

# SPUN

*Part One*



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*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear...*

—**Lovecraft**





## ONE

*THE KINGS OF FRANCE RELY ON WHITE HILL TO PRODUCE A VERY special breed of champion, an elite variety of soldier prepared to defend both the throne and the empire from a variety of supernatural evils. Vampire, sorcerer, fae, witch, basilisk and brownie, afreet or demigod – there are more supernatural creatures above and below the earth than most men can acknowledge and still retain a shred of sanity.*

*The students who manage to graduate White Hill in one piece go on to don a hero's blue and silver livery. They are made of stronger stuff than most mortals. And by the time they leave Le Château for the royal court, each is convinced that sanity is a small price to pay for the continued safety of France.*

*Id happily argue the point, but as I'm high on the list of monsters those newly promoted acolytes are meant to murder, it's unlikely anyone would listen to my admittedly biased opinion.*

IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH, WHILE PAUSING TO REST HIS FEET

and adjust the lantern he carried, David heard White Hill's catacombs exhale.

He froze. The flame on the candle affixed in front of the mirrored lantern lens bowed sideways in the swell of musty air, shivering orange and yellow on a black wick, pointing back along the tunnel from where David had most recently come. He licked dry lips, heart thumping in his breast. The flame smoked angrily the light did not go out.

The unnatural breeze reversed itself - an inhale - and the flame flickered briefly in the opposite direction before settling again where David much preferred it stay: upright on the candle wick.

His fingers cramped on the lantern's handle. He made them unclench one by one before setting the lantern on the floor, which was smooth stone to match the curved walls and ceiling. Eyes fixed on tunnel ahead - pitch black beyond the cheerful glow of the lantern - hand settled now on the hilt of the sword he wore on his belt, David clenched his jaw and waited.

La Tarasque. The ancient wyrm had once burrowed beneath White Hill, leaving behind a system of tunnels so vast even David's predecessor hadn't been able to explore them all. The wyrm was presumed long dead, nothing now but dust and bone and memory.

But other, equally dangerous, creatures had come to inhabit the warren in more recent centuries, most of them unwilling prisoners, compelled by the old magician who had kept White Hill's secrets in the name of Charles the Wise and King John before him. The old magician's eclectic menagerie had once been the envy of every scholar who dared dabble in supernatural studies. The royal purse and House Valois' implicit approval meant White Hill need spare no expense when it came to research or instruction.

The old magician had been gone for decades, the royal purse - thanks to Philip VI's war against England's Black Prince - was running dry, Le Château was all but empty of students, and White Hill's underground warrens were not quite so secure as they had once been, aging cells crumbling into disrepair, their contents neglected.

La Tarasque might be long dead and the old magician's menagerie dismantled, but that did not mean the tunnels David braved were, by any stretch of the imagination, safe.

The flame on its wick in David's lantern burned merrily upright, undisturbed by surprise subterranean breezes. Nothing stirred the stale air. Whatever trouble had lurked there in the darkness outside the lantern light must have moved on.

Or so David fervently hoped.

An anxious sweat dripped between his eyes. Briefly snatching precious spectacles from the bridge of his nose, he used the sleeve of his robe to wipe his face. Apprehension heated his blood, flushing his cheeks and tightening his muscles, threatening to fog glass lenses when he returned his spectacles to his nose. So deep into White Hill, the tunnels were cold. Frost filmed the floor and ceiling, muting the sparkling gold and green mineral that ran throughout the warren. David had spent his first few months on White Hill half in love with the swirl of shining color in the tunnel walls, had looked for any excuse to walk the labyrinth, enchanted by the glimmer of underground starlight, believing himself both worldly and intrepid.

It didn't take long for the novelty to wear off. The stars in the heavens might be more commonplace, but at least above ground a man could better escape prowling monsters. And David had learned soon after settling in as Sir Thomas Chevalier's in-house scholar-cum-chemist-cum-physicker that when it came to supernatural threat, judicious retreat was much preferable to close combat.

But like La Tarasque and the old magician, Sir Thomas was dead, murdered years past in his own garden by a much-beloved student wielding nothing more remarkable than a kitchen knife, and David no longer had the luxury of hiding behind books or potions in the face of danger.

By order of King Charles, Le Château's recruits were David's responsibility, had been since the day Sir Thomas' body was sent in a wagon to Paris for burial. White Hill's secrets – the good, the bad, the magnificent and the execrable – were his to shepherd, whether he liked it or not. David still relied heavily on the comfort of his books and potions, but now his hands also bore the callouses of a swordsman. His body had traded the awkwardness of youth for the muscled confidence of a soldier in his prime; he was still the scholar but in taking over

White Hill he'd had to teach his body how to be equally as formable as his mind.

Formable, so long as the foe he faced was in truth friendly, the battle feigned. In the practice yard no man or woman on White Hill was as skilled. Against honest threat...

Well.

He'd done his very best to avoid real conflict in the twelve years since he'd taken over as White Hill's Chevalier.

The lantern sputtered. David sighed. Delay would not make the task ahead easier, and would possibly make the whole mess waiting for him in the château above his head much worse.

Drawing his sword in case whatever had been breathing in the shadows returned, he picked up the lantern and walked deeper into the earth.

When he finally stumbled upon it, the door was like any other door in the warren: old, ironbound, latched and locked. None of the underground cells were marked in any way. He was working off the map he kept in his head, a piece of ink-marked vellum he'd memorized on Sir Thomas' insistence. Even so, there was no guarantee the room on the other side of the door was the room he'd spent half a day hunting. David need only read a thing twice to remember it later in perfect detail, but experience had taught him Sir Thomas' map was not completely accurate. He supposed even the most fearless of mapmakers might become disorientated in La Tarasque's warren.

He set the lantern down again while he fumbled at the heavy ring of keys he wore on his belt. He wasn't so foolish as to sheathe his sword. The back of his neck prickled as he fit key after key into the hasp. His spectacles were beginning to fog again. His pounding heart threatened to leap into his throat.

It took him eight tries, eight different keys, before he found the one that worked.

The lock clicked open, the snick of the tumblers echoing against the tunnel wall. David paused to clean his spectacles a second time before shoving at the door. He was desperately glad no one else was there to see how his hand shook as he buffed glass against the edge of his sleeve.



The door opened grudgingly, not into the room but sideways into the stone wall along an iron track. The track needed oiling. The door and the small cell beyond hadn't seen a visitor for a very long time, possibly since before the old magician's death.

David stepped over the threshold, leaving his lantern behind on the tunnel floor. Once inside the cell there was no need for candlelight. Every cell within the warren was enchanted for warmth and light; as soon as he set foot in the room a large cluster of natural crystal burst into yellow light, making David blink.

His predecessor's enchantments still lingered. The light could be quenched with a touch, David knew, and summoned again with another. When activated, the crystals provided warmth as well as illumination. And the old magician had been thorough. David had yet to encounter a room in the catacombs not fitted with the luminous mineral.

"Bless you, rabbi," David murmured, fingers restless on the hilt of his sword. He turned in a circle as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the yellow light. "For your wisdom and your foresight."

Wooden chests of varying sizes filled the narrow cell, stacked one atop another on the floor. A few of the half-hazard piles reached the ceiling. Most ended at shoulder-height, the top-most coffer leaning dangerously. Time or the quaking earth had sent two of the larger trunks smashing onto the floor. Pieces of wood slat lay in pieces amongst a scattering of straw.

Whatever treasure the boxes had contained was lost to time as well. Shards of broken glass and pottery winked from beneath straw and splintered wood.

The chests were neatly catalogued in the old magician's eccentric hand, a mixture of letters from the Hebraic alphabet and alchemic runes burnt into the wood. One quick glance over the inscriptions reassured David he'd found the room he needed.

"Blood magic," he confirmed out loud, suppressing a shiver of distaste. The runes indicated that the contents of each chest were tuned to human blood, the most powerful of all bodily fluids and, in David's opinion, the most repugnant of alchemic ingredients.

The short Hebraic phrases seared alongside the runes provided

more specific clarification as to the nature of the artifacts packed inside each chest. *Divination* or *contamination*, *transmutation* or *conservation*. *Strength* and *nourishment*, *poison* and *protection*.

Human blood was a precious fluid indeed, blood magic a potent – and explicitly forbidden – alchemical tradition.

Cold eddied suddenly through the open door and into the cell, plucking at the hem of David's robe and sending a violent shudder through his bones. He whirled, sword raised, braced against attack, but whatever was following him – and now he had no doubt that something was – did not show itself.

*Playing cat and mouse*, David thought with rising dismay. *Trying to frighten me useless. It's working.*

And then, when chill fingers wafted against the back of his neck, a lover's ghoulish caress: *What in God's name is loose down here this time?*

"Begone!" he commanded the room at large while terror squeezed his heart. At least he managed to sound confident. "White Hill and the treasures within are mine to guard. You are not welcome!"

He waited, eyes darting from corner to corner. There was no response, either from vigilant shadows or unexpected breezes. He did not fool himself that admonishment would scare whatever it was away. Banishment properly worked on the preternatural only when strong spells were involved.

*Not a revenant*. Keeping his front to the cell door, David backed carefully through the accumulation of chests, reading labels with a rapidity born of desperation. *Despite the ghostly freeze.*

White Hill couldn't be haunted. The old magician had seen to that.

*Not dwarf nor troll nor vampire*. Even as he sorted through wooden coffers he sorted through the lore in his head. *They're none of them subtle*. His gaze caught on a chest smaller than most of the others, wedged between a tilting stack and the stone wall. No bigger than a loaf of bread, the chest was the right size, but turned sideways to the floor so David couldn't make out any inscription.

*Basilisks can't disappear*. Step by step he edged his way toward his goal. *A troll would leave behind a very obvious mess. And a gnome – gnomes stink. I'd know at once if it were a gnome.*

As close as he could get without turning around, unwilling to relin-

quish his sword or defensive stance, David wedged the toe of his boot under corner of the chest and dragged it away from the wall, causing the nearest pile of coffers to wobble precariously as he did so.

"Careful, lovely. They'll all come down atop your head if you're not more circumspect. And then where would you be?"

*Ob*, thought David as the sound of that familiar voice made his mouth go dry. *Incubus? But White Hill is charmed against demonkind.*

Lifting his chin, he appraised the monster now standing just inside the threshold. Intending either disguise or enticement, it wore the form of an old friend. Against all odds, definitely an incubus. Fear warred with amusement. Of all the monsters he might encounter wandering untethered in the labyrinth, this one, while far from harmless, might be the most ironic.

"Child of Lilith." He raised his voice, sword steady in his hand even as anxiety knotted his stomach. "You do not belong here. Get thee gone."

The incubus showed its teeth in Corbin de Beaumont's white smile. Corbin's blue eyes widened, guileless, beneath a tousled ginger fringe. David knew that ginger fringe as intimately as he knew his own darker curls. He'd tended Corbin's more than once as White Hill's resident physicker, seen him in every state of undress and several times gravely wounded, admired the aesthetic beauty of a body well cared for, but never had David looked upon Corbin and felt sexual desire.

"I've missed you," protested the creature in a perfect mimicry of Corbin's gruff tones. Pink stained Corbin's cheeks as he approached. He licked his lips as if in anticipation of a good meal after long starvation, the tip of his tongue shining briefly in the yellow light.

The display was meant as seduction. The children of Lilith were born to feed off sexual stimulus, to milk lust until the monster was satiated and the victim a desiccated corpse. That an incubus was wandering loose in White Hill's catacombs was deeply disturbing. That it had snatched an image of David's true love from the recesses of his mind was not a surprise. That it meant to make a meal of carnal desire—if he hadn't been so frightened, David would have laughed at the joke.

"Keep back!" David warned, blocking the monster's advance with

the blade of his sword. His pulse stuttered. Lilith's lesser children – succubi, incubi, the Will o' the Wisp – were more easily killed than a full-blooded demon. A true devil wouldn't be cowed by something so mundane as David's small sword. But that did not mean the lesser fiend wasn't dangerous.

The incubus went still, staring from the sword to David's face, Corbin's features twisted in confusion. By now, David supposed, he should be showing signs of the enchantment at work, becoming addled by wave after wave of lust, made clumsy by the body's overwhelming appetite.

Instead David faced the creature coldly.

"I thought you missed me, too," the incubus complained, mouth turning petulant. Corbin's head tilted in disbelief as the monster considered David's sword. "I thought you loved me."

David knew better than anyone that love and lust were too very different things. The incubus had made a fatal mistake. Almost, he felt sorry for it. Mayhap the demon did not distinguish between the heart's desire and the body's inclination. In the end it mattered only that Lilith's children could not make a meal of sentiment, nor could they glamour a man immune to sexual urgency.

Without lust to draw upon, the lesser demon was powerless, a shade throwing deception. Even as David pressed his advantage, crowding the monster with sword edge and false courage, the illusion frayed. Corbin flickered, as tenuous as the flame in David's lantern. Behind ginger hair and wide blue eyes something squat and green angrily flexed a multitude of wizened tentacles.

David's breakfast threatened to rise. Now that he could see the creature behind the disguise, he could also smell it: wet fur and sulfur, far worse than any common gnome.

A thing out of his nightmares.

He could not think how the incubus had ended in up in White Hill's warren to begin with. He and Sir Thomas had cleaned the catacombs of any artifact related to demonology when they'd decided to aid Corbin de Beaumont in his quest to kill the Littleton Fiend. David did not think it possible they'd missed something so obvious as a living specimen lurking beneath their home. Nor had the old magician listed

one of Lilith's offspring in the extensive catalog he'd kept of his trophies.

David would know. He'd spent more hours than he liked to admit reading over the artifact lists.

"There's nothing here for you," he told the incubus through gritted teeth. Logic said he should kill it immediately. A demon, even the lesser variety, couldn't be allowed to continue. But unease stayed David's hand. Except for in the pages of White Hill's many books, he'd come face-to-face with only one other devil, and that with the silvered glass of a scrying mirror between them as protection. They were unpredictable but not erratic. If an incubus had managed to get past White Hill's wards, David needed to know why and how.

"Nothing *here*," the incubus agreed after an instant of hesitation. "It seems I've made a mistake."

An abomination of feeler and fang, it used Corbin's voice still, and that was much worse than the original deception. "You are hardly worth the effort. A juicier meal calls to me from upstairs." Dismissing David and his sword, it scuttled toward the door. But, being Lilith's offspring, it could not resist one last taunt.

"You, you're not worth the effort, mortal. You're flawed, a broken thing." Corbin's voice, dripping disgust, was as injurious as poison. "I can smell your cowardice, wizard. A waste of my time. I have no appetite for terror."

"No."

"No?" the demon was almost out the door, unnatural appendages twitching as it reached the threshold. It looked back at David, yellow eyes shining in an otherwise featureless face.

David's sword took the incubus through its middle. The blade caught on bone and gelatin, jerked like a live thing in his hand. The incubus howled, a gusty cry redolent of rot and despair. David bit his tongue to keep from flinching. He twisted the hilt until black ichor burst across floor, wall, and ceiling, careful to turn his face from the spray.

The incubus moaned as it fell, tentacles whipping back and forth in paroxysms of agony. David leaned hard on the sword exactly as he'd been taught, gripping the pommel with both hands, using all of his

weight to keep the demon trapped. It was not the same as pinning a straw dummy or skewering one of the many dead pigs Affrodille brought up from Honnefleu for practice.

Unlike a mannequin or butchered pig, the incubus struggled against David's attack, flailing weakly. David's sweaty hands slipped on the pommel and he almost lost his grip. The sword was meant for sparring with students or defending against the infestation of dwarves that ran amok in the forest below White Hill. It was not the weapon he would have chosen to face down a demon, even the lesser sort.

The devil's true form was – despite an overabundance of angry feelers – roughly the size of a Billy Goat, far smaller than its more powerful cousins. Luckily for David, it was depleted by starvation, dwindled to little more than leathery skin, matted fur, and knobby bone. Still, it struggled to the very last, several times landing a solid blow across David's thighs. Once a single thorny tentacle managed to encircle his left wrist, squeezing. Pain blossomed where the thorns punctured his sleeve and pierced his flesh. David reared back in shock, tripping over his own feet in instinctive retreat, dragging the sword and demon with him as he tumbled to the floor.

The incubus exhaled a final gasp. The tentacle around David's wrist quivered and went limp, leaving a smear of blood as it fell away. It landed with an ugly wet slap on cold stone.

David sat gasping, both hands still clenched around his sword hilt, until he was certain the incubus was dead. The stink of sulfur increased to noxious. Splashes of ichor ate away at stone, smoking. The demon blood would leave permanent scars.

When at last David found the strength to tug his weapon free, he saw that the incubus' yellow eyes had gone milky white in death.

His left wrist throbbed, the wound a bloody manacle of torn flesh and small black barbs.

Climbing to his feet, he wiped what ichor he could off his blade onto handfuls of straw gathered from the broken coffers, though the blade was likely already ruined. He could not sheathe it for fear of damaging the leather scabbard he wore, nor would he leave the sword behind and walk the tunnels back to White Hill unarmed.

