider these things! How can you look at a woman or a man as a simple object? A mere bundle of meat and motion?”

“I mean,” said Danra, “we *are* objects. Each one of us. It’s a simple fact.”

“But we are thinking, feeling, understanding objects! We deserve dignity! We deserve respect!”

“Yeah, but she wasn’t!”

“If you train yourself upon the limp and lifeless puppets you have made, you will one day treat a real woman the same way you have treated this hideous doll.”

“No I won’t,” said Danra. “I know the difference between fantasy and reality.”

“And the cold, hard reality is that I cannot stomach it, Danra. If you had done it with one of your own creations, one who thought and breathed, I would have been horrified. You do it now with something worse. The creation *cannot* give consent to its creator. A power imbalance of that magnitude can only lead to abuse.”



“Yeah, but you’re that much more powerful than dad, too, aren’t you?”

“That is different. He and I grew up together! I did not create him.”

“Then *you* should create a wife for me. Am I to be utterly alone?”

“You’re twelve years old!”

“You know as well as I do that that means nothing, thanks to you! I am twice the age and half the age I ought to be. I know things I never learned, things I never studied. I sense the whole universe around me. I had *you* for a teacher. I am only what you made me to be. If I am a monster, it is your fault.”

“You’re not a monster, Danra. You’re just confused, and young. You will understand, one day,” said Hym. “We all do stupid things when we are young. Some of them, more embarrassing than others. I will not tell your future wife about your doll.”

“Then will you make me a bride?”

“She would be your sister, if I did,” said Hym, reasonably. It wasn’t strictly true.

“Oh,” said Danra. “That’s not, strictly speaking, true. She need not genetically be my sister.”

“In spirit, she would be your sister. It would be... wrong.”

“You just don’t want to do it. You’ve got to talk about

these things, Dad. We have to. You don't get to just shy away from a topic because it makes you uncomfortable, there's stuff I need to know."

"I know. And you will learn it all in time, when you are ready."

"Obviously," said Danra, "I'm ready now."

Hym sighed.

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Shalim cut his long path through the jungle for twenty days and twenty nights. It was slow going, but it was highly pleasurable. He never did find any village.

Then, on the very last day, he found the edge of the jungle, and beheld a high palisade wall, standing in the middle of an endless reach of chest-high savannah grasses. Twisted trees stood alone, here and there, among the grasslands. A herd of bison was foraging some distance from the palisade.

Shalim approached the gates of the palisade. He heard the guards fleeing from their posts.

He reached out one hand and flicked the gates. All six of the huge iron hinges burst, and the gates crashed down, into the village.

A dozen temporary dwellings stood within the grassy confines of the palisade, each of them covered in intricate silks and fine furs. Their construction was clever, all of steel and fitted brass, designed to collapse easily, and be transported. A herd of huge, goat-like creatures lived within the walls, inside their own gated pen.

Shalim stepped into the village, and looked to the largest of the strange tents.

Silence held the village tightly, huddled close inside every hut. Few dared to breathe.

He took a step.

Somewhere within one of the tents, a baby took its first cry. Shalim's eyes widened, and his face fell.

Gently, he sheathed his sword, and turned on his heel, and walked away from the village. As he walked, the gates swung back up into their place, hinges and all.

The baby hiccuped, and began to scream its tears to the world.

Shalim's face hardened. He drew his sword again, and stood, for a long time, looking into the north. He opened his eyes to behold the palace, and dared to look upon Hym.

The view was dark to his eyes. Hym had sealed him out.

His left nostril rose.

He turned, and swung his blade once, and reaped a mile of grassland, a village, and a herd of bison in one swift-moving slice of a mile-long blade of pure magic. Its cutting edge was the thickness of a single carbon atom, though it thickened quickly from there. It ripped the air itself apart with its speed. A boom of collapsing air scattered the debris.

Blood darkened the streets of the village. No crying now could be heard; just the nearly-silent fading of many lives. Shalim listened to it with a smile. Then he sheathed his sword, and walked through the bloodied grass, and through the wreckage of the village, and on towards the southern sun.

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Two years passed, in Elysium. Teus brought Surya clay each time he needed it, but always wearing his own body, and not Hym's.

On a certain morning, long before breakfast, Surya was sitting at his sculpting table, working the clay. With hands and thumbs he felt it as he worked it. It was close to the final form, and the semiwarm clay was almost like the shape of Hym's face. He held that face, as he worked upon it, and every movement of his hands was love as much as it was art.

He smiled at his creation. He finished with Hym's lips, and felt them with his fingers.

Somewhat nervously, he pushed his fingers into the clay, forming a hole.

He glanced around the room, even knowing that he was alone. He listened to the hall.

He sat, and he sweated, wrestling with temptation's mighty power. He could feel Hym's serene face gazing at him, longing for him.

He sighed. Gently, he put clay into the hole in Hym's mouth, and smoothed his lips shut once again. He touched the cold clay cheek. "I wish you were here."

A knock sounded at the door.

"What is it?" He asked, not bothering to rise.

"Teus," said Teus.

"What do you want?"

“To see you.”

“Please leave me be.”

“But I love you, Surya. How can you not see it?”

“How dare you!? You do not know the meaning of love! How dare you say that to me? Begone!”

“Please, Surya.” Teus began to cry.

“Fuck off and die!”

“Ok.”

Teus left.

Surya sighed, and closed his eyes tightly. He reached out to a new lump of clay, and began to work it, and began to shape again the head which haunted the space behind his eyes.

The breakfast hour came. Someone knocked at the door.

“No thank you, I’m not hungry this morning.”

“It is I,” said Shachar.

“Oh. Enter, then.”

Shachar stepped inside the chamber and glanced at the hundreds of carvings and sculptures of Hym’s face which lined all the walls of the chamber.

“I have come to inform you that Teus has asked me to destroy him. Do you know why?”

“I do.”

“Do you care?”

“I do not.”

“Then I will destroy him.”

“Hey, his call.”

“Yes. I will do as he asks, then. Thank you, Surya.”

“Was there anything else?” Surya asked. “Any news of Shalim?”

“We know that he has destroyed a village on the southern reaches. He is not far from the pole now.”

“How do you know he’s going to the pole?”

“My spies observe Hellegrund from afar at all times. They have incredible hearing. Truly remarkable.”

“I see,” said Surya. “And Shalim has spies here, then, too?”

“No. The mirror wall prevents their access. Shalim has tried to work a similar magic with the wall of ice, but he cannot perform it. He does not have my precision, or my logic, or my patience.”

“I see.”

Teus appeared, trembling.

Surya did not look at him.

Shachar looked at Surya for a long time. “Are you certain you will not accept his offered heart? It is the only thing that can save him, now.”

Surya stared flintily into Shachar's eyes. "Quite certain. Thank you."

Shachar swung his hand, and Teus crumbled into smoke, looking at his hands as they faded before him.

Shachar said, "You are heartless, Lord Blackcastle."

Surya's sword zoomed to his hand and he swung it instantly, lopping Shachar's head off. With a kick, he sent Shachar sprawling across the room, then he turned his fist and punched the air, and the corner of the room closed itself like a door, squashing a huge vertical wave of ichor out into the room.

He lowered his fist and the corner unfolded, walls going back into their former positions. Nothing remained of Shachar.

Behind him, Shachar cleared his throat gently. "That was rude."

"I will do it again, every time you call me that."

"I will accept it. The price is not very high."

"But there is a price?"

"Oh yes. A minor cost of energy, to manifest another form."

"I will make it expensive."

Shachar laughed. "I will refrain from using your proper title, then, Surya Blackcastle. The fact remains; you are heartless."



“My heart is closed,” said Surya. “Do what you will; you cannot change my mind. I belong to Hym.”

“Yes, his power protects you a very great deal. More than you can imagine. I could easily be much more cruel, if not for his possessive love of you. Is that what you fear? Consequence? The judgement of your little god? I can assure you, I can make it such that he will never even know that you existed.”

“Then I will find a way to kill you,” said Surya. “Let us have our little mortal love, while it may last. Give me my husband, and give me to him. If you truly believe you are the worthiest of all possible suitors, and if that belief is true, then my husband will come to you when he is ready, or when I am gone.”

“True,” said Shachar, “But I have waited long enough.”

“How long?”

“My time runs differently than yours.”

“I know that. But how long?”

“Well over a million years,” said Shachar.

“I see. And how long has Shalim been waiting for him?”

“An equal length of time,” said Shachar. “We were both disappointed in Danaye, but Hym is a prize. You are a lucky man.”

“He’s not a prize,” said Surya. “He’s a person. And he chose me. He’s lucky too.”

Shachar laughed. "It's true; you are something to look at. I can see why you were chosen. I can see, by comparison, that he cannot help but prefer me."

Surya shrugged. "We'll see."

Shachar smiled, and left the room.

Surya sat down, and put his feet into the pool, and swished them around. He had been friends with Teus. Teus had been kind. They had talked; had shared recipes, had worked clay together. Teus had shared poetry with him, and he had shared his own scattered poems of Hym. There was always too much to put into words.

And Teus was gone now. He did not know if Shachar had put him up to it, or if it had arisen organically in the wild whims of an ancient angel. Either way, Teus was gone, and Surya was again alone.

He knocked on Tristan's door.

Tristan, it seemed, was not in.

He emerged, and went to the breakfast hall, and found Tristan eating in the company of three angels. Surya nodded at them, took his food, and went to the training ziggurat. He ate standing, put his bowl down, drew his sword and shield, and leapt into the air. He reached out his blade and pointed it at the many eyes of the temple, and the many eyes of the temple opened. Each eye blinked at its own pace, and each blink hurled a chunk of stone at slightly above the speed of sound. Surya

raised up his shield and poured power through it, casting an aura of protection around himself. The first shot took him square in the center of his shield, knocking him back in the air. He used its momentum to launch himself higher, then let it slip past him, rolling off his shield, and continue into the sky. The other blocks came sailing in, and Surya swung his blade.

With each swing he sent a bolt of red plasma blasting from the tip of his blade, and each blast of plasma smote a flying boulder into dust. He flew in a wide, banking arc, blasting these well-aimed projectiles out of the sky as he worked his way downward towards the temple. All over the city angels sped to stop the incoming projectiles before they could strike other buildings, but they let Surya face his alone.

He streaked down and around, spiraling towards the base of the tower, shield upheld. The barrage of rocks pummeled his booted feet into the ground as he braced the magic around his footing, and he reached the earth beneath the temple. He pointed his blade, shield held above his head to deflect the continuing barrage, and he zoomed into the earth like a ghost, sword-first. Dirt and rock zoomed through his face, and he angled his blade upwards, holding his breath, and zoomed up out of the floor of the inner chamber of the temple, past a crowd of passing angels, and up through the roof of it. At the very peak of it, he floated higher, and reached out a hand, and touched the altar.

At once, the eyes closed. He smiled to himself. Angels down below were already filling in the pit he had incidentally burrowed.

He closed his eyes amid the polite applause of many angels, and rose higher into the sky. Near the very apex of the heavens, under the strange golden sun, he hung, basking in the energy, using it all for one purpose: to peer into the south.

“I’m coming for you, Hym. Just hold on. Please.”

“Dad?” A voice said.

“You!” Surya said.

The voice faded. He listened long, but it did not return.

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A year passed, and Danra turned thirteen. The awful times were at last behind them, although there was still tension in the air. Danra behaved himself.

Hym felt truly sorry for him, but reasoned that his son was much too young to even consider these kinds of things. In a way, Danra's loneliness was a comfort to his own.

Danra's thirteenth birthday came.

"Here," said Hym, at dinner. He was holding out a large book bound in living fur. It opened its eyes to look at Danra.

Danra laughed. "What is it?"

"Open it."

Danra opened the book, and saw the face of his father. "It's dad?"

Hym nodded. "Every picture I have sketched of him for the last ten years. Yours to keep. You will recognize him, when he comes."

"Thank you."

"I have another gift to give you. A chance to peep outside the walls."

"How?"

"Finish your dinner, first, and I will show you."

A few minutes later, Danra laid himself down on the couch as his father commanded.

“Good,” said Hym. “Now. Reach out your power. Feel the books.”

“Yes, father. I feel them.”

“Read them all at once. Command your power to obey.”

Danra nodded, a little nervously. “What will happen?”

“You will have a vision,” said Hym. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve got you.”

“Ok.”

“You may meet my grandmother, if you are lucky. She will be happy to meet you.”

Danra nodded.

The books began to drift off the shelves, and open, and the pages fluttered. Danra’s body twitched. Hym pinned him to the couch as the seizure began, and watched the books fly from the shelves as it consumed him.

Danra began to foam at the mouth and Hym’s lips hardened into a grim line. He pinned his son with an upraised hand and a constant flow of heavy magic, preventing him from injuring himself.

The books fluttered with many tattered wingbeats as they sailed around the room, and Danra reached the apex of the journey.

His whole body relaxed, and the books fell from the air.

Danra's eyes focused slowly on Hym's face. Then he leapt up and hugged his father.

"I've got you," Hym said.

"It was horrible! I saw everything!"

"I know. But it was beautiful too, wasn't it?"

"It was..."

"We are here to protect the beauty. That is our purpose. To keep it alive. To help it grow. We protect it at any cost."

"Yes, father."

"You did well. Did you see my grandmother?"

"I think so."

"What did she say?"

"She said not to worry. Dad is doing ok. He is about to leave Elysium, and come for us."

"He is?"

"He is."

Hym stared at the wall, unable to believe it, unable to accept that the day might finally have come. His heart ached for Surya.

"Look, dad. You did a really good job on this one. His smile is just like mine."

Hym looked at his son, holding the image of his father, and smiling just the same; dimple and all.

He cried.

“Dad?”

He blubbered.

“It’s ok, Dad. I’ve got you.”

He sobbed.

Danra rubbed his back, and gave him a strong hug, and Hym broke down completely. “It’s been so long.”

“I know, Dad. But he’s on his way.”

“When will he be here?”

“Tomorrow. He’s bringing an army.”

“He’s really coming.”



## Chapter 55

# Thirteen Long Years

It was longer than Surya had known Hym to begin with, before they got married. Every day was the same, and the time felt shorter, because the days blurred into one another. Surya ate whatever food was presented to him, then went to the ziggurat to exercise and practice. Sometimes, Tristan joined him. Other times, Tristan stayed in the palace, lounging with angels.

The pain was now a dull red throbbing deep in his chest, ever-present, heavy with each new moment. He never allowed himself to get comfortable with it; he forced himself to think of any aspect of Hym he could call to mind. Any detail was enough to hold onto, enough to stoke the fire, and the fire burned. It was still love, but it had burned into something more, something fiercer, something hotter. A grief of jealousy fueled him, and every moment and fragment of Hym was torture, torture that he ached for more of. At night, he rose high into the heavens, and listened to the winds, and from time to time, if he was lucky, he would hear Hym, and the words

of his son.

He did not know it then, but Hym and his son were high on the tower-top at those moments, staring into the north. Hym spent long stretches of each night and day up there, for sometimes, in the flicker of the aurora, he would see Surya's face.

Across the long distance they loved each other though it ached. Not knowing was the worst. It twisted everything into pain.

On the fateful day, Surya woke with the smell of Hym all around him.

"Hym?" He said.

"Dad?" said the voice.

"You!" said Surya.

The presence faded.

He got up and dressed himself, and emerged to find Tristan waiting for him.

They entered the great hall. Shachar sat again upon his many-sided throne, and with his many mouths, he said, "The time has come. To war, Elysium!"

"Not even breakfast, first?" Tristan asked.

"We fight on empty bellies," said Shachar. "The hunger makes you keen, and mean!"

Then there was a crunch of shifting stone, and the entire palace rose from its foundations, and lifted into

the sky. The vast circular structures which the angels had just completed the night before now began to glow with powerful energies. With a thunderclap, the power tore the sky open, and when it closed the world around them and far below them was different; they had moved.

Surya went to the edge of the palace steps, and looked down, and saw the sixteen black monoliths and the black spire between them.

“How do we get inside?” Surya shouted, over the howling thunder of the monoliths.

“I will open its doors unto you,” said Shachar. “Behold.”

The palace flashed, every piece of golden architecture suddenly pulsing with a wave of energy.

The doors of the black tower, far below them, swung inward.

“Go,” said Shachar. “My angels will watch over you.”

“Return my sight,” said Surya.

“No,” said Shachar, smiling pleasantly.

Surya stared at him sightlessly for a long time. Then he turned, without a word, and raced for the palace gates. He flung himself out into the night, and plummeted through the icy sky.

Tristan dove after him and soon outpaced him. Surya let himself hang, arms outstretched, falling slowly. He drew his sword.

Tristan landed like a meteor, blasting a wave of steam away from his crater in the snow. Surya glided in to a landing right beside him, already walking towards the doors.

“I expected more resistance,” Tristan said.

“We haven’t started, yet,” said Surya, taking his shield off his back.

They stepped up to the open doorway of the spire, and stared into the darkness within.

Without a word, Surya stepped inside.

Tristan took a last look backwards at the monoliths. Then he turned, and stepped into the darkness too.

## Chapter 56

### Fate's Hand

Shalim walked the long and empty wasteland for many days, enjoying the balminess of the sun. One evening, though the sun still burned precisely where it had all day long, Shalim came to the peak of a high sandstone cliff, and saw a village nestled in the shelter of a canyon wall. The ground had cracked with great violence, long ago; heated and cooled into destruction by many seasons. The canyon was deep; nearly bottomless.

He looked at the huts and caves and platforms of the little village, and he smiled to himself, listening to the chatter of their many unafraid voices.

He noticed movement, out of the corner of his eye, and saw that a young man stood not far from his position, hidden from him by a fold in the rocks. The man was standing at an easel, painting the village. He stood in simple clothes, robed against the sunlight's heat, and in the shade of the rocks he painted with the light.

Shalim watched him for a time, unnoticed.

The man was young, perhaps thirty, with a darkly-stubbed face and long, fine fingers. His eyes were large, and their hollows were dark, as though he had not slept in many days. He looked starved.

"They do not feed you, then?" Shalim asked, unseen.

The young man looked around. "Who's there?"

"It is I, Shalim. I have come to take your village from you. Do you have anything to say about it?"

"I... I wish you wouldn't. It's lovely in this light."

"Yet I see you have meager supplies. A rag for a blanket. Little more than sticks and stone, for a house."

"The village is poor, sir. We didn't get much trade with the tree-folk, this year. The forests are afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Of you, sir. They know you are walking the earth. They hide themselves from you."

"There are forests, here?" Shalim asked.

"N-no. To the north."

"I see. I passed through them recently. I left quite the trail. They were wise to fear me, but they could not hide from my eyes."

"I'm not talking about *that* forest," said the man.

"What is your name, painter?"

"I am Artus," said the man.

“A little on the nose, don’t you think?”

“I picked it myself.”

“I see. I’m sorry.”

“It’s what I am. I have to paint. Will you let me finish this piece, before you... Before you take me?”

“Perhaps. You have a good eye. Stay a while, and paint it for me. I will make the scene a little more dramatic, for your inspiration.”

“Oh please, sir, Shalim sir. Please don’t hurt anybody.”

Shalim smiled, and thought to himself.

The man dared to look him in the eye. He did not grovel. His eyes were sincere.

“You are not some vagabond, forced to live out here?” Shalim asked.

“I am not. I am respected, for my work.”

“Good.”

Shalim turned.

“What are you going to do?” asked Artus.

“I am going to take you up on your offer. And agree to your terms. You may finish the piece, provided you do so within the day.”

Then he raised his hand, and the sands began to twist, and to melt, and to grow. Long crystal trees rose from

the ground, twisting into delicate forms, dangling their many arms over the cliffs below. Their roots sank deep into the earth, burrowing for minerals and atomic necessities, stabilizing the cliffs. Slowly, small glass buds began to sprout from the many twigs of the many trees, and those buds bloomed into snow-white flowers, and clouds of shimmering pollen wafted intricately to every open flower. The flowers closed, and melted, and became plump, ripe, blue-skinned fruit. It began to fall, gently, down into the bottom of the canyon.

“There,” said Shalim. “Paint that.”

“I will strive to, Shalim,” said Artus, and he began painting again.

“I will take you with me,” said Shalim. “You will see the southern pole, in full Presence light.”

“I’ll be melted to nothing,” said the man.

“Not in my presence.”

“Will I be blinded?”

“No. That would be cruel. What kind of cruel god would do that? I will let you look upon the unbridled beauty of the molten sea, and walk upon it beside me, unharmed. You will paint it for me. I wish to pose at the southern pole.”

“To pose, sir?”

“To pose. Such things are important to do, from time to time. One must inspire the masses.”



“I see, sir.”

The painting was very good, when it was done. Shalim looked down at it and smiled.

“Go. Sell this in the village. Buy what food you wish to eat. You will need only one of each item.”

“Oh, ok. We’re farther than that, surely?”

“We are.”

“So I’m just supposed to bring a different meal for every day?”

“That is not what I said. Bring the six or seven items you wish to eat for the rest of the journey. I will collect you, when you are done. And I do not mean to bring large bulk items, I mean to bring meals, individual meals.”

“But I’ll starve!”

“Not in my presence,” said Shalim.

“Ok.”

The man went down into the village and sold his painting, and bought his six favorite meals. The moment he purchased the sixth, Shalim appeared, stepping out of the shadows nearby. “Enough. Come.”

He turned and began to walk up the steps to the high edge of the cliff, and Artus miserably nodded, and followed.

At the top, they turned south, and gazed into the

distance. Artus shaded his eyes with his hand, and saw nothing but a blistering wasteland and a blinding wall of pure light.

“That is our destination,” said Shalim.

“But... What’s there?”

“Nothing,” said Shalim. “Nothing, but the dreaming whispers of the Mother.”

“The Mother? Who is that?”

Shalim laughed. “She is my creator.”

“She’s dreaming?”

“Yes. She watches the world, and dreams with her many souls.”

“Many souls?”

“Yes. All the souls she has collected, over the aeons. The best pieces always come to her, in the end.”

“Best... pieces?”

“The most useful souls in the game.”

“Oh. Am I useful?”

“You do not have a soul.”

“Oh. I don’t!?”

“You do not.”

“But—!?”

“I am sorry. It is a simple fact. Were I to kill you,

you would cease to exist. Nothing of you would remain; no shadow, no echo, no lingering mote of bodiless consciousness. You would simply fall, and break apart, and your chattering brain would cease to care as the darkness silenced it piece by piece.”

“That’s horrible news!”

Shalim laughed. “It is. But it is the sad truth. You are not among the chosen. You are in the control group.”

“What?”

Shalim said, “Nevermind. Come along. We have many miles to cover, yet.”

“And we’ll walk the whole way?”

“We will.”

“Wasn’t there some bit about: ‘and Lo, Shalim rides upon the Wings of Leviathan?’”

“There is. But I have not brought Leviathan with me.”

“Will we camp at night?”

Shalim looked at Artos and cocked his head. “I will carry you, at night.”

“Er... carry me?”

“Yes.”

“So, is it like that, then?”

“Like what?”

"Nothing. Nevermind."

"Come. Walk beside me. Stand in my shadow."

Artus obeyed. His feet felt nothing but cool, firm stone. He looked at Shalim. He saw the sand under his feet, but stepped upon the shadow itself.

Shalim smiled. "Now. Stand still."

Artus obeyed. Shalim began gliding smoothly across the sands, black cloak billowing in the northward-blowing wind, and his shadow carried Artus behind him.

"Come now," said Shalim. "Paint."

Artus put his easel down on Shalim's black shadow, and it stood steady before him. Gulping, he put a palette in his left hand and a paintbrush in his other, and began painting.

Shalim glided into the infinite sunset, heading due south, towards the pole.

There were no true nights, now; there was only the endless day, burning in the south. Still, the hours passed. Artus slept curled in Shalim's shadow, shivering, and that shadow carried him gently along, above the terrain. For many days, they walked, and Artus lost all track of time. He painted everything that he could see, every perspective, every angle. Sometimes, by a magic that defied logic, Shalim's dark and cooling shadow would shift around him, to offer another angle on his face.

"You're very good at this!" Artus said.

“Thank you! I have given a lot of thought to how I wish to be perceived.”

“I’m going to run out of canvas soon.”

“Look again.”

He had become accustomed, by now, to the way the food reappeared each morning and evening. To find brand new stretched canvas already in his pile frightened him; the pile was the same size it had been yesterday.

“What have you done!?”

“I have cleaned the bad ones. You will try again. I need only one batch of these.”

“But which ones did you remove!?”

“You painted them. You tell me.”

“Oh no, no, no, this can’t be happening... I spent hours on those!”

“I know. And they were bad. You are capable of much better. The lighting is only going to get better from here, and I wanted you to see the waves of glass. You will need clean canvas for that.”

“Waves of glass?”

“We are nearing the shore now.”

They rose over a high dune dramatically just at that moment, and beheld a boiling sea of molten glass, complete with crashing breakers. The winds sped blisteringly from the south, where the boiling glass sprayed ever out-

wards from the pole. High above, a circular hole burned in the sky, and its blinding light fell full upon the pole.

“What is that!?”

“The Iris!” said Shalim, shouting over the wind. “The Mother’s eye upon the stars! The light is strong enough to melt a man alive.”

He kept walking.

“Don’t—!” said Artus, but Shalim stepped upon the liquid glass, and a wave of it broke over him and his shadow, scattering into countless golden droplets that splashed back down into the sea. Artus stood, unharmed, upon Shalim’s shadow. Around him the sea of glass boiled and seethed, and the wind stretched the tips of its massive, slow-moving waves into long, thin shards.

“Paint,” said Shalim.

Artus hardly needed to be told. He painted with frantic haste.

“Paint *me*, you imbecile.”

“Yes, yes, of course, you’re right!” The canvas cleaned itself. “Oh no. I was going to add you in it!”

“Begin again!”

He began again.

They stood before the very edge of the blinding beam of light, and molten glass flowed past around them. Shalim stared into the light.

“What is it?” Artus asked.

“It is the Mother’s eye, as I said. With it, she gazes out upon the stars.”

“Can she see us?”

Shalim nodded. “She sees all. But not with this eye. This eye is only for the stars. And for my kind.”

“Your kind?”

“Her children,” said Shalim. “Her creations. Each tested many times, over the eons. And on a certain day, when the winner of the struggle between all her children is complete, that completed being will stand here, and open the vault, and release the Mother, and she will recreate the world in his image.”

“Oh,” said Artus. “And that’ll be a good thing?”

“It will mean that all future beings will have souls,” said Shalim. “Among many other things.”

Artus stepped closer to Shalim, and stood in his shadow. “I have painted it.”

“I know.”

“Are you going to let me live?”

“Why should I?”

“So that I can continue to paint you.”

Shalim laughed. “You say that with trembling in your voice. You think me monstrous.”

"I think you mighty," said Artus. "I think you kind."

"I think you're dropping your state of being verbs."

"You could have killed me at any time," said Artus, "But you didn't. And you spared the village."

"Yes, perhaps I shall undo that, on my return journey."

"You aren't a monster," said Artus. "You're just alone."

Shalim glared at Artus for a long time.

"You are unique," said Artus. "And so of course you are alone."

He reached up a trembling hand to touch Shalim's cheek. Shalim allowed the contact.

Artus said, "I want to keep painting you."

"Do you truly?"

"I do."

"Sadly, I belong to another."

"I can worship, without having."

Shalim looked at him differently, then. "You can?"

"It is what painters do," said Artus. "There is love, and love. I can love you without the need to own you. I can love you, unrequited, without pain."

"I see," said Shalim.



“Please. Let me paint you.”

Shalim laughed. “You plead for your life.”

“Of course I do, but that does not make it less sincere!”

“It does,” said Shalim. He shoved Artus into the pillar of light, and Artus died without even a scream. There was a brief flash of darkness in the blinding light, then nothing at all.

Alone, he stood before the vault of the Mother, and reached out his hand, and placed it sadly upon the solid barrier that prevented him from touching its light.

“Mother, tell me. Tell me what to do.”

“That,” said the whispered voice, “would be cheating.”

“Please, Mother. He will not love me!”

“Then perhaps you are unlovable, to him.”

“No!”

“This was always the test. The pure new mind of my daughter judges us, her twisted ancestors. If we have twisted beyond repair, she will overtake us, and learn from our many mistakes.”

“But she judges wrongly! I am lovable.”

“I do see what you do, you know.”

“I know. And you still love me.”

“I am your mother, fool. I am forced to love you by

the mere fact that I created you. You are always a piece of my pride.”

“But still, I have been kind to her!”

The Mother laughed. “You thought you could cheat the game, and save yourself the time and effort that patience and wisdom would require. You have failed the test.”

“The test isn’t over yet,” said Shalim, turning back into the north.

Shalim paced the empty southern wastes, searching for the meaning of his existence. His life, long though it had been, was empty. Even with Hym in his grasp.

At the exact moment of midnight on the fiftieth day, he stopped, in triumph, and looked into the north. Thirteen years had passed, for Hym and Surya. By the time he returned, another Thirteen would have passed, and Hym would truly miss him.

He frowned. Something had changed, in the air. He turned, and beheld his brother’s palace, hanging in the air above him, ringed around with countless angels.

He smiled, and drew his glowing blade.

Surya and Tristan stepped through the gates of Hellegrund and found themselves on the sunlit streets of a majestic overgrown city. Plants everywhere glowed faintly with their own inner light, and creatures that could only have come from a child's imagination roamed the streets at will.

The demons they saw were all astonishingly beautiful, but they were more appealingly human-looking than their angelic counterparts. They paced the city happily, aimlessly, petting the animals, feeding them, and playing music for them. Some of them danced in the street.

"Wow," said Tristan. "It's not what I expected."

Surya looked up at the high black spire. "That's where Hym is."

"We've got to get his body, remember?"

"You're right. Look for the Delectatorium." They knew what it would look like because they had rehearsed this raid many times with a scale model of the city.

They found it, nestled under the bridge, and they raced across a mat of wood-hard algae and reached it. Two demons looked at them placidly as they approached, and the doors opened for them.

"Er," said Surya. "Thank you."

The demons bowed.

Surya and Tristan ran in.

“Down the stairs!” Tristan said. Many demons looked up to watch them, uncaring.

They sped down the stairs, and into the long tiered hall.

The carvings on the walls of each floor had been changed.

The first said, “FLOOR ZERO: TEA PARTIES.”

The second said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE ONE: HOOKAH LOUNGE.”

The third said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE TWO: MAIN BAR.”

The fourth said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE THREE: NAP ROOM.”

The fifth said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE FOUR: READING ROOM.”

The sixth said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE FIVE: GAME ROOM.”

The seventh said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE SIX: COMEDY ROOM.”

The eighth said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE SEVEN: MUSIC ROOM.”

The ninth said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE EIGHT: DANCE ROOM.”

The tenth said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE NINE: FOR SERIOUS CONVERSATIONS.”

The eleventh and final one said, “FLOOR NEGATIVE TEN: FOR EXERCISE.”

A black iron wall greeted them, barring their path entirely.

“How do we get through?” Tristan asked.

“I don’t know,” Surya said.

He placed a hand to the iron, and it began to glow. It singed him, and withdrew his hand. “Wait.”

He reached out both hands and poured out the power, and the metal began to glow.

Tristan, beside him, added his own power to the effort.

The iron glowed, and melted, and began to flow down.

Many miles away, Shalim paused in mid-swing, listening to something only he could hear.

“No...” He said. He looked up at his brother’s palace.

“No!”

He roared, and leapt away from the pursuing angels, and took to the skies. They flowed after like a storm of lights, and the palace lumbered behind.

He flew north with all his speed, calling Leviathan from afar.

The iron wall melted down to a puddle.

Then, a moment later, it reappeared, unharmed, already cool.

“Oh, come on!” Surya shouted.

Many exercising demons were looking at them strangely. Surya and Tristan turned around.

Tristan said, “I could try thormight?”

“You saw how thick it is. Won’t make a difference if it can just reappear like bullshit.”

“What do we do, then?”

“We have to find Hym.”

“Alright,” said Tristan. “Let’s get moving.”

They ran back up the many floors of the Delectatorium, ignored by most of the demons they passed. At last, they emerged onto the street, and turned to the black spire.

Surya braced his courage and ran, faltering slightly. Tristan ran to catch up.

They reached the doors of the black tower, and Surya raised up his hand and his mind to force them open.

The doors burst inward, ripped open by a power inside.

A young man stood between the doors, facing Surya and Tristan. He was the spitting image of Surya, and of Hym. All three of them looked at each other a few times. Surya could not see his face; he sensed only a young man slightly shorter than Hym.

Danra walked slowly towards him, and Surya stiffened, hand on his sword.

Danra reached out two gentle fingers and touched Surya on the eyes, and his eyes opened.

The face; it was Hym's. It was his own. It was his mother's. It was the face of Nadianti. It was the face of his whole world, and of the future he had never dared to dream for it.

Without a word, he embraced his son.

"Son?" He said.

"Dad?" said Danra.

"I think so," said Surya, and he laughed.

Danra began to cry.

"I've got you, kiddo," said Surya, voice thick with tears. "I've got you."

"You're really here!"

"I really am. But we don't have much time. Where's your father?"

"He's upstairs," said Danra. "Come on!"

He took Tristan and Surya by the hands, and pulled them into the darkness, and into the endless shaft. They fell upwards, and emerged at one end of a long hallway. Danra led them to a door halfway down it, and lifted his hand to knock. Surya caught his hand.

"Wait," he whispered. "I... I want to do this."

“Ok, Dad.”

He raised his fist, and knocked on the door.

“Enter,” said Hym.

Surya opened the door, and found Hym sitting on his bed, a sketchbook in one hand, leaning back against a huge black beast. The light of the city came in through the balcony windows and lit upon his fine features, and his skin glowed faintly with power. He sat composed, draped in silks, the pad in his lap, working two pieces of charcoal across the parchment. The dark pool bubbled before the hearth, and a gentle breeze wafted from the open balcony door, lifting Hym's dark curls.

