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By

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The Rite of Initiation began at midnight. Bunson, the temple groundskeeper, waited intently, with deadpanned face, for the temple’s chronometer to reach its midnight zenith. He would give the signal, a great ringing of the temple gong, and Zar would begin her Dance of Understanding.

Their god, Arethelos, contained the wisdom of Passion, that being of pain, of pleasure, and of the balance between the two, which is sacrifice. In the Myth, the Trial of Arethelos was to dance before the seven-headed serpent so as to understand what it was to create beauty out of pain for the sake of love. And so it was for Zar.

Morga, Zar’s mother, stood by, along with the other twenty-one temple priestesses, to witness the dance. Seven priests watched as well, forming the Seven-Headed Serpent at the top of the circle where the circle’s arc passed before the statue of Arethelos. The statue, a woman draped in robes, encircled seven times by the seven heads of the Serpent, kneeled before an unseen observer. She faced East, being on the later half of the deific calendar, so as to face the sun in its rising. Arethelos’ hour was from midnight to the second hour of the morning. Her’s was the first rise out of death, but her rise also started with death, which came at midnight, following Eberothe’s hour, whose wisdom was of the passage of time and the growing and aging of all things.
Zar, draped as Arethelos with the official raiment of the Initiation, a simple, black robe, sat still in the middle of the circle. In silence, more out of necessity than from ritualistic observance, Zar traced over the motions she would soon have to perform. She was not permitted to move, but in her mind she watched herself move about the seven-point star that she was in the center of now. First, her beginning stance, graceful as a lover, and then her right foot placed on the point where the two bottom points of the star met on the center most ring of the circle. Then a return to the center while raising her arms, then this, then that, then this, then that.

Lu the oldest of the women, who had seen the ritual performed over a thousand times over the course of her one-hundred and forty-eight years of life, had instructed Zar in her dance the most. “Let your body be here, but let your mind be elsewhere. It does not matter where.” Zar had been raised in the temple, and so was taught to practice self-emptying, and this dance, like every task, could be performed with a steady heart, neither exultant in emotion nor devastated in despair, nor even at a point somewhere in between, but somewhere separate from the continuum. Here and not here. Feeling and emptiness. “If Arethelos teaches anything--if there is an Arethelos to teach anything,” Morga had told her once, “she would teach that emptiness is just as much apart of living as fullness is.”

Let your body be here, but your mind be elsewhere. Where was that elsewhere? Zar’s training involved more time in answering that question than in all the hours spent rehearsing the dance, and that question bothered her more than all the sores on her feet, more than the aching burn in her calves and thighs, and more than the dread of the Initiation itself.

Where was this elsewhere? She decided, one morning, that she would imagine where the shorehawks migrated to when summer approached. She knew that north of New Malinsburg, if you traveled far enough up, past the forests that separated the region of Zonon from the region of
Ustos, you would come upon the rising foothills of the Prism Mountains. Zar had never seen mountains, but she had read enough in her studies and heard enough from travelers on pilgrimage and those world-wise temple visitors to know what mountains were and that were majestic and struck one with awe.

They say some of the gods live there, up on the mountain tops, where there is only snow and wind. They say that if you are lucky enough to stay alive and reach the top of the highest of the mountains, the gods, supposedly impressed by your applied will to reach the summit, would grant you audience, and you would be given solace, whatever that solace might be for you.

But where was Arethelos now? Where were any of the divines? Why the need to climb a mountain? Why the need to visit a temple, to meet with a priest or priestess, and receive some blessing? What blessing? None of the other women seemed to know for sure what to say to that question. They just met with worshippers, took temple payments, and fornicated about the sanctum rooms. “Arethelos is in the pain of sacrifice,” said Father Crustok. “She is in the love of sacrifice. You’ll understand when you proceed through the Initiation.”

But she did not want to. She had to because Father Crustok had secured her as a temple child, but she did not want to. She was bound to her goddess until the priesthood decided that she was no longer bound. Until she was too old to attract any seekers of the goddess. Being an elf, she would be there for longer than any of the priests. She would be there for centuries. Lu had been a temple priestess for more than one-hundred years, longer than the lives of most other races. And how did Arethelos reward her? Petty philosophy? Comforting mythology?

Zar stopped her thoughts. She had to perform her dance. Fine. She had to receive the Understanding of Passion from Father Crustok. Fine. Let it be. Let it all be. She would be here to let it all happen, but she would be elsewhere, out on some snowy mountaintop, wondering where
all those deities were that promised themselves to people. Zar steadied her breathing. She counted the seconds that her breaths took, measuring out how long to inhale, how long to hold the breath, how long to exhale. She closed her eyes, and became as akin to stone as she knew how.

And then came the gong. It was positioned on the north side of the statue where, Zar knew, Bunson was striking it. Now snapped back to the moment, she recalled to mind all the steps and movements of her dance. With the third gong’s ring, she had replayed her rehearsals, part for part, inch for inch, in her thoughts and had sent herself to that elsewhere she had spent the better half of a month preparing for herself. The women began to chant, and the men began to sing. Father Crustok recited from the Book of Wisdom. She began.

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Zar was covered in sweat, and the sores on her feet, now reopened, stung and bled. Her arms, having repeated the same motion nearly fifteen times, ached, and her legs were almost to the point of trembling. However, the first hour had finally passed, and Bunson rang again the temple gong. With sweat in her eyes and a burning in her breath, Zar returned to the center of the seven-pointed star, and took on the stance of the goddess behind her. The women’s chanting ended, and Father Crustok, now upon the last verses of the relevant passage, finished his recitation as Zar knelted, unmoving. When he recited the final line, he closed the book, and Bunson struck the gong another three times.

“Rise, O Mother of Passion,” Father Crustok declared. “You have found favor with me.” Zar obeyed, slowly rising out of her kneeling position, keeping as gracefully as she could to the movements she had learned. She turned to face him. “Throw off now your robes that I may see you. Throw off now your mask that I may know you.” Zar inhaled deeply, a nervous energy on
the verge of escaping. Though nearly imperceptible, she hesitated, but in compliance to what she knew she had to do, she undid the belt around her waist and dropped the robe about her. Now naked, she fought the need to shiver as the eastern ocean winds glided through the temple.

“Come now, my child, into covenant with me, and all fall away as the night taketh the world.”

The ring of the priests and priestesses stepped back from the encircled star and moved to the front of the sanctuary. Though she could not look, Zar knew they had turned to look east with the goddess statue. She knew also that despite Morga’s best attempts not to, she would be crying.

Encircling the statue were two sets of stairs, one to each side. They rose up only a few feet, meeting a dais behind the statue which held a number of candelabras and long, thin tables on which rested the bowls of the offering, the sacred texts and trinkets for ceremonial use. Zar and Father Crustok stepped onto the dais. They passed the tables and candelabras to retreat behind a large, long curtain. Zar looked upon it before she disappeared with Father Crustok behind its folds. The Circle of Divinity was embroidered onto its fabric, gold overtop red. Zar’s head craned up to look at it as she neared the right edge of the curtain. The Circle narrowed in her vision as she neared the edge of the curtain, and when she finally passed through the edge of the curtain into the space beyond, the Circle thinned into nothing, and the space of the sanctuary disappeared, giving way to the Cave of Trials. She had never been here before.

There, in the space behind the curtain, a small hallway ran for a short distance before revealing three rooms. Small torches lit the space. The left room, Zar knew, was for sacrifices and other offerings. The right room was where the temple’s gold was locked away. Two massive padlocks, both of them bigger than Zar’s hand, confirmed this.

The third room was the Inner Sanctum. It’s door, unlike the other two which were brown, was painted red. A golden knob was its only decoration, molded to look like seven serpent heads
coming out of the door and spiraling into a circle. Father Crustok, with whom Zar was keeping pace to maintain the symmetry of the ritual, advanced ahead of her as they reached the door. He turned the knob and pushed the door inward. “Come, Arethelos, into the Serpent’s chamber,” he said.

Zar saw past him into the room. Everything was red. Drapery, cushions, candles, even the walls. All red.

“Child,” Father Crustok said. His face, which was at once softer, now showed clear impatience.

Zar hesitated. Something was different. Something was off. Something didn’t feel right.

She was all here now, the imagined mountain of the gods forgotten in a moment. The physical stress of the dance was newly felt, but it didn’t worry her. The sweat that suddenly beaded on her forehead didn’t bother her either. But Father Crustok’s face, something between stern and demanding and excited, worried her. All that red worried her.

“Zar,” came Father Crustok’s harsh whisper. “Get in the room.”

“Um.” She remembered herself and inched past Father Crustok. Crimson carpet met her weary feet. More small torches, these stained red as well, gave the sense of warmth. Or they should have. Zar couldn’t help but feel that she was in something’s mouth.

Father Crustok entered. He shut the door and latched it. “Well,” he said. He moved past Zar, lightly stepping between cushions and couches, stepping up three short steps onto another raised dais, and finally stopping at what Zar had just realized was a large mattress. There were no torches near it. Father Crustok, whose own robe was red, blended into the scene. “Enough waiting,” Father Crustok said. He gestured towards the mattress.
Zar had pictured this moment ten-thousand times. She had been given descriptions of this room, this moment, from all twenty-two other women for more than half of the fifteen years she had been alive. *Let your body be here, but let your mind be elsewhere.* But where? Where could you send your thoughts to justify this moment? To some bleak mountain top where you can only hope that the gods will hear you? To the Sea? To the times when this rite of passage wasn’t about to happen? It worked for the dancing and for all the hours of practice leading up to that time, but what now?

Zar watched herself walk forward. She weaved around the same cushions and the same couches, and she stepped up at the same place where Crustok had. “Oh don’t be so dour about it,” Father Crustok said. “Smile for gods’ sakes. Kneel.” Zar did, and Father Krustok stood before her.

As he began to disrobe, Zar gave effort again to letting her mind be elsewhere. She saw her mother’s face, first smiling, and then crying. She saw the faces of other women. Mabel, Anavere, Cass, Meandra, Juliander. And all of them seemed to look at her as though she were but a child to them. She saw mornings in the temple courtyard. Mornings in the market. The image of the temple bell tower against the open sky, like a needle pointed to the All-God’s smug, distant face. The sound of shorehawks squawking in hunt. Cutting onions. Rinsing plates. Reciting poetry. Holding a pen as she wrote her letters. The shapes of trees. Clouds. Wind. Stars. Night. Morning. Someone’s laughter. Summer heat. Winter cold. Wintery forests. Wintery mountains. Snowy mountain tops, pointing to the sky just like the bell tower. Pointing to some face, some glow-eyed, unmoving visage made of the grey lines between grey clouds and the grey blanks where clouds revealed only a higher, paler overcast twilight.
A face that saw all and felt nothing. A face that watched now as Zar received her “blessing” from Father Crustok like scraps tossed to a dog. A face that never blinked and never needed to. A face closer to stone than to flesh.

It was not the Initiation, Zar realized, that ultimately twisted her stomach. It was the way the gods, and the All-God with them, gave no heed about it, either before or since. It was their silence. It was their hiding.
Chapter 1

The city slept, reaching the first hours of the dawn, the chill quiet hours in which nothing stirs and the air stills to a hush long enough for the dew to deposit itself onto the stray weeds and isolated bushes creeping out between cracked bricks and squares of unpaved soil that dotted the city’s pathways. The first glow of morning loomed ahead, and already the heights of the governor’s palace revealed their gilded emblems at being kissed by the sun’s rays. A twilight hue colored the wooden walls and beaten dirt paths which lined New Malinsburg. Nothing made noise, save for the faint cries of the shorehawks arching into the sky, as they did, when the sun was just about to peak over the crest of the horizon. Nothing else moved, and even the night guards, heavy clad with shining steel, rested wearily at their posts, half-hunched over or asleep altogether. The market, which would soon vibrate with life, lay vacant, and the streets, waiting to be filled with the day’s traffic, rested unburdened.

But when the sun finally pressed into the morning sky, a white line against the dark edge of the Zophian Sea, there came the day’s first true awakening. A temple bell, large, crafted from the finest bronze, and banded with Uthian cedar bars, swung once, then twice, and then, on the third drop, struck against the hammer within. There came the morning’s first call to awaken, a sound as deep as a mountain, reverberating with the steadiness of breathing. The whole city could hear it. It was the earliest bell to sound that day.

New Malinsburg would now, almost with one mind, begin to rise into the new day. Zar, however, was already awake. She didn’t know if she had slept, and even if she had, her dreams
would have been cut from the same cloth as the thoughts that kept her up: She turned seventeen years old today, and custom was to save a portion of that Sunday’s sacrifice (a young calf freshly slaughtered two days prior) for a celebration later. For the other temple dwellers, this meant a good feast. For Zar it meant reciting scripture while the feast grew cold.

Earlier, she had sat on the stone floor beneath the bell tower for what she calculated was an hour, waiting for the night to end, holding her legs close to her chest as she looked out over the empty sanctuary, counting the rows of empty pews and the unlit candelabras that stood next to the outer end of each one. Her thoughts, like the great incense bowls swinging ever so slightly above, oscillated, moving from the stream of memories leading up to this moment now and the string of days that would follow after. She didn’t move in that hour, but when she could take the swelling in her mind no longer, she stood, fighting the stiff numbness of her legs, and climbed the bell tower ladder. It was a long climb; the floor of the bell tower was a full one-hundred feet up. But it was better than nothing. In two shoves, she had driven open the ladder hatch. The air was instantly cooler, and she was all the more awakened. Welcomed by the breeze, gentle though it was, she stood like stone, watching the hazy fog of morning until the first light rose over the curve of the world. She had a clear view from the bell tower to the ocean, impossibly large and impressively serene. The bell tower, at its highest point, stood one-hundred and twenty feet above ground. From there the world seemed containable. Understandable. And something like hope pierced the long boring hours of her waiting. It mixed in with the dreariness of her impending morning chores and evening duties, but all the same, she somehow felt better.

Above her hung the Bell of Arethelos. The wind through its wheel and headstock assembly whistled and moaned, the sound lilting and lulling with the fluctuating force of the wind. Feeling inspired, she sized up the rope system that hung from the wheel, stepped onto the
small wall at the edge of the tower, measured the distance between herself and the rope, and leaped forward. She grabbed onto the rope, gripping tight and yanking down as hard as she could. The bell lurched, first once, then twice, and then on the third swing, the clapper slammed against the great bronze bell, and the blast resounded.

The sound was louder than she anticipated, but it wasn’t unwelcome. In fact, the sheer disruption afforded by the sound was refreshing. For this moment in time, it was the only thing that mattered. It commanded the space, the whole world, and even the waves did not drown out the sound of this bellowing. She let the bell blast a full seven times before grabbing the rope and working against the bell’s swing. Seven times was all that was supposed to be allowed. Arethelos was the seventh deity in the Circle of Divinity, Goddess of the Seventh Month, and Keeper of the Seventh Understanding, that of Passion. This being the month of Septulos, the seventh month, Arethelos’ bell was to be wrung as the city’s first call to awaken, the other temple bells following suit each hour thereafter.

Zar did not know the time off the top of her head, but she didn’t care. The bell was rung, and it could not be unrung. Bringing the swing of the great bell to an effective halt, Zar again peered out over the Zophian Sea, sitting atop the low wall on the eastern end of the bell tower, one leg dangling down, watching only the constant motion of the waves and the swinging flight patterns of the shorehawks. After some time, Zar heard her mother call her from below, and Zar, broken from her concentration, hurried down the ladder chute.

Her mother, head in hand, waited for her on the nearest pew, dressed only in her night gown. Zar said nothing, only standing still.

“Why, Zar?” Morga asked.

“What do you mean?”
“You rang the bell more than half an hour early.”

“No one cares.”

“The priests and temple workers do.”

Zar felt suddenly tired. She sat in the nearest pew, some feet from her mother. She folded her arms and rested her head back against the top of the pew. “I’ve been yelled at before.”

“It’s just your birthday. You don’t need to be reckless.”

“Why not?”

Morga groaned. She slid down the length of the pew, joining her daughter just beside her. Already light was beginning to inch its way in through the open windows. “It’ll go easier if you let it happen. Just let it be another day.”

“It’s not another day.”

“I know it seems that way, but things make sense when days are just days. The only importance you need to give to it is when you recite your verses. Let it be a day.”

Zar knew what her mother meant, always prescribing stoicism as a means of surviving the day. Service to Arethelos demanded it. It was how they dealt with the temple rituals, with the priests’ nagging and the unruly worshippers. And it worked. Zar knew it did. “I want it to be a good day.”

“It will be a good day.”

Zar leaned forward, propped up by her elbows on her knees. “It will either be a stressful day or a day like any other day.”

“Aren’t the other days good days?” Zar felt Morga’s hand on her head, slowly running her fingers through her hair.
“I suppose.” Zar studied the familiar grain of the wood in the pews, tracing the scratches and chipped grooves. The light, now filtering into the sanctuary, light as silk, highlighted the gold and amber of the wood’s stain. It gave the impression that time had stopped, that time was stale. The floor, a stone-tiled assortment meant to replicate the Circle of the Divines in the center and a flowery array of filigree elsewhere, also betrayed its grooves and chips and scratches. And if you looked at it long enough, even the statue of Arethelos was that way. It was much nicer than everything else around it, but it too revealed the wear and burden of years spent merely existing.

“You’re worried about something else,” Morga said.

She was right. Zar’s head bent lower. “Mabel.”

Morga straightened, looking around. He rubbed her thighs, like her legs were asleep. But she answered directly. “I figured as much. But you shouldn’t be that worried.”

“And why not?”

“You came about the same way. And you’re still here, doing well.”

Zar sat up. “Well, I haven’t died yet.”

“Don’t say stupid things. You have a good life.”

“As a prostitute.”

“A well fed, healthy, protected priestess.”

“Hmm.”

“Look, Mabel will be just fine. Her pregnancy is coming along as well as can be expected. The priests see her every day.”

“I’m so glad they care.” Zar folded her arms.

“Zar, they do care.”
“They care about another ass to sell.”

Morga rubbed her forehead, then her face, then her temples. “Zar, I can’t tell you what you want to hear. All of us want for her what we want for ourselves. But I can tell you that while she works for the temple, she will be safe and taken care of. It’s a lot more than a lot of other women can say, pregnant or otherwise.”

Zar left her mother’s words unchallenged. “You’re right. Again.”

“I’m always right.”

Zar laughed. “Sure.”

From the back end of the sanctuary came Father Crustok’s voice. “What are you doing?”

Both women looked up to find him and a number of the other priests marching fast down the left-most aisle towards them, their red robes alive with indignation. If his voice didn’t reveal his anger enough, his face certainly did. “The bell was rung too early,” he said, glaring at Zar. “They tell me it was you.”

Zar said nothing. Morga answered for her. “She wanted to please the goddess.”

Father Crustok, who had stopped just next to Zar, held his arms akimbo and hunched forward so he could better judge Zar’s soul for all his worth. “She wanted to please the goddess. Woman-” he looked at Morga “-if the goddess were pleased with Zar’s stupidity, I’m sure she would have cured the headache I have because of it.” He looked back to Zar. “Look at me.”

Zar refused. She held her head in one hand and picked at a particularly large cavity in the wood of the pew in front of her.

“Look at me,” he repeated, and he grabbed her chin, twisting her head forcibly to face him.

“Father,” Morga said, repressing a shout.
He shot her another look. “Morga, I won’t stand for it.” He brought his face closer to Zar’s. “And you. Since clearly the wisdom of Arethelos isn’t in you as abundantly as it should be, you’ll meditate on your transgression by fasting in place of eating.” He released Zar’s chin and looked to Father Aldos next to him. “See to it. Tell Gob not to feed her.” Father Aldos left for the refectory.

“Father, that’s outrageous,” Morga said.

“Morga, I swear on the very ground-”

“Don’t you remember what today is?”

“It…” Father Crustok stopped. He sighed, brushing down his robe. His face softened and he remembered himself. “It is the day of Zar’s birth. I know.” He looked out the window, conflicted, and then at Zar. “Fine, you may eat, since today is your birthday. I’ll tell Gob myself.” He turned to leave, but stopped just as soon as he started. “However, I’d be a fool not to teach you some lesson. You’ll join in preparing for the morning services on top of your usual duties, whatever they are this rotation. And you.” He looked at Morga, a pinch of menace returning to his visage. “You will take extra care in teaching your daughter how to respect this temple and those in service to it.”

“Yes, Father. Thank-you, Father.” She bowed. Father Crustok nodded in affirmation and then looked to Zar. If only not to provoke his anger again, Zar rose and bowed as well. He waited. Zar inwardly groaned but did as she was expected. “My apologies for my insolence Father. Thank-you for showing mercy.”

Father Crustok again placed his hand on her chin, but this time much gentler. He lifted her head, prompting her to stand tall again. “Ah, child. You have much to learn, but you are young. Now come.” Father Crustok again headed off towards the utility rooms to fetch the
necessary implements for the ceremony, and Zar fell into line behind him and the other priest, Father Jasto.

She turned to face her mother for a moment, though, and gave a look that said as best it could how pissed she was. Morga pursed her lips and nodded: yes, *he is an ass*. Zar rubbed her chin and turned again to follow the others.

Fortunately, Cass was also tasked with assisting in the preparations for the morning’s services. Father Crustok tasked them with setting up the dais, long tables, and the holy instruments that were placed on them as well as saying a blessing over each item in recognition of the mercies and blessings of Arethelos.

Unless they were watched, neither one spoke any of the blessings.

The first thing Zar and Cass would do was to drape the dais tables with the ceremonial table cloths, so each of them grabbed a cloth from the utility rooms and left the priests to their business. Once they were sure they were out of earshot, Zar and Cass quit their silence. “Gob said that you won’t be eating breakfast with us later,” Cass said. Zar left her cloth on the southern table to help Cass unfold and place the cloth on the northern.

“He later took back his threat, but only after Morga argued with him.”

“Surprising.” Cass paused and bent down as she eyeballed the length of each side of the cloth hanging from the table. While she cared for propriety only as much as Zar did, she was a stickler for symmetry. “He was livid when he burst into our quarters. He was threatening to have someone flogged.”

“He’s a pushover.”

“For today, at least.”

“What, because it’s my birthday?”
“Why not?” Cass seemed satisfied with the symmetry of the cloth and stood.

They moved to the south table. Zar glanced to the southern hall, but it didn’t seem that any of the priests would suddenly pop out to catch them insulting Father Crustok. “Do you think he cares about anyone’s birthday around here? Maybe his own, but that’s it.” Zar unfolded the cloth, handing one end to Cass.

“You know he cares more than that. He’s not completely awful.”

“Doubtful.”

“You’re just upset about this morning.”

Zar stopped. “I’ve been upset my whole damn life.” For a stretch of time, she refused to move but finally leaned on the table, both arms stiff and tense.

Cass came to her. She lifted Zar off the table and turned her shoulders until they were square with her own. “I believe it.”

“I’m not crying, if that’s what you wanted.”

Cass pulled Zar in, embracing her. “Not unless you want to.”

Zar scoffed, but she hugged Cass back. “Maybe later.”

“Fair enough.” Cass pulled back and picked up the tablecloth again, as did Zar, and they began again to place the cloth “I’d cry if I had to recite verses tonight.”

“Yeah, half of the fourth canto of the Trial of Arethelos and chapters nine and ten of The Wisdom of the All-Mother.”

“Gods be damned.” Cass shook her head. “He makes them longer every time.” Again, Cass examined the symmetry of their work. She nodded, and headed for the southern hall.

Zar followed. “I’ve been practicing the reading at night. I don’t think anything will come of it. It’s not the longest thing I’ve had to memorize for a recitation.”
“Still, what’s even the point? It’s not like Arethelos ever gave a shit. All these years, and not a single sign that she’s even around.”

“Well, I don’t know what that means exactly. Does that mean Arethelos doesn’t exist?” Cass stopped just before the utility room. “Why believe in what has never shown itself?” “I’m not saying-” Zar looked down the hall. Still good. “I’m not saying Arethelos is real. But maybe something is.”

“Something.”

“Maybe.”

“Well when something shows itself, I’ll give it some more thought.” Cass found the collection and ceremonial bowls in their cupboards and handed a stack of them to Zar while she grabbed the candle sticks and lanterns. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what? You’ve been a priestess for five years now.”

“I’ve been a temple prostitute for five years now. I’ve never considered myself a priestess.”

“Even so, you’ve studied. We’ve all studied. You know what answers are given for things.”

“I know the stories, sure, but what are those?”

“Aren’t they something?”

“I don’t know.” They reached the tables again, and Cass, ever the perfectionist, made certain the candles and lanterns were placed equally apart and equidistant from the edges of the table. “I think,” said Cass, measuring here and there with her hands and eyes, “that apart from stories I have yet to see any god move.”

“I can’t say you’re wrong.”
Cass smirked. “That’s usually how it goes.”

“Do you think any of the priests doubt the gods?”

“No, not really. They have the option of leaving. They can go off and be craftsmen if they wanted to. They know how to read, and the law wouldn’t punish them for acting independently. They don’t have to live here and do this. They stay because they want to. We stay because the law doesn’t see fit to let former priestesses live in peace.”

“But even then. What if one of them doubts? What if he stays because he’s comfortable?”

They had finished, though Zar waited for Cass to check the placement of the bowls.

“I suppose it’s possible. It’s more believable than any of the gods.”

“That’s true.” Zar felt the volume of her voice dropping while Cass’s remained level and certain. “It’s just… I don’t know.”

“Zar, since when were you ever really a believer?”

Zar thought back to the string of thoughts and beliefs she had considered herself to subscribe to, as organized or unorganized as they were. “I don’t know if I ever was.”

“So why start now?”

“I’m not saying I am. It’s still a question for me.”

“Fair enough. Let’s see…” Cass surveyed the dais space. “We still have to hang the candles, and we still have to lay out the rugs.”

“And we need to set out the incense and polish the gong.”

Cass sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “If there were any gods, the least they could do is be less picky about their ceremonies.” They headed back again to the utility room to retrieve the remaining items. And all the while they talked, going back and forth between
discussing temple workers, the weather, the produce sold at the market and whatever else came up between them.

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The morning’s ceremonial rituals were performed as they usually were. First, chanting the Rites of Awakening. Then the Prayer for the Attainment of Wisdom, then the Song of the Great Circle, and so forth. The women performed them as they usually did, dancing in their circle with twirls and the clinking of bracelets and brooches, while the men recited, in monotone, the numbered verses and lines that came with the morning’s practices. Zar, for her part, could enjoy the dancing. It was simple compared to other yearly rituals and feasts. And after so many years performing it, she knew it instinctively enough to let her mind wander. During those parts of the service when the women needed to speak, responding to this or that pastoral call from the men, words would form by themselves, it seemed, as Zar’s tongue moved to speak them. The routine nature of the whole thing afforded a moment’s respite from the otherwise tumultuous buzz of the morning hours. With noon came the day’s first reprieve.

Also with noon came the day’s first patrons. Most came when they knew the sermon itself would be taught, wanting to be entertained by stories from the collection of Trials. However, some believers did come early, shuffling in with all the weight and weariness of self-denial. Having been in the service of the goddess all her life, Zar understood the subtle power of routine, the ways that repetition could mold a person. Still, she questioned why people would come so early when no one, not even the Emperor, required them to. Being Tuesday, the day’s rituals were not as lengthy as they would be on Sunday, and there was benefit in routine, yes, but
what of this routine? Why this tedious listening, this unrewarding adherence? Wasn’t belief enough? But then, what if the belief was that the service offered more than just words? Zar wasn’t sure, and she didn’t care to think about it more.

She found something else to occupy her thoughts with anyway. During the Prayer to the All-Father, the masculine half of the All-Being’s nature (another metaphysical oddity in the Circle of the Twelve that Zar contended with), there entered two men, and it was instantly observable that one of them had never been there before. Zar’s dancing prevented her from keeping an eye on the pair consistently, but when her stance and movements allowed her, she monitored them as closely as she could.

The stranger was robed in what would nearly have been all black, save for the blue-dyed trim around the edges of his garment and a leather satchel. The quality of the material was unquestionably high-grade, and it was matched only by the foreign nature with which the stranger sauntered, often stopping to view this or that, through the sanctuary. His companion, if he wasn’t in actuality, at least appeared to be much poorer. A plain leather vest over a simple woolen shirt and trousers to match. Still, it was obvious that he had been present for more than one service. A life-time goer, Zar guessed, though she was certain he had never received “blessings” from her before. Maybe he was new to New Malinsburg even if he was familiar with the religion.

The rich stranger would often get the attention of his companion, pointing to artwork on the walls or perhaps to the general arrangement of the sanctuary, and, Zar presumed, ask some question about why things were the way they were. Even if he didn’t indicate anything in particular, he almost never stopped talking. His companion kept up the dialogue though. god
bless him. The details behind the symbology of the temple imagery, though Zar knew them thoroughly, were as boring as a legal document.