"A demon wandering loose in the cellar," he muttered, holding the

sword away from his body as he retrieved the coffer from the floor. "Sir Thomas would never forgive me." He tucked his prize under his right arm then edged around the incubus' slowly dissolving corpse, sidestepping a spreading puddle of sticky fluid. The stink of immediate decomposition made his eyes sting.

Once safely outside he closed and locked the cell door. The room would have to be cleansed and quarantined, the coffers moved to a new location. The incubus' death made the space unusable. Lore said the demon-stain endured long after the ichor was invisible to the mortal eye, and was three times as unlucky as any broken mirror.

Grabbing up his lantern, David hurried back the along the tunnels the way he'd come. The cleansing would have to wait. He had more pressing business, specifically one of the king's most trusted dukes waiting impatiently upon his return. John of Berry seemed a tolerant man, but also a man of action, and in the face of supernatural threat David supposed he could not expect Berry be contained indefinitely. Affrodille would do her best to act as distraction, but David knew Berry would not wait much longer before he gave up on White Hill and rode off for Littleton's black forest all on his own.

And that would be a very bad idea indeed.

TWO

FRANCE HAS HAD NO SHORTAGE OF 'MAD' ROYALS. CLOVIS II OF Neustria, consumed by a fit of greed and tormented by fiendish voices only he could hear, stole the skeletal arm of Saint Denis from its reliquary with the intent of feeding the sainted bones to his favorite hound. Charles Maximilien was so fond of sadism that his court feared for their own lives, and for those of their pets. Anna de Coligny believed she could turn into a lioness under the full moon, and periodically tried to climb her bedroom wall tapestries in full royal regalia, hissing and spitting, while her chamber maids looked on in horror. I have done business with the Franco-Therianthropes for centuries, I can assure you Anna was not of their line. And if the poor woman suffered a curse of any kind, it was only that of excessive inbreeding.

Believe me also when I say that none of these three - not the thief, the sadist, or the lioness - held a candle to Charles the Mad, the Glass King, the young brute that once ordered my Corbin executed for treason.

WHEN DAVID EMERGED FROM THE CATACOMBS INTO WHITE HILL'S



kitchens by way of an unobtrusive, narrow door usually secured with padlock and heavy chain, Affrodille was waiting.

"What took you so long?" she demanded, springing up from a stool near the hearth. When she caught sight of David's sword, still held carefully away from his body, she scowled. "Is that *ichor*? What happened? You're bleeding!" She kept her voice low but Cook and a kitchen lass, both chopping tubers near the ever-present cook fire, paused in their work to stare.

Cook had been serving meals to White Hill's residents since before Sir Thomas ruled Le Château. She took both the extraordinary and the grotesque in stride, so long as neither invaded her kitchen. Now she tossed David's stained sword and bleeding wrist a disapproving look before waving her knife.

"Out," she told him. "No mess in my kitchen!"

The young lass working at Cook's side, less jaded, blanched and covered her eyes. Her horrified expression made David's pulse race again in remembered terror.

"Not that way." Affrodille caught at David's elbow before he could round the large hearth and escape into the dining room. "It's supper time. People are eating." She snatched up several rags from a pile Cook kept near her chopping block for cleaning pots. Ignoring the woman's angry grumbling, Affrodille steered David out the back door and into the kitchen garden. "*Berry's* eating in there."

More time had passed in the catacombs than David realized. The sky over the kitchen garden was pink with sunset. He turned his face briefly upward, gratefully inhaling fresh air. Birds twittered in the branches of an old lemon tree, while evening butterflies browsed Cook's herbs. Pale fish dozed in a small pond where water onion was just beginning to sprout for the season. A makeshift wall of old Rouen stone kept predators from the herbs and provided a convenient place to sit and enjoy the garden or read a book, if one so desired.

In the summer, the plot was often filled with students, studying or fraternizing, sometimes napping. David envied them their enjoyment. To him the blooming oasis would always be the place where Sir Thomas was murdered.

"Sit," Affrodille ordered. "You're in shock. Leave the sword. I'll

send one of the children for it later. Here. Clean yourself up." She tossed a rag. David caught it clumsily before abandoning his ruined sword in spring grasses. He set the coffer on the wall by his side. Where the ichor was still wet on the blade, the grass smoked angrily.

Affrodille glanced at the coffer, nodding in satisfaction.

"Good. You found it. Berry's practically gnashed his teeth to nubs," she said, hands on her hips. "That man has no patience at all. I can't believe he's allowed near the throne." She narrowed her eyes, watching as David daubed at the blood on his wrist. "What was it this time? Are those barbs? Is it dead or do I need to be barring the door to the catacombs?"

"Your faith in my swordsmanship continues to underwhelm." David winced as he picked the incubus' thorns from his wrist. "It's dead. But mayhap lock the door." He should have seen to it immediately, but lingering anxiety kept him from thinking clearly.

Another misstep, to add to the oversight of walking the catacombs with only a small sword for protection. He knew better and wanted to blame Duke Berry's appearance for his scattered attention, but that, too, would be a mistake.

"It's not *my* faith that's lacking," Affrodille retorted. She snatched up the ring of keys David detached from his belt. "I'll see to the door. Take a moment to compose yourself and then come have supper."

"Come report, you mean," David said, rubbing at his brow where a headache was brewing. "Before his majesty's regent grinds his teeth to dust."

"That too," Affrodille agreed, her full mouth twisting into a wry grin. Not for the first time David was grateful she'd stayed on at Le Château after Thomas' death. If not for her quick wit, uncanny skill with throwing knives, and stubborn spirit, David would have given up on White Hill long ago.

If David wasn't a fighter, Affrodille had been born ready to brawl.

She relented, touching his shoulder before she left him. "You can do this. You *are* doing this. White Hill depends on it. Take a moment. Remember who you are, David Chevalier."

David allowed himself a brief respite on the low stone wall, listening to the birds and enjoying the scent of spring lavender, before

he scooped up Berry's artifact, tucking it once again beneath his arm. He pulled his sleeve over his battered wrist, hiding the wound as best he could. Duke Berry was an observant man, and David couldn't let him know Le Château was in any way vulnerable. White Hill's future depended upon it.

Squaring his shoulders, he left the garden.

Cook stole a glance at his face as he crossed through the kitchen but wisely kept mute. The young lass, now busy with mutton instead of tubers, ducked her head, refusing to look his way. The kitchen smelled pleasantly of warm bread and roasted meat. An enormous bowl of stew hung from a tripod over the hearth flames, bubbling gently. David's stomach woke again, threatening to growl. He'd broken his fast with only a piece of fruit. All at once he was ravenous.

The large hearth divided Le Château's kitchens from the dining hall. The hall was cavernous, meant to feed many more students than White Hill currently housed. Several broad wooden tables were placed in rows marching at an angle away from the hearth. Fresh rushes hid the earthen floor. Ancient tapestries depicting amiable forest scenes warmed the stone walls. Candles burned on every table, keeping darkness at bay. The light in the high, glass-paned windows far above David's head was already beginning to fade.

Duke Berry sat on a low bench near the hearth, warming himself at the fire, studiously ignoring the spotted cat twining between his booted feet. More of the dappled felines walked the boards or sat quietly in the rushes near the students still enjoying their supper. The cats hoped they would be awarded bits of food beneath the table if only they begged politely, a tradition Sir Thomas had encouraged.

White Hill's students, two lads and one lass – a paltry clutch – knew that they would be allowed to stay and witness the king's business if they also behaved tactfully, another tradition of Thomas' David continued. House Valois' difficulties were White Hill's difficulties, so long as the supernatural was involved, and White Hill was nothing without its pupils.

'My inglorious crew' Thomas had called his original apprentices, and the name had stuck through more than one graduating class.

*"I'm smudged, besmirched, the most inglorious of all the crew."* Laurie had

told Corbin only days before all their lives had gone to ruin. Corbin had relayed those sour words to David much later in a private letter obviously – from the wine stains and misspellings – written when Corbin was deep in his cups, adding a postscript in his strangely elegant scrawl: *We failed him when he needed us most.*

The most recent inglorious crew looked up when David entered the dining hall, faces expectant. They were very young. David could not quite believe he and Corbin, and Affrodille and Laurie, had ever been quite so innocent. Their naivety shook him to the core.

The incubus, had it lived, would have found them a very tasty meal.

He scanned the room for Affrodille and found her talking quietly with two soldiers dressed in blue and silver livery. The livery marked them as members of House Valois' elite ranks. Their alert stances and the way they scanned the room as they talked with Affrodille told David they were practiced killers ready and willing to defend Duke Berry with their lives.

A slight stiffening of their spines was indication they'd noticed David the moment he stepped around the hearth. That the soldiers continued to smile and nod at Affrodille instead of drawing the swords they wore on their hips meant they believed him harmless.

No one from House Valois had ever believed Sir Thomas harmless.

"Chevalier." Berry stood up. "There you are, at last." He wiped a finger over his thin mustache, lips folding into a frown. "I did not plan on wasting an entire day, waiting upon your success."

"Apologies, Your Grace." Affrodille joined them, smiling prettily at the duke. She had grown up at court and could wield charm as deftly as she did her knives. "White Hill's catacombs are extensive. Not even Sir Thomas knew his way around the labyrinth, or understood the old magician's collection. As a collector yourself, surely you understand how treasures may get out of hand."

Berry was not immune to Affrodille's appeal. He relaxed minutely, smiling even as his eyes darted to the coffer under David's arm. "You found it."

"Not without some difficulty," David admitted. He crossed to the nearest table, set the chest carefully atop the boards. His students—Tawet and Rolo, and the lass, Micah—craned their necks to see but

knew better than to rise from their supper for a closer look. "But, yes, here it is."

It did not matter that he hadn't had a chance to check the coffer's contents, that his certainty rested entirely on a working knowledge of the old magician's shorthand. He hoped only Affrodille noticed the tremble in his hands as he opened the chest.

*Nerves later*, her expression cautioned. *First, see this through.*

If Affrodille could sham agreeableness in the face of the duke's disdain, David supposed he could fake confidence.

"Medea's Phial." David slid the open coffer across the boards.

Berry bent at the waist for a look. When the duke started to reach for the glass jar where it lay nestled in a bed of dusty straw, David murmured a warning. Berry thought better of the impulse, instead folding both hands safely behind his back.

"Aye, it matches the description," King Charles' regent agreed, head bowed over the artifact. "The glass is the correct color, and the etchings—although of course I cannot be certain without touching—"

"Don't," David said.

"—appear to match up." Berry snapped his fingers and his guards left their positions against the wall. One carried a sack bundled in her arms. The second spread a piece of papyrus on the table near the chest. In the candlelight David could make out a detailed sketch, ink fading from blue to grey.

The drawing, he deduced from the worn papyrus and declining ink, was very old indeed. It was also a capable likeness of the blue glass phial he'd brought up from the catacombs.

"I suppose it's possible copies of the phial were made..." Berry paused, playing again with his sparse mustache. "As a connoisseur of the arts, I've seen my fair share of painted forgeries."

"We keep no forgeries in White Hill," David replied coldly, pretending not to notice as Tawet, Rolo and Micah hid affronted expressions behind their hands. "Fakeries are quickly disposed of. We have no interest in falsification. This is Medea's Phial. I have no doubt."

Cocking his head at the narrow sack in the soldier's arms, he

continued, "Whether or not it will work as we hope depends entirely on the authenticity of the incantation."

Berry's dark eyes narrowed. "As I said, I've seen my fair share of forgeries and I have it on excellent authority that this is the real thing." Again, he snapped his fingers. The soldier slung the sack onto the table. David winced at the woman's nonchalance.

"The book is straight from the Vatican's Archives, along with the sketch." Berry drew a fragile-looking volume from within the bag. Bound in mottled brown hide, it was hardly thicker than the width of David's thumb, the cord used to secure the pages fraying. "A copy of Brother Albert's last addendum to his *Theatrum Chemicum*, as you requested. The original, as I'm sure you understand, must never leave Vatican City. Sixtus was quite disconcerted when he learned you knew of the manuscript at all, and further dismayed when I told him you have the phial here on White Hill. Luckily for us, the Pope owes our king a favor or six."

First wiping his fingertips fastidiously on his tunic, Berry opened the volume, turning over each leaf one at a time until he'd paged more than halfway through.

"Here." He turned the volume toward David. "The incantation. In the original Latin. I understand the addendum is mostly a collection of rare spells Brother Albert stumbled upon in the last years of his life. Mayhap during his wanderings in Germania. More likely in his readings of Aristotle. It's less than one hundred pages. I had my scribe flip through it." Berry rolled his broad shoulders in a shrug. "And here, you'll see"—the tip of his finger landed on fragile vellum—"it's the same drawing, the same phial."

"Yes." A quick check through the list of ingredients as well as a few minor notations written in the margins next to the incantation convinced David that Pope Sixtus would, indeed, be reluctant to let even a copy of manuscript leave the Vatican's protection. "This is the spell that kindles the Phial. I've seen parts of it before, but never the whole. I imagine Sir Thomas believed the incantation lost, else he would have mentioned it when —"

David caught himself in time to swallow back Corbin's name. House Valois, though too polite to press the issue, still thought of the

de Beaumont family with distaste, and continued to believe Corbin was a thief.

Affrodille cleared her throat. Berry's unpleasant mustache twitched.

"About that," the duke said, as he drew a second treasure from his bag, "almost as difficult to convince his majesty to part with this again than convince Sixtus to send the book. The Saracen glaive, at your insistence."

David was grateful his hands did not betray him with another tremor when he reached for the oaken case. His fingertips remembered the feel of the old wood, the uncanny warmth of the golden clasp and padlock, the miniature faces carved into the lock's face.

"Are they laughing or screaming?" Berry wondered as David caressed the etchings. "Hardly matters, I suppose. Either way, they're...disturbing."

David didn't reply. The padlock was unsecured. He set it tenderly to one side before opening the long box.

"Is it the same sword?" Affrodille stood on her toes to look over David's shoulder. "There are four, are there not?"

"This is Corbin's sword," David said, gazing down on the blade where it rested on old velvet the color of emeralds. "I remember it clearly." He still sometimes saw the glaive in his nightmares as he relived Laurie's death, the sound of flesh and bone breaking while Corbin twisted the unlucky blade in Laurie's gut.

"They are not all four identical," Berry agreed. "This is the same sword your friend was trained to in his childhood. It is a measure of King Charles' regard that he's agreed to the loan."

"His majesty's regard." Pretending not to notice his own little inglorious crew had left their table and drifted close, each trying to get a glimpse of the infamous weapon, David closed the lid on Corbin's glaive. "Or his desperation."

"Candidly: both. We need the monster dispatched and the poor girl back, swiftly. The girl alive, if possible. Her corpse, if necessary. Either way, time is of the essence." Berry drummed an agitated tempo on the table with blunt fingers.

David had taken the other man's unrest for impatience. Now he

was beginning to suspect Berry's annoyance cloaked fear. Affrodille must have come to the same conclusion. She made a conciliatory noise as she poured red wine from the pitcher on the table into a goblet.

"As House Valois well knows, White Hill is both efficient and discreet." She passed the goblet to Berry, giving the man something to occupy his restive hands. "Please tell his majesty the problem is all but handled. And thank him for the loan."

"In the past House Valois has known White Hill to be both efficient and discreet. As of late White Hill has been less reliable. You'll understand, then, that his majesty also requires proof of the demon's destruction. We cannot have the monster returning to court." Berry flapped a hand. "To be frank, Charles begins to worry good coin sent your way might be better spent on more reliable defenses."

"Charles?" Affrodille asked, "Or his dukes?"

"White Hill has been House Valois' greatest weapon since before Philip gained the throne." David met Berry's sneer with a practiced, pleasant smile. "It would be a mistake to discard us now."

Berry's sneer faded. "Return the girl to us quickly and without fanfare along with the Aureate's head in a bag, and his majesty will have no cause for complaint." He took a long swallow of wine.

David repacked Brother Albert's book and Corbin's sword into the bag, taking care to handle both artifacts with the reverence they deserved. He added the small chest holding Medea's Phial, then gathered the sack up against his chest.

"If you'll excuse me, Your Grace, I want to begin on this at once. Time, as you said, is of the essence."

"COME." DAVID SAID TO THE KNOCK ON HIS DOOR. HE WAITED until Affrodille slipped into the tower room before slumping back into the over-stuffed chair he preferred for thinking.

She studied him with badly concealed concern. "How's the arm?"

"I told you, it's nothing." Upon returning to his quarters he'd plucked the remaining thorns from his flesh, then sterilized and bandaged the gashes. He preferred not to think of the stinging fire in his wrist. "Is he gone?"



"On his way back to the Grand Châtelet, riding like the hounds of hell are nipping at his heels." Affrodille paced a turn around David's laboratory, pausing here and there to sniff at a tincture bubbling over flame. "Speaking of, what exactly did you encounter in the catacombs? When you popped back into the kitchen, you'd gone white as if you'd seen a ghost."