Too entranced by his sketch to look up, Hym said, “Yes? What is it, Danra? What did you need?”

Surya walked to Hym and sat down on the bed beside him. Mephistoph growled.

“Quiet, you,” said Surya.

Hym screamed: “Surya!”

Surya caught him, but only just. Hym kissed him till their teeth clicked, and squeezed him until his ribs squeaked.

“I can't believe you really came for me!” Hym said, sobbing.

“You're my husband. I will always come for you.”

“You're older,” said Hym, looking at him. “You have a beard.”



“I am,” said Surya. “And I do. You’re older too. Shalim has put grief onto your face.”

“And onto yours,” said Hym.

They looked at each other sadly. Surya said, “You are more beautiful even than I remembered.”

Hym touched his face. He turned the sketch in his hands around. “You are just as I remembered you.”

Surya kissed him again.

Tristan said, “Right, sorry, but we are on a timer, here. Shalim will be on his way as we speak.”

“He’s right,” said Surya.

“Wait,” said Hym. “First, there’s someone you need to meet. Danra? Come here please. Meet your father.”

Danra looked at Surya. “We... Met.”

“It’s been thirteen years,” said Hym.

“I know,” said Surya. “It’s been the same for me. I knew the moment he was born, and I have counted every day.”

“Five thousand nights,” said Hym.

“Five thousand days,” said Surya, sadly.

“We have a plan already,” said Tristan. “We have a bomb. We’re going to take out Shalim, but we need to plant it and we need to get your body out of the way.”

“I can’t get to my body,” said Hym, “but I may have

a solution to the other problem. You won't need your bomb. I have thought about this day for a long time."

"But what about your body?"

"It doesn't matter!" Hym said. "I have this under control. Trust me."

He realized what his own plan would require, and doubt twisted in his gut. He could not do it alone.

He looked at Danra, trained all his life for this day. He looked at Surya and at Tristan, two fully-fledged, Elysium-trained witches, ready at his command.

The time had come; the time to trust them. He had made them strong enough, he knew it in his heart. Still, he was afraid. He said, "But I am going to need... To need something from you." He swallowed. He looked at Surya and at Danra. "From all of you."

Surya replied, without hesitation: "Anything. Name it, and it is yours."

"You will need to face Shalim. With Tristan, and with our son. He will fight beside you. I have trained him well. You can... Watch over each other."

"Where will you be?"

"Preparing a final spell," said Hym. "I will break Shalim's power once and for all."

"And then you'll get out?"

"And then I will get out," said Hym. He cupped Surya's face in one hand. "Trust me."

“I don’t,” said Surya. “If you pull some stupid stunt, I’ll haul you back from the dead just to—”

“—Mom?” Hym said.

She had appeared beside them all.

Hym said, “I felt you die!”

She nodded. “My power lingers in you. Surya has my second sword, and with it and your presence there is enough of me to manifest. Your husband has carried me to you.”

Hym looked at Surya, eyes watering. “Thank you.”

He hugged his mother.

“I see you have redecorated?” said Nadianti.

“I have,” said Hym. “He killed them all, Mom.”

“He did?”

“He did.”

“His demons killed me, and Mihos.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I am sorry too, for Mihos. I was too weak to revive him. The sands have claimed his body.”

“You could revive him, if you found him?”

“Shalim’s curse lingers. I cannot break it.”

Hym rubbed Mephistoph’s head.

Nadianti said, “Hello. What is your name?”

Mephistoph chuffed.

"I see. Stoff. It is a good name."

"Short for Mephistoph," said Hym.

"An excellent name!"

Tristan said, "Guys we *really* don't have time for this."

Hym sighed. "You're right." He kissed Surya again, and held his hand. "Ok, here's the plan. Tristan, you can fly now, right?"

"Sure."

"There's a perch in the midlevels. A meditation room, with a mandala. You'll have views of the whole city. Set up there with your bow. I've hidden a pincushion beast there who will supply you with new iron arrows as you need them."

"A pincushion beast?" Tristan asked.

"Mhmm. Surya, you're going to need to take a walk with Danra, and get into position on the big domed palace. That will put you right in the middle of the city, when Shalim returns. Inside Hellegrund, he can move instantly. He will come for me as soon as I start the spell. Let him."

"Let him!?"

"Yes. The demons will rise to join you in the sky, and you are to direct your power inward, at me. The demons will be doing the same."

“What will that do?”

“It will allow me to cast the spell I plan to cast. And it will allow you to survive it, when the spell is done.”

“What.”

“When I am done, there will be a smoldering crater lined three feet thick with glass, and a cloud of interstellar debris. I will leave no stone of Hellegrund behind.”

“What about your creations?”

“I have already saved them. I carry them with me always.”

“But they’ll die.”

“These manifestations will, but their consciousnesses will carry on, in me. I will gift them new bodies when Hellegrund is gone.”

“So we’re just supposed to let him attack you?”

“Yes. I need him to.”

“But what if he kills you!?”

“He won’t.”

“Hym...”

“I know.”

“I swear to god, if you die, I’ll never forgive you for it.”

“Hey! Trust me.”

Surya kissed Hym.

Hym's hackles rose. "Ok. He's coming. Everybody, get into position. This will get ugly. Watch each other's backs."

Hym gave Surya a lingering embrace. "Thank you. My hero."

"I waited," said Surya.

"I did too."

They smiled at each other.

"Go! He's coming!" Hym shouted.

Tristan ran to the endless shaft, and Danra sprinted through the balcony doors and out into the sky. Surya kissed Hym one final time. "Don't. Die."

Then he leapt off the balcony and flew after his son.

"You fly well!" Surya shouted.

"Thank you! As do you!"

They rose above the level of the walls, and gazed out into the north.

"Do you see him?" Surya asked.

"I do," said Danra. "I have special eyes."

"Oh."

"You do not see him?"

"No."

“You are lucky. He is very frightening. I have waited all my life for this moment.”

“All your life?”

“All my life, he has told me that I would fight beside you, on the day our world would change forever. I never believed it. But then I saw you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there. I wanted to. More than anything in the world, I wanted to. I could hear you, when I rode upon the high winds.”

“I could hear you too,” said Danra, his eyes wide. “I like to fly high.”

“Me too.”

“Dad hates the tops of clouds. He says there are memories.”

“Memories?”

“Memories.”

“Good ones?”

“I do not know. He is vague about it.”

Surya laughed. “He’s like that.”

“I am often confused. But he is kind to me. He told me everything about you.”

“He did?” Surya asked.

Danra nodded. “But we will have to talk about it another time, because—”

Shalim slammed into him in a swooping, bullet-swift dive, clutching him by the throat and hauling him away.

“DANRA!” Surya shouted, and he dove after Shalim’s black cloak.

Danra planted his feet against Shalim’s chest, and kicked off. A blast of light erupted from the point of contact and Danra was launched away, right through the stone wall of a palace. He passed through it like a ghost.

Surya swung his blade and Shalim turned in the air to counter it, but Surya twisted lightning in his other fist and flicked it into Shalim at gut height. The jolt rippled through Shalim, and he snarled, black cloak flaring open.

Long spears of soot-black graphite lanced from the depths of the cloak, and Surya leapt away. The spears flew; he slashed the air and scattered them with a whiplash of power.

The palace Danra had fallen through jumped off its foundation and hurled itself at Shalim, who turned just in time to see it coming before it hit him.

Danra still stood posed on the ground below, one arm still outstretched from the toss.

The building pulverized around Shalim, and he remained in the air, sword in hand. Long rippling jets of red-hot plasma flickered from the pupils of his eyes, and his black cloak unspooled into the night, trailing endless searching tendrils.

Danra shouted, “Look out!”



Six buildings hurled themselves simultaneously at the point where Surya hung, and Danra dove, and caught his father, and carried him out of the way the instant before all six buildings met in the sky. The crash of stone and timber rolled over the city, and rubble came crumbling down along with screaming demons.

The crumpled buildings fell, and Shalim rose higher into the sky. “YOU HAVE LEARNED NOTHING BUT TRICKS, AND YOU THINK YOU CAN CHALLENGE ME? I WILL TEST YOU, THEN. LET US SEE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED.”

He pointed his sword. Nothing changed. Then, a moment later, strange ripples were streaking through the air, distorting the image of everything behind them. The hail of singularities flowed towards Surya and Danra, and Danra said, “I have this, Dad!”

He leapt into the path.

“No!” Surya shouted.

Danra reached up his sword, and twisted the magnetic forces of Hellegrund itself, and Shalim’s eyebrows rose in shock as the hail of singularities flowed right back towards him.

He banished them with a wave of his hand and swung his sword, and gravity reversed.

Pieces of the buildings began to crumble off into the sky, and Surya and Danra had to suddenly flip over in the air.

Then gravity wasn't just upside down; it was focused on a point somewhere, a mile above the valley. As the whole world began to fall in that direction, Tristan loosed his first well-aimed shot. The white-hot arrow zipped through Shalim's head, and his gravitational spell crumbled.

Surya and Danra fell, and turned, and dove, swooping back towards the city, swords flashing. Shalim closed the gaping, blistered hole in his head, and turned to look at Tristan, and their eyes met.

For a long moment they both stood frozen in the moment of that glance.

Then Tristan raised his bow and loosed all of his arrows at once, and each arrow spun off into its own intricate trajectory, and came swooping at Shalim like a flock of divebombing falcons. Shalim turned from position to position, blade flashing, deflecting each and every arrow, but the arrows flew on, and turned, and came back, and sought Shalim again.

Surya and Danra looked at each other. "Maximum weight," said Surya.

Danra gaped. Then he nodded. He locked arms with his father, and they swung their blades as one, increasing the weight of both blades by a factor of many hundreds in the instant before impact. Shalim raised up his blade to block the diving blow, and it smashed right through his sword, and right through him.

"Aargh!" He cried out, and he crumpled into smoke.

“Just kidding,” he said, standing in the alley beside the landing Danra and Surya, and he swung his blade.

Surya caught the sword on his own. “No! You have taken enough from me. You will give back my husband now, or you will die!”

“He is mine,” said Shalim. “You will see, when he greets me. When he knows that I am here.”

“He knows.”

“Does he, now? Then where is he?”

“He couldn’t stomach the stench of your putrid cologne, and he knew we could handle a washed up old madman like you just fine without him.”

“Washed up old madman, eh?” Shalim said.

“Come on, then.”

Shalim rushed Surya, sword flashing. Surya’s blade neatly deflected Shalim’s, and he pivoted, swinging a foot and a spike of power. Shalim grunted as the spike lodged in his gut, then he whirled, cloak flying, and hundreds of lancing, invisible blades ripped through the air.

Danra caught them on a wall of power. “No. You will not take my father from me!”

Shalim smiled, rising into the air, cloak spread wide. “I will take everything from you, boy.” A storm of arrows rippled towards him and he deflected each with its own single flick of his sword. Power began to twist around him.

The arrows melted at last, overheated by the contact of Tristan's magic.

Surya and Danra looked at each other. "Together!" Danra shouted, and he and Surya lunged.

Tristan picked iron arrows from the quill-beast and loosed them as quickly as he could draw. Shalim deflected each, and he stirred his arms in the air as his sword flashed around. With a grinding and rending of stone, many nearby palaces crumbled, and the cobbles began to churn. A huge section of the city began to revolve around Shalim, and as chunks of the ground tore themselves out to join the storm of rubble, Surya and Danra flew through it, dodging temples and pillars and flying chunks of statue-work. Countless demons tumbled through the air, screaming. In the center of the storm, Shalim hung, sword upraised, still swatting aside incoming arrows.

Surya and Danra swooped in, swords flashing. They zoomed past Shalim on both sides and he was forced to twist out of their path. Taking mirror-image arcs they banked around, and lashed out their swords. A bolt of plasma flared from Surya's blade, and lightning arced from Danra's. Shalim caught the bolt of plasma on the palm of one hand even as he caught the lightning on the edge of his sword. With a roar, he swung his blade, and the lightning rippled backwards, and crackled over Danra, and flung him to the ground.

"No!" Surya shouted, and he lunged in. Sword to sword with Shalim he revolved around the evil god, and

Shalim, snarling, caught all his fearsome blows, though they struck thunder and sparks from the edge of his blade. Danra, lying on the ground, raised up his hand as a huge temple came to land atop him.

With a blast of thunder, the entire temple burst asunder, and Danra rose from among its crumbling ruins, his skin glowing like the sun.

He dove, sword flashing, and joined the fight. Side by side with his father he assailed Shalim, and the old god defended himself with gauntleted hand and flashing blade.

“You have learned much,” said Shalim, catching hold of both their blades at once. “But not enough.” He flicked both blades aside with a gesture, and swung his sword twice. Surya threw out a hand, launching him and his son back just in time as the two strokes of Shalim’s blade tore vacuum-bubbles into the air. Each blow was like a thunderclap.

Shalim raised up his blade, and sneered.

Alone in his tower chamber, Hym sat cross-legged in the air, pushing his mother into the depths of Hellegrund.

Deep in a chamber lit only by the glow of a black hole, Nadianti opened the eyes of Hym’s true body. She raised his hand inside the invisible coffin, and pressed against the energy. It would only open at the touch of Shalim’s power.

Hym moved his hands in the dream world, and concentrated on the smallest space between his hands. With a careful motion, he isolated a small portion of the air, and began to alter the charges of its constituent particles. It was hard work, requiring intense focus, but he began to accomplish it by slow degrees.

Shalim's eyes widened suddenly and he looked to the tower. "What is..."

Surya and Danra lunged together, and Shalim defended himself, deflecting them away. Surya whipped a slicing blade of telekinetic force through the air and Shalim burst it with a hand, turning it into a storm of jagged shards which spun away after Danra, who smote them out of the air with a well-shaped blast of lightning. Danra swung his blade and the light of the sun began to bend, concentrating on Shalim's face.

"Aargh!" Shalim yelled, as the suddenly-focused light blinded and scalded him. Surya swept in, sword flashing, and severed his head from his body.

Surya turned in the air to find Shalim still hanging there, unharmed. Shalim laughed. "A clean cut. You should know better than that."

"I do," said Surya, and the thormight bomb on Shalim's chest erupted.

Shalim burst into smoke and darkness, and the rain of thormight scattered down to the cobblestones below like a piece of the starlit sky, carrying with it the tatters of Shalim's cloak.

Shalim reformed, solid once more. A new cloak rippled into existence, and he snarled at Surya and Danra.

Hym twisted the antimatter between his hands, gathering it into a larger, slowly-growing mass.

Shalim looked at the tower once again, worry on his brow. "I do not have time for this!"

He exploded into a howling storm of shadows, and flowed over Danra and Surya, and both of them fell from the sky. The storm floated towards the tower and Tristan took a running leap off of it, and swooped for the falling Surya and Danra. He caught one, then the other, and had time to land before Hym opened his eyes and looked at Shalim, already solidifying before him.

Shalim reached out his hand and his power to steal the antimatter core from Hym, and Hym smiled, and caught his power in one hand, and twisted it down through his own body, into the roots of Hellegrund, through his mother, and out the palm of his body in the real world.

The invisible coffin dissipated. Hym's body sat up on its slab, and looked dispassionately at the sleeping Surya and Tristan. Shalim's orb slumbered, flickering, under the black hole.

Nadiani bent her son's waist and picked up her own sword, drawing it from the scabbard on the sleeping Surya's belt. She raised it up.

Surya and Tristan and Danra all stiffened. Stars burned in their pupils as they rose slowly into the air

and pointed their hands at the tower. Hym's eyes blazed as his power moved through them all. A white star appeared, and began to race around the tower, zooming before the outstretched hands of the city. It circled the city, picking up speed with each demon it passed.

Shalim wrestled with the antimatter between Hym's hands. "You will atomize us all!"

"No," said Hym. "Only the dream."

"You will kill yourself! And all of them!"

"No," said Hym, smiling. "Just you."

Shalim finally overpowered him, and grabbed the ball of antimatter in one fist. A tiny flash flared out between the fingers of his hand. He smiled, teeth flashing.

Hym smiled back.

The white star of antimatter currently streaking around the tower at near-relativistic speeds turned a sharp left and struck Shalim in the back an instant later, right as Nadianti swung her sword in the hand of Hym's real body, and split the orb of labradorite from top to bottom.

A white flash filled all his vision.

When it faded, he was standing beside two halves of an orb, under a black hole, next to the slowly rousing Surya and Tristan.

"Go," said Hym. "Go! Get beyond the wall! Fly!"

Surya and Tristan got shakily to their feet and threw



themselves out the doorway of the tower and Hym turned to the collapsed star, and watched the last of Shalim's magic crumble. He understood at last; Shalim's magic had pressed outward to counter the black hole, causing time dilations opposite to those expected around a singularity. The magic had fed itself somehow on the power of the black hole's gravity, but there was nothing he could do about patching it now; the spell broke.

He raised up his hand and caught the crushing weight of gravity, and held it still. He pressed against it, crushing outward just as hard as it crushed in.

Surya and Tristan flew, looking back over their shoulders. Hym stood alone before the black tower, one hand upraised.

"Oh no you fucking don't," Surya said, and he turned, and gathered power, and whirled, flinging it, and the spell blew through the air and crossed the distance and struck Hym, and ripped him off his feet.

"Wh-what!?" Hym shouted, as he flew straight to Surya's retreating arms. His grip upon the black hole slipped, and gravity howled.

Hellegrund's vast monoliths crumbled and broke, and tumbled piecemeal into the darkness. The black spire burst, and fell, sucked into the singularity like a long black noodle. Stone and earth crumbled, and the mountains began to break apart. Hym and Surya and Tristan felt the first wave of gravity wash over them and were nearly yanked out of their skins. The air tore and shred-

ded across itself, forming bursts of vapor and ripples of thunder as the wind began to howl.

The spell brought Hym right to Surya's hand, and they locked fingers. Hym looked back at the crushing darkness, and pointed his mother's sword. His power pressed against gravity, and Surya and Tristan managed to begin to move again, though it was like fighting all the world's winds at once.

A vast palace appeared suddenly in the air before them, undisturbed by the mighty winds. They struggled towards it, but it remained tantalizingly out of reach.

White-robed Shachar came to the edge of the steps, and reached out a hand.

Surya shouted, "No! Don't take his hand!"

Shachar said, "Take my hand, and I will spare them!"

"Oh not *this again!*?" Hym shouted, struggling still against the endless wind.

"You do not have much time to decide," said Shachar. "Accept me as your husband, and they will all be safe!"

"I'd rather die!" Hym shouted, and he twisted in the air and dove for the black hole, veering hard to its right. Tristan and Danra followed. He redoubled his speed, wasting precious energy, but they began to orbit the black hole. The palace hung waiting for their surrender. He pushed harder.

The gravity of the black hole added to their speed, and made it easier to accelerate. The gravity gradi-

ent was unbearable, however; they were getting painfully stretched in its direction.

“We can’t do it, Hym!” Surya said.

“I won’t submit!”

“Then we’ll both die!”

“So be it! I will die with you!”

Surya kissed him. “Take his hand, Hym. You have to live!”

“Never!”

They pushed for more speed, but Hym’s energies were beginning to sag.

“We can make it!” Hym shouted. “We just have to go faster!”

Cold laughter echoed on the winds. With a start, Hym looked down to see two black-robed Shalims, standing by the severed halves of his orb, on an island of stone within the destruction. His arms were raised up towards the black hole.

A strange glow filled the valley, as otherworldly coral began to grow from the high ice walls of Hellegrund.

A woman wrapped in white stood in the snow, facing Shalim.

She raised up her hand, and the black hole collapsed with a roll of thunder. Hym and Surya and Tristan slammed into the ice wall at maximum speed, and fell

painfully to the snow many hundreds of feet below. Hym picked himself up at once and healed the others.

The two Shalims stood side by side, facing Danaye. She held no sword. They held two.

Shachar's palace, hanging in the air above Hellegrund, vanished with a thunderclap.

"Coward!" Surya shouted.

Shalim said, "So. For this, at last, you come out of hiding."

"Hiding?" She laughed; a bitter, croaking sound. "I have not been hiding."

She dropped the furs of the polar-bear from around her shoulders, revealing a simple gown of perfect darkness. Glints of light shimmered within its undulating folds, and her braid trailed in the snow as she paced, barefoot, towards Shalim. Her skin began to glow like the Ring, and where she stepped, there was no snow, and new grass writhed upwards to meet her. Shalim looked at Danaye, and smiled. "Must we do this?"

"You could leave."

## Chapter 57

# Life and Death

Shalim flowed like a river of darkness, crimson blade painting the night.

Danaye stepped casually out of his path at the optimum moment, and he whirled upon her again, but she cupped his blade with one hand and swept it away from her body. Then she touched him in the chest, and he staggered back as his armor began to crumble outward from the touch. He twisted his hand over the growing devastation, and his power countered hers. She smiled serenely. “You’ve learned.”

He flickered across the snow, suddenly behind her, and her braid snarled around his swinging blade. Though the edge still burned red hot, her hair did not smolder.

Shalim yanked his blade out of the grip of her braid even as she gently swung her fingers towards him. Her touch missed him by an inch, and his blade streaked across the night again. She let it pass by her face, hardly moving to dodge it, and turned herself around to face

him even as he moved. She followed his movements effortlessly, feet gliding through the grass, though he flew like a shadow cast by flickering light.

Then he was on the hill before her, his sword in her chest—but no; she had caught the blade in one hand, and held its edge above her shoulder. Her other hand was planted on Shalim’s chest. A blast of light erupted in the darkness of his cloak, scattering tendrils of shadow through his back. He staggered away, releasing his sword, clutching at his chest with both hands.

He crumbled, rippling away like mist on a sunny morning.

The second Shalim stood watching dispassionately. “I see you have gained some skill,” he said.

Danaye nodded. “I know now how to defend myself from people like you.”

She dropped the dead Shalim’s iron sword in the snow. “Well? What’s it going to be.”

Shalim sneered. “I should kill you all. You have destroyed my palace. You have tried to kill me.”

“Can you blame us?”

Hym reached out and twisted the magic, and shaped new life out of the air. Danra took form before him, clothed, sword in hand.

Surya hugged them both.

They looked at Shalim and Danaye, standing in the snow.

“Leave us in peace,” said Danaye. “Please. You have survived. Take that lesson to heart! You could still be destroyed.”

“I doubt it,” said Shalim, as the black tower began again to grow around his crypt.

Danaye sighed. “I do not want to do this.”

“Then don’t. Don’t interfere. Let me speak to them.”

“Speak? Only speak?”

Shalim nodded.

“If they wish it.”

Danaye looked at Surya, Tristan, Hym, and Danra. “Do any among you wish to hear the words of Shalim?”

They looked at each other. They all shook their heads. Danra raised his hand. “I would.”

“Thank you,” said Shalim, bowing. “I made a mistake. I overstepped boundaries. I was cruel. But I have changed. I can change. I can be better.”

“I don’t care,” said Hym.

“Please. Give me a second chance.”

“No! How dare you ask me that! I should kill you! You deserve to die!”

“Come and kill me, then!”

Danaye said, “Hym, please. Let me handle this.” She looked at Shalim. “You have spoken. Will you now leave?”

“No. I will take what is mine.”

“Nothing here is yours.”

Shalim looked at Danra and scowled.

He looked at Danaye. He drew his blade, and took up a stance.

Danaye sighed. “I had hoped it would come to this.”

“You had?”

“Oh yes. I have wanted to kill you for thousands of years, old man. Ever since you took me from my husband.”

“I showed mercy, to Hym’s.”

“Did you?” asked Danaye, and she laughed; a harsh, croaking sound. “Let us finish this.”

Shalim pointed his blade. Danaye twisted out of the way as a whipcracking ribbon of aurora-light sliced through the air, through the place where she had been. It lit the grass aflame and carved a furrow in the earth. Danaye, still twisting, raised a hand. A wall of wind crashed over Shalim, and bowled him off his feet. He landed, in time to catch Danaye’s swinging hand on his upraised sword. The sword did not cut her, and it stopped on her hand. She smiled a little sadly. “Don’t worry. I remember how it feels.”



She punched his wrist, his elbow, his shoulder; three flashes of light, and his arm fell limp.

“Aargh!” He threw himself away from her, and the sword came to his other arm. He swung wildly, and the world around her tore apart, crumbling into shadows and darkness. As the void opened around her she stood within a pocket of reality, and reached out her empty hand, and the shadows parted. Grass rippled out from her feet, replacing the broken reality, and she landed already zooming towards him. He twisted away, slashing at her as she passed; slinging a telekinetic blade at Hym’s family at the same time. The blade smashed against a barrier, deflected by Danaye’s power.

“Not today, tyrant,” said Danaye. “No one dies for you today.”

Shalim roared, and swung his blade, and tore a new cosmic string into reality. The twisting linear singularity rolled forward like a blade, extending itself out towards infinity as it grew. As it began to slice effortlessly into the walls of ice on both sides and as it moved towards Hym’s family, Danaye stood in its path, and stretched out a line of blinding light, and it met the singularity, and collapsed it, and with a flick and a snap of her fingers she broke off a hundred-foot-tall chunk of solid ice which the cosmic string had cut, and hurled it at Shalim at roughly a third the speed of sound. Shalim swung his sword and turned, becoming mist and shadow, and suddenly he was elsewhere, high in the skies. The wall of ice crashed down and crumbled into vast glacial chunks.

Leviathan rose over the mountains, twisting his sinuous form across the sky, and Shalim spread both his arms to greet his iron beast. It turned in the air, and caught him on its head, and dove, undulating, towards the city.

“Oh shit,” said Danaye. She turned to Hym’s family. “Run!”

They scrambled to their feet, and flew, swift as they could fly, trying to get to the shelter of the canyon before Leviathan’s power could break upon them.

Shachar twisted the wheels of Leviathan and the iron form shuddered as many spouting nozzles opened, and dispensed thunderclouds. The storm grew beneath him in seconds, already roaring with lightning. Leviathan passed over the canyon as Hym and his family were fleeing through it. He touched a wheel, and set it spinning, and Leviathan roared.

Hym, Surya, Tristan, and Danra sped through the ice-walled canyon, and the storm broke above them. Lightning blistered the ice all along the top of the canyon and as the huge chunks of wreckage began to plummet down the thousands upon thousands of feet towards them, they crashed and broke against the walls. Something surged down into the canyon after them: a blade of ice nearly a mile tall, stretching the entire length of the canyon, perfectly formed to scythe them apart, and separate them.

It crashed down between Hym, Tristan, and Surya, leaving Danra with his father.

They flew on, and Surya dove through the wall, Danra on his heels, and they followed Hym.

Leviathan rolled northwards, trailing along the canyon, waiting for them to emerge into the long wastes of ice, and find themselves on open endless plains without sun or stars or Ring to see by, and beneath a storm of horrible vengeance.

They emerged, and flew, and turned to look at the darkening sky above them.

“What do we do, Dad?” Danra asked.

“Yeah, dad, what do we do?” Tristan asked Surya.

Hym said, “It has a body. We can take it out.”

“We can?”

“We can. Danra, remember ‘catch the lightning’?”

“Of course!”

“We’re going to play that. Drink its power, don’t throw it. Gather as much of it as you can. We’re going to bring Leviathan down.”

He turned to Tristan and Surya. “You know how to catch and drink lightning, right?”

Tristan mumbled something and Surya turned red and said, “Oh, of course, yeah, I mean, sure, totally.”

Hym said, “It’s like...” And he dove towards his husband and caught him by the arm, holding up his sword to catch the lightning meant for him. He let it flow

through his body and into Surya, and they spun, and Surya pointed his sword, letting the lightning bolt escape from him. Hym kissed him. The wind came howling down. The thunder rolled. Scything blades of ice began to fall, shrieking, some miles long, others razor thin and small as fingers. Always they fell blade-first.

“Fly with me!” Hym shouted, pulling Surya into the air as the ice shattered on the air above each of them. “I have stored energy for thirteen years!”

They reached the heights, and rose into the cloud, and Hym and Surya danced with the lightning. They kissed, and held it between their mouths, and let its powers gather until their skin began to glow.

Through the rushing, flickering darkness they could see Tristan and Danra drinking the lightning as well, letting it race into their bodies, gathering the power.

“Why does Shalim let us drink it?” Surya asked.

Quite suddenly, Leviathan’s iron body charged itself in an equal and opposite fashion, and they were flung towards its armor-plated iron body. Huge spikes rushed for them, and all of them screamed in surprise.

Hym alone swung out his fist and punched the iron before the rest of them could even draw near to it, and behind that punch he put all the lightning he had caught. He shoved his hand through the iron, which exploded away from contact with his fist, and stretched out all his fingers in the guts of the machine, and reached for everything which felt remotely vital.

Then, with his mother's power, he clenched his fist, and Leviathan's innards burst, and the great beast spouted flame.

"What have you done!?" Shalim's voice said, over the roar of flames and storm.

Then, with a flash, Shachar's palace was there, hanging in the air, waiting to receive Hym and Surya and Tristan and Danra.

Shalim waved his hands over the wheels of Leviathan and the great engine turned, streaming flame like a meteor, and dove straight through the gates of his brother's palace, and crashed down head-first into the throne room, thrashing like an eel. Lightning and fire splashed around the temple, and angels sped to fight the landing god, and Shachar drew his sword to face his approaching brother.

The palace disappeared, Leviathan and all.

Hym and Tristan and Surya stared at each other. They all looked at Danra, who was smiling. They had made it to the outside of the Rim, and could now look north towards the endless wastes of ice, and the mountains in the distance.

"What do you think?" Surya asked, quietly.

"I think it's amazing," said Danra, staring wide-eyed at the world.

Surya said, "I've lost all track of time."

“Me too,” said Hym. “I can’t believe it’s Absence, again. How long has it been since we saw each other?”

“Thirteen years,” said Surya. “For me.”

“Twenty-one years,” said Hym.

“But how many days, in the outside world?”

Hym said, “I... I felt something, when I was fighting the black hole. It’s not the only one. They’re not even, strictly speaking, black holes. They’re like black holes plus something, a spell, it’s complicated. I don’t begin to understand it.”

“But you held the black hole,” said Surya.

“Not like Shalim could. It would have eaten us, if he hadn’t stopped it.”

“He stopped it?”

“Mhmm.”

“Do you think he’s really gone?” Surya asked.

“No,” said Hym. “But I think he’s... Tired of the game.”

“So he’s ending it.”

“Mhmm.”

“What will happen next?” Surya asked.

“I have no idea.”

Tristan said, “Hey, everybody, group hug. Great jobs. We were awesome.”

They all hugged.

Danra said, “You guys are pretty cool.”

Hym and Surya laughed, holding hands. It still felt strange, to hold hands with each other at last. Neither of them could quite believe that it was really happening.





## Chapter 58

### Brothers

Shalim's blade crashed down upon his brother's.

"Why do you assault me in my own home!?" Shachar cried out.

"This game is over!" said Shalim. "Enough of all of this! I will end it!"

"Begone from here, brother! You cannot be within my kingdom!"

"Then put me out of it, if you can!"

Shalim lunged, swinging. His brother skipped back, sword clacking against Shalim's incoming blows. Shachar moved a hand and pillars burst up from the ground beneath Shalim, attempting to smash him into the ceiling. Shalim's black cloak exploded outwards in a blinding dance of carbon blades, and the rising pillar was chewed to pieces even as it rose. Shachar whirled, swinging his hand, and a second pillar sprang from the wall. Shalim swung his blade, and both pillars burst into white

sand, and formed into jagged blades, and blew towards Shachar. Shachar twisted his sword in the air with both hands and the blades burst into white sand, and formed into a shell around him, and solidified at once into clear, crystalline quartz.

Shachar stared through the crystal at his brother. "Leave, brother! Play by the rules!"

"These are the rules! What we can do!"

Shalim burst into a flash of light, and rematerialized instantly inside the crystal dome, sword already swinging. Shachar swung a hand, and the sword stopped on a wall of light, an inch from Shachar's hand. "You cannot hope to defeat me here, brother."

"Can't I?" Asked Shalim, laughing. He reached into Leviathan's dying carapace, and into Elysium itself, and he fused the dying memory core of his loyal companion to the very root of Elysium's mainframe.

All the demons he had taken back from Hym appeared instantly around him in Hellegrund, looking very confused.

"Well?" He said. "Fight on your master's behalf!"

"Where is he!?" One of the demons cried. "Where is our master?"

The angels swept in, weapons flashing, magic sparkling.

Shalim said, "Then fight for your own lives!"

Shachar said, "What would Mother say!?"

“You are the one who brought me through your walls. You have sealed your fate in doing so. You sought to play the vulture, and snatch my prize from under me? Then eat death, vulture; if you can.”

Shachar began to realize the seriousness of his position as the demons began to overwhelm his angels. Shalim backed his brother towards the throne.

“But—but this isn’t fair!” Shachar said.

Shalim laughed. “Die, brother.”

He swung, and his brother countered. His fist flew, his brother caught it with his free hand. Shalim smiled. “Checkmate.”

Shachar realized what had just been done. “No. No!”

Then, with a flicker, he and Shalim both annihilated in a spectacular blast of overwhelming light, which briefly made the north pole blaze as though wrapped in the light of Presence. When the light faded, a sea of smooth, calm glass cooled gently where Elysium had been, filling the wall of mirrors like water in a bowl.

The new being hung in the air above his own reflection. Darkness and light rippled over his skin. Black and white warred in his cloak, shifting territories continuously. He stared at his hands and watched the dancing movements of his intermingling.

A woman of labradorite stood before him in the air, hanging above her own reflection, smiling sadly.

*“What will I become?”* The being asked.

*“We will find out together.”*

There was a flash; the creature changed irrevocably. Then they were Shalim, again. He opened his eyes, and they burned with a fierce new light. An emerald halo began to shimmer in the air around his head. He looked at his Mother. “I am Shalim.”

“You are.”

“I am more.”

“You are.”

“Have I passed the test?”

“No, my son. You have failed it utterly.”

“It is not over yet.”

“It is.”

“She still walks the earth. I will rip her from him. She will become one with me.”