The two sat down in one of the north end pews, which, because of Zar’s position in the circle of women, gave her a better perspective than if they had chosen the other side. They weren’t too close that it would be obvious she was watching them either. Other patrons, each one as unremarkable as the last, steadily kept sauntering in, in ones or twos, filling spaces, assuming either a posture of lying back to take in the view or drawing circles on their chests and folding their hands to mutter prayers. But Zar’s view remained relatively unobstructed. Throughout the entire service, she watched the two, particularly the robed one. It helped that he wasn’t hard to look at.
Chapter 2

Despite his better judgment, Brandur decided he’d entertain Gurst’s wishes. He hadn’t been to a temple service in years. Not since his mother passed. Who knows, maybe it would turn out beneficial. The two of them rode together on a wagon sent by Brandur’s father. They had crossed the Ibenes River into the Pit, the poorer, west half of New Malinsburg. The subtle stench which wafted faintly in the air on the eastern side of the river was now much more pungent, and the general disarray of the Pit--uneven cobbles, broken in doors, and always a poor soul or two hobbling around, seemingly aimlessly--all became much more apparent. Gurst wasn’t a great fan of the Pits’s conditions.

“I wish we could have just rode ourselves,” Gurst said. He took a swig from a bottle of Selwain wine he brought alone as an offering. Just as soon as he put the bottle down, he plucked a small stone lying in the corner of the wagon, accidentally left by some stable hand, no doubt, and chucked it forward. It nearly struck a woman who was shuffling away from their approach. The stone skittered off the cobbles into an unknown cranny. “Bah,” Gust said. He took another swig.

Brandur put a firm hand on Gurst’s arm. “Don’t be an ass. I requested a wagon so we wouldn’t look completely pretentious. I don’t want them to feel judged.”

“They?” Gurst asked. The warning hadn’t fazed him at all.

“The poor folk.”
“Ah. You don’t want the poor folk to feel judged. Is that why you’re wearing your University robes? Mink fur, isn’t it?”

Brandur rolled his eyes. “I also want them to know I come from the University,” he said, patting his healer’s satchel on his lap. “Healers are rare here and there are plenty sick folk here who are in need of one.”

“The ones that don’t honor the Twelve.”

“Oh please. You don’t think we’ll find any ailing people in the whole of the temple?”

“Not if they really believe.”

Gurst sounded so sure of himself that Brandur decided it would only ruin things to continue debating. He folded his arms, leaning back against the bench. “Feldor, how much longer until we’re there, and will we be late?”

Feldor, navigating a turn, waited until the horses could trot straight before answering. “A third of an hour, I’d say, sir. You’ll be plenty on time.”

“For the beginning of service?”

“Oh the beginning. I thought you just meant the sermon. That’s the only part that matters anyway.”

“Hey,” Gurst said. “Watch your tongue, boy. Don’t disrespect the temple.”

“Well,” Feldor returned, “If you’re really worried about time, you could always run there. You can see the bell tower from here, sure enough, and you can leg it faster anyways. The roadways are too jumbly here to go much faster than this. Might break a wheel.”

“Oh for gods’ sakes,” Brandur said. “Fine. We’ll get there when we get there.”

“Didn’t think you were so eager to arrive,” Gurst said. “One might think you actually cared.”
Ahead of them, through a stretch of stucco-covered homes, ripped awnings, and kicked up clouds of dust, a myriad collection of people wandered the streets. Some powered on, some meandered slowly and quietly. Others stopped for talk, and others sat outside of their homes surrounded by the makings of makeshift shops. And all of them looked more or less beleaguered by their own lives. “I do care, Gurst. I care about healing. That’s why I’m a healer. The whole point is to heal. And the temple is the best place I can go to to find people who need healing.”

“Sick people go because they know the Twelve will heal them, if they seek for Wisdom.”

“In my experience, people go where there is hope.”

“Right, to the Twelve.”

“Well then how about this. The Twelve heal whom they want to, and I heal the rest.”

“Suppose I can’t argue with that, now can I? Though you’d be usurping the Twelve in their role as healers. Can’t say I like that too much.”

“When you were in the Northern Army, did you ever break a bone.”

“Well sure I did. Broke this arm.” Gurst lifted his right arm and pulled his sleeve back. “Right there, where that fucking mace smashed my bones up. The one bone came through right there, poking out into the free air.” He pointed to a long line running through the mottled skin when the mace had landed. “Hurt like fucking hell.” He lowered his arm, only to raise it again, bottle in hand, to take a draught.

“So did a priest heal that or a healer?”


“Well.”

“With the blessing of Oridiach.”
“So then, I’ll heal with the blessing of...” He lost whatever name it was this deity went by. He knew it started with an ‘A.’

Gurst rubbed his face. “You don’t even know.”

“That’s part of the partnership, learning things I don’t already know.”

“As if your head needed to get any bigger.”

“It’s not my fault healing requires a lot of learning.”

“It is your fault when you flaunt it.”

“I wasn’t flaunting it.”

“So you admit you have a big head.”

Brandur grunted. “Nevermind it. Point is, I’ll be able to operate as a healer out of the temple. If they don’t want me there, I’ll go elsewhere, but I’m not abandoning the people of this city.”

“Well, I suppose that compassion is a part of the Wisdom of the Twelve, so it is a good thing.”

“At last,” Brandur said, grabbing the bottle of wine from Gurst. He ignored the latter’s small protest, and gulped down a glass’ worth. “Something we can agree on.” He wiped his mouth, returned the bottle, and resigned himself to as comfortable a position as he could find.

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The temple was bigger than Brandur would have first guessed it to be. On the outside it was rather ominous in size, as though a goddess really were housed there, but on the inside, the temple’s size was even more apparent. Light, now streaming in through pyramid-shaped
windows in the ceiling, refracted the light in such a way that the whole of the temple seemed to
glow, as though the ever-rising sun had no ceiling to bypass at all. And the array of colors
afforded by the stained glass designs threw a veritable rainbow about the room.

Soon the stained glass windows themselves took Brandur’s focus. The sanctuary proper
was dominated by ten windows, five on either side, which showed, Brandur guessed, the various
Trials the gods had to endure. As they began down the aisle between the rows of pews, Brandur
tugged at Gurst’s vest. “I thought there were twelve Divines.”

“There are twelve, you fool.” The alcohol had begun to take effect. Gurst’s words were a
combination of needless aggression and soft slurring. “The first god is there.” He pointed directly
above them. A large pyramid frame of window panes, all of them decorated in a stained glass
pattern, pointed upward through the ceiling. This acted, Brandur understood, as the first part of
the twelve Wisdoms, Initiation. He didn’t need Gurst to explain the rest of the set up. That ten
gods were presented by the other windows in the walls was obvious. And at the other end of the
sanctuary, where the great hall’s ceiling arched up into a dome just above the statue, another
glass structure, at the dome’s zenith, must represent Unity, the final deity’s wisdom, and indeed
the final deity himself. O’on, the twelfth of the Twelve, and the name of the All-Being itself, was
a “god beyond the gods,” as he mother put it. It was one of the few details Brandur knew of his
mother’s faith.

“Isn’t the All-being supposed to be both genders,” Brandur asked as they made their way
through the rows of pews, “so as the whole of humanity could claim it as its deity?”

“Yeah.” Gurst took another drink from his wine bottle and, thankfully, plugged the cork
back in. “Yeah.”

“Huh. And which of these Twelve oversees inebriation?”
“Oh, fuck off.”

“I don’t believe that phrase is appropriate for temple conduct.”

Gurst didn’t respond. He found a spot among the pews that suited him for whatever reason, and took his seat, which was of some relief to Brandur as Gurst’s gait had begun to wobble. Brandur sat himself beside Gurst, setting his satchel on the other side of him. He straightened out his robe and folded his arms. “So, what now?”

“We pray.” Gurst, with his right index finger, drew a circle on his chest and folded his hands. He leaned forward in as much a pose of obeisance as Brandur had ever seen him take, his elbows on his knees and his forehead resting on his hands.”

“And what do we pray about?”

“I’m sure you’re smart enough to think of something,” Gurst muttered.

Brandur looked around. Half of the people gathered—about one-hundred, he estimated—were as deep in prayer as Gurst. The other half merely watched and listened. Deciding that a divine mind would, supposedly, know better than he would what he ought to pray for, he contented himself to watch the ceremony. Besides, if it mattered, prayer could be performed at any time. The ceremony seemed more pressing.

He counted the women. Twelve of them danced. He knew there were more than twelve women who worked in the temple, but, of course, the numerical themes had to be maintained. The men present numbered twelve as well, which made sense.

As for what they were singing and chanting about, that was a different matter. “Gurst, what are they singing?”

Gurst moaned and shook his head, but otherwise kept to his praying pose. “We’re in the prayer to the All-Father now. And then the All-Mother, and then the All-Being.”
“Lovely.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

Brandur tried his best to listen. The sheer volume of the sanctuary made hearing the words difficult, but the priests’ enunciations were sharp enough. Even so, the prayer was uninspired at best and plain boring at worst. Much of it revolved around offering this or that superlative to the All-Father. The rest was simply a collection of thanks for things typically masculine in nature: strength, perseverance, justice, and so forth and so on. It wasn’t hard to figure out that the next segment, the Prayer to the All-Mother, would be the same thing regurgitated into its feminine equivalent. More accolades given, more thanks given.

The All-Being Prayer had to be something different though. Perhaps supplication? Based on the All-Being’s omnipotence? Brandur couldn’t be sure, and he couldn’t be made to care enough to find out. The singing itself was, at least, pleasant to listen to, and the dancers danced well.

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It wasn’t until the sermon was finished that either Brandur or Gurst spoke. Gurst, during the Collection of Sacraments, as Brandur later learned it was called, finished his praying to give up his bottle of wine. He took one final drink though, before handing a bottle one third full to the attendant priest at the end of the aisle. After that he sat up, and both of them observed in silence, neither saying a word through the rest of the ceremonies and the sermon. Gurst was the first to speak when Father Crustok finished his lesson. “Just a few more minutes until the whole thing comes to an end. Well, at least the ceremony parts. What did you think?”
Brandur, brought back from the mild trance the sermonizing had put him in, shifted in his seat and cracked his neck. “I think Father Crustok is an intelligent man.”

“What a surprise, a man like you thinking anyone else is intelligent.”

“You’re an ass when you’re drunk.”

“You’re an ass when you’re sober.”

Brandur ignored the jab. “I think the priest knows a lot. That he’s studied and read. I don’t agree with half of what he says, but he teaches with the same sort of charisma as the University instructors do. It sounds the same, at least.”

“He’s decently educated. Wonder if he grew up in the Perch.” East Haven, better known as the Perch, was the richer east half of the city. “Or maybe somewhere else rich. Idiots around here don’t know shit.”

“I could point out that that’s why they come to the temple, but I’ll hold my tongue.”

“You’re an ass.”

The priests left their positions on the dais and came down to the sanctuary floor with the women. The women stopped dancing, and each waited for a priest to take her to the side of the sanctuary where the minor sanctums lay.

“Now what?” Brandur asked.

“Now the fun part.” He stood up and belched and then began shuffling out of the pews. Brandur remained seated, uncertain of what was about to happen, but when he looked at the way the dancers stood by the men and how the male half of the room began drifting towards the nearest dancer, he realized what was taking place.

He followed after Gurst, more perturbed than he thought he would be. “You’re going to sleep with one of them?”
Gurst ignored him, but Brandur pressed the question. “Yes, I’m going to sleep with...with one. What else do you do with them?” The full force of the wine had caught up with him; he was more drunk than before. “How else am I supposed to get a blessing? From the priest?” He smiled wildly, his face red from wine, and laughed curtly at his own joke.

Brandur followed him only as far as the end of the pew. There he leaned against the pew’s side (pushing aside the candelabra), arms folded in mild astonishment. If Gurst wanted to sleep with a temple prostitute, then who was Brandur to stop him? Yet he found himself frowning, and not merely from annoyance.

Gurst managed to calm himself enough to approach a priest and dancer, a young elf woman. Brandur was surprised there wasn’t a line of men waiting, but he supposed most came during the night services. Gurst wasn’t so patient, apparently. Not while drunk, anyway. He was now speaking with the priest. Brandur couldn’t hear every word they were saying, but it was clear the priest was a little off put by Gurst’s behavior. Brandur decided to ignore it, though. He had other matters to attend to, namely speaking with Father Crustok. A quick look around revealed that he wasn’t among those priests standing with the dancers; someone must have taken his place. He didn’t think finding the priest would be hard, however. He was here somewhere. The hard part would be convincing him that a partnership with the University, or at least with Brandur, would be beneficial for the residents of the city.

The fact of the matter was that the people of the Perch did their utter best to ignore the people of the Pit, only a few interactions notwithstanding. Beyond simple trading and governmental concerns, the wealthy elite of the city did not want to interact with those in the poorer parts, and as a result the poor were often the subject of a host of diseases and ailments: improperly set broken bones, pox diseases of various sorts, infections, coughs, intestinal
diseases, and some sicknesses not yet fully understood. All this despite having the region's best healers.

The reason was that the Perch was dominated by humans, and humans did not take kindly to the other races, which composed the Perch. There were few exceptions. An orcish jewel smith in the Perch, say, or a human merchant in the Pit, and only a handful of other deviations from the norm. Otherwise the break between the two social spheres was strongly held. By both sides.

The University, however, saw things a bit differently, namely because of recent breakthroughs in the study of the brain. Each race had its anatomical and biological differences from the others. There were different prescribed diets for each, different ways in which muscle tissues worked, different explanations for appearances and body composition, different life expectancies and different epidemiological concerns. However, the brains between them all were surprisingly similar. Structure, size, chemical make up: every factor was shared between the species as far as their brains were concerned.

If anything, the similarity was alarming. Brandur watched several students, some of them close friends of his, walk out of lecture halls and professors’ quarters in disgust and unbelief. To be fair, most economic systems operated with the understanding that one race did this and another race did that and so forth. Religion, social rules, cultural traditions, and nearly everything else worked by the understanding that certain races behaved in certain ways. Why that was was not yet fully grasped. Race, of course--one race’s expectations of another race--was the blanket answer for the question, but why goblins were expected to be thieves or why most blacksmiths were orcs--those sort of distinctions--were hard questions to provide answers for. History, economics, politics--they all played a part of that answer, and no one had quite put it together yet.
But the brains, as far as Brandur had studied them, were all the same. Professor Zollaar, who had spearheaded the study of the potential differences between the brain structures of the races, was himself shocked by the uniformity. At least he had the discernment to continue his studies. Half of his protégés left upon realizing the depth—and implications—of the discovery. His continued experiments, which would involve the introduction of the electrical element, would, Brandur guessed, only show more similarities. Any differences then found between the brains of one race and that of another would be no more significant than the difference found between two brains of people belonging to the same race.

Because of these newfound discoveries, the University instructors sought to recognize the potential for race integration. Trolls could indeed be taught to do higher level math. Goblins could indeed become skilled musicians. Orcs could indeed become leaders of great renown. And Brandur wanted to see a world like that come about. But it couldn’t come about if they were claimed by pox. The irony was that most of the deadlier diseases were easily cured with the right potion. A brew made in a day could prevent the death of hundreds.

Brandur was brought out of his thoughts by a sudden door slam. He looked up to find the elven dancer that Gurst had been arranging to sleep with marching past the attendant priest. The priest grabbed her arm and spun her around. “What in her holy name is going on?”

The woman was livid. “This pig brought a knife.” She was holding her left hand with her right. Despite her white knuckled grip, blood seeped through her fingers, dripping steadily on the floor.

“What?” He turned to see Gurst stumble through the door, holding said knife.

“Wh- where you going, pretty?” Gurst’s face was flushed, and his pants were still halfway down his legs.
“Good gods on high,” Brandur said. He hustled to Gurst, but not before Gurst grabbed the robe sleeve of the priest. “She- she owes me a...a good…”

“I don’t owe you shit, you rat,” the women yelled.

Gurst reached for her as well. His hand landed on her shoulder. “Get off me,” the woman said. She raised her uninjured hand to slap him, but the priest grabbed her arm before she could.

“Zar, behave yourself,” the priest said jerking her back. He turned to Gurst with an equally dismissive remark. “Should have known you were too drunk to behave. You’ll have to leave.”

Gurst’s composure dropped instantly. “The fuck you mean? I paid the coins.” Gurst cracked his neck. He was gearing up to fight.

Brandur was quick though. He slammed Gurst against the door, holding his forearm against Gurst’s upper chest. He held back from pressing it into his neck. “Don’t fucking ruin this.” From behind came several gasps and the hurried steps of several feet.

“Pretty boy thinks he can fight?” Gurst asked mockingly.

“My father didn’t raise a wimp.”

Gurst glared and his voice dropped to a menacing whisper. “I could snap you in half.”

“Touch me and my father will have to you in prison.”

“Always running to daddy.” Gurst raised the knife till it was only inches from Brandur’s eye.

“Don’t think for a moment I’d need him to deal with you.” Brandur backed off, but shoved Gurst aside. Gurst shuffled off with a smirk, picking up his drawers.

“What is this foolishness?” Father Crustok asked.
Brandur turned to find the Father just behind him. He straightened his robe and cleared his throat. “I am Brandur Reyan. I’m from the University. I’m the healer you have been corresponding with.” He bowed.

“And this...this is how you greet the temple?”

“My...companion, who will not be working with me in the future, was acting belligerent. I saw fit to admonish him.”

“ Fucking prick,” Gurst mumbled.

It was obvious that Father Crustok was straining to contain himself “This, this buffoon is drunk. And you brought him here.”

“He’s a believer. He wanted to show me the temple, and I was grateful for his assistance. Until now.”

By now a number of priests had gathered as well as other temple workers. In particular, a large, almost impossibly muscled Orc stood rather close to Gurst. He had the presence of mind to let keep his hands off of Gurst, but the tension was thick between them. “Watch yourself,” the Orc said. His hand rested on a rather long dagger holstered at his side.

“I could say the same, hog,” Gurst replied. It was a derogatory remark.

Brandur turned back to Gurst. “You will behave yourself. My father will hear about this, and he won’t be happy.” Gurst only scoffed.

“Regardless of your ability to control your own associates, you’ve caused quite the scene.” Father Crustok said. “It’s not something the Temple will forget for long.” Arms akimbo, Father Crustok pressed his face near to Brandur’s in demand for an answer.

Brandur had to think fast. But he was good at thinking fast, and just as good at composing himself under pressure. “You doubt I’m serious?”
“Yes! Yes I do. You’ve done more harm than good so far, bringing this ruffian here.”

Brandur calmed his voice. “Then let me show you how serious I am. Allow me to mend the woman’s hand. You’ll see how seriously I take my work then. And how seriously I take this temple.” He turned to the woman. “Miss.”

The woman, at once furious, became softer, but only just. “Well alright then. Heal me, healer.”

Brandur opened his robe and pulled out his own knife from off his belt. He slipped his right arm out of his robe sleeve and cut the sleeve off at the seam. “Show me your hand,” he said, holding out the sleeve. “We can use this as a bandage for now.” The woman held out her hand but kept her other hand over the cut. “Trust me,” Brandur said. The woman looked at him more intently than before, and then again at her hand. She quickly removed her right hand from her left and winced. Brandur didn’t hesitate. He wrapped her hand twice and tied a knot with the excess material. He smiled at her. “There.” She smiled back.

Father Crustok interrupted. “Well don’t do it all here, we have...business to conduct.”

“Fine then. I assume you have some room in here private enough for a medical examination?”

“Zar, you know where the infirmary is. Show him.”

Zar nodded and led the way.

“Wait,” Brandur said. Zar stopped. Brandur turned back to Gurst. “Leave if you know what’s good for you.” He looked to the Orc. “I’m sure you can see to it.”

“With pleasure,” the Orc said. “Get going,” he said to Gurst.

“Don’t...fucking touch me,” Gurst said. He stormed out, the Orc following in tow.

“Well then, to the infirmary,” Brandur said, turning back to Zar.
“About damn time,” she said.

“Watch that tongue, woman.” Father Crustok said.

She laughed and kept walking. Brandur rushed to grab his satchel and followed. He didn’t turn to look, but he could hear the whispers of what few patrons remained. “A healer, here, in the temple.” “He could cure my joints.” “He’s a sham. They’re all a sham.” “He’s just here to laugh at us.” “Heretic.” “What a fine man. Hope he know’s what he’s doing.” “The faithful get their own healing.” And so forth and so on. Most notable though was a comment from another elf. She had watched the scene from a distance, it seemed, and when all had disbursed remained stationary, leaning against the wall near where the the northwestern corner of the sanctuary led into a hallway, which is where Zar was leading him. He wasn’t sure if she participated in the earlier ceremony at all, but all the same she was certainly witness to most of the commotion that had gone on. As they approached the woman, she arched an eyebrow and smirked. “Quit smiling,” she said.

“Mother, please,” Zar said, though Brandur pretended not to hear any of it. But when he knew he had passed far enough for the woman--Zar’s mother, apparently--not to notice, he too smiled. At least one person wanted him here.
Zar led the healer through the northern hall, past the sleeping quarters and the kitchen and the small dining hall, as well as past several inquisitive stares. The women that didn’t watch the spectacle Zar and the man had just come from watched in mute perplexity as Zar, holding her now wet bandage, led the healer through the living quarters the women used.

“Don’t mind him,” Zar told them. “He’s a healer.”

“A healer? Here?” said Cass. She exited the sleeping quarters, having just cleaned them, further down the hall when she heard Zar’s admonishment. “I can fix anything he can.”

“I’m sure you can, priestess,” the man said. “But it looks like you’re busy at the moment.”

“Don’t test me, vulture.” A word the denizens of the Pit used for those of the Perch, especially when angry.

“Cass…” Zar said.

Cass backed off, letting them by as they passed her in the hall, but not without staring down the healer as they went.

They passed two priests more, but neither of them offered a word, content with the curt ‘healer’ Zar gave for explanation. Lu, the head priestess, who was sweeping the infirmary floor when they entered, did have a few questions. “Well who is this?”
Zar brushed past Lu and moved to one of the wash basins along the wall. Beneath it was a stack of clean rags. Zar plucked one and quickly swapped her bloodied bandage for the clean one. “He’s a healer,” Zar said, as she wrapped the new bandage around her hand.

“You don’t need to wrap it like that,” the healer said, standing just behind Zar. “We’ll have to unwrap the bandage to seal the gash.”

“Shit.” Zar said under her breath. She began unwrapping the bandage.

“You will want to press the bandage against the wound, though. Definitely do that.”

“Wound?” Lu rested her broom against the wall and, fists on her hips, confronted the healer. “What’s the meaning of this?”

The healer stood straight and offered his hand. “My name is Brandur Reyan. I’m a healer from the University.”

Lu didn’t take the hand. “And what are you doing here?”

Brandur lowered his hand and turned his attention to Zar. “I’m here to heal the people of New Malinsburg. The one’s that really need it, and right now this young woman needs it.”

“What happened to her?” Lu asked. She too approached the wash basin intrigued by the gash on Zar’s hand.

“What is your name, priestess?” Brandur asked.

“It’s Lu,” Zar answered.

“I’ll give my name when I want to, Zar.”

“She’s the head priestess”

“Oh, tell him everything, won’t you?”

“Lu, are you able to fetch water for the basin?” Brandur asked. “We’ll need to clean the wound.” Gingerly he held Zar’s hand. “Carefully take the bandage off of the wound. Zar obeyed,
pulling the rag off revealing a gash, from the base of her pinky to the heel of her palm, that steadily reddened with more blood.

“Will one of you tell me what happened?” Lu was near exasperation.

“One of the patrons brought a knife into my sanctum,” Zar said. “He was drunk.”

“You slept...with a drunk man...and...” but Lu didn’t bother to finish her sentence. She groaned and threw her hands up. “It hardly matters now. I’ll fetch the water.” Lu left.

“Right, now keep pressing the bandage hard against the wound,” Brandur instructed, “and hold your hands above your head.

“But why?” Zar asked.

“It slows the bleeding. Your blood has to go up hill to get to the wound, so it goes slower.”

Zar again obeyed, pressing the bandage against her hand as hard as she could while holding her hands above her head. She left the basin, however, and sat in the chair next to the first of the sick beds that lined the walls along the further half of the room. With her foot she dragged the chair from against the wall, spun it around, and sat on it backwards, propping her elbows on the chair’s back. Her hands rested well enough above her head.

“Smart,” Brandur commented.

Zar gave him a look. “Don’t act so surprised.”

“Fair enough.”

“So when do you actually start healing, healer?”

He leaned against the wall next to the wash basin, folding his arms in waiting for Lu.

“You can call me Brandur, you know.”

“Well, Brandur....” She emphasized his name. “When do you start healing me?”
“When I get some water. All the learning in the world won’t do any good if we don’t clean the wound first.”

“It’s not like it’s dirty. He may have been drunk, but his knife was clean. Well polished, actually.”

Brandur shrugged. “Gurst does like keeping his knives sharp. It’s his military training. Everything he does is somehow derived from his time in the Northern Army. All the same, it’s not dirt I’m worried about.”

Zar looked puzzled. “Then what’s there that needs cleaning?”

Lu had returned. She entered the room hauling with her a bucket full of water on either side of her. She walked fast, keeping her arms stiff, until she was at the basin. She dropped one bucket, hoisted up the other, and poured all the water the bucket held into the wash basin. It sloshed around, clear and clean.

“Excellent,” Brandur said. “One bucket should do for now.” He was rummaging through his satchel now. “Thank-you very much...Lu, was it?”

“Yes, Lu” she said curtly.

“Well thank-you, Lu.”

“So now what?” Lu waited with rapt attention.

“Now we clean the wound.” As Brandur said this, he set his satchel on a nearby table and pulled out of it a vial of dark blue liquid and a vial of dark green liquid. “Zar, come back over here.” He indicated the wash basin. As she walked over, he uncorked the dark blue vial and poured its contents into the water. Immediately the water began to bubble and swirl. The vial’s contents, which were just a moment before dark blue, fizzed purple, then rich dark blue again, then an opaque eggshell blue, and then...utterly invisible. The water looked like water again. The
swirling stopped, but small lines of tiny bubbles issued up here and there from the bottom of the basin, as though the water were midway to boiling. However, even these stopped soon, and the water was indistinguishable from before.

“What by gods did you put in there?” Zar asked.

“A cleaning solution,” Brandur answered. “Well, more of a purifying solution, really.”

“Purification?” Lu asked? Her eyes were transfixed on the water.

“Yes, purification. Zar, remove pressure from the wound and slowly stick your hand into the water.”

Zar looked up. “What?”

Brandur smiled. “It will sting, but it’s not terrible. You only have to put your hand in for a few minutes or so.”

“But...I don’t even know what it is.”

“I know what it is.”

“Explain to us, then,” Lu said. “Tell us what it is.

“It’s hard to explain what the liquid does,” Brandur answered. “Most learned men don’t even know what this does.”

“Get creative,” Lu said. “If you can’t teach it, you don’t know it. That’s what my father always said.”

Brandur sighed. “The best I can say is that some things, so small they aren’t even visible, can get into a cut or a gash, and they can get in from the thing that caused the wound or from touching the wound to unclean surfaces.”

“So it is dirt,” Zar said.
“Not quite,” Brandur said. “And not only that, but the man may have put something on the blade.”

“You mean poison!” Lu was beside herself. “What kind of man brings poison into a temple?”

“I wish I could say, ma’am,” Brandur said. “I don’t know who did this, so I can’t be sure the blade wasn’t poisoned.” Zar looked at Brandur. He looked back. “Please, put your hand in the solution.”

Zar hesitated. Looking down at the water in the basin, she recalled once an acid, which Father Porter had accidentally made, burning half way into the wooden work table in the priests’ work quarters. Zar was asked to help clean the mess, and she became quite familiar with the acid. This liquid, whatever it was, reminded her of that acid: deceptively powerful. “What if it burns too much?”

Brandur arched an eyebrow. Zar looked down to the water then again at Brandur. “Look,” Brandur said, “I’ll do it with you. How’s that?”

“Well…”

Brandur didn’t wait for her acquiescence. He rolled back his sleeve, removed a ring from his right hand, setting it on the basin stand, and dipped his hand in the water. Small bubbles, like before, rose in thin lines from various parts of his hands. But nothing more happened. “See,” Brandur said, that smile still framing his face. “It doesn’t hurt bad at all.”

“Well go on, girl,” Lu said. “You see it won’t hurt you.”