"No ghosts on White Hill or in Le Château," David said automatically as he did every time a new student asked. At Affrodille's sour glance he hurried on. "Incubus. One of Lilith's children. Lost in the labyrinth. I got the impression it hadn't been down there long, but I'm not certain..." He trailed off before admitting, "I wasn't prepared. It could have killed me easily, if it hadn't been already weakened by starvation."

"Incubus. *Demon?* There are no demons in the catacombs. Sir Thomas would have said. Why, if he'd had a demon on hand, especially a lesser devil, Thomas would have set Corbin to kill it as a test for readiness before he took on the Littleton Fiend."

David shrugged. "Perhaps he intended to and didn't get the chance."

"No. An incubus walking below Le Château is not something he would keep from us. Thomas never willingly put his students in danger."

David couldn't agree, but Affrodille had loved Thomas with all her heart, and he saw no point in causing her pain. "It's dead now. That's all that matters."

"You're a fool if you think so." But she dropped to her knees between his chair and the cold hearth. "I'll deal with the catacombs while you're gone. Double-check the wardings, keep the children above ground." As a second thought, she added, "When you return, we'll go down together, check for further demon sign."

David murmured wordless assent. He had no doubt Affrodille would handle the breach in the catacombs as she did any other inconvenience—with skill and courage, easier done alone than with David's help.

It didn't matter. His thoughts were already on the journey ahead, and on the sword that rested, blade naked, across his knees.

Affrodille couldn't read minds but by now she knew David's as well as her own.

"Do you think Corbin will take the glaive back?" she asked as she began the process of kindling a fire in David's hearth. Outside the tower window night had fallen and despite the season and the flames simmering on his stove, the room was quickly growing cold. "Do you think he'll help us?"

"If I ask, he will," David said with more certainty than he felt. Corbin had been trained since childhood to kill, but Laurie's betrayal had changed something in all of them. David had seen Corbin's face after he'd agreed to surrender the glaive. Remembering it now, he thought Corbin had been relieved.

Affrodille touched candle to tinder. The hearth burst into cheerful flame. "The Beast may stand in our way. Even Media's Phial can guarantee that devil only a taste of what he desires most, and a taste may not be enough to seal the bargain."

"It will be." David's gaze drifted to the oval looking glass propped on his table against a pile of books. The glass, set in a simple, worm-eaten wooden frame, reflected back the cluttered worktable. It was the same glass the Beast had once used to contact White Hill, the same glass Corbin sometimes used to look for David when Beastly Manor grew too lonely.

But Corbin hadn't used the mirror to speak to David for months, and although David had tried scrying through it twice since Duke Berry arrived at White Hill, king's missive in hand, there had been no answering response.

"You've said time moves strangely in the manor," Affrodille reminded David, guessing his concern. "No telling how much has passed for Corbin since you said your goodbyes at Fontainebleau."

"Impossible to know for certain," David agreed. He stretched booted feet toward the fire, grateful for the warmth. The afreet glaive was heavy in his lap but he was strangely reluctant to set it aside. He traced a thumb over the Saracen blacksmith's stamp on the pommel and the distinctive nautilus curves on the grip as he blinked thoughtfully at the hearth. "I can't reliably guess what sort of reception I'll find."

"Well." Affrodille rose to standing in a single, fluid motion. She thumped his back with enthusiasm. "I envy you the adventure. You know how I love a challenge."

David refrained from rolling his eyes. "I need you and the children to find whatever you can on King Charles' 'problem'." He jerked a thumb at the king's letter where it lay on his writing desk, pinned beneath half a geode. "Shape-shifter with a taste for tailoring, abduction and blackmail."

"Tailoring?" Affrodille quirked both brows.

"Cloth-of-gold," David confirmed, ignoring her amusement. "According to his majesty, 'a most beauteous fabric fit for God and king alone.' Monsieur Aureate secured a place in court based solely upon his rich textiles and enviable dress-making talents. He is, the king writes, one of a kind."

"Monsieur Aureate," Affrodille said, "would be a *nom de plume*. Cloth-of-gold suggests sorcery. Or alchemy?"

"Spinning wool into gold is far beyond even my not-insignificant capabilities. Besides which, Monsieur Aureate had one other distinguishing characteristic."

"Oh?"

"He always wore an especially cloying perfume. His majesty thinks an extract of jasmine. So strong, in fact, that monsieur was often detectable by nose before he entered a room."

"Ah. You think our tailor was masking one strong scent with another. Sulphur, or brimstone? And that would be why you required the glaive." Her mouth turned down at the corners. "That's a bit odd, isn't it? Decades without any manifestations, and now a demon at court and a demon in our cellars within the span of a few months?"

*Decades without any manifestations, and then Corbin woke the Littleton Fiend*, thought David. From the grim expression on Affrodille's face he didn't need to voice his suspicion out loud.

"Everything we have on demonology is still up here." David gestured at the books piled haphazardly around his room. "Including the English king's Latin treatise. Set everyone to reading. Find me Monsieur Aureate's true form. I'll contact you through the mirrors as

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soon as I speak to Corbin. One day, two at the most if the manor eludes."

Affrodille groaned. "Two days? Two days is not enough time! You're asking the impossible!"

David smiled without sympathy. "You *did* say you love a challenge."

THREE

*HONNEFLEU IN THE SPRING OF 1382 WAS A TOWN HOLDING ITS BREATH, prosperous and cautiously lively, aware that young King Charles' troubles in Rouen could easily spread west along the Seine and become Honnefleu's troubles as well. News traveled quickly up and down the riverbank, carried by sail or on horseback. Rouen's bells were confiscated, the city gates torn down, and twelve good men executed for the crime of standing against the Duke of Burgundy and his policy of heavy-handed taxation.*

*The revolt was quelled, and Rouen was placed under the administration of a royal governor. But the mood in France was hardly peaceful. Violence simmered in the air, barely contained, ready to explode at the slightest provocation. While the people of Honnefleu went about their daily business as usual, outwardly calm, behind shuttered windows and locked doors, in the privacy of their own homes and businesses, they spoke of their displeasure in whispers.*

*Honnefleu lacked Rouen's courage. Afraid of retribution, villagers would not protest taxation outright for fear of Burgundy's iron fist, but they did not hesitate to show their discontent in small human ways: pelting naval officers with word, stone, and rotten fruit when the sailors dared leave the protection of*

*their ships for the temptations of shore, or turning their faces aside in disgust when members of the royal cavalry passed through town on the way to Fécamp in the north.*

*It was well known even as far as Littleton that the proprietress of the Blue Goose, Honnefleu's most beloved tavern, would refuse service to any man or woman wearing the king's uniform, and not politely.*

*I applaud her for her good taste.*

DAVID DEPARTED WHITE HILL FOR LITTLETON AT DAWN, CHOOSING a nondescript bay mare from Le Château's stables, eschewing Affrodille's larger, faster, and more conspicuous black gelding. He left his scholar's robes folded neatly on his bed, dressing instead in a plain crofter's tunic and trousers, and a pair of sturdy, well-worn boots.

Though it galled him he left off the soft, Phrygian cap he habitually wore, covering himself instead with a hooded cloak. Even more than his scholar's robes the cap marked him as White Hill's alchemist. Le Château, as much as any warship or cavalry regiment, belonged to King Charles.

He could not risk delay on any account, nor did he wish to be battered with rotten fruit as he rode through Honnefleu.

"Keep your hood up," Affrodille cautioned for the third time as David checked the straps fastening the sack holding the afreet glaive across his back. "To better hide your curls."

And for the third time David awarded his friend an incredulous glance. "I'd be recognized for my spectacles first." Reading glasses were an expensive indulgence. Those who could afford spectacles rarely risked them outside of their homes. David was a well-known exception. He refused to grope through life half-blind and thanks to House Valois, had the means to regularly replace broken lenses. "Stop worrying. No one will pay me any mind. It's not like I intend to pause for a friendly chat."

Affrodille grunted doubtfully. But she did not chide him again as he swung up into the saddle, and if the salute she tossed him when he kicked the mare into a gallop was mocking, her tepid farewell was more than made up for by the cheers and whistles issuing from the

student's dormitory above the stables as he galloped away from Le Château and down the steep wagon track toward Honnefleu below.

*They have too much faith in their elders,* David thought as the track down White Hill unspooled beneath the mare's pounding hooves. And then: *Time alone with Affrodille will soon teach them otherwise.*

Honnefleu was already stirring. Lamplighters whistled their way down sandy cobblestone streets, snuffing what flame remained in the cresset baskets used overnight to keep the cold at bay. The brisk morning air was heavy with the scent of brine. The bay reflected the rising sun on David's right where ship masts split the silver sky, while on his left industrious merchants began the process of opening their shops, and customers spilled grudgingly from port-side inns, calling for their horses and wagons. The city's many taverns would open for business later in the day, when travelers and sailors alike began to think of beer, supper and companionship.

David crouched low in the saddle, head bowed and hands light on the reins as the mare, barely winded from her climb down White Hill, trotted past shop fronts. The lamplighters dodged out of her way, and the merchants paused in their busy work to watch David hurry on. He could feel their eyes on his back as he passed. He'd come from the direction of Le Château, that they knew for certain, but cloaked as he was and without the king's favor glittering in starburst on his breast he was shielded from acrimony. The people of Honnefleu looked after David with sleepy suspicion, but they let him pass unmolested.

Away from the harbor, crooked streets branched south toward the king's highway, skirting gardens and well-kept homes. There were no garden walls in Honnefleu to divide one patch of grass from another. Flowering vines and blooming pear trees stretched between stone facades, connecting one residence to the next. Neighbors shared meticulously tended vegetable plots and chicken coops. Every other stoop seemed to host a fat cat waiting to be let in for breakfast. Baking bread and wood smoke scented the air, making David's mouth water. He'd packed only hard tack and cheese for travel, and he envied the house cats their breakfast of leftover patisserie.

It would be an easy day's journey on horseback from Honnefleu to Littleton. The king's highway ran in a southerly direction past field and

hedgerow, the horizon broken here and there by groups of fruit trees and spreading bramble. Armed soldiers in royal livery patrol the road in regular intervals, charged with keeping travelers safe. There was no more dependable road between Calais and Angers, and none busier.

Just outside of Honnefleu, David reined his horse to an easier trot. It was unlikely he'd be recognized beyond the city, either as king's man or Rouen Jew. Besides which, a man in visible haste would only draw unwanted attention.

He was not so foolish as to pull the hood back from his face, but he did straighten in the saddle, lifting his gaze from the cobblestones, relaxing enough to enjoy his surroundings. It was not often that he had occasion to leave Honnefleu. Although he was a self-proclaimed hermit, he did not regret the opportunity for adventure, even as he expected he was riding into a much bigger mess than either Berry or King Charles had been inclined to admit.

So early in the day the king's highway was lively with traffic, on foot and on horseback. Merchants and crofters made up the greatest number of travelers, but David counted two families of tinkers—each pulling a brightly painted caravan behind raw-boned oxen—as well as one wealthy Caen tradesman flanked on either side by armed guards. A patrolman in livery rode nearby, sword on his back and eye on the way ahead.

David wondered if the merchant had bribed the soldier to stay close at hand, or if the patrolman's attentiveness was only coincidental. The highway was safe, but not impervious to trouble. Brigands occasionally hid themselves in the adjacent trees, springing out for a bit of thievery between watchmen. Corbin had been set upon on his way from Littleton to Honnefleu, almost murdered in the night by a rogue disguised as a Benedictine from the island abbey of Le Saint-Michel.

The false Benedictine had been no average brigand, intent solely on robbery. Corbin had survived the attack but with a hole in his skull. The monk had fared far worse, torn to pieces by a pack of wolves in the night.

David and Sir Thomas had traced the false monk back to Caen where they discovered he was a sword-for-hire called Alf, but learned nothing more.



What Alf had wanted with Corbin, or why the man had walked the highway in the guise of a monk, David would not guess. But he was certain Alf was no coincidence. After the inquest he'd found a sailor's charm sewn into the hem of the man's blood-stained robes: a sprig of rosemary burnt at both ends and braided through with red salvia, then wrapped in a piece of soft parchment inscribed with Corbin's full name.

Sailors were a superstitious lot, and most of their charms were ineffective—but not all. David knew of at least one pirate in Honnefleu who had a talent for crafting authentic charms. Corbin wore her protection around his neck in the form of mermaids' fingers and sharks' teeth strung together between beads.

The bone necklace had come too late to protect Corbin from Alf. And David, who didn't like unsolved puzzles, had kept Alf's tracking charm to himself, planning to speak of it to Corbin only after he had an explanation. He'd never had the chance. Laurie had murdered Sir Thomas, and Corbin had cut down Laurie and fled White Hill for Beastly Manor, and the mystery of the false Benedictine became unimportant.

Twelve years later the puzzle of Alf was still unsolved. David, riding past a square of farmland that might have been the very same upon which the sword-for-hire had died, continued to wonder who had sent an assassin after Corbin, and why.

THE TRADESMAN AND HIS RETINUE MADE GOOD TIME. DAVID RODE in their wake, grateful for the path the guards cleared through slower foot traffic. His mare seemed eager for the company of other horses, stretching her legs to keep up with the merchant's stout pony, pricking her ears hopefully in the direction of the patrolman's courser. The courser paid her no mind, but the soldier flicked David a friendly glance before returning his watchful gaze to the road.

"Strange animals, aren't they?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Horses," the patrolman explained, mouth curling at the corners. He rode bare-headed, his helm attached to his saddle, which told

David he wasn't expecting mischief, but he kept one hand loosely on the hilt of the dagger on his belt, which meant he knew better than to trust expectations.

The shiny badge on his shoulder said he was a newly made knight while the cut of his boots and gloves suggested he was of noble birth.

"Not my specialty," David confessed. "Horses."

"It's the herd instinct. They prefer company to loneliness, you see, even the company of strangers. Tilda, here – " the young soldier thumped his courser lightly on the neck " – is the friendly sort, a rare thing in a mare. She won't mind if your girl there gets close. But the pony will kick." He indicated the guards with his chin. "And while the geldings are too foot sore to make a fuss, their handlers are another matter. You'll be safer back with me, if it's companionship you're looking for."

"I'd like that."

The soldier's smile deepened. "You're a man of letters? A scribe. I can tell by the ink on your fingers. And your spectacles." He laughed when David reached up in consternation to tug at his hood. "Not used to travel, are you? Safer behind a desk with a quill in your hand. Which house do you work for?" He took his attention off the horizon long enough to toss a quick salute. "I'm called Ansel, recently of his majesty's cavalry. My youngest brother is a man of letters, you see. He works for Duchess d'Auvergne, a prime position."

"I'm David." He couldn't help but be impressed. "You've an eye for detail. Most don't pause to take note of a man's face, let alone the ink on his hands." It was the sort of scrutiny schooled into pupils of Le Château, where attention to detail could be the difference between life and death, and not a skill that came naturally to many.

Ansel shrugged. "Curiosity killed the cat, as my mum used to say, and to my shame I'm plagued with more than my fair share. Still, can't be too careful, lately." He lowered his voice. "Not with the troubles north and in Paris. I'll wear his majesty's colors proudly, but I'll keep both eyes open whilst I do."

One of the guards riding ahead near the tradesman chose that moment to turn his head and spit on the cobblestones, barely missing a gray-haired shepherd coaxing a group of goats along the highway. The

shepherd cursed, but the guard ignored him, darting an ugly glare back Ansel's way instead.

"I see. And why is it a royal knight is playing nursemaid to..." David paused, letting Ansel fill the silence.

"Oh, that's Rolande LHerboriste. Private physician to his grace, the duke of Anjou," Ansel replied readily. "He rides twice a year from Littleton way to tend to the duke's health, and to his majesty's as well. Sometimes he brings his daughter. Valentine's a bright, well-formed woman, a treasure." Ansel clicked his tongue. "Rolande is very well regarded at court, and his services do not come cheaply. His grace swears Rolande is worth more than his own weight in gold, and so King Charles provides the man an escort to and from Paris whenever he rides attendance. I drew the short straw this time 'round, but I won't complain. The weather is fine and I've a second cousin in Littleton with a cot to lend and an extra jug of apple brandy put aside for my arrival."

David regarded the tradesman with new interest. As far as he could see, Rolande was remarkable only for his casual display of wealth; the ostentatious silks and furs he wore were as dangerous as royal livery in a climate of unrest. The dark-haired man flaunted rings on every finger. A large purple cabochon hung suspended from a delicate gold chain around his thick neck. His shoulders were broad, muscled beneath his fine tunic, his thighs massive. This was a fellow used to hard labor, dressed implausibly in a lord's finery.

As master of White Hill, it was David's business to know everything of import regarding House Valois, and that included everything about the king's health. And indeed, thanks to an assortment of carefully placed informants, David knew the name of every court physicker, bloodletter, and hedge witch granted access to Charles.

But he'd never heard of Rolande.

"I don't believe I know your herbalist," David murmured. "From Littleton, you said?"

"Aye. Well. Directly west of Littleton, I mean to say."

David's brows rose beneath his hood. "Directly west of Littleton lies the black forest."

"So it does," Ansel agreed. "So it does."

. . .