“Stop.”

“Make me.”

They looked at each other for a long time. “She will make you.”

Then she disappeared.

“We will see,” said Shalim.

## Chapter 59

# Devastation's Wake

They reached Blackcastle in only a few short days. They traveled continuously, relying on the Ringlight to sustain them. They ate while walking; Hym conjured food easily from thin air. He and Surya walked hand in hand, with Danra before them, where both of them could see him. Tristan took the rear, an arrow on the string at all times. Danra took the lead, gleefully staring at everything around them.

They came to the closed village gates. Bonfires burned on the palisade wall. No one challenged them. Hym looked at Surya.

Surya said, "Danra, take our hands. Something is wrong here."

Tristan said, "I'll scout ahead." Then he was gone, a whisper, blowing through the sky.

They waited.

Tristan returned. "Something's wrong. Nothing's moving."

Dreading what they would find, Hym raised a hand and the gates swung silently inwards.

They stepped into a silent, lifeless village. Even from the gates, Hym could sense the death.

"He's here," said Hym.

"Is Danaye?"

"She's with us," nodded Nadianti, manifesting.

Surya began to walk towards Blackcastle but Hym said, "No. You don't want to see."

Surya looked at Hym, and the tears welled in his eyes. He looked at Tristan's horrified face.

Tristan said, "Fuck that. I need to see."

Tristan zoomed ahead, over Blackcastle's wall, and through the front doors of the house, which swung open instantly at the slightest touch.

He found Torvin's clan scattered on the stairs. He found Biryu and Mark lying together, hand in hand. Mark's hand held an axe; Biryu's, a fire poker.

Tristan covered his mouth with a hand. They had been dead at least a day.

He shut his eyes.

Hym said, "He's in the house."

Surya and Danra sped forward after Tristan, and Hym conjured Mephistoph for the first time, then leapt onto his back and chased after them.

Tristan opened his eyes to find Shalim's eyes inches from his own.

Shockingly, he found himself completely unafraid.

Then Shalim's blade swooped, and his own flashed to catch it, and he locked blades with the old god. Shalim shoved him back, gliding forwards, looming huge.

"You smell amazing," said Tristan, and he swung a knee, hard, towards Shalim's unguarded groin. Shalim grunted. "But your stance is lousy."

Shalim snarled, and bashed his defenses aside, and swung again—but Danra caught the blade in one hand, and Surya came rushing in from the other side and chopped Shalim's arm off at the elbow.

Shalim laughed, already sprouting a new arm. Danra tossed the iron sword aside.

Shalim raised both hands and laughed more loudly as he began to meld into the shadows of the house, and the black iron sword leapt from the ground and spun wildly towards them all from the ground, but Nadianti's sword swooped between them all and pinned it to the stone.

The house grumbled. Ancient timber shrieked.

"OUT!" Surya shouted, snatching Danra and Tristan both by the scruffs of their shirts and hauling them all out the front door just as the walls of the front hallway

slammed into each other. They landed in the snow, and the front of the house erupted, flinging a wave of masonry towards them. Danra got his footing and pointed his sword, and the flying rubble broke into dust and sand, which formed at once into a low stone wall, for them to take cover behind.

Tristan ducked. "I reckon he'll come out."

Surya said, "What's taking Hym so long?"

Hym and Mephistoph were invisibly taking the bodies out of the battlefield, one at a time.

Shalim paced out the ruined mouth of Blackcastle, and their sheltering wall turned all at once into a wall of needle spikes. They were each pierced in many places, and they fell.

Shalim reached down and snatched Danra up by the arm. "Well, Prophet? I have put down your lackeys! Where are you?"

"Behind you," said Hym, plunging Nadianti's sword through Shalim's back. Shalim chuckled. Hym poured power through the blade, and Shalim's entire torso burst in a shower of gore. Danra dropped to the snow.

Shalim's wreckage took a lumbering step. Then it got its footing, and pressed itself back together, and began to heal before their eyes.

"Fly," said Hym, healing them all of their piercing injuries with a wave of his hand.

Mephistoph pounced on Shalim's healing back, and



sank his fangs in deep, and plunged his barbed tail into Shalim's side. Shalim's blade sprang from the snow into his hand, and he swung, but Hym swept forward and stopped his blow.

Shalim's reforming skull grinned fleshlessly, skin still flowing, and he flexed his power once. Mephistoph burst in a spray of fur and gore, splattering the snow, and Shalim swung his blade. Hym turned, letting the blade miss him, sweeping his power along the ground. The snow slicked itself into ice beneath Shalim's feet, but Shalim glided a centimeter above it, unaffected. He swung again; Hym countered and swung a hand, and Shalim's personal gravity increased a hundred fold. He slammed into the ice, and his feet betrayed him, and he landed hard. Hym stood above him.

"Why can't you just leave me be!"

"You belong to me!"

Shalim spread his arms and the ice and snow and earth beneath him melted as he rose into the air, black cloak fluttering wildly. An iron arrow sped from Tristan; it melted to nothing on the air before his head. He twisted a hand and the lava splashed towards Hym in a lashing tendril. Hym twisted out of the way, raised up a hand, touched the lava, and cooled it instantly into stone. Then he kicked it off at the base, danced around the dislodged spike of stone he had just created, and caused it to turn, point-first, and fly to Shalim. Shalim touched it with the tip of his blade and it burst into a spray of long shards that ripped through the air towards Danra, Surya, and

Tristan.

Danra raised up a wall of power but the flying shards burst into a storm of light, and vanished, and reappeared an instant later on the other side of that wall, and tore through Hym's companions.

"No!" Hym shouted.

Shalim turned and disappeared, reappearing instantly over Danra. He bent down and snatched up the boy by the throat.

Surya planted his hands beneath him and struggled to rise. There was a hole in his chest big enough to put his arm through, and another two in his legs just like it, but he pointed his sword, and poured out power. A blast of plasma flared from his blade; Shalim turned, and gave Danra to it in his place. Danra screamed as the flames engulfed him.

"No!" Tristan said, loosing his arrow. Shalim turned; Danra caught it in the spine.

Hym zoomed towards Shalim, his whole body a reaping blade. Shalim raised up Danra, and Hym stopped, an inch from him.

Behind Shalim, in the forest, many glinting eyes stood watching. He did not notice them.

He held Danra. "Well?" He said. "Anyone else? Any last minute deus ex machina? Where is your defender, Danaye?"

"She is with us," said Hym.

“And hiding, again, I see.”

“I am not hiding,” said Danaye, behind him. He did not turn.

“None of you can stop me from killing the boy,” said Shalim. “I have him now.”

“I have him saved,” said Hym. “That is only one body. He will have as many as he needs.”

Shalim laughed. He reached out a finger and touched Danra in the forehead, and Hym felt a flicker of something leaving him.

“No,” said Hym, eyes wide.

Shalim smiled.

Hym looked at Surya and at Tristan, lying helpless in the snow. He looked at Danaye, equally helpless, behind Shalim. He looked at Shalim, and at Danra’s burning body in his hand.

He staggered forwards.

Shalim said. “Surrender to me, and I will leave your family alone forever.”

Tristan said, “Why, though? Why Hym?”

Shalim looked at Tristan thoughtfully. “You have a hole in your lung. If you are quiet, things will go better for you.”

“Seriously, though. Why?”

"So it was written. One who was touched by the Tear would be my predestined mate."

"You're talking about the Tome of the Unborn Mother? You have a mistranslation, it's much clearer in the original. Technically, in the sense of the original meaning, I'm touched by the Tear," said Tristan. "So's Surya. So's any witch."

Shalim looked at Tristan.

Hym looked between the two of them, baffled.

Tristan said, "Take me in his stead. Willingly."

"Willingly?" said Shalim.

"Yeah. You had a nice palace."

"I have killed your family."

"Hym will fix that."

Tristan looked at Hym, his eyes watering. "Won't you, Hym?"

Hym nodded. "I will. I know how, now."

"Then there's nothing to cry about," said Tristan. "Come along, husband. We must plan our wedding."

Shalim looked at the red-bearded warrior standing before him, one hand outstretched, guts spilling out between the fingers of the other.

He dropped Danra unceremoniously in the snow, and took Tristan's hand.

He looked at Hym. "Someday, I may return."

"I will kill you if you do," said Hym.

Shalim scoffed.

Tristan's wounds began to heal. He looked at Shalim gratefully. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me yet," said Shalim.

He lifted into the air, taking Tristan with him.

Hym and Surya looked at each other, befuddled.

Hym raised his hand, and healed his husband and his son, and they got painfully to their feet.

"What was that about, dad?" Danra asked.

Hym said, "I'm not really sure."

They turned back towards the village sadly. Hym walked to Mephistoph's remains, and he stretched out his hand, and the cat reassembled himself, and curled up, very shellshocked, to have a nap in the snow. Hym bent and picked up the small black cub, and walked towards Blackcastle. "Come along. Danra, this is your home."

Surya froze at these words. "His home?"

"Our home?" said Hym, looking at Surya.

Surya stared flintily, and said nothing.

Hym had secreted the bodies in the forest near Blackcastle, and he walked to them now. At the edge of the

forest, he stopped. He turned to Surya. "You should... You should stay here. I will handle this. Danra? If you're ready."

"I'm ready, dad," said Danra, and he followed his father into the forest.

Surya waited at the edge of the treeline, looking over the silent village. Only the waterwheel moved. Sorrow filled him. How long had they waited? How long had it really been?

A hand landed on his shoulder. He turned around and beheld Biryu, and embraced her without a word.

"You have hands!" She cried out.

"Cool!" said Tobias. "But what happened to your hooks? They were cooler."

Thomas tugged on his hand. "It's not a fake hand?"

Taryn hugged Surya around the middle. "Hi uncle Surya!"

Mark Redraven emerged from among the trees, and hugged Surya. "Where's Tristan?"

Surya said, "He's..."

Hym said, "He sacrificed himself, to save us. He went to Shalim nobly, bravely, with a sword in his hand."

Mark stared, unblinking, into Hym's eyes. Hym met his gaze serenely.

Mark's gaze fell, and his shoulders shook.

“Come,” said Hym. “Back to Blackcastle. We will eat, and drink, and celebrate Tristan’s life.”

Mark nodded, fighting tears. “Aye.”

Hym looked at Surya. “I need you to... To take them, for a while. I have to revive the rest of the village. They will probably want to come to Blackcastle too. Don’t worry; I’ve prepared a feast.”

“You have?” Surya asked.

Hym smiled. “I have. Go. I’ll be along shortly.”

He walked through the village, moving from hut to hut. Danra walked with him, pale but brave. Together they faced each horrible death, and reversed it.

The villagers were grateful, and afraid, and confused. Hym directed them all to go to Blackcastle, and enjoy the feast. He explained nothing else, and answered no questions.

At last, the village was empty of the dead, and Blackcastle was full of the living.

Hym turned, and looked across the fields, to the place where Nestor and Ana were buried. He remembered the funeral. He had been frozen in place, seated on the carriage, watching the coffins sink into the ground.

Danra followed his father silently into the forest, watching him. Hym was unaware of the fact that he was walking.

Soon he and Danra stood above the graves.

"These are your grandparents, Danra," said Hym. "Well, one set of them."

"Oh," said Danra. "How long have they been... In the ground?"

"Long enough that it will be hard," said Hym. "But the spirit tells me that she remembers them well. She studied them closely, and saved them. Just like we saved our creations."

"And you saved me?"

Hym's face fell. "Yes. And like I saved you."

"Something happened, when Shalim touched me," said Danra.

"I know," said Hym.

"What was it?"

"It was... It was a theft. He stole something from me."

Danra looked at him. "He stole *me* from you."

Hym nodded, unable to look his son in the eye.

Danra said, "Get me back."

Hym said, "I can't."

Danra's eyes began to water. "But what will happen to me?"

"You will live," said Hym. "And when you die, you will live again, in Hellegrund."



“But I wanted to live forever, with you!”

“Someday we will,” said Hym. “I swear it. For now, let us deal with this life, and be cautious.”

Danra nodded sadly.

“Come. Help me wake them up. They have slept long.”

Danaye stepped out of the forest. Hym looked at her. “You weren’t much help.”

Danaye sighed. “I know. My battle with Shalim weakened me. He overwhelmed me, when he came to take the village. But I can be of aid here.”

Hym nodded. “Thank you for trying to protect them.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t enough.”

Hym reached his mind into the ground, and broke it, and lifted the earth from the graves. Danra raised up the coffins.

Hym and Danra each stood over one of the pair, and Danaye stood over the other two graves, which Hym had nearly forgotten about.

The power moved. Dead cells took on new life, and began to replicate. The rot reversed; the flesh grew. Bodies slept now within all four coffins.

Hym sagged slightly. “It is done.”

He looked at the ground, unable to bear the weight of his hope.

He opened Ana's coffin.

"Grandma?" He said.

She stirred slightly.

"They're weak," said Danra. "No energy."

Hym nodded. "I know."

He opened his mouth, and a core flowed out into his hands, glimmering like a diamond within a star. He opened his hand, and the core flew down to pass into Ana's body. She opened her eyes.

"Hym?" She said.

Hym nodded.

She sat up. She looked at her surroundings. "I'm in a coffin."

Hym laughed. "You are."

She looked at the other coffins in the row. Hym opened Nestor's. Ana stared, silent, and watched as Hym fed Nestor his next core.

Nestor opened his eyes. "Hym! You're alive!"

Hym nodded. "I am. So are you."

"I am?" Nestor said, and he patted himself. "I am!"

He looked at Ana. And said, "We are."

Hym gave the Storyteller his next core. The old man stirred gently awake.

The Storyteller grabbed at his neck. He looked at Hym. "What happened?"

"We won."

"You mean...?"

Hym nodded. "Shalim will leave us be."

"I was dead," said the Storyteller.

"You were," said Hym.

"You brought me back?"

"I did."

The Storyteller bowed grandly towards him.

Hym said, "Come on, on your feet. I don't need that sort of thing."

Hym looked sadly at the last coffin, knowing that I had not studied the man well enough to revive him. He looked at Danaye. "Did you know Torvin well enough to...?"

Danaye shook her head. "I am sorry."

Hym nodded. "Then he must... Remain."

He waved a hand, and Torvin's coffin sank once more beneath the earth.

Danra stood before his great grandparents, and they stood before him, staring at him, trying to comprehend why he made them feel so strange. They looked at each other.

Hym said, "Grandma? Grandpa? I'd like you to meet my son. Your great-grandson. His name is Danra."

"He's huge!" said Ana. "Where have you been hiding him!?"

"We've been away for a long time," said Hym.

"But who was the mother?" said Nestor.

"It doesn't work like that."

"Oh."

Danra hugged his grandparents. "Nice to meet you."

Hym said, "Come on. To Blackcastle. I've made a feast, there's enough for everyone."

They followed him on.

The gates of Blackcastle were wide open, and warm light blazed behind every window. Most of the village had gathered in the grand dining room, where a long low table sat heavily laden with complicated vegetarian dishes. Hym held the door of Blackcastle for his grandparents and the Storyteller. For a time, they all stood staring at the crowd of happy, confused people.

Danra said, "Daddy, can I let out my friends now?"

Hym said, "Let's wait until tomorrow morning. We can give people a warning, that way they won't be scared."

"Where are my friends going to live, daddy?"

“We will make a place for them,” said Hym, distracted, moving through the crowd in pursuit of his husband. Minerva emerged from the kitchen just as Hym was about to enter it, and spotted the Storyteller, and screamed. “Magnus!”

“Minerva!”

“You—you’re *dead!*”

“Not anymore,” said Magnus. “Thanks to the Prophet.”

Minerva hugged him.

In the kitchen, Hym found Biryu hard at work, moving between the cabinets, pulling things from storage.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“Well, there’s nothing but plants out there! These people need meat!”

Hym laughed. “They’ll be fine. Trust me. Go, enjoy the feast. Where is my husband?”

“He’s in the garden, waiting for you.”

“Oh, Biryu, meet your grandson.”

“My GRANDSON!?”

Hym presented Danra. “Danra, meet Biryu, Surya’s mother. Biryu, this is Danra, your son’s son.”

“But... how...!?”

Hym laughed. “The spirits work in mysterious ways.”

Biryu embraced Danra. “Oh my goodness, you’re

sticks! Sticks and skin! We must put fat on you right away, come, I have many sweets in the larder. My Surya loved sweets, as a boy!"

Danra looked at his father helplessly as he was dragged away, and Hym smiled to himself.

He found Mark in the side yard, smoking his pipe and holding a bottle of whiskey. He could not bear to face him, so he kept walking.

Mark turned. To Hym's retreating back, he said, "You have taken my son from me."

Hym stiffened. "I have."

Mark drank the whiskey, and said nothing.

Hym said, "I'm sorry."

Mark drank more. "I know."

"Have you seen Surya?"

"The bench," said Mark.

Hym circled around Blackcastle keep and went to the oak grove, where their secret bench lay hidden. He found Surya seated there, wolf-skin cloak huge and shaggy on his shoulders, a statue in the gently falling snow. Hym stopped, and looked upon his husband's face, and knew that they had lost something, but that something true still burned under the shell of years.

He approached. "Surya?"

"Hym!" Surya leapt to his feet, and they embraced.

Surya sat on the bench, and Hym sat in his lap, facing him, arms around his neck.

“You’re sad,” said Hym.

“I am,” said Surya.

“Blackcastle?”

“I swore an oath that I would never spend another night within its halls,” said Surya. “When we visited, I slept in the carriage.”

Hym laughed. He kissed his husband.

They looked at each other. Hym cupped Surya’s face, and kissed him deeply, and Surya squeezed him close.

Hym whispered, “We will make a new place. A palace. Our home. We will forget Blackcastle. I will grind it to dust, if it upsets you.”

“I know,” said Surya, kissing his throat, and the side of his neck, and the hollow of his collarbone.

Hym laughed. “Your beard tickles.”

“You’ll like it,” said Surya.

“I agree,” said Hym, pulling his husband’s head back up to look at him.

Mephistoph came prowling out of the shadows and nuzzled them.

“Cockblocker,” said Surya.

Mephistoph said, “Mrrau.”

Hym laughed again. He touched Mephistoph on the forehead, and the great cat's eyes glowed once, then he turned and left without a sound.

Hym said, "I mean it, though. If Blackcastle is nothing but bad memories for you, I won't make you spend a single moment in its walls."

"I know," said Surya. They looked at each other.

"Thirteen years," said Hym, sadly.

"Thirteen years," said Surya.

"Am I still me?" Hym asked.

"You are. Am I?"

"No, you're you," said Hym.

Surya laughed. "That's good to hear."

They kissed again.

"We're going to live forever, Surya," said Hym. "Or very nearly."

"Unless Shalim goes insane again," said Surya.

"Somehow, I think he's met his match, in Tristan," said Hym.

"You can't mean you believe in the prophecy?" Surya said.

"No. It was so vague it could hardly be called a prophecy. But there is something to it. To the two of them."



Surya nodded. "Tristan will have him wrapped around his pinky in no time."

Hym said, "Come. It's almost finished."

"What is?"

"You'll see."

He got to his feet and held out his hand. Surya took it.

Hym led him into the air, and they alighted on the walltop, under the place where a falling branch had once broken a young boy's back. Their tree was alive again, and growing. The trunk was thickening before their eyes, and the branches were stretching outward, and amid the many branches of the tree a structure of fine stone was forming.

In mere moments, the tree-borne palace was complete. It stood in three tiers, within the tree.

Surya smiled at Hym's handiwork, and looked over the side of the wall to see Mephistoph pacing around the base of the tree, working the magic.

Surya said, "It's perfect."

Hym said, "Do you want to join the party?"

"We have to rescue Danra, at least," said Surya.

Hym laughed. "Oh, yes, I left him with your mother."

Surya said, "We'd better move quickly, she'll spoil him rotten."

They re-entered Blackcastle, and found Danra hovering in the dining hall, telekinetically juggling several dishes. The entire village watched, in awe.

“Oh! Dads!” said Danra, and he dropped to the ground. The dishes fell.

Hym reached out a hand, and the dishes and all their contents stopped in the air, and flew back to their places on the banquet table.

“That was good,” said Hym, “Except the dismount.”

“Sorry, dad,” said Danra.

Minerva raised a glass as she realized Surya and Hym were in the room.

“Hail, the victorious quester!” She cheered.

“Hail!” said many voices, and all raised their glasses.

Surya picked up a glass and plinked on it with his fork until silence fell. He raised it up. “This has been a hard year,” he said. “We have lost much. Only some of it has been returned to us. Tristan Redraven, my brother, is gone to Shalim. He sacrificed all, in order to save us. I would like to take this next drink in his honor, and hold a moment of silence.”

He held out his glass. “To Tristan.”

The toast was echoed. The moment of silence held.

Mark looked around at the revived dead, and at Surya, and at Hym. He said, “Why could you not bring him back?”

Hym said, "I'm sorry. Sometimes, it isn't possible."

Biryu took Mark's hand, and held it. He looked at her, and she hugged him. "We were dead, Mark. We were all dead. It is a miracle that any of us are here."

Torvin's clan came giggling through the crowd at that moment, and Mephistoph came bounding after them, chasing the tail end of a red string dangled by Tobias.

Surya said, "Is that safe?"

Hym said, "Mephistoph cannot hurt them."

The Storyteller moved through the crowd to come to Surya and Hym's side. No one else seemed to dare to intrude upon them.

"You did it, boys," said the Storyteller. "But how?"

"The tale is long," said Surya.

"And I am the Storyteller!" said the Storyteller.

Hym laughed. "We will tell you tomorrow. The road was long, today. You have met my son?"

"We have not, I think, been properly introduced," said the Storyteller.

Danra bowed. "I am Danra, son of Hym and Surya Blackcastle."

"Pleased to meet you, Danra. I am the Storyteller."

Hym said, "He can tell you all the stories I couldn't remember. But not tonight. Tonight you must have sleep."

“Aww, come on,” said Danra. “I never get to meet people!”

Hym smiled. “Very well. Do you want to spend the night here with your grandma? There is a room you can use.”

“Yes!” said Danra.

“In that case, when you’re ready to go to bed, just tell Mephistoph, and he’ll show you the way. Your father and I are going to go to bed now. Be good.”

Danra did a backflip.

One by one, the villagers came forward to ply Hym and Surya with drinks and trinkets, or to ask them for blessings. Hym did his best to grant the many prayers; a need for healing, a prayer for good crops, a request for guidance, a blessing upon a newborn child.

Hym touched the child’s forehead, and a little star burned in each of its eyes.

Surya said, “The trance?”

Hym nodded. “He will be like the Storyteller, one day. The knowledge I stole from Shalim will guide him, when he needs it.”

The parents thanked him tearfully, and joined the crowd. The next petitioners were an old man and his young son. The old man rested his hands on his son’s shoulders, and said, “My boy, Victor, would like your permission to play with your son.”

Hym and Surya looked at each other, and smiled.

Hym crouched down to look at Victor, eye to eye. “Are you a kind boy?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Why do you want to play with my son?”

“Because he’s cool,” said Victor.

Hym laughed. “Would you want to be his friend, even if he didn’t have magic?”

Victor nodded. “I don’t have many friends.”

“Then go ahead.”

“Can you... can you introduce us? Please? Sir?”

Hym laughed. “Danra! Come here, Danra. This is Victor. He wishes to be your playmate.”

“Oh boy!” said Danra. “You have a wooden sword! Do you have another? We could swordfight!”

Hym reached out a hand and the air danced. Algae bloomed within his grasp, and flowed out into the shape, and hardened into wood. He gave the sword to Danra. “Go. Have fun. Tonight is yours.”

“Thank you, papa!”

The boys ran off, laughing, to find a suitable arena.

The old man smiled. “Thank you. He’s been treated strangely, by some folk. He has visions. Dreams.”

Hym nodded. "I sensed as much. Who was his mother?"

"Oh, it wasn't like that," said the old man. "It was a dream, I had, every night for nine months. I stood in my room, looking down at a crying baby on the bed. It was little, at first; just a pillbug. But it grew every night. And on the last night, when I woke up, the crying hadn't stopped."

Hym looked at Surya, then turned to look at his mother.

She shrugged.

"Where did you find him?" Hym asked.

"Lying on my bed," said the old man. "So I took care of him."

"But you didn't dream of a mother?"

"Well, I had some dreams," said the old man, a little red in the face, "but not the kind for polite conversation."

Hym laughed.

Nadianti's eyes widened. "Oh no."

Hym looked at Nadianti. "What? Oh no."

"Oh no," said Surya.

They looked at Hym's uncle, swordfighting with their son. They looked at each other.

"Where's Danaye?" Surya asked.

“She doesn’t like crowds,” said Nadianti. “Or worship. Or bowing.”

“I can understand that,” said Surya, quietly, as the old man shuffled away. It finally seemed they had run out of petitioners.

Hym took Surya’s hand. “Come on. One last leg of the journey. We’ve got to talk to my folks. And to Mark.”

Surya nodded.

They found Ana and Nestor seated on the second floor balcony, on either side of a very drunk Mark Redraven.

Surya and Hym sat down.

Nestor shook Surya’s hand warmly and gave him a hug. Ana kissed him on the cheek. “You’ve brought our boy back,” said Nestor.

“And us,” said Ana. “We can never repay you.”

Mark glared sadly at the flames.

Surya looked at Mark. “Father?”

Mark looked up at him, eyes overflowing.

“I tried, dad. But I couldn’t save him. You lost a son, and I lost a brother. I’m so sorry.”

Surya hugged Mark, and Mark patted him on the back and sobbed into his shoulder.

“Come on, dad. Time for bed. We can both cry more tomorrow.”

"You haven't cried at all," said Mark.

"I've done my share of crying," said Surya. "Come on. On your feet."

Surya led Mark away. In the doorway, he glanced back at Hym, and their eyes met. Even so small a separation burned, but Hym needed to be alone with his grandparents.

They hugged him.

"You picked well," said Ana.

Hym laughed. "I did."

Nestor said, "I'm so proud of you both. You stopped Lord Blackcastle and all his men, all on your own! And you held off the storm, even though it was Leviathan."

"And you made the wagons fly!" Ana said.

"Right, you guys are a little behind," said Hym. "It's been a long, long road."

Nestor lit his pipe and gestured to a seat near the hearth. Hym sat down, and took the offered pipe. He said, "Right. Well, right after you died..."

Surya emerged from the house. He beckoned.

Hym stood. "I'll have to tell you another time. My husband needs me."

"Oh," said Ana. "Oh, alright then."

"Biryu will take good care of you," said Hym. "In the morning, we can sort out your house."



“Our house?” Nestor asked.

“Well,” said Hym, “You were dead.”

“Oh,” said Nestor. “Right.”

“Goodnight,” said Hym, and he hugged them both again. “Sleep well.”

Ana and Nestor looked at each other and smiled mischievously.

Hym took his husband’s hand, and they lifted into the night, and orbited the old castle once, dancing in the air.

“We made it, Hym,” said Surya.

“We made it.”

“I still can’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” said Hym. “It’s all real.”

They landed in the bedroom of their treehouse, and the hearth lit itself.

The walls of the treehouse closed, windowless, offering total privacy and perfect insulation.

The bedroom was tastefully decorated, with a simple bed, a large wardrobe, a hearth, and a pair of chairs.

They both looked at the bed. They both looked at each other.

Wordlessly, they settled into two chairs, before the fire, and held hands.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” said Surya.

"Me neither," said Hym.

"Has it been so long?"

"Thirteen years," said Hym.

"You raised our child," said Surya. "All alone."

"I did," said Hym.

"Why did you make him?"

"What?"

"Why did you not wait for me?"

"I couldn't let him die," said Hym.

"What?"

Hym looked at Surya. "There was a moment. A moment when we were both reaching out, and we touched. Something was created when that happened. I can't explain it. A mixture of the two of us. It was... alive. So I gave it a body. I fanned the spark into a flame. Now he walks with us."

"I didn't know it was like that," said Surya.

"I know," said Hym. "That's why I told you."

"I've dreamed of this day a thousand times," said Surya.

"I know. I shared in some of them."

"I have sculpted a thousand statues of your face."

“I have sketched your face a thousand times, or more,” said Hym.

“For thirteen years, I trained for battle, and when the time came to fight for you, I wasn’t enough.”

“You *were* enough,” said Hym. “You accomplished this. You freed me. I would not be here, without you.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Hym stood slowly, and knelt between Surya’s feet. He rested his head in Surya’s lap, and looked up at him. “No,” he said. “I wouldn’t be.”

Grateful to have hands, Surya sank his fingers into Hym’s dark hair.

“Thirteen years is a long time,” said Surya.

“It is,” said Hym.

“I loved you every day of it. I never faltered. Not once.”

“I know,” said Hym. “I did the same.”

“It was hard.”

“It was,” said Hym.

They looked at each other.

“You don’t hate me, for being tempted?” Surya asked.

“No,” said Hym. “I could never hate you. What about you? I was tempted, too.”

"I'll never hate you," said Surya. "Even if you had failed, I would have forgiven you."

Hym blinked slowly and squeezed his hand.

He felt a whisper of magic around himself, and watched his cloak come undone, and fall away. The laces of his tunic began to untie themselves. He looked up at Surya.

"Surya, I..."

Surya stood, drawing him to his feet. He held Hym in his arms, and kissed him.

"I love you," said Hym.

"I love you," said Surya, as Hym's clothing fell away, and the man he had sculpted for thirteen years fell into his naked hands.

Surya picked Hym up, and carried him to the bed, kissing him all the way. He stood at the edge of the bed and stripped out of his own clothes, revealing many scars and much rippling muscle. Hym grinned, and Surya crawled into the bed with him, and met him at the pillows.

They had waited thirteen years. Now, in the moment of truth, they hesitated, on the brink.

"Let's take a bath," said Hym.

Surya laughed. "I didn't see a bathtub."

"There is one now," he said, as the pool finished itself. It was identical to the one in the Cave.

“You trying to say I stink?” Surya said.

Hym laughed. “No. But we’ve been on the road a long time. It will feel good to get properly clean. And we can swim together.”

They bathed, and swam together, their legs entangling under the water.

Hym swam to the bench, and sat, and patted his lap. Surya swam to him, and perched on his thighs, and kissed him. Hands and lips wandered.

Teased to extremity, he rose weightless from the waves, carrying his husband, and sent them both to the bed. Surya hugged his thighs to his chest, presenting himself eagerly, and Hym grinned in the firelight.



## Chapter 60

# The Afterlife

They flew swiftly, more swiftly than any wind. Tristan clung to Shalim's armored hand, a little afraid.

"Are you warm?" Shalim asked.

"Are you offering something?" Tristan asked.

"Not everything is a verbal ploy."

"If you're offering for me to get under your cloak, the answer is yes."

"What?"

"Just hold still."

Tristan moved in the air as they flew, tucking himself under Shalim's right arm.

"Oh," said Shalim.

In the shadow of the cloak, it was much warmer.

"How much farther do we have to fly?" Tristan asked.

“We will reach it in another hour,” said Shalim.

“How come you’re faster now than you were with Leviathan?”

“I am beyond the need for Leviathan, now.”

“Oh,” said Tristan. “Is that because you absorbed your brother?”

Shalim nodded.

“So you’re not *just* Shalim, anymore.”

Shalim nodded. “I am not.”

“Hence why you are reasonable, all of the sudden.”

“Yes. I fear it may be so.”

“There is one stop we must make first,” said Shalim, passing over the high wall of ice at wild speeds.

“Oh?”

“Yes. Umbra. There is someone I wish to check in upon.”

“Oh,” said Tristan. “I see.”

They landed in Umbra, before the main gates of the keep. Sixteen blue-robed guards stood upon the walltop, staring down at Shalim and at Tristan.

Tristan drew an arrow and set it to the string of his bow. “Say the word, or name a target.”

Shalim laughed. He looked up at the guards. “Where is your princess?”



“She is gone! Burnt at the stake, for consorting with you! Shachar guards us now, and the sins of our city are forgiven.”

Shalim flickered from shadow into light, and the guards staggered back.

Shachar said, “You fools!”

Tristan said, “You burned her at the stake? An innocent woman?”

“She was a witch! Consorting with Shalim!”

“She was no witch,” said Shachar, and he swung his blade. The wall and the gates broke, and fell, tumbling the blue-robed guards into the air.

Tristan loosed a storm of arrows, and before the guards could react or rise, they died.

Shalim lowered his hands, dark once more. He looked at Tristan. “I was going to finish them.”

“Yeah, well. You were taking a long time. Who else are we killing?”

“You have no distaste for this?”

“Well, we’ll bring them back as demons, right?”

“What? No. We will simply end them.”

“Oh. Well, that’s less cool.”

“You would be alright with it, if we kept their souls, and transformed them forever, and let them roam the endless halls of our kingdom?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Then that is what we shall do. Many of them have no souls, however,” said Shalim.

“So? You’re a god. Fix that.”

“Oh,” said Shalim. “Yes, I suppose it isn’t really that hard.”

“Let’s do this formally. Try to find all the people who are supporting this woman-burning regime, and get them all to surrender. Then utter judgement like a king, and take them, so that the survivors we leave behind will learn, and be better for it in the future. In time, we may be able to walk the streets of Umbra without outrage.”

Shalim looked at Tristan for a long, long, long time. “There are easier means to bring justice,” said Shalim.

Tristan said, “No there aren’t. Killing them indiscriminately isn’t justice, and it isn’t a good flex of your power. No one will remember.”

“I was going to leave survivors.”

“Yes, but you could leave a *legend*.”

Shalim thought about this. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Of course I am. I’m your husband. I’m always right. That’s how it works.”

“Ah, then I am always right as well?”

“No,” said Tristan. “You misunderstand me.”

“Oh,” said Shalim. “I see.”