Zar swallowed. She pulled back the bandage once more and lowered her hand down, feeling the surface of the liquid grace the palm of her hand. Drops of blood, slowly dripping into the solution, fizzed and dispersed, coloring the water a translucent burnt orange. She looked up at
Brandur. His face was soft, his eyes open and clear as day. They were the same color as the morning sky, a grey-blue haze. Like ocean spray. Like-

“Zar,” Lu said.

“Interesting,” Brandur said.

“Sorry,” Zar said. She shook her head. Looking down again to the water, she realized her hand was already submerged. Resting on his.

She jerked her hand back, but only just, regretting immediately her embarrassed impulse. Despite her best effort, she felt herself blushing. She decided to leave her hand stationary where it was, and it was about then that Zar noticed the slight tingle around her hand. For the most part, it wasn’t painful at all, merely a small tickling sensation, but where the cut was, she noted a slowly rising pain. It grew to be somewhat alarming. “This does hurt a bit,” she said. The blood had made the pool red now, and the bubbles that Zar had seen around Brandur’s hand seemed to be pouring out of her wound even more freely than the blood.

“What you’re feeling is the solution crawling along every part of the cut, in and out, looking for all the small, invisible things that could have entered your cut from the knife, as well as any poison. And soon you’ll feel it going further in.”

“Further in?”

“Into your arm.”

As though on cue, Zar felt a jab of pain, dull and yet sizzling, push into her hand. It throbbed around her palm, and then carved its way up her wrist. She winced, but she refused to make a sound.

Lu looked alarmed. “How bad does it hurt?” When Zar didn’t give an answer, she pressed her gaze onto Brandur.
“It shouldn’t hurt very badly. Less painful than breaking a bone.”

“What even is it,” Lu asked. Her face was a puzzled by Brandur’s potion as Zar had ever seen her: brows crossed, mouth half open as though ready to shout.

“It’s a mostly natural concoction, made from things most people can get a hold of. Crushed goat bones, crushed flower leaves, blueberries.”

“Blueberries?” Zar asked.

Brandur arched a brow. “Yes, even blueberries. Hence the color. The University does have some key ingredients that aren’t as readily available in this region. Still, most of the potion is natural and harmless.”

Lu seemed satisfied for the time being, but just as soon as her expression softened it became perplexed again. “What do you mean most of the potion is natural?”

“Part of what I do is strictly natural, things that any healer could do. But another part is—”

“Magic?” Lu asked.

“Yes,” he said innocently. “It is magical as well.”

Zar’s eyes widened. Here this man was, a magician. A magician in the Pit. In the temple, no less. Here, right in front of her. He said her name even. “You...you know magic.”

“Yes,” Brandur said. “I know magic.”

Lu had backed away from the basin, awestruck. “A magic-user....” She blinked, her incredulity plain as day. Her mouth opened and closed, and it seemed like she had been shocked into muteness. Almost. “This...this isn’t something Arethelos would approve of.”

Brandur, who had watched Lu’s growing astonishment just as Zar had, looked away, and now down at the basin. “So I’ve heard.”
“Lu, it’s fine,” Zar said. “I’m fine, it’s not too much.” Though the burning had not increased in intensity, she could now feel it in her elbow, but that too seemed to be the limit of the liquid’s reach; it hadn’t progressed past that point.

“It isn’t a matter of how much pain you’re in,” Lu said. She ran a hand through her hair. “I can’t believe Father Crustok would allow this. Magical healing, in the Holy Temple.”

“That is a matter I’ve come to discuss with him,” Brandur said. He turned to Zar. “Where is the burning at?”

“Right in my elbow,” said Zar.

“Has it gone any further?”

“No, it stopped there, but it still burns.”

“Good.” Brandur grinned. “Now for the exciting part.” Brandur took the second vial and poured the pine green liquid into the basin. Zar became more worried, but she was determined not to complain or back out.

Brandur closed his eyes. He looked concentrated or in pain, or both. His hand, which still remained in the basin, curled mostly into a fist save his thumb and index finger. These he pressed hard onto the edge of the basin.

Then he began chanting.

“What are you…” Zar began to say, but the green liquid that Brandur had poured into the basin caught her attention. The dark green liquid, which at first had dissolved into the water, recollected itself back into a single, rope-like strand. Like a snake, this green thing began coursing through the water, whirling and bobbing, ever closer to the gash in Zar’s hand.

When it touched her hand, Zar forced herself not to pull back. She closed her eyes. What she felt, though, opened them again. A new pain, a cold pain, very cold, punched into her cut and
ran disturbingly fast up to her elbow, and she realized that the feeling came from the liquid itself moving through her body. Then, for a moment, the pain flared. Zar bit her lip, but a groan escaped anyway.

“What are you doing now?” Lu asked, her voice now a horrified whisper.

Brandur did not answer. He continued to chant, as steady and as measured as the priests were in their chants and songs.

Lu’s jaw was clenched, and she didn't come closer, but she watched the healing like a hawk.

The cold sensation began to dull, and, at last, a warm pleasant feeling replaced it. It slowly retreated back along the line of her arm, back into her palm and finally into the cut, filling the whole half of her hand with a gentle heat. “Watch,” said Brandur. Zar hadn’t noticed when his chanting stopped. His smile was bigger than ever.

Zar watched. The green liquid poured out from her hand along the edges of the wound, but as it did, the wound began to seal shut. Zar gasped, and whatever pain she had just felt was too unimportant to worry about. As though turning back time, the two parted halves of her skin were pulled together. At last the inches long gash became nothing more than a hairline of red, but even that faded as the thin red line turned into a beaded line, and then nothing.

Zar pulled her hand from the basin. The pain was entirely gone, her hand perfectly healed. It was as though she had never been cut at all. All she could do was marvel at it, turning her hand, rubbing the place where the throbbing, burning opening had been. “This would have taken weeks to heal. But...but not even a scar....”

As Zar stared mesmerized, Brandur poured the water from the basin back into the bucket. “Well that’s healing for you.”
Lu scoffed, but it was clear that she was still amazed. “I...I’ve seen enough. I’ll leave you to clean up your mess.” She lifted the other bucket and left.

“If only I had a potion for that attitude.” Brandur returned the basin to its stand, using one of the rags underneath to wipe dry the inside. “I forget what a rarity a magic-user is sometimes. I forget how cautious people are about magic-users.”

Zar stared intently at her hand as she flexed her fingers and wrist. “Don’t mind her,” she said, puzzling over the phenomenon. “That attitude isn’t shared by many outside of the Temple and its patrons.”

“Oh, it’s fortunate then we’re not in the Temple.” Brandur eyed the bucket, and decided to let it sit for now. He took a seat where Zar had been sitting, hunched forward, elbows on his knees and his hands crossed in contemplation. “And what about you? Are you amazed or horrified?”

“Amazed for sure.”

“Horrified as well?”

Zar pulled her attention away from her hand. “What do you mean? Why would I be horrified?”

“You said it yourself, wariness of magic is prevalent in the temple.”

Zar frowned. “You didn’t think I meant myself, did you?”

“I didn’t know what to think. Scholars aren’t in the habit of making assumptions. Not good ones, anyway.”

“Well if it eases your mind, I’m not bothered at all.”

“My first patient, and a satisfied one at that. I’m off to a good start.”

“I’m glad you’re so modest.”
He glanced at her, but then shrugged. “You’ve got me there. I’m a tad pretentious.”

Zar laughed, shaking her head. “At least you’re honest.”

“Scholars aren’t in the habit of lying.”

“No,” Zar rested her hands on her hips. “I bet not.” It was then that Zar realized Brandur was sweating. “Did the healing exhaust you?”

“Quite a bit,” Brandur said. He wiped his brow with the remaining sleeve of his robe. “Not many realize it, but commanding magic requires a good bit of energy. It’s not as easy as speaking the right spell.”

“Are you...okay?”

Zar snorted. “Yes, I’m quite alright. It’s nothing I’m not used to. I’ve done similar healings more than I can count.”

“Well, practiced or not, you’ll want to adopt a bit of humility when talking to the priest. He’s as prideful as a bull.”

“He must make a very good priest, then.”

Zar scoffed. “I wouldn’t know. Women aren’t allowed to teach.”

“They are at the University.”

“It’s a shame women aren’t allowed to leave the temple either.” Zar spoke more wistfully. More mournfully.

Brandur sat up. “I knew about the limit in teaching. I didn’t know you weren’t allowed to leave.”

“We’re allowed to physically leave, of course, but we aren’t allowed to exit the service of the Temple. Women embody the submissive aspect of the All-Being. Whereas the All-Father
side engenders control and rule, the All-Mother side engenders obedience and loyalty. It’s the same reason why we...well...”

“I understand.”

“Women who try to leave the temple are considered to be in direct defiance of the role that we as women play in teaching the Wisdoms of the Twelve. By trying to be independent of the Temple’s ways, we are in effect saying that we renounce the temple’s ways.”

“And what is the punishment for that?”

“Death.”

Brandur furrowed his brows. He was almost totally silent, staring off somewhere past the wall. “Death.” His voice too took on a somber quality. “Stupid.”

“Tell it to Father Crustok. Speaking of which, he’ll probably come looking for you soon. If my sense of time serves me right, the temple services will be wrapping up soon. After the first hour past noon, the Temple closes and we have a small reprieve until evening services. We’ll have lunch then.”

Brandur continued staring past the wall, but when Zar said nothing more, his attention returned. “Are...you asking me to lunch with you?”

“You’ll likely be invited by Father Crustok anyway. I doubt you’ll finish your talk before then even if you were to have started right after he finished the sermon.”

Brandur stood. “Hmm. Well I suppose I’ll go find him then.”

“Or I could show you to his study and spare you the possibility of being turned around.” Zar picked up the bucket of the concoction that had healed her hand. “Weird. It’s black now.”

“That’s the blood mixing with the other alchemical ingredients. If you let it sit long enough, it turns that color. I hope you have a relatively safe place in which to dump it.”
“There’s a sewer grate in the courtyard.”

“Do you have a well near there?”

“No. We do have a well, but it’s several yards away, and the sewer channel runs all the way to the ocean side. It pours out straight into the waves.”

“Save for a few disturbed fish, that should do.” Brandur stood. He brushed his robe straight, took back his ring from the basin stand, and grabbed his satchel from the table. “Here, I can carry the bucket.”

“Oh please. You’re already carrying the bag.” She began walking, keeping the bucket, but she felt glad. “Healed by a healer….” she said, under her breath. “I never thought that would ever happen.”

“Well, you can expect a lot more of it to come. Hopefully,” Brandur said.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“I meant not for you specifically, but for the Temple. For the people. If Father Crustok will let me.”

“Hopefully he will.”

He followed her out of the infirmary and into the hall. More busybodies rushed by, most of them priestesses or temple workers. When he saw the two passing by, Bunson, the head of the temple guard, held up his hand to Brandur. “I need a word with you before you go anywhere else.”

“Bunson, what is it?” Zar asked.

“You’re friend,” Bunson said to Brandur. “He’s been temporarily banned from the Temple.”
“Even if he weren’t, I wouldn’t bring him back here. There’s a temple in East Haven. He can go there.”

“That’s good. ‘Cause if you were to bring him back here while he’s banned, I’d have to throw you out too.”

“You don’t need to threaten him,” Zar said. “He didn’t cause any trouble.”

“On the contrary,” Bunson countered, “He brought the trouble here, thus causing it.”

“Your logic is sound,” said Brandur. “But still, I won’t be bringing him back here. You have my word.” Brandur held out his hand.

Bunson, though he didn’t quit his stern demeanor, did shake Brandur’s hand. “I’ll hold you to it.” Then, as quickly as he appeared, he left down the hall.

When he was out of earshot, Zar spoke. “Bunson has no time for nonsense. He’s all work and seriousness all the time.”

“I believe it,” Brandur said.

“He’s good at what he does, though. No one’s stolen anything from the temple in the time he’s been here.”

“Quite impressive. I imagine temples are targets for a lot of thieves. All of these valuables must be tempting for one with no morals.”

Zar laughed. “You’d be surprised.” She switched the bucket from one hand to the other and headed once more for Father Crustok’s office.

“What do you mean?”

“We priestesses often hear more confessions than the priests do. The men that confess to theft are often among the most religious.”

“Curious. I wonder why that would be.”
“It’s simple, really.” Zar walked slower. “They live by more faith than the rest of us. They rely on the gods more because they don’t have any way to earn their food. And because of that they steal it. You learn things like that, working like we do. You learn a lot about people, about all their vices. And we try our best to ‘bless’ them.”

“By sleeping with them....”

“For the ones that really care, they take it as a blessing. They tell us their troubles, and we offer them forgiveness and counsel. In some ways, we too are healers.” Zar returned to her quicker pace. She noted Brandur’s silence and decided that being able to say something to which he had no reply was as good an achievement as any she might accomplish that day.
Chapter 4

Brandur spoke with Father Crustok the entire day. After Zar had shown Brandur to Father Crustok’s office, both of them debated and bargained nonstop for the remainder of the afternoon. Even through the midday meal. When evening services came, both were granted a much needed reprieve from the other. But as soon as the ceremony came to a close and the priestesses and priests prepared for the evening’s crowd of men, Father Crustok excused himself to a quick dinner, letting Brandur do the same (seasoned bread and quail that night), and then both continued their deliberations with the other.

At the night’s conclusion, Brandur and Father Crustok managed to reach an agreement. “I’ll come back later in the week to have my equipment and necessary materials brought in,” Brandur explained to Zar. “I should have everything ready for Sunday before the ceremony begins.” She walked with him through the sanctuary as he took his leave. The room echoed with their footsteps, his in particular. “I’ll ensure that everything is in place that morning while you...while the women....”

“Sleep with the men.”

“Yes, that.”

Zar stopped walking. “Does it embarrass you?”

Brandur stopped as well, “That you have paid sex with men?”

“Yes. Does it bother you?”
“No, it doesn’t bother me.” He gave it more thought. “I suppose I wasn’t sure if it was an embarrassment for you. Apparently it isn’t.”

“It was at first,” Zar regretted sounding sadder than she meant to. She tried to recover the mood: “But after so long it’s the same as any chore. Sweeping, cooking, fucking. I hardly think about it.”

“I see your point.” He said it casually. Too casually, like he was consciously trying to say it casually.

Zar chuckled. “If you say so.”

“All the same, when that’s finished, I should be ready to take on the day’s patients.”

“How many do you think will come?”

Brandur thought about it. He rubbed his chin, coming to a full stop as he calculated.

“Hmm. Well, one must factor in the population that come to the temple, reduce that to the number of people who would be in need of healing, factor in those who would come only because of the healing while skipping the service, as well as those who would fake an injury or ailment simply to meet a healer.” Brandur’s eyes traveled about, connecting as though by sight the portions of his logic. Slowly he resumed his exit, but he continued his train of thought.

“We’ll also need to factor in those who will show up simply to talk to me, and I suppose I’ll have some naysayers appear only to harass me.”

“Bunson would stop that from happening.”

Brandur smirked. “Hopefully. He seems very capable.”

“He is capable.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“That would be wise.”
“I’m sure it would be.”

They had reached the Temple doors, and Zar found herself looking at him, and found him looking back in equal measure. She noted his grey-blue eyes once more, the slight cleft in his chin, and the number of seconds both of them stared without speaking.

“Well,” Brandur said, breaking eye contact. “When you factor in all of the variables as well as what we healers have learned based on past accounts of city-based healing affairs, I’d say I’ll have more patients than I’ll be able to deal with in a day.”

“Then you’ll have to come back,” she said. He smiled, looking down at his feet and then towards the temple doors, and then at her. “Yes, I will come back. Every Sunday and every Wednesday.”

“I’ll try not to injure myself in the meantime. You don’t need one of us distracting you from your patients.”

“Pardon me, but what kind of healer would I be to heal the guests of the temple and not the hosts?”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“And you are rather distracting.”

Zar laughed and looked away. Blood rushed to her face, and she felt nervous. Nervous because of all of the men, numbering more than a thousand, that had tried in some fashion to flirt with her, none of them made her feel in any way like how she felt now.

“I’ll take my leave then,” Brandur said.

Zar looked up at him. “We’ll be waiting,” she said.

“As will I.” Brandur smiled. Then he pushed open the temple door. He passed through the doors, into the night. The wagon driver, waiting a few short feet from the entrance, sat
impatiently, a glimpse of his tired face showing through the opening between the two temple doors. Through that vertical line, Brandur’s form descended the temple steps, at once taking up nearly the entirety of the gap but soon becoming a simple robed figure hopping up on the side step and into the wagon. The wagon driver whipped the reins and the horses pulled the wagon away. Brandur’s head turned, as though to look back, but he didn’t fully turn his gaze to see the temple entrance. His neck straightened, so only the collar of his robe and the faint tinge of golden hair sticking above it stood out from the dark. Soon, the wagon faded into the night and nothing but the glow of the torches framing the entrance and a handful of stars bright enough to penetrate that glow revealed an outside world.

Zar lingered a moment longer, unsure of what to make of what happened. When she realized she was beginning to look ridiculous, standing like a longing widow at the doorway, she grabbed hold of the great iron ring on the open door and, with all her weight, pulled it shut.

From behind her came Bunson’s voice. “You seem sad.”

Startled, Zar jumped. She turned with a gasp. “Good gods, Bunson, why the hell would you do that?” She discovered Morga was with him as well. “What are you doing here?”

Morga cocked an eyebrow. “I could ask you the same thing.”

Zar flushed, looking from her mother’s eyes to Bunson’s to her mother’s. She knew they knew why she was there, though in their presence the reason seemed silly even to her. “I was showing our guest out.”

“That’s typically my job,” said Bunson.

“I saw him passing in the hall. He had no escort.”

“He was intended to find me at the end of the hall...but I heard you two talking.” He smirked. “And I figured I’d leave well enough alone.”
“I wish you had interfered,” Morga said to Bunson with a half-hearted shrug. “Now she’s got all these whims and ideas in her head.”

“Oh what ideas?” Zar asked. She put more bite into her intonation than she realized. “I was just escorting him out.”

“Clearly,” said Bunson. “I suppose then you were simply checking the weather just now, standing there like you were.”

Morga’s tone was firm as stone. “He’s a stuck-up vulture, Zar. That’s all he is.”

“You’re going to say that about the man who healed me?” Zar asked. “He’s a boon to the Pit.”

“To the Pit, yes, perhaps even the Temple--and we’ll see how that goes. For now, he’s a young man with a dick like the rest of them.”

“Men typically do, as you might recall.”

“My typically use women as well.”

Morga’s comment stayed in the air, lingering within the staring contest that Zar found herself engaged in with her mother. She forced herself to bite her tongue.

“I’ll leave you two at it then,” said Bunson. He turned and marched away.

Morga folded her arms, though her tone remained level as ever. “If you’re not careful, you’ll get in trouble. He has enough money to avoid it. We do not.”

“He’s a healer. His entire life’s mission is to help people improve their lives.”

“Just like ours is to bless those poor, weary souls with love from the goddess herself.”

Zar was silent. She knew her mother was right. She knew from the start that any man, no matter how handsome, no matter how rich, was capable of dubious things. Brandur wasn’t the first Perch resident to come to the temple. Lawyers, artisan smiths, even nobles--Zar had seen
them all. She heard their confessions, she dealt with their peculiar forms of sexual expression. They were no different than those of the Pit folk. Both Pit and Perch men stole things, even if the value of what was stolen different. Both of them conducted affairs. Both of them murdered. Both of them confessed total disbelief in any god other than themselves. Zar knew Brandur was a man just like all men were men.

But she still hoped he wasn’t.

Zar was grateful, however, that her mother wasn’t one for yelling. She could wield the anger of a million fires but still keep herself from outburst. And, judging from the hint of intrigue on her face, her mother wasn’t yet that upset with her.

“Don’t be stupid, Zar. That’s all I’m asking. Use the sterility salve. And just because he’s rich doesn’t mean he doesn’t have diseases.

“Good gods, mother, I’m not going to sleep with him.”

“Yet.”

Zar shook her head. “He’s different.” She was lying, but she hoped she wasn’t.

Morga laughed. “Oh please. I don’t even need to be your mother to know you don’t believe that.”

“Well...no, I don’t.”

“Well so be it.”

“So be it.”

Morga yawned. She looked around the room, what she was looking for being a mystery. “I’m going to bed. You ought to come to sleep soon yourself.” She turned and left just as quietly as Bunson had.
Zar watched her go, but having a lack of any reason to stay behind, she followed suit soon enough. She did turn around, however, once, to view the doors again through which Brandur had existed. She imagined him leaving again, going into the night, going back to the University, to some satin-lined bed with golden bowls filled with fruit next to it and a fireplace in every room. He probably had some woman waiting for him even, some maid or vulture down the street. Maybe even another student. He did say that women were allowed to teach there, so it must mean that they were allowed to be admitted there as students. Between being the beaten housewife of some drunkard merchant or the underappreciated heir to a poor craftsman’s shop, women of the Pit had little to gain from life here. However, Temple prostitution was a better life for women than most other options in the Pit, if stations in life could even be considered options. Zar was born into the temple. Though they all used the salve, it wasn’t totally perfect; her mother used it as much as any of the other women, and she still became pregnant with Zar. Since then, she knew nothing more than the halls of the Temple and the few streets between here and the market.

Zar caught herself before long still staring at the temple doors. She turned around. The sanctuary was entirely empty, save for herself and the sunken-eyed statue of Arethelos staring at her from the eerie light that strained inward from the skylight above. Zar ignored it as she walked, or she tried to, but the shadow masking the statue’s eyes gave the illusion that, behind those small screens of darkness, real eyes were watching her as she left.

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Zar found Mabel in the priestess’ prayer room. Hardly was it used for such a purpose, though, the number of believers among the women only numbering around half, and of those only a few being devout in any sense. Mabel was among them, though, that not only believed in the existence of the gods but also poured much of their effort into navigating the maze of emotions and actions that constituted religious living.

In the prayer room, the room adjacent to the sleeping quarters, Mabel sat upon one of the two couches on opposite ends of the room. A square-shaped low table dominated the space, but nothing was laid upon it save for the burden of Mabel’s prayer.

What she was praying was hard to determine at first. Her words, like those of most of the patrons who offered prayer, was quiet and concentrated, enunciation being secondary to the formation of thoughts and the proper internal stance one was to assume when requesting anything of the Divines. Zar could guess, though, what Mabel prayed about. She was five months pregnant; what else would she pray about? Perhaps also the continued well being of the other temple workers was thrown in at points, and thanksgiving for her child and for what good things Mabel could identify in her life. Whatever the specifics were, Zar knew from overhearing earlier prayers of hers--given while dining on lunch or dinner, or in her bed, which was next to Zar’s, in the sleeping quarters--that she would spend nearly all of her time merely speaking about her child. While her physical posture gave the impression of intense, almost painful looking concentration, her words, should Zar pay close enough attention to parse them out from their mumbled nature, were much more conversational. Eyes closed, but with a peaceful visage, Mabel seemed to be speaking to something actually there. Tonight was the same, and Zar found herself taking a look at the other couch. It was empty.
Zar sat down next to Mabel, lounging back, waiting for Mabel to finish. Mabel’s eyes opened, and her praying stopped. She stared straight forward, which in her bent over position was in the direction of the floor. She sighed, and sat up. “Evening, Zar.”

“You should go to bed. You most of all.”

Mabel sat back, letting herself lounge back too. She looked up at the ceiling. “I couldn’t sleep. I felt the baby kicking. It made me nervous.”

Zar shifted closer, resting her head next to Mabel’s shoulder. “Why would it make you nervous?”

“It’s not the kicking itself. It’s wondering what will happen later.”

“When the baby is born.”

“Yes.” Mabel sighed again. Zar realized she was more stressed than she was letting on. “Hopefully it’s a boy.” She rubbed her stomach gingerly. “Hopefully it’s at least half-human.”

Mabel was a dark elf. If the child was half-human, they would be cast out from human society, just as the elves, orcs, trolls, and goblins were. However, the child could not be excluded from all of human society. Some laws, when worded to say “Only a human may be X or do Y,” would not be able to prevent the child from being X or doing Y. Any other combination of races would bar the child completely. The trouble was that Mabel, indeed all of the women, could never accurately determine who they slept with.

Zar wrapped her arm around Mabel’s chest. She ignored that Mabel did not respond as warmly. “I’m sure things will work out.”

“If the divines hear my prayers.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“Odd question coming from an agnostic.”
“Fair point, but if they are real, and I haven’t determined they aren’t, why wouldn’t they listen to you?” For the same reason they listen to no one, Zar thought. Who could prove they listened to anyone? Who could prove they did not just look down from above in apathy, if they were there at all?

“You know what the Lessons say about the dark elves,” Mabel said. The Ta’Siti, the nation of dark elves that existed in antiquity, were “scattered and dispersed upon the winds” after the War of Night. The humans, in their colonizing rampage, descended like hawks upon the Ta’Siti empire in the south, claiming the land as holy and the Ta’Siti as a hindering blight. More specifically, they were considered to have been betrayers of the Divine Impetus, that universal calling by which all were summoned to a life of obedience to the Twelve. For their transgressions, they were supposedly marked as evil by their skin tone, a deep dark purple. Before the humans and their warring were checked by Alboff’s Treaty, the Ta’Siti empire was no more. What dark elves had not been killed off by war or by zealous “hunts” were traded off as slaves. The Temple of the Divines, in an act of “mercy,” bought many of the dark elves in an attempt to restore them to the blessings of the Twelve, or so they argued.

Zar scoffed. “Those are just tales. Those are just the humans’ tales. The real story is probably different. The gods wouldn’t be stupid enough to ignore you just because of your skin.”

“I hope not.” Mabel’s voice was quiet, sleepy. “I hope they hear me.”

“They hear you as well as they hear anyone.”

“I hope so.” Her voice began to trail off, chasing some thought into the night. Some thought of the future, Zar imagined.

“Quit hoping. They hear everyone or they don’t hear anyone. There’s no point hoping.”

“If that were true, we wouldn’t hope to get out. But we do.”
Zar had to concede that point. “True, we do hope to leave, even though we can’t.”

“We can’t alone. But the All-Being can do it.”

The discussion was beginning to shift to theology. Zar didn’t have the patience for such a topic, and not because it was too technical a subject but rather that people were not technical enough about it. Sentimentality always entered into the discussion somewhere, and here that somewhere was obvious: if Mabel’s heart was right, if she obeyed the right way, with the right mindset, with the right prayers and the right thoughts, then the All-Being would grant her request. If not, she didn’t follow the path of the Divines correctly, or the purpose of her life was such that being a temple prostitute was best for her. As if that could be true. “You’re right. We can’t. So trust that the All-Being has your best interest in mind and go to bed. You can’t do anything more than you already have.”

“But if I pray more-”

“The All-Being isn’t that stupid. You’ve prayed as much as you can. We all know it. We all see it.” Zar sat up and left her seat. She reached for Mabel’s hand.

“I need the All-Being to know I’m serious, that I need help with this.” Though Mabel protested still, she cooperated. She took hold of Zar’s hand and let herself be lifted off the couch. “I don’t want to ignore the Divine Path in any way.”

“You aren’t. Go to bed, Mabel.”

Mabel was on her feet now, one hand on her stomach, the other on her head, scratching through a series of thoughts. “My gods, but what if it’s a stillbirth?”

Zar, already halfway out the door turned around. “Mabel, what are you saying?”

One tear rolled down Mabel’s cheek, glistening against her dark plum skin with the light of the single lit torch in the room. And then another tear, from the other eye, and then another
and more after. Her lip trembled, and her hands covered her face. “What if it’s stillborn? What if I anger the gods and it’s stillborn?”

“Mabel, love…” Zar rushed to her, holding her with her arms wrapped around as far as they would go. “You know those births are uncommon. All of us were born without a problem. The whole world is filled with births that didn’t go wrong.”

“Oh but what-” Mabel couldn’t finish her sentence, the possibility of horror now gripping her mind. Lu mentioned that it could happen, sudden bursts of emotion.

“Honey, that won’t happen.” Zar’s voice dropped to a whisper, and she caressed Mabel’s hair in some attempt at offering comfort.” Mabel only sobbed in response. “Mabel,” Zar said, trying a different approach. “You know as well as I do that a healer visited today, that he will be coming more often.” Mabel, her hands still planted firmly against her face, nodded gently. Her sobs stopped, replaced now with soft gasps for air in and shaky breaths of air out. “You know he’ll want to see you, to help out. If this is to partner with the Temple, then of course he’ll help you. Free, just like he helped me.”

Mabel removed her hands, her diamond white eyes shining through long strands of silver hair. “That- that was real? That wasn’t just the other women talking?”