ROLANDE THE HERBALIST CHOSE TO REST HIS PONY AT MID-DAY. David, despite the urgency of his errand, decided to do the same. He judged they'd make Littleton only an hour or two after dark, thanks to the hired guards' aggressive push down the highway.

They pulled up off the side of the road near a crofter's well. Distant cottages squatted in the spring crop. A spotted cow watched over a hedgerow as the guards drew water from the well for their horses and Rolande's pony. The herbalist stood to one side, stretching the kinks out of his spine and legs, the jewels on his fingers flashing. Ansel wandered deeper in the crop to take a piss while David, relieved to be out of the saddle, stomped blood back into his feet and waited for a turn at the well.

Noontide sun beat against his hood and cape, too warm. The wound on his wrist throbbed angrily. He put it out of his mind, opting instead to ponder Rolande. He let the mare drink her fill from the bucket attached by rope to the well, then pushed back his hood long enough to wash road dust from his face, hands, and spectacles which he dried on the edge of his tunic. When his spectacles were once again in place, Rolande met his eye across an expanse of new green crop. He jerked his chin in invitation.

*It's not like I intend to pause for a friendly chat.* He'd promised Affrodille he'd keep a low profile. But if David's hunch was right, Rolande L'Herboriste was worth a vow broken.

"My escort tells me you've been making enquiries," the merchant said as David approached, leading the mare on a loose rein. "Ansel's naïve. Which explains why he might not understand Anjou would toss him in the gallows for a wagging tongue. You, my friend, haven't the excuse of youth."

"Have we met?" David asked. "I'm certain I'd remember if we had. Beg pardon, *my friend*, but yours is not a face I would forget."

Rolande's eyes—one blue and one brown—narrowed to slits when he laughed. "Fairy touched. I was born with only the one eye. The other was empty, just a socket. My da was a woodsman who had no patience for a one-eyed child. He wanted to smother me whilst I slept

but in desperation my mam made a deal with one of the forest fae. Plucked its own blue eye out, the fairy man did, and shoved it right into mine own head." He snapped his fingers. "Pop!"

One of Sir Thomas' many cats was a rough-eared tom with one blue eye and one brown. David had been in White Hill's kitchens the day it was born. The kitten had two blue eyes when it first regarded the world. As it aged the right darkened to brown while the left stayed true to the color of sky. The mismatched eyes were a notable oddity, but definitely not the result of fairy magic.

"You don't believe me," Rolande said, chuckling. "No matter. But it's my fairy eye that shows me the truth of a man's ailment, and how best to set his body right again. I do well by my mam's bargain, and it does well by me."

"I'm told you tend his majesty in Paris. I trust King Charles is well?"

"Well, and hale. But you'll understand if I can't go into more detail. His majesty's health is his majesty's business."

David pretended confusion. "In truth, I care little for matters of court. It was Ansel's mention of the black forest that caught my attention. I'm certain I misunderstood. Surely you don't make your home within that accursed wildwood?"

Rolande's affable smirk faltered. "Not within, nay. I'm not so much a fool as that. But close by its shadow, aye, and I am familiar with its denizens."

"My good luck. As it happens, I'm heading to Littleton, and into the forest beyond. I'm in need of a guide."

"What is your business with the forest?" Wariness replaced Rolande's good cheer. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "I doubt you can afford my services."

"My business is with the Littleton Fiend. I'm told that devil's lair is very difficult to discover. A many-towered mansion, a château that moves hither and thither through the forest of its own whim, unmoored in time and in place, tethered to the black wood by the strength of a sorcerer's potent curse."

"Sorceress," Rolande corrected sourly. "'Twas a witch that first

spoke that ancient curse, a vengeful crone." He crossed his arms on his chest, pulling his furs close. "I can't help you."

David filed Rolande's unease away in the back of his head, something to be taken out and examined later. "Can't or won't?"

But the herbalist shook his head, stubborn. "There are others in Littleton who might, for the right price. Ask for Sarah Brown, the inn keep's wife. Or Nell at Cottage Farm. Both have cause to know the forest."

"Thank you." David essayed a polite half-bow from the waist.

Rolande was already turning away, reaching for his pony.

"Don't thank me yet," he tossed over his shoulder as he swung up into the saddle. "Your coin purse will be much lighter for their help, likely with slim result. The Fiend keeps his lair well hidden, unless it serves his purpose to catch you knocking at his gate." Rolande's bi-colored eyes flicking across David's face. "Are you expected?"

"I've no reason to suppose so." David smiled. "Though I do have a knack for finding what I seek."

Rolande kicked his mount sharply in the belly, sending it headlong back toward the highway. His guardsmen, surprised, hurried to catch up.

"What's got into him?" Ansel asked, materializing at David's side.

"I can't say for sure. We were speaking of the black forest."

"Good God!" Ansel snorted, handsome face crinkling in amusement. "No wonder he scuttled off. The people of Littleton don't much like strangers asking questions about their forest. They're protective of its strangeness. Or mayhap just afraid."

"Of interlopers?"

Ansel turned somber.

"Nay," he said, "of catching the wildwood's attention."



## FOUR

*MIRROR MAGIC IS A LEARNED SKILL, JUST LIKE SWORDS-WORK OR RIDING a bicycle. And as with any learned skill, practice is important. One need not use a mirror. Any reflective surface will do. A crystal ball, a bowl of water, a piece of highly polished silver. Shapes appear in the reflective surface, nonphysical but not necessarily harmless. Often what is revealed is symbolic. A good scryer may also use mirror magic for long distance communication.*

*Some people have a natural affinity for scrying. They only have to walk past a shallow pond, glance sideways at the polished blade of a dinner knife or look too long into the blue heart of a flame and unbidden images will flood their mind. Other people, like David Chevalier, spend a lifetime in practice and achieve only modest results.*

*As with any sorcery, some capability is often more dangerous than none at all. The apparition Bloody Mary, surprisingly enough, is responsible for almost as many dead children as the automobile.*

THEY REACHED LITTLETON AN HOUR BEFORE SUNSET, EARLIER THAN

David expected. Rolande and his company turned off the highway first, kicking up dust as they left cobblestones for packed earth, urging their horses ahead. Ansel tossed David a quick farewell salute and a grin as he rode on. Neither Rolande nor his guardsmen spared David any attention. All three had been ignoring him with impressive determination for the last half of the day.

David took no offense. Quite the opposite. That he'd managed to rattle Rolande only meant he'd been asking the right questions. That David wasn't certain what he'd said to upset the herbalist didn't matter. He expected it would be made clear sooner rather than later, if it was of any consequence. It was Rolande's reaction, slowly stoked by David's continuing presence nearby from discomfort to a simmering fury, that was truly interesting.

Conversation, he knew, was much like alchemy: often the end reaction was well worth a day spent gently stirring.

David reined his mount to a leisurely walk, letting the others pass and then pull ahead. The mare, a hardy sort used to carrying riders in haste between White Hill and Paris or White Hill and Fontainebleau, was not winded by a day's journey in good weather. She rooted at the bit, unhappy, as her new friends disappeared into the dusk. But the gash around David's wrist had turned to fire and the rest of his body, unused to so many hours in the saddle, felt stretched out of place. He wanted a hot meal, even hotter water to wash in, and afterwards a comfortable bed until dawn.

There was no good reason to rush on. Only a fool or a truly desperate man would brave the wildwood after sunset, and David had not yet reached the point of true desperation. He'd meant it when he told Rolande he usually found whatever it was he sought, be it clandestine monster or lost treasure. He did not suppose catching the Littleton Fiend could be much more challenging than tracking a vampire to its tomb or a dwarf to its nest.

A small voice in the back of David's head whispered that he was perhaps overconfident. He dismissed it with a shake of his head and a sigh, then pointed the mare's nose in the direction of torchlight ahead.

As he grew close to town the road changed, running straight between humps of field. Weathered oak planks shielded the deepest



wagon ruts, the wood worn smooth by traffic and weather. Low stone walls and thick hedgerows bordered plots of farmland. Past a tangle of vegetation, thatched roofs and stone dormers made strange shapes in the dusk. Candles flickered through the cracks in shuttered windows. The evening air smelled sweetly of burning applewood. Distant voices wreathed the fields like smoke; the sounds of families greeting each other as they returned home for supper.

David's stomach growled. The mare whickered in sympathy, no doubt thinking wistfully of grain mash and White Hill grasses.

"Almost there," David soothed. "Affrodille assured me the inn's stable is recently renovated on his majesty's dime, and more than adequate."

The mare swung both ears forward, mollified.

David could see the inn ahead even in the increasing gloom. The three-story building, called Henri's after the baker who once sold bread and patisseries out of the first floor, was the tallest in Littleton. Henri was several years gone, the building under new management, the bakery converted to a tavern frequented by locals and travelers alike. A new baker had set up shop several doors down.

An eager lad met David in front of the inn, popping up from the stoop like a marionette on strings.

"Welcome to Henri's!" He cast a curious eye over David's hood and over the bag strapped across his back. "Stable your horse, monsieur? Are you staying the night?"

"Yes." David winced when his boots hit the ground. Pain stabbed his injured arm, wrist to elbow. His legs protested time spent too long in the saddle. "Assuming there's room." Light and noise spilled through the inn's open door, along with the scent of roast meat. "It seems very full."

"That's only the regulars come in to celebrate Cooper John's good fortune. There's plenty of beds left. Just ask Sarah behind the bar." The lad accepted the reins and an offering of two silver pennies from David's purse. His affable smile widened. "My lord. Thank you, my lord."

"See that she's well fed." David slapped the mare lightly on the withers before limping across the stoop and into the inn.

A burst of loud good cheer heralded his arrival. He was relieved to see it was only the general conviviality of a friendly crowd enjoying a fine night and even finer drink. Several patrons raised their tankards in his direction—the universal sign of welcome recognized in every tavern from Brittany to Flanders—before returning to whatever conversation his arrival had interrupted.

"Welcome!" The woman polishing tankards behind the wide field-stone-and-oak bar had pink cheeks and a snub nose and small gold hoops in her ears. She also wore a woodcutter's axe on a belt over a simple wool tunic. "Supper or a bed or both?"

"Both." David pushed back his hood and maneuvered his way to the bar, slipping between patrons seated on benches, patrons propped drunkenly against the inn's slanting stone walls, and patrons already passed out on the rush-strewn floor. The glaive in the sack on his back made sidling awkward. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in so close a crowd.

"Belly up, then." Flapping her bar rag as incentive, the woman cleared a place for David and his belongings at the bar with the efficiency of Moses parting the Red Sea. She looked David up and down as she did so, stare catching on the bag as he propped it against the bar within easy reach. Unlike the stable lad, she declined to keep her thoughts to herself. "That looks cumbersome. Down from Rouen, are you?"

David was used to the mistake. It no longer made him as homesick as it once had.

"Honnefleu. Heading west. I'm in need of a guide through the forest," he added as she placed a trencher of good roast beef and a tankard of cold, dark ale on the bar in front of him. "Are you Sarah Brown?"

"Aye." But she shook her head knowingly. "You mean my mum, I think. She was Sarah, also, and a woods-woman, hedge witch, and a tracker. Made a nice wage leading merchants and the like back and forth through the wildwood, once upon a time."

David paused, tankard raised. "Once upon a time?"

"Mum died over the winter. Cold got into her old bones at last. Went to bed and didn't get up again. She's sorely missed."

"I'm sorry." The ale tasted faintly of apples. It fizzed on David's tongue and warmed the back of his throat before hitting his empty stomach in an explosion of pleasure. He drank his fill, then started on the trencher.

"Stick to the main path through the wood and you'll be fine," Sarah said in between filling tankards. "You look like the sort of man who can handle himself."

*Looks can be deceiving*, David mused as he chewed a mouthful of tender beef and carrot. The food was as fine as the drink, lightly spiced and expertly cooked. He ate very well on White Hill, but the tavern's simple meat and vegetable trencher was a thing of rare gastronomical beauty.

"What about Nell? Nell of...Cottage Farm?"

Sarah's brows rose under a fringe of dark hair. "Oh, aye. She'll take you through. But only if you convince her it's worth her while. Nell's a busy woman."

David nodded. He ate without speaking until gluttony made his stomach protest. Around him the common room grew boisterous, and then solemn, and boisterous again in waves, like the ocean lapping against a rocky shore. The party showed no sign of slowing even though outside night had fallen, shadows grown inky.

He'd always assumed farm folk went to their beds soon after dusk and rose with the sun, but the group in Henri's seemed disinclined to behave like proper villians.

"What's the celebration?" he asked around a young man slumped and snoring on the bar.

"John Cooper's best milk cow," the young man's companion, a grizzled fellow with ale in his beard, replied. "Had twins just this morning, she did. Two heifers. Both healthy and strong, and the mother's doing fine."

David's confusion must have shown on his face. The old farmer laughed.

"His *best* milk cow, I said. Twins make for a complicated birth. Often one or both die in the doing, and sometimes the mother was well. John expected a loss, he did, and John can't afford a loss. But the

cow and the calves are well, you understand? Fortune smiled on Littleton this morning."

"I see." David scanned the crowd, trying to guess which of the men might be the lucky John Cooper, but quickly gave up. They all had the whittled, windburned features specific to farmers and laborers, and each appeared as pleased with life as his nearest fellow. Any might have been the man who expected loss and was granted bounty instead; none seemed less relieved than his neighbor.

David extracted several coins from his purse and caught Sarah's attention. "For a room, and my supper, and another round of ale in honor of John Cooper and his milk cow."

A cheer went up. The farmer slapped David on the shoulder, gap-toothed grin crooked. Sarah winked and waited until the noise died down again. Then she leaned in close over the bar top.

"Bed's up the steps, first door on your right." Then, more quietly: "You'll find Cottage Farm on the east side of town, near the old mill. Barn's brand new and looks it, stands out like a rose in the briar. Get their early and you'll catch Nell at her chores before she walks out down the cliffs for crabbing. Once she's off she won't be back till nightfall."

"Thank you."

"Oh, nay." Sarah tested the weight of his coins in her palm. "Thank *you*."

THE BED WAS ONE OF TEN EMPTY COTS SET UP DORMITORY-STYLE IN a square room just off the second-floor landing. The room had no windows and smelled faintly of bread. It was cold. The thick stone walls and lack of windows and hearth made David think the room been used for storage when the building had been a bakery. The only light came through the open door from the busy common room below, though each bedstead was equipped with a squat beeswax candle and a serviceable chamber pot. He supposed he was meant to trot back downstairs to the main hearth if he wanted a flame for his candle. Instead, he left the door open in hopes of letting in some warmth.

He set his bag gently on the floor next to the cot nearest the door

then sank gratefully onto the mattress. It was horse hair stuffed into a patchwork of empty bags once used for flour, lumpy but clean. A thick wool blanket folded neatly at the head of the bed would serve as pillow or coverlet. He saw nothing to indicate hot water for a wash was in his future, but he was willing to settle for a full belly and a serviceable mattress under a safe roof.

The pain in his wrist was becoming worrisome. He shucked off his cape and rolled up his sleeve. By the light of the open door he could see the brown crust of dried blood on the bandages Affrodille had insisted on applying before he'd set out for Littleton. Then they'd both hoped the sluggish bleeding gashes were of no serious concern. Now David wasn't so certain. Though the bleeding was slowing, the skin around the bandages was hot against his seeking fingers, lumpy as the horse hair mattress. Where the incubus' thorns had punctured his flesh, puss rose in pinprick boils.

He had no reason to believe an incubus was venomous. Everything he'd read indicated their danger lay in their glamour, and in straightforward brute strength. Their ichor scalded flesh but every report indicated burns left behind were straightforward and not overly prone to infection.

He convinced himself that the wound was only acerbated by a day spent on horseback. A night's rest would help. Rolling his sleeve back into place, he decided he'd take a second look in the daylight, change the bandages then if necessary.

A gut full of good food and ale fogged David's head. He smothered a yawn. But there was one more task needing his attention before he could sleep. Hefting the bag onto the bed, he unbuckled one of the leather straps and reached in, digging past Medea's Phial still safely snuggled in its small coffer and the glaive in its larger chest. He tugged forth a bundle wrapped tightly in strips of raw silk. It felt solid in his hands, unbroken. Still, David didn't relax until he'd wound away the silk and held the mirror, thankfully in one piece, on his lap.

The glass was black in the dim room, the oval frame rough against his hands. He placed it to one side and reached again into the saddlebags, retrieving a small wedge of soft limestone secured in a drawstring pouch.

Scrying was one of the most basic skills in an alchemist's tool kit, often the first passed from master to apprentice. Any neophyte was expected to demonstrate his competence in primary divination before he or she was allowed even limited access to the alchemic lab. A mirror, a piece of black crystal, still water or fogged glass—the instrument didn't matter so long as the prospective medium learned to steady his or her mind and see true.

David had learned the principles of scrying at his uncle's knee. He'd proven very poor at it at, laughably unreliable. The things he glimpsed in the glass were impossibilities: towering buildings made of glass, metal-skinned birds skimming high above even the uppermost roofline. A crystalline bridge spanning a rift in red earth. Once, a giant clock face ticking atop a tower while figures swathed head-to-toe in white punted boats back and forth on a green river below.