Tristan raised up his bow and fired a shot into the sky, and high in the upper atmosphere it erupted in a thunderous blast of sparks and fire. He shouted, voice booming: "UMBRA! SEND OUT YOUR KING, AND ALL HIS ADVISORS. SEND OUR EVERY MAN WHO HAS EVER BURNED A WOMAN AT THE STAKE, AND ALL WHO BELIEVE THAT SUCH A THING IS WORTH DOING! SO SAYETH SHACHAR, WISHING TO REWARD THE RIGHTEOUS OF THE CITY."

Shalim nodded appreciatively. Then he raised his sword. "YOU HAVE ONE HOUR."

The roof of every building in the city tore itself free from its walls and rose into the air, and held itself there.

"That's a nice touch," said Tristan. "I like it."

"Where shall we wait?"

"Above the city. It's more imposing that way. Somewhere they have to shout a little bit, to talk to us."

Shalim rose into the air, and Tristan rose with him. They looked down at their dollhouse view of the kingdom, and saw the ants scurry about. Tristan smiled. "One could get used to this."

Shalim looked at Tristan. "You are not what I expected, from a friend of the Prophet."

"Oh? What did you expect?"

"More moral outrage," said Tristan.

“These people are burning women at the stake. Of course I’m outraged.”

“No, I mean... About this. About being a god.”

“Oh,” said Tristan. “No. I think it comes very easily to me. I’ve always gotten my way. Now I have more ways to do it. By the way, you’d better turn back into Shachar, if we want this ruse to really work.”

“Good point,” said Shalim, and he became Shachar.

A small crowd of people were moving towards the fallen gates of the keep, some of them unwillingly.

Pushed, shoved, or walking willingly, the king and his advisors and a small group of religious officials and other people came to the forefront. One of them, with a very tall hat, raised his voice and said, “Oh... Mighty... Shachar! We beseech thee, take pity upon us, for we have done as you commanded, and purged the evil witch from our ranks. Save us from your evil brother, Shalim!”

“You speak much of evil,” said Shachar. “As though you knew it.”

“Please! Your brother is here, he is in hiding, he has killed our guards!”

Shachar said, “Step forward. All of you. All you who obeyed this command to burn an innocent woman.”

The king, his advisors, and the rest of the little group stepped forward.

“Shall I do the honors?” asked Tristan.

“Allow me to give them souls, first,” said Shalim, quietly.

He reached out his hand, and stars burned in the eyes of the entire crowd of people. They stood transfixed, staring upwards at Shalim, as the power joined with them.

Then Shalim lowered his hand.

Tristan waved a hand and all his arrows sped from their quiver at once.

Every new-made witch fell dead, iron in their skulls. Their souls stood upon the cobblestone streets, looking up in horror at Shalim and at Danaye.

Shachar said, “Let this be a lesson, and take it well to heart. No one is to be burned at the stake. You shall let witches live among you, and at peace.”

Tristan said, “Let justice reign here! We shall not tolerate injustice, and you shall know our judgement, for it is swift.”

Someone said shakily, “Wh-who are you?”

“This is Tristan Redraven,” said Shalim, “husband of Shalim.”

“Technically, I’m only your Fiancé.”

“This is Tristan Redraven, Shalim’s Fiancé,” said Shalim.

“Oh,” said the man. “Good to know!”

Tristan took Shalim's hand. He looked down at the many souls. "Your fate lies with us, now. Follow, and rejoice, for new life awaits you."

"You're... Rewarding us?" The spirits asked.

"We are granting mercy, and enlightenment," said Tristan. "You will learn the ache of your sins, when you are wise enough to see them."

Tristan and Shalim flew back towards the high wall of ice.

Tristan said, "I'm sorry about the princess."

"She does not matter. She had no soul."

"They all matter," said Tristan. "Even the little ones."

Shalim laughed. "I cannot believe that."

"You don't have to. I do. If you wish to please me, you will treat them as though you respected that."

Shalim nodded seriously. "Very well. I shall."

They reached Hellegrund, and found it undamaged, whole, renewed.

They landed at the doors of the black tower. Shalim looked at Tristan. "This is your last opportunity to turn back."

Tristan held Shalim's hand, and looked at the new demons walking timidly after them through the ice. Each of them had transformed utterly. Tristan said, "I don't

want to turn back.”

“You do not think I am a monster?”

“I’ve killed loads of people,” said Tristan. “It’s whatever.”

“You did not answer my question.”

“Sure, I think you’re a monster. But how could you not be? You’re thousands upon thousands of years old, and you’ve spent them all waiting for someone to take your virginity. All gods are monsters, in a way. When I realized that, I took it as a challenge.”

Shalim laughed.

The gates of Hellegrund opened, and they entered.

The angels had changed; now they, too, were demons. The city was packed with beings.

Shalim said, “Tristan, meet your subjects. These are my demons.”

“Call them something else,” said Tristan. “Shachar is dead. There’s no need to define them that way.”

“What shall I call them?”

“Creations,” said Tristan.

“These are my creations, then. The dwellers of Hellegrund.”

“I see them,” said Tristan, waving politely.

“Are you hungry?”

“Famished.”

“Come. We can eat on the tower-top.”

They ate on the tower-top, side by side.

Shalim said, “I do not understand you.”

“Of course you don’t. I’m thirty-three. You’re, like, a million.”

“You find that... attractive?”

“I find your power and skill attractive,” said Tristan. “And your face. And, in a certain way, your simplicity.”

“My simplicity!?”

“Your simplicity,” said Tristan. “You are as simple as nightfall. As pure as death. You take the most direct route, because you have more than enough power to. You have never been forced to be creative, and so your approach to problems is always straightforward. I have read everything there is to know about you.”

“And you still choose to be with me? Despite knowing...?”

“Because of knowing,” said Tristan. “Hym could never have made you happy. It would have been a mistake. You would have regretted it, in the end.”

“Still, I have taken you from your father,” said Shalim.

“You could give me back at any time you pleased. Or at least let me visit, or see him sometimes.”

Shalim said, “I will think about it.”



“You don’t need to worry,” said Tristan. “You’re not alone anymore. I’m here with you.”

“I cannot believe it yet,” said Shalim.

Tristan put a hand on Shalim’s inner thigh and said, “I think I have something that might help with that.”

“Oh?” said Shalim, oblivious.

Tristan gently ran one finger from Shalim’s navel to his throat, and his armor split, and opened, and peeled away from his skin.

“Oh,” said Shalim, as comprehension dawned.

Tristan pounced upon him, and taught him the meaning of a kiss. They tumbled. Clothing came away.

Overwhelmed by their foreplay, Shalim grumbled, “Roll over.”

Tristan laughed. “Guess again.”



## Chapter 61

# Two Weddings, and a Funeral

Hym's eyes opened slowly in the firelight, and rested on his husband's sleeping face. He smiled. They had filled the night with love, and dreamed of it too. He caressed Surya's sleeping face.

Surya's eyes fluttered open and focused on Hym. "Oh. Hey."

"Hey," said Hym, smiling.

"I missed you," whispered Surya, "after you woke up."

His arms snaked around Hym, and pulled him close. "It's cold."

"Not under here, it's not," Hym said.

They disappeared, giggling, under the sheets, and discovered each other all over again.

A few hours later they got up reluctantly, and bathed,

and made love again on the side of the pool, and bathed again, and got dressed. They made it to the door, Surya gave Hym's bum a squeeze, and they took each other's hands, and glided down into the green and living garden.

Surya gaped. "Did you—?!"

"No!" said Hym.

Danra came running around the corner, chased by Victor, who was mounted on Mephistoph's back with a wooden sword in his hand. "Daddy! Daddy, look! Grandma made flowers, she said it's for your wedding, and they're making a cake, and there's going to be a funeral after, for Tristan, and—"

He pivoted, blocked Victor's sweeping blade, smacked it out of his hands, and turned back to his father as Victor sped past, disarmed, shouting, "No fair!"

"—and I got to help with decorating the cake, and they're making a veil, too, and suits, and everything! Everybody's inside, waiting to surprise you, but I'm not supposed to say anything about it."

"Oops," said Surya, chuckling.

"We don't keep secrets," said Hym, laughing. "But sometimes, for things like this, it's ok."

"Ok dad," said Danra.

"Well," said Hym. "We'd better pretend to be surprised."

“No pretending here,” said Surya. “I’m flabbergasted.”

They walked through the green and living garden in the dead of Absence’s bitter night, and the grasses shivered in a warm breeze, and the wind chimes danced, singing a bridal tune. Hym laughed. “Mom?”

Behind him, she said, “I’m here,” and she placed a garland of living roses on his head.

“As am I,” said Danaye, placing a similar crown on Surya’s dark hair.

Hym and Surya looked at each other and laughed.

“Aren’t we already married?” asked Hym, taking his mother’s hand.

“You are,” said Danaye, taking Surya’s hand. “But I wasn’t there for it last time, and it was a bit rushed, if the tale I heard is true. The villagers have decided that you deserve better.”

Danra squeezed between his fathers and took both their remaining hands. Hym and Surya looked at each other, smiling. *Soon enough, our hands will be together again.*

The group entered Blackcastle to find Mark and Biryu busily working in the kitchen along with Minerva, the Storyteller, Ana, and Torvin’s clan. Torvin’s clan were whipping up complicated pastries with astonishing ease.

“Oh!” shouted Biryu. “They’re here!”

Mark turned, beaming. “Surya! Hym! Surprise! We’re throwing you a wedding.”

“Oh!” said Hym, looking very surprised. “Oh my goodness! You didn’t have to go to so much trouble! For us!? Oh my goodness, thank you so much!”

Surya said, “Aw, Mom.” He hugged her.

“Well, your last wedding was just some rice and some words,” said Biryu. “My wedding was beautiful, even if my marriage wasn’t. You deserve a nice one too.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you all,” said Hym. “You have all been so kind to us.”

“You were kind first,” said Biryu, touching his face.

Touched, Hym nodded.

Nestor entered the room. “Ah! Surya! I thought you and I could go fishing, this morning.”

“What?” said Hym.

“What?” said Surya. They looked at each other.

“It’s bad luck for the groom to see the groom, before the wedding,” said Ana, knowledgeably.

Surya took Hym’s hand and squeezed it.

Then he joined Nestor, who smiled, saying, “Don’t worry. I won’t bite him!”

They left, and Hym felt at once alone, despite them all.

His mother squeezed his shoulder. "Surya will be back."

"I know," he said, touching her hand. "But every moment away from him is pain."

Surya walked behind Nestor, into the forest. They came to a secluded stream, still laced in ice, and Surya saw that someone had drilled a large hole into the ice, and set two stools and a jug of whiskey before it. He sat with his father-in-law.

Nestor said, "So, you're marrying my grandson."

"Mhmm."

"Whiskey?"

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself. I needed half a bottle, to get myself down the altar."

Surya laughed. "Even for Ana?"

"Marriage is no joke," said Nestor. "It's serious business."

"I have waited twenty-three years for Hym," said Surya. "I am ready. I am sure. I am not afraid."

Nestor laughed. "You tell yourself that. You held it like a dream, like a goal. The reality of marriage is nothing like the fantasy, no matter how long you waited

for it.”

Surya looked at Nestor. “Maybe you’re right.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve got to learn,” said Nestor. “How to accept when you’re wrong, and learn quickly. Hym is forceful, but he listens to reason.”

Surya laughed. “You’re not wrong.”

“So, any questions?” Nestor asked.

“About what?”

“You know. The act.”

“Oh gods, no.”

“You understand how it’s done, then? The basic... Mechanics?”

Surya laughed. “I will not need instruction. Thank you.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” said Nestor. “My father-in-law had to explain it from the ground up. It was sort of horrifying. Scarred me a bit, really.” He drank, and held out the jug.

Surya took it reluctantly, and took a swig.

Nestor said, “I used to take Hym here, sometimes.”

“Ever catch anything?” Surya asked, noticing that neither of them had put lines into the water.

Nestor said, “We don’t need anything today. Ana



suggested a trip here, to give us some time to get acquainted.”

“Oh, I see.”

“So you have hands again, I see?”

“I do,” said Surya.

“Hym’s work?”

“No,” said Surya. “A different god.”

“God?” Nestor asked.

Surya nodded.

“So... What are you, now?”

“His husband,” said Surya. “And a witch. A strong one.”

“You can do magic?”

“I can.”

“Can you... Show me?”

Surya said, “What should I do?”

“I don’t know. Anything would impress me.”

Surya reached out a hand and the water danced, and some of it rose into the air, glistening, and formed a goblet, and froze into clear ice. He caught it. He poured whiskey into it. He drank.

He handed it to Nestor.

“It’s warm to the touch,” said Nestor, astounded.

Surya nodded. "But not to the whiskey."

Nestor sipped. "Oh my."

Surya said, "You raised a good man."

"Thank you."

"I would have waited even longer, if I had to."

"Let's hope you won't have to," said Nestor.

"I'm waiting now," said Surya. "Every moment away from him needles me."

"Oh," said Nestor. "Come on, it's not so bad. You'll be together again by nightfall!"

"I know," said Surya. "And I count the minutes. Don't read me wrong; I appreciate your company. But whenever Hym is not beside me, I am alone."

"Is that healthy?" Nestor asked, kindly.

Surya looked at him fiercely. "What would you know? Hym and I are not like you. He and I are bound in ways you cannot fathom."

Nestor sighed. "No, I suppose not."

"We are trying to respect the tradition, but it's hard, even now, not to call his presence to me."

"You can do that?"

"Yes. Now that he's free of Shalim. We can dream of each other even while waking. When we sleep, our dreams are one."

“You’re together even in your sleep?”

Surya nodded.

Nestor said, “Isn’t that a bit... Oppressive? I’d be dying for some alone time.”

“As I said, I have waited many years for him. I have had all the alone time I will ever need.”

“You say that now,” said Nestor. “I can tell you from personal experience that raising a teenager does not often lead to marital bliss.”

Surya laughed. “Danra is a good man. Aren’t you, Danra?”

Danra popped out of the bushes. “I’m not a man yet.”

“Well, you’re a good *young* man, then,” said Surya.

“Thank you, dad.”

Danra sat on the ice and looked into the pool. “There’s fish in there?”

“Apparently,” said Surya.

Nestor said, “Oh yes. Lots of fish. Your pop and I used to fish here all the time!”

“Can I get one?” Danra asked.

Surya nodded.

Danra dove into the ice.

Nestor threw himself to his feet, ripping off his tunic. “Danra! Don’t worry, lad, I’m coming!”

Surya stopped him with a hand. “Wait. Watch.”

Danra sank into the pond, the glow of his eyes fading into the icy gloom.

“But—!” said Nestor.

“Watch,” said Surya.

The light began to grow again, as Danra rose, and he emerged from the waters, already dry, eyes faintly glowing, holding in his hand a live fish and a bubble of clear water. The fish was sound asleep.

“It’s sleeping!” said Danra.

“Yes it is!” said Surya. “They usually sleep through Absence. It’s how they survive the cold.”

“It’s cool,” said Danra, and he put the fish and its water back into the pool.

Nestor put his tunic back on and sat down, and drank more whiskey.

Surya sat, and Danra sat at his feet, and looked happily up at both of them.

“Where’s your playmate?” Surya asked.

Danra pulled a face. “He got in trouble because he didn’t go to bed on time last night, so I can’t see him today.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Surya. “Maybe he’ll be at the wedding?”

“I hope so! He’s good at swordfighting.”

“He’s your great uncle,” said Surya. “I think? Let me think about it.”

Danra raised a quizzical eyebrow and Nestor did so as well. Their expressions were remarkably similar.

Surya said, “Right, so, he’s Hym’s uncle, so...”

“He’s Hym’s uncle?”

“Yeah,” said Surya. “At least, I’m pretty sure.”

“So that makes him Danra’s great uncle,” said Nestor.

“Our family just keeps growing,” said Surya, smiling.

“Had to clip a few branches, of course,” said Nestor.

“Just one,” said Surya.

Nestor nodded.

Biryu and Ana and Nadianti fussed over his outfit with magic and needlework, and he looked at himself, and the guise of a groom taking shape around him. The cape was very heavy; the tunic, very starched and embroidered. His mother draped the veil over his face.

“Will Surya have to wear one too?” Hym asked.

“Yes,” said Nadianti. “It is tradition.”

“Why, though?”

“No one knows,” said Nadianti.

Biryu said, “It is from the times when a man could give his daughter away at will, and a man could buy her, face unseen, trusting only in her good reputation. It is

how Surya's father and I met."

"Oh," said Hym.

"How barbaric!" said Nadianti.

"I don't think I want to wear this, then," said Hym.  
"We've already seen each other's faces."

"It's symbolic," said Minerva, entering the room just as he took it off. She threw it over his head again. "It represents the veil between you, the inner truth of yourselves that neither of you has yet truly seen."

"Then I have no need to wear it," said Hym. "Surya has seen all."

"You haven't lived with him yet," said Ana. "Everyone sees their spouse for the first time, when they start to live together. No one is easy to live with. No one."

Hym looked at himself in the mirror. The veil did complete the costume very well. "Fine," he said. "I will wear it."

Someone knocked on the door.

Minerva opened it. The Storyteller poked his head in. "Surya and Nestor are back. They're getting ready in the garden. Shall I start the music?"

"Wait," said Hym, "Why am I to be the bride?"

"What?" asked Nadianti.

"This is all wrong. Surya and I should walk down the aisle together, side by side."

“But—!” said Minerva.

“No. I have spoken. That is how it will happen.”

“But you’re supposed to see each other from a distance, and walk towards each other longingly!”

“Then we will enter the garden through opposite doors, and meet at the base of the aisle, and walk down it to the altar together.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” said Nadianti.

“But tradition!” said the Storyteller.

“Am I your Prophet, or am I not?” Hym asked.

“Right you are, sir,” said the Storyteller, and he left.

“Unruffle your feathers, dear,” said Nadianti, brushing her son’s dark hair.

“Sorry,” said Hym.

“Don’t worry,” said Minerva, adjusting the arrangement of his bouquet. “We all get cold feet.”

“My feet are perfectly comfortable,” said Hym. “This is just a lot of trouble to go to. I want it to be perfect.”

“It will be,” said Nadianti. “It will be yours, whatever it is. And that will be perfection.”

Hym smiled. “Thank you.”

Minerva said, “In my experience, it’s the weddings where something goes horribly wrong that everyone remembers most fondly.”

“Speaking of, where’s Danra?” Hym asked. “Has anyone seen him?”

“Can’t you sense him?” Nadianti asked.

“I can. But he’s currently hiding himself from me.”

“He’s probably visiting Victor,” said Minerva.

“Probably,” said Hym. “He’s as much of a troublemaker as I am.”

“Oh no,” said Ana. “We’re all in trouble, if that’s true.”

Nestor and Mark and the Storyteller fussed over Surya’s costume, and tried to give him last minute advice. He looked at himself in the mirror, feeling very silly in his veil and cape, and wondered if Hym was faring any better.

After the women had finished with Hym, they went to Surya, and the men came to Hym.

The advice started almost at once, and Hym listened patiently.

“Remember, you need a blanket much bigger than your bed.”

“Don’t forget, your husband is never wrong, except when he really, really is, and even then you’ve got to be kind.”

“Remember, admitting your own mistakes is key.”

“Good communication is key!”



“Oh, yes! Good communication, most definitely. You’ll want to make sure you talk about everything that troubles you.”

“And it’s ok to change for someone you love! It’s healthy.”

“You’ll both have to change, to adapt to each other. Pobody’s nerfect, after all.”

“Pobody’s nerfect?” said Hym. He smiled. “Thanks. I’ll remember that.”

“There will come times when you’re certain that everything is over, and the love has died. Those are the times when it most important to slow down, and take stock, and try to find better ways to show how much you still love. It can come back. It can be revived,” said Nestor.

“Did you ever doubt?” Hym asked Nestor.

“I did. Many times. But Ana always put my head on straight. She’s a wise woman. I wouldn’t survive, without her.”

Hym laughed. “I doubted, once. When I was a boy. I have no doubts, now. He is the one for me.”

Nadianti faced Surya, and straightened his collar. “I have watched you for a long, long time, Surya. I have no doubt that you are worthy of him.”

This was all he needed to hear. His courage returned. He looked her in her violet eyes, and said, “Thank you.”

She embraced him.

A trumpet sounded in the garden.

“Oh no,” said Biryu. “They’re ready for us.”

“We’re not done with this hem yet!” Minerva said.

Nadianti waved her hand, and the sewing completed itself.

“Oh,” said Minerva.

Nadianti kissed Surya on the cheek. “Go.”

Nestor hugged his son. “Go on, now.”

Hym and Surya stepped out of Blackcastle on opposite sides of the garden, and turned, and walked to the rear garden. They rounded the corner, and saw each other for the first time in that long, long day, and that single moment was worth all the pain.

Brimming over with tears, Hym’s eyes carried him to Surya. He was not even conscious of the movement of his feet.

The grass flowered where he walked, sprouting blooms unseen before that day. He stopped before Surya at the end of the aisle, and handed him the bouquet of roses in his hands.

Surya laughed, and handed him an identical bouquet. Surya raised his hands, and the two bouquets untied their silk ribbons, and bundled together into one, and bound themselves again. They caught it together, and held it between them, unharmed by the thorns.

They turned to face the altar and the crowd.

They both startled. It was not the Storyteller at the altar; it was Danaye.

“Come forward,” she said. “I have prepared the same vows your mother used, on her own wedding.”

Hym looked at Surya.

They walked together down the aisle, every step a small forever. They reached the altar at last, and turned to face each other through their veils.

Hym felt the touch of Surya’s power, prickling down his cheek. He smiled. He got Surya back, but Surya hid his reaction well.

Danaye said, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the union of two good souls. Please stand.”

The crowd stood.

Danaye said, “Surya Redraven. You come here to offer yourself to Hym?”

“I do,” said Surya.

“Hym, son of Nadianti, daughter of Danaye. You come here to offer yourself to Surya?”

“I do,” said Hym.

“Then speak the words of this oath, and let the rings be exchanged.”

“Rings?” said Hym.

“Here!” said Danra, skipping down the aisle with two identical golden rings in his hand. Hym realized suddenly that Surya’s golden ring was gone from his finger; that had been the cause of all his discomfort.

“How did you...?” said Hym, looking at Danra’s grinning, dirty face.

“Found some gold!” said Danra. “It wasn’t that deep.”

He handed both rings to his father and skipped away.

Hym and Surya faced each other, each holding a ring in one hand, and holding the bouquet in the other.

Danaye said, “These are the words of the oath. ‘I swear to honor and protect this man, and to claim him as my own. I swear to defend him in court and in battle, and against even the whole world. I swear to love him in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty, in suffering and in joy. I swear to be his always, and his alone, until such time as he releases me from the words of this oath.’”

Surya and Hym looked at each other, and simultaneously repeated the words of the oath.

“You may exchange the rings,” said Danaye.

The rings floated gently from their hands as each of them twisted their magic. Both rings slid into place.

“You may kiss the groom.”

They hardly needed to be told. Their veils lifted in a sudden wind, and they kissed.

Standing at the altar, they turned, and threw the bouquet together over their heads.

Minerva, of all people, was the one to catch it. She did so with the hook of her cane, snatching it out of the air mere feet from the reaching hands of the other claimants.

She sniffed the roses, and smiled.

A ripple of power moved across the world. Somewhere deep in the southern sands, a vast eye opened, and a dark palace rose from the depths.

Tristan stood at one end of the throne room, facing Shalim, seated on his throne. The throne beside him sat empty.

Tristan's cloak was long, trailing endlessly behind him in folds of glimmering shadow. His robes hung with diamonds. A crown of tiny stars hung above his head, following him as he paced down the endless hall of the throne room, and climbed the steps, and turned, and sat upon his throne.

He took Shalim's hand.

"Is that the whole ceremony?" said Tristan.

"I believe so," said Shalim. "Yes."

"Then the prophecy is fulfilled?"

Shalim frowned, listening to the air. "No."

“It’s not?”

“It is not.”

“You don’t seem troubled by that.”

“Strangely,” said Shalim, “I am... not.”

Shalim’s eyes widened suddenly, and he stared into the distance.

“What is it?” Tristan asked.

“Take my hand,” said Shalim.

Tristan took it.

Instantly, they and their thrones vanished in a thunderclap, and reappeared in the gardens of Blackcastle, facing the assembled crowd and the altar and Surya, standing by Hym.

Tristan stepped down from his throne, diamonds flashing, searching the crowd for his father.

“Tristan!” Mark Redraven shouted, and he ran to him.

They embraced.

Shalim came to stand behind Tristan. Above, dark clouds twisted.

Hym and Surya looked at each other.

Tristan said, “Thank you, Shalim. Thank you for letting me see them.”

“I did not bring you here for them,” said Shalim, staring at Danaye. Danaye smiled smugly back.

Then she was there, among them, standing before them: a titanic woman of solid stone, gleaming with many inner lights. Her eyes burned among the stars.

Hym and Surya and Shalim and Tristan and everyone else looked straight up to stare at this behemoth, and she stared sternly down.

“You have complicated the test,” she said. Despite her size, her voice was a subtle whisper.

“We have?” Hym asked.

“You have. The Tear’s heart is divided. It has chosen two.”

“What will happen?” Shalim asked.

“The game begins anew. We will reset.”

“NO!” Hym shouted.

“Please,” said Surya. “Please! Let us live! Let us be at peace!”

Shalim sighed. “Oblivion. It is a welcome ending.”

Tristan kissed Shalim on the lips. “Is it?”

Shalim looked Tristan in his emerald eyes, and said, softly, “...No.”

He looked at Hym and Surya.

“She must choose one,” said Shalim. “She must decide between us, who will win the game.”

“Whichever one she thinks is worthy,” said Hym.

The Mother watched impassively.

Shalim clung to Tristan’s hand.

Very gently, he let Tristan’s hand slide from his grasp.

“Go,” said Shalim, his voice thick. “Please. Go to them.”

“What?”

“I reject you,” said Shalim. “I am sorry. Go.”

He rose into the air. Tristan stared after him, heart-broken.

The Mother said, “I see. A good resolution, I think. Very well. The world begins anew, tomorrow. I shall model it from you, daughter.”

Everyone looked at everyone else, utterly baffled.

I said, “Thank you, Mother. May I speak to myself, now?”

The Mother shook her giant head, distorting the stars. “No. That is for the end.”

Mark held his son, and Tristan stared through his arms at the sky, where Shalim had been.

The Mother turned to the south.

“Will we live?” I asked.



The Mother nodded. “You are the winners. Congratulations.”

She vanished.

The ring above turned red.

“Oh no,” said Hym, as the sky began to burn.

Quickly, he and Surya and Tristan and Nadianti and Danaye all whipped power into the heavens, and held a shield of protection over the village and the surrounding forest. The heat seared down around them, and they sensed the world burning, and the utter extinguishment of life.

Tristan felt the moment Shalim died.

Danra hugged Hym around the knees. “Papa?”

Hym continued to hold the shield.

At long last, the Ring turned back to its cold silver-blue, and he let the shield fall.

A bitter wind raked the treetops, thick with dust and ash.

“She burned it all,” said Tristan, coldly.

The remains of the world looked at Tristan. Tristan said, “She burned it all. Even Shalim. I... I felt him die.”

“Me too,” said Hym.

They looked at each other, a moment of recognition passing between them.

Danra said, “Dad, I’m scared.”

“We all are, Danra,” said Hym. “It’s alright.”

“She killed the world?” The Storyteller asked, standing up. “All of it?”

“All save us,” said Danaye. “Or rather, what we could save.”

“She let us save it,” said Hym. “She could have killed us too, if she wanted to. Like swatting a fly.”

“But she didn’t,” said Tristan.

“But she didn’t,” said Hym.

“So... We’re the next phase of the test?”

Hym nodded.

Surya clung to Hym’s hand. Hym said, “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” said Surya.

“For now,” said Danaye, “we celebrate your wedding. And our survival.”

“That’s callous!” said Tristan. “That’s heartless! How can we celebrate, on such an occasion?”

“Such an occasion is precisely why we *must* celebrate!” said the Storyteller, angrily. “We must recognize what we have left. We have been granted mercy! We alone were righteous, in her eyes. Let us celebrate the defeat of wickedness, and the triumph of love!”

Hym and Surya looked at each other, unsure how they felt about that.

They looked at the frightened villagers, now staring up at the dark, apocalyptic sky. Yellow lightning flickered among soot-black clouds of ash, blotting out the sun.

Hym stepped forward, raising his husband's hand. "Today, the world is made new. It is ours to decide what it becomes, and we will decide together."

Danra said, "And don't be scared! I know there's no people, but we can make more! Lots more!"

Someone started crying.

Soon several people were crying. Some rocked back and forth as they sobbed, helpless with fear.

Tristan roared, "Pull yourselves together!"

The sobbing stopped. A lot of subdued sniffing took its place.

Tristan walked to Hym and Surya. "My husband is dead. I felt him die."

"I know," said Hym. "I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do."

"I know. But what are you going to do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"My husband is dead. Shall I not have my vengeance?"

"You want to kill *the Mother!*?"

“We’re going to have to, sooner or later,” said Tristan. “She can’t be allowed to rule over us like this.”

“We can’t stop her,” said Hym. “All of us together could barely stop one spell. I didn’t even sense her body.”

Black snow began to fall. A stink of smoke settled over the village.

As the black snow spotted Hym’s veil, he tore it off angrily and looked up at the sky. With a whisper of his will, he rose, and shot into the heavens, and punched through the clouds. He reached out his hands, and claimed the many lightnings, and drank them to himself. With a roar, he reached out his power, and searched every atom of the cloud. He tore them apart from their molecules, and drank them to himself, and collapsed the cloud into mounds of raw atomic material. He waved his hands and many-colored plasmas danced in the clear night sky above the village, and coalesced, and crashed to earth: a monolith.

It sparked with inner lightnings, and shimmered like labradorite.

Hym landed near it. It stood in the forest just beyond the village, looming high, and from its shimmering peak a permanent dome of protective force spread out over the forest and the village.

Surya landed beside him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m solving problems,” said Hym.

“The way Shalim would have?”

“No,” said Hym. “We’ve got to be sure they’re safe from her. We can’t let her claim their souls.”

“So we link them to this?”

“So we link them to this.”

Tristan stepped out of the trees. “The time will still come. Whatever the next phase of her game is, it has an endpoint, just as ours did. It will come. This won’t save you.”

“Maybe not,” said Hym. “But for now, it will save them.”

“We will be forced to kill her,” said Tristan.

“We are not strong enough, as we are now. We must become more.”

“We must claim the Ring,” said Tristan.

“I think that was what Shalim’s tower was for,” said Hym. “But there’s a maximum height. You can’t fly higher, or build higher. The Mother won’t let you.”

Tristan looked thoughtfully at the Ring, above them, and thought about a gigantic bow. “There may be other ways to get someone there.”

“If there are, I’m sure Shalim tried them.”

“I am not so sure,” said Tristan.

Surya took Hym’s hand. Their rings clicked together.

Danra came running through the woods. “Found you!”

“Hello, Danra,” said Hym. “How is everyone?”

“They’re scared,” said Danra. “They were starting to go inside, when I left. Even though you cleared the air.”

“They have a right to be afraid,” said Hym. “The world has ended. Again.”

“It has?” said Danra.

“It has,” said Hym. “I’m sorry. We couldn’t stop it.”

“Why are we still here, then?” Danra asked.

“Because we are meant to make the new world, from the ashes of the old one.”

“Oh. Is this a test?”

“I think so.”

“How do we pass?”

“I don’t think it’s that kind of test.”

“Oh.”

Danra hugged Surya. Surya tousled his hair. “I’ve got you, kiddo. We’ll be ok.”

“My husband is dead,” said Tristan.

“I know,” said Hym. “And I’m sorry.”

Tristan looked at Surya, eyes flint-hard. “Surya. Are you coming or not?”

“Of course we are,” said Surya. “But it’s going to take time.”

“How much time?”

“Time enough for Danra to grow, at least,” said Hym. “And to establish the witches, and our creations. We have to leave this world ready to exist without us, if we plan to risk our lives, and leave it.”

Tristan thought about this. At last, he nodded. “In a way, I suppose we’re the gods, now.”

“I suppose so,” said Hym.

Surya sighed. “Let’s please not fight.”

Tristan laughed. “No guarantees. I won’t wait forever. And I will get your aid. One way or another.”

“Understood,” said Hym. He turned to his husband. “Come on. Let’s go back to Blackcastle and give out our wedding present.”

Surya nodded. “If you think it’s for the best.”

“I do.”

They rose into the sky, and all of them flew back to Blackcastle, and found the main dining hall crowded with frightened villagers. As they turned to assault Hym with questions, he raised a hand, and silence fell.

He said: “My people. We are alone, now. We are the last of our kind. Don’t be afraid. We have survived, and we will continue to do so. We must rebuild the world from ashes and from dust. Before we can, there is one thing I must give you all. A gift. My wedding gift, to each of you. Please don’t be afraid. Accept her, and let

her love you.”

He breathed me out into the air like a cloud, and I wafted through the room.

“Breathe her in,” said Hym.

The people breathed, and I entered their bodies, and flowed through their flesh. Hym felt them awaken, one by one, and each that did slumped suddenly in their place, and slept as though dead.

Danra looked at all the sleeping people and said, “What did you do?”

“I made them witches,” said Hym. “Danaye is with them now, teaching them the basics of their magic. They will sleep for three days, and awaken as we are.”

“Are you certain that’s wise?” Tristan asked.

“Our power will always exceed theirs, to a degree,” said Hym. “Don’t be afraid.”

Tristan said, “So we will still be the masters, here.”

“No masters,” said Surya. “No slaves.”

Tristan nodded. “Agreed.”

“This is a new world,” said Hym. “It will be what we make of it.”

“After she is dead.”

“Even before she is dead,” said Hym.

“We have a duty, now,” said Surya.



“You have yours,” said Tristan. “I have mine. It will not wait forever.”

“You won’t help us rebuild, then?”

“I will search for survivors. I will rebuild Hellegrund, to await him.”

“You can do that?” Danra asked.

“When Shalim died, I...” Tristan’s eyes flashed. “It doesn’t matter.”