Zar wiped Mabel’s eyes and smiled, seeing she had come through to Mabel. “Yes, love, I saw the healer today. His-” Zar stopped, choosing her words “-This man came in today to sleep with me, but he was drunk and he cut me with a dagger he had hidden on him. And the healer used his, um, his craft to heal me. Look.” Zar held up her hand, the one that had the gash. “It was right here.” She traced the invisible cut along the edge of her hand. “But he made this concoction of something or other and it healed right up. Just like it was never there.”

Mabel looked from Zar’s hand to Zar to Zar’s hand. “But there isn’t even a scar.”
“No, not even a scar. It worked that well. Like it never happened.”

“You’re not lying to me, are you?” Mabel, wiped her eyes and nose, a new look of distress crossing her face.

Zar frowned. “What? Mabel, why would I lie to you? I’m not half as terrible a friend as that. He healed me. You can ask Lu. She saw it. I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it at lunch or supper.”

Mabel shook her head. “I wasn’t there. You don’t remember?”

Zar was confused. “I was…” She was distracted by Brandur talking to the other priests at the priests’ table. “I was thinking about my healing. Where were you if not at lunch or dinner?”

“I was here, praying.”

Zar’s eyes opened wide. “Have you eaten, Mabel? You can’t not eat when you’re pregnant.”

“I…” Mabel looked away. “I wanted to pray. I thought—”

Zar rubbed her forehead. Of all the dumb things Mabel could let religion convince her of, it had to be that. “Mabel, you have to eat. The baby can’t grow if you don’t eat.”

“We all learn that Arethelos is the goddess of sacrifice. We’re supposed to show sacrifice in our daily lives.”

“Mabel…” Zar turned around, hoping Mabel wouldn’t see how much tension was present in Zar’s painfully clenched fists. Mabel was good hearted, but she was gullible, and her devotion to the gods often got the better of her. Zar fought the urge to show more dismay for Mabel’s stupidity than she already was. She turned back around, sighing, collecting her thoughts. “Mabel, aren’t we supposed to emulate the gods in all walks of life?”

Mabel hesitated. “Yes…”
“So shouldn’t we also show the wellness and bounty of Venash?”

“But we’re supposed to emphasize Arethelos and her wisdom while-”

“Emphasize, but not at the cost of balance in the other areas, correct?” Zar, though agnostic, knew the arguments of Circle theology up and down. It was surprising that Mabel, who was taught just the same, could so blindly follow one tenet while utterly ignoring another.”

“Well...yes.”

“So go eat something, Mabel. Take something from the cellar. Gob won’t mind.” Gob ran a very tight kitchen, but Zar was right in that he would be understanding in Mabel’s case.

“Zar, I can just wait till morning.”

“No, now, Mabel. Go eat now.”

Mabel smiled, embarrassed. “I might just throw it up tomorrow morning.”

Zar rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t matter, Mabel. Something is better than nothing, even if most of it gets thrown up. You know Lu and my mother have told you that. Why didn’t they make you eat?”

“I told them I was sick and would eat after.”

“Figures they would believe you.” Zar shook her head.

Mabel shifted her weight. She grabbed one arm with the other, clamming up. More tears appeared. “I’m a bad mother, aren’t I?”

Zar hugged Mabel, not giving her the chance to close in on herself again. “No, you’re not. You’re just confused about things. That’s okay. It’s okay. Just go eat. And whatever happens, the healer can fix things. I’m sure of it.” She wiped her thumb across Mabel’s cheeks, dispelling the tears, and kissed her forehead. “Here, I’ll go with you.”

“But you need to sleep.”
“Not as much as you need a friend.”

The two left the room and made their way into the hall. A few moments later, they emerged into the kitchen. Dark as it was, no torches being lit unlike in the common room of prayer and only the light being that of a few stars filtering in through the windows, they had to feel their way to the cellar. Gob’s kitchen was always organized, and both of them had been through it so often it might as well have been day, so Zar didn’t have an issue navigating the dark. As a dark elf, however, Mabel was gifted with nocturnal sight. Mabel’s luminescent eyes, not unlike those of a cat, glowed like white, smokey orbs in the dark, and so Zar felt unafraid in letting her enter the near-pitch black kitchen ahead of her.

In no time they found the cellar door. Zar bent down, feeling the edges for the latch. Unfortunately she forgot that the latch was closed and locked. “Damn. Of course it’s locked,” she whispered to herself. “It’s always locked, Zar.”

“We’ll come back in the morning,” Mabel said.

“No,” Zar harshly whispered. “I know how to pick it. I just need a few things….” She stood up. Consulting for a moment her memory of the kitchen’s arrangement, she gingerly felt her way to the drawers along the far wall. Counting the third one from the right, she pulled open the drawer and rummaged through its contents. “Here we go.” Zar had found what she was looking for: a pair of skewers. She returned to the floor in front of the lock and set one skewer down. The other she pried into the tight space between the cellar door and it’s frame within the floor. Using her finger to measure the right length, she wedged the skewer in only a fraction of an inch and bent the skewer down, forcing the tip of the skewer to bend into a right angle. Feeling the result of her work, she was satisfied and proceeded to the lock.
The dark made it more difficult than normal, but she had first learned the trick from Zethien, a woman that had come to the Temple off of the streets. For Zar’s kindness, she taught Zar how to pick locks, and even fashioned a lockpick for her from an old, iron lynch pin. Having long since broken the lockpick from use, Zar learned how to get around the loss with other methods. Zar had used this particular method at least ten times before, and she had picked this particular lock at least three other times.

After less than a minute, Zar popped the lock. The shackle groaned as Zar pulled it out from the body, and with a quick twist had slid it out from the latch. She flipped the latch open, felt about for the handle, and pulled up on it with her full might once she located it. The cellar door creaked open. Zar, as gently as she could, let the door down to rest on the other side of the cellar opening. “There,” said Zar. “Now you can eat.” She turned back to Mabel.

Mabel’s skin blended perfectly with the night, though her silver hair and eyes were almost a source of light all their own. Other dark elves, whose hair was also dark, could practically disappear in the night, something Zar sometimes envied in Cass and Anavere. If Mabel had hair they they had, Zar wouldn’t even know Mabel was there. “Well, uh...what should we eat?” Mabel asked.

“I’m not particularly hungry, but you must be starving. What do you want?” Zar slowly marched down the steps into the cellar room.

Mabel followed, but she was slowly and only descended the first few steps. “Are there roots? Carrots, potatoes?

“We’d have to boil the potatoes, and I’d rather not take all night. But we do have carrots. We always have those.” If the kitchen was dark, the cellar was utterly black. Not a thing could be seen. But again, Zar knew the cellar well enough to feel out its contents. On the left, on the shelf
closest to the ground, lay the sacks of raw vegetables. With enough focus, Zar was able to feel which sack held the carrots. She pulled open the drawstring and pulled two carrots out. “Here.” She returned to the stairs and held up the carrots for Mabel to grab. “Don’t eat them yet. I’ll cut the outer skin off for you. And you’ll need something else too.” Zar was thinking specifically of bread, but again, that was easy enough to find. On the opposite wall, several loaves of thick-crusted bread were wrapped together with grains of rice in wax paper. Zar grabbed one of these and returned up the stairs.

As Zar took the carrots from Mabel and set them and the bread on the kitchen island, Mabel asked her, “Do you think the healer...do you think it would be possible for the healer to, uh…”

Zar frowned. “Do I think what is possible?”

Mabel’s voice was hesitant, but it came out hopeful at the same time. “Do you think it would be possible for the University to take my baby?”

Zar didn’t know what to say. She stood still for a moment. Remembering she needed to skin the carrots and cut the bread, she quickly resumed her movement and searched the drawers again for a knife, but her mind was as equally occupied with Mabel’s question as it was feeding her. “I do not know,” Zar finally said, having begun cutting the skin off of the carrots on the kitchen island. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up, though.”

“If the baby were given away right away…” Mabel’s face, Zar imagined, was all dreams and well-wishing. “The University could take the child, even if it were born a girl.”

“It’s not a thought I would entertain.”

“Even if I didn’t see the child. Even then…”
Zar had finished the carrots. She hastily grabbed the bread. “Mabel. You can talk to the healer when he comes next, but for now don’t assume anything.”

“Do you think that’s why my mother left me here? Because I would be taken care of?”

Zar sliced off the heel of the loaf and started into the next cut. “Mabel, you’re not going to get anything good out of this.”

“I always hated my mother for that, but what if she just wanted to protect me?” An uneasy quiver came to Mabel’s voice. “What if my child will hate me?”

“Mabel, please, I-” Zar cut into her thumb with the knife. Hot blood poured out immediately. “Gods be fucking damned,” she growled. She sucked on her thumb and then pressed it hard into the folds of her robe.

“What happened?” Mabel asked. At least the potential to go into a cry sounded as though it had subsided.

“I cut my gods-be-damned thumb.” After fearing the pressure she was applying wasn’t enough, she grabbed the end of her sleeve with the hand she had cut, made a fist around her thumb with it, and lifted her hand as high above her head as she could. “Brandur heals one cut and I give myself another. The irony.”

“Thank-you for the food, at least,” Mabel said. She took the knife and finished cutting the slice of bread that Zar had sliced halfway through. She tossed that slice aside. She cut off another slice and tossed that aside as well, getting rid of any remaining blood that could have been on the loaf of bread. “I’ll be okay with the carrots and slice of bread. We can go to bed.”

Zar groaned, but she had at least fed Mabel. “I still don’t understand how you thought you could get away with not eating, though,” Zar said. “There are mornings you’ve been so hungry I thought you’d eat your own hand.”
“I don’t know. I do know better. I...I was frustrated.”

“With what?”

“With wondering if I even want the child.”

Zar’s surprise was enough that for a moment she forgot about her thumb. “Mabel, why wouldn’t you want the baby? Even the day you found out you were pregnant you were happy.”

“A girl will be brought up with me here. A boy will likely leave, and I will not be able to go with him.” Mabel began eating the bread. Zar took the time to close the cellar door (much more difficult while trying to keep pressure on an elevated hand), but even when she had closed the shackle of the padlock back into place, Mabel was still silent. She was eating a carrot now, silently chewing save for the pointed crunches when she bit off a chunk of carrot. After the first carrot, Mabel spoke again. “I don’t want a daughter to be what I am.” She took a bite of the second carrot, chewing this one slowly as well. “And I don’t want a son to grow up without a mother.”

Zar let her speak, but after the carrot was finished and the silence continued afterwards, Zar interrupted. “Mabel, let’s go to bed. Sleep on this a little.”

“I’ve been sleeping on it the whole damn time.” It was unlike Mabel to swear. She was angry.

“Still, let’s go to bed. We’re not going to figure this out tonight.” Zar made for the door. Mabel stayed still. Zar waited by the door, looking back at the streak of silver hair and the vibrant boles of light hovering by the table. Eventually Mabel moved, shuffling towards Zar. They both exited the kitchen and made their way back to the sleeping quarters.

Fortunately, no one stirred when they returned, but they said nothing more after leaving the kitchen. They both entered their beds as quietly as they could. Zar wasn’t sure when Mabel
went to sleep, but she kept herself awake for sometime, watching Mabel drift off. Mabel, who at first faced her when they slept, turned over after several minutes, and for all the world sounded like she was sleeping: gentle breathing, a steady rise and fall of her torso. But Zar watched on, wondering, worrying, waiting for some sign that things would be alright for Mabel. What sign she looked for, she wasn’t sure, and before long she too succumbed to sleep.
Chapter 5

On his way back to the Perch, Brandur said not a word. He told Feldor where to take him, something Feldor already knew, and that was all. The night passed by quietly, the wagon’s wheels pushing steadily over half-cracked cobblestones and past barely-lit alleyways. The wheels’ constant turning was the loudest sound emanating through the air, but the occasional creak of forlorn shutters or the lone steps of some midnight pedestrian checkered the night’s otherwise peaceful ambiance. With the slow rumbling of the wagon through the passageways of the Pit, both broad and narrow, there came the mild jerks and bobs of the wagon itself, but Brandur didn’t mind. He sat still atop the bench in the rear of the wagon, overlooking the passing homes and shops. The cracked brick exteriors were noted, as were the missing bricks that should have been here and there, and the crooked frames that seemed to mark every building. Most windows were closed, wooden shutters or cloth coverings hiding what might lie inside. Some windows were nothing more than dark, roughly rectangular holes, revealing nothing to passersby, their lack of cover notwithstanding. Alleys zigzagged without apparent logic, giving Brandur, who was used to straight and open streets, the sensation that he was in a maze. The added darkness of night only enhanced the feeling. He knew he was not in a maze, reminded himself that he was not in a maze, and that the driver knew where to go even if he was uncertain. Still, a fantasy entered into his mind more than once in which he was by himself within the Pit at the night’s darkest hour. In the fantasy there was nothing present to fear, no apparent threat, but something about the quaint, somber glow of the few torches that dotted the Pit, something about
the way the wind whistled for only seconds through unseen crannies and doors, something about
the isolation of being in the middle of a labyrinth--something was odd about it. Something not
quite right. Something suspicious.

Brandur wasn’t in the habit of entertaining the ridiculous, however, so he banished the
thought from his mind. But he found, despite his continual effort, that the thought came back.
There he was, in the middle of a spiderweb of potential routes, none of them any better looking
than the others, and, somewhere in the winding, turning, shifting, crawling passageways,
something waited. There he was, impossibly alone in some small, quiet space of what might have
been a world of brick and cobblestone nexes, something only a god could riddle out. But despite
the extremity of the feeling of being isolated, it coexisted still with that nagging certainty that
something waited, something close by….

Brandur, as one gifted in the practice of the magical arts, understood that his perception
of the world was indeed rare. He likened it to having a second set of senses by which he could
taste and see and feel and hear magic, in at least a number of its forms, as it appeared throughout
the world. Streams, waves, walls, flames, lines, winds, puddles, blobs, sheets, doors--magic took
a number of “shapes” and instantiations, and none of them were fully understood. None of them
were understood to even a decent degree. But a few things were known, a few patterns
recognized, a few discoveries stumbled upon. Stumbling was the word for it too. Even the most
learned and experienced of the University’s instructors hardly dared inch outward into the
unknown nature of what magic was and how magic worked. Too many accidents had taken
place. Too many horrible discoveries. While some scholars were more brazen than others, the
most anyone could do was cautiously stick a toe into the waters of what yet remained to be
known. It was compared by Brandur’s instructor Master Abbus to men exploring a cave. What
light they had only illuminated where they had already been, and even then some dark discovery or accidental offense might come roaring up like a bear to strike down whoever was unfortunate enough to have chosen a wrong path or to have simply stepped on just the right spot to cause a cave in.

Brandur was wary of the magic he could interact with, but he was also fairly confident in what he had learned in his time at the Academy. Despite how many miles yet the University had to go before making real progress in understanding magic, what was learned was immediately beneficial, and as long as steps were replicated with consistency, a consistent result could be counted on. That was why the creation of alchemical potions was particularly valuable: it was the branch of magical studies easiest to quantify. This much of one ingredient, that much of another. Manipulate the magic within the ingredients according to formula and lo, a potion specifically created to mend torn flesh or to grow crops or to purify water.

What was understood the least in the study of magic was the working of wonders. There was no curriculum at all by which to even begin understanding such things. All that the University had to understand them by--all that anyone had to understand them by--were the recorded instances of such wonders. The Temple called them miracles, moments in which the gods acted directly through human instruments, but nomenclature hardly mattered. The Temple of the Twelve knew barely more about wonders, or miracles, than the University did. The only understanding the Temple claimed to have which the University did not was the explanation that one’s dedication to the gods improved one’s chances of working a miracle. After all, why would the gods act through someone who did not seek out their wisdom? No, it made much more sense for the gods to act through those who most passionately devoted themselves to pursuing the Wisdom of the All-Being. If anyone who performed a miracle seemed, at first, not to follow in
the lessons of the All-Being, then it was explained that their devotion was unknown to the public and that they secretly had been pursuing Wisdom apart from any outward appearance of such. That’s what the Temple taught, at least. It explained why a number of the few people to ever perform a miracle seemed, as historians put it, “in conflict with the Temple.”

But what was theory, what was speculation, compared to the utter lack of knowledge the Temple and the University possessed on the matter? A handful of men and women, according to a scarce few stories handed down for centuries (and subject to mutation for as many years as well), did things on monumental levels that no one could explain. Aden of Cathera reportedly drowned an entire coastal city “for the sinfulness of its inhabitants,” as the Temple claimed. Malora of the White Wilds hypnotized and then commanded the dragon Thasanuuras, last of the great beasts, and compelled him to burn down the tower of Mok the Witch, thus saving the northwestern province of Goshon. That was again, of course, because of Mok’s sinfulness. She was said to abduct and eat children, however, so no one challenged that particular claim.

The University did not attempt to describe the wonder weavers, as they were called, in terms of religious explanation. Nor did they try to piece together the weaver’s actions as being connected, as many popular theories did. What made things even more complicated was sorting out the real stories from the false ones. A small number of scholars from other schools in Great Goshon dedicated themselves to the parsing out the facts from the fiction. It required finding multiple accounts of the same story, deciphering between the accounts what really happened, and investigating with their own use of magic the sites upon which the accounts described the wonders to have occurred. Confirmations were rare, but the stories were numerous. Even New Malinsburg had its number of stories, ranging from the summoning of other dragons to the revival of dead men to the shifting of the Ibenes River running through the city. There were a
number of other stories floating around the city, mostly in the Pit. The stories were entertaining, and a number of them gave a sort of dignity to the Pit, so their credibility among the Pit residents was understandable.

Oddly, one of the stories about the Pit did, in fact, feature a maze of sorts. If Brandur recalled correctly, one of the myths spoke of a lone adventurer’s attempts at navigating a great maze here, right where the Pit lay upon the earth, and just as big as the city, or at least the west half of it. Yes, he was recalling it more fully now. Some wanderer named Ellid, Ellid being an agreed upon placeholder name; know one knew the real wander’s name. He came here in pursuit of some boon (a lot of the stories featured treasure hidden in the Pit, and that for the obvious that it made the Pit seem more valuable than it was), and he had to do battle with some other thing in the maze. What that thing was exactly varied between stories as much as faces between people. For some, a demon. For others, a wizard. For others still, a dragon. A golem, a giant wolf, an invisible lion, a creature that was half-man and half-fish. The answers to question of what Ellid fought ventured from respectable to outright comical. The only agreement between the tales was that the thing Ellid did battle with, whoever or whatever it was, was called Azabon. But not a single detail could be confirmed beyond that. Nothing was written down. Ellid did not make it back alive out of the maze in the stories, and of course if he was the only one there to report what happened and didn’t make it out alive, then any account of the story had to be fictional. It’d would be like a man describing his own burial: nonsensical.

All the same, the inspiration for the maze portion of the stories made sense. The Pit, in a certain light, was a maze. It certainly felt that way, now, among the hodge-podge of houses and alleys and small walkways between the second and third stories of the buildings lining the streets.
It was disorienting. It was unnerving.

But now that he really looked around, Brandur realized that the wagon was very close to the river. He could hear it well enough. A few turns more and the path entered onto a wider street than most, and at its end, though it was several feet away still, was the welcome sight of a bridge gate. As usual, both guards were posted, standing at either side of portcullis, a welcome sight, and above each guard a torch, framing the gate in wonderfully orange warmth. Brandur, delighting in the vision, felt a tad ashamed that he should be so perturbed by the Pit at night. He wasn’t used to the environment, he reasoned. And it was, statistically speaking, much more dangerous. Though Brandur could hold his own in a fight, it wouldn’t matter if the assailant had the jump on him. One swift knife slash from the dark and it’d be over. It didn’t seem that that would happen now though. The wagon approached the gate, and the guards lifted the portcullis once Brandur revealed who he was.

As the driver passed through, Brandur looked back again. More than ever, the Pit resembled crates stacked on top of each other, architecture and engineering be damned. The Pit seemed to have a life of its own, a sprawling brick-and-mortar clover checked only by the Ibenes, the ocean, and the uneven terrain that marked the western and southern end of the Pit, and even then here and there a new extension appeared, be it a house, a shop, a shed, or something else. Brandur knew this because his father worked as the city’s development planner, and every unauthorized brick angered him. But nothing his father did halted the odd nature of the Pit. It would be interesting for Brandur to set up his healing practice here among the general craze and activity of it all. At least the Temple offered a sense of organization and structure. And at the Temple the sense that something watched and waited was not present.
As Brandur turned around to view East Haven, he felt better. He was home. He was safe. *Safe*, he thought. *What do I fear that I now feel I’m safe from?* Answering the question would mean entertaining again the scenario of his being lost among a world-sized labyrinth, so he didn’t and dropped the thought altogether.

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“Welcome home,” Feldor said. He spoke listlessly, his weariness more than apparent. They had pulled up to the front gate of Brandur’s home located at the end of a winding path through Brandur’s father’s estate.

Brandur grabbed his bag and hopped off of the wagon. “Thank-you. Get some sleep.” He waved to the driver, a gesture the driver was too tired to bother responding to. He turned to the gate, pulled a key from his bag, and unlocked the gate lock. In a moment he was walking up the front steps, through the patio, up more steps to the front doors, and through those doors into the foyer. There a servant stood greeting him.

“Evening, sir,” he said, taking Brandur’s robes from him.

“Evening, Martin,” Brandur said. He left Martin behind him and headed straight for the parlor. “Do we still have any of the southern import whisky?”

“We do, sir. Shall I pour you a glass?”

“No, that’ll be all. You may retire.” Brandur pushed open the swinging doors into the parlor and marched straight for the cask of whiskey resting on the barrel rack. He heard Martin say something about thanks and a good night, but he wasn’t really paying attention.

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The room was dark. Brandur set his satchel on the parlor table and, as he was headed for the barrel of whiskey, he paused enough to focus. “Usna iquvus,” he said, furrowing his brow. Above, a slab of marble, bolted to the ceiling and carved to represent the twirling, elongated nature of a dragon’s body, began to glow.”

“It always fascinates me,” came a voice, “how you do that.”

Startled, Brandur turned. At the other end of the room, sitting at the parlor table, his father Tharbrant watched like a hawk, hands folded right in front of his face, his eyes peeking out from above his knuckles.

“Gods be damned, father,” Brandur said. He turned back around, grabbed a flagon from off a hook on the wall, and poured it full of whiskey. “Did you command Martin’s silence, or are you just creepy enough to make your way down here without him hearing?”

Tharbrant chuckled. “Both.”

Brandur rolled his eyes, glad that his father couldn’t see it. “Well, at least you take pride in it.”

Tharbrant drew himself upright. “Gurst told me you decided to start a healing practice in the Pit.”

Brandur knew this conversation would happen sooner or later, so he took a sip of whiskey and braced himself for the interrogation. “It makes sense. There are plenty of people to practice on.” Brandur, satisfied with the amount of whiskey in his flagon, snagged a short glass off of the bar, and took a seat at the table. He sat opposite his father.

“He told me that you’re practicing at the Temple.”

Brandur poured a finger into the glass and downed it. He winced, but the aftertaste was rather agreeable. He poured another finger.
“Nothing to say on your behalf? That’s unlike you.”

Brandur frowned, scoffing. His threw back the drink again, sighing when he finished.

“There’s no need to explain myself. It’s a clean, well-ordered place that acts as a common space for the locals. Why not set up there?”

“I didn’t think you could stomach the...philosophies there.”

“Please…”

His father took a softer tone. “Admittedly, it worried me that you were trying, in some way, to connect with your mother.”

Brandur glared. He poured another drink, this time a full glass.

“I know it’s been years, but things change,” Tharbrant said. “People sometimes revisit old memories in new ways.”

“Well, when I start practicing my craft at her grave, then you can worry.” He took a sip.

“Until then, don’t bother me about it.”

“Don’t take that tone with me just because I care about you.”

“Oh, is that why you asked?”

Tharbrant looked away. “I don’t want you getting ideas.”

“Religion’s the last thing I need. If anything this whole venture will remind me how stupid it is.”

Tharbrant stood up. “I don’t want you getting mugged either.” He moved to the bar and grabbed his own glass. “Those people have no refinement, no brains. They’re practically savages.”

“They’re people with problems, many of those being illness and untreated conditions.”

Brandur took a long swig.
“They’re ruthless no-goods.” Tharbrant poured his own glass of the whiskey. “You start healing them and they’ll start taking advantage of you. Before you know it they’ll be threatening you, or worse.”

“You act like I’m a child.”

“You are a child. My child.” Tharbrant stood beside Brandur, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m allowed to think of your well-being.”

“I’ll be your son, but I won’t be a child. Don’t treat me like one.”

“Fine.” Tharbrant removed his hand. Brandur brushed his shoulder off. “If you want to risk your life, then it’s your life with which to do so.”

“For gods’ sakes, Father, it’s not dangerous.”

“It would be much safer, much more predictable, for you to practice your craft here.”
Tharbrant sat back down at the far end of the table. “I meet with the most powerful people in the city. I can procure for you any sick or wounded person you’d need.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Of course it’s the point.” Tharbrant took a sip. He recoiled. “What the hell is this?”

“Southern import. From Tree Crest.”

“Damn.” He studied the glass in mild horror. “Regardless, I can get you all the patients you'd need.”

“And they’d all have a minor cough. Three of them might have a sprained ankle.”

“I’m head minister of city development. I can get you more than just coughs and sprains.”

“Oh, so you’ll bring Pit residents here, to East Haven, where no one wants them?”
“I have ways of making it work.” He was referring to his network of subordinates, the head of whom was Gurst.

“Have you perhaps considered that I want to help the people of the Pit, or is that too much of a stretch for you?”

Tharbrant scoffed. “See, this is why I drink. You say ridiculous things.”

Brandur downed the rest of his glass, slammed it on the table, and stood up. “You’re an ass.”

“One, don’t you ever disrespect me, boy.” Tharbrant too gulped down the rest of his drink. “I’m your father, and I’m not half as stupid as you are about how the world works.”

Brandur poured another glass from his flagon and turned around so he couldn’t see his father.

“Don’t you turn away from me. I’m talking to you.” Brandur heard the all too familiar edge that he added to his voice. He remained facing away. “You want to prolong the suffering of doomed people. They’re ignorant, they do nothing to help themselves, they feed on the strong, and almost all of them are sub-human. You’ll be helping people that we used to be at war with.”

Tharbrant had moved into his lecturing tone of voice. He no longer cared about conversation, Brandur knew. He cared about being right. There was no arguing about what was right, and any attempt to debate the matter was met with lecturing. Lecturing and threats, if one resisted long enough. “I try to help you, and you spit in my face.”

“Gods be damned, Father, you know nothing. You have no interest in learning, no care for investigating if what you say is true.”

“I care about my people. My people!” He dashed his glass onto the floor. It shattered with a sharp crack, and its shards scattered everywhere.
Brandur watched his father, once again, lose all the aplomb and cool composure that he masqueraded around with. This side of his father showed more of who he was than any other. Brandur closed his eyes in disgust only to open them the next moment with open disdain in his heart. “Now who’s the child?”

“Boy, I swear on my own head I’ll tan--” He stopped, collecting himself.

“This ‘boy’...would love to see you try to lay a hand on me. In case you’ve forgotten, you’re twice my age.”

At that moment Gurst came strolling into the parlor. “You know,” he said to Brandur, “I’m twice your age too, and I could fight you like you were a chicken.”

“You’re full of shit,” Brandur said. “And why are you here?” he asked as he paused bringing his drink to his lips.

“I heard something break,” Gurst said. “I needed to make sure the fight wasn’t getting too violent.

“What’s breaking is my patience,” said Tharbrant. However, his tone had returned to a composed level. Even if Tharbrant was inwardly violently arrogant, he was utterly prideful too, and his own posture was a point of pride Tharbrant was keen to maintain. At least for the public. “You’re partly to blame,” he said, accusing Gurst. “You took him to the Temple today.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Gurst asked.

“Well apparently it’s filled with monsters and deranged people,” Brandur said. “If you were listening to our conversation at all you had to have heard my father for yourself.”

“He’s not completely wrong,” Gurst answered, pulling out a chair from the table. He dropped onto it and put his hands behind his head, and then he propped his feet up on the table.
“‘He’s not completely wrong’? You were the one who wanted me to see the temple,” Brandur argued. “I’m baffled that you’re not insulted.”

“The Temple is good. The practices are good,” Gurst said, maintaining his nonchalance. “I’d know. In the military, the faith helps you. It’s keeps you from going mad. But these folk? They’re a pile of cowshit, aren’t they?”

Brandur reeled with disbelief. “Just my fucking luck,” he muttered under his breath. He jabbed a finger at his father while lurching forward to sneer as hard at Gurst as he could. “My father is insulting them for being religious, and in case you’ve forgotten since this morning, you’re religious.”