"Imagination," David's uncle scolded after each vision. "You have too much imagination. Steady your mind and try again!"

He was better at far-seeing than divination, but not by much. He could speak to a person through the mirror one room away, one house away, and on a good day one village over. While both his cousins, neither of whom had aspirations of joining the old magician on White Hill and spent more time practicing swordsmanship than the family business of poisons and potions, could scry Grandmère in León.

"So much time spent admiring your pretty face!" they teased David as he glared into the glass. "Best hope the magician in his white château takes a shine to it as well, or he'll never let you near his tower. You've nothing else of worth to offer him."

David never met the old magician. He arrived at White Hill too late. Luckily Sir Thomas was a kind man who saw value in what David could do and did not judge him for what he could not.

"Use it sparingly," Sir Thomas had counseled as he'd admired the old mirror, a gift to David from Uncle Bendit—who thought himself very droll—on the day David had left Rouen for White Hill. "And for all our sakes put yourself in a sacred circle when you must. If you can't control, do your best to contain."

David did use the mirror sparingly, and while his technique improved with time, he was never equal to his uncle or his cousins.

And he never used the mirror without first putting himself inside a protective circle.

He drew the circle now, limestone chalk on the cold stone floor. He didn't need the light from the common room below. He could draw a sacred circle awake, asleep, blind, and half-dead. Geometry and ritual he understood. Unlike far-seeing or divination, geometry and ritual were consistent, enduring and unchanging. The incantation fell from his lips without hesitation, his hand was steady as it moved across the floor. The chalk was a lodestone in his fist.

When the circle closed David sat at the center, the mirror again on his lap. The noise from the downstairs was muffled, the light through the open door obscured. If anyone walked into the room, they would not see him sitting there on the floor by the bed. Their eyes and mind would skirt the edges of the circle, unable to comprehend that which was right in front of their noses.

David lifted the mirror flat on his palms to nose level, breathing softly through his mouth so as not to fog the surface. He closed his eyes, counting backward from twenty, calming his breathing, clearing a cobweb of distractions from his mind. His heartbeat slowed to a peaceful, steady bump behind his ribcage. He forgot the pain in his arm, the ache of overused muscles.

When he opened his eyes again, he did not look directly into the mirror but slantwise across the glass. It was not unlike gazing across Le Château's garden pond on a quiet winter's morning. The mirror shone a soft, silvery brown, lit from within by an old magic he could only hope to someday master.

It was not an easy connection to maintain. If he let the cobwebs gather again, if he thought, for instance, of mad Rob who'd used a similar method to scry for King Charles and who'd driven Laurie to murder, or if he moved in too close and let his reflection fall across the mirror's face, disturbing the spell...

Then he'd have to begin again.

"Eleven...ten...nine..." David whispered, barely moving his lips, doing his best not to think of anything at all.

Tiny whitecaps ruffled the mirror's surface. Where they broke,

folding in onto themselves, they left smears of vibrant color behind, pieces of a mosaic swirling into place.

Encouraged by the mirror's response, David sharpened his intent. Droplet by droplet he filled the empty ampoule that was his mind with elements specifically Corbin.

Astonishing ginger hair, cut short for safety's sake. Eyes the color of the Seine on a sunny day. Slow to smile, quick to laugh. A volcanic temper, tightly restrained. The scar on Corbin's temple, the long lazy days spent in recovery after that ugly wound, David dancing affable attendance in the sick room. Innumerable hours shared over the problem of the Littleton Fiend, together in David's tower, high above the rest of the world.

*Corbin.*

Self-pitying, self-sacrificing, too fond of alcohol, loyal to a fault, prone to black moods, cultivated as a killer and deadly with the glaive in hand.

Blushing pink over a ribald joke. Gobbling up Cook's fresh-baked bread, sighing pleasure even as he nearly choked on a mouthful. The string of mermaids' finger-bones around his throat. Corbin had offered that same string to David, shrugging off the necklace's worth, laughing at David's excitement.

*"A gift. From me to you. Merry Christmas, David."*

"By God and all His devils! You make more noise than a cock at crow! Must you broadcast your schoolboy crush across all Normandy?"

David's pulse wanted to leap. Only the iron control of long hours spent in practice kept the spell from dissolving.

"Schoolboy crush?" he enquired, baffled, as he glanced askance at the mirror, catching a sideways impression of a decrepit chamber: tattered curtains, faded carpets, broken furniture.

The Littleton Fiend—angry yellow eyes, wild black hair, a notion of silk and velvet—snarled something under his breath that David wasn't meant to catch.

"What do you want?" the demon demanded. "It's the middle of the night!"

Whether he meant to tempt David into checking how much time had passed since he'd chalked the circle, thusly breaking the spell, or



whether it was indeed late night wherever and whenever the manor resided, David couldn't guess.

"Never mind. I know well what you want. You can't have him. *Now go away.*"

A flicker of fingers on the other side of the mirror, the threat of scrying cut short.

"Beast!" David blurted. "Wait! I've brought Corbin his sword!"

The fingers froze. The connection held.

"Brought?" the Beast enquired coldly. "What do you mean, brought?" He inhaled through his nose disturbingly like an animal testing the air, sniffing out prey. "What are you doing in Littleton, David Chevalier?"



## Five

*THE WOMEN OF LITTLETON HAVE BEEN CONNECTED TO THE BLACK FOREST for as long as I've been watching, and I've been watching for a very long time. Before even the hamlet had a name, the fae who made their homes deep in the wildwood and the mothers, wives, and sisters of the shepherders who had begun to settle the fertile meadowland between the Alevins to the north and Bretons Sea to the west exchanged promises over blood and milk. They were bound forever after.*

*I'm an expert negotiator, but I've never yet been desperate enough to strike any bargain with fairy kind. For their side of the contract, Littleton's mothers, wives, and sisters received a taste of the forest's benevolence.*

*They called it hedge witchery and it runs still in their daughters, a contract unbroken.*

*As for the fae, I can say only that if anyone notices that occasionally an infant born into Littleton seems more preternatural than any human child has a right to be...*

*Well, no one dares speak their suspicions out loud.*

*Safer by far in a world where any advantage is hard won to count your blessings and not spit in the direction of the forest.*

DAVID WOKE LATER THAN HE INTENDED, TO THE SOUND OF BOOT heels on stone and hushed breathing much too close. He sat bolt upright, at the same time reaching for the afreet glaive.

The sword was there, safely concealed in its bulky sack, snuggled against his side on the mattress.

"Monsieur." The man bending over David's bed was a blur. "Your snoring offends the ears. I'm trying to sleep. Roll over or get out."

David unhooked his spectacles from the collar of his tunic. Settling them on the bridge of his nose, he blinked sleep from his eyes. Though the closed room was no brighter than when he'd rolled into bed, he could tell by light that he'd slept the morning away.

"It's late," he said in disbelief. He hadn't slept through a sunrise since he was a small child, rising always before the birds. It was a habit he'd cultivated, believing no day should be wasted.

The man standing over him frowned. He was dressed in royal silver and blue, covered from the neck down with a fine layer of mud. "So it is. I've been riding all night, haven't I? A man's allowed to a sound sleep in a good inn, so long as he's got the coin. A sound sleep, mind you, undisturbed by snoring."

He flicked a glance at the sack on the mattress. When David had gone to bed, he'd covered both himself and his treasures, but now the blanket was on the floor and the bag revealed.

"Shouldn't sleep so deeply, if you're carrying something precious enough you'll take it to bed like a lass with her jewels," the soldier said, grimly amused. "Henri's is the safest establishment you'll find a day's ride either way, but the roads are thick with thieves of late, and you never know who you're sharing a roof with. I could have had it off you easily and been long gone before you stirred."

"I'm not...I don't usually..." He didn't think the man was a threat. If he'd been intent on thievery, both he and the bag would have been long gone, David none the wiser. "I don't usually sleep so deeply. And I don't snore."

The man snorted. He dropped into the bed across from David's, shedding road dust in a puff. "Well, it wasn't me shaking the rafters. Kindly get off your back or leave." He shook out the wool coverlet, pulling it up to his ears, and rolled away from David.

David's mouth hung open. He shut it with a snap, which only proved to bring the dull throb in his head into focus. His eyes were sandy with grit, his mouth sticky and dry. His bones ached. A shiver rattled his body from head to toe, setting his left arm afire. He knew at once that he was in trouble.

Moving gingerly, he sat on the edge of the mattress, feet on the floor where the scuffed outline of his chalk circle was barely visible to his knowing eye. He had a tincture of willowbark in his bag, as well as dried elderberry and his precious glass vial of opium. A fever was a nuisance, but not debilitating. As White Hill's physicker, he'd treated more fevers than he liked to remember.

Wound infection was the obvious cause. He'd ask the inn keep for hot water and honey, re-dress his wrist and be on his way. No cause for alarm. It was only the fever setting his heart to pounding.

He needed to check beneath his bandages, assess any signs of putridity, but the light in the dormitory room wouldn't do. He stood up. His head swam in protest. Briefly he thought he'd lose last night's supper all over the floor.

Moving as carefully as if his bones were made of glass, David threw on his cape, shouldered his bags, and made his way downstairs.

"Look at you," Sarah Brown said from behind the bar. "Bit late to rise, aren't we? You'll never catch Nell now, not until nightfall." She paused, brow wrinkling. "You look all done in. I don't recall serving you that much ale."

Silently, David cursed himself for a fool. In the fog of waking too late and too abruptly, not to mention the mists of his fever, he'd forgotten Cottage Farm.

"Sit down before you fall down." Sarah came around the bar, reaching for David's elbow. "I'll send for the blood-letter. He'll set you right in no time."

David demurred. "I'll see to it myself. After I speak to Nell."

"Well, there's no point in hurrying now. You'll not see hide nor hair of her until after dark."

But David was already out the door, calling for his horse. The stable hand watched expressionlessly as he strapped the sack on his back and then hitched himself up into the saddle, but not before he'd slipped the green glass vial of opium into hand and taken a healthy sip.

"What sort of medicine is that, my lord?" the lad asked, curious.

"What makes you think it's medicine?"

"You're bleeding through your sleeve, my lord. And you look like you're going to puke."

"Which way to Cottage Farm?" Tucking the vial up his sleeve, he tossed the lad a coin. His purse was growing light. He could only hope Nell didn't expect a king's ransom up front for her services.

"That way, my lord." Clutching the coin in his fist, he pointed. "East at the divide, on until the road narrows. You can't miss it for the new barn and the gigantic hound that guards it."

"Gigantic hound?" David paused in reining the mare around. Sarah hadn't mentioned a guard dog. He wondered if she'd left out that important detail on purpose.

"Some say it's a loup-garou, a wolf man, come out of the forest to keep Nell company. But I don't believe in fairy tales. Do you?"

"Yes," replied David, making the child gape. He nudged the mare with his heels, clucking encouragement. She moved immediately into an eager trot, snorting at a pair of quail bobbing across the cobblestones, scattering them into the brush.

"Someone is rested. Treated you well in the stables, did they?"

The mare swiveled her ears backward and forward, lifting her hooves high. David buried his fingers in her mane for balance. He tugged the edges of his cape more tightly around his body, shoulders slumping. The opium was already doing its work, dulling the sharp edges of pain and fever, but the remedy came with a price. Every good physicker knew poppy oil blunted the wits and should be used sparingly.

In hunting the Beast, David had need of his wits.

Beyond the heart of Littleton proper, just past a squat stone shopfront displaying signage too weathered to be read, the road

forked. David and his mare took the east-most fork, stepping off cobblestone onto dirt. Pink and yellow wildflowers dotted overgrown meadows on either side of the track. Low walls and bramble hedges ran rampant through the greenery, cutting the land into uneven shapes.

David could smell the sea in the air: salt and iron, like spilled blood. It was less cloying here than in Honnefleu, overlaid with the sweet perfume of cut grass and apples. A breeze kicked up, making pink and white blossoms sway on their stalks. The long grasses whispered. Hypnotized by the ripple of color and sound, David's own head bobbed.

The mare stumbled on a rut in the dirt then stopped abruptly. David jerked in the saddle, coming awake just in time to lock eyes with the loup-garou standing stiff-legged in the middle of the lane.

But, no, that was the opium talking. David had encountered more than one lycanthrope in his service to White Hill. In fact, he'd encountered exactly three. Three was not a multitude by means, but the werewolf was no longer a plentiful species in western France thanks to Philip VI's penchant for trapping the gray wolf.

The animal in the lane was no supernatural monster. Nor was it an overgrown hound. A fine example of *canis lupus lupus*, it stood almost as tall as the mare's barrel, tawny fur bristling, long pink tongue lolling between bared yellow teeth.

The mare began to tremble. The wolf growled. David gripped the saddle and the reins both, knowing an instant before the mare whirled that she would spook.

A whistle split the air, two high trills and then a deeper note. The mare froze mid-flight. David tilted on her back but kept his seat. The mare lowered her head until it almost touched the dirt, breathing heavily. David craned his neck, looking for the wolf, but the animal had vanished.

"I've sent her away." A woman stepped out of the meadow, leaping over a fallen hedge row. She landed on her feet within a hand's breadth of David and his horse. The mare twitched but did not flee. "She's used to teasing the locals, you understand, and didn't expect visitors from out of town or she wouldn't have been so bold." She soothed

David's trembling mare, running a light hand over her neck. "I'd dismount, were I you. I can only hold this one in place for so long."

David did as he was told, moving slowly so as to spare both his arm and the mare's nerves. Once on the ground he eased the reins over her ears, gripping them securely in one hand, before turning to face his rescuer.

She wore a long tunic over torn hose and pair of high boots. A string of freshly caught fish dangled over one shoulder. The fish dripped water down her front, and the boots were coated with mud. When she was sure that David had his mare firmly in hand, she whistled again, one low note and two high.

The mare, released, took off skyward and sideways. The next several minutes were spent trying to convince her that charging back toward town was not an option. By the time David coaxed and cowed her into standing again in place they were both out of breath and sweating, the mare having decided David was a menace and David beginning to wish he had never left White Hill in the first place.

The woman observed their struggle with veiled amusement. She did not offer to help, or even speak again until David had his frightened mount back under control.

"Dog scares horses," she said when David and the mare stood panting. "They don't like her smell."

"That was not a dog," David retorted. "I know a wolf when I see one." He blew out through his nose to clear his head. "How did you do that?"

She had dark eyes and dark brows and dark, glossy hair cut short like a lad's. Feigned innocence widened her eyes. "Dog minds me when I send her home - "

"No," David interrupted. He shoved back his hood. "My horse. You kept her from running."

"Oh, that." The string of fish danced when she shrugged. "It's a simple hedge spell. My mum taught me how when I was just a child. Useful on most animals." She closed one eye in what might have been a wink. "Even wolves."

For the first time David noticed the cottage in the meadow behind

her, and beyond that, a proud stone barn, clean and white in the morning, newly thatched roof golden.

"You're Nell," he said, sagging with relief. "I feared I'd missed you. I need your help."

"I can see that." She cocked her head, amusement gone, and pursed her lips. Then she sighed. "Follow me. I can't do you much good here in the middle of the lane, dirt all around and no clean place to sit. This way. Put your horse in my barn while I start the water boiling."

"Water?"

But she was already back over the hedge row and halfway across the meadow, leaving David and the mare to follow much more slowly, wary of gopher holes beneath the grass and wolves lurking in the wildflowers. The mare, in a baffling reversal of moods, lipped idly at tall pink blossoms, forcing David to pull at the reins repeatedly to keep her from grazing. It was as if she had forgotten the wolf completely.

The simple charm Nell had used to calm the animal seemed very thorough.

David untacked the mare and put her into a large box stall in the stone barn. He hung her bridle on a peg in the wall, taking quick note of his surroundings as he did so. The inside of the barn was spacious and rigorously ordered. Crofter's tools hung in neat array from more pegs on the wall across from the stall. Last year's hay was put up in the loft above his head, kept cool and dry under the thatched roof. A single fat rooster, red-plumed and suspicious, watched David from the loft.

Slinging his sack over one shoulder, David left the barn and made his way across an extensive kitchen garden to the cottage on the other side. The garden was as ruthlessly ordered as the barn, plots trim and tidy. A one-eyed orange tomcat judged David from a clump of rosemary. A dun-colored pea hen startled up from her nest beneath a white rose bush when Nell stuck her head out the cottage door.

"Water's almost boiled. Sit here on the stoop." She disappeared back into the cottage.

David collapsed gratefully onto the stoop. The limestone was pebbled with moss and worn at the center where generations of crofters had stepped in and out of the old farm house. The orange tom came to twine about his ankles.



"That's Cat," Nell said, returning outside with basket, bowl, and whistling kettle in hand.

"Dog and Cat." It was the opium, David supposed, that allowed a snort to escape. "And do they get along, Cat and...Dog?"

"Why wouldn't they?" Nell refused to be baited by his raised brows. She knelt on the ground below the stoop. "You know my name. I don't know yours."

"David." He hissed pain through clenched teeth when she began to roll up his sleeve.

Nell sighed.