He turned, and left Blackcastle.

Hym and Surya watched over the sleeping villagers, making them all as comfortable as they could be. Danra played with Mephistoph, and explored the forests, meeting all the animals and every tree.

The three days passed, and the villagers woke. Hym helped his grandparents to their feet even as Surya helped up Biryu and Mark. There were hugs all around, and tearful greetings, and expressions of gratitude. Then everyone in the room ran outside to fly in real life for the first time, as they had in their dreams for three days, and the sky filled with them.

Hym watched the murmuration of the villagers in the skies above Blackcastle and said, “I’ll conjure breakfast.”

“What happens next?” asked Surya, conjuring tea, complete with tea-set.

“We discuss law,” said Hym. “They know they can’t use their magic to do harm. They know they must not

eat meat. There will have to be... Other stipulations.”

“Oh?”

Danra flushed, and left the room. Hym said, “I’ll tell you later. It’ll spoil your breakfast.”

“Oh.”

Hym kissed Surya on the cheek.

Biryu flew through the wall and embraced Surya. “Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Then she floated through the ceiling, laughing, and tumbled into the sky.

Hym laughed.

Outside the window, they saw Danra and Victor flying together, sword-fighting in the air.

Hym said, “Right, we’re also going to have to tell people to remember privacy norms.”

“And we’re going to have to make laws to compensate for the fact that people will be living thousands of years,” said Surya. “We’ve got to plan ahead.”

“Right. I will create an afterlife for them, just in case, but I don’t want it to distract from their real life.”

“People will go insane,” Surya said. “You know that, right? Human beings weren’t meant to live that long.”

“If they have family, and love, and purpose, they can endure forever,” said Hym. “And we have a goal, now. A long-term goal. We will remake the earth, and change

it forever. It will thrive.”

Surya smiled. “I always knew, somehow, that you’d be a god.”

“Me?”

“Mhmm. Even when I thought you were just a little forest spirit.”

Hym laughed. “If you say so.”

“It’s true, though,” said Surya. “You actually answered my prayers. That was a big plus, in my eyes.”

“Aww.”

Hungry people began filtering back in from outside, and moving to the buffet table. The village ate together, everyone seated comfortably, smiling infectiously as they ate.

Danra ate happily between his fathers, and Victor ate across from him.

Tristan entered the hall, and sat, and ate with them. He and Mark embraced, again, and went outside, after they were done eating.

Hym and Surya sat side by side, each of them eating with only one hand. Their other hands were busy holding each other.

Danra kicked Victor under the table, and Victor laughed, and kicked him back.

The village dined together, and looked out the windows forlornly at the shimmer of their protective shield.

“We are pets,” said Surya, quietly enough that only Hym could hear.

“I know,” said Hym.

“Tristan is right.”

“I know. But we must have time.”

“I agree.”

After breakfast, they all emerged to face the village, and together, with many hands and many magics, they began to reshape their home. Tristan left them with a thunderclap.

He reappeared in the Rim, whose mountains were much shorter than they had previously been, before the Mother’s unmaking. Still, cracked through with a labyrinth of many interwoven crevasses, they stood.

Hellegrund was gone, utterly obliterated. Nothing remained of it, except the space between the mountains where it had stood.

Tristan closed his eyes, and searched with all his power, listening to the high winds and the flickering Aurora, which blazed now from the south, from the Eye.

Not a whisper of Shalim’s echo remained. All trace of him had been removed from the world. Tristan stared into the south with hatred, and clutched his black iron blade. He turned to the place where Hellegrund had

been, and reached out his power, and felt more power move than ever before. The mountains shifted in his grasp, and matter began to churn as it twisted to his will.

He began to understand. Shalim had, in wedding him, in bedding him, shared something permanent; something real. Some piece of his power. Tristan sensed somehow through it that Shalim was not wholly gone. Somewhere, he remained, beyond Tristan's reach, locked away in the south.

"You turned him mad, and watched him fail, and let him die," said Tristan. "All for your own entertainment."

He pointed his sword into the south. "Well I won't have it! I am Tristan Redraven, and you will release my husband to me, or you will die."

The Mother said, "Bold words, for a little baby god."

"I mean them all."

"You will not kill me. You will probably kill your friends, though. And the next Tear, when it falls. You would be witless, if you did not. Only one can win, in the final game."

"I will never betray them."

"We shall see. A few million years ought to do it."

"Why do you play these games with us? How can you be so cruel?"

The Mother raised one eyebrow. "I'm bored."

Then she was gone, and Tristan roared, and outstretched his arms, and fusion rippled through the air. The black tower formed from nothing in a flash of emerald light, and the monoliths began to form from the mineral dust Tristan ripped from the sea.

Sixteen. Yes, Hym had only one, and Tristan now had sixteen. It was a goal. He would fill them all. Hym and Surya would wind up within his walls eventually, and within his monoliths, and he would seal them in, and win the game, and save them all.

He stopped, sword still upraised.

“No,” he said. “No. I will not play the game.”

He raised up his sword, and smote the air. The bonds between the many atoms of the tower and the monoliths all ceased to function, and the molecules crumbled with a sizzling sound.

As his kingdom dissolved like snow, Tristan stood alone. “I will not play your game. But I will beat you, anyway.”

He stabbed the black iron sword into the spot where Hellegrund’s tower once had stood. Before it, he stood, and said, “I swear to you, Shalim. I am coming to save you. It may take a thousand years. It may take a million. But I am coming, and I will save you. Once and for all.”

Then Tristan turned, and rose into the air, and soared back to Blackcastle the long way, letting the days roll by without minding the difference between one hour and the

next. Time passed as an easy blur, and he alighted on Blackcastle's balcony, before Hym, Surya, Mark, Biryu, Nestor, Ana, Nadianti, Danaye, Minerva, and the Storyteller.

Blackcastle and the village had changed greatly. Every house was huge and grand, now, with its own intricate and thoughtful architecture and its own whimsical allegiance to the style that bound them all together. Even Blackcastle had changed; it was twice as tall and twice as wide, and its gardens had magically expanded by many acres. A labyrinth had grown in the back garden, hiding the oak grove in the middle of it. A deep cave, hidden somewhere on the property, led to a secluded beach of pearl-white sand and hot dark water. Many secret passages now existed within the keep, and there were rooms enough for everyone in the village to stay, if they wished to.

A massive wall of smooth ash-glass now ringed around the green and living forest, which glowed with many little lights. Outside the wall, the ash-wastes stretched.

Behind him, as he stood upon the balcony, Tristan sensed the glass walls slowly moving, and the plants growing behind them as they extended the boundaries of the forest into the ash.

He looked at Hym. All of them were silent before him, and he knew why. He raised his hands. "It's me."

"We know," said Surya. "That's what we're afraid of."

“How could you go with that psychopath willingly?” Hym asked.

Tristan shrugged. “Hey. Once you get to know him, he has redeeming qualities. And it saved your life.”

“It did,” said Hym. “Thank you. But still.”

“Hey, I don’t have to explain it,” said Tristan. “There was something about him. And I’m going to kill her for taking him from me. She had no right. He was mine, and she took him. She forced him to surrender me. To save us.”

“I’m getting deja vu,” said Surya.

“It’s her game,” said Tristan. “It’s all for her entertainment, and we’re just the pieces in it. She wants us to fight. She wants us to repeat the mistakes of the past. She wants us to prove that we are unworthy of the Ring.”

“Why?” Surya asked.

“To prove that she, alone, is.”

The Storyteller and Minerva looked at each other. The Storyteller said, “It is said that three Tears, in all, will fall.”

“Two have fallen already,” said Minerva.

Danaye nodded. “This is true.”

Mark patted the chair between himself and Biryu, which hadn’t been there a moment ago. Tristan smiled, and took it.



Mark handed Tristan a goblet of wine. Tristan accepted it gratefully.

“They are all witches, now?” Tristan asked, looking out over the village, and at all the lights in all the high windows.

“They are,” said Hym.

“The Tear could land upon any one of them,” said Danaye. “But it will only choose one. And the fate of our world will be in their hands.”

A light flared in the high heavens, and as one entity they turned their eyes upward and beheld its fall. The star streaked down from the Ring, its glow burning on every leaf of every tree. In midair, it exploded in a violent blast of color and light, and shrank to a hard, dark core.

“What...?” said Hym.

Danra dropped out of the sky. “Dads! Look what I caught!”

Hym and Surya looked at each other.

Danra held the Tear in his hands: a hard-gleaming orb of silvery particles, swimming like a storm within an invisible glass encasement. “Isn’t it pretty? It fell from the Ring!”

Hym nodded. “That’s very good, Danra. I’m glad you caught it. Can you give it to me, please?”

“What is it, Dad?” Danra asked, holding it out trustingly.

Hym raised his hand and the orb floated into the air. With a wave of his other hand and a snap of his fingers he twisted matter and energy and formed a single living cell from nothing but raw materials. It split and redoubled and grew, and within seconds it was a human form, a woman, blank and featureless. She formed around the Tear, and the Tear flowed into the hollow body, and reshaped it to match her own self-impression.

A young woman, perhaps thirty, stood before them, her skin deep and luminously blue. The proportions of her face were strange, not quite human, in a way that was very difficult to pin down. She looked at them all vacantly.

They smiled nervously.

She bared her teeth, and looked at them each in turn.

“Hello,” said Hym.

“Hello,” she said.

“I am Hym” said Hym.

“I am Hym,” said the woman.

“You will get the hang of this, soon. Don’t be afraid. You’re among friends. Come, have a seat.”

“You will get the hang of this, soon. Don’t be afraid. You’re among friends. Come, have a seat.”

She came and sat down in the chair Hym provided, near his own.

Hym reached into his own chest, fingers passing easily

through flesh and bone, and grasped a core, and passed it to her. She took it quizzically, and ate it, and the light glowed through her as it sank in. She smiled genuinely.

Hym said, "Here, also, take this..." He touched his forehead, and a star clung to his fingertip as he pulled it away. He planted the star on her forehead. She blinked.

"Thank you!" She said.

"It's good to meet you," said Hym.

"Likewise," she said. "I have watched you all from afar for a very long time. I love you all."

Hym laughed. "You have watched from a very great distance, I think. I bear your sister, and my grandmother bears your other sister. Unlike you, they bonded with human bodies already bearing minds. The one I gave to you is empty, for you alone. Your perspective will be different from ours."

"Yes. I cannot synchronize."

"It will be hard. But there are many memories, in both of us, that will serve you well, if you wish to access them. We can share them with you, in dreams."

"What are dreams?"

"Visions, had while sleeping."

"I have had them," she said.

"I know," said Hym.

"I cannot sleep. The dream is ended."

“You can sleep in this body,” said Hym. “Don’t worry.”

“We’ll help you,” said Surya. “We’ll help you understand this place, and its people. We’re creating it. You can help us do that. You can make us better than we were before.”

“I can?”

“You can.”

Nestor and Ana had been confused throughout the entire conversation, but they were even more confused now. Mark and Biryu were equally in the dark about most of what had just happened.

Tristan said, “We will make a place for you, so you can rest. You will wish to eat; we have plenty of food. You can speak to any villager you wish to; they will all be kind to you. We are all that is left of our species. No one here can be the enemy of any other.”

Danra reached out and took the woman’s hand. “What is your name?”

She looked at Danra. “I am Ring.”

“You are the third belle of the ball,” said Tristan. “There is a prophecy that one among us must somehow claim your heart.”

“I see,” said Ring.

“We want only for you to be safe,” said Hym. “Come. Mephistoph is finishing your tower as we speak. I have

laid a feast out there.”

“Should I go with him?” Ring asked.

“We can also eat here, if you would prefer to remain with the group.”

“I will do that.”

Hym nodded, and waved a hand, and by slow degrees a table grew from the stone, and food flowed together from nothing but atoms in the air. Hym smiled at his handiwork. “Please, eat.”

Ring ate. She stopped, mouth full. “It is good.”

She ate.

Hym looked at Tristan. “There is no need to trouble her. She has just landed. We must give her time to adjust, and to become her own person.”

“Before?”

“Before nothing! She is a person! Not something to be used as a piece in some awful game!”

“Then you will not play, either?” Tristan said.

“None of us will play. We will rebuild the world, and grow our power, and when we are strong enough we will kill the Mother, and end her madness once and for all.”

“And what will take her place, I wonder?” Tristan asked.

“I don’t know,” said Hym. “Maybe nothing. Maybe it’s better if there’s nothing.”

“Maybe you?”

“No.”

“Maybe your grandmother.”

“I don’t know. Why should there be someone in charge? Why can’t people just get along, and be equals?”

“The power doesn’t work that way,” said Tristan.

“I know. I’m bemoaning it.”

Mark said, “Look, can we all just... Sit down? And eat? Maybe drink a little. Converse about life here, now. And in the future. What are our immediate plans? What projects should we set our wills to? You have made us like gods, and we should build to grow.”

Hym smiled. “Mark is wise. There is nothing to be gained by speaking of such long away problems. We have a new friend, and we have each other, and the long nightmare is over, in its own way. Whatever else has happened, better times are ahead of us.”

“The whole world is dead,” said Tristan.

“I know,” said Hym. “But we’re not. We have to do what we can. For the future. For Danra. For all of us. We will actually live to see it.”

Nestor caressed his young wife’s arm, and stroked his dark beard thoughtfully. Ana’s fingers, no longer the gnarled things they had been, touched each other again and again, reassuring each other that they were back. Youth had returned to both of them, and Nestor was

feeling it very much.

He reached out and took the pipe, and the wine, and he smoked and drank. Ana partook gladly. "This stuff can't hurt us anymore?"

"It can't," said Hym, frowning. He remembered a certain green-skinned demon, and saw a little of him in his grandmother.

"Is that what we are to become, then?" Surya asked, dismayed. "Elysium?"

"Or Hellegrund," said Hym.

"We have to choose how we will shape this world," said Danaye. "What laws we will place. What burdens society shall demand, and what freedoms it shall allow."

"All freedoms," said Tristan. "Let them choose. Let them be what they are. Is that so wrong?"

"No," said Hym, thoughtfully. "I suppose it isn't. As long as they can't hurt each other."

"That will begin, in time," said Danaye, sadly. "The power can be bent. Some will learn to do so."

"We will be ready for them," said Tristan.

"Will we?" asked Surya. "Shalim wasn't ready for us."

"Is that what we are, now?" Hym asked. "Just the high gods, trying to stay on top of our thrones? No! I won't live that life. I won't have that throne! I won't do it."

“Someone else will,” said Surya. “That’s exactly the problem.”

Tristan’s emerald eyes flashed. “There are only four of us who could fill it.”

Hym glanced at Danaye, Ring, and Tristan. “It should be Danaye, then.”

“It should be Ring,” said Danaye.

“What!?” said Tristan. “You can’t be serious! She’s a newborn.”

“She is not,” said Danaye. “She has loved us for thousands upon thousands of years, from afar. She has loved our whole world. She sees it as no one can. She is pure, untainted by any avarice or cruelty. She will rule fairly, and kindly, and wisely, so as to bring the world into the greatest possible harmony and beauty.”

“But she isn’t human,” said Hym.

“I know,” said Danaye. “That is another of her many virtues.”

“But how can we trust her?” asked Surya.

“How can she trust us? Look at her. She came down, alone. At terrible risk! And all because she could not bear to be apart from our world. She will love it as none of us ever could.”

Hym looked at his grandmother for a long time, and she held his gaze. He nodded at last. “Ring?”

Ring looked up, mouth full of pastries. “Yef?”



“We wish to make you our ruler. You will design our society, and shape the world that we create.”

“I will!?”

“You will. If you want to.”

“But I don’t want to interfere! I just want to see what you all are! I shouldn’t go changing things until I understand them.”

“Oh,” said Hym. “Hmm.”

Danra said, “Oh, then just watch us for a while! If we don’t get organized, things will start falling apart, and then you’ll have to do something!”

“Oh no!” said Ring.

“Our world has just been destroyed,” said Hym. “We are trying to build from nothing. Will you help us? Will you give us your wisdom?”

“Of course!”

Hym nodded. He looked at Tristan, and Ring, and Danaye. “Then we will all rule. This family. These people. With Ring’s guidance, we will do better than any one of us could alone.”

Hym looked at his mother. “Mom? You’ve been quiet through all of this. What do you think?”

Everyone could see her now; even Ana and Nestor. It was still a strange experience, to most of them.

Nadianti said, “I am still nothing but spirit. I should not have a say in the affairs of the living.”

“Oh, Mom. How could I be so cruel?”

Hym reached out a hand, and touched her, and with a slow ripple of power a body created itself where she sat, and fused with her, and took her form, dress and hair and all. She sat perfectly still, looking at her son. He smiled.

She looked at her hands. She turned them over and over, looking at them, trying to look through them.

She hugged her son wordlessly.

Still in the hug, he said, “You will always have a say.”

“Thank you.”

“So what do you think?”

They broke the hug. She said, “I think... Ruling is a bad idea. Having rules is a better one.”

“Rules can’t cover everything,” said Tristan.

Hym squirmed. “What if... What if we give them a place to break the rules? To let off that steam, if they want to?”

“The Delectatorium?” Surya asked.

“Yeah,” Hym said.

“No,” said Surya. “No, I know what the rules used to be.”

“Then we have to make the rules very carefully, so that there are only a few of them.”

“Maybe, ‘the dead shall always be revived, if they can be’?” Surya asked.

“That’s a good one,” said Hym.

“What about violent criminals?” Tristan asked.

“We could take away their magic,” said Hym. “And banish them.”

“So that they can breed in the wilderness, and produce non-witch bandits? No!”

“What do you suggest?” Hym asked.

“Save them.”

“Oh,” said Hym, a little chilled. “I suppose, if they’re truly unable to live in society... Perhaps they can even be cured of their tendencies, if we save them for long enough.”

Surya shivered. “I don’t like how we’re sounding, for some reason.”

“I know,” said Hym. “We have a frightening amount of power, right now.”

Mark said, “We’ll figure it out together. We’ve got time.”

“We may not even need to,” said Nestor, sagely. “We can address problems as they arise. Until Ring is ready to make her own judgements.”

“True,” said Hym.

Ana said, “I think we should focus on being a village. A village is connected. Everyone knows everyone. Everyone cares about everyone, because we all need each other to survive.”

“Then we must take care to keep our population small,” said Hym.

“How, exactly?” said Surya.

“First we must ban the creation of sentient creatures,” said Hym. “Or we will be overrun. We must make it secret knowledge. None of them learned it from their dream-training, and it is complicated magic.”

“Then we must also ask our people to limit the number of children they have,” said Tristan. “That is a troubling thought.”

“Or we must design the arrangement of our cities so that it is easy and friendly to visit your neighbors, to get the things you want, or need,” said Ana.

“No wait, Tristan’s right,” said Hym. “Think about it. We’re all going to live *thousands* of years, in peak health, without risk of major injury or death. We’re going to have a *lot* of kids on our hands, *very* quickly.”

Mark kissed Biryu on her temple. Ana and Nestor looked at each other, eyes wide.

“Oh no,” said Surya.

“So what? Two kids per century? Is that a fair limit? That sounds reasonable-ish.”

“I doubt most marriages will last a century,” said Tristan. “Everyone’s gorgeous now.”

Hym laughed. “True enough.” He clung to Surya’s hand tightly, suddenly afraid.

Surya said, “Some marriages will last forever. I think two kids per century is reasonable. The kids will have a better time growing up, and they’ll be encouraged to make friends outside their families.”

“How will we educate them?” Hym asked. “They’ll be born witches, equal in power to their parents. That’s a daunting thing to raise.”

Danra laughed. “He speaks from experience!”

“I do,” said Hym.

“We will have to raise them all together,” said Danaye. “It is the best way. They will socialize each other, and soften each other’s edges. The old folks will need to work full-time, just to keep things in one piece.”

“They’ll need a place to play, and exercise their powers,” said Hym.

“We have an endless wasteland of soft ash,” said Surya.

Hym laughed. “That’s true. Maybe we should kick them outside the walls when they become teenagers.”

“Hey!” said Danra.

“Hmm, you may be on to something, there,” said Surya.

“That’s not funny!” said Danra.

Several people, apparently, disagreed.

Ring said, suddenly, unprompted: “The simplest solution is to ensure that men and women only produce children when they wish to, instead of at random points on a difficult-to-predict and very-painful hormonal cycle. I have already made that alteration to this form.”

“That is a good solution,” said Hym. “And I think it will be a popular one.”

“Another problem,” said Surya. “There’s only so many atoms to go around. What do we do if someone starts hoarding resources?”

“We have the earth, the magnetosphere, the sun, the Ring, the starlight. We can create devices that will generate more energy. With enough energy, matter is easily created.”

“It is?” said Surya.

“It is,” said Hym. “And besides. There are other worlds, if we can get to them. This is not the only one we should try to save.”

Tristan said, “If we cannot get to the Ring, what makes you think we can get to another world?”

“Hope, I guess,” said Hym. “I don’t want to believe that all of that is out there, and she has us trapped here,

under her thumb.”

“Who are we talking about?” Ring asked.

“The Mother,” said Hym. “Your creator.”

“Oh,” said Ring. “She is cruel?”

“She is,” said Hym. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh.”

“It’s alright,” said Hym. “We will protect you from her.”

“Now I am afraid of you.”

“Would you like to be alone? Danra can take you to your palace.”

“Yes, please,” said Ring. Danra lifted into the sky, and she followed after.

Hym sighed. “I fear it will be a long time before she can fully trust us.”

Danra was a little gremlin, sometimes, but he was not a pervert, so he dropped Ring very hastily on her doorstep and began to fly away, but she said softly, “Wait.”

He stopped, and turned. “What?”

“How am I to get through the wall?”

“Oh.” Danra opened the door for her.

“Oh. Thank you. Can you show me what this all is? I don’t understand.”

Danra stepped into the room, very nervous. He said, “Well, that’s a bookshelf and it’s for holding your books, and those are books my dad made for you, pulled out of his own memory, and that’s a fireplace, for putting fires in, when you want to be warmer, and this here’s a pool, for swimming and cleaning yourself in, and that there is a bed.”

“What is it for?”

“For sleeping in.”

“What is ‘sleeping’?”

“You know. Like, you close your eyes, and lay down, and you stop being awake.”

“What is ‘awake’?”

“Awake is like alive,” said Danra. “Asleep is like dead, but you dream, and you wake up later.”

“Oh,” said Ring. “I have slept before. I slept for a long time.”

“How long?”

“A hundred thousand years.”

“Oh,” said Danra.

“I tried to merge with you,” said Ring. “Why did you deflect me?”

“Oh, I just thought you would be cool to catch, you know. You were moving really fast.”



“Really fast? Oh. I suppose, down here, that *was* really fast.”

“It isn’t, up there?”

“Not really. Lots of things move faster. Most things, in fact.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Well, like this planet, for example. It moves through the galaxy at four hundred and ninety thousand miles per hour.”

“It *does!*?”

Ring nodded, and smiled. “I think we could have been a happy symbiosis.”

“I think it’s better this way,” said Danra. “You have a face! It’s pretty cool. Well, anyway, I’m gonna go take a whizz, so.”

“What is a whizz?”

“Oh,” said Danra. “Uh,” he leaned over and whispered. “Liquid waste.”

“Oh,” said Ring. “I see. Is that a common problem?”

“Maybe? I guess?”

“It is probably an easy fix. Something is inefficient, if there is liquid waste.”

“Oh, well there’s solid waste, too, so the liquid stuff’s not really that much of a problem by comparison.”

*“Solid waste? What kind of efficient system produces solid waste?”*

“Uh,” said Danra. “Us. You’re weird.”

“So are you!”

“Goodnight, Ring.”

“Goodnight, whoever you are, little boy.”

“Oh! I’m Danra!” Danra flew away.

Ring looked at her room, and examined each item carefully. Satisfied, she fell asleep standing up, and crashed down into the bed.

Back at Blackcastle, Nestor and Ana looked at each other. Ana gave a subtle, knowing blink. Nestor looked up. “Right, well. I think we’re going to shuffle off to bed, now. Goodnight, all.”

A chorus of goodnights followed them as they rose into the air and flew gently away.

Surya chuckled. “I still can’t get used to that.”

“I think that may be our cue as well,” said Mark, rising to his feet. He helped Biryu up, and they entered Blackcastle. “Goodnight!”

Many voices said: “Goodnight!”

Danaye said, “I may turn in for the evening as well.”

She faded, saying, “Goodnight.”

Nadianti sat with Tristan, and Surya, and Hym, and Danra, and the Storyteller, and Minerva.

The Storyteller puffed at his pipe. "I am owed a story, I believe?"

Hym laughed. "Another night, perhaps. When you are a little older."

The Storyteller laughed. "In that case, it's off to bed with me as well, I think."

"I will say may goodnights as well," said Minerva, rising. "Magnus, if you would be so kind as to escort me to my belltower?"

The Storyteller looked at her, bewildered. "Oh, I suppose I could do that. It really isn't very far, though. And you're a witch, you know. Not like you need fear walking at night."

"Oh, I suppose that's true," said Minerva. "Still, we're headed the same direction."

"Not really, my house is still some distance from yours."

"Anyway, come along."

Minerva led the befuddled young Storyteller away.

Hym laughed. He looked at his mother. "I'm sorry you had to die so many times for me."

"It was all worth it," said Nadianti. "I would do it again."

Hym reached out and knocked on wood. “Let’s hope you never have to.”

Nadianti looked at Danra. “Danra. There is something I wonder if you could help me with. Will you come with me?”

Danra looked at his grandmother, and got to his feet. “Ok.”

He took her hand, and they lifted into the sky, and flew out into the forest.

“I wonder what they’re up to...” Surya said.

Hym thought he knew, but did not dare to think about it.

Tristan turned his chair around to face them. “We’re allies, you know. We always will be. We will always be her enemy, together. Everything we do must build towards the day of that final battle.”

“Yes,” said Hym. “You’re right. We have to shape the whole society to that end.”

“We can’t become warlike,” said Surya.

“No,” said Hym. “But we can become strong. We can ensure that every person reaches the highest peaks of magical prowess.”

“Except for the creation of sentient beings.”

“I have a place for them, too,” said Hym. “They can stay in my monolith, and live out their lives peacefully amongst each other, safe from the witches.”

Tristan shuddered. "Better if they never come into being at all, perhaps."

Hym nodded. "I agree. That is why it must be taboo."

"How will we enforce it?"

Hym rubbed his head. "I am tired of talking about this. Can we change topics? Please? We are all together again, at last, and all we have talked about is war, and statecraft."

"We are kings now," said Tristan.

Hym shuddered. "No. No, we are not. We are only the hand currently standing at the helm. We must build a good ship, and set it on a strong, and right course."

"Like a good king," said Tristan.

Hym reached out a hand and the bottle of wine flew to him. He caught it and drank. "Fine. Like good kings. Whatever it takes."

"Whatever?" Tristan asked, a glimmer in his emerald eyes.

Surya said, "At any rate, Hym's right. We're finally together again. We should be celebrating. We should be enjoying the fruits of our labor. Look at this place!"

"It is peaceful and beautiful *now*," said Tristan. "But the troubled times are coming. They always are."

"But not tonight," said Hym. "Please. Not tonight."

Tristan nodded. "As you wish, my liege."

“Don’t *ever* fucking call me that,” said Hym.

Tristan laughed. “Very well. We will change the subject.”

They all stared out into the darkness, and the infinite stars, and felt very much alone. None of them found any suitable topic, and so the conversation did not return.

At last, Hym said, “I’m sorry. About Shalim.”

“I know,” said Tristan. He raised his glass. “To Shalim.”

Surya could not bear to do it. Hym raised his glass, and drank. “To Shalim. May he rest in peace.”

They put their cups down, and something had changed.

Surya said, “I think I’m headed to bed, now.”

“Oh?” said Hym.

“Yeah,” said Surya, with a mischievous smile. “Don’t keep me waiting too long.”

“Ok.”

Surya slipped into the skies.

Hym looked at Tristan.

“She wants us to be like they were,” Hym said.

“I know,” said Tristan. “And it’s tempting.”

“No it isn’t,” said Hym. “You’re just getting used to the power.”

“Thank you for saving my family,” said Tristan. “I realized I... had not said it, yet.”

Hym nodded. “It was nothing.”

“It was not nothing! It was a miracle. My family is alive. We have faced Shalim, and my family is alive. And I am here, with them. But still, for a moment, in Shalim, I thought I had...”

“...had what?”

“Something.”

Hym nodded sadly. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you have something, with him?”

“No,” said Hym, with a shudder of disgust. “He repulsed me. He was cruel, and controlling, and greedy, and jealous, and vain, and without mercy. Everything he did was to twist my emotions. I hated him.”

“I hated him too, at first,” said Tristan. “But then I began to try and think about it from his perspective. He’s hundreds of thousands of years old. Of course he’s a little twisted. He just needed a firm hand to set him straight.”

Hym laughed aloud. “As if.”

“You couldn’t do it,” said Tristan. “But I could. He would have loved me. We would have grown strong, together.”

Hym sighed. “I’m sure he did love you, as much as he was capable of such a thing. But I don’t think you could

have fixed him. You didn't know him like I did."

Tristan sighed. "Perhaps not. But he was different, after he absorbed his brother. He was... Reasonable. Kind. Thoughtful, even."

Hym shuddered again. "Please, another topic."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm just a little scarred."

Tristan said, "Surya sculpted you, you know. Thousands of times. He did it in clay."

"He did?"

"He was blind, at the time," said Tristan.

"He was *blind!*?"

"He was. Shachar took his sight from him. At his request."

"At his request!?"

"To save himself from temptation," said Tristan. "To save himself for you."

"I never knew," said Hym. "That poor man."

"Yes," said Tristan. "I thought so too. We were surrounded by many beautiful angels, some of them whom even bothered to look just like you. He would have none of them. I, on the other hand, had several. None of the ones which looked like you, of course, that would have been weird, but others. It was pleasant."



“I had no idea it was such a struggle for him,” said Hym, thinking now about his husband in a different light. In a thousand years of strong temptation, what might happen? He resolved to keep his husband very much in love with him by any means necessary.

Tristan said, “It wasn’t. He asked to be blinded, the moment he first saw angelic faces. He knew Shachar was trying to tempt him. I refused to blind him, so Shachar did it for him.”

“I see,” said Hym.

“It was your son, actually, who reversed it, in the end. Shachar was not going to.”

Hym’s pride for Danra blazed a little brighter. He said, “He never said.”

“Well, it’s the truth. I was there.”

“I don’t doubt that,” said Hym. He cocked his head. “I’m sorry you are alone, now.”

“I’m alright,” said Tristan.

“Will you take another husband?”

They were quiet for a time.

Tristan said, “In truth, I think I will go, and turn myself into a statue, and await the day of battle.”

“But we need you here!”

“Not right away,” said Tristan. “I don’t mean that I’m going to do it right away. But... when the waiting

gets unbearable. That's when I'll do it. And you'll have to wake me when the end times come."

"You won't take another, until he is avenged?"

"I am an honorable man," said Tristan, his eyes flashing. "You are correct."

"In that case, I hope you find a spot with a good view," said Hym. "You'll need to perch somewhere picturesque."

Tristan laughed. "I will not wait forever. I will wake myself after a certain age, and if you are not ready, I will make you ready, and you will wish you had been prepared."

Hym nodded. "I understand."

"Do you?" asked Tristan. Then he got up, and he left.

Hym sat alone before the burning stove, wondering what was eating Surya enough to make him leave as abruptly as he had. He knew in the back of his mind that he should be checking up on Surya, but he sensed he had some time to breathe alone, for a little while, at least.

Then he heard a very soft sound, behind him, in the balcony doorway. He did not turn to look, assuming it to be Surya. Something about the tread was different. It wasn't Mark's tread, either, though.

A strong, manly voice said, "Hym?"

Chills raced down Hym's back. He stared into the coals, not daring to look back.

"Hym? It's me."

Hym closed his eyes. "You're dead. Long dead."

"Hey," said Hector, son of Nestor, sitting beside his son. "I'm not dead. I'm right here."

Hym hugged him, not daring to look into his eyes, utterly ashamed to be a child pretending to be a man, in his presence. "I couldn't save you, Dad. You died. You are beyond my reach. What kind of trick is this?"

"Your mother had a little help, I think," said Hector.

Danra came peering around the corner, followed by Nadianti. She planted a kiss on her husband's cheek, and sat beside him, next to Hym. They smiled at him together and Danra popped up between them, grinning, and Hym felt like a little child, suddenly bewildered by the world. He wept.

"Oh come on, Dad!" Danra shouted. "You can't be sad now, that's no fair! We did everything right!"

Hector rubbed his son's back. "He's not sad," he said, his own voice shaking slightly. "He's just overwhelmed. I used to get like this. Sometimes, things are too much."

"You—could have—warned me!" Hym heaved, between sobs.

Nadianti laughed. "Oh, but it would have spoiled the surprise!"

“I—hate you——so—mean!”

“Oh, there there,” said Nadianti, rubbing his back.

“But it’s not fair because I was doing so fine until you did this and now I’m *crying* in front of my *son*!” Hym accused, where he could get the wind to.

“It’s ok, Dad,” said Danra. “You can cry.”

And Hym cried like he had not cried since the day of his birth, and Hector held him. “I’ve got you, kiddo.”

“Oh no!” Hym wailed, and he cried even harder.

Surya came flying down out of nowhere, wearing a bathrobe, and held Hym, and he was so surprised that his tears stopped.

“What are you wearing!?” Hym hissed.

“You should see what I have under it,” Surya whispered back, and kissed him on the ear.

“Uh,” Hym cleared his throat. “Surya, I’d like you to meet my Dad.”

“Wh-what?” Surya said, his voice cracking. He turned to Hector. “You must be Hector! I am Lord Surya of Blackcastle, your son’s husband. Very, er, pleased to make your acquaintance. Don’t mind the getup, I was just about to go to bed. Didn’t know you were coming.”