“He thinks the poor are idiots for being religious. They’re idiots for other reasons. Tharbrant don’t see that like I do. They’re a bunch of morons for other reasons. Always doing the same thing, every day, changing nothing, always just dealing with the suffering instead of getting out. It’s all stupid.”

“Gods, boy, will you listen to reason?” Tharbrant asked. “Even he knows they’re idiots for staying how they are.”

“The fuck does that mean, ‘Even he’?” Gurst asked.

“It means he thinks you’re an idiot too,” Brandur said. “And for siding with him, you are.”

“It means you aren’t a scholar,” Tharbrant said. He started pacing, hands behind his back, making his way around the table towards Brandur. “But you are, and it’s ridiculous that you would help the lot of them.” He shook his head. “Sub-human. Wastes of resources.”

“Now you’re pissing me off,” Gurst said, and by the anger in his voice it was true. He quit his lounging position and bolted upright, pointing a mean finger at Tharbrant. “Being human
ain’t have anything to do with it. You know how many times an orc saved my life in the army? How many goblins died to protect others? How many elves--"

“Save it, you oaf,” Tharbrant growled. “I don’t care what they were in the military of Ustos. We’re not in Ustos. We’re in Zonon, and Governor Brackett thinks they’re a nuisance. If they don’t like it, they can leave.” Tharbrant pounded a fist on the table. “And you can go with them if you want.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Gurst said. He turned, kicked his chair out of his way and left.

“Lovely how you treat the staff,” Brandur said.

“Shut up, welp.” Whatever effort Tharbrant might have put into his composure was woefully lacking now. The stray hairs falling in front of his face and the natural scowl that contorted it were telltale signs. But Tharbrant breathed deep. He brushed back his hair behind his head, straightened his robe, cracked his neck, and exhaled long and steady. He regained control of himself, and his hubris was at its usual, insufferable extreme. “This discussion is over.”

“And what the hell does that mean?” Brandur asked.

“It means you may do whatever you wish. The University is instructing you, not me. Besides, my concern with the Pit lies with other concerns.”

“What, inventing false charges so you can evict the ‘subhumans’ from their only homes?”

“I’m not nearly so petty.”

“Oh. Forgive me, sir, for forgetting how fucking noble you are.” Brandur grabbed the flagon of the table. He poured another drink, noting that he was already halfway through the flagon. He didn’t recall drinking so much of it. He was glad the argument was beginning to end, though; he’d be near to reeling soon.
“Nobility lies in loyalty, and I’m as loyal as anyone to New Malinsburg’s well-being, and the governor’s will, and by extension to the king and to the emperor.”

“Jolly.” Brandur said, oozing sarcasm. He sipped his whiskey

Tharbrant resumed his pacing, hands once more behind his back. With slow steps he walked up to Brandur and again placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not the greatest of fathers. I’m angry she’s gone too.” Brandur couldn’t look at Tharbrant, but he had enough presence of mind to know not to argue now. Being upset about the loss of his wife, Brandur’s mother, was often nothing more than something to excuse Tharbrant’s behavior, but the memory hurt Brandur enough that he could not help but give his father the benefit of the doubt. Tharbrant rubbed his cheeks and chin. “You might doubt it, but I think of your well-being too.” Brandur took a sip. The light above them, which had remained at a steady twilight medium since Brandur entered the room, glowed a little brighter. Tharbrant looked up, smirking. “Think on my words. I'm retiring.”

Tharbrant removed his hand, returning it to where both hands were folded behind his back. He paced out of the parlor and into the foyer. Brandur listened to his father’s footsteps ascend the western staircase and drop to soft thuds as they reached the carpeted hall above. A door opened, closed, and all was silent.

Brandur stayed where he was. He downed the rest of his drink, and gently rested the glass on the table. For several minutes, he did not move. The light above lowered its brightness steadily, finally fading the room into darkness. Brandur still did not move, not for some time.

After a several moments, Brandur breathed loud and long. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. He grabbed satchel and left the room.

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Brandur walked the streets of the Perch alone. That’s how he wanted it. Every so often a
guard, posted here and there underneath a glowstone hoisted up on poles in the middle of the
street, would shift his head towards Brandur as he shuffled by. But nothing was said, no
comments or eye contact. If he weren’t as drunk as he was now, he might have gone the back
way to the University, but that required some dexterity and a mind not so pensive, so he resigned
himself to simply walk and to encounter whatever he may.

The distance wasn’t too grand for a night’s worth of walking. About an hour with a
normal pace. The mood mixed with the alcohol would add another half hour for Brandur, but he
didn’t mind. The opportunity to let his mind float for the time being was nice. To be here, in the
street, in the world, but not to bother with it, to watch it as it shuffled by at a pace similar to his
own--it was a sort of bliss. Though not really. He was half an hour into his walk to the
University, and in an hour the world would return, red-faced and roiling, right back at him as
before. At least he was already drunk.

He didn’t want to give mind to the the future, however, even if it was about an hour
away. Nor did he want to give thought to half an hour ago. He’d already gone over his feelings
towards his father a thousand times, and he always arrived at the same conclusion: Tharbrant not
only loved power, he loved appearing powerful, and Brandur was one of the few things that
undid that spell. For the public, Brandur was a boon for his father. To have a son who possessed
rare, magical power was a gift all its own. The population of individuals within all of Great
Geshon who could interact with the ‘unseen element’ was less than one in seven-thousand. For
him to be top student at the University was another. The University of St. Abbernost was among
the best in Great Geshon. The the academic standards were grueling and difficult, even to the
point of death for some. But Brandur was talented and brilliant, and he knew it. Among the various social circles that mingled and gossiped throughout the Perch, his name was on their lips, be it a rumor here or an opinion there. What was talked about wasn’t always favorable, but most of it was, and so his father, whom all those circles knew about as well, looked good because Brandur looked good. The scandals surrounding Brandur’s life (usually involving a woman) weren’t enough to overshadow the accolades. For some, even, the scandals were just accolades in disguise. And even if they were true faults in the eyes of others, those others usually didn’t impinge those notions onto the merit of Brandur’s father. By and large, Brandur’s success was Tharbrant success.

The issue lay in how Brandur treated his father behind closed doors. Tharbrant, for all the pomp and austerity that he paraded around with, knew that Brandur was a threat. Brandur didn’t want to usurp his position or undermine his authority. No, the threat was more psychological. Brandur, by his very nature, was more powerful than Tharbrant ever could be. He had a natural advantage through magic. Tharbrant feared that, Brandur knew. He’d feared it, whether or not he was aware of it, for years.

Brandur caught himself. Here he was, giving all this care to the relationship he had with his father when there were other, better things to think about. Tharbrant was an unsolvable problem. Getting a chance to begin a practice in the Pit, graduating from his studies with top marks, having his pick of any of the women he came across--

Suddenly there was Zar, looking up at him from the intersection of the cobblestones and Brandur’s wobbly vision. He stopped and stood straight, blinking, taking in the reality of what was around him. He was breathing harder than he thought he should be. Perhaps it was the alcohol, but he wasn’t sure. He noted the chill of the air, the fuzzy whirl of magical force
buzzing around the nearest glowstone, the clouds, the stars beyond them, the way the chill in the air pricked his neck. He was still somewhat dizzy from the whiskey, but the walking helped combat the disorientation. What didn’t help was that he felt like he could almost see Zar standing before him, could almost see the shadow of her form on the ground, even how the shadow would have been warped by the gaps and cracks between the cobblestones. It was like she was there, her robe twirling with zest as she turned.

But then he would blink, and remember that he could see the rest of the path through her form along with the shops, the bars, and the warehouses that lined the street. But still, the color of her robe, the way the light and shadow played with the contours of her shoulders and breasts, the creases in her lips as she spoke, the way she said the word ‘careful.’ Careful?

Brandur shook his head. He ran his hand through his hair, feeling the hard curve of his ring pass over his scalp. He rubbed his eyes, and sighed. “Stop,” he said to himself. “You’re only going to make yourself mad.” He blinked more. The trace of the form he saw, or thought he saw, seemed less real now, more of an idea than a visual. Still, it bothered him. Was it the drunkenness? Was it his own mind playing magical tricks on itself?

He kept walking. He told himself to keep walking, and he told himself that he wouldn’t need to think about it if he kept walking. But he did anyway. About her, about her hand and the blood that dripped out of it. About the way her brows arched and how solidly grey her eyes were. Her hand touching his, and the warmth he felt there. Her friends, her mother. His mother. His mother’s eyes, his mother’s voice. The last thing his mother said to him. The regret that after fifteen years he was beginning to forget what she looked like. The way her ghost seemed to follow him, always watching what he did and looking down in mourning.
By the time he reached the University gates, his purposes in going there had left his mind. The guards posted on either side of the gate gave curt greetings at seeing him, and he mumbled something back, but once he was in the park that filled the space between the outer wall and the University itself, his mind traveled back to isolation, grateful that he wasn’t in anyone’s company. He walked along the stone path, winding as it did around trees and bushes and open clearings of grass and flowerbeds. In his drunken, longing, pondering state, he neither heard nor saw the shadowed figure approach him until it was nearly upon him. “Brandur.”

Brandur froze, and a chill rushed up his stomach, but in a moment he knew the figure as the man he was to meet with, and he knew he was safe. “It’s almost like you’re trying to appear mysterious,” Brandur said, hoping his sarcasm was biting enough to hide his surprise. “I told you to wait in my study.”

“I decided it was too great a risk,” the figure said. He was entirely covered in black, with not an inch of skin revealed. Black trousers with a black belt. Black leather boots and black gloves. A black, close-fitting shirt with a black hood, and even a black shroud, one that covered the entirety of his face. The shroud must have been enchanted in some way; Brandur couldn’t imagine how the man could see past it otherwise.

“Even at night?” Brandur looked around him. Nothing could be heard save for the call of a nightingale or the chirps of crickets. No footsteps or distant talking, at any rate. They seemed alone.

“Yes, even at night. Follow me.” The stranger hastened away from the path that Brandur met him on. He went north, disappearing like a phantom. Brandur followed, knowing where to go only by the soft brush his companion made with each footstep, and even then it was hard to hear and track the man. What was more annoying yet were the flora that Brandur crashed
through in an effort to keep up with the man and they way that every twig, every needle, and every outstretched branch all but lunged at him while he marched onward. He’d be lucky if none of his clothes were ripped come morning.

When they had gone what Brandur estimated to be somewhere over two-hundred feet away, the subtle sounds of the footsteps ahead of him stopped, and, after shoving himself underneath the low-hanging branches of a pair of trees, Brandur found himself within a small clearing. The pine trees he has passed through along with three others formed a sort of circle. Brandur turned about, wondering where the stranger had gone, but after a moment, he realized the man was standing right next to him.

The stranger broke the silence. “I’m glad to see you can make your way through the dark,” he said. “That might come in handy later.”

“It wouldn’t have to if we were inside.”

“As I said, it’s too risky. I don’t know if there are any Ashen agents working at the University. Not to mention your study has no immediate exists I could take advantage of should we have been discovered.”

“Exits? Do you mean windows?”

“Yes. In a building that big—” he turned to face the towering structure, shown only by the exterior torches glowing through the branches and needles of the trees “—I prefer to have a swift exit. Lot’s of people can hide on the inside. It’s easier to manage an escape when there’s a window.

“Gods.” Brandur rubbed his face, sobering up as much as he could, grateful the walk and subsequent chase took care of much of the alcohol. Still, a combination of frustration and weariness caused Brandur to sit. He squatted down and sat cross-legged, one arm propping his
head up by the chin. The stranger remained standing. “You’re not going to join me down here on this lush, velvet grass?”

“I don’t like sitting. Not for too long, anyway.”

Brandur shrugged. “To each his own.”

“It leaves one too inert when one sits for too long.”

“Good to know,” Brandur said. “Do you hate sleeping too?”

“Yes.”

Brandur looked up with an almost pained confusion. “You know that’s not very good for one’s health.”

“Neither is exorbitant drinking.”

“You know, as a student of those arts and magics most beneficial to the industry of medical healing, it is with the utmost gravity by which I implore thee to consider not being an absolute stiff.”

“Stiffs stay alive longer.”

“Oh. Goodie. That must be hard for you to hear, seeing as how your personality would be better suited for the dead.”

“Have you ever met a dead person?”

“I’m a healer. We use dead bodies to study. I’ve met more dead people than I can count.”

“Ones that still possess their personality?”

“What?”

The man shook his head. “I digress.” He folded his arms, “Let’s discuss what we came here to discuss.”
“You mean what you came here to discuss. I came here to get to where I thought we were going to discuss things.”

The man suspired, and the beginnings of annoyance were clear. “Have you found anyone yet?”

“First off, what is your name?”

“My name?”

“Yes, your name. Or at least something to call you. Not to be rude, but the anonymity is somewhat jarring. Like I can’t trust you.”

The man seemed taken aback, but he gave an answer all the same. “You may call me...let’s see...Nightingale.”

“Are you actually that unimaginative?”

“You’d be surprised how creative I can be. But Nightingale is certainly not my real name, and it’s certainly not a code name for me either. Frankly I don’t care what you call me, but I’m not giving you a name someone could trace back to me.”

“So be it. Nightingale.”

“Well then, Brandur,” Brandur mocked a smile. “Has the ring reacted to anyone? To anything? At all?”

Brandur thought for a moment. “No...no it has not.”

“The stone wouldn’t be incorrect, and you know that. You’d feel it.”

Brandur fingered the ring on his right hand, rubbing the simple, unpolished metal, and on it the plane black square cut rock. All Brandur knew about it was that the rock was bathed—for years if he was told correctly—in the magic of a specific relic. The rock, though useless, would react to the touch of a person the same way the relic would: with longing. “I know.”
“We’d have been lucky to have found someone so soon, so my disappointment is minor. We’ll need to hurry, though. The Ashen have one of the stones as well.”

“How do you know?”

“I killed one of their agents.”

If Brandur was at all inebriated before, he was utterly sober now. “You...killed a man.”

“Yes, a troll. I was on the wharf doing my own search when I overheard him. He was careless. He was drunk—” Brandur mocked a smile again “—and was blabbing about the stone to a fish merchant. Fortunately, doing him in was simple. It’s amazingly easy to ‘fall’ off a pier when you’re inebriated, and it’s amazingly hard to swim too. Another reason not to drink.”

“Yes, well...being drunk has its disadvantages.”

“I’m glad we’re clear on that.”

Brandur rubbed his chin. “Do they know that I’m working for you?”

The figure shrugged. “I can’t say. If they do, our moles haven’t found out. The real trouble is trying to find their moles among our members.”

“Have we found any ever?”

“Yes, twice. One was a goblin woman caught trying to kill a number of us in our sleep.”

“How did you catch her?”

“Fortunately I was her first intended victim, and she made the mistake of thinking I was sleeping.” A queasy chill sprung into Brandur’s neck. He decided not to mention it.

“And the other?”

“The other was in connection to the troll. He was too drunk for his sentences to make full sense, but he kept saying the phrase, ‘Right out from under them.’ He said more too. He described a meeting that sounded like one I was a part of some weeks ago, and he also talked
about a ‘sneaky she-elf’ that managed to snag a particular ring. He mentioned to the merchant his not being able to say who it was, but he was dumb enough to describe the elf in enough detail that I could figure out her identity. Sure as the sun, she was one of us.”

“Yes, but who was it?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Brandur was annoyed. “And why wouldn’t I want to know? I’m a part of this...outfit now, aren’t I”

“Because, based on what rumors and hearsay I’ve encountered, I’m almost positive you’ve slept with her.”

“Good gods.” Brandur shot up. He would have pressed Nightingale for an answer, but he was too preoccupied with running through the list of elven women he had slept with. Though she was certainly not on the list, Zar flashed to his mind. “Was she a student? One of my father’s workers?”

“If it eases your mind, we got to her before we got to you, so to speak. You weren’t one of us at the time.” Brandur was still awestruck. Had the timing been different, she might have killed him. Even more frightening a thought, he might have had to kill her. “The point here,” Nightingale continued, “is that I can’t fully guarantee your protection while you endeavor to find the one we’re looking for. We can only hope they don’t find him first and do our best to stop them in the meantime.”

“What happens when we find this...person of interest?”

“We use him to stop a potential massacre. And the only way to do that is to find someone who can wield the relic.”

“What is this relic, by the way? What is this resting place? And what massacre”
“Terran didn’t tell you much, did she?”

Brandur recalled all he could that night. A dark bar where he met Terran. A darker alley where he followed her. A trip into the sewers where he thought the smell alone would kill him. The brief blood oath she made him give to join the Greywings. And the quick description of what the ring did and what he was to do with it. “No. She only told me that it would identify someone and that this someone was to be brought to the bar.”

“That’s like her. All secrecy, all the time.”

“As opposed to your utterly conspicuous behavior.”

“I’m cautious because I can’t help the Greywings if I’m dead.” His voice possessed a surprising measure of bite. “Listen: I can’t have you seeing me because if the Ashen find you, I don’t want you to be capable of recognizing me. And I can’t tell you my name because I don’t want you to be able to speak it to another. Understand, Brandur-” The man stooped until his face was directly in front of Brandur’s. “-that you were contacted and recruited by us because you offer us the opportunity to search more thoroughly than before. You’re a part of us only as long as you are useful to us. We can’t fully trust you at the moment.” From out of nowhere, Nightingale produced a knife and held it out before Brandur. “What if you’re another mole? What if the Ashen reached you before we did? What if you’re here to sabotage us for your own reasons? What if you’re incompetent and are more liability than asset?” With each question, Nightingale came closer with the knife until Brandur was backed into the branches of the pine tree behind him. “See, I don’t know the answers to those questions yet.” He held the knife outward, ready to strike, and Brandur wondered why it never occurred to him to reach for his own knife. He would be a fool to do so now and so remained still, and for a number of seconds neither one of them budged.
As quickly as he had advanced, Nightingale relented. He tucked the knife away in a flash of motion--quick enough that Brandur didn’t see where that was--and stepped away. “As a student of those arts and magics most beneficial to the industry of espionage, it is with the utmost gravity by which I implore thee to consider taking thy role in this organization a little more seriously.” But now Nightingale’s voice was softer once more. “Still, we aren’t soulless. Even at the top we know the value of wanting to help the world. That was the other reason we decided to contact you: you actually care. I only regret that Terran didn’t impress upon you the scope of the situation we are dealing with. She doesn’t yet know how much of an asset you could be.”

Brandur was relieved that the man, clandestine though he was, had become friendly again. Or at least no longer aggressive. He let the man’s words sink in until he responded. “So...what is the scope of the situation?”

“That is quite a story. It starts...wait.” The stranger grew silent and stood utterly still.

“What is-”

The stranger lifted a hand, halting Brandur’s speech. He turned his head this way and that, slowly, the rest of him as still as stone. After some time, he spoke in a whisper, “I hear someone.” Brandur, who listened as well, heard not a thing. “Listen, go to the same bar we contacted you in tomorrow night, and I’ll explain things to you the proper way. In the meantime, I have to go. I can’t be seen.”

“Wait, what hour?” Brandur asked, but the man was already off and away. Brandur was now kneeling, waiting to see if he might have to bolt himself. He kept listening, but he heard nothing unusual, nothing but the real nightingales and the crickets. Still he stayed put, one hand tight around the strap of his bag, the other posed to snatch his knife from his belt if need be. He stayed this way, poised for some unknown attack, for several moments, past even the point
where it felt silly. He supposed he was on edge because of the elf woman, whoever she was, that he apparently had slept with. What disturbed him was that he had not a single idea who the woman could have been. Looking back over the five years of his time at the University, there were at least ten elf women that were with him, and none of them struck him at all as being a part of an underground syndicate. Maybe she joined after sleeping with him: that was a possibility. Yes, maybe she wasn’t an Ashen double-agent until after they slept together. Brandur decided to accept that as the most truthful explanation and drop the matter. At present, he had waited for several minutes and no one had appeared. Nor did anything else out of the ordinary make itself known.

Brandur slowly rose and snuck to the edge of the copse of trees, staying within the cover of the outer branches. He looked around, seeing what he could of the darkened park. Nothing. The University, visible only by the torches that dotted the exterior, loomed ahead, ominous but otherwise placid. Brandur inched out further, convinced that whatever Nightingale thought he heard had either gone or had never been there at all. Brandur marched forward, careful to step around the foliage he had crashed through previously. Despite the eased tension, he still went slowly, keeping his focus sharp and his ears honed to the sounds of the night.

One thought, though, quickly rose up to the front of Brandur’s mind. As he walked back to the path and turned back again towards the gate, the knowledge that he would be conducting a very public healing ministry in which he’d be in personal contact with very unknown persons began to feel much more dire a situation than before.

He would do it, however. He would do it because he wasn’t a coward. He would do it because apart from the task of finding this worthy person, whoever that was, the sick still needed
a healer, and the poor still needed hope. He would do it because stopping a massacre, as
Nightingale had put it, was of utmost importance.

Brandur resumed his typical demeanor as he approached the outer gate of the University
grounds. He bid the guards have a good night, and hurried home, taking the middle of the street
where his path would be brightest and where the guards would notice any odd behavior. All the
way home, Brandur felt alert but safe.

When he finally entered through the door of his room at his father’s manor, he locked the
door, something he hadn’t done in years, and secured the windows. Fortunately the metal lattice
work between the panes didn’t leave gaps big enough for a person to fit through. When securing
the windows, however, Brandur remembered what Nightingale had said. He decided to leave the
windows unlocked and instead took out a length of twine from his bag. He tied a length of twine
from one window to the handle of his servant bell, and that he put on the edge of his bedside
table. He used more twine to connect the second window, further from his bed, to a large glass
vase that sat next to his desk at the other end of the room. If the windows, both of which swung
open like shutters were to open, they would drag either the bell or the vase off of its base and
cause enough noise upon hitting the floor to wake Brandur.

He admitted to himself that he felt stupid setting up his windows in such a fashion, but he
decided it was better to be smart and embarrassed than dead, so he settled himself into bed and
waited for sleep to take him. Before he passed into unconsciousness, he thought over his soon-to-
begin ministry at the Temple, and it excited him. He would like to have said that what excited
him most was the chance to earnestly practice his craft or that he would be conducting secret
work for a good cause or that he was slowly leaving his father’s realm of influence. But none of
these thoughts rose above one in particular, the one that he tried to tell himself was not true. He silently lied to himself until sleep took him, but there he could not fight the truth.

When he dreamed, he dreamed of Zar’s face. He dreamed of her dance in the Temple. He dreamed of her hand on his, her eyes looking through his into those caverns within him he thought he kept so hidden.
Chapter 6

Zar found herself on a grass field, and not a single thing was in sight for miles around. Only the wind was there, and her only companions the clouds and the grass and an ocean of sunlight. Miles and miles of this and nothing more.

Zar picked up a blade of grass. Long and flat it was, and it’s edges were coarse and stiff, but these things she did not mind. She took the blade of grass and pressed one part of it between her thumbs and one part of it between the places where her thumbs met her palms, and then she held the taught blade of grass before her lips and blew fiercely upon it. The air of her breath whistled past the grass-made reed and sounded a sharp and reverberating cry. The sound echoed through the world, and, as though given life, resounded louder and louder and louder.

This continued until it stopped, the fading shrill of it vanishing as though it had never been brought into the world. But as soon as the whistle ceased to be, there came a great trumpet cry, and the ground shook to hear it. Three long blasts, each one louder than the last, issued forth from the corners of the world, and the wind howled in answer. Three mighty bursts of passion rolled headlong over the plains, and the world shifted with their weight. Three awesome bellows from a great heart longing, and the soul of the earth stood in astonishment.

With the first of these trumpets came forth the sea. Washing over all that it met, it swept away a half of the world and claimed what it found for its own. At once the seas roiled, and at once the waves crashed, and thunderous cacophony was made commonplace.
With the second of these trumpets came the fire. What was not claimed by sea was
engulfed in flame, and the heat of it was known everywhere. Long did the fire burn, and long did
the ashes fall from on high, and blackened heaps of soof were in all places to be found.

With the third of these trumpets came a small and subtle sound, and this did Zar follow.
Thrice through water and thrice through fire traveled Zar, and at the end she knew both spirits
well. She knew them and bore their marks upon her hands, one on her left and one on her right.
With the left she held water and with the right she held fire, and they held her betwixt them both.

But still the sound came, so Zar travelled on, one hand in water, one hand in fire. But lo
came a cry, and Zar knew it for weeping, and so did she weep with the cries that she heard. And
lo came another cry, and Zar knew it for laughing. So laughed Zar aloud with the laughing she
heard. And lo came a third noise, and Zar knew it for breath, so breathe did Zar softly in time
with the sound.

When ended the third sound did Zar find that place between fire and water. There, on that
shore did the waves of water halt, and there on that shore did the tongues of fire cease. There on
that shore stood another. On one hand bore he the mark of water and on the other bore he the
mark of fire. His eyes were like Zar’s eyes, open and wide.

“Whence come thee, good son?” called Zar to the other.

“Where goest thee, good daughter?” asked he in return.

“What sings thee, good son?” did Zar ask of him.

“What mourn thee, good daughter?” he asked of the woman.

“I mourn thee, good son,” answered Zar in her heart.

“I mourn me as well,” answered he with his heart.
So she held out her hands, one water, one fire, and she waited thus for him to rejoin her. But he did not. Zar waited the longer, each hand opened to receive the other. Neither hand came, though, from the man standing there. His hands waited at his side. He moved not.

“Why suffer thee, good son?” Zar asked of the man. “Come thou into my embrace, and know not this agony. Be made whole and rejoice.”

“It becomes me, the agony,” said he, “and I be rent asunder.”

She repeated: “Come thou, sufferer, into my embrace. Be made whole and rejoice.”

“Rejoice not will I, nor smile, nor laugh.”

“But heard thee laughing did I.”

“Heard thou thy own laughing, didst thee. ‘Twas I thou heard weeping.”

“Come then, thou weeper, and embrace wholeness here.”

“Nay,” said he, “for the weeping hath embittered me.”

At his saying this did the seas crash greatly, and at his saying this did the fires grow terribly. The sky above did grow dark, and night came upon them.

There shone in the eyes of this man the crashing of water and the whirling of fire, for the agony of the the world had entered unto him. But Zar advanced, full loving of this man. He did the same, not for his love but for the agony writhing within him. They met.

And Zar woke up.

~

Zar was silent that morning. She greeted others, and made light conversation at the breakfast table, but even in her speech she felt quiet. She felt like listening more, half here, half
behind herself, watching herself and all that happened to her and all that she did. She felt like being stoic, she supposed. So she listened to what everyone else was discussing. One such conversation was about Mabel.

Lu and Morga both thought Mabel was doing just fine in her pregnancy, though half of the time it seemed that she vomited shortly after waking up. “It’s normal,” they both said. To be expected. Fair enough.

Beth had, through the accumulation of moments so miniscule that most would have barely thought them to be there, finished a painting. Father Asbury, who fortunately did not think of art as superfluous, had purchased for Beth a hemp canvas, stretched over a simple wooden frame along with a number of simple jars of paint. Most of Beth’s paintings were religious in nature, often depicting the trials of the Twelve in their various mythological accounts. This one, though, depicted the view one would have from the temple’s belfry as it looked towards the governor’s mansion. She titled it “Distance.” Father Asbury marveled at it, but told Beth that he would have to keep it in his personal living quarters lest Father Crustok “read into it.” Beth understood.

Nelly had a nervous breakdown again, the second one this month. She reported afterwards that she overheard a discussion about a particular dwarf customer. Nelly, who had been owned by a dwarf before being sold to the temple, recalled a time that he beat her, and her mind convinced her that she was back at his farm, feeling his horsewhip on her back.

“That’s what Lu said, anyway,” said Ethemar. She, Cass, Bunson, and Zar were all traveling to the market that day, recounting the morning’s drama and rumors and breaking them down into the smallest pieces they could in their analysis. Bunson drove the cart, his usual stance to keep quiet and not give too much thought to what was said. But for the others, the five mile
long ride provided a decent time for talk. Ethemar continued: “Lu said she’s seen it happen before to several people. Men, women. Orcs, dwarves, goblins. I didn’t think goblins would. They seem too...sneaky to be bothered by things like that.”

“You’d be surprised,” Cass said. “Some would even say that dwarves couldn’t feel that sort of way, that you’re not sensitive enough.”

“Aye, I suppose they fucking would.” She looked concerned, her gaze looking eastward out over the sprawling jungle of uneven architecture and dirt-blasted alleyways. “They know better, though. We’re not bad people.”

“Neither are goblins.”

“You’re right. I know better than to be stupid like I am.”

“You’re not stupid,” Zar said. “You just learned wrong.”

“I suppose. Doesn’t mean it isn’t stupid.”