"Well, David," she said. "It's the wrist, is it? I'm going to have to cut this fabric away. Your arm's puffed up hand to elbow." She retrieved a pair of short-bladed sheers from her basket, sterilized them with water from the kettle. "Sit still. I've a steady hand but I'm no saint."

He nodded, shoulders hunched beneath his cloak. Cat washed its paws, purring sympathy as Nell set scissors to David's sleeve. A cloud passed overhead, casting a brief shadow over the garden. David suppressed a shiver.

"How long have you had the fever?" Nell's sheers were making quick work of his sleeve, fabric falling away beneath her onslaught.

"A day. Perhaps two."

"Fever and swelling. The wound's definitely gone putrid. It's a good thing you found me," Nell said cheerfully. Then she paused in her snipping. "Jésus. What did this?"

David's eyes had fallen shut without his permission. He cracked them open, looking past Nell's bowed head. She'd reached his wrist, cut away the bandages. He didn't recognize his arm for the ribbons of black and red running in angry striations beneath his skin, and for the inflammation. It looked less like a limb than a boiled sausage; fingers, wrist and elbow were almost lost in the swelling.

"Demon." He shook the green glass vial out of his other sleeve, popped the cork with trembling fingers, and took a swallow. "Incubus, to be more specific."

Nell looked from David's face to the vial. Her frown deepened. "Demon, you say? I know of only the one devil in Normandy proper, and he's a peaceful sort so long as he's left alone."

David put a hand over his mouth to stifle another snort. "So long as you dance to his tune, you mean." He leaned precariously forward, looking past his grotesque arm and into Nell's shocked face. She was really quite striking—sharp cheekbones, square jaw, proud nose. The lines around her eyes and mouth said she was quick to smile, though she was scowling now.

"Don't be frightened," he whispered while the orange tom purred, and the pea hen scratched about in her rose bush. "I know. I know the Beast sent his she-wolf to watch over you, to be his eyes and ears. How many other 'dogs' roam Littleton, snooping for their master?"

"What is that you're drinking?" Nell inquired archly. "It doesn't smell like spirits, but you're obviously off your head. Or is it the fever talking nonsense?" She rose to her feet. "Let's get you inside. This is far worse than I expected. You'll need to be lying down for what comes next."

She looped an arm around David's waist, helping him up off the stoop. She took his weight easily, sturdy when he fell against her. Both of his legs were suddenly unreliable.

"What comes next?" He dreaded the answer.

"I burn the infection out of you," Nell replied grimly. "If you're lucky."

"Wait!" David slapped his good hand against the cottage lintel before she could guide him through the door. "My bag. The glaive! You don't understand." Opium fogged his brain. He couldn't be certain he was making sense, and he desperately wanted to make sense. Affrodille would chide him for letting weakness get in the way of necessity. "I need your help."

"Aye, of course you do. I'm the finest healer in Littleton."

"No, no. You don't understand. I need to find Corbin, and quickly, before time runs out!"

"Corbin?" He must have imagined the hitch in her step because her cheerful expression didn't change. "Very well. Come inside and I'll help you, just as you say."

Relief rushed through David. His already racing heart pounded violently. The noise in his ears turned to buzzing and flooded his skull. Colors, much too bright, dazzled his eyes.

"I think I'm going to faint," he said, chagrined, and did.

DAVID CAME AWAKE SLOWLY, CHASED FROM DREAMLESS DEPTHS BY firm hands on his shoulders.

"Careful, now. I'm just changing out your shirt, understand? The fever's finally broken."

She pulled his shirt—rough wool, much too large, *not* his shirt—over his head in increments, moving carefully around his throbbing arm. David knew he should protest for modesty's sake, but he was warm, much too warm, and bare skin seemed preferable to clothes. He squinted, trying and failing to bring his surroundings into focus. Where were his spectacles?

"Here." Her name slipped his grasp like a fish through water, darting close and then away again. She pressed a cup into his hand. "Drink this. It'll help."

Obediently David held the cup one-handed to his lips. He took a sip, made a face at the taste.

"Nettle tea," he diagnosed. His voice sounded too much like stones scraping. He swallowed again to wet his throat. "And honey. What else?"

"Chamomile. 'N'er a man shall lose his life from infection—"

"—were chamomile prepared with his food'," David finished. And all at once her name surfaced. "Nell, the hedge witch. I've been looking for you."

"And you're David. Are you also a physicker, then, to know the Nine Herbs Charm?"

"When there's need at home." His muscles quivered protest. The empty cup tilted dangerously in his grasp. Nell took it from him before it fell. "There's often need," he admitted.

"Well." She eased him back onto a very uncomfortable bolster. "I emptied out your wee glass bottle. I did not like what the tincture was doing to your heart. If that's the sort of medicines you prescribe your patients, I think you're doing more harm than good."

"It's a family antidote for pain, very costly." David reached up to adjust his spectacles, remembered they were gone, and clenched his

teeth against the ache in his bones. His arm pulsed angrily from fingertips to shoulder. Silently he cursed Nell for her meddling. "It would be welcome now."

"An antidote for life, I think." Nell placed the spectacles in his good hand, waiting while he settled them on the bridge of his nose. "The chamomile will help with the pain while my compresses and your fever sort out the venom." She smiled. "Pain is only a reminder that we are still alive."

David didn't answer. Infection and fever felt like a failure, pain a punishment. He was struck with an urge to weep. He took a moment to compose himself by looking around, everywhere but at his offending limb.

Nell's cottage was a simple affair, stone and thatch. The walls in the front room were gray with soot and age. David rested on a low pallet near the kitchen hearth, so near he was in danger of rolling into grate. Flames leapt up the chimney, stoked high and giving off waves of heat.

It was no wonder he'd soaked his clothes. The room was a furnace.

"As I'm sure you know, febrile humors help a body fight off infection." Nell sat in the room's single chair, arranged as far away from the hearth as the small space allowed. Now that David's wits were returning, he saw she'd traded her crofter's togs for a loose, knee-length tunic. Her legs and feet were bare, her short hair stuck to her skull with sweat. "Your body seems stubbornly unwilling to do the work on its own, so we'll just help it along."

"How long was I asleep?" It felt wrong sitting bare-chested in front of a woman he hardly knew, but the only blanket was across his lap and from the feel of things he was just as naked below the waist as above. "Where are my things?"

"There." Nell pointed at a large tapestry hanging on the wall on the far side of the room. The tapestry was covered all over with skillfully embroidered birds and butterflies. In the flickering light off the hearth they almost appeared to move. "My son's room is there, behind the wall hanging. He's taken apprenticeship in town with the blacksmith and rarely sleeps here anymore, so I use the space for storage." She drew up her feet and tucked them between her thighs and the chair seat. "You were fretting after the bag even in your fever dreams, so I

set it as far away from the heat as I could, just in case your treasures are sensitive. I don't know what you're carrying, but you worried like you have charge of the king's own jewels."

"Don't you?" David challenged, because the smug tilt of her chin suggested otherwise. He didn't take her for a thief, nor could he be certain she was trustworthy. "Not the king's jewels, no, but dangerous things better left undisturbed."

"Hmm." She rose and crossed again to his side. "As for how long you were out—not long enough, I think. I'd hoped for a few more hours untroubled. But maybe it's your bladder waking. Do you need to take a piss? I'll fetch the pot."

"No!" He flushed. "But a cup of water would be welcome. Febrile humors may fight infection, but it's no good if I'm roasted like a pig on a spit before the wound clears."

"My ma used to say physickers make the worst patients," Nell told him. "Now I'm beginning to see she was right. There's a well out back. I'll bring you water. But first, I need to change your bandages."

It was David's bad luck she saw right through him to the panic he struggled to suppress. He'd had a good look at the black and red lines running up and down arm before he'd lost consciousness. He knew the classic signs of sepsis. It was theoretically possible to survive blood poisoning, if one first survived amputation of the effected limb.

"You're wondering about the pain, I expect." Nell brought over the candle from the table and held it over David's left arm. It cast a soft yellow glow over the bed. She bent her head over the bandages wrapping his forearm.

"It's onyx stones that keep the worst of it at bay," Nell continued, carefully unwinding the dressing. "So long as they're placed correctly against the damaged tissue, throughout the poultice." A small pebble, dark and shiny as a drop of ink, fell from a fold of bandage into her hand. "That's an old and powerful charm, that one, not so simple as bidding a horse stand still or sending a wolf away. My great-great-grandmother bewitched these stones. The knowledge of the doing is long forgotten but the stones still work, better and safer than any poppy juice, so far as I'm concerned."

When David couldn't muster a reply, she shrugged, continuing:

"The sea kelp and the rock salt are my own addition, tuned to the stones. I know something about demonkind. I've been told the sea water and salt mineral will sometimes keep them at bay. I guessed it might help, and you'll see I'm right. The lines beneath your skin are improved. If it were a common putridity, I might have used red fern and rue instead, but a strange infection such as this requires imagination, don't you agree?"

Still David didn't speak.

"It's a bread poultice on the wound," Nell explained quickly, beginning at last to notice his dismay. "And lavender and calendula, ash from a lightning-struck tree, and more rock salt. It will help draw out the infection. It's working, or your fevers wouldn't be flagging so quickly."

"It's swollen," David managed at last. "More swollen. And my fingers!" He reached one-handed for the candle, but Nell snatched it back. "I can't feel them. I can't feel them at all!"

"That's the stones working." Nell took the soiled bandages to the hearth, returned with a pot of steaming water and a clean rag. "As to your hand. There's been some necrosis. I can't promise you'll keep all your fingers, but I'll do my best."

David slumped back on the pallet.

"You've turned green again. Are you going to be sick?" Nell enquired, washing pus and poultice from around his wrist, taking care not to disturb the small black stones strung on leather and wrapped like a bishop's rosary around his forearm.

"No."

She huffed. "Because I'd think that, as a physicker, you'd mayhap be more grateful I've managed to keep you alive. It was a near thing, I've never seen infection move so quickly. Truth be told, I went for the bone saw before I even mixed your first cup of tea. Just in case, you understand."

Wound washed clean of angry fluid, she dried it with a second rag. David didn't feel a thing, not the pressure of her fingers, not the pain of gaping flesh. The absence of sensation frightened him.

"We'll leave the poultice off," Nell proclaimed. "Let the wound breathe a while. I don't like that it's still leaking pus."

"Thank you," David said, inhaling through his nose while she deftly

rewrapped his arm, bundling more onyx among the bandage folds. "May I have that water now?"

"Aye." She rose, arranged her kit back on the hearth, and hurried outside, bare calves flashing in the firelight. She left the door cracked open behind her. A wash of cool night air burst across David's damp chest.

Once he was alone in the room David lay rigid, determined not to let fear get the best of him. Nell might be brusque, but she wasn't wrong. Had he collapsed anywhere but on her stoop, it was conceivable he'd be dead, felled by sepsis and fever. Her black stones were keeping pain under control, and from the look of his arm he suspected the pain was very bad indeed.

A finger or two lost to necrosis was a small price to pay. He did not assume he would have done any better, were their roles reversed.

But logic and sentiment were warring beasts, and melancholy threatened to win the battle.

"Drink." Nell appeared at David's side. He hadn't heard her return from the garden. "Then sleep again. You'll feel better when you wake."

"You can't know that."

"I can." She held the cup to his mouth. "As you're not the first surly young man I've head in my sickbed."

David drank. The water was sweet on his tongue, tasting of the night. The effort left him trembling, but he felt better for the refreshment. After, he turned his face away from the firelight, and closed his eyes.

## SIX

*EVERYONE KNOWS THE FAE USE A POWERFUL AND SUBTLE MAGIC TO disguise their true, less than fair, forms. But the glamour is not only a fairy device. The angels often used a glamour when they deigned appear on earth, else mankind would have fled in terror upon glimpsing their most authentic aspect. A vampire uses glamour magic to beguile his hapless victims. Mermaids will sing a ship onto the rocks, enticing sailors to their death. It's the same sorcery wielded a dozen different ways, for a thousand different purposes. Generally, humans are unable to resist a glamour without magical aid—mermaids' fingers strung alongside an archangel's rune, for example, worn around a young man's neck.*

*When Corbin complains that the prevalence of the glamour in the supernatural world seems unfair to humans, I remind him that the prevalence of black and white stripes on a zebra seems unfair to the lion.*

WAKING A SECOND TIME SEEMED AN INSURMOUNTABLE EFFORT, ONE David was reluctant to make. Sleep was easier, oblivion sweeter than



the responsibilities that invariably came hand-in-hand with consciousness. Dreams, although unremembered, left a rare, peaceful lassitude throughout his body. Half-aware, floating in that fleeting midpoint between sleep and wakefulness, he fought to keep from surfacing.

"I had no idea it was this bad." But the familiar, gruff voice chiseled away at the edges of darkness, buoyed David's heart, refused to let him sink. "You did not say!"

"I did not suspect he was so far gone when I sent word!" Nell retorted. "What do I know of incubi or demonic fevers? This is not something so simple as the croup or spring boils! Be grateful I've managed to keep him alive this long and pray the Beast can heal him."

"I'll need a wagon." Corbin's was dangerously close to losing his temper. David well remembered the way his friend's syllables grew sharp as knives just before patience snapped. "When I left, the manor was somewhat east and north of Grimonia's Oak. Jenny can pull him along the road that far. I'll carry him from there."

Sleep no longer seemed the wisest choice. David struggled to open his eyes but now, when he needed his body to obey, it refused.

"The dwarves are thick as lice in the forest this time of year! Don't you look at me like that! I can see by the state of your boots you've already encountered several on your way here."

"Corbin," David said but the name passed his lips as hardly more than a sigh.

"You're no small fellow, old friend, and you're stupidly brave, but you cannot expect to carry a man over your shoulders whilst fighting your way through a spring infestation of dwarves, *alone*. That wagon's a fine idea, and Jenny can pull him as far as the oak. From there you and I will go together."

"Nell." Once again, David's tongue betrayed him and only the briefest whisper escaped into the air.

"I'll not risk you!" Predictably, Corbin's temper broke at last in an angry roar. It was his father's legacy, David knew, though Corbin's rage was a controlled maelstrom, and Jean de Beaumont had always preferred violence to containment. "I cannot protect you and David both in the forest!"

Something crashed against a near wall, shattering. A bowl thrown in anger.

Nell, David reasoned, as Corbin at his worst would never stoop to force, even against inanimate objects. Jean had taken that small release from his son. David could easily hate him for it.

"Dwarves don't frighten me!" The witch scoffed. "I can protect *myself* against dwarves, but not against the Littleton Fiend, should he learn I sent you back into the wildwood with your flank unguarded."

"Oh, for fu—"

"Corbin!" David's admonishment was more mortified squeak than shout, but at least it carried. Corbin broke off mid-curse. A brief, startled silence fell.

"David." Corbin's fingers brushed David's bare wrist, the tips calloused, made rough by hard work. A careful, tenuous contact, secretly cherished. "You're awake."

"Am I?" At once he hated the weakness that suffused his body. "I can't seem to open my eyes, nor speak much above a whisper."

"That's the compresses," Nell said while Corbin squeezed his wrist. "Over your eyes. You were complaining the light hurt them, don't you remember?"

"No." Now that Nell drew attention to them, he could feel the weight of damp bandages on his eyes and brow. The faint scent of lavender tickled his nose. "It itches."

"And that's the river mud, it prickles like the devil when it dries but it does wonders for angry skin. Here, now, don't open your eyes quite yet." A damp cloth skimmed across David's face once, and then again. "Let me get it all off."

"Corbin." David had no tolerance for coddling.

"Hush. Lie still. In the sick room, Nell's word is law."

"Says the man who escaped through my front door before I had all the porcupine quills safely out of his arse. I don't recall you minding my word *then*, Corbin. Here, put the bolster behind his back, we'll sit him up just so, if he can stand it."

"The quills hurt," Corbin protested as he carefully manhandled David up until he was propped between a plump cushion and Corbin's

solid shoulder. "I was just a wee lad. And you were doing it wrong—mother got the rest of them out with half the trouble."

"Open your eyes, David," Nell coaxed. "The fire's banked. Let's see how you do."

Corbin's shoulder tensed against his side.

*He's afraid*, David thought.

Which meant everything was going awry, and David needed to be brave.

He opened his eyes. It was a less daunting task now with the weight of the bandages removed, but it still took effort and an alarming amount of concentration.

Corbin asked, "How's the light?"

David blinked.

"No pain," he said at last, disconcerted. "None. Not in my eyes, not in my arm, not anywhere. It's wrong."

"It's strong magic and stronger medicine." Nell's shadow passed back and forth in front of the candle still burning on the table. It was the only light left in the warm room: a motionless flame in an airless tomb.

"I don't like it. I can't breathe!" For an instant the subtle shine of wool across his lap was his winding sheet, his *tachrichim*, and Corbin sitting shiva. "Open the door!"

Nell hurried to do as he asked. Corbin caught David's chin gently in one hand.

"David. Look at me. That's right. Breathe. In and out, slowly. There. Nell's got the door open. Feel the breeze? Listen! I can hear birds fighting over the seed in her garden."