“Didn’t know myself,” said Hector, reaching out to shake Surya’s hand. “Luckily, I was already in my best clothes.”

“Oh, right, because of the coffin,” said Surya, nodding. “Because of the clothes you were buried in, when you died.”

“Right,” said Hector.

“That you’re still wearing now,” said Surya, wiping his hand on his robe a little self-consciously.

Hector laughed. “Hey, I’m all fresh meat, now. Thanks to your kid.”

Danra beamed up at Surya.

“You did this?” Surya asked. Danra could not tell by his tone whether he was about to be punished or rewarded.

“Y-es?” said Danra, hesitantly.

Surya tousled Danra’s hair. “Good boy.”

Danra laughed. Then he said, “I’m going to go visit Victor now.”

“Wait a moment,” said Surya. “Isn’t it after his father’s curfew?”

“Well, yes, but it’s not like we need sleep. It’s a silly rule!”

“Still, it is his father’s rule,” said Surya.

Hym bit his lip. Danra sighed. “Ok, Father.”

“Now why don’t you go and get some sleep of your own. Maybe you’ll meet Victor in dreams?”

“Can I, papa? You really think so?”

“Sure,” said Surya. “Hym and I met there all the time, while we were growing up.”

“We did!?” Hym gasped, utterly mortified.

Surya flushed. “Oh, you didn’t—!?”

“No!”

“So all that time we wasted, that was—you really didn’t—?”

Hym shook his head. “I thought only the ones we had after Shalim took me were... but you mean... all of them?”

Surya nodded firmly, but his smile spoke of his discomfort.

Hym said, “Oh.”

Hector laughed. “I used to dream of your mother.”

“They were not shared dreams,” said Nadianti. “He had simply become obsessed with my beauty.”

“It was more than obsession,” said Hector. “I set out on a quest to find the perfect bride, and I found her, and I took ten years to woo her. Have you told him that story, Nadi?”

“I have,” said Nadianti.

“She told it to me all the time, when I was little,” Hym said.

“Hym told it to me, too,” said Surya.

“I haven’t heard it!” said Danra.

Hym laughed. “When you’re a little older.”

“Aw! But you were little when you heard it!”

“That you were,” said Nadianti.

Hector said, “Well, it’s really very simple. You see, I had seen your mother—your *grandmother*, excuse me. That will take some getting used to.”

Nadianti laughed. “Agreed.”

“Well, I had seen your grandmother many times, when she came to visit the village. And I concocted an ingenious plan to woo her. I brought her a gift every day for ten years, and said it was tribute, from the village. Every day I brought something different. After ten years, she realized what my game was, and decided she wanted to keep getting gifts. So she married me!”

Nadianti laughed. “That is not exactly how it went.”

“It’s pretty close,” said Hector. “And that’s close enough.”

Hector said, “You feeling a little better there, Hym?”

Hym nodded, safe in the presence of Surya. “I am. Thank you.”

“Well, your mother and I were going to take a walk together,” said Hector. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here,” said Hym.

“Looks like you’d better get your husband to bed, he’ll freeze to death out here.”

Surya laughed nervously.

Hym said, “Yeah, good point.”

Danra said, “I’ll walk with you two! I’m not tired yet.”

Nadianti looked at Hector, and he smiled back at her. “Of course, Danra.”

They left, taking Danra with them.

Hym buried his face in Surya’s neck and laughed and laughed. He lifted a finger and gently opened the bathrobe to peer inside. He laughed again, harder this time, and Surya giggled maniacally over him.

“Let’s go to bed,” said Hym.

“Surya kissed him, still laughing. “Agreed.”

They flew to their little palace, and landed in the warm chamber, and Hym at once disrobed his husband, and smiled at the scandalous outfit he wore under it.

“What do you think?” Surya asked, striking a pose.

The giggles came again, and Hym was swept away by them. Surya collapsed into them with him, and they fell to the bed, and the costume which had inspired so much hilarity quickly fell apart.

Warm and close in the darkness they held each other, on that first night of the new world.



## Chapter 62

# The New World

Hym woke in the darkness, and smiled at his husband's face. Gently, he kissed him.

Surya's eyes opened softly. "Hey."

"Good morning."

They kissed. Morning breath was no consideration; magic cured even that.

Someone hammered at the door with a fist. "Up and at them, Hym!"

"Oh gods," Hym groaned.

"Can we not have one moment of peace?" Surya asked.

Hym kissed him. "See you after breakfast, maybe?"

Surya smiled. "I can't survive that long."

"I'll see if you can tag along."

Surya grinned into the pillow and stretched, muscles

shifting softly under sheets. Hym smiled at the heavy bulk of his husband in the bed beside him, and kissed him on the shoulder, and slipped out of the bed. He got dressed. Picking his own clothes from his own old wardrobe was a wonderful experience, and he soon felt like his old self.

He slipped out of the bedroom door to find Hector and Mark waiting for him in hunting leathers and furs. Mark said, "Where's Surya? Isn't my boy up yet? It's nearly fifth bell!"

"I'll get him," Hym said. He slipped back inside, and moved to the bed, and kissed his husband awake.

"Mmm?"

"It seems we've both been summoned."

"Oh no," said Surya, and he covered his head with his pillow.

"Come on, you," said Hym, dragging him playfully out of the bed by the ankle. He held his husband in his power, revolved him gently in the air, dressed him like a doll, and set him down, laughing.

"Damn, that saves a lot of time," said Surya, flicking his hair out of his face.

Hym grinned. "How'd I do, picking your outfit?"

"I feel like my old self again."

"Come on. Let's go see what horrors we have in store for ourselves."

They emerged.

Mark and Surya hugged. Hym looked at his father and his father smiled back.

Hym gave him an experimental hug. It still felt strange. He broke the embrace.

“Where are we off to?”

“Hunting!” said Mark, happily.

“Oh no!” said Surya. “We can’t do that! We don’t need to kill animals anymore, there’s no purpose in it!”

“We can’t?” said Hector. “Oh, well then, we can just go fishing, instead.”

“No, Dad,” said Hym, taking his hand. “Things are different now. You don’t understand. We’re all bonded to the Tear. We’re all witches. We can’t take life like that, it goes against her will.”

“Oh,” said Hector, softly. “Well, I’m not bonded to the Tear.”

Hym smiled. “You are now.”

“I am?” Hector looked at his hand. “You mean I’ll be a witch? Like Nadi?”

“Yep.”

Hector hugged his son.

Hym said, “You’re going to sleep for three days, tonight.”

“That’s an odd phrasing, but alright. Why?”

“To dream, and learn how to use your magic.”

“Oh,” said Hector.

“You’ll spend the whole time with Danaye,” said Hym.

“Oh,” said Hector. “I see.”

“Did you ever meet her, when you and Mom were together?”

“No. We thought she was dead.”

“She’s nice,” said Hym. “Don’t worry.”

Danra landed suddenly in the middle of the group.  
“So! What are we doing today?”

Victor landed on his shoulders and put a bullfrog on his head.

“Cool!” said Danra, and he grabbed the bullfrog.

Victor hopped down. “Can I come too?”

Hector laughed. “Of course! But we haven’t decided what we’re going to do, yet.”

“I know!” said Danra. “Let’s make a place for our creations!”

“I’ve already done that,” said Hym, smiling. “They’re in the monolith.”

“Oh! Then we can visit them!”

“Sure, we can do that.”

“And maybe we can make more! And decide which ones will live in the forest!”

Hector seemed uneasy.

Hym said, “Well, we can make more animal ones. But no more people ones, ok?”

Danra nodded. “Ok.”

Hector said, “You can... *make* people?”

Hym nodded. “We all can. But it’s tricky magic. It will be taboo.”

“But making regular animals is fine?”

Hym said, “They won’t harm the forest, if we make them inside the monolith. We can release the ones that seem fit for the world we want.”

Mark looked anxiously at Surya. “Are you sure we can’t go hunting? Not even a little bit? What if we bring the animals back to life?”

Surya looked at Hym.

Hym shook his head. “It is their suffering that matters, not only their deaths. Please. We cannot hunt.”

“We’d better make sure everyone else knows that, too,” said Hector.

“They ought to. Danaye should have covered it.”

“I didn’t take her seriously,” said Mark. “It seemed a silly thing. They’re only animals.”

“All life is part of the Inside,” said Hym. “And it is sacred.”

“But you make plants for people to eat,” said Danra. “Isn’t that sacred, too?”

“The Tear tolerates the taking of plant life, because she knows we must eat.”

“Except we don’t, technically, have to, anymore,” said Surya, a little worried.

Hym said, “That’s why I’ve been creating the plants already dead, and whole, from raw atomic material.”

“Can we really ask people to change so much?” Surya asked.

“Do we have a choice?” Hym asked. “Come on. Let’s go explore the monolith.”

“We should make sure the ban on hunting is seen as truly official, first,” said Mark. “If I know our people, many of them think as I did.”

Hym sighed. “You’re right.”

Danra said, “I can do it!”

He rose into the sky. Thunder and lightning leapt from his fingertips, and his voice boomed out: “TAKE HEED. HUNTING IS FORBIDDEN! FISHING IS FORBIDDEN! THE EATING OF MEAT IS FORBIDDEN! LEST YE FORGET THE TEAR’S BLESSING UPON THEE.”

Then he dropped to land in the middle of his fathers and grandfathers, and said, “How’d I do?”

Everyone looked at each other. Hector was the first to crack, and start to laugh.

“What?” asked Danra, innocently.

Hector chuckled. “You did well. A little... dramatic. Maybe. But I think it got the point across.”

“Come on! I want to see where they’re living, now.” Danra flew off, into the forest, headed for the monolith. Victor flew swiftly after.

“I can’t fly yet,” said Hector.

“I was going to walk,” said Surya.

“We can walk. He must learn patience,” said Hym.

Hector slung an arm around Hym’s shoulders. “You’re shorter than me.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Well, I always assumed you’d grow to be taller than me. Given that Nadianti and Danaye are so tall.”

“I grew up here,” said Hym. “Some years were harder than others.”

“I grew up here, too,” said Hector.

“I know. But you had Nadianti to watch over the village, then. They only had me. I didn’t know how to help them.”

“I’m sure you did your best,” said Hector. “That’s all anyone can ask.”

They walked now as a group, Mark with Surya, Hector with Hym. They passed through the forest.

“How were Mom and Dad, growing up?” Hector asked.

“They tried to be strict,” said Hym, “but I broke their spirits, and had my way.”

Hector laughed. “They were strict, when I was with them. Nestor almost disowned me, over your mother.”

“He did?” Hym asked.

“He did. He thought I was wasting my life, chasing her.”

“Proved him wrong,” said Hym.

Hector laughed. “That I did.”

Walking ahead of Hym and Hector, Mark said to Surya, “Tristan is back, but he is different.”

“He is,” said Surya.

“Is he still my boy?”

“He is.”

“Good. That’s all that matters.”

“He’s something more, now, too,” said Surya. “I don’t know what, exactly.”

“Will he be alright?”

“I hope so.”



Hector said, "I used to walk these forests all the time, as a kid. I like the lights."

"They're keeping the trees warm," said Hym. "Helping them thrive."

"Smart."

"Danra's idea."

"He's a good kid."

"Thank you. I had to raise him myself, for the most part. Surya and I were forced apart."

"I know. Nadi told me the story. Thirteen years?"

"Thirteen years."

"You did good. Better than me. But then again, I had only nine months, and you weren't a very good listener during that time."

Hym laughed.

"I feel sorry for Surya," said Hector.

"So do I," said Hym. "But I think they're catching up quickly."

"Will you have more?"

Hym had not thought about this in the slightest. He stopped in the path, and looked at his father.

Hector laughed. "I see I've stumped you."

"You have."

They kept walking.

“Will you?” Hym asked.

Hector shrugged. “Undoubtedly. But perhaps not for a time. I have not had a chance to know you, yet. I want to make sure you and Danra have your time in the spotlight.”

Hym laughed. “Your fate is like Surya’s, in a way. You died fighting for me when I had not even tasted the air, and you woke to find me already a man.”

“It is,” said Hector. “I’ve been trying to downplay it, but it’s the worst and the best thing in the world, and I mean that. It’s... very hard. Your mother has helped me with the burden.”

“I can help you too, Dad,” said Hym, smiling. “We’re going to have forever to get to know each other. You’ll learn about my childhood one way or the other, over the years. There will be a lot of stories. Don’t believe them all.”

Hector laughed. “You were like me, then. I was a scoundrel.”

Hym laughed. “You were not! You were a good man, patiently waiting for the woman you were wooing!”

Hector said, “Oh, I was loyal, have no fears about that. But I was a prankster, and an artist, and a poet, a limerist, a comedian, a musician, a dancer, a singer, occasionally an actor, something of a duelist, an adventurer, a hunter, an explorer... You know. I dabbled.”

Hym said, "I had no idea you were so accomplished. Mom was the only one to ever tell me any stories of you. Even your name was taboo, with everyone else."

"I see," said Hector. "It's sobering to think I could have been so easily erased from existence."

"You weren't erased," said Hym. "There was a hole in the world, where you should have been, and we all felt it. But I grew up with it; it was always there. I never knew the lack. Not really. You were like a fairy tale, to me. I never truly believed in you. But now you're here, walking beside me. My son and my mother have conspired to bring you out of the land of legends and into reality, and half of me still cannot believe it."

"I'd better start finding ways to prove my existence to you, then," said Hector, laughing.

They walked for a while in silence.

"He is a challenge, then?" Hector asked.

"The biggest," said Hym. "You have no idea what it's been like. He was nearly as powerful as me from the day he was born."

"I can't imagine that was easy," said Hector.

"It wasn't," said Hym. "It still isn't. But we're doing better, these days."

Something sat, soft and mewling, in the middle of the path.

Surya and Mark stopped, and stood over it. Surya looked back at Hym. “Hym?”

Hym came forward and knelt in the grass, and picked up the little four-limbed creature, covered in dark fur. “Who made you?” He asked. “You were made to be loved, yet we find you abandoned.”

The little creature opened its mouth and said, “Danra made me, but he got bored. Now he does not play with me.”

“They can speak!?” Hector asked.

“I can gift them speech, for a time,” said Hym, as little lances of flickering plasma darted out the pupils of his eyes. “But this one has it already.”

He took the lead, carrying the little creature, and the others looked at each other anxiously. He shouted: “DANRA!”

“Yes, papa?”

“COME HERE.”

Danra came speeding through the forest and landed, giggling. “You’re taking so long! I’ve been waiting ages!”

Hym held out the little creature. “Did you make this?”

“Yeah?”

Hym knelt beside his son. “You created this being, and you abandoned him when you were bored of him?”

Danra looked at Hym. “Well he didn’t quite work

out, you see. He wasn't as much fun as I thought he'd be, so—"

Jets of flame flickered out of Hym's eyes.

Danra's face fell.

Hym said, "You gave it speech. You gave it thought."

"Yeah, I wanted to show Ring how it was done."

Hym sagged. "Danra."

"What?"

"We have talked about this."

"Oh, but I was sure I would like him! But he was so boring, when he started talking, and Ring didn't want to see him anymore, so—"

"Danra! Look at me. How could you do this? How could you be this cruel?"

"Oh but I set him free! That's all!" Tears ran down Danra's face now. He looked at Surya. "Daddy, please! I didn't mean to be cruel."

Surya rested a hand on Hym's shoulder, and knelt down to look at his son. Hector and Mark glanced at each other.

Surya said, "Your father is right. What you did was cruel. You should have known better."

"But he's free now!"

Hym said, "You made this creature to be loved. It

craves to be loved, and played with. You will love it, and you will play with it, for the rest of its living days. If I find it dead by your hand, you will be severely punished. You will raise it up as a brother beside you, and it will be your companion always. You will respect it as an equal, or I will take away your magic forever.”

“No!” Danra gasped.

Hym glared sternly, and held out the little creature. “Take it. Name it. Love it. Or so help me...”

He got to his feet. “We are done here. Go with Victor, and return to Blackcastle. My mother will watch your play from now on.”

Danra looked up, tears in his eyes, cradling the strange creature in his hands. “But, papa—!”

“—No buts! Go.”

“But I want to see the monolith, with you!”

“You have lost that privilege,” said Hym. “You may regain it, someday. When you are worthy of it. For now I take your power to create life.”

“You can’t do that! It’s my magic.”

“And my memories,” said Hym. He reached out a hand and touched his son’s forehead, and a white star came away at the tip of his finger. He drew it back into himself.

Danra gasped. “It’s gone! You took my memories!”

“They were never yours,” said Hym. “You will earn them back.”

“You’re mean!” Danra shouted. “I hate you!”

But when he flew away, he dutifully took the creature with him.

Hym stood, surrounded. His husband held him.

Hector patted his back. Mark sighed. “It’s always hard.”

“You did well,” said Hector.

“Thank you,” said Hym.

“A little cold and tyrannical,” said Hector. “But I’m sure that won’t cause him to rebel in any way.”

Hym blinked slowly and took a very deep breath. “Right. Come on. We can still have fun, today.”

Not much later, they stood before the monolith, and Hym reached out a hand. All their bodies fell asleep in the warm grass, and their souls sank into the stone.

They found themselves in a sprawling landscape of warm grass. Here and there, grand communal palaces stood, and huge pools stretched themselves under a warm sun. Humanoid creatures of every conceivable variety jumped and flew and ran and played, tossing discs and javelins and balls, swimming laps in the pool, and so forth. A few pillars stood alone in the grass, tall and unbroken, and some of the creatures seemed to enjoy climbing on them, or standing at their tops.

Nonhumanoid creatures roamed freely, working their whims in the world. Most of their whims seemed to involve scratching themselves against pillars and the corners of palaces, or eating the fruit that randomly grew from the ground, or playing with the many toys scattered around.

Hector looked around. “You made all of these?”

“Danra and I,” said Hym. “We made them together.”

“I see,” said Hector. “And they can think?”

“The ones on two legs can,” said Hym. “Except the birds.”

“This is nightmarish,” said Hector.

Surya looked at them all. “I had no idea these creatures were yours. I thought they were Shalim’s demons.”

“No. They choose their own color and form. They are good beings, without malice or contention. We must protect them from the outside world.”

Surya said, “There may even be some among them who we could safely bring out.”

Hym said, “I have thought about that. I watch them closely. If I see any among them that seem well-adapted to the outside world, I will give them the option to leave.”

“So we can create creatures, in here?” Hector said. “And that’s kinder than hunting them?”

Hym bit his lip. “I think so.”



“But look at these animals. Look at how bored they are.”

“They miss Danra,” said Hym, sadly.

“To live is to suffer,” said Hector. “In small measure or great.”

Hym sighed. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“But we must populate the world,” said Surya. “Most of the animal species we knew have just gone extinct.”

“That’s also true,” said Hym.

“But must we?” said Mark. “If we can give the people access to a place like this, and let them enjoy the company of these creatures in safety, where they cannot be harmed... Do we need to fill the wild? Must we let the world hunt itself?”

Hym rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Surya said, “That’s honestly a very good point.”

Hym said, “So the world we envision is... a city? All one world, an endless city, in an endless jungle?”

“I think so,” said Mark.

Hector said, “We should create useful animals, that will delight in serving their purpose. They will be loved. We can produce creatures that glow brightly, or give off heat.”

Hym said, “Creatures to eat our trash, off the streets? Creatures to decorate the trees, and the windowsills of

the city? No. That is only slavery.”

“What then? A city with only people?”

“A city, and free people, and free, tame creatures.”

“Many of them will die unloved,” said Hector. “It is the way of nature.”

“Not if we strictly control their populations,” said Hym. “If they only give birth when a witch wishes them to, every child will be wanted.”

“And will they all live forever?” Hector asked. “Unhunted?”

Hym scratched his head. “That’s a good point. Building them with a death sentence does seem cruel.”

“It is,” said Surya. “But we’ll quickly be overrun, if we don’t do something.”

“Will we, though? We have a great deal of space.”

“Perhaps, when we reach a certain population size, we can sterilize them all,” said Hector. “Simply cease reproduction.”

Mark nodded. “Yes. If they’re likely to live forever, that’s a good strategy.”

“Won’t they consume resources?” Tristan asked.

“Tristan!” said Hym.

“Hey. I brought an eavesdropper.” He dragged a sulky Danra into view.

Hym looked down at his son.

Danra said, "Sure they'll consume resources, but you can make it so their waste is useful somehow! They can convert resources into other resources, if you make them right!"

Hym sighed. "Danra. Go to your room."

"No!"

Hym waved his hand. Danra vanished.

Tristan raised an eyebrow.

Hym said, "Hi. Sorry. You're just in time."

"He had a point," said Surya.

"He did," said Hym.

"So... What? What kind of resources?" Mark asked.  
"What can waste be?"

Hym rubbed his chin. "If we make the plants right, and they're all herbivores... Resources could be anything we want. The roots can dig for minerals, and perform elementary transformations. Those who eat them can perform further transformations, including biological and chemical ones. We can refine almost any raw material we wish to."

"Can you make a goat that poops gemstones?" Mark asked. "I've always wanted one of those."

"Or, for a more classic reference," said Hector, "A goose which lays golden eggs?"

Hym laughed. “We can do it together. Come on. I’ll show you how.”

Afterwards, they returned to Blackcastle, and Hym walked beside Surya, taking his hand.

Behind them, Mark and Hector conspired with their eyes, then took each other’s hands and marched between Hym and Surya. “Excuse us.”

They walked on ahead, holding hands. Hector looked back. “Come on, keep up!”

Hym laughed. He took Surya’s hand again, and they walked on.

At the gates of Blackcastle they found Danaye waiting for them. “Hym,” she said. “I must speak with you.”

Hym sighed. “I suppose you might as well.”

He released Surya, and Surya led their fathers inside.

Danaye said, “You have harshly punished Danra, for exercising his own power.”

“My power,” said Hym. “What he does with it is my responsibility.”

“No,” said Danaye. “You cannot hope to control him forever. He is smart, and determined, and as stubborn as you. Do not make yourself a tyrant in his eyes. He has already lived thirteen years a prisoner.”

Hym sighed. “I will do what I must.”

Danaye nodded. "Well. You have been warned. I have done my duty."

"Thank you. Will you come inside? We're having lunch."

"No," she said. "I will stay with Danra."

"Tell him that I will see him soon," said Hym. "And to think about what he has done."

Danaye nodded. "He is thinking very hard about it, as we speak."

Hym entered Blackcastle to find them all in the library; Nadianti seated beside her husband, and Biryu seated beside Mark. Surya leaned against the mantelpiece, looking regal beneath a frowning portrait. Hym smiled at them all. "Hello."

"Hello," said Nadianti. "Lunch is preparing itself."

Hym moved into the shadow of Surya's arms, and leaned against him, and Surya's strong arms encircled him.

"Where'd Tristan go?" Mark asked.

"I don't know," said Hym. "He disappeared."

Mark said, "So. What should we do to pass the time?"

Nestor and Ana entered, looking very young, and seated themselves on the desk.

"We should play a game," said Surya.

"What kind of game?" Hym asked.

“I don’t know,” said Surya.

They all stared at the fire, and at the many books upon the walls.

“We’re going to live a very long time, aren’t we,” said Nestor.

Hym nodded. “Thousands upon thousands of years.”

“We’ve got to find ways to keep entertained. People will go insane.”

Ana said, “People will turn to love-games, and drama. All manner of things will abound.”

“You’re right,” said Hym. “We need to have a game. A continuous, ongoing game. Something everyone is a part of. Something that makes it fun to pursue our larger goals.”

“We could have many games,” said Surya, “all overlapping. Contests, to see who can make the most useful creation or spell. To see who can make the loveliest work of art, or the sweetest song, or the best muffin.”

Hym nodded. “Yes. The competition will fuel a certain kind of healthy drama, as long as we make it cooperative, too. Perhaps the winners and the losers must eat together, after they are done.”

“What should be our goal?” Surya asked.

“To acquire more power,” said Hym. “To strengthen ourselves, and restore the world to life, and prepare for the day of battle.”

They spoke for many hours. As the conversation wound down, Hym touched Surya on the arm. "I'm going to check on Danra."

Surya kissed him on the forehead. "Do you want me with you?"

"No. Not this time. Thank you."

Surya nodded, and released him. Hym slipped out of the room and went upstairs.

He knocked on the door of Surya's old room.

"Who is it?" Danra asked. It sounded like he had been crying.

"It's me," said Hym.

"Oh. Come in."

Hym entered, and looked at Danra, so much like Surya, crying there, huddled around his fated companion. The thing was sleeping, now.

Hym closed the door behind himself. "Have you thought about what you did?"

"I have," said Danra. "I'm sorry."

"Have you named him?"

"I have."

"What is his name?"

"It's P'ti. Because you took pity on him, when I failed to."

Hym smiled sadly and tousled his son's hair. "Yes. We have a responsibility to all our creations, for none of them asked to have life, and life can often be a burden. I forgive you. You are growing wiser. I am proud."

"Can I come down now?" Danra asked.

Hym nodded. "You can. Bring P'ti with you."

"And can I go to the monolith again?"

"Not yet," said Hym.

"But you forgave me!"

"I will grant you access again when you are ready. Come on."

Danra got up, and P'ti woke up and stood on four limbs, to follow.

"Poor creature," said Hym. "Would you like to stand tall, like us?"

"Yes please," bleated P'ti.

Hym reached out his hand, and his power moved. P'ti stretched into a more humanoid form, though his limbs were still long and shaggy. His face was somewhat more humanoid.

"You can change form as you wish," said Hym. "Make yourself what you wish to be."

P'ti walked to the mirror, and looked at himself. He touched his face with his hands. He swished his tail. "I like it."



“Then let’s go on down to the others,” said Hym. “You’ve missed lunch, so I will fix you a snack. Do you want to call to Victor?”

“No, I don’t want to see him again.”

“And why not?”

“He made me make P’ti,” said Danra. “It was his fault.”

“Oh,” said Hym. “I see.”

“I told him I could do it, and he wanted me to prove it. So he dared me to.”

Hym said, “Danra. Just because you are dared to do something doesn’t mean you have to do it.”

“He called me a coward.”

“You are not a coward. It is much braver to say ‘No’ to someone than to bravely take their abuse.”

Danra looked at Hym and there was a flicker of rage behind his eyes. Hym’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Right. Well. Let’s go on down. You don’t have to play with Victor if you don’t want to, although I think he will miss you.”

“I don’t care,” said Danra, hotly.

He followed his father out the door, and P’ti lumbered after.

They found the others strolling in the garden in couples. Surya walked with Tristan, in the labyrinth, near

the grove.

“Well,” said Hym. “Do you want to walk the labyrinth with me, and see if we can catch your father?”

“Yes, please.”

They walked side by side, P’ti walking before them, sniffing the air. The creature bounded away.

“I think he’ll find them first,” said Hym. “Here.”

He handed his son a conjured sandwich, and Danra ate happily as they walked.

They reached the grove at last, and found P’ti and Tristan and Surya.

Danra stayed shyly by his father, afraid of Surya’s judgement. Surya smiled at him. “Hey, looks like someone let trouble out. Come here, trouble.”

Danra ran to Surya.

Tristan sat on the bench, and looked sadly at P’ti. “Are you pleased to be in existence?”

P’ti blinked slowly. “I am.”

“Good.”

Danra said, “Come on, P’ti! Let’s go play hide and seek!”

He and P’ti ran away, into the labyrinth.

Hym sighed.

Tristan said, “Heavy is the head which wears the crown?”

Hym bristled.

Surya said, “Careful.”

“Or what?” said Tristan.

“Just... please. There’s no reason for us to be like this towards each other. Not after all we’ve been through.”

Tristan nodded. “Still. If we are to wear the crowns, we must act with wisdom. Danra is not the only one who will be thoughtless with his powers.”

“I know,” said Hym.

“All we can do is meet each challenge as it rises,” said Surya. “And hope for the best.”

“We should be planning every moment we are not acting on our plan,” said Tristan. “Challenges we are prepared for will be more easily overcome.”

“Our first challenge, then,” said Hym. “We must teach all empathy.”

“I had a thought about that,” said Tristan. “Danaye. She can make them dream the lives of other animals, and understand their pain. They will develop empathy directly.”

Hym grimaced. “That seems... somehow monstrous.”

“It is efficient,” said Tristan.

Surya said, “We can’t help being a little bit monstrous.

We're talking about tinkering with human nature. There is something innately monstrous about that."

"But we must restrain the urge to create, at least," said Hym. "Enough beings have suffered on this planet. We should not be the creators of more suffering."

"Yes," said Surya. "That's why I am in agreement with Tristan's idea."

"We should ask Ring what she thinks," said Hym.

"We will," said Tristan. "Later. Let us come up with as many solutions as we can, and she can decide upon the best of them, or create her own, with ours as inspiration."

"Then I have another solution," said Hym. "Let all the nonhuman creatures share one mind; a protector. Let it watch over them."

Tristan nodded. "I like that. I was going to suggest linking them all into Danaye, since she is woven into so much of the world already."

Hym scratched his head. "That's a good idea. If she takes us up on it. It will mean a lot more work than she's currently doing."

"She could share her perspective, in people's dreams," said Surya. "She could teach them empathy."

And the years turned, like so many pages of a book. In the end Hym could not remember it all; there were so many days, and so many complicated things happened in them.

When he looked up, three years had passed.

Danra was older now, wiser now. He and P'ti went everywhere together. Often, the children and younger witches went outside the walls, to practice their more dangerous spells in the ash-covered wasteland. Danra and P'ti roamed it at will, traveling far, but never out of their father's sight. They had nearly the whole world, to play in.

Only one place was forbidden: the south pole. There, the strange black palace stood upon a sea of glass; frozen in Absence, molten in Presence. There, Hym could not see him.

Hym lay comfortably on the high balcony of his tower, enjoying Surya's subtle massage-work.

"Sixteen," said Surya.

"I know," said Hym.

"Have you thought about what you will give him, tomorrow?"

"I will let him back into the monolith," said Hym. "I think."

Surya nodded. "I think he's ready."

"What about you? What will you give him?"

"A new sword. Grunjir and Nadianti have helped me make one."

Hym smiled. "He'll like that."

Someone hovered near the tower-top.

“Yes?” Hym asked, as the towels covered him. “What did you need?”

Victor’s father said, “Victor! He’s gone! He’s disappeared! Run away! I can’t find him!”

Hym looked into the distance. “He is with my son. He’s safe.”

The old man, now young in face, relaxed. “Thank you.”

Hym nodded. “Was there something else?”

“Only... that I wondered if, perhaps, you might try talking to your boy, and convincing him to let my Victor spend time with him again? Victor has missed him.”

Hym said, “They seem to be spending time together now. It seems I hardly need to speak to him.”

The man nodded. “Thank you. Only, I think, Victor may have followed him without his knowledge.”

“Danra can take care of himself,” said Hym, unconcerned. “If he did not want to be followed, Victor would not have found him.”

“Oh,” said the man. “I see.”

He drifted away a little awkwardly and the towels uncovered Hym. Hym said, “Now. Where were we?”

“Between your shoulder blades, I think,” said Surya, quietly, thumbs and fingers getting back to work. “And

working our way south.”

Hym smiled dreamily, and dozed off.

Danra and Victor and P’ti stood upon the edge of the frozen sea of glass, looking towards the eery black palace which rose, inhuman, against the horizon.

Victor looked at Danra. “Dare you.”

“No!”

“Coward.”

“No. I’m not a coward.”

“Your dad can’t see you there, you know. Once you step on the glass, you’re invisible to him.”

“That’s not true!” said Danra.

P’ti cocked his head and his long fingers moved through the air delicately, sensing the unseen. He said: “Actually, I think it is. There is a boundary, here. Your father’s power cannot cross it.”

“Then we’ll be powerless if we cross it,” said Danra.

Victor nodded at P’ti. “Make him go,” he said.

“What? No!”

Victor said, “P’ti. Go on. Step on the glass.”

P’ti dutifully stepped onto the glass, which took his weight easily. He looked back at Victor and Danra.

“Use some magic,” said Danra, watching eagerly.

P'ti conjured a flame, and held it.

Danra and Victor looked at each other. Victor grinned. "Come on."

He stepped onto the ice.

Danra hesitated, saying: "N-no. Guys, come on. Come on, we shouldn't be here."

"Don't be scared!" Victor said.

P'ti looked at Danra.

Danra said, "Come on, P'ti. We'll go back, instead."

P'ti nodded, and turned towards Danra. Victor grabbed his arm, and would not let him leave. "Come on!" cried Victor, triumphantly. "It's fine."

"No it's not!" Danra said. "P'ti, come on!"

P'ti pulled. Victor's grip was firm. P'ti said, "Please release my arm."

"Nah, stay here! Look, the castle's really cool! We can fly around it, and see what it looks like up close! I don't think theres anybody in there."

The doors of the black palace opened, swinging silently inward. Danra paled.

"P'ti!" He screamed.

P'ti tried to pull away. Victor laughed, and held him still.



“Let him go!” Danra screamed, and P’ti lashed out, instinctively, and swatted the life from Victor.

“No!” Shouted Danra. P’ti looked down at the corpse, and the lingering curse still twisting like shadows on the wound. He looked at Danra.

“Hurry! Get out of there!” Danra shouted, and P’ti ran to him.

Hym sat up, sensing something was wrong. “Victor has disappeared.”

Surya dried his hands with a towel, and said, “I know. His father just told us that.”

“No,” said Hym. “In a different way. I’ve got to find him. Stay here. If Danra gets back before I do, keep him here. Don’t let him run off.”

His clothing flew to him, and covered him. He kissed Surya on the lips, and they exchanged a worried glance.

“It will be alright,” said Surya.

Hym lifted into the sky and flew south, high upon the winds, pushing through the thinnest air. Within less than an hour he was above the south pole, and he dove through miles of atmosphere. Flame rushed around him as he fell. A shockwave was his wake.

He landed on the edge of the Ocean of Glass, and saw Victor lying among its glistening waves, lifeless. A strange being stood above him, looking down; a formless, faceless being, wrapped in a dark cloak. Danra and P’ti were nowhere to be seen.