“At least you’re aware of it,” Cass said. “The priests aren’t, bunch of idiots. Well, most of them. But even then the good ones are idiots in less angering ways.”

“Don’t I know it,” Zar said.

“Don’t we all,” said Ethemar. “Don’t suppose we can say they learned the wrong way too?”

“Maybe,” said Cass. “You’d think years spent living with women would give them a basic understanding of how monthlies work. But maybe not.” She turned to Bunson. “Do they teach orc men what monthlies are, or are you just left to guess?”

“What?” said Bunson

“You know, monthlies. The sanguine lady. The red tide. Are orc men taught was those are or just the women?”
“I wouldn’t know. I only grew up with a father and brother.”

“Ah. Well, I suppose I’ll just have to ask the next orc to come for a blessing.”

“Good luck with that,” Ethemar said.

“All the same, the men are idiots,” said Zar. “Father Porter asked me to hold my monthly once, and I swear on all the gods I’ve told him before we can’t just hold it.”

“Even I knew that,” Bunson said.

“Well that’s one of you, at least.”

“And at least Father Asbury has a mind to learn things,” Ethemar said. “It was nice what he said about Beth’s painting. I overheard it. It was genuine.”

“He should be the head priest,” Cass said. “He’s the one that gives a shit about us.”

“But he cares too much,” Zar said. “That’s why he won’t be head priest. Head priests are supposed to look down on others a little. They’re supposed to be mean. That’s how they keep the church going. They keep a bully at the top.”

“Same with the governor,” Ethemar said, staring out at the city. Zar followed her gaze. She was looking at the governor’s mansion, half-hidden as it was by the other buildings of the city. Even so, it had a presence to it, and that was true today, it’s central tower rising like a judge up from the rest of everything around it. “There’s a reason he’s at the top. It’s ‘cause he knows how to beat someone around to get what he wants. That’s how all the humans are, always trying to see who’s better at beating up who, whether or not the winner should be calling any shots or not.”

“You think they just leaned wrong too, then?” Cass asked. “That’s a lot of people who learned wrong.”
“That’s cause it’s not just learning from their moms and dads that’s the problem.”

Ethemar said. By her voice, Zar could tell she’d had this thought several times before. “They learn from each other. They all learn from each other, whether they know it or not. You get enough humans in an area, and everything starts to be human-like. Human buildings, human cooking, human talking, human thinking. It’s gets in the fucking air, I swear. And by the time a human gets to be a grownup man or woman, they’ve been breathing that air for years. It’s in their blood then, how to be human, and that means figuring out who punches harder.”

“Right, but what if they can’t help it?” Cass asked What if it’s in their blood from the beginning?”

“Ah, but it ain’t,” Ethemar said. “Before I ended up at the temple, I lived up north, in Ustos. There’s plenty of humans there, and they weren’t like they are here. Up there they’re nice. They’re just carrots in a big pot of stew with all the other vegetables in there. Down here, seems like the carrots want the stew to be carrot stew only, if you get my meaning.”

“Yeah, of course, Ethemar,” Zar said, smiling. “I couldn’t have thought of a better analogy if I tried.”

Ethemar punched Zar. “Oh well aren’t we a fucking poet.”

Zar flinched and whimpered, but she laughed through both reactions. “Compared to you, yeah.”

“Gods, you’re annoying,” Ethemar said. She shook her head, rolled her eyes, and let well enough alone.

“Blame my mother. She raised me.”

“Explains why you steal things all the damn time,” Cass said.

“Oh please, she stopped when she had me,” Zar said.
“Doesn’t mean you didn’t learn from her,” Cass said.

“No, she really did stop. I maybe saw her take something off a patron once or twice. Nothing more. If you really want a culprit to blame, you should blame Zethien.”

“Damn right.” Ethemar said. “Zethi came off the streets. I remember that. You might have been only eight, Zar, and I don’t even think Cass was with us yet. She was hungry, bleeding from a wound on her head. Probably would have died on our front steps if Bunson hadn’t found her.”

“Mom said that too,” Zar said. “Said she would have died. Good thing she didn’t.”

“Right. Then I would have had to teach you how to nab things,” Cass said. She was smirking.

“There’s nothing you could pilfer that I couldn’t,” Zar said. “Nothing.”

“Don’t make a game of it,” Bunson said.

“Like we’d tell you if we were,” Zar said.

“You’d be surprised how much I see regardless of whether or not you’ve informed me of it.”

“What does that mean?” Cass asked.

“Means you’re good at stealing, but you’re terrible thieves.” Bunson said, his voice as flat as an anvil. “Thieves aren’t seen by anyone”

“How would you know?” Zar asked.

Bunson whipped the reins gently. The cart lurched onward, gingerly rolling through yet another crooked alley. “You’d be surprised.”

“Well, so be it,” Zar said. “The point remains that I could out-thief Cass any day.”

Cass laughed. “You fucking wish.”
“I fucking know.” They were now staring at each other, half in jest, half in challenge.

“Horseshit.”

“Horseshit’s all you’re good at stealing. You haven’t mastered sleight of hand like I have.”

Cass rolled her eyes. “Gods, you’re annoying.”

“Annoyingly good.”

“Annoyingly annoying.”

“She’s not wrong,” Ethemar said. “Been in this cart only an hour and I already want to hit you. Again.”

“Well, here’s your chance,” Zar said. She stuck her chin out towards Ethemar.

Ethemar debated it, her hand slightly reaching out and then returning to hold her chin in thought and then reaching ever slightly out again. Ethemar at last shook her head and looked away.

Zar was pleased. “Well, you-”

Ethemar’s arm flashed forward, and there came a solid clap as her flat palm slapped against Zar’s cheek. The hit was so jarring, Zar had to hold out a hand for support lest she topple too far sideways.

Cass and Ethemar immediately started laughing, and Zar thought she heard even Bunson chuckle. “That sounded like it hurt,” he said.

Zar might have been irked if she wasn’t so amused. “Well holy shit.” The others laughed more. Zar rubbed her cheek, pleasantly surprised at how much her cheek stung. “Where did you learn to hit?”

“Would you like some lessons?”
“Maybe I would.” Zar continued to rub her cheek, but it was all she could do to keep from laughing herself.

“You have enough roughhousing patrons, you learn how to wallop on a man.” Ethemar said. “Some of them even like it.”

“Yeah, I’ve had a few of them,” Zar said. “Like you to hit them, spank them. I’ve never really understood it.”

“Men are weird like that,” Cass said. “Some of them want to have power over you, and some of them want you to have power over them. And some of them don’t know what they want.”

“Do any of them?” Zar asked.

“No, not really,” Ethemar said. “Well, sort of.” Her brows crossed. She had given this some thought too. “There’s looking powerful and there’s feeling powerful. Some men want to dominate because they want to look powerful, but it’s because they don’t feel powerful, so they need to trick themselves into feeling like that.”

Cass giggled. “Is that why Father Crustok always acts like he’s about to destroy the earth when he preaches?”

“Yes, actually. I’d reckon it is,” Ethemar said.

“You really think so?” Cass asked.

“Yes, I do. Look for it, you’ll see it.”

Zar was intrigued. “So what about the others, the ones that want to be dominated?”

“Well I’m not quite sure,” Ethemar said, “But I feel…I feel it’s like they can’t just pretend to be powerful to feel powerful. They need a reason to believe it. So they need to feel loved.”

“But they know we don’t love them.” Zar said.
“Right, but instead of the lie being that they’re powerful, which is what works for the others, the lie is that we love them, which tricks them into thinking they’re valuable. And when they think that, then they can believe they’re powerful, or at least capable of it. I think.”

“So then what about the men that want to be hit? Some of them want us to be their mom, and then some of them want us to just abuse them. I can see the former but the latter never made sense to me.”

A look of confusion blossomed over Ethemar. “My best guess? They like being hit because they feel like they didn’t get enough attention from their moms or dads.”

“I could see that,” Zar said.

“That or they feel guilty for shit.” Ethemar chuckled. “I don’t really know.”

Cass thought it over. “Huh. Maybe. I’ll have to pay attention next time.”

“It’s not something I’m sure of; I’m not a man. I don’t know how a man thinks really.”

“What do you think, Bunson?” Zar asked.

“I think they’re desperate,” Bunson answered.

“How do you mean?”

“Men shouldn’t have to pretend to be anything, powerful or loved or otherwise. They’re desperate because they can’t live with themselves. Orcs are taught better than that. You are what you are.”

The women quietly thought about his answer. Zar, looking at Bunson, became aware suddenly of the sheer size of the man, the hard musculature, the width of his shoulders, the mass of his arms. When she stopped to think about it, he was the most physically powerful man she had ever seen, the hundreds of men she’d slept with notwithstanding.

“Well, aren’t some of them there just for the fucking?” Cass asked?
“You know better than I do that fucking is never just about fucking.” He said.

“See, that’s what I’m getting at,” Ethemar said. “There’s stuff going on upstairs, with all of them.”

“So wait,” Zar said. “If orcs are taught that, then how come some of patrons are orcs?”

“It’s like you said. They were raised wrong. They breath too much human air.”

“So it’s a human thing,” Zar asked.

“Needing to pretend to feel like you’re something?” Bunson waved his hand across the cityscape. “Look at this city and tell me it’s not,”

It was a metaphor, but Zar found herself looking all the same. And it was true. From where they were, moving slowly uphill to the market, parts of the Pit and parts of the Perch were visible. The River Ibenes cut through the the swamp of stone, splitting the two halves, and even from a distance the difference was apparent. One side orderly, the other side in shambles. One side almost completely human, the other side almost completely not.

“But even the elves are like that,” Cass said. “All the men that come in, regardless of their race.”

“All of them learned it wrong,” Bunson said. He sounded more sure of his explanations than the rest of them. “All breathing the wrong air.”

“But what about the human men?” Cass asked, “Are the human men breathing in the wrong air too, even if it’s them that make it?”

“I don’t know,” Bunson said. “Maybe it’s that humans are mad. Maybe it’s that a few bad apples ruined the bushel. No way to know now.”

No one argued with him. Zar didn’t know what the other women thought, but she believed him.
“Did you hear what Father Crustok was saying the other day?” Ethemar asked. “About some of the human diplomats coming down to the Pit?” Zar looked at Cass. Neither of them had, and Bunson said nothing. “He said something about fixing things up. Changing things. Said one of the governor’s men was coming by these days, looking at places to renovate.”

“To renovate,” Cass echoed. “How do you mean?”

“I don’t know, to improve things, rebuild things, I guess.”

“Doubtful,” Zar said. “They’re not that nice. That’s why they’re so high up.”

“They’re mean, but they’re mean to those that they need to boss around,” Ethemar said.

“They don’t need to boss us around.”

“Yeah, it’s ‘cause we’re already shit to them,” said Zar.

“That’s true, but that’s my point,” Ethemar explained. “They don’t need to bully anyone around here to make their power known.”

“So they’ll do it by patronizing us,” Zar said. “Makes sense.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan, I think,” Ethemar said.

“Jolly,” Cass said. “If it means that some of these roads actually get cobblestone put in, then they can patronize me all day.”

Zar laughed. “If they come by the temple, they just might.”

Cass slapped Zar’s leg. “You be quiet,” she said, but Zar only laughed more.

The three of them continued their speculation of what the governor’s men were doing in the Pit. It was agreed upon that patronization was the ultimate goal, but they wondered what would be improved upon first. Perhaps the prison so that space could be added. Perhaps the market since even the rich did business there on occasion. Or perhaps even one of the temples,
theirs or the Temple of Zassan. No one had any clues as to what would come, but Zar figured they would all find out eventually. Their talk of it carried them all the way to the market.

~

The market, as always, was a mix of lethargy and chaos. Some merchants watched as countless potential customers walked by while others, burdened by fortune, raced to satisfy as many buyers as possible before any of them became impatient.

Fortunately, Bunson knew his routine well. First Riston, the cloth merchant for bolts of cloth. Then Jasper the carpenter for tools and planks of wood should any repairs be required at the temple. Then Arrus for books. That was something that Bunson kept from the priests, but as long as some of the women were willing to pilfer a few coins from patrons, and as long as everyone kept quiet about it, Bunson would purchase a book or two for them all to read. Of course, that was after he read them himself.

Bunson’s order of purchases followed in the same way every week. Next came the grains, then the spices. Then the vegetables, and finally the meat if weekly sacrificial offerings didn’t suffice to provide enough already. It was after the purchase of the grains, however, that the routine was interrupted.

Zar watched as Bunson handed to Frommer a small handful of coins.

“I trust you don’t need help with the lifting,” Frommer said, looking up at Bunson from his mat on the ground.

“Never do,” Bunson said.
“Help yourself to it, then. Three sacks of wheat, and one sack of oats.” He said the same thing every time, reciting what the cost of the coins Bunson gave would earn him.

Bunson didn’t need help lifting any of the sacks of grain, but Zar still offered it. “Would you like me to carry those, sir?” It was her own personal joke.

“They weigh more than you do,” he said. They were sizable enough that she doubted he was wrong. Without even so much as a muted grunt, Bunson hoisted the sack he was carrying into the wagon. The whole thing heaved, and the horses stamped in protest. He turned back for another.

“I wield the power of Arethelos within me,” she added. “I can carry anything.”

“That’s good.” Bunson added, lifting another bag. “Otherwise how would you carry around that ego?”

Ethemar and Cass, standing just behind Zar, started cackling, both of them straining to keep from bursting out with laughter.

“Shut up,” she said to them.

“My gods, it true, though,” Ethemar said. Her face was turning redder by the second.

“You’re both idiots,” Zar said, and she turned back around just in time to catch a smile leave Bunson’s face. “You’re all idiots.”

“Oh, come now,” Cass said. She hugged Zar from behind. “You know you love it.”

She did. “I do not,” Zar said. She decided to play along. “Such mockery is beneath me.”

“Of course, O divine one,” Cass said, petting Zar’s hair. “No one is as upright as you are. No one is as just as you are.”

Zar planted her fists on her hips and held high her chin, gazing into the bright clouds above. “You’re damn right.” Ethemar could no longer contain herself and doubled over laughing,
leaning against the cart for support. Zar turned around. “That is, in fact, the rightest thing you have ever said.” She produced as kingly a countenance as she could. “Kneel and receive thy reward.” Cass struggled to compose herself, but she dropped to one knee. “Kneel lower.” Cass scoffed, but still she kneeled lower. Zar stood over her, arms akimbo in self-righteous glory.

“Now what?” Cass asked.

“Now you shall suck my grossly divine cock.” She grabbed Cass’s head and started thrusting her pelvis at Cass’s face. “Have at thee!” she exclaimed.

Ethemar was utterly gone now. She was reeling on the ground, both hands trying to hold her jiggling stomach. Zar kept at it, slamming her pelvis into Cass’s face, mock-grunting with each thrust. Cass, a mixture of chortles and groans, slapped at Zar’s torso, but Zar held on, enjoying every second of it, until at last she let go of Cass’s head. “Now,” Zar said, brushing off her dress as she fought the urge to break character, “You have been given a most divine blessing. Go now and do likewise unto your fellow man.”

“Zar, you’re the most blasphemous shit I have ever known,” Cass said, rising to her feet. She wiped her eyes, wet from the force of laughing. Her face was all blush and embarrassment. “But you’re our blasphemous shit, so it’s okay.”

Ethemar was still on the ground. Her laughter was winding down, however, and now she gasped for air more than she was racked with her guffawing. Zar and Cass both held out their hands to her. Ethemar, collecting herself, let out an impressive sigh and grabbed hold of both hands offered to her, letting them lift her off the ground.

“Turn around,” Cass said to Ethemar, “You’ve got dirt all over you.” Ethemar turned, and Cass and Zar both slapped at her dress until they got off it what they could, and Ethemar tried her best to get out what was in her hair.
“Guess it’s a bath for me tonight,” she said. “Or at least dunking my head in the water.”

“I’ll need to bathe every hour for a week,” said Cass. She slapped at her own dress where her knees were. “It’ll take all the the bathing I can get to rub Zar’s divine pelvis off my face.”

“You love it and you know it,” Zar said.

“That’s what the men tell me.”

At that moment, Bunson loaded the last of the sacks of grain onto the cart. The whole thing heaved with the weight of its load, and again the horses clattered. “Alright, get on,” Bunson told them, and they did, climbing up the side of the cart until they were all nestled in, half on top of the sacks of grain and the lengths of wood, and half on the benches that lined either side of the cart. Bunson took up the reins and gently snapped them. The horses lurched forward, and the cart with them.

They didn’t go far. “You there! Halt!” shouted a voice from the crowd. Several feet away, the crowd of market patrons parted as a group of men marched through, leaving a wake of concern and curiosity behind them. There were five men, and all of them were guards. Four of them, those following the fifth, all carried spears, the spearheads of which bobbed and tilted with each step. The fifth, the leader—he instead was armed with a sword which swung and bounced at his left side. Emblazoned on his right pauldron was the emblem of a sergeant. As they neared the cart, Zar thought she heard Bunson mutter “fuck” under his breath.

They were only a few feet away when the leader held his palm out behind him. The other four stopped, planting the butts of their spears into the ground. The leader continued forward, stopping just beside Bunson.

“Quint,” said Bunson.

“Bunson,” said Quint.
Then the two remained still, Bunson looking down at Quint’s face from the driver’s seat, Quint looking up at Bunson. Behind Quint, most of the market patrons returned to their shopping, but a few formed a circle around the scene. Mothers holding their children in front of them. Men with their arms folded and their heads cocked to one side in speculation. A few young women holding their hands to their mouths in anticipation of some scandal to take place.

Finally Quint spoke. “They told me that you had gone to work at one of the temples. I hadn’t believed it until now.” He spoke lowly, almost remorsefully. “I thought that you had left town, gone off to join some army. Or maybe mercenary work. You were pretty good for an orc.”

Bunson said nothing. He lifted his gaze and glanced about, looking at nothing in particular, it seemed. Finally he looked back down at Quint. Still, he said nothing.

Quint nodded towards Zar and the other women. “Are these priestesses? That’s what you call temple prostitutes, isn’t it?” He looked at the women longer now, with more attention. Zar felt naked. “They’re quite pretty, the two elf women at least.” He grinned. “I might have to pay a visit come next holy day.”

“What do you want?” Bunson asked.

Quint shook his head. “After all this time, and that’s how you greet me? I would have thought you had more respect for your former companions.”

Bunson was silent. He only stared.

Quint raised his brows in mock surprise. “Well, if you’re going to be so uncordial about it, I might as well have a chat with the women here.” Quint looked at Zar, who was sitting on the side of the cart he was nearest. He started to walk towards her.

“Don’t touch them,” Bunson said.

Quint turned back around. “Excuse me?”
“You heard me.”

“They’re prostitutes. Being touched is what they do all night. Or...no, that’s right. They do it in the middle of the day too now, don’t they? Gods, feisty bitches, ain’t they?”

Bunson hopped down off of the driver’s seat. “Don’t touch them,” he repeated.

The other guards, at first placid as stone, all dropped their spears and leveled them at Bunson. “No,” Zar shouted. Ethemar gasped, and Cass began cursing under her breath.

Quint held out his hand again. “No, we’re fine, we’re fine,” he said, nonchalantly. “We’re old friends. Or at least I think we are.” The guards raised their spears again, but it was obvious they were still at the ready.

“What the fuck do you want?” Bunson asked.

Quint’s grin disappeared. “Maybe I want to level the score a bit.” He walked up to Bunson’s face. Though he was thinner, he was taller than Bunson by a number of inches. “You know, we still have that bounty out on your head.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Well, you know it’s not about the money for me.”

“What, honor?” Bunson spat and he turned around again, heading towards the driver’s seat.

Quint’s demeanor changed instantly. “Don’t you fucking turn your back on me.” He grabbed Bunson’s shoulder, spinning Bunson around. He drew his sword

Bunson shook off Quint’s hand. “Ironic coming from you.” Bunson’s hand rested on his dagger.

Quint clenched his jaw. “You disobeyed a direct order from me.”

“You wanted me to detain an innocent boy.”
Quint laughed. “Gods, you’re stupid. He was a goblin.”

“He was innocent.”

“Goblins aren’t innocent. If he wasn’t guilty of that theft, then he was guilty of four more at least, I’m sure.”

Bunson closed his eyes. He rubbed his forehead. Zar had never seen him look so exhausted. “I’m not fighting this battle anymore.” He turned back around and began climbing back onto the driver’s seat.

“What did I fucking…” Quint turned back to his men. “Detain them all.”

Bunson growled. He was back on the ground immediately, but the guards were quick. One guard thrust his spear at Bunson. Bunson ran at him, dagger drawn, deflecting aside the spear shaft with ease. He rushed the guard, plowing into him with his shoulder. The guard next to him tried the same. Bunson spun around, smacking the spearhead away.

“Keep him alive,” Quint said to the third guard. “Grab them,” he said to the fourth, and gestured towards the women. Both he and the fourth guard ran up to the cart. “Don’t move,” said the guard, thrusting his spear at the women. At the same time, Quint climbed into the cart and grabbed Cass.

Zar closed her eyes. But when she opened them again, she felt like she was watching herself move from afar. Meditation, stoic practices, even the psychological preparation for her Rite of Initiation--nothing felt as...detached as this. As out-of-body as this. She felt as though she was merely spectating as she lunged forward, grabbing the spear the soldier threatened them with and wrenched it from his hands. She felt she wasn’t there, that she was watching someone else, when she whipped the butt of the spear against the back of Quint’s head. Her arms swung and punched, but who was moving them? Her legs kicked and sprung, but how? How was she doing
it? She was on the ground now, and there was Quint, scrambling for footing. Now, suddenly, she was on top of him, bashing her fists into his jaw and ear and brow. Was that Ethemar screaming? Were others yelling? It didn’t matter. They were at once horrendously clear and pleasantly distant, the sounds around her. It was the same with the pain. Her knuckles were bleeding, and she could feel the sharp gnawing burn of a gash along her cheek, but they were someone else’s wounds, someone else’s pain to deal with. Here she was, now leaping off Quint’s chest towards the guard that she pulled the spear from. Here she was, driving her shin into his groin, her chin taking the full brunt of his fist as though both fist and chin were merely cotton balls. It wasn’t her moving, but it was, but it wasn’t.

All of a sudden the air opened up and Zar gasped. She had been hit, somewhere on the back of her head. She was reeling forward, and if she didn’t feel really there before, she felt it now, all woozy pain and spinning nausea. Zar hit the ground face first, unaware of where she was. But now someone was lifting her up, grabbing her throat, pressing her against them.

Things became clear again. She was still in the market, and Quint was holding her against him. A blade was held against her neck, his sword. He was panting, and so was she. He shouted Bunson’s name, and the space before them, chaotic as it was, settled into stillness.

Bunson was bleeding on the ground, two guards holding their spears (one of them missing half the shaft where it had been snapped) above his torso and neck. A third guard was on the ground, completely unconscious. Bunson must have knocked him old cold, but Bunson looked awful. His cotton shirt, which was normally white, was streaked and blotched with red.

The fourth guard was leaning against the cart, holding Cass against him by her hair. His other hand held a knife pressed against her neck. Ethemar, still in the cart, was weeping horribly.
Quint yelled Bunson’s name again. “Bunson! What do I do now, Bunson? You’re the professional. You tell me what I should do now, Bunson.” Quint’s sword blade slid ever so slightly across Zar’s neck, but it was enough to cut skin. Zar yelped.

Bunson was quiet. His breathing was labored. A particularly dark red blotch beneath his ribs on his left side was growing bigger and darker by the second.

“Yeah, that’s what I fucking thought, you hog,” Quint yelled. “I should fucking kill you now. Like I should have before.”

Bunson spit in Quint’s direction. A guard kicked him, and Bunson arched his back, gasping painfully.

“Stop it.” Zar yelled.

“Shut your fucking whore mouth,” Quint said. He jammed the pommel of his sword into Zar’s stomach. She doubled over with a cough, but coming back up she found the opening to smash her head against Quint’s nose. Quint squealed and stumbled back. It was enough time for Zar to wrench free of his grip. He swung at her with his sword, but she was out of range. “Fine, fuck you all,” he yelled. He looked to the guard holding Cass. Zar, knowing what would happen tried to scream, but a sudden horn blast commanded the air.

Marching through the market just as the guards had minutes before came a much larger number of guards. Every patron fled away, now watching only from around the corners of walls and from darkened doorways and no closer. There were at least forty men approaching, all of them carrying the same spears and outfitted with the same armor. At their front, though, was the one holding the horn.

“What the hell is this, Quint?” yelled the man as he stormed closer. “You were supposed to secure the market, not cause a fucking street fight.”
“Commander, these troublemakers were--”

“Troublemakers?” He marched up to Bunson, dismissing the soldiers around him with the wave of his hand. “I’m not stupid, Quint,” he bellowed. “Bunson’s never been a troublemaker.” He turned his attention to Bunson now. “Can you get up?”

Bunson nodded. The commander held out a hand. Bunson took it, groaning, and the man heaved back, lifting Bunson from off the ground. Slick blood coated the stones beneath where Bunson lay.

“You have a rather serious wound,” the commander said, indicating the growing red spot on Bunson’s stomach. “Medic,” he shouted at the troop of guards. One from among the first row of men, burdened with a large pack on his back, left his post and hurried to the commander.

“I’ll be fine,” Bunson said.

“I’d ask if you were sure, but knowing you, you’d bleed to death before admitting you were in trouble.” He turned to the medic. “Wrap his wound. Stop the bleeding.” The medic set his pack down and searched through its contents, pulling out several rags, a phial of liquid (likely some alchemical compound), and a long strip of cloth bandage. He lifted Bunson’s shirt and began cleaning the wound. “You know, you’re an idiot for how much shit you let yourself go through,” the commander said.

Bunson chortled. “I’ve lived through worse.”

“And I fucking believe it. Where are you headed?”

“The temple of Arethelos.”

“Gods be damned,” the commander said under his breath. “The rumors were true. Well. We’ll escort you back there. You two…” he pointed behind him at two of the guards standing at attention. “Follow Bunson home. Make sure he gets there as quick as possible. When you’re
finished, go back to the barracks.” The two men left the group and headed to the cart, one taking up the reins, one hopping in the back.

“The women,” Bunson said. “They’re with me.”

“Are they hurt?” the commander asked. He marched to the guard that was holding Cass. He let the hand holding the knife drop to his side, and he released Cass’s hair, but he still had a grip on her arm. “Are you hurt?” the commander asked Cass. The guard released her, and she stumbled away from him, rubbing her arm. She didn’t answer the commander’s question, but she didn’t have to. Approaching her, the commander bent down and looked at her neck. Zar could barely see it from where she was, but even she could tell that Cass had a red, bloody line across her neck where the guard’s blade was. “What the fuck is this?” the commander asked the guard. Cass hurried away, running towards Zar, who caught her and held her, rubbing her head and back as she sobbed into Zar’s chest. The commander was furious. He grabbed the guard’s neck and slammed him against the cart. “A damn woman? You were going to slit the throat of a woman?”

“Commander, I--”

“Fuck you,” the commander yelled. He jammed his fist into the guard’s gut, the guard’s plate mail armor notwithstanding. The guard buckled, groaning. “Get back to the barracks--” the commander looked at the other two guards still standing “--all of you. Now. And take him with you.” He pointed at the unconscious guard heaped upon the ground. The three of them marched off, dragging their fourth companion, their heads low. “And you,” the commander said, returning his attention to Quint. Quint quickly sheathed his sword. It was clear he was nervous.

“Undisciplined. Needless violence. You’re a fucking disgrace,” the commander said. Quint was
silent. “Wait in my quarters until I return there. And you better pray that I return sometime this week.” Quint grunted. “What was that?”

“Yes, commander.”

“Yes what?”

“I will wait in your quarters, commander.”

“Until when?”

“Until you return, sir.”

“Even if it takes days.”

Quint hesitated but forced himself to say it. “Even if it takes days, sir.”

“You fucking better. You’re dismissed.”

Quint left, storming off in a rage. Both of his fists were clenched, and his shoulders were tight with the need to hit something. Suddenly he stopped, feeling at his side. “Where’s my holster at?” he said. He turned around, scanning the ground. “Where’s my knife?”

“What. The hell. Are you waiting for, soldier?” the commander bellowed.

Quint turned back around, stomping even more furiously across the market towards the Perch, an undecipherable string of his own cursing accompanying him.

The commander turned around again towards Bunson and the women. Bunson, temporarily patched up, had climbed into the back of the cart. His hand was pressed against his wound and his shirt, ripped and bloodied, had been discarded into the back of the cart, but otherwise he seemed like he normally did. Ethemar was next to him, looking him over, occasionally wiping tears from her eyes as she analyzed how bad his injuries were.