David forgot air for the slice of sunlight falling into the cottage through the open door. It burnished old stone walls, turned motes of dust into miniscule stars, pooled in Corbin's blue eyes, softened the edges of his scowl.

"You've grown a beard," he said stupidly.

"For warmth." Releasing David, Corbin scratched the ginger stubble on his chin. "The manor seems determined to keep us in winter. You look somewhat worse for the wear, my friend. An incubus, Nell says?"

"It hardly matters. Now that you're here. How did you find me? I thought..." He paused, catching Nell's eye where she stood by the door, and belatedly understood. "You two know each other."

"Littleton's not so large that we don't all have our noses in each other's business," she agreed. "Corbin and I grew up together. I would have told you, but I didn't get the chance." She quirked a brow at Corbin. "I'll just run and borrow a wagon, and ready Jenny. Your mare will have to stay a few days, David. Horses won't go near the manor. Sarah at the inn will keep her for you if I ask. Shall I?" Without waiting for an answer, she made for the door. "Get some more tea down him, won't you, Corbin, while I'm gone?"

"Trousers," Corbin said, snatching Nell's discarded pair off the cottage floor and tossing them in her direction. Unembarrassed, the witch pulled them on as she went into the sunlight, tucking the trailing hem of her shirt into her waistband.

"The Beast knew you were coming," Corbin continued, rising to fill a cup with cold nettle tea. "We knew where you were, just not when. You'll recall I told you time behaves strangely insides the manor? Luckily Nell kept her head and sent Cat to find me."

"Cat?" David frowned. "Not the wolf?"

"Wolf? What wolf? Wolves haven't troubled Littleton for years. The Beast keeps that old bargain." Corbin returned with the tea, concern creasing his mouth. "The fever is giving you nightmares, I expect. This will help."

"Tastes like fermented grass," David complained, but he swallowed it down if only to smooth the worry lines from his friend's brow.

Even with Corbin's help the simple act of drinking left David limp and sweating. Slumped once more against Corbin's shoulder, he sighed.

"When pride comes, then comes disgrace."

Corbin's ribs vibrated amusement. He looped one arm around David's shoulders in a loose embrace.

"Fever is not disgrace. And although Affrodille would likely argue the point, I've never taken you for a prideful man."

"Affrodille!" David groaned. He buried his face in Corbin's tunic to hide frustration. "Affrodille will have my skin as a throwing target. I've wasted precious time. An innocent life is at stake!" He raised his head,

gripped Corbin's sleeve with his good hand. "A child, Corbin. We need your help. We must speak to the Beast at once! If the lass isn't dead already, I fear she soon will be."

To Corbin's credit he didn't take David's mounting anxiety for feverish hysterics. Were their roles reversed David wasn't sure he wouldn't have done just that. But Corbin, as always, was a better friend than David deserved.

"Of course you'll have my help. As for the Beast, I doubt he's left the Mirror Room since I walked out the front gate." Corbin glanced around the cottage. "Shall I get your looking glass? Where's your pack?"

"I haven't the strength to work a scrying spell. We need to leave here, we must go now!"

"Nell will be back soon." Corbin checked David's forehead for heat, nodding to himself. "Tea's working nicely. While we wait, tell me. What's happened to send you from White Hill when it's clear you should be recovering at home? A child, you say?"

Corbin's earnest expression brought betraying tears to David's eyes.

"I've missed you," he said, then turned his face away in embarrassment. That he'd blurted out so casually what the incubus couldn't wring from him with seduction or attack only proved how thoroughly fever had leveled his defenses. Far more than bodily weakness he dreaded the inevitable fraying of rational thought, the indelicacy of sentiment laid bare.

Plucking at the edge of the blanket, he stared across the cottage at the slice of garden through the cottage door and barreled on.

"Duke Berry and King Charles are in agreement on one thing only: it began in mid-winter, a few weeks before the Christmas holiday, during a rare Paris blizzard. Duke Berry remembers Monsieur Aureate presented himself alone at court with several letters of recommendation from Venice, one signed by the Doge himself. His majesty, on the other hand, insists Monsieur came to Paris in the company of a well-known traveling circus come to entertain les noblesse as part of the holiday festivities. The troop was called Les Joueurs Dorés for its elaborate and striking use of costuming, notably cloth of gold, beaten silver and an abundance of feathers."

"Was called?"

"They're dead now, all seven members. The inn where they were staying caught fire in the night and went up like a torch. They died in their beds along with the innkeeper and his wife, just a few days after Christmas. At the time everyone in Paris assumed it was a terrible accident, an old building, an overturned candle. These things happen." Feeling more like himself for the recitation, David chanced a glance Corbin's way. "Monsieur Aureate was not with them. By then he'd made himself rather indispensable at court. King Charles gave him rooms at the palace."

"Luckily for Monsieur Aureate. You say he'd made himself indispensable. How so? It's been my understanding Paris is not lacking in traveling players."

"Whether or not Aureate came into the city with the circus as Berry maintains is important only in that it may be a clue to the man's present whereabouts. He is no player, though I believe he likely had a hand in designing some of their more flamboyant costumes. Aureate is a tailor, but hardly an ordinary clothier. His creations—elaborately embroidered coats and gowns and tunics and even shoes cut from a delicate and yet impossibly sturdy golden fabric are more coveted in court than even the king's good favor."

Corbin's expression turned quizzical. "You've risked your health to come all this way and beg my help in dealing with Charles' tailor?"

David stiffened. "I never beg." Exasperated, he shook his head, wincing when the room tilted. "You don't understand. Aureate's vestments are said to arouse greed in even the most spartan souls. I'm told no less than twenty duels have been fought over the privilege of spending just a handful of minutes in front of his loom. Men and women have come to blows all in the name of gilt stockings."

"Paris is a strange city. I've heard stories that would curl your toes."

"The Marquis Beaufort strangled his wife at breakfast because he wished to possess the embroidered handkerchief she wore over her décolletage," David said dryly. "Beaufort refused to give the kerchief over once the guards were summoned. He fought like a rabid animal over the scrap of fabric until he was knocked insensible by a well-

aimed fist. By all accounts he languishes yet in prison, mourning not his dead wife but the lost handkerchief."

"I'll admit that seems over the top, even for Paris. What is it then? Some manner of spell? A curse?"

"Sorcery Affrodille and I can deal with." David's eyelids were growing heavy. Lassitude crept again through his body. He sagged further against Corbin, taking comfort in his friend's strength. "But in fact, King Charles and his regents eventually came to their senses. Perhaps the bodies piling up in court took some of the shine off the cloth of gold. Or the glamour was fading. Either way, his majesty sent his guard after Aureate, but too late. The tailor had fled the city, taking with him all manner of treasures given over in payment for his services."

The muscles in Corbin's shoulder clenched beneath David's cheek. No fool, Corbin. He had three sisters of his own and knew from personal experience that both men and monsters sometimes used currency other than coin.

"You mentioned a lass. A child."

"Exactly." The sickness in the back of David's throat had nothing to do with fever. "One of Aureate's best clients was a certain Bavarian Duke. Like a glutton in a sweet shop, the duke quickly spent his pockets to let on coats and hose and fripperies. He swathed himself in Aureate's fineries head to toe." David swallowed. "I have it on good authority he traded the last thing of value in his possession for a pair of golden gloves."

Through gritted teeth Corbin said, "Tell me."

"His fifteen-year-old ward, Isabeau. Who happens also to be the young king's intended, just arrived in France from Bavaria. It's said Charles and Isabeau took to each other immediately. All the arrangements have been made. The wedding was planned for just a few day's hence. His majesty and the duke have put it about at court that Isabeau has taken to her bed with a lesser case of la grippe, but Isabeau's absence cannot be hidden indefinitely. She must be returned safely and covertly to Paris at once or the consequences will be dire indeed."

For White Hill as well as poor Isabeau. But David couldn't confess to Corbin the extent of his failing, at least not yet.

"I'm very sorry for the poor lass. I'm less sorry for the boy king who sent Spare to chase me down like a thief in the night. I do not care if Charles weds tomorrow or dies in his bed tonight."

"You have good reason to resent the king." David met his friend's glare levelly. "And I every reason to curry his favor. House Valois keeps White Hill in coin. Without Charles' backing we would struggle to continue. But it is not for my sake, or White Hill's, that I must see Isabeau rescued. Corbin, she is an innocent, hardly more than a child. Snatched from Paris beneath Charles' very nose by a man who *purchased* her in trade and most certainly has some nefarious purpose in mind." A tremor shook David. Sighing, he closed his eyes. "Even if I were not in Charles' employ, should I turn my face away from her plight? Should you?"

"Of course not."

"Isabeau aside, Aureate would have come my attention soon enough. Charles writes he has seen the man spin common wool into the golden thread he uses in his fabrics. His majesty, disbelieving, suspected at first that the man's wheel was enchanted, but Aureate could do the same on any spindle produced."

"A magic spinning wheel would be a fine addition to White Hill's collection of curiosities."

"I'd count myself lucky if our dilemma was only a magicked spindle," David retorted wearily. "Affrodille and I have reason to believe it's Aureate himself who is the curiosity."

Corbin grunted. "Not a vampire, or a man-wolf; both eschew public attention. I've never heard of a leprechaun this side of the water, but everyone knows they have an affinity for gold—"

"Demon," Exhaustion crept around the edges of David's mind, threatening to pull him under. Almost, he would welcome pain, if only to clear away the fog. "Uses an excess of perfume to hide the stink of brimstone. Handy with a glamour, if we're to believe the murder and mayhem he left behind in Paris. Stole the king's bride-to-be for his own, by way of bargain. The signs are there. I believe Monsieur Aureate is a fiend, and he has taken Isabeau for his latest consort."



Corbin was quiet. David, trapped in the darkness behind lids too heavy to lift, clung to consciousness. He could not rest until he was certain he'd made his point. Isabeau must be saved from the devil's grasp, even as Corbin refused to be rescued from the Beast.

"Ah," Corbin said at last, without inflection. "I see now why you came to me. I thought in your need you sought a friend. But it's not my friendship you require."

Shame suffused David's cheeks. He hoped Corbin would take the flush for rising fever. "Not *only* your friendship. But, yes, also your sword arm."

"I suppose you have it with you? My father's glaive? Charles gave you leave, so long as I swear to use it only in his service to kill this Aureate. So long as I remain his dog on a leash?" Corbin stood up, dislodging David who collapsed back against the cot, immediately bereft of comfort. "Well? Where is it?"

"It's in the other room," David confessed wearily. "With my pack, and Medea's Phial."

Seven

*PICARDY DWARVES ARE NATURAL BORROWERS AND SPEND MORE OF THEIR time below ground than above, content to maul their prey as a gibbering pack, overpowering with numbers before stripping bone of flesh. They are blessed with needle-sharp teeth, hooked claws long as knives, and a drive to kill. A man on his own is unlikely to survive a pack of dwarves larger than four, no matter his fortitude or blade. Once, seven of the little monsters took down a well-armed merchant and his three hired guards just outside my gates. Their screams distracted me from a lovely bouillabaisse I'd been tending all afternoon and had just sat down to taste. Their spattered blood stained my garden wall until the next heavy rain.*

*I waited until after dawn the next day to collect the merchant's scattered goods and burn the remains of his cart. He'd come all the way from Calais on my behalf—I'd ordered in a very rare treatise on poisonous wildflowers from a botanist in London—but I suffered no guilt over his gruesome demise. I'd warned him thoroughly about the dangers in my forest, and suggested he hire on no less than five strong swordsmen to protect him on his journey.*

*Nor was I surprised he'd taken my suggestion too lightly. The biggest peril of*

*the Picardy dwarf is that no one really expects to end up as a meal for toddler-sized vermin.*

THE JOURNEY TO FROM LITTLETON TO BEASTLY MANOR HAD THE quality of pleasant dream turning nightmare. Nell insisted David fortify himself for with large quantities of sweet apple brandy before she allowed the shift from cottage to wagon. Corbin sat again at David's side, a living bolster, saying little as he steadied the cup against David's lips, patiently pouring more brandy when David reached the bottom.

It may have been the warming effects of strong spirits at work, but after his first cupful David thought Corbin's touch was tender, and dared hope maybe his friend had already forgiven him the king's imposition.

David drank slowly, spending the time he was allowed on quick, assessing glances Corbin's way over the edge of his cup. The rough golden beard was not the only indication Corbin had recently escaped winter. Though it was a warm spring evening outside Nell's cottage, Corbin was dressed for cold. His boots were fur-lined. His tunic, although fraying at the elbows and shoulders, was quilted. He wore leather gloves tucked into his belt next to a long-handled axe. More leather guarded his knees and thighs over his trousers, a style David found both intriguing and unfamiliar.

Corbin's hands on David's cup were chapped and reddened, his cheeks above his beard wind-burnt. He looked far less a dog on the king's leash than he did a wolf pretending tameness.

"The manor's grown capricious of late," Corbin explained, catching David's stare. "It flits back and forth through the years like a bird caught in a squall, seeking respite in the most unpleasant of conditions. I'll swear we spent six full winters mid-blizzard, under the same snow fall, caught like a fly in honey." He shook his head. "The Beast pretends to be unaffected, but I know he's worried. If your need was not so dire, I would not risk you inside our walls."

"Better to live in an unpredictable manor than die in my cottage," Nell countered. She plucked the cup from Corbin's hands and downed

the last swallow of brandy. "Wagon's ready. I've padded it best I can but I'm afraid even the king's goose-down mattress wouldn't do much to save you pain. My hedge-witchery will not work inside the black forest, David, and it's a long pull to Grimonia's Oak. I won't lie: I'd feel better if I could see the drink working on you. Mayhap we should sit a piece until it does."

"No." One-handed, David pushed himself to sitting. The apple brandy sloshed in his belly but except for a faint numbness to his lips and a warm buzzing in his ears he remained worryingly sober. "For Isabeau's sake, we must go now."

"Isabeau?" Nell asked. "You don't mean the young queen?"

"Not queen yet," Corbin muttered. "But have no fear, David's determined to see her crowned." He loomed, blocking the sunlight with his shoulders. "Up we go," he said gruffly.

Though Corbin lifted him as if he were close to shattering, his care was for naught. Nell's stones and herbs, wrapped in the bandages around his arm, kept pain at a distance. David imagined he could feel it lurking just out of reach, waiting to pounce the moment they stepped under the forest canopy.

"Here. Bite down, it will help until the brandy kicks in," Corbin ordered, slipping something coarse and dark against David's tongue. A square of old leather, it tasted of pine sap and wood smoke and, faintly, of blood.

Sunlight dazzled his eyes. when Corbin stepped down into the garden. Nell watched anxiously from alongside a sturdy mule harnessed to a narrow crofter's wagon. A collection of miss-matched blankets, all smelling pleasantly of lavender, padded the wagon front to stern. Corbin set David in their midst. Then he produced a plump cushion.

"Keep this under your arm," he ordered, arranging the cushion and David's bandages to his satisfaction. "God knows the track through the forest is mostly mud and ruts. It may help with the bouncing. And if it doesn't"—he jerked a thumb at David's mouth—"use the leather. We'll do much better if we go silently, not attracting dwarves or worse with your screams."

David nodded. White Hill's Chevalier could not allow himself the

luxury of weakness. Sir Thomas, in David's place, would bite down and remain silent.

But Sir Thomas would never have let things get so badly off-kilter. Sir Thomas knew how to handle House Valois, knew how to impress upon the king White Hill's importance. The coffers had been filled to overflowing when Thomas reigned, the list of young students eager to begin their studies in the Château long.

Thomas would have cut down the incubus without a second thought, avoiding thorny tentacles, emerging from the fray unwounded.

*Thomas*, David could not help but think, *would have made Corbin come to him.*

Nell whistled, sending the mule and wagon forward. David watched blue sky pass overhead.

*I am the Chevalier of White Hill*, he repeated in a silent chant, chewing old leather. *And I am stronger than pain.*

Almost, he was convinced.

THE BLACK FOREST IN SPRING SMELLED HEAVILY OF THE RICH LOAM that made Littleton's fields so fertile. Gigantic ferns grew in verdant clumps between tree and thorny briar, clogging the forest path. Purple hyacinth and silver-white Mary's Stars blossomed bravely in between fronds. The trees—ancient specimens with high, gnarled branches and leaves so darkly green they were nearly black—were festooned with yellow vines. The vines, complete with hungry, gaping mouths in the form of pink trumpet flowers, reminded David uncomfortably of serpents.

Fat bumble bees flitted from flower to flower, buzzing industriously. Gray forest squirrels chattered in the canopy above, scolding human intrusion, while brightly colored birds scattered from branch to branch, calling alarm. David watched them all from flat on his back in the wagon, his head pillowed on Nell's lap. Either the brandy was working on him at last or Nell's stones were more potent than she believed because the ferns, and the trees, and the forest creatures, and

especially the pain, seemed soothingly remote. His brain felt muffled in layers of warm mist, uninvolved.

"Opium and brandy are a dangerous mix," he said minutes or hours into the journey, finally making the connection. He knew he should be furious, but all he felt was vague alarm. "You lied to me."