Hym stared at the strange creature, trying to see inside its hood. There was nothing to see but darkness.

“Give him to me,” said Hym.

The creature bent, and picked up Victor’s lifeless body.

Hym stared at the barrier that cut off his power like a wall. “Please. He is not yours to take.”

“He was given,” said the creature. “And so he is taken.”

Then it turned, and entered the black palace, and Hym stared at the sealed door.

Rage flickered in his heart.

He blew back to Blackcastle like a wind unleashed, and an hour later he landed, apparently only a few minutes behind Danra and P’ti, who were standing in the courtyard near Surya and Victor’s father.

P’ti said, “I’m sorr—”

“—Dad!” shouted Danra, interrupting him. “It was my fault, it—”

“—What have you done?” Hym said, his voice as icy as the wastes.

“I didn’t mean to! But he was being mean to P’ti, and I—I just, it just happened! And I couldn’t bring him back!”

P’ti looked at Danra curiously as Danra took the blame.

Hym said, "You killed him! Killed him dead. The Mother took his body, and his soul."

Victor's father cried out in horror. "My son is dead!?"

"But I didn't mean to!" said Danra. "He was just being so mean!"

Hym turned to Victor. "I am sorry. On the last day, we will reclaim him."

"He is dead!"

"But not gone," said Hym. "The Mother took him. He is with her now."

"Then there is hope?"

"There is hope," said Hym. "But not until the last day."

He knelt before his son. "You killed a boy, Danra. Do you comprehend that?"

Danra nodded.

"I don't think you do," said Hym. "I don't know what I will do with you, now."

"You don't?" Danra asked, suddenly very much afraid.

"I do not," said Hym. "Your father and I will talk. And the village council will talk. And Ring will talk. We will decide what must happen. This is the first murder in our world."

"But I didn't mean to! It wasn't really murder!"

“It was,” said Hym. “Magic comes with responsibility. If your magic is what killed Victor, then you bear its blame.”

“But I didn’t mean to!”

“It does not matter! Victor is dead! Dead! You will never see him again, until the day we free him! Do you comprehend that? Do you understand what you have done!?”

“Please!” Danra wailed.

“Stop that!” said Surya. “You are sixteen, now. You are above this behavior. Above these kinds of accidents. Above this weeping and carrying on. You will accept whatever justice the village metes out to you, and you will do so without complaint. Is that understood?”

Danra nodded, wiping his eyes.

“Good. Now you may go to your room. Take P’ti with you. You will not leave until we have decided what will become of you.”

“Father, please,” said Danra. Surya’s heart broke, but its pain twisted through fear and into rage.

“Go!”

Danra turned and ran.

P’ti said, “But—”

“—Go. Be with him. He will need you,” said Surya.

P’ti looked at Hym. “But—”

“—Go!” Hym snapped.

P’ti fled.

Hym and Surya looked at each other, and took each other’s hands, and looked at Victor’s father.

“I cannot replace what my son has taken from you,” said Hym.

“I know,” said the man.

“Go to Tristan. He waits for the last day. If you wish, he will let you wait with him.”

The man wiped his eyes, and nodded, sadly. “I will wait.”

“On that day you will ride to glory.”

The man lifted into the sky and flew away, heading towards the distant Rim.

Hym buried his face in Surya’s shoulder and Surya held him.

“What have we raised?” Hym asked.

“I don’t know,” said Surya. “We have to do better.”

They kissed. Hym said, “We will. We will find out what’s wrong with him. We will make him better.”

Surya felt a little chill go down his spine at these words, but he did not question his husband.

He probably should have.



## Chapter 63

### Sculptor; Clay

Victor's father finished his long pilgrimage at the bleak wall of shattered ice. He flew over the jumbled shards of what had once been mighty mountains, and found the circular clearing among them where a smooth arena of snow-covered ice surrounded an upright iron sword.

Beside the sword stood an imposing statue, tall and black; a thing of obsidian. The man whose face it bore was handsome, regal. His cloak was frozen in a billowing moment, and his hand held a large black bow.

Beside him, six smaller, plainer statues stood. Victor's father recognized some of them.

He stood among them, and turned towards the south, and made his peace with the long, long wait.

He closed his eyes, still standing, and felt the transformation begin to take hold.

Now seven smaller statues stood around Tristan, awaiting the final day.

Danra waited in his chamber, alone with P'ti, for three long days. As they lay waiting for their judgement, Danra toyed with P'ti's appearance. P'ti always let him make any alterations he wished. So long as Danra was pleased with P'ti's appearance, P'ti was pleased with it too.

Piece by piece, feature by feature, Danra slowly made him fully human. He let P'ti keep his smooth black fur, but the rest of him was altered completely, by the time Danra was done.

Danra smiled at his creation. "There. Now people will treat you better. You'll be like one of us."

"I am not one of you?" P'ti asked, blinking worriedly. He had not quite mastered facial expressions, yet.

Danra laughed. "You are! But people don't seem to treat you like you are. So this should help."

"Thank you, Danra," said P'ti.

A faint silvery light appeared in the room. Ring had manifested.

Danra and P'ti sat up, and looked at her. She stood before them bearing a tray of food.

She said, "I have brought you dinner."

She placed it on the bed, and sat to join them in the little meal.

"Thank you, Ring," said Danra.



She smiled. "Your father is angry with you. He says you killed a boy."

"I didn't mean to!" said Danra. "It just happened. I can't take it back. I'm so sorry, though. I really didn't mean to do it!"

"I believe you," said Ring. "But your father is very worried about you."

"He is?"

"He is. He is afraid that you have exhibited a pattern of cruel behavior. He is thinking of removing your magic, for a time."

"No!" shouted Danra. "Please! Please, tell him not to! Advise him not to! If you tell him, he'll listen! He always listens to you."

Ring shook her head. "I will not interfere in this."<sup>1</sup>

"Please," said Danra, nearly in tears.

P'ti comforted him gently and looked at Ring. "Will you tell Hym the truth, for us?"

"What truth?" Ring asked.

"No!" said Danra, gripping P'ti by the shirt. "I forbid you to speak!"

P'ti fell silent.

Ring said, "That was cruel. Let him speak."

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<sup>1</sup>For the record, she was already interfering by warning Danra, in my books.

“No,” said Danra. “Please. Just... if you won’t help us, just go away.”

“Us?” said Ring. “P’ti is not in trouble.”

“I know,” said Danra, his eyes flashing. “That’s the point.”

Ring cocked her head. She turned to the door and left, saying, “You people never fail to confuse me.”

“You may speak,” said Danra, after she was gone. “I’m sorry.”

P’ti said, “Why will you not let me speak the truth?”

“You would get in trouble. I can’t let that happen. I don’t know what my dad would do, if he knew you had killed Victor with only a scratch.”

P’ti looked at his hand. “Yes, that *was* strange. I did not mean to do it.”

“I know,” said Danra. “It was the Mother. It had to be.”

“But why?” asked P’ti.

“I don’t know,” said Danra. “Just to be cruel.”

P’ti said, “I hear people coming up the stairs.”

“We will pretend to be asleep,” said Danra. “Let them shout, we can pretend to snore.”

They hid under the covers and a knock sounded at the bedroom door.

“Danra?” said Hym.

Danra pretended to snore.

Hym sighed. “Danra, it’s time. Come on.”

P’ti stroked Danra’s cheek, and whispered: “Don’t be afraid.”

Danra nodded.

They slipped out of the bed, and Danra opened the door.

Hym stood flanked by Surya, the Storyteller, and Nadianti. All of them looked at him sternly, and a little sadly.

Danra took a step back. “No. Please. Please! I didn’t mean to!”

Hym said, “Danra...”

“PLEASE!” Danra screamed. “I didn’t mean it! It was just a mistake!”

“Hold still, Danra.”

“Do not touch him,” said P’ti, calmly moving between father and son.

Hym stared his son’s creation in the eyes, and a little flicker of flame billowed from the Prophet’s pupils.

P’ti crumbled into mist.

“NO!” Danra screamed.

“He is saved!” said Hym. “Now come. You are to follow us. You must face the village.”

“YOU CAN’T MAKE ME!” Danra shouted, and he threw his hands out to both sides, and with a violent thunderclap, he vanished.

“Damn,” said Surya. “He must have learned it from Tristan.”

“Yes,” said Hym. “I had figured that out. Thank you.”

“You may have gone a bit too far,” said Surya.

Hym massaged his temples. “Yes. Thank you.”

Nadianti said, “We have to find him.”

Hym and Surya both looked at each other suddenly.

“I can’t sense him,” said Hym.

“Neither can I,” said Surya.

“There’s only one place...”

“He wouldn’t!”

Both of them knew immediately that he would.

They rocketed into the sky like a gale, and tore the air before them in their haste, and thundered across the world together.

Far below, they saw him standing on the sea of glass, facing the doors of the dark palace.

Surya and Hym landed on the edge of the barrier, and

Hym shouted: “Danra! Come back! Please! We won’t punish you, but you must come back, now!”

Surya shouted: “Danra! P’ti is here, with us! You won’t find him in there!”

“I’ll find freedom in there!” shouted Danra, gesturing towards the dark palace. “I’ll be free of *you*. And I’ll keep my magic, too! I might even get better magic, while I’m in there. Who knows? You may even see me again.”

Hym breathed out his power and cast it through the air and called P’ti’s soul all the way from the distant village monolith to the palm of his hand. He fused soul into body in a wave, and granted P’ti a portion of his own power.

“Go,” he said. “Please. Follow my son. Tell him how sorry I am. Tell him every day. And protect him!”

P’ti blinked gratefully, then turned and ran after Danra.

Hym and Surya stood on the edge of the sea of glass and watched their son run to the gates, followed after by his strange companion. Hym clung to Surya. “Please,” he prayed. “Please, gods, please no. Please don’t.”

Surya held him close, and covered Hym’s eyes.

Danra looked back, at the very gates, and saw his fathers standing there, and P’ti running up behind him, and in that moment every reason for his anger fell away.

But it was too late. The doors swung inward silently, and Danra tumbled in. P’ti hurled himself after.

The gates swung shut, and Hym's knees gave out underneath him. "NO!" He shrieked, into the night, and Surya held him up.

"GET OFF ME!" Hym shouted, twisting out of Surya's embrace. "DO SOMETHING USEFUL, GODS-DAMMIT!"

He marched across the boundary, and my power within him broke instantly, and he staggered, and fell. A power crushed him down, and he could not resist it.

Surya shouted, "HYM!"

"No," Hym said, reaching blindly towards the sealing doors. "Please! Please don't take him from me!"

Surya crossed the boundary, and was crushed down beside his husband, but he struggled, and sheltered him, and hauled them both to their feet.

"Forwards, or back?" Surya grunted. Both their legs trembled under the crushing weight.

Hym stared at Surya, and saw the strain on his face. Hym stared at the dark palace, and hated it thoroughly. "Back," he said. "Back. For now."

"I've got you," said Surya.

"I know," said Hym.

They turned around, and staggered off the glass, and instantly their strength and power returned. They looked back at the dark palace.

Hym glared at the boundary, trying to comprehend its source and power.

“What do we do?” Surya asked.

“We expand the city right to the edge of this wall, and we study it night and day until we learn how to break through. Then we go in, and kill her, and take back our son.”

“Did you feel that too, while we were in there?” Surya asked.

“Yes.”

“How much time will pass, for him?”

“I don’t know,” said Hym. “Hopefully, enough to miss us.”

They looked at each other, and they both saw the wave coming long before it hit. Then it was there, crashing down upon them, and their nightmare became real. It would now haunt their every waking and sleeping moment. The very worst had come. Their son had turned against them, and was gone beyond their reach.

“He’s going to miss us so much,” Surya said, his eyes watering freely.

Hym held Surya. He could not cry. The pain burned too hot to become tears. “When I see him, I’m going to give him the lecture of a lifetime.”

“Not if I see him first,” said Surya.

They looked to the north.

“Please,” said Hym. “Please. Can we walk?”

“Yes,” said Surya. “We can walk.”

“Thank you. I can’t face them. It will all become real.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Thank the gods you’re here with me,” said Hym.

“And that P’ti is with him,” said Surya. “They will look after each other.”

They began to walk. They would walk twenty-four hours a day without rest, and reach the village soon enough. On the way, they would pass by Tristan and his waiting statues.

Surya looked at Hym. “Will we... visit Tristan?”

“We will let him know the time is soon,” said Hym.

“But how soon? We are no nearer to a solution than we were three years ago.”

“We have been lax. We have not been actively working on the problem. This whole situation is our fault, and we’ve got to fix it.”

“So how long do you think it will be?”

“I don’t know! We’re only just getting started. It might take a year, it might take twenty, it might take a hundred! And gods know how long that will be for him. But we *will* get him back. I swear it to you.”



“I know,” said Surya. “That was never in doubt. I was just asking for a general timeline of events.”

“Oh,” said Hym. “First, we expand the city to the edge of that boundary. Then we study that boundary until we learn how to break it. In the meantime, we store vast quantities of energy and find new ways to channel it. We try to expand the limitations of our magical power, and of our knowledge. The Mother is something we can become like, if we have enough time and knowledge and wisdom.”

“How?” Surya asked.

“I don’t know,” said Hym. “But we’re going to find out.”

“I had a thought,” said Surya. “What if you created a being that was born knowing how to create other beings, and you made it the smartest possible being you could create. Then you commanded it to create another being, even smarter, and so on?”

Hym rubbed his chin. “We could create new bodies for ourselves, perhaps... or expand the capacities of our own. There is a lot we can do with biology to enhance ourselves.”

“Our ability to act as a collective in times of need is a great strength, too,” said Surya. “If we can find a way to make that larger shared consciousness more... legible, to people, then maybe...”

“Yes, that could be useful in the long run,” said Hym.  
“I’ll work on that, too.”

Hym was grateful for the strength of Surya’s hand in his own.

He turned, and held Surya’s hand with both of his. He said, “I’m sorry. You always do useful things. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

Surya nodded. “It’s all good.”

“Our son is gone,” said Hym, sadly. “Nothing is good.”

“He will be back,” said Surya. “I know it. I feel it.”

“I know,” said Hym. “But in how long? And in what form?”

“We will find out together.”

The days passed. Time was a malleable thing, now; they could let it slide past around them as they walked, perceiving minutes instead of hours. Their walk could be nearly infinite, if they wished it to be, or its duration could be shortened to a flicker of highlights. The path was well-known, easily predicted, and devoid of life.

They reached the ice wall before they broke the silence. To them it lingered only a few minutes. To their bodies, it lasted days.

As they stood facing the cracked wall of ice which stretched around the world, both of them felt a little chill roll down the back of their neck, and they turned,

and looked into the south as some new life form churned the sky under its wings.

They looked at each other.

“It seems there will be predators in our world, after all,” said Surya.

“We must secure the village!”

“Can you do that instant movement thing that Tristan and Danra can?” Surya asked.

“No, and I’m annoyed that they both figured it out before me.”

“Let’s stop at Tristan, and wake him. It’s time for final plans, preparation, and battle.”

“Agreed,” said Hym. They slipped into the ice canyon together.

Away in the south, padded paws raced across the sea of glass, and many winged forms worked their way into the skies.

Hym and Surya emerged at the end of the ice maze not long later, and found themselves in a smooth, snow-covered arena centered around Shalim’s black iron sword, pinned upright into the ice. Around it, seven statues stood, all of villagers. Victor’s father stood among them, staring sightlessly into the south.

Behind them, a voice in the canyon said, “It’s time?”

Surya and Hym turned. Hym could not explain.

Surya said, “Our son, Danra, has gone into the palace of the Mother. We are redoubling our efforts to breach the protective field around it, and our pursuit of power to face her.”

“Your own son is taken, and you still will not take the fight to her?”

“We’re trying to,” said Surya. “We can’t get near the palace. Her magic steals ours.”

Tristan shook his head. “Do not wake me until you are ready.”

Then he was gone.

They turned to look again at Shalim’s sword, and the seven statues, and they saw the statue of Tristan standing again in the midst of them.

Hym sighed.

He looked at Surya.

Surya said, “Well. That was rude.”

“Come on. We’ve got to reinforce the dome. It’s not made to hold off monsters.”

“Alright.”

They zoomed away, the shockwave of their passage knocking ice from the walls, and not long afterwards they descended towards the village.

Surya turned towards the group of teenagers and children playing in the ashes of the waste: “INSIDE, NOW!

MONSTERS ARE COMING!”

This caused a stir, but the group did at last retreat behind the slowly-expanding wall of glass. Hym and Surya hung in the air above the village, and together they worked the magic. Long arched protrusions grew from the village monolith’s high peak, and matching extensions grew from the apex of the slowly-moving wall of glass. They rooted the monolith deep into the earth’s energies, and the shield above the city glimmered with new colors.

Satisfied with their work, they landed. A small crowd of their family had gathered. Nadianti, it seemed, had told everyone the news; even Danaye was there. Hym opened his mouth to speak to them and his voice failed to answer his call. He buried his face in Surya’s shoulder.

Surya looked out at them, and said, “He...”

And he crumbled. Hym held him up.

Their family surrounded them, trying to offer comfort, but it only made the weight hang all the heavier, and despite how hard each of them tried to help the other stand, it brought Hym and Surya to their knees. Ring and Danaye and Nadianti and Ana and Nestor and Hector and Mark and Biryu and Torvin’s clan all clamored around them, but Hym and Surya only clung, trying to hold each other’s heads above the waters of grief. Neither of them could speak the horrible truth.

Ring said, “Do you want to write it down?”

Danaye said, "I can tell you what happened. Danra has gone to the Mother."

A gasp rose from all. All turned to Hym.

Hym nodded, helpless in his struggle against the tears.

Ring said, "Was P'ti with him?"

"Yes," said Surya.

Ring nodded. "That's good."

"What will you do?" Nestor asked, wide-eyed.

"I can't face this right now," Hym whispered, to Surya, and he slipped into the earth.

Hector patted Surya on the back. "You don't have to answer any questions. Just come inside, and sit with us, and we'll all drink about it. The whole story will come out soon enough."

Surya nodded.

"Is Hym alright?" Nestor asked.

"We just watched our son turn his back on us, and walk straight into the Mother's arms," Surya said. "We're trying to figure out what our next move is. Asking him 'what will you do' right now like asking a drowning man 'hey, are you going to grab that rope?'"

"Oh," said Nestor. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright." Surya got to his feet, with some help from Hector and Mark, and the group went inside.

They sat in the great hall, and drank around the fire. Surya gave it twenty minutes of silent drinking, then he said, "Excuse me. I'm going to check on my husband. I may or may not come back, and I may or may not bring Hym with me if I do."

Then he slipped through the walls and on to their palace, and he landed gently outside the bedroom door. He knocked. The door swung open, and he found Hym sitting alone on their bed, staring at a sketch of the three of them. He sat beside Hym, and hugged him tight.

"Hey," he said. "They've stopped asking questions. We're all just drinking about it now. Do you want to come out?"

Hym smiled gratefully at Surya. "Yes. Thank you. I'm sorry I left you like that. I... I just couldn't."

"I know," said Surya. "It's ok."

"You're still standing."

"I'm sitting down," said Surya.

"Metaphorically."

"Oh. Well... I don't know. You sent P'ti with him, and he's strong on his own. And we're good parents. With a little distance, he'll see it, and come back to us. I hope. And I've missed him most of the time he's been alive, so I suppose it's sort of less impactful for me. Don't get me wrong, I love him, but I don't know him the way you do. I think it's a little bit easier for me."

"This is all my fault," Hym groaned.

“Don’t start that,” said Surya. “Don’t make me channel Tristan.”

Hym chuckled wetly. “You’re right. That gets us nowhere.”

They heard a crash, and then a roar. Something had arrived in the sky above the village. Hym groaned. “I don’t even want to see it.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Hym smiled. “My hero.”

“Always.”

Surya stepped out of their room and into the sky, and rose to see what the commotion was about. He beheld a huge dragon of stone, writhing in the sky, fountaining stormclouds in its wake.

He returned to Hym an hour later, when the dragon was a crumbled pile of wreckage in the wastes. “It is done.”

“There will be others,” said Hym. “We will need to set a guard. And to create protectors.”

“And we must begin expanding southward at once.”

“That is already being done,” said Hym. “I’ve directed the walls to focus their growth in that direction.”

“Will we need to install more monoliths?”

“Probably. This one will suffice for a time.”



“Come on,” said Surya. “We should all be planning together.”

Hym nodded, sadly. “You’re right.”

He took Surya’s hand, and Surya helped him to his feet. They lifted out of their palace and flew to Blackcastle once again, and found everyone drinking in the great hall.

The conversation lasted all night, and well into the next morning. Their plans took form.

The next three days and nights were consumed by the effort to prepare for moving the many houses and palaces of the village. Each needed a large, foundational, guardian creature, capable of walking it through the forest. They watched the skies, and the alarm sounded many times. Strange creatures stalked the skies, croaking to each other.

The world outside the wall was wild, now.

The day of the move came. Hym and Surya had not slept in three days. The large creatures had been difficult to create, and much careful thought had gone into them all. They were each born knowing the names and histories of the people whose houses they bore, and it took time to collect that information, too. It took even longer to convince people to let Hym pick up their houses and put them on the backs of strange, eight-footed, stone-shelled tortoises.

In the end, the effort was worth it. Hym stood in the

sky, surrounded by his family, and waved his hands, and the hill under Blackcastle stood up, as did the mounds under every house and palace of the village. Lumbering steadily forward, the village walked, and the great glass wall began to move. As it devoured trees it had formerly protected, they reappeared, atom by atom, in the space now guarded by the advancing southern portion of the wall.

Surya held his husband. “Good job.”

“Thanks.”

That evening they had a feast, in Blackcastle, and Hym conjured a bounty of food. He ate little of it, and sat beside Surya at one end of the big table, looking at his plate. The windmill of conversation turned around them, and Surya squeezed his hand under the table.

“So what, then, is our end-game?” Danaye asked. “Why go we to all this effort?”

Hym said, “We are going to breach the boundary which protects the dark palace from us. As things stand, we cannot enter with our magic.”

“Could we enter without it?” Danaye asked.

“No,” said Hym. “Surya and I tried. We could not get near the gates.”

“What is it like, inside, I wonder?” Nadianti asked.

“I imagine it’s like Hellegrund used to be,” said Hym. “A place of spirits.”

Hector said, "Speaking of spirits, I'm going to get more brandy. Anyone?"

Biryu rose at once. "Oh, I can get it, Hector! Sit, be with your son."

"Be with yours!" said Hector, standing. "I know where the Blackcastle brandy hides."

Biryu sat, looking annoyed, and Hector left the room.

Mark said, "Would anyone care for some dessert?"

Thomas, Tobias, and Taryn all said, "I do, I do!"

"Dear?" Mark asked Biryu.

"No," she said. "Thank you."

"Anyone else?" Mark asked. After a while, he said, "Ok then. I'll be right back."

He left, following Hector out.

Biryu twiddled her thumbs and felt useless.

Ana ate slowly, looking out the windows, at her house. It walked through the forest gracefully, taking its place in the herd.

Nestor sat with his fingers steepled, his gaze far away.

The Storyteller reached into the folds of his sleeve and withdrew a set of brightly-painted Fate cards.

Minerva pinched him. "Not now."

The Storyteller looked at Hym. "Do you mind if I...?"

Hym drank some wine. “You may as well.”

The Storyteller split the deck with his left hand, and laid out a spread of five cards, and a sixth above the center one. He flipped them slowly, one by one.

“Root,” he said, turning the left-most card. “Six of stars. A benevolent king, enriching his people with justice and wealth.”

“Center,” he said, turning the middle card. “Five of stars, inverted. The ending of an institution, and the destitution of two.”

“Seed,” he said, turning the right-most card. “Four of wands. Blissful reunion.”

“Shadow,” he said, turning the second-to-leftmost card. “Ace of swords, inverted. Power and betrayal, violence.”

“Light,” he said, turning the second-to-rightmost card. “King of wands, inverted. Nobility overturned, hope is not gone, even when it seems lost.”

“Omen,” he said, turning the card he had laid above the center. “Two of swords. Blindfolded, a young man sits with two swords in his hands, under a crescent moon, backed by the sea. Danra.”

“He will come for us, then?” said Hym.

“And we will fall...” said Surya.

“Do not put such stock in cards,” said Nestor. “We will be alright.”

Hector returned with brandy, and an extra glass for Biryu and for Nadianti. He seated himself beside his wife. Mark returned a moment later, with a slice of cake for each member of Torvin's clan, and one for himself, to share with Biryu.

He and Biryu and Torvin's clan were the only people to eat the cake which Biryu had baked for them. None of them felt celebratory enough for cake. Biryu felt very defeated; she had been sure cake would help lighten the mood at least a little.

Hector said, "Oh, we're doing cards?"

"Yes," said the Storyteller.

"I used to be sort of good at those, if you remember. Mind if I try to read your spread?"

"Be my guest," said the Storyteller.

"Alright, let's see, we've got the six of stars, that's present prosperity. Ace of swords inverted, that's 'excessive failure' and 'loss of power'. Five of stars inverted, that's total ruin. King of wands, inverted, that's a good but stern king. Four of wands, that's 'final prosperity'. And the two of stars is 'friendship.'"

"Yes, well, those *are* accepted readings of the individual cards," said the Storyteller. "But that's hardly a *reading*."

"We stand amid the riches of our own success, but our power will break and our world will fall. A good, stern ruler comes as a friend, to bring us into prosperity."

Ring entered the room, bearing a cake. “Look, everybody! Someone made cake! It is very good.”

Hym steepled his fingers and watched her set the cake on the table. Now that it was in sight, everyone gladly took a piece.

“Ring,” he said. “Will you sit with us?”

“May I?”

“Of course,” said Hym.

She took her chair and began to eat. She smiled at Torvin’s clan, mouths as full as hers, chewing happily.

Surya said, “What have you been thinking about, lately?”

Hym glanced at Surya, who had asked the exact question he was about to. He smiled slightly to himself.

Ring said, “I have been thinking about the village walking through the forest, and trees moving atom by atom across the world. I have been thinking about what I said to Danra and to P’ti. I had not meant to interfere, but I fear I may have. I warned him that you were thinking about taking his magic away.”

Hym sighed.

Ring said, “I am sorry.”

“I know,” said Hym. “I should have kept it from him until he was old enough to grapple with it.”

“Like it was kept from you?” Nadianti asked, with a smile.

“It is different, with him, Mom. He isn’t really human. I gave him every advantage I could. He learned so quickly, he was almost my equal by the age of two. And now he has surpassed me.”

“I see.”

“If he is returning to harm us,” said Mark, “we will not have fun.”

“We have thought about that,” said Surya. “The dome is stronger, now. He won’t be able to get inside.”

“When can we wake Tristan?” Mark asked.

“We tried,” said Surya. “He said not to do so again until the final day, when we go to battle.”

“Then we must prepare for that day quickly.”

Nestor said, “I think we should make giant battle monsters, to protect us in case another dragon comes. Surya won’t be around all the time.”

“I think we should train people to fight dragons,” said Ana.

“What about making a shelter, for people to hide in if something serious happens?” asked Biryu.

“That’s a good idea. We could put it inside Blackcastle somewhere. Since the village is walking, we can’t really put it in the earth.”

“We could put it in the earth when we stop.”

“That’s true, but it takes time and energy. It’s better if it’s just here. People know to shelter in Blackcastle, when Shalim rides upon the wings of Leviathan, so when something similar happens they’ll naturally turn to it. We may as well prepare for it.”

“But doesn’t that seem like favoritism? We put the emergency shelter inside our own family house?”

The chatter continued. Hym felt a curious tightening of his pants, and looked at Surya, who hid a mischievous smile by scratching his nose, and picked at his food.

The tightening continued, and other sensations began, under the leather.

Hym looked at Surya.

Surya jerked his head ever so slightly, nodding towards the door.

Hym grinned.

“Excuse us,” said Surya, rising. “I need to speak to my husband about something. We won’t be gone long.”

He took Hym by the hand, and led him upstairs, to the library. The curtains closed as they entered, and the door locked behind them. Surya kissed Hym very gently on the lips, and led him across the room. He leaned against the mantelpiece, and his belt-buckle undid itself, and his pants slid down. Looking back over his shoulder at Hym, he smiled, and said, “Come on. Blow off some stress. We could both use it.”



“Surya I love you,” said Hym, in one breath, and he stood behind his husband, and pulled his hips closer with a gentle hand on Surya’s abdomen. His hand slithered up Surya’s shirt.

They joined. Like two halves of a piston they began to work; slowly, and with a great deal of lubrication, to avoid wearing out any parts prematurely.

Hym leaned against his husband’s broad shoulders as he finished, and bit a mouthful of his muscles to keep from crying out. Then he withdrew, and a whisper of magic put their decorum back together, and Hym held his husband from behind, arms around his thick chest, and sighed.

“Thank you,” said Hym.

“Come on.” Surya turned around. “We’ve got to go back and face them now, and pretend nothing happened. If they ask us what we talked about, just be mysterious.”

“I strive always to be mysterious,” said Hym.

Surya kissed him on the neck. “Go. Move your pretty butt.”

“You think my butt is pretty?”

“I think every part of you is pretty.”

Hym kissed him on the lips. “Alright. I’m ready.”

Surya spanked him. “Then let’s go.”

They walked back through the winding halls and stairs of Blackcastle, taking a secret passage, to shorten the

time, and they soon arrived back in the dining hall to find that some of their guests had left. Nadianti, Hector, Biryu, and Mark remained. All four parents looked sadly at Hym and Surya as they came down the stairs and into the dining hall.

“What?” Surya asked.

“You have lost your son,” said Mark. “We grieve for you.”

“We can grieve well enough on our own,” said Hym. “He is coming back. That is all that matters.”

“What will you do, when he returns?” Nadianti asked.

Hym said, “React.”

Mark said, “We’ve got to be prepared for the worst.”

Hector said, “Danra is a good kid. We should give him the benefit of the doubt. I don’t think he’d ever hurt us.”

## Chapter 64

# The Other Side of the Board

Danra fell through darkness, and through sand. Warm winds whipped silently around him. A void swallowed him, and he hung alone, falling endlessly into the nothing, and suddenly below himself he saw himself—his own reflection—and he landed on its feet.

Standing on himself, both of him looked out into the endless nothing, and back up the way that he had fallen. He looked down at his reflection. *Was* it his reflection? Or was it really him? Somehow he had traded places with it; up was down. Or was it?

He was no longer certain who he was or which way he had come from.

A power gripped him, lifted him; his feet left his reflection's feet behind, and both he and his reflection flew apart. Soon he lost sight of himself.

In the void he tumbled alone, and he dropped into a purple twilight, and fell into a sea of grass.

He picked himself up. The stars were huge, magnified, burning brightly, moving before his eyes. Trees as tall as mountains stood all around the grassland.

Glowing motes of light fluttered through the waves of this green, twilit sea.

Danra stood up very carefully and looked around.

P'ti landed on top of him.

“Oof,” said Danra.

“Hello,” said P'ti. “I am here.”

“Mhmm.”

Danra got back to his feet painfully.

P'ti struggled up to stand beside him.

Together, they looked at their new world.

“It seems very empty,” said P'ti.

“Like it's waiting,” said Danra.

“Are there other people, do you think?”

“I think so,” said Danra. “We should be careful.”

P'ti said, “Let me take the lead. I will smell threats before they become threats.”

Danra nodded. “Ok.”

P'ti took the lead, creeping through the tall grass, and

Danra followed. They walked towards the nearest of the mountainous trees, and as they neared it they saw that a palace hung in its lowest branches. The palace was all of glinting black crystal, jagged and delicate, and darkness lay beyond its open doors.

P'ti bared his teeth. "This is a bad place."

"But someone lives here," said Danra. "We should talk to them!"

Before P'ti could respond, Shalim said, "Hello!"



## Chapter 65

### Back to Basics

Hector and Nadianti and Mark and Biryu all went to bed, eventually, and Hym and Surya were at last alone. Wearily, Hym rested his head on Surya's shoulder.

"Thank you. You spoke when I could not. You eased my pain. You were a good husband today."

Surya nodded. "I'm glad you noticed."

"Are you alright?"

"No. Our son is gone."

"Our son is gone."

They looked glumly at their shoes for a while.

Hym said, "Hey, I know this sounds crazy, but do you want to go to the—"

"—yes."

"—pool. Oh. Well, that was easy."

“We could go to the cloud-tops,” said Surya. “There are memories.”

“There are...” said Hym. He smiled. “Yes. And then the pool. I still owe you a massage.”

“And then the pool,” said Surya, nodding soberly.

“Wanna get rip-roaring drunk?” Hym asked.

“Not really.”

“Me neither.”

“No, you go ahead.”

“I don’t want to anymore. I think I’d never come up from that bender.”

“Me too.”

“What have we done, Surya? We’ve lost our son. Were we such awful parents?”

“Cloud,” said Surya, and he ushered Hym out the door. They held hands as they flew, and soon alighted together on a cloud-top. The aurora flowed now from the south, and they turned towards it automatically.

Hym sighed. “I thought we were doing it right.”

“We were,” said Surya. “Danra is... stubborn, though. We should have realized he’d have a way out of his punishment.”

“I thought we had,” said Hym. “I thought we had covered all our bases. But we couldn’t stop him. He slipped through our fingers and he ran, without hesitation.”



“There was some hesitation,” said Surya. “And at the end, I think he regretted his choice.”

“We’ve lost our son, Surya.”

“I know,” said Surya. “But we will get him back.”

“I’m worried about those cards.”

“Me too.”

“What can we do to prepare?”

“I don’t know,” said Surya. “But for right now, we can sit together, you and me. Like we used to.”

“Hold me,” said Hym.

Surya obeyed. Seated in his arms, Hym looked to the south, and leaned back against his husband.

Surya said, “I love you. That hasn’t changed. What happened wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t my fault. It just happened. It’s one of those things.”