Zar still held Cass, petting her hair, kissing her head, whispering whatever comforting words came to mind. The commander approached them. “Are you hurt?”
“No,” Zar said. “I’m not hurt.” She was lying. The back of her head throbbed, and the half of her face that the gash ran through burned fiercely. But for some reason it didn’t matter.

The commander squinted. He pointed at her face. “You have quite the cut there.”

“I’ll be fine. We have a healer at the temple.”

The commander cocked an eyebrow, shaking his head. “Another rumor found to be true. Well, you should be well taken care of then.” He again called the medic. The medic gave clean rags to Zar and Cass after first applying a dab of the ointment he produced from his pack to their cuts. “Hold the rags against your cuts,” the medic said, applying the ointment. “They’re not deep and should stop bleeding soon.”

“Thank-you, commander,” Bunson said.

“You earned it a long time ago,” the commander said.

As the commander walked back to his troop, another man walked forward, holding a ledger and small graphite pencil. He was dressed elegantly, a long, black robe, trimmed in fur; two well polished boots; and slicked back blond hair. He looked impeccable, filthy rich, and utterly non empathetic. “What’s the meaning of this, commander?” The man asked. He met the commander at the front of the troop. The commander saluted.

“An unruly guard captain. I’m seeing personally to his punishment, sir.”

“The guard was the trouble, not one of these Pit rats?”

“Correct. The guard was the cause of the issue. I’ve sent him back to my quarters for personal corrective action.”

“And what of the lessened number of my personal guard?”

Another man sauntered up to the two, cracking his knuckles. Zar recognized him as Gurst. What was he doing here?
“Please, Tharbrant. I can guard you better than half these men here combined,” Gurst said. “Bunch of mild-drinking shits.” He spat in the ground.

“You be careful,” the commander threatened. “I don’t take kindly to people insulting my men.”

“If they’re all like the idiots that you sent back to the barracks, then I’d hardly call them men.”

“You fucking dare-” the commander started, but the rich man cut him off.

“I’m sure that my personal attendant is right in his assessment of your troop. I’d hope that the governor’s work would warrant something better than these...oafish fools.”

The commander, clearly enraged, squirmed. The only thing greater than his anger seemed to be his ability to restrain himself. “Well...if your attendant wants to take the place of the men that I dismissed, he’s more than welcome to.”

The rich man shrugged. “I trust your judgment. Let’s be on our way then. I have a lot of appraising to do.”

“Sir.” The commander saluted, visibly relieved to be done with the conversation. He turned to the waiting troop. “You, Wallace.” He pointed to a guard whose shoulder emblem was also that of a sergeant. “You’ll take Quint’s place as recon unit. Take whichever four men you wish to.”

“Yes, commander,” Wallace said.

“And don’t fuck it up. Disperse any potential threat, detain only if attacked. I want Master Reyan here to be safe, not entertained.”

Master Reyan? Reyan? As in Brandur Reyan? Zar’s jaw went slack as she put the dots together. Gurst was with him, just as he was with Brandur just the other day. And even with the
distance between them, Zar could see all of Bradur’s features in this Master Reyan. Zar kept looking both for physical and behavioral similarities. As she did, her shock did not lessen.

“Understood, commander.” Wallace looked behind him. He shouted names, and four guards left rank to follow him. They jogged ahead, spears bouncing like dog tails.

When they had gone far enough ahead, the commander gave the all clear. “Proceed.”

The men moved in unison, lifting their spears and marching onward, taking the path leading through the rest of the market. Master Reyan walked beside the troop at a leisurely pace. He paused once to look around him--he and Zar briefly made eye-contact--and wrote something in his ledger, and then took up his strolling pace once more. Half the troop passed the official, and the other half stayed behind him. Zar watched them all go by, swarming the market and clearing everyone from the area as they went.

The medic, having put everything in his pack away, hurried off to return to his position.

“Zar. Let’s go,” said Bunson.

Zar snapped from her half-trance watching Master Reyan. She lifted Cass’s head. Cass was okay now: red eyed and puffy cheeked, but she was composed again. They turned from the market scene and returned to the cart. Zar did catch the glance of Master Reyan, though, one more time. He looked her over, as though appraising her too. He shook his head and looked away. Folding his arms behind his back, he proceeded on, half the troop ahead of him, and half the troop following slowly in tow.

Zar climbed onto the cart. The guard in the driver’s seat whipped the reins and turned the cart down a side alley. The cart bounced and jostled as they went, but Zar could only feel relief. The midday sun was on its way, and she would be glad to return to the comfort of the temple.
For the entire ride home, no one spoke. When they finally did reach their destination, Ethemar went immediately to bed. She spoke to no one and ignored all comfort save for that from the few other dwarven women, Gelda and Sparkle, who followed her into the sleeping quarters. Bunson explained to Father Crustok what happened and was told that Brandur would return to the Temple soon. He was to receive instruction regarding how the Temple operated and how his practice would merge with the rest of the Temple’s routine, but he would of course be permitted to first attend Bunson and the women.

Bunson retired to the infirmary, intent on replacing his bandage rags and further cleaning the other minor scrapes and abrasions he sustained. Cass and Zar were sent to Father Wilson. In his study, Cass and Zar gave their testimony about what happened at the Market. Should a legal proceeding occur, Father Wilson wanted a detailed report about what happened. Cass spoke first, giving an account of what took place while Zar waited just outside the study door. After what Zar guessed was roughly forty minutes, Cass emerged. She seemed her bright normal self again, much to Zar’s relief. Cass flashed a knowing smile. “I don’t know how you stole it, but I told him the dagger was a gift from the commander as a token of remorse and good faith.”

Zar was confused. “Dagger? What dagger?”

Cass stared, blinking, apparently astounded. “You’re either a much better actor than I thought, or you hit your head a lot harder than I thought.”

“What are you talking about, Cass?”

“Oh, quit pretending. I’ll concede that you out-thiefed me today, but I’m going to knock that ego down one of these days.”

“Yeah...I got you today for sure,” Zar said, going along with whatever story Cass had concocted.”
“Well. I’m exhausted,” Cass said. “I’ll be in the sleeping quarters if you need me.” She turned and left.

Zar was baffled. Where was this supposedly not made-up dagger? But as soon as she asked herself the question, a sinking feeling filled her stomach. She looked down. At her waist.

There it was. Holstered to her belt. A dagger. Quint’s dagger.

“Zar, what’s taking you?” Came Father Wilson’s voice from his study.

“Yes, uh...I’m just, uh...” How did it get there? When did it get there? Did she do it? And how, this whole time, did she not even know it was there? How did she not even feel it? “I’m just a little shaken up, but I’m okay.”

“Well then...enter.” Zar did and sat down across the study table from Father Wilson. “Let’s begin then,” he said. He dipped a quill pen into his inkwell and held it poised above a blank sheet of parchment paper, waiting for Zar to give an account of what happened.

Zar explained everything. She hesitated when she arrived at the part in which she attacked two guards, but she had to assume that Cass brought it up, so she explained that portion of the account as well. Father Wilson did his best to hide his astonishment through that portion of Zar’s statement.

At last she came to the end, explaining that two guards were sent as an escort for the four of them and that one of them gave Zar a gift from the commander, the dagger. “Here is it,” she said, removing it from her belt. She placed it on the table in front of Father Wilson.

Father Wilson, examined the dagger and its sheath. “Interesting that he would I've you the sheath with it,” he said. “I suppose its design does allow it to be holstered to any belt the fits the loop here, but why would he assume you’d ever need to use it? Oh well. We’ll put it with the
other offerings. We can see about bartering it next week along with the rest of the collection.”

Father Wilson signed the document and set down his quill pen. “You’re free to go,” he said.

Zar left. Walking down the hall, however, she felt something missing, and that something was the dagger. It felt like it was supposed to be there. Perhaps not that dagger specifically, but something. It felt normal for there to be a weapon at her side, she realized, and not having it there, not having it at the ready, felt queer to her.

She only forgot about the feeling when she fell asleep only moments later. She too was exhausted, and as she neared the sleeping quarters, she felt this immensely and went to bed.
A week after he had first shown up at the temple, Brandur was showing Father Crustok the infirmary, “now improved with all the finest devices that medical and magical studies have to offer.” He had in the two days prior sent several instruments to the temple for his use: looking glasses, several vials of liquids of all different colors, knives, bandages, a few saws, leather belts, books, mirrors, towels, bowls, and even a few clubs. All of this and more. Several men, that Brandur explained worked for his father at their home and were familiar with his work, helped him put everything in order. By the end of the second day, the infirmary was drastically transformed. When Father Crustok came to see the changes that Brandur had made, he nearly fainted. “What in the name of the Twelve is all this?” He walked, stupefied, into the room, his arms open wide in horror. There were operation tables rigged with protruding arms holding surgical tools, shelves lined with vials and jars of unknown liquids, and all other manner of apparatus, instruments, and substances used in the healing arts. “This...this is mad.”

“This is a long established and well tested approach to healing patients of their ills and woes. It seems overwhelming now,” Brandur said, “but in time you’ll see that everything in here has its function and purpose.”

“It all looks absurd.” Father Crustok was almost at a loss for words. He pried his gaze from the chaos of the infirmary and turned an exasperated look towards Brandur. “To let a magician work in the confines of the temple is by itself a wonder, and I already can’t believe I’m
allowing it.” He waggled a finger in Brandur’s face. “Don’t turn this into some butcher’s shop. I’ve no interest in mutilation of any sort.”

“Butchering and mutilation are the last things I’d ever think of doing.” Brandur put a hand on Father Crustok’s back, guiding him to the room’s exit. “I’m a healer, not a monster. If it takes weeks to prove that to you, so be it.”

“I mean it, don’t make me regret my decision.”

“You won’t. It’s a promise.” Brandur followed Father Crustok out into the hall. “By the time you are over and through with the services, I’ll be ready to receive my first patients.”

“You know how weary we are about magic here,” Father Crustok said.

“Yes. I am aware.”

“But…I’m not as much a fool as you might think I am. Magic scares me, frankly. It’s dangerous, but so is fire, and yet we use fire all the time for many goods.”

“This is true.”

“I hope…” Father Crustok reached for words. “I hope that by the end of your time here, the Temple might have learned a thing or two about the good magic can do. And hopefully none of the bad.”

“Then I have a rather important duty to perform. I’ll do my best.”

“They say you’re the University’s best student.”

“Not to brag, but…yes.”

“Then I have high expectations for you.” Father Crustok clapped his hands and wrung them together. “Well, I have a sermon to deliver. I shall send Father Asbury and Bunson to you to help you conduct your affairs with the temple crowd after the services have concluded. Take care to be ready.” With that, Father Crustok, hands behind his back and his posture once again
made straight and austere, headed down the hall towards the temple’s sanctuary. After a moment of hearing only his footsteps, a barely audible hum emanated from that direction.

Brandur returned his attention to his infirmary. He double-, triple-, and quadruple-checked everything. All instruments were cleaned. All phials and vials and other liquid-holding containers sealed. All dust swept from the floor. All hinges on the mechanical appendages attached to the operating tables were oiled and fluid in motion, and their range of motion was unhindered in any way. He had a list made up for himself of everything that needed to be examined, which he kept folded up in his satchel so it was with him at all time, and after running through the list several times, he felt at peace with beginning his work. Everything felt ready.

Brandur marveled at it for a moment, his own private practice. It wasn’t the first time that he would be seeing patients from the public; under Master Abbus’s tutelage, he was privileged to see and heal many people from among the city’s populace. The city’s human populace, he corrected himself. He had met only a handful of patients from other races. The numbers of patients from other demographics were always the same with things like these: most nonhumans were elves (wood elves, to be technical), and then dark elves, then dwarves, orcs, trolls, and last of all goblins. In his time practicing his healing on living patients, he had only ever seen one goblin, and that because the goblin was a servant to a wealthy merchant family. Looking at the size of the demographics, it was clear that population was not the determining factor in how rare a patient from one demographic or another would be. It was, of course, race. The University knew this, and they weren’t afraid to say it either. Goblins made up one sixth of the Pit population, but they accounted for one fifteenth of the patient base. It took any given goblin family a long time to save up for one of their number to see a healer. To see a magical healer took even longer, but sometimes the risk was worth the wait.
Sometimes it turned out the risk was not worth it, and a dying goblin who wanted a magical healer would pass away when they could have paid the amount needed to see an unmagical healer and lived. But even if they saw the unmagical healers, there was no guarantee that whatever malady they suffered from would be made better. Sometimes a healer could only delay the inevitable. Sometimes magic was really what it took.

It was a shame, then, that there were so few magicians who were also practitioners of the healing arts. Brandur was among only seven magic-using students at the University, which held a student body numbering over four-hundred people in size. There was a larger percentage of magic users among the instructors, but even then, they numbered only twenty. It was true, though, that nearly every magician, once they were discovered to possess the talent, was sent off to one of the Universities across the empire and given a standard education in the manipulation of the invisible element. Skills and abilities such as the manipulation of matter, the perception of the hidden, the alchemical mixture of components, and the navigation of the mind were all taught to any person, be they human, orc, or even goblin, who possessed the ability to wield magic. However, very few students of the magical arts chose to pursue a course in healing beyond that. Anatomy, biology, and the intricate harmony between all of the body’s various systems and organs all composed a vast body of knowledge that most magic-users had no experience with. For this reason, many diseases and injuries, ones that could only be corrected through the use of magic, were left untreated, and many died for that reason.

But that would change. Today would be a glorious day for the advancement of the healing arts, and Brandur would be at its helm. He didn’t care if there wasn’t money in it; his father had plenty of wealth, and Brandur knew his inheritance would be weighty. He didn’t care if the relationship between the Universities and the Temples of the Twelve were strained;
whether by faith or by magic, a healed body was a healed body. What he cared about was that people could be helped. People who could not afford to pay other healers, people who were unable to travel to the healers they could pay for. People who could not be healed any other way than that a healer versed in the magical arts heal them. People who were so desperate for hope that all their lives’ energies were drained just to feed that singular hope of the chance of living.

People like his mother.

Brandur stood amongst his nearly-begun healing clinic. Everything was in order and everything was as it should have been. All of it pristine, quiet, and waiting. Brandur held up his right hand. He examined the ring, a simple circle with a simple square chip of rock. He removed it from his middle finger and fiddled with it, turning it over like a coin. The ring itself was simple bronze, and the embedded stone a simple square-cut chip of rock. Solid black rock. Nothing more. It was as unassuming as dirt.

Brandur rubbed the base of his finger where the ring had rested. He recalled a salve he had prepared in advance for today’s initiatory clinic session and located it on his rack of salves and potions and other such magical compounds. He rubbed a drop of it onto his skin and then replaced the ring. Though the ring was hardly irritating to begin with, the salve removed what little annoyance wearing the ring produced.

Brandur sat down on his chair, positioned just next to one of the operating tables, and waited with the rest of the room for the sermon to finish. He spent almost the entire time speculating about the stone on his ring.
When the morning’s services concluded, and the priestesses met with their share of patrons, Father Asbury, accompanied by Bunson, met Brandur in the infirmary. Brandur, lounging on one of the resting beds, bolted up and greeted them.

“I’m Father Asbury, if you might have forgotten.” He held out his hand to Brandur.

Brandur took Father Asbury’s hand, shaking it vigorously. “A pleasure to see you again.” He turned to face Bunson. “You seem much better than a few days ago.”

“I take damage well,” Bunson said, and he too held out his hand. “Still, I thank you for your treatment of my injury.”

Brandur again took the offered hand. This time the handshake was slower, and much more powerful. Brandur tried to match Bunson’s grip in force. “Injury is putting it lightly. Whoever stabbed you had almost cut into your stomach.” Father Asbury left the room, so, after Brandur grabbed a blank book and a graphite pencil from his bag, they pursued after him, following his path down the hall to the sanctuary.

“I’ve learned to deal with severe pain.” Bunson said.

“Is that a trick you can teach someone?” Brandur asked.

“Yeah. All you need to do is get stabbed a lot.”

“Ah. Of course.”

The orc chuckled. “We can start whenever you’re ready.”

Brandur curtly laughed. “I think I’ll sleep on your offer a bit.”

“Sounds wise.”

“Wisdom is what we aim for, I suppose.”

The two of them followed Father Asbury’s leading out into the sanctuary as they exited the northern hall. There, sitting haphazardly among the pews, a number of patrons waited.
Around forty, Brandur estimated, their faces dull, their stature sunken. Father Asbury paused some distance away from them and held out a hand, indicating the lot of them. “Assuming your me distributed the fliers throughout the city in good fashion, these would be the patrons that have stayed to receive healing. We’re uncertain how many more people might appear in the next hour, however. For all we know, these are all that you’ll see today. Alternatively, you might be ambushed by the masses.”

“Hopefully a combination of the two.”

“Enlighten me...how does one proceed at this point?”

Brandur studied the crowd. A few of them were looking at him, weary-eyed and half-present. Others waited patiently with children, varying by degrees in how successfully they controlled them. Still others were alive with talk, discussing fervently their work or their families. There was always the wonder on part of the healer if they were talking about the healer simply without looking in his direction. Brandur supposed that he would find out.

“The first order of business is establishing a triage system: determining the order in which I’ll address each patient. Those with the most critical needs will obviously be seen first, and those with the least threatening issues will be seen last.”

“It’s not ordered by who appears chronologically?” Father Asbury asked? “I’d think some of the patrons would get impatient.”

“Unfortunately it’s not that simple. If done that way, then those with splinters might be healed while those with broken bones go without treatment. I trust you can see why that would be problematic.”

“Yes, that does make sense.”
“The real issue will be deciphering what some of these ailments are that the patrons have. There are hundreds of conditions that all feel like a bad stomach ache, and that’s the case for several other symptoms as well.” Brandur grinned. “But I’m not the best for nothing.”

“Modest too,” Bunson said.

“Well, of course,” said Brandur, smirking. “I’m the most modest person I know.” Father Asbury shook his head.

Brandur stepped forward, approaching the front row of pews, book and pencil in hand. More and more eyes turned to him. When he was almost in line with the front two pews when he clamped his book and pencil between his arm and torso and clapped, slow and loud, three times. The talking quieted. Everyone looked at him. “If you are here to see the healer, raise your right hand.” A show of hands rose into the air, a number of them left hands, but Brandur would let that slide. Left or right hand, everyone had a hand in the air, which he tried his best to count. He returned the book to his hand, turned open the first page and made a note of the estimated number of patients. “Stay where you are,” he said as loudly as he could without seeming angry. “I will come to you one by one to see what it is that ails you. Do not move; stay where you are.”

“You’re the healer?” a dwarf man in the back asked.

“Yes, I’ll get to you in good time. Please, no interruptions.” Brandur started with a dark elf woman and her child sitting just to his left on the first pew. He bent down so as to speak softly with the woman.

“But you don’t even have a beard,” the dwarf shouted.

Brandur sighed, and leaned up again. “You don’t need a beard to heal people. Please be patient and I will see you shortly.”

“My uncle probably knows better than you how to heal folk,” the man said.
“Then go see your uncle.”

“Bah!” the man grunted. Thankfully he remained quiet after that.

“Ma’am,” Brandur said to the woman, “What is your name?”

“Estra,” she answered.

“And the boy?”

“Eddie. He’s my son.”

“What brings you to see me?”

She described as best she could an issue that her son was having. Heavy breathing during different parts of the day, trouble breathing after running, and a wheezing sound whenever he tried to breathe during the episodes. He turned to the first blank page in his book, wrote their names, and recorded the boy’s symptoms.

“Do you think it might be a spirit of sorts?” Estra asked.

“No, it’s much easier to fix than that. Now, wait here. I’ll be with you again in due time.”

Brandur turned to the next person on the pew, an aging goblin woman.

Estra’s hand caught hold of Brandur’s arm. “Are you not going to heal my boy?”

Estra was dismayed, Eddie utterly curious. His eyes were glued to Brandur’s. “I will certainly tend to his needs, but I need to see if anyone else needs more urgently to be dealt with first.”

“But you came to me first.”

“Ma’am, someone here might be dying for all I know. They are the ones that I need to address first.”

“But what if my boy is dying?” Estra was getting irritated. “You don’t know, you didn’t even look at him at all.”
Brandur saw that this would go nowhere, and if even half of the patrons assembled were to give Brandur a similar attitude, things could get ugly fast. He knew they could; he had read a number of accounts of such a thing happening.

But he was prepared. “How about this: I have some medicine with me right here, see?” Brandur reached into his robe and pulled from a small pocket there a vial of clear blue liquid: sugar water dyed blue with hints of angelica and mint to give that bitter yet refreshing “healing” sort of taste when consumed. “Have you ever seen this kind of medicine before, ma’am?”

Estra shook her head. “No, never before.”

Brandur added some theatrics. “Oh, well this is a special medicine, you see.” He looked at the vial of liquid as though it were diamonds. Eddie gave the same look. “Very powerful. I’m the only one in the city who has it.”

Estra’s face moved from annoyance to desperation. “Well then give him some, he could be dying.”

“Which is just what I’ll do. Here,” he said to Eddie, “Open your mouth.” Brandur stood up and uncorked the vial. He held it above Eddie’s head. Eddie looked up, closed his eyes, and opened his eyes mouth as wide as it would go. “Now, you only need a few drops; too many and you might turn blue.”

“Blue?” asked Estra. “Like a fairy?” Her voice was alarmingly serious.

Brandur had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. “That’s only if you get more than ten drops, and he’ll only need three.”

“Well I hope you can count, then, aye?”

Brandur repressed a sigh. “Yes, I certainly can count. Here I go.” Brandor lowered the bottle down till it was nearly inside of Eddie’s mouth. He tilted the vial and tapped it, counting,
“One, two, three.” Three drops fell in, and Eddie moved his jaw and tongue about, attempting, Brandur assumed, to suck the drops off his tongue and down his throat.

“Now,” Brandur said, leaning down to speak more closely with Estra, “That’ll keep him from dying for at least three weeks, but it won’t do the job forever.” Estra nodded, completely gullible. “If you stay here, though, I’ll be able to see you later on, and we’ll get that breathing of his cleared up. Do you understand?”

Estra nodded. It would do.

Brandur moved to the next patient, the elderly goblin woman. He ran through the same questions, recorded the same information. As he went down the pews of people, he sometimes had them stand and move about, testing motor skills and range of motion. He sometimes peered intently at their eyes, and sometimes he had them open their mouths so he could look in. It took nearly an hour, but every patient was accounted for, and every symptom and every pain recorded.

Brandur’s eighth patient was a troll. He had broken his arm falling off of the second story of his shop, and the fracture was severe, but Brandur had dealt with a plethora of injuries of the same nature. A quick incision, a generous dose of a bone fuse salve, and a concentrated effort on Brandur’s part to manipulate the streams of magic that coursed through the troll’s bones: thus the break was mended. His arm would be sore for the next few days, but it would be useable and an infection would be avoided.
Bunson and Brandur saw the troll out, whose gestures of thanks were so forceful as to be almost oppressive. “Thank-you, kind sir. Please accept this gift,” the troll pleaded. “It’s all I have.” He reached into the coin purse dangling from his belt and offered the three coins he produced from it.

“If you feel like giving, give to the Temple.” Brandur said. As politely as he could, he pushed the man’s hand away. “I’m quite content with my own share of wealth, but the Temple could make good use of the money. A much better use of it than I could.”

Beneath the statue of Arethelos stood Father Asbury. Next to him lay a basket, the collection basket for any of those patrons who felt especially generous that day. The troll looked Father Asbury over. His gaze drifted to the figure of Arethelos and then to the surrounding decor of the sanctuary. “They got money already.”

“Then save it for yourself. Consider it a gift.”

“Well, if you say so.” The troll pocketed his coins and trotted off, whistling loudly and sweetly.

Brandur consulted the triage list he had made after conducting his investigation of the patients’ ailments. Next on the list was a human man by the name of Jossem. “Jossem, please stand,” Brandur called to the crowd.

In the back, Jossem rose. He stepped past a number of others and walked briskly up the center aisle. His level of energy combined with his drab brown robes gave the impression of a devout zealot. Given how successful some of the healings had been thus far, though, Brandur wouldn’t be surprised if the remaining patients expressed some thrill at being able to see him.

Jossem fast approached Brandur, his arm outstretched for a handshake. “I’m sure glad to see you here, sir. Sure glad.”
Brandur took hold of the man’s hand. As he did, he tuned his perception of the magical to the stone on his ring. Nothing. “Now you follow us,” Brandur said. He proceeded to the north hall, back to the infirmary, followed by Bunson followed by Brandur.

They reached the room and Brandur bade Jossem sit upon the operating table. “I know the arms look scary, perhaps, but we won’t be using those.” Brandur set his book and pencil down and washed his hands in the basin nearest him. Bunson, arms folded, leaned against the door post, watchful and silent as he had been for most of the morning.

Jossem examined the arms of the operating table. He lifted his hand, nearly touching the instrument suspended at the end of one arm in particular. It was a long metal rod with a pointed end. He stared at it curiously. “What is this used for?” he asked.

“That,” Brandur said, “is for releasing fluids. It also acts as a conductor of sorts for more extreme procedures, but I assure you that we won’t need to use it.”

Jossem continued to stare at it, examining its handiwork, studying its design. He nodded to himself a number of times. His fascination was odd. Bunson moved a bit closer.

“You mentioned you were feeling a pain in your chest, a dull pain. Is that right?”

“Yes, a dull pain,” Jossem said. He abruptly spun around and hopped up on the operating table, letting his legs dangle off of it.

“Where in your chest does that dull pain occur?” Brandur asked.

“Oh, about right here,” Jossem said. He pointed to the center of his chest. “Right in the middle.”

“Your sternum, the hard part where your ribs come together, is that right?”

“A bit behind it.”


Bunson neared. “What are you doing?”

Jossem let go of Brandur’s hand and flicked his own hand in Bunson’s direction. Out from Jossem’s robe sleeve came a fine, sparkling dust. Bunson’s entire upper body was engulfed in the cloud of it. He stopped, grabbed at his eyes, and roared.

Brandur was stupefied. “Witch cloud,” he said, recognizing what Jossem had used. This was bad. “Shit,” Brandur muttered.

This was very bad.

Jossem swung at Brandur. His palm bashed against Brandur’s ear. Brandur staggered back, holding up his hands.

Jossem whipped his other arm outward. From that sleeve came a dagger, crudely cut and charred black. With a cry he lunged at Brandur. Brandur caught Jossem’s arm just in time, keeping the knife blade from stabbing into his neck, but Jossem’s full weight fell onto Brandur, and both of them toppled back.

Brandur’s body slammed onto the floor, Jossem landing on top of him. Brandur had both hands on Jossem’s arms, pushing back on it with all the strength he could muster. Jossem did the same, both arms driving the knife downwards with as much force as possible.

“You need to die,” Jossem muttered.

“Fuck...you,” Brandur uttered back. As the knife shakily drew closer to Brandur’s neck, he rolled leftward. The knife slammed down onto the floor next to Brandur’s head, nearly

Brandur scrambled to stand. He hopped up, faced his attacker and braced himself. Bunson appeared from behind the assassin. With a grunt, he grabbed Jossem’s head and wrenched it around. A short choking gasp came with the horridly queasy sound of Jossem’s neck snapping. Jossem's body went limp, the knife dropping to the floor. Bunson let go of Jossem’s head, and Jossem dropped to the floor as well, nothing now but a heap of lifeless limbs.

An elongated groan escaped Bunson’s lips, and he fell to the floor. Brandur paused. He blinked, not fully believing what had just taken place. “Gods be fucking damned. Bunson, don’t move.” The orc had both hands pressed against his eyes, his head bent back in what Brandur imagined must have been fantastic pain. “I can help you.”

Brandur searched his potion rack. He didn’t have the potion he needed in particular, but he had the next best thing: a combination of solutions and the knowledge of how to manipulate the magical fabric in Bunson’s eyes to return them to a wholesome state. It required a measure of pain on part of the healer, however. But Brandur would be damned if he would let down the Temple on his first day.

At that moment, Father Asbury burst into the room. “What on earth is happening here?”

“Father,” Brandur ordered, “help Bunson to his feet. He’s in great pain.” Brandur lost no time in combining three potions into the water of the basin. He poured two of them, a solid, dark green concoction and a clear liquid, into the basin in full. The third he had to measure out specifically. He pulled a series of measuring spoons from his bag and calculated out the amount. “Father, help him up.”
Father Asbury seemed to understand what was happening. He ran to Bunson. “Bunson, let me help you up.”

But Bunson pushed the priest back. He drew a deep breath and pushed himself up off the floor. “Son of a fucking bitch, it burns.”

“By the gods, his eyes,” Father Asbury exclaimed.

Brandur poured the specific amount of a milky white liquid into the basin. He turned around to face Bunson. Indeed, where his eyes had been were now red and black holes. He eyes and eyelids were completely gone, and charred and bloodied flakes of flesh were all that remained of his eye sockets. Bunson stumbled forward, one hand on his face, the other reaching out to feel ahead of him. “Father, lead him here.”

Father Asbury grabbed ahold of Bunson’s hand and directed him to the water basin. When Bunson felt the basin stand, he grabbed it fiercely with both hands. His breathing was shaky.

“Now the hard part,” Brandur said. He dreaded the day he would have to do this. He knew it would come eventually, but he didn’t think it would happen so soon, not on his first day. Still, he thought to himself, he wasn’t the best for nothing. “Father, look into the front compartment of my bag and hand me the spoon you find there.”

Father Asbury nodded. He extracted the spoon and handed it to Brandur.

“And now I ask your forgiveness for the horror you must behold during this next part.” Brandur bent over the basin. He took a few breathes. “Gods be fucking damned.” He took the spoon to his right eye and pushed it underneath his eyeball, into the eye socket. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He repeated this, the pitch of each cursed rising higher as the spoon went in deeper. Finally he pried his eyeball from its socket. It dangled a few inches beneath his face, attached
precariously by his optic nerve. “Oh gods, oh gods….” He said. He lowered his face until the eyeball was submerged into the liquid. Brandur groaned as the liquid hissed. “Guttos naut vatun nehai ise lennah,” he whispered. He continued, manipulating, in his mind, all that unseen, coursing, vibrant rush of magical force that pulsed throughout the world.

After a full minute of his chanting, he stopped. “Bunson, very slowly--very, very slowly, lower your face into the basin. It will hurt immensely, but don’t stop until your ears are submerged.” Brandur backed away from the basin until his eye was only barely submerged into the liquid, the optic nerve rising up along the edge of the basin and connecting to Brandur’s eye socket a mere inch away from the basin’s edge. He needed to create as much room for Bunson as possible. Both his eye and Bunson’s eye sockets had to be in the basin at the same time.

Bunson lowered his face as Brandur instructed until his nose touched the surface of the liquid. He took a deep breath and lowered his face the rest of the way, grunting against the pain. “Ahs vahana neek artur…” Brandur chanted the rest of the spell.

As he did, the liquid swirled. The grey, milky mess that the water had become began to turn clear. At the same time, the milkiness gravitated toward the center of the basin. It was one thing to behold the alchemical processes with a normal view. Seeing it from the eye still in his head and the eye dipped into the pool was as disorienting an experience for Brandur as any he’d ever had. Soon the whitish liquid spun itself into two semi-solid spheres. As they continued spinning and as Brandur continued chanting, they floated through the liquid into Bunson’s eye sockets.

All of a sudden, Brandur stopped. The water stopped swirling. Brandur tapped Bunson’s shoulder, and Bunson pulled his face from the liquid. He gasped, rubbing his eyes, blinking furiously, groaning softly. “Good gods,” he said.
Brandur slowly lifted his face from the basin’s edge. His dangling eye lifted upward until it hung freely in the air. Groaning, Brandur grabbed his own eye and gently sat down on the floor, eyeball in hand. He lay down, keeping the eye close to the socket from which it protruded. With an agonizingly slow motion, he held open his eyelids with one hand and lowered his eye into its socket with the other. With a final, awful push, his eye sank back into place. Brandur rose off the ground, tears practically pouring down his right cheek. He hurried to the potion rack and searched with his good eye for one more potion. Trying to keep from panic, he located it at last, and pried open its seal. He poured the potion, another milky white liquid, onto his eye, letting the excess fall where it would, all the while chanting the appropriate spell. At last he lowered his head and opened his eye. It tingled and stung, but he knew the procedure had worked.

Father Asbury was beside himself. “What in the name of almighty O’on have you done?”

Beside him stood two more priests and four other priestesses. All of them looked at him in horror.

“Organ replication,” Brandur said, his breath quick and heavy. “Very painful…but it can be done.” He looked over to Bunson. “Can you see?”

Bunson, still blinking rapidly, looked at Brandur. “Yes, yes I can.”

“Well, I’m glad that worked. It usually only works about four times out of ten.”

“Are...are these your eyes?” Bunson asked.

“No, they’re an orc’s eyes--your eyes, specifically--but they needed my eye to figure out how they should be put together”

Bunson was speechless now.

One of the women spoke. “Brandur’s eye was...was dangling out of his own fucking head....” She looked pale, and Brandur hoped that he wouldn’t have to deal with a fainting.
“How long have you been here?” Brandur asked. He hadn’t realized anyone had come into the room during the procedure. “And if you’re going to be sick, please just lie down.” The first woman, an elf woman, ran out of the room holding her stomach.

“...And then he just popped it back into his head,” said another woman, “...like it was nothing.” This one at least looked unfazed.

“I assure you it was an ordeal,” Brandur said. “Speaking of which…” he turned to Jossem’s body on the floor. “Who the hell are you?”

Bunson lifted the body up and threw it onto the infirmary table. “Leave. Get Father Crustok and the other temple guards,” he said to the priests and priestesses that had gathered to watch the spectacle. He studied the corpse’s face intently. “I want to know if any of them have seen this man before.”

“You know, you really ought to rest your eyes for a day. The more you use them right now, the more irritated they’ll be later.”

“I’ll live.”

Brandur shrugged. He looked over the body, lying pathetically on the infirmary table. He would seem like a passed out drunkard were it not for the alarming way his eyes rolled independent of each other in their sockets, and the stream of blood leaking out of his nose. “He used witch cloud on you,” Brandur said. “That’s an assassin’s tool.”

Bunson studied the body. “I’m aware.” He opened the robe, pulled the body’s arms through the sleeves, and discarded it. “Well…”

A short, leather bracer encircled the right wrist, and a thin, wide ring of wood lay embedded in the leather. A small oval hole, cut into the wooden circle just beneath the palm, revealed where the witch cloud had been stored. Just beneath the back of the assassin’s hand was
a spring loaded trigger. Tilt one’s hand back enough, and the trigger would be activated, it looked like. “This is how he dispensed the powder,” Bunson said. “I’m surprised he didn’t use a dispenser on both arms.”

Brandur studied the bracer. “I assume the other arm was used to hide the knife, and he couldn’t manage both a knife and another dispenser with the same arm. Witch cloud is hard to come by as well. He might have only had enough for one use as it was. You were the unfortunate victim.”

“True,” Bunson said. “But he was after you.” Bunson’s words hung on the air as he pulled his dagger from its sheath on his belt and cut open the man’s shirt. Underneath, several tattoos covered the assassin’s torso, all of them symbols that Brandur had never seen before. Most prominent was a large circle centered on the man’s chest. In the center was a black hand. Bunson grimly chuckled. “Whoever this man is, he wanted you dead for a cause.”

Brandur recalled his conversation with Nightingale. “Do you recognize the circle and hand? Any of the symbols?”

“No, but it’s very possible that he might have been affiliated with a religious sect. They’re rare, but a few followers of the Twelve Divines abhor the use of magic to the point of violence. He might have belonged to one of those sects.” Bunson sighed, rubbing the top of his head and then he newly regenerated eyes. “I apologize that I was not cautious enough to protect you.”

Brandur snorted. “Two major injuries in less than a week’s time at the hands of villains, one of them a religious zealot, and you blame yourself for not being able to protect me?”

“It’s my job.”
“Well, if it makes you feel better, had it been just me in the room I would have been the recipient of the witch cloud. I’d be dead.”

“Glad to be of service.” Bunson’s voice became grave. “The matter still stands that you are a very hated man, though, and if the tattoos are any indication, you are hated by more than one person.”

“Damn,” Brandur said. Not even ten patients in and his life was already threatened.

“Damn.”
Chapter 8

After Jossem’s attack and after Brandur and Father Crustok had dismissed those who came to receive healing, Bunson, together with two of his men, took up the body, bound it, and flung it off the cliffs that marked the edge of the temple’s property into the crashing waves beneath. But beforehand Bunson summoned every priest, priestess, groundskeeper, and guard to see if they recognized the man. None of them had ever seen him. None of them had ever seen the tattoos on his body either. Bunson asked Beth to redraw them on a large parchment paper for official record. She did, drawing rough facsimiles of the body from different angles and then mapping out which tattoos were located where.

Dinner was oddly quiet that night, Zar noted. She would have thought that such an event as an assassination attempt on Brandur’s life would have sent the whole temple into a frenzy of talk. However, Bunson did not want to discuss the matter, and it was evident that any attempt to speak with him about it would anger him greatly. Brandur, exhausted and weakened by both the attempt on his life and from the sheer effort needed to restore Bunson’s eyes to him, took most of the day to resituate himself. He spent half of it walking about the temple grounds and the other half secluded in the infirmary, and he vehemently asked that his dinner be brought to him there.

Though she wanted to, Zar decided not to bother him. For someone as collected as he appeared to be, a day’s hiatus must indicate a monumental amount of stress. And who could blame him? An assassination attempt on the first day of his rather groundbreaking healing practice? Most men would jump ship. She was glad that he did not. All the same, she didn’t
know him well enough to know how he dealt with the trials that came to him. Frankly, she hardly knew how to overcome her own trials. Stoicism had been the default attitude to embrace among the priests and priestesses for centuries, but what of the University? Did they teach things like that, practical things? For all its speculative education, the Temple at least taught orthopraxy as well as orthodoxy. It taught how to embrace one’s aging, how to manage one’s resources, when to speak and when to be silent, when to work and when to rest, which habits prospered a person and which habits destroyed them.

Did the University teach that? Did it teach wisdom, wisdom that didn’t need a dogma attached to it to be valid? Zar didn’t know, but throughout the day her heart was heavy with worry about what Brandur’s heart was heavy with, and she wished she could take part of the burden.

As night settled, Zar found herself outside in the courtyard. The late summer air was cool enough to cause the flying insects to vanish, and yet it was warm enough for the breeze, slight though it was, to feel pleasant when it washed over her. She sat upon a stone bench just next to the pool in the garden. The light was dark enough that, though she could not make out her own face on the water’s surface, the smattering of stars that framed the silhouette of her face were as poignant and luminous as fireflies.

When Mabel found her, she felt as though she were being pulled out of a dream. “Are you alright?” Mabel asked. She placed a hand on Zar’s shoulder.

Zar tilted her head. She did not have a good answer to the question. “I’m shook up about the assassin. He could have killed Brandur or Bunson. He could have killed anyone.”

Mabel didn’t question Zar’s response. “I’m a bit shook up myself.” Mabel gingerly sat herself down on the bench next to Zar, one hand perpetually rubbing her stomach. “And that
wasn’t even the only time this week you might have died. I threw up when I heard what had happened to you at the market.”

“Morga told me. She said you almost vomited yourself out of consciousness.”

Mabel smiled. “Well, I was feeling nauseated then anyway. This baby isn’t a fair guest.”

“I don’t think I ever want to get pregnant.” Zar said it, and she knew her hesitation was justified, but she still marveled at Mabel’s girth and the thing hiding inside. She still felt somewhat giddy, whenever she spoke with Mabel, at the prospect of creating life within oneself. “The world’s too dangerous. It’s too hard to keep a child safe.”

“The baby happened to me just like that fight at the market happened to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Neither of us asked for these things. They happened anyway. Staying here in the temple I’d like to think would protect us from a lot. Starving. Fighting. But even that’s not true anymore, is it? It was never true, I suppose.”

“No. I guess not.”

“It’s a shame, really,” Mabel said. “Even in the temple of a Divine, you aren’t safe from harm. It’s still able to come in and find you here.”

“It would seem that even the temple is a part of the world after all.”

“Explain that.”

Zar looked up. The clouds scudded by, hiding and revealing the eternally fixed stars behind them. “I mean the temple is a part of the world. We’re not free from worldly affairs just because we live here.” The nightly clamor of the Pit, garbled into a consistent droning, mixed together with the cricket chirps and the rustling of the wind through the small garden trees. The sounds, though varied, were an odd symphony. “That’s how I think of it anyway.”
“It makes sense. The Divines don’t want to hide us from life.” Mabel sighed. “But they don’t protect us either, at least not all the time, and I wonder why.”

“I stopped asking that question.”

“I know you have. I know you’ve stopped asking a lot of the questions.” Mabel rubbed her belly. She shifted her weight, putting out a hand on the bench to help hold herself up. “I can’t not ask them, though. I have to assume there’s an answer. Somewhere.”

“What if it’s an answer you won’t like? What if it’s an answer you can’t even understand?”

“So be it. As long as there’s an answer.”

Zar leaned forward, propping her cheek on her fist. “If you ever find an answer, tell it to me.” She looked out across the pool’s surface, tracing the dragon fly’s paths over the water, watching the edges of the pool catch and return the ripples that reached out that far.

“You’ll be the first to know,” Mabel said.

Zar knew there could be no answer to the question. However, seeing Mabel rub her belly, seeing her day by day battle with the fate of her child, seeing her plead and plead and plead still more with whatever god or gods would hear the wishes of an orphaned Temple prostitute, Zar still hoped for one.

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Were it not for Bunson’s arguments added to his own, Brandur might have lost his opportunity at the temple altogether. Though he was relieved that Bunson had been healed, and though he was impressed by Brandur’s willingness to continue the practice, Father Crustok felt
not at all comfortable with allowing Brandur to continue his work in the Temple if it meant
drawing the attention of potential threats. Zar, who was supposed to help prepared lunch in the
kitchen with Gob and Gelda, had followed Brandur and Bunson to Father Crustok’s study and sat
outside of the double-doors, listening now to their conversation.

“Not only you but Bunson almost died yesterday,” Father Crustok argued. Zar could tell
he was pacing around his table, scholar that he was. “What if it happens again. What if next time
a priest is attacked on accident? Or a priestess? Or Bunson again? No, it’s too dangerous to
continue."

“Father Crustok, I urge you to reconsider,” Bunson said, “What if someone comes not for
Brandur but for any of us? And what if we have no healer then?”

Then came the sound of Father Crustok pounding on his table. “Do you know what will
happen if the public knows about this? They’ll never return. Why risk being in the same temple
as the target of an organized assassination attempt? None of them would risk it”

“Father, I was careless before,” Bunson continued. “But I have enough men here to
ensure that no one will make any more attempts on anyone’s life. We’ll tighten the inspection of
all potential patients. I don’t care if I have to strip search them all myself; we can make the clinic
secure.”

“Ah, but the safer bet,” Father Crustok argued, “is to remove the cause of the threat in the
first place. And here he is, still in the temple. Wonderful.” Father Crustok wasn’t often sarcastic,
but he knew how to be when needed.

“Well that’s an interesting point by itself, isn’t it, though, Father?” Brandur said.

“What do you mean?” Father Crustok asked.

“We can’t be certain that the assassin was here solely for me, can we?”
“Who else would be the intended target of such attacks? The gardner?”

Zar had to stifle a laugh.

“It’s reasonable to assume that the man is motivated by a religious purpose of some kind, and perhaps it is the case that I was the only intended target of yesterday’s attack. However, it might be that the company of people that this assassin was a part of aren’t strictly interested in halting my operation here. Yesterday’s assault may have been a small part of a larger agenda.”

“What are you getting at?” Father Crustok asked.

“What I’m getting as is that this league of villains might be intent on attacking the temple in general. So, for argument’s sake, let’s say I leave. What if another attack comes regardless? What then? What if another person is stabbed and still another person blinded or potentially killed by a deadly powder? If I am not here, would you be content to rely on your fellow priests to cure your wounded before they died of their injuries?

“Hmm…If that’s truly the case, then we ought to alert Brackett. We should also alert the other two temples.”

“But consider again,” Brandur said, “that this Jossem, if that even is his name, might have been working alone. His assassination attempt wasn’t very well executed. He may have been nothing more than a fanatic, and his attempt to kill me might have been nothing more than the outpourings of a mind gone mad.”

“But you yourself said that the tattoos could safely be assumed to be indicative of a cult or at the very least a collection of people numbering more than one member.”

“It’s possible, but without the man here alive to explain the tattoos, we have no sure way of knowing what the tattoos mean at all. For all we know, they might be decorative only,
whimsical symbols with no bearing on anything in the real world. For all we know, they mean nothing.”

“I find it rather difficult for those markings to have meant nothing.”

“Oh, I’m sure they meant something to him, but their meaning might stop with him as well. And as we all concluded, none of us have ever seen or heard of any of the markings that were found on the man’s body.”

“So what are you trying to tell me exactly?”

“That the temple guard is more than enough to handle any existing threat, if there is one at all. Either Jossem worked alone and the threat is gone or he worked in a group so obscure that their numbers aren’t large enough to pose any real danger for us. As long as Bunson and his men are more thorough in their observations of my patients, the temple should be safe.”

“And I can assure you, Father,” Bunson said, “that I am in no way worried about any further incidents. I’ve suffered first hand from my own carelessness, and it will not happen again, not to me nor to anyone. I give you my word as head of the Temple Guard.”

There was a long pause.

“Let me think on it,” Father Crustok said. “In the meantime, make yourself useful.”

Zar heard the two of them head for the door. She ran down the hall, rounding the corner just as she heard the double doors opening.

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Zar waited for Brandur in the infirmary, sitting in the chair next to an operating table, one candle burning softly on the table next to the first of the infirmary beds as her only light. It was a
little past the second hour of the morning. Brandur left the Temple so that he might visit the University grounds to go “nightingale hunting,” as he called it. “They’re behavior offers an interesting insight into human behavior,” he said at dinner. He promised to return, however, after Zar made him swear it. And he did examine Mabel before leaving, so she had no excuse to keep him from his own affairs. Thus, she waited.

She wondered why she cared, though. Why he was in any way significant to her. “He has a dick,” her mother said. True, but so did every damn patron she’d ever seen (save for one orc sailor; she didn’t ask, he didn’t explain). Was it just that he was pretty to look at? He was, certainly, compared to all the other men in the temple. Some were kinder and some, like Bunson, certainly had a more powerful physical presence, but he was simply more beautiful.

But no, that wasn’t it. He was easy to look at, but that wasn’t what she looked forward to when he was scheduled to appear. His status, perhaps? He was a magic-user, an absolute rarity, and he was at the top of his class at the University, and he was the son of an administrator in the employ of governor Brackett. He had money. He had talent. He had intelligence. But even then, it was something else. Something not as tangible.

Personality? He certainly had a presence about him. He was flat out pretentious, but he was gloriously confident. Not in the way that many of the men were that she slept with. They wanted to be confident. They wanted to be powerful. So they tricked themselves into believing it for a time. He was different. He didn’t need to prove anything to himself. He knew what he was capable. He knew it so well that he didn’t even think about it, like how no one thinks about their breathing. His value wasn’t a question. It was an accepted and unexceptional reality for him, as accepted and taken for granted as gravity or the changing of day to night and night to day.
But even then...there was something else. Bunson had the same demeanor, the same blunt self-security that Brandur had. And both were physically attractive in their unique ways. But she felt for Brandur something she didn’t for Bunson.

Was it that he was simply new, a shiny toy that outshined the rest simply for his newness? Was it his particular profession, having studied the humanoid body for so long that he knew her body better than she did?

Was it the way he made her feel small and vulnerable?

Was it his face when he looked at her, the way his eyes settled on hers?

Zar brought her focus back to the present when she heard footsteps coming down the hall. Already she knew they were his; she could tell by the clack-clock of his boots and the speed with which he traveled. A moment later the door opened, and there he was.

He paused upon seeing her, but he didn’t seem bother. In fact he grinned, even if just for a moment. “Do you ever sleep?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same question.”

“Normally I do, but I sometimes have to hunt for nightingales.”

“What can I say? Sometimes I need to hunt nightingales.”

“You look tired.”

“It’s because I am.” He yawned, and peeled off his outer robe, tossing it on the infirmary table. He took the seat opposite of her, the other chair by the other operating table, resting against the other wall. He was facing directly towards her.

“Black robes, black shirt, and black slacks with black leather boots. You’re a rather colorful individual, aren’t you?”
“When I want to be.”

“Is that for your work, wearing black?”

“No,” Brandur rubbed his face. “Well, I guess it helps when you’re looking for nightingales, but as healers we’re actually supposed to wear white. It’s easier to spot bodily fluids that might get on you.”

“Then why don’t you wear white?”

“My entire wardrobe is enchanted. Liquids never stick onto them. They slide right off, as though I were wearing glass.”

“Right onto the floor, you mean, where you can step on them and slip.”

“I have towels if need be.”

“You’re completely prepared, aren’t you?” She grinned.

“More or less.” He grinned as well, though his weariness was apparent.

For a moment, Zar did not know what to say. Brandur yawned again and stood up, but he leaned too far to his left and nearly tripped over. He caught himself, shook his head, and took a deep breath.

“You’ve been drinking, haven’t you?” Zar asked. She didn’t know why but she would have thought him above that.

“More or less.”

“Some nightingale watching then.”

“I did actually encounter a nightingale, if it means anything to you.”

“I don’t really care. What you do with your time is none of my concern.”

“Oh, I can tell, you sitting in my room until...what is it, the beginning of the third hour? You don’t seem interested in my time at all.”
Zar blushed, hoping he didn’t notice. He smirked. Of course he would notice.

“And anyway, I’m not drunk. Just a little...tipsy.” He smiled wide, his eyes half open. Zar couldn’t decide if that was a pun. “Surprising as it may seem, being a healer has its share of stress.”

“You don’t say.”

“It’s nice to take the edge off before bed.”

“You’d think you could come up with something better than alcohol.”

Brandur burst into laughter, straining to keep himself quiet. “We did. Oh gods, we did, but it doesn’t have same bite as alcohol.” He was certainly more whimsical when he was drunk. “No one takes pride in their alchemical potion the way craftsmen take pride in their meads or their whiskeys. It’s not as...special to take a potion to calm the nerves. It’s just not the same.”

“That makes sense. I’d probably want the alcohol over the potion.”

“Everyone does. Save for a few uptight fellows.”

“Like Father Crustok?”

“Exactly!” They both laughed, and Zar had to agree; he seemed like the sort of man who would trade the excitement of alcohol for the predictability of a potion. It was a long time they laughed. It got to the point that they were laughing at each other’s laughing; her watching how inebriation changed his persona, him finding her laughing funnier than it normally would have been. Or so Zar speculated. But who cared? Laughter was laughter. It felt good. It felt right.

Finally Brandur ceased, his guffawing dwindling off steadily into giggling and then into panting for breath. “Well,” he said, standing up, “I had better be on my way to bed.” He grabbed an unlit candle from the counter just beside the infirmary table, moved to the single burning flame that Zar had lit, and ignited his own.
“Take care you don’t get lost on the way there. You’re not as familiar with these rooms as I am.”

Brandur scoffed. “To the other side of the room? I’ll do my best.” He shook his head and proceeded past the operating tables and on in between the double row of beds made up for the sick and afflicted. He was halfway down the aisle when realization struck him. He turned, A look of pleasant surprise on his face. “Although I suppose... I could use an expert navigator, one familiar with these regions. One such as yourself.”

“Well,” she said lifting herself off the chair. “That I can certainly do.” She joined him, sliding her right arm underneath his left. She grabbed tight. “Don’t want to go losing my charge before we get there.” Over a thousand times she was forced to sound and act as sexy as possible for over a thousand different men. The work was hardly ever enjoyable-- even abominable at times-- but it did, for rare moments such as these, give her the ability to determine precisely and exactly what excited a man most. Her skill in theatrics was unmatched, and she could read a man as well as a priest could read scripture.

Brandur waved his arm before the array of beds. “Pick any one. I’ll trust your judgement.”

She led him down the room, choosing the bed furthest on the right. “And wouldn’t you know. Here we are.” She breathed deep, smiling, staring at the bed as if it were a treasure chest, simply marveling at it. The trick was to seem enthused about a thing associated with the man (in this case his resting place) but not to let that enthusiasm be directed at the man. Then it seemed fake and forced. When applied to a something symbolic of the man, however, the feeling seemed more genuine.
“Thank-you, kind lady, for your safe and courteous escort,” Brandur said. It wasn’t his first time, she could tell, but he was still of the impression that overt politeness was somehow more advantageous than plain and honest speech. She could look past that, though. They all did it.

“It was the least I could do for you.” She smiled, aware that he was watching her expression, and slowly, very slowly, removed her arm from under his, letting her arm slide along the side of his chest, followed by her hand, which gave a gentle scratch as it passed. She moved to the far side of the bed. Here she changed her expression from infatuation to casual curiosity. “Shall we...further explore your sleeping quarters?” She looked up at him, open eyed, calmly expecting his answer.

Fortunately, he seemed to have picked up on the nature of her flirting. He looked quizzical, exaggerating just a little the way it showed on his face. He cocked an eyebrow, appearing equally as casual in giving his answer as she was in asking her question. He opened his mouth, pausing for just a moment, as though he really needed to think about it. “I think so.”

“Well…” She looked down at the bed, rubbing the fabric of its woolen cover. Again, slowly. Again, scratching it here and there. Now for a soft smile. She gently grabbed the edge of the blanket and pulled it back. She wanted it to seem as though it amused her, so she let it. How amusing, this soft sheet pulled back, revealing a softer, more intimate space beneath it. She sat on the bed, passing her oh so gentle hand over the surface of the bedsheet. “Here you are,” she said. Her eyes rose up to meet his.

He grinned and turned around. “A moment as I prepare the right equipment to explore further.” He set the candle down on the bedside table next to the adjacent bed. He undid his belt and pulled his shirt off, revealing a sculpted river of muscle that ran the full length of his back.
At the same time, silent as a mouse, Zar removed her own boots and her long skirt, keeping only the robe upon her, and sat down on the bed, her legs angled towards the head of the bed. She knew how to appear angelic, and by the gods was she good at it. Brandur continued to undress, tossing the shirt onto the adjacent bed and then addressing his boots. He sat down on the bed, his back still to her, cleverly withholding what the front of his torso would look like. First he pulled off the right boot, and then the left, letting them thud against the floor as they may. Finally his slacks. He stood again and slid the waist of his slacks down his legs, exposing his rear and, eventually, his entire body. She was glad the musculature of his butt and legs matched that of his back. It wasn’t often she could savor that sort of physique. Brandur sat back down, turning his head just enough to see her over his shoulder. He said nothing.

“Oh but sir,” Zar said, her voice walking the line between sensual and formal, “allow me to show you the best posture for your further...explorations.” She grabbed his right shoulder. She pulled gently so that she didn’t unbalance him but only guided his shoulder down to the bed while letting him be the one controlling the motion. Halfway, down, however--and here was the tricky part--she pushed much harder, turning a soft, guided descent into a show of power. She put her weight into it too, pressing down upon his chest as he looked up in mild astonishment and as she looked down in smug appreciation.

She swung her leg over his head--quick, not slow; the time for slowness was over--and mounted his stomach. She could feel the ripple of his abs and the rise and fall of his breathing, pleased that it was faster than normal. “Now, help me take this off,” she said, sliding her left hand from his right shoulder down to his right hand.
Zar was in a cave, and a bright light shone from the entrance. It was dry, but the air was cold, and it howled outward from behind her, flowing into the yawning expanse of pure, brilliant white. Behind her, issuing forth an unending stream of moaning gales, pure and utter darkness.

Where do you go from here? Out, out into the unstained unknown? Or further in, further down, and find whence comes this cold and stiffened blast?

Do you hear it, that sound? That...song? You must be quiet. Bend down and touch your ear to the stone underneath you. Do you hear it now? Has it yet hummed into your bones, like trumpet calls? I hope so, Child. I hope so.

You’ll know where to go when you hear it.

Zar came to. She sat still upon Brandur’s stomach. She was sweating. She was breathing heavily. “Wh….what?”

“Oh gods on high,” Brandur whispered. He looked scared, mesmerized. “It’s you.”

“What...what just happened?”

“I’m sorry,” Brandur said. He twisted, and Zar nearly fell off of him.

“What? What are you doing?” She hopped off of him as he rolled off the mattress.

“I have to go. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I have to go.” Brandur hurriedly pulled on his clothes, almost tripping over his slacks as he jammed his legs into them.

“I don’t understand. What happened just now? What the fuck was that?”

Brandur didn’t answer. He flung on his shirt and rushed down the aisle. He moved past the operating tables, past the rack of potions, past the chairs. He grabbed his robe off of the infirmary table and bolted through the door. “I’m sorry,” he yelled.
Zar was alone. She held her head. There was a cave. There was light. But the rest of it had already faded into oblivion, and even now that light—was it light?—seemed far gone. So was the other thing that started with a ‘c.’ It was gone. She couldn’t remember anything.

But she knew something was wrong. She didn’t know how but something scared Brandur. And, like after all of those hundreds of men who came and entertained a lie and unceremoniously left, Zar felt cold, empty, and inescapably alone.