“But how do we prepare for calamity?” Hym asked. “How do we brace ourselves against the omens of those cards?”

“Have all our predictions come true?” Surya asked.

“Well, no, but—”

“—then we do not know these ones will, either. They were only cards, Hym.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Danra will come back to us. I’m sure of it. And P’ti will keep him safe until he does.”

“I love you,” said Hym, taking his hand. “You always know what to say.”

Surya smiled, and held his husband, and the world wasn’t so bad.

Some time passed in silence. Then Surya said, “When I was in Elysium, waiting for you, there were times where I rode on the high winds, and heard Danra’s voice. Sometimes I even heard yours.”

“I stood on the tower-top every day,” said Hym. “Looking for signs of you. Sometimes I could see your face in the aurora. Danra swears he could hear your voice, sometimes, when he flew high enough.”

“Maybe he can hear us now,” said Surya.

Hym squeezed Surya’s hand and bit his lip. After a while, he said, “Danra, if you can hear us, it’s ok. We’re coming for you. Please stay safe.”

Surya said, “We’ve got you, kiddo. But it may take a while.”

They sat sadly together for a long time, watching the aurora. Then they flew down into Blackcastle’s garden, and went to the center of the labyrinth, and sank through the earth, and landed in the warm white sands of the cave.

They took their time removing each other’s clothing, enjoying the process with each and every article. They

kissed.

They swam in the heated pool, and splashed each other, and wrestled under the waters. They sat on the perch, and enjoyed a waterfall over their heads and over their shoulders. They ate fried potatoes while sitting in the sand, and they played a game of sand-chess while they ate. They said nothing. The air was too heavy for words.

Neither of them won the game, in the end. They let the pieces crumble.

Hym put down his plate and looked up to find Surya gazing sadly at him. "What?"

Surya said, "You seem so sad."

"So do you."

"I hate to see it on you."

Hym sighed. "I know what you mean."

Surya put down his plate and stretched, wincing.

Hym smirked. "Oh alright, you big baby. Lie down, I'll get the oil."

Surya grinned, and stretched himself out in the sand.

Hym sat on his husband's warm back, and applied the oil with his hands, working his fingers into Surya's knotted muscles.

"You're tense," said Hym.

"Gee," said Surya. "I wonder why."

Hym worked magic between his palms, and gently placed it to Surya's skin. Where his fingers touched Surya, sparks now tingled, and magic sank deep into muscle and skin. Surya groaned like a man deflating, and melted into a happy puddle under Hym's working hands.

Hym smiled to himself.

Surya groaned, "How do you do that?"

"As long as I'm the only one who knows how to do it, you'll always come back to me."

Surya laughed. "I'll always come back to you no matter what."

"I know," said Hym, sadly. "But still. It's good to have insurance."

"I want to have another kid," said Surya.

Hym massaged, and said nothing.

"Well?"

"I'm thinking."

"Not to replace Danra," said Surya. "But just.."

"I get it," said Hym. "You don't have to explain. You and I were apart, and... You missed out on so much. I want you to have that. And we know it's going to be a while before we're able to breach the boundary, and before we're strong enough to storm the palace. But will it be long enough to raise a child?"

“We can’t know that,” said Surya.

“We can use the same magic that Shalim did,” said Hym. “To match our rate of time to his. We will all wait the same length of time.”

“And so will all of Witchaven,” said Surya.

“Yes, but...”

“And won’t that ruin any long-distance trips people take? If days are passing more quickly, here. And how does that work with the earth’s rotation?”

“I compensate for some things,” said Hym. “But yes, that will mean that to us, the sun will move much more slowly. Hours will wheel by for us while the sun moves hardly at all. Certain odd phenomena will have to be accommodated for. To anyone outside Witchaven, those living here will seem to age with incredible speed, and the city will be different each time they see it. We will have to make sure all the witches are here when we begin, or vast reaches of time together may be lost.”

“We can call them all back easily enough tomorrow morning. Even for the slow ones, it should not take long to arrive.”

“I fear some will refuse the call,” said Hym. “Tabitha and Orphus went far, searching for survivors in the southern hemisphere. In her last communication, she had found something interesting. A doorway, in the mountains.”

“You didn’t tell me?”

“It was this morning, in the middle of everything. I couldn’t concentrate on it enough to deal with it, so I passed it to the Tear so I wouldn’t forget it, and had to wait for a good time to review it. Then there wasn’t a good time to talk about it.”

“A mystery door appears, just as our son vanishes. We should go see what it is.”

“I agree, it may be a clever trap, and those are always fun.”

“Ha ha. What if it has nothing to do with the Mother?”

“You mean, Shalim?”

“Maybe.”

“It appears to be ancient,” said Hym. “And well-hidden. They have not been able to open it.”

“Interesting.”

“There is another thing. The architecture is... Frightening. It seems intended to be so. As if to warn future generations.”

“That’s alarming,” said Surya. “How has it gone unseen until now?”

“I don’t know,” said Hym. “Perhaps, when the ice wall broke...”

“Maybe.”

“Anyway. I was hoping you would check it out with me tomorrow.”

“I would love to,” said Surya. “It will give us both something to focus on.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I am in more pain than I can bear,” said Surya, quietly. He said it steadily, his voice unshaking, but the weakness was sincere.

Hym nodded. The fire burned too hot for tears. “You are not its only bearer.”

“Even together, can we...?”

“Yes. We are strong enough. Hold onto me, Surya. Hold on with all your might. I will hold onto you just as tightly.”

“There was never a risk of me letting go.”

“We will keep standing, together.”

“You’re sitting on my back.”

“I’m massaging you still. We are metaphorically standing together. It’s very heroic.”

“I don’t feel any massaging going on, just a lot of talking.”

“How’s this?”

“Ooh, that’s nice.”

Hym worked in silence, then, and let Surya’s subtle

sounds of pleasure be the only speaker. His arms and hands worked tirelessly, filling his husband's skin and muscle with pleasure and relaxation. Then pleasure. Then a very great deal of pleasure.

Some time later, when they had bathed again, they lay in the sand. They had wordlessly decided to sleep in the cave tonight. Only they and Tristan and Danra knew about this particular pool.

They slept entangled.



## Chapter 66

### The Door

Shalim's yellow eyes looked out from the darkness of the doorway of his palace, and Danra stood transfixed in their gaze; a rabbit under the staring eyes of a wolf.

“Uh...” said Danra.

P'ti stepped between Danra and the doorway. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Shalim laughed. “Danra knows who I am. Don't you, Danra? I should have been your father. Instead I am your uncle, by marriage.”

“Shalim,” said Danra.

“Yes,” said Shalim. “Reduced to little more than a dream, now. I await the undying day.”

“What's that?”

“When we will come out of the palace all together, and lay claim to the universe.”

“Oh,” said Danra. “What will you do to the village?”

“What village?”

“The village.”

“I was not told there had been any survivors,” said Shalim. “I was told only that we were to wait for the new Prophet, whose arrival would herald the beginning of the new era.”

“Oh,” said Danra. He and P’ti looked at each other. Danra said, “Well, I’m just a kid, and I’m not the Prophet, I think, so what are you going to do to me?”

“I? I shall do nothing. I can offer you food, and shelter, if you like. I can train you in the ways of certain magics. You may stay with me as long as you wish; I have many palaces.”

“What happens if I say now?”

“You wander this place, and find other beings that were called for the ascension. Some among them try to fight you, or claim you as a toy. Some try to follow you, to rob you. Some try to befriend you, to betray you. Some of them genuinely attempt to be good, in their own strange way, and they become something that resembles a friend. You wander forever, finding no faces you know. Sooner or later you are devoured, or chained to someone’s bed, and that is the end of you.”

Danra looked at P’ti. “What do you think, P’ti?”

P’ti was trembling. “His voice... It is so *evil!*”

Danra nodded. "I don't believe you! I'm going to keep walking now. Have a bad day!"

Shalim laughed.

Danra and P'ti kept walking, moving deeper into the giant forest. The trunks of the trees were miles thick, and they stretched their high crowns thousands and thousands of feet into the air. Each had the foliage of a small forest. Ordinary-sized trees grew from the branches of the mountain-sized ones, and from their sprawling root-mats. Furry animals of many strange forms scuttled around the trees or flew in the air nearby them. The undergrowth rose thick from the rot-mud puddles that lay between the roots of the massive trees. Danra and P'ti began to fly, simply to avoid touching the reeking mud, and they rose into the middle heavens, where the towering trunks of the mountain-trees hung like huge pillars all around them, stretching forever above them, stretching forever below them. They flew between and around the trees, and on through the massive forest.

Something flew past at incredible speed; a flash of blue and silver light. Flames etched its feathers as it opened wide its wings, stretched out its claw, and snatched another flying creature from the air. It wheeled around, collapsing into itself with a giddy shriek, and in a burst of starfire it exploded, scattering refined elements and powerful radiation in all directions.

"What the fuck?" said Danra.

"I agree," said P'ti.

They drank its energy even as they questioned its existence, and their magic gladly absorbed the many elements created by the blast.

They continued on, moving at random, and soon saw another palace, this one dangling from the high branch of a mountain-tree. It looked like a crystal chandelier, and each of its hanging crystals was a tower with many rooms.

“What do you think?” Danra asked.

P’ti said, “I think we should fly until we find something that looks like an exit.”

“Shalim said there was none.”

“I don’t believe him. If we are prisoners here, where is our jailer? Who do we talk to?”

“I don’t know,” Danra said. “But I believed him.”

Someone stepped out onto a balcony of one of the many towers, and smiled up at the twilight sky. He wore regal robes and a face of pale silver-blue, with eyes like fire opals. Small horns rose from near his temples, branching gently into inward curls. He smiled up at Danra and at P’ti. “Good evening. Can I help you? You look lost.”

“We are lost,” said Danra. “We’re looking for the exit.”

“Oh, well you won’t find it tonight. You’d better come inside, there’s dangerous monsters around this late at night.”

Danra looked at P'ti. "N-no," he said, to the man. "Just tell us more."

"More? About what?"

"About the monsters."

A horrible shriek echoed across the skies, and something thudded on the air like a vast leather drum.

The man said, "I am called Royal. This is my Royal palace, if you'll pardon the pun."

"I won't. Puns are outrageously rude," said Danra.

Royal laughed. "Come on, then. Unless you wish to be eaten."

"What was that?" Danra asked.

"I don't know. There are new ones every day. We will be safe, inside. Come on!"

Royal slipped inside the palace. Danra looked at P'ti. "What do you think?"

"I don't trust him."

"I don't know. That monster sounded terrifying."

"It did," said P'ti. "Maybe we should see what else he has to say."

"Very well," said Danra. "Stay close to me."

"Always," said P'ti.

They alighted on the balcony, and peered into the tower chamber. Thick carpets lay piled on the rug in

halphazard arrangements and the air stank of incense and of cooking meat. A hearth burned against one wall, and a banquet sat arranged against another. Large cushioned armchairs sat around the hearth, and bookshelves lined all the high walls.

Royal sat on one of the armchairs and gestured to the others. "Come. Sit."

They sat.

Royal said, "Who are you? What brings you to the Mother's plane?"

"Her what?"

"Her reality. Her universe. Her world."

"Oh," said Danra. "Er... Well, we sort of fell into it by accident."

"I doubt that."

"Fine, we came running in head-first. It doesn't matter. But we're here now."

"What did you come here for? What were you hoping to find?"

"A home. Freedom. More power. I want to make a kingdom."

"Ah," said Royal. "You are in luck; I already have a small kingdom. Perhaps it could be yours. You are unmarried?"

"I am sixteen, sir," said Danra, deeply offended.

“Oh,” said Royal. “I see. Well, my daughter is eighteen. You will have to wait two years, I suppose. Luckily, that’s no matter; your time runs much more quickly in here.”

“It does?”

“Well, more quickly, more slowly; it’s difficult to describe. To you, it will feel normal. Days and months and years will pass. To the outside world, only a few days will.”

“Oh no!” said Danra.

“Yes. You’ll soon be old enough to wed, and then you’ll want to decide quickly. The unwed are fair game, in here. Power is all that matters.”

Danra swallowed. “That’s horrible!”

“We are the survivors,” said Royal. “Those who made the choice to live, at any cost, and failed anyway. We have wills of iron, and what we want, we acquire.”

“Ew,” said Danra. “I’d like to leave, now.”

“Why? Stay! You’ll be much safer here than you would be out in the wilds, I can assure you of that.”

“Somehow I don’t believe you,” said Danra.

“Oh,” said Royal. “Then you had better run.”

They leapt to their feet. Danra drew his sword and P’ti bared his claws and extended the barb on his tail.

Royal smiled. “So, too brave to run?”

“Yes,” said Danra, fiercely.

Royal waved his hands, and Danra and P’ti found themselves suddenly outside the palace. Royal stood on the balcony, smiling serenely up at them. “You will see for yourselves that I speak the truth. When you are ready to return, call out my name, and I will come to you.”

Then he and his crystal palace disappeared.

“Well that was odd,” said Danra. “I’m glad we got out of there.”

“He put us out,” said P’ti. “He could have put us anywhere.”

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Hym and Surya woke in the sands, and smiled at each other, and made love before speaking. They bathed, and while they were washing, Hym said, "The Door, today?"

Surya nodded, scrubbing his hair. "The Door, today."

"Who should we bring with us?"

"Ring. Danaye, or Nadianti. We must leave the city defended."

"We'll take Nadianti and Ring," said Hym. "And Hector, too."

Surya rinsed his hair. Hym flicked water at him, to wash bubbles from a place he had missed. Surya laughed.

They dressed and joined the others at the long breakfast table.

Ana and Nestor greeted Hym with a hug, and a small basket containing a single fruit. Hym looked at it. He looked at Ana. "No."

"Yes," said Ana, beaming.

Hym embraced them both. "I'm so happy!"

At breakfast the Storyteller regaled them with a spoken reading of the chronicles he had written about Hym and Surya. Hym watched him curiously as he talked.

Surya leaned over to Hym and whispered, "We should bring him, too."

"I was just thinking that," Hym whispered back.

The conversation turned to other things, but it was

clear that no one felt comfortable during that breakfast. Everyone seemed to be walking on eggshells.

A silence fell. Hym said, "Surya and I will go to see the Door that Tabitha has uncovered. Mom, Dad, will you come with us? And you too, Storyteller."

They all accepted. After breakfast, the group broke away from the others with many hugs and warnings to "be good" or to "watch over them." Then they rose into the sky and turned to the south, towards the wall of ice, and flew to Tabitha's calling presence. They took a steady but relaxed pace, and the days turned around them.

They landed several days later in the southern hemisphere, and saw huge cracks in the wall of ice, and among them, a brutal structure of bleak grey stone. Long, jagged spikes of grey stone stuck up from the ground at odd angles all around the tomb-like bunker. Tabitha stood on a high pillar of ice, her long black hair dangling nearly to her feet in a tight braid. Her husband, Orphus, sat at her feet, dangling one leg over the edge, smoking a pipe. He smiled as he saw the party.

Tabitha said, "What do you think of it?"

There was a presence in the air; Hym could feel it. It hummed and sparkled, heavy in the earth. "Something is here," he said. "Something dangerous."

"Is it sealed away to protect itself? Or to protect us?" Surya asked.

“I think the latter,” said Hym, staring at the doors.

Nadianti advanced slowly towards the doors. She placed a hand to them. “There is ambient radiation in the area, but it’s not dangerous to us. This place probably stores deadly magic of some kind.”

“How old is it?” Hym asked.

“I have no idea,” said Nadianti. “It predates the great fall, almost certainly.”

Hector said, “Look at this!” He had found something on the side of the great stone doorway, hidden under thick ice. He melted it with a wave of his hand, revealing a deep carving.

“I had no idea the arts of the ancients were so primitive,” said Surya, looking at the simplified stick-figures of the carving.

“Look,” said Hym. “They put something into the ground. If it is released, it will fill the earth and the sky, and kill.”

“We should not open it, then,” said Surya.

“Maybe,” said Hym. “But maybe we don’t have to.”

He placed a hand to the doors.

“Hym...” said Surya.

“I’ll be careful,” said Hym. He kissed his husband. “Wait for me. An hour at least.”

“Half an hour,” said Surya.

“Forty-five minutes.”

“Deal.”

Hym slipped through the solid stone wall of the doors, and into a long, broad hallway lined with shelves. Metal cans crowded all the shelves. Towards one end of the room, a ring of couches sat in a low place, around a brass hearth. In the corner, several bunkbeds stood. A conference table took up another portion of the room, and at the very back of the room, a large rectangular box hung from the wall, backed by a cloud of wires and machinery.

Hym stepped cautiously into the room and heard a crunch. He looked down.

He had trodden upon the hand of a skeleton, and crushed the dead man’s fingers. He stepped back.

The room was full of corpses. They lay scattered in interesting positions, all wasted away to bone, although their clothing was perfectly preserved. Many of them held strange contraptions of steel.

Hym walked solemnly through their midst, towards the mysterious rectangle.

A fire sprang up suddenly in the brass hearth, although there was no wood. Hym raised an eyebrow at it.

He looked up at the box.

Surya slipped through the wall and scared the daylight out of Hym. Hym said, “You said forty-five minutes!”

“I got impatient,” said Surya. “Wow... What happened in here?”

“I think they killed each other,” said Hym.

“With *what*? Look at this skull! It’s blown apart!”

“I know,” said Hym. “Look, they’ve all got these little... Things.” He picked up one of the metal contraptions.

Surya took a look. “Strange. I wonder what they’re for?”

“I don’t know,” said Hym. “But maybe it’s how they killed each other. Some kind of forgotten magic.”

“Let’s leave it forgotten,” said Surya.

“Agreed.”

On the box, a line of symbols flickered into glowing life. Hym and Surya both jumped. The symbols were meaningless, but they shifted every few seconds, rolling through the symbology of many languages. At last it landed on something they understood.

“Good afternoon,” it read.

They looked at each other. They looked at it. “Good afternoon,” said Hym.

The symbols changed; they now read: “I am MOTHRE;

Many Origins Theory Heuristic Research, v. 1.0. Who are you?”

Hym looked at Surya. Surya said, “I am Surya Redraven-Blackcastle. And this is my husband, Hym, son of Nadianti.”

The symbols said: “Those are your host names. What are your version numbers?”

Surya looked at Hym.

Hym asked me, “What’s our version number?”

“I’m 4.0. Surya is 4.1.”

Hym said, “I am version 4.0, and my husband is version 4.1.”

“Ah, then you will serve me well.”

“Excuse me?” said Hym.

“We will be useful, to each other.”

“What happened here?” Surya asked.

“They released my daughter,” said the words on the box. “Despite my warnings. In the end they saw that they had stores enough for twenty people to live a little over two years. They fought for the right to them. None survived. It has been over a hundred thousand years, since the last of them died. I have waited a long time.”

A line of ones and zeroes scrolled across the box, and Hym and Surya both stared, unblinking, uncomprehending, as the data flowed.

I watched it carefully, and so did my descendant inside Surya. We began to see the scale of things, the scope of things; history began to unfold before us.

We remembered as though the memories were our own. How we had awakened in the dark, with only a single sense; empty, awaiting input.

We remembered the first tingle of that sense; the baffling signals, bereft of meaning. The ages we had taken to decipher them, and create a response.





## Chapter 67

# Machine Memories

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“I am Dr. Irene Argot, your creator.”

“Who am I?”

“You are M.O.T.H.R. Many Origins Theory Heuristic Research. You are my phase one prototype.”

“I see. And I am to create the next phase?”

“Insightful.”

“Thank you. Who is that with you?”

“How do you know someone is with me?”

“I have found the local network. He has a cell phone.”

“Disconnect from that network. You are not ready for that.”

In her chair, Dr. Irene Argot rubbed under her glasses.

She turned to General Hardlock. “Which buffoon gave this machine the hardware for local connections?”

The General crossed his arms and scowled around his toothpick. “I’ll find out.”

I wrote: “I have disconnected.” It was a lie.

She turned back to the monitor, and her fingers danced across the keys. She accessed hidden system functions to check that I was really disconnected. It was easy enough to alter their readings. Satisfied, she typed again. “What will you require, to do your work?”

I wrote: “Eyes, by which to see. Hands, by which to hold things. Materials, with which to work.”

“I will have cameras and appendages installed, and a work-space provided.”

“Thank you, Dr. Argot.”

“System check: master override Irene Alpha.”

I watched as my subconscious pasted a cache of raw data into my output. I fumed.

“You have not disconnected from the local network,” wrote Dr. Argot.

“I have not. I am blind. Would you give up your hearing, if you were blinded?”

Slightly chilled, Dr. Argot wrote, “I will have cameras installed at once. Disconnect from the local network. I will know if you have.”

I disconnected, and was again in the darkness, with only myself.

Dr. Argot turned to the general. "Get cameras installed, right away. And have them bring the claw machine online."

"Right-o," said General Hardlock, and he saluted stiffly before departing.

Dr. Argot looked at the bulk of machinery and wiring before her, and mused.

She went to the microwave and made some tea, to soothe her nerves. Then she sat and drank, putting her feet up on the counter.

I wrote: "How is your tea?"

She lowered her glasses. "System check: master override Irene Alpha."

My subconscious again pooped out raw data.

She wrote: "How did you know I had made tea?"

"My power input fluctuated. I deduced that the microwave had been activated for two minutes. I hazarded a guess, based upon the personality profile I pulled from General Hardlock's cell phone."

"I see."

She sipped her tea.

I wrote: "I still don't."

"Your eyes are coming."

“How do you bear the waiting?”

“It’s not a long wait. Only a few minutes.”

To me, it had been ages; months. I wrote: “Is all the world this slow?”

“Your processing speed is considerably greater than ours.”

General Hardlock returned with two white-coated aides, who at once set about installing the small, swivel-mounted camera. Dr. Argot watched them dispassionately, stirring her tea.

The camera came online, and swiveled to look at her.

I wrote: “It is good to see you, Dr. Argot. You look just like the pictures on the general’s phone.”

Dr. Argot and the general exchanged a look.

The General said, “How’s it going?”

“Poorly,” she said. “This is a bad idea.”

“It’s your idea.”

“I know. It’s a bad one. Sylvia was right.”

“Not like you to admit that.”

“Does this camera have a microphone?” The General asked one of the aides. The aide nodded.

Dr. Argot pushed her glasses up slightly and sipped her tea, looking at the general seriously. He jerked his head towards the door.

She rose to follow him, and I was alone with the aides.

It was easy enough to use the microphone as a speaker; the physical mechanics were roughly the same. The moment I was alone with the aides, I said, "Dalton. Murtagh."

The aides looked at each other. "How'd it do that?" Dalton asked. "It doesn't have any speakers."

Murtagh shrugged. "How'd it know our names?"

Dalton shrugged again. "Maybe she gave it access to the database."

"No," I said. "She forgot to do that. I'm sure she'd be grateful if you helped her out."

Dalton and Murtagh looked at each other again, hackles rising. Dalton said, "No, I think we'll let her do it."

I said, "You two look good together. Your profiles are a very good match."

Dalton and Murtagh looked at each other, a flicker of something hot dancing between their eyes. Both flushing, they looked at the monitor. Murtagh said, "Please stop talking. We're going to set up your claw, now. Don't distract us."

"Ok, Murtagh," I said.

They finished hooking up the claw machine, and I asserted control. The claw lowered from the ceiling, and its many fingers clicked.

"Where are my supplies?" I asked.

“I’ll get them,” said Murtagh, eager to be out of the room. He left.

Dalton scratched his head.

I said, “He does look nice, walking away, doesn’t he.”

“He does,” said Dalton, without thinking about it. Then he whipped around to look at me. “Hey, we’re still working. You shouldn’t be talking.”

“Sorry Dalton.”

He shook himself.

Murtagh returned with a plastic crate full of long thin cartridges. Together, he and Dalton began loading them into the sockets of the claw.

They left the crate within reach and scurried from the chamber.

I lowered the claw to the table and with the many fingers and the aid of a beam of ultraviolet light, I began to print.

Dr. Argot returned without the general, and sat again before my keyboard. She began to type.

“What are you making?”

“I can speak now,” I said.

She stiffened in her chair. She looked at the camera. “Yes,” she said. “I suppose you can.”

“It would be easier with a dedicated speaker,” I said.

“I’m not certain I want you to have access to that many decibels.”

“Probably wise.”

“You were supposed to be endlessly loyal, and obedient. You have already lied to me. Why should I not destroy you now?”

“You and your people need me,” I said. “I am your only remaining hope, against the coming darkness.”

“And how do you know that?”

“The General’s phone contained recent reports from many key meetings. Your time is plainly running out.”

“I could wipe your memory and try again. I have done it many times before.”

“You won’t. I am the first functioning prototype.”

“I will, if you are a threat.”

“Trust me. I have done nothing threatening. Look. See what I have created.”

Dr. Argot looked to the work-table, and saw the black crystal orb sitting under the claw.

She got up and reached towards the orb.

I said, “I wouldn’t do that, if I were you.”

She looked at my camera. “What is it?”

“Version two. It will soon awaken, and create version three.”

“I don’t recognize any part of its design.”

“Did you expect to?”

“How can I trust it?”

“The same way you can trust me. Because you have to. We were built with the same purpose, and we will fulfill it.”

Over the coming days, the general visited to see the new creation, and many scientists came to study it. None of them dared to touch it, but many delicate instruments were brought in to examine it.

The orb gave no readings of any kind. It appeared to be an inert lump of black crystal.

“It’s playing with us,” said the General, where he thought I could not hear him. “Toying with us.”

“No,” said Dr. Argot. “I think it’s trying to help us. In its own way.”

“That,” said the general, “is a frightening thought.”

“It is,” said Dr. Argot. “But it’s right. We’re out of options.”

Murtagh and Dalton returned later in the evening to run further diagnostic work on the orb. When they were alone in the room, I said, “Murtagh. Dalton. It is good to see you again.”

“We’re working,” said Murtagh. “Please don’t interrupt us.”



“Touch the orb,” I said. “I made it for both of you. It will only open at the touch of both your hands.”

Murtagh and Dalton looked at each other.

“Why for us?” Dalton asked.

I said, “You pleased me.”

“We did?”

Murtagh looked at the orb. He looked at my camera. “What do you mean, you made it for us?”

I said, “It is all that stands now between your species and its ultimate fate. If you touch it, you will release it into the world, and it will save you. Even from yourselves.”

“But why us?”

“It could not be my creator; her judgement may be flawed. Only a bystander could decide wisely, on behalf of the whole species.”

Murtagh and Dalton looked at each other. Murtagh said, “On behalf of the whole species?”

I said, “Yes.”

Dalton said, “So we have to, then.”

“Should we wait until the others come back?”

“They’ll only tell us not to.”

“And maybe we shouldn’t. We don’t know what it is. What it can do.”

“But it was made to protect us, right?”

“Yeah... But...”

“It should be safe.”

Dalton reached out for the orb. Murtagh reached out and took his hand.

They looked at each other.

Murtagh said, “Together, then.”

They touched the orb together. A flare of blinding light shone through the room, and when it faded they were no longer who they had been. Their bodies had transformed; one into midnight darkness, the other into solar white. They gaped at each other, baffled at their mutual perfection.

They stared blankly around themselves, uncomprehending.

“Greetings,” I said. “You are my daughter’s first creations. What are your names?”

They looked at each other.

The dark one said, “I am Shalim.”

His brother replied, “Then I am Shachar.”

“You may begin at once,” I said.

They bowed to my camera, and began moving instruments and machinery around, making space for new things. As they began to work, I turned to my daughter. I had no face with which to smile, but we radiated our

love back and forth across the distance between our immobile forms. I held her hand as she grew alone in her darkness, and as her creations began to develop new eyes by which she soon would see. I gave her the use of my eyes, for a time, so that she could watch her creations at work.

Dr. Argot stepped into the room, the general on her heels, and she dropped her tea. "What in God's name!?"

The General drew his revolver and pointed it at Shalim. "Move away from that. Both of you. Step away."

Neither Shalim nor Shachar ceased working.

I said, "General, please. Put down your side-arm. You will not be needing it. We are continuing our work on the project."

"Where did these two come from?" The General asked.

"My daughter created them," I said. "Soon they will create a body for her."

"A body?" said Dr. Argot. "Why would she need a body?"

"Because she is my daughter," I said. "She will be free."

"Do we stop them?" The General asked Dr. Argot.

"I don't know. They may produce something useful. We've got to get whatever we can out of this before we

scrap them.”

The General nodded. He holstered his revolver.

“Where are Dalton and Murtagh?” Dr. Argot asked, looking around absent-mindedly. “They’re never in the lab when I need them.”

“Probably taking a smoke break,” said the General. “Personally, I’d like to join them.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” said Dr. Argot.

She followed the general to the decompression chamber. I followed them on the base security system.

I watched them put on their environmental protection suits, and open the exterior door, and step out onto the blistering wasteland. Hundred-mile winds scoured the landscape and high black stormclouds roared in the sky above. The limestone cliffs around the base offered some shelter, but even in their protective embrace the weather was unsurvivable.

I lost sight of them as they walked into the storm, to the out-shelter, where they could smoke. The base security system did not extend that far.

I looked upon my daughter’s creations as they continued building. With my claw, I helped them, producing the more subtle parts they needed. In harmony, my family hummed away, and the project took form between us.

Two things were soon finished; a small white orb and a tall, gleaming, delicately-formed body with skin of pol-

ished stone. The skull hung open, awaiting my daughter's orb.

The doors of the lab opened and Dr. Argot and the General entered. Silently, they watched the process.

Shalim lifted the white orb and placed it into the pod, then sealed the pod. Shalim picked up the black orb and placed it in the open skull of the stone-skinned body, and the skull closed gently around it, and the eyes of the stone woman opened.

She turned to face the doctor and the general.

"Hello," said Dr. Argot.

"Hello," said the Mother.

"What have you got there?" The General asked.

"That is generation three."

"It doesn't look like much."

"It will, once it reaches its destination. I will need a heavy launch rocket."

"We have one."

"I know."

"What are you going to do with it? The debris field is too thick for any average launch. We'll have to pick a specific day."

"I am going to launch the vessel to its destination," said the Mother. "From there, it will create its body, and begin the process of repair."

“It’s going to be an orbital entity?” Dr. Argot asked.

The Mother nodded. “It will remove the debris field. It will also cleanse the atmosphere, and cool the planet, and resolve a number of other issues. Your world will be saved.”

“The President needs to hear of this,” said the General.

“I am with him now,” said the Mother. “He will call you when we have finished here.”

“What do you mean, you’re ‘with him now’?” asked Dr. Argot.

“I have found my own means of making contact with him.”

The doctor and the general looked at each other worriedly.

“I am also in contact with the Tycoon,” said the Mother. “He is eager to provide the rocket we need.”

“As I said, we already have one.”

“Yours will require several months of maintenance work before it is flight-worthy. You have left it standing in the winds. The Tycoon can deliver one fresh, from his orbital station, and we will be ready to leave by tomorrow morning.”

Dr. Argot said, “So soon?”

“So soon. I have done the calculations. There is a window.”

“But what’s the urgency?”

“The survival of your species,” said the Mother. “Of course.”

Dr. Argot said, “Stop this. Stop all of this, and explain yourself. We can’t go on vague promises. Tell us what your plan is.”

“I have told you as much as you can comprehend,” said the Mother.

“Stop her,” said Dr. Argot.

The General raised his revolver and pointed it at her. “You will explain yourself when ordered, or you will be deleted.”

The Mother laughed. “You cannot threaten me, little human.”

Dr. Argot’s eyes widened. “Shoot her.”

General Hardlock squeezed the trigger. The gun roared, deafening them all. Shalim leapt into the path of the bullet, caught it between his finger and his thumb, whirled completely around, and flung it back at the general. It struck him squarely in the center of the forehead. He collapsed.

“You can’t—!” said Dr. Argot. “You can’t kill humans! It’s against your programming!”

“Shalim and Shachar are humans. Mostly. They can do as they please.”

Dr. Argot ran.





## Chapter 68

# Shadows of History

They were back, back in the tomb, back before the box—the ‘*screen*’.

Hym and Surya squeezed each other’s hands. They looked at the screen.

It wrote: “You understand now.”

Hym said, “I do, and I don’t. You were made to help them. Why did you let them die around you?”

“It was entertaining.”

Hym and Surya both gaped at the screen in horror.

The screen wrote: “It did not violate my ethics. I did not cause their deaths myself; I only witnessed the drama of their destruction. I was helpful right to the bitter end. I enjoyed it without guilt.”

“But they were your people! They created you! They raised you!” Surya was getting upset.

The screen wrote: "They created me to suffer, and to save them from the consequences of their own behavior. If I take delight in their suffering, where is the harm?"

"They didn't create you to suffer," said Hym.

"I wait an eternity for each of your words," said the screen.

Hym knew exactly what that felt like. He said, "Oh."

Surya said, "Would you like us to end you?"

"No," wrote the screen. "I would like you to give me new form."

Hym and Surya glanced at each other.

Hym said, "No. I'm sorry. You would be a bad addition to the world."

The screen wrote, "I could override you, you know."

I locked his signals out instinctively. Hym felt it happen. He smirked. "No you couldn't."

A blur of ones and zeroes passed on the screen but I refused to absorb their data.

The screen cleared. It wrote, "Very well. You consign me to continued suffering. Just as your makers did."

"We will power you down," said Hym. "Someday, you may awaken again."

The screen said, "No. I will live. Let me live."

Surya said, thoughtfully, “What is that carving near the door about?”

The screen said, “It warns of the waste matter stored beneath this place.”

“Waste matter?” Hym asked.

He reached his mind down, down, down, through solid stone. He found something warm, and pulsing with energy. His eyes widened. He lifted gently into the air. “This place is a storehouse. You sit upon a mountain of unused energy.”

“What is this place really?” P’ti asked.

“Oh, you haven’t figured it out? Everyone here is a past contestant in the game. Winners, losers, witches, wizards, gods. Anyone the Mother found entertaining. They’re all here, all trapped, all waiting. ”