"About emptying out your little vial, and also about what was in your cup," Nell agreed calmly. "I did intend to toss your tincture, after I'd studied its effects for myself. Poppy juice is hard to come by, and I'm an inquisitive sort." She paused before patting his brow. "Don't fret. I watered the brandy down."

David was not at all reassured. He started to scold Nell for her thievery but was distracted by the abrupt appearance of Cat who dropped from the leafy canopy above, landing soundlessly on the blankets. Regarding David through one green-gold eye, he began to purr loudly.

"You know the Beast will pick his teeth with that animal's bones if he catches him near the manor," Corbin warned from where he walked alongside the mule at the head of the wagon.

"Cat goes where he likes. I've no say in the matter once he's made up his mind. The Beast hasn't taken him yet, and not for lack of trying."

David, captured by Cat's unblinking stare, was certain he saw the tom bare his fangs in a disturbingly human smirk.

The track through the forest, although cut through with deep ruts and marshy in places, was wide enough for several men to walk abreast and even the bulkiest tinker's wagon to pass unhindered. That briar and tree root had not taken over spoke to regular use by merchant and soldier back and forth between Littleton and Caen.

The opium worked a magic Nell could not. David dozed, woke, dozed again. He dreamed of Affrodille, walking White Hill's labyrinth with sword in hand, stalked by a creature she could not see. He woke shouting. His hand throbbed with each beat of his frantic heart, and he needed desperately to piss. The drug was wearing off, his kidneys protesting too much brandy.

They stopped long enough for David to empty his bladder, an embarrassing and agonizing effort. Embarrassing because he was

forced to lean against Corbin for balance while he pissed. Agonizing because his arm was a burning brand attached to his shoulder, and his rising fever made his legs shake and his teeth rattle until he needed help to stand.

His muttered apologies did nothing to smooth away Corbin's scowl.

"Affrodille should not have let you ride out from White Hill," his friend said, frowning into the wildwood as David watered the ferns. "And I will tell her so when next we meet. You should have sent a messenger and stayed safely tucked up in Le Chateaus' sickroom."

"Would you have come?"

"Of course."

But he turned his face away and would not meet David's eye.

The process of returning to the wagon was tortuous. David's arm turned from burning brand to stabbing, fiery poker. He did not cry out as Corbin lowered him back onto blankets, but it was a close thing.

"I'd like the bit of leather, now," he told Nell breathlessly, as Cat paced near his shoulder, ginger tail bristling. The witch took it from her trouser pocket where she'd secreted it while he slept.

"It won't be long now," she promised. But like Corbin, she would not look him in the face.

THEY MADE GRIMONIA'S OAK WITHOUT INCIDENT, HALTING beneath its spreading branches while Corbin freed Jenny from the wagon. Nell checked David's bandages, clicking her tongue unhappily when she thought he wouldn't notice.

David blinked dully at the tree above. The gnarled branches and blood-red leaves wavered in and out of focus. The oak's namesake, a young woman who chose death over forced marriage and was later ordained for her chastity and faith, had spent most of her short life sheltering in France's old forests away from her controlling father. There were several identically christened trees between Calais and Flanders, though the lass was in truth enshrined in LesQuielles.

Grimonia was best remembered for her contemplation of Godly beauty. David thought it very unlikely she would have found Littleton's

fiendish forest to her taste. Whichever traveler had chosen to name the towering scarlet oak after the young saint must have suffered from an unreliable sense of humor.

"We'll leave the wagon here and send Jenny home," Corbin announced. "It wouldn't be fair to take her further in." At Nell's nod, he slapped the mule lightly on her rump. Jenny snorted once before crashing through the underbrush, kicking up clumps of dirt in her haste to be away.

"*That* one has sense." Corbin tossed Cat a sour glare as he leaned into the wagon bed. Cat wet his whiskers with a nonchalant paw and didn't budge from his spot near David.

"The day is waning," Corbin added. David wondered how he could tell. Grimonia's red leaves turned the light falling through the forest canopy murky and pink. "Much better for us if we're safely inside before sunset, and I can't guess how long it will take me to track the manor."

He bent, lifting David from the wagon bed in one controlled motion, cradling him against his chest. Agony made David's head spin. Leather was a wet mass against his tongue. Gagging, he spat it onto the forest floor and chewed the inside of his cheek instead.

"Guard his arm against branches, Corbin."

Nell strapped David's pack onto her back. She slipped Corbin's axe from its his belt, ignoring his protest.

"Don't be a fool. Your father taught us both how to use a blade, or have you forgotten? Mayhap he didn't drill me near to death as he did you, Corbin, but it wasn't my job to slay the family demon, was it?" Before Corbin could respond Nell stepped past him into deeper fern. "I was wise enough to keep up the practice. Now let's see if you can keep up with me. East and north you said?"

Without waiting for an answer, she pushed into the forest.

"How does she know where true north lies?" David wondered into Corbin's jerkin. "I lost all sense of direction hours ago and the trees are no help. They're festooned with moss on every side."

The rumble in Corbin's chest might have been reluctant mirth. "Nell's mother and grandmother and grandmother's mother all walked the wildwood in search of herb, and flower, and fairy favor. Nell knows



the forest better than anyone else in Littleton. Though I fear herb and flower and even fairy favor won't help her find the manor."

"Fairy favor?" Excitement almost distracted David from misery. "Corbin, you didn't say there are fairies in the black forest. They're nearly extinct, you know. I've never seen a *live* one. And Sir Thomas would have sold his left testicle for the chance. Mayhap his right as well."

"Enough!" Corbin barked. Up ahead Nell sounded as if she were choking. "As soon as you're well again I'll find you a fairy. They're generally very shy, but I understand one can be coaxed out of hiding so long as tea and pastries are involved."

"A foolish desire, I know, when we have more important concerns. But I have always wanted to see one, a live one, not just an illustration in an old book. Before they are gone." He confessed, "I am not Sir Thomas. Charles may grant me any title he likes, but I will always be David the scholar, fonder of book-learning than intrigue, more useful in front of the alchemic table than leading the charge against evil." He sighed. "I do not blame you for being angry. Why, I cannot even successfully defend myself against the monsters in my home! Affrodille would have been the wiser choice for Chevalier."

"Nonsense. The poppy Nell put in your drink is making you melancholy."

"And addling my nose," David admitted to Corbin's neck where the necklace of mermaid fingers rode just above his collar. The single bead with the angel Michael's rune carved on gray stone rested in the hollow of Corbin's throat. "I smell fruit gone to rot."

Corbin stopped walking. "Dwarves." He twitched toward his axe before recalling it was gone, jostling David. White spots blossomed in the air between David's eyes and the lenses of his spectacles. "Nell!"

She was at their side in an instant, turning this way and that as she studied the forest floor, axe in hand. "Are you certain? I don't smell anything but the forest.""

"David has a nose like a hound. He always knew supper was ready long before Cook called." Corbin's chest rose and fell against David's ear as he tested the air.

"Do we run?"

"In circles through the wildwood? Even if I knew in which direction the manor lies, I'd be reluctant to risk it."

"Put me down!" David ordered. "You'll be of more use with blade in hand."

"And let them pull you under?" Corbin growled. "No. Nell, toss me your fishing knife. It will have to do. Put your back to mine and keep watch."

To David it seemed they stood frozen between heartbeats, standing motionless as a sluggish breeze rustled the canopy above and sent a single yellow leaf fluttering above Nell's head. The birds and squirrels no longer scolded from nearby branches. Their silence was as ominous as the stench clogging David's nose.

"Shit," said Corbin, breaking the tableau half a breath before the dwarves came boiling out of the ground in a bellowing mass of tooth and claw. He kicked out, bashing the leader of the pack in the face with the heel of his boot, knocking the creature back before the it could latch on with fang or talon.

The dwarf somersaulted in the dirt before springing up and again flinging itself forward. It was joined by three more of its kin, stocky bodies no higher than Corbin's knee, but no less dangerous for their diminutive height. Snarling, two of the little monsters sprang onto Corbin's back, clinging to leather, while a third scuttled crab-wise through the ferns toward Nell.

Corbin swore under his breath as he struggled to shake free of the dwarves without loosening his grip on David.

"Hold tight," he ordered as he crashed against the nearest tree, battering the dwarves viciously against trunk and branch.

The tree shook under his assault, dropping more yellow leaves. David heard bones cracking. One of the dwarves fell away, leaving a streak of smoking ichor on Corbin's leather-clad shoulder. Its fellow howled fury before burying its teeth in Corbin's neck.

Corbin shouted. His blood spattered David's upturned face. It tasted of salt and iron, hot. David didn't hesitate. Twisting against Corbin's front he slammed his good fist again and again up and into the dwarf's face.

Flesh split. More bones crunched. The spots hovering in front of

David's eyes were equally terror and agony. The world narrowed to a single cold purpose: he could not let Corbin die for King Charles' mistakes, for White Hill's failures.

"David. David, stop!" Corbin's voice cracked in his ear, breaking David's savage concentration. "It's dead."

"It's dead. You've killed it." Nell repeated, "It's dead, David."

She used the flat of the ichor-drenched axe to lever the motionless dwarf off Corbin's back. It fell into the forest floor where it lay face-down without moving.

David's heart was a frozen stone in his chest, constricting his lungs. He gasped for air, struggled to see past gathering darkness. Had the sun set so quickly?

"Jésus," Corbin muttered. Blood ran freely from the wound in his neck, turning the collar of his padded tunic scarlet. His hold on David never loosened, though he'd lost Nell's little knife in the scuffle, proving it useless after all. He winced when Nell stood on her toes, pressing a handful of mud and leaves against his throat.

"They travel in packs of no less than seven," he said, frowning over the top of Nell's head at the surrounding underbrush. "I count four dead. Now is not the time to let down your guard."

"Do not lecture me on the ways of dwarves," Nell told him, scowling in return. "I know their brutality better than most." She pointed into the emerald gloom beneath a spreading fir. "*She* chased the other three off with barely a snap of her teeth."

Through an increasing haze, David glimpsed the gigantic animal watching from between the trees.

Corbin exhaled relief. "She'll lead us home. Not much farther now. Just hang on."

"I'm not the one bleeding like a stuck pig," David retorted weakly. He didn't dare confess pain was leaking away in the wake of rage. Now that they were no longer in imminent danger he had an overwhelming desire to close his eyes and sleep.

He was experienced enough in the ways of physicking to guess it was not opium's siren call that made his lids heavy. Death circled close, a dark-winged bird seeking just out of sight above the tree tops. Should it find its way through the forest canopy, he knew it

would pierce him through with beak and talon, drag him down to Sheol.

*In truth, I expected to die alone on White Hill, an old man slaving over his tomes and tinctures. This is much better, I think, though I wish I'd lived long enough to see a fairy. And poor Isabeau. Who will save her now?*

“We will save the lass,” Corbin replied, a growl in his ear. David realized he'd spoken aloud. “And I have seen you in the Beast’s magic mirror, many years hence, gray-haired and solemn, minding your tomes and tinctures. Today is not the day you die.”

“Oh. Well. In that case, I am heartened.” He did not remind Corbin a scrying spell was only as reliable as its caster.

He would spare his friend sorrow for as long as it was still in his power to do so.

“No time to linger,” Nell prompted. “Even the wolf won’t be able to save us should the dwarves return with more of their kind.”

The wolf flicked an ear Nell’s way. Rising, she stretched long and low, then turned her head and looked in their direction, tongue lolling, fangs flashing in a lupine grin. To David’s immense chagrin she met his stare. Her inhuman, colorless eyes brimmed with cunning and dislike.

He’d seen the same unfriendly expression a day earlier, captured within a salt circle. Then, it had belonged to the Littleton Fiend.

*You can't have him.*

With a shock of dismay David realized it still did.

*I only ask to be free. The butterflies are free.*

—**Dickens**

EIGHT

*WHEN COLERIDGE CAME TO ME ABOUT XANADU, I WAS AT FIRST NOT inclined to help. The manor was being extremely difficult at the time, and I was never certain from one breath to the next whether it resided in summer of 1213 or winter of 1799. Neither year was happy one. Without Corbin—not yet born or long dead, depending on your point of view—I was lost. Unmoored in time and space, alone and lonely, it was perhaps the darkest period of my life.*

*I did not expect to recover, and I certainly had no interest in poetry, especially Romanticism.*

*But Coleridge was relentless. In 1799 he was in ill health himself, but still he braved my wintry wildwood, rattling my gate and agitating my wolves. They would have liked to make a game and a meal out of him, but he was canny as well as stubborn and had brought along a wagon full of things interesting enough to tempt a listless demon.*

*I examined his gifts through the falling snow as he spoke rapidly about strange dreams, unfinished verse, and a stranger on business from Porlock. I found his chatter tedious, but also my head ached with a nagging recollection that there was something on his person I would need in his past.*

*"Nepenthe," I demanded hoarsely. "Do you have it?"*

*"Laudanum?" Expression quizzical, he nodded. "As a matter of fact, I do keep some on me. But is that—"*

*"Yes. That is what I want. Bring it inside and I'll help you finish your damnable poem."*

BUSHY TAIL HELD HIGH AND MUZZLE TO THE GROUND, THE WOLF LED Corbin and Nell unerringly through the forest tangle. North and east, although Corbin found no satisfaction in guessing the manor's direction correctly, not with David's head lolling heavy against his shoulder and Nell trotting breathless at his heels.

"Wastes no time, does she?" Nell gasped, dodging angry briar thorns. Corbin's jerkin turned the thorns before they scratched, and his longer legs found the log no obstacle, but the gathering twilight made him as wary as the wolf up ahead.

"I imagine she's no more eager to encounter vengeful dwarves than we are." The wolf flicked an ear Corbin's way in agreement.

"Is he still alive?" Nell demanded as they forded a cheerful, burbling forest brook, disturbing strange, red-eyed fish from beneath sheltering yellow moss. "Corbin, tell me he didn't save your life only to die of the effort?"

The bite mark Corbin's neck throbbed. He clutched David close, counting his friend's shallow gasps as he ran. The wolf's easy trot was stretching to a gallop. He thought he caught the faint whiff of rotten dwarf rising in the evening.

"Still alive." And thank Christ for small mercies. "The Beast will save him."

As if spurred by Corbin's desperation, the wildwood parted suddenly before them, ancient trees and knotted undergrowth giving way to low green grass and still-flowering Mary's Stars, blooms turned from white to silver in the gloaming. Beastly Manor waited in the center of the clearing as if it had grown up naturally among the flowers and not come to rest there according to whim.

The Beast stood just outside the manor's iron gate, yellow eyes narrowed to disapproving slits as he watched Corbin and Nell sprint

for safety. Cat crouched on the garden wall above. The tom arched his spine, tail bristling censure, when the wolf came to rest at her master's side.

"I see you've brought guests for dinner," the Beast drawled.

The white shirt beneath his velvet coat was open at the throat. His dark hair hung loose around his shoulders. From the mud on his trousers and the scattering of petals on his coat Corbin deduced he had been passing time in the manor garden, tending the old roses.

"How fortunate for me," continued Littleton's Fiend, gaze snagging briefly on Corbin's bloodied neck before alighting on David's limp form. "It's been a long time since I've made a chowder of an alchemist's bones. Dare I hope he died along the way?"

"Dwarves!" Corbin warned the Beast, as if the devil didn't already know. "Lock the gate behind us."

He didn't wait for an answer, instead following Nell through the manor garden past white roses and blooming hydrangea, around the bubbling three-tiered fountain, and up flagstone steps. The manor door stood cracked open, the brass knocker, forged in the shape of a wolf's head, shone dully in the fading light. Cradling David, Corbin stepped over the threshold.

The manor—square, stone, and adorned with a multitude of ever-shifting broken windows beneath a peaked tile roof—welcomed him back with a sigh of shifting wood and scraping stone.

"That's new," Nell commented, shrugging David's bag from her back and dropping it in the middle of the foyer. Her cheeks were red from exertion, her hair sticking in strands to her face. She wiped them away impatiently, turning in a circle beneath the gigantic silver-and-horn chandelier hanging unlit above their heads.

"Beast!" she called. "Where have you set up the sickroom?"

"Kitchen," he replied, materializing behind Corbin with a suddenness that made Nell jump. Corbin, used to the Beast's flare for drama, ran for the kitchen, David an increasingly lifeless weight in his arms.

"Not quite dead, then," mourned the Beast, trotting on Corbin's heels.

"Be quiet, devil, and get to work!" Nell retorted. "You promised you'd save him if I got him here alive!"



"I said 'alive', not 'mostly a corpse'."

But the Beast stripped off his coat, tossing it onto the kitchen sideboard. He rolled up his sleeves, meeting Corbin's eyes as he deftly tied back his hair with a bit of ribbon. Whatever he saw on Corbin's face made him grimace.

"Lay him down here, if you will, on the floor. Do not disturb the chalk when you do so." He indicated the pentagram with a flick of inhumanly long fingers.

The pentagram was a new addition in what Corbin had come to think of as the heart of their home. Where most of the rooms in the enchanted manor were continuously rearranging themselves with no visible rhyme or reason, shifting location or size or both, the kitchen had remained one of the few constants in Corbin's life since he'd become the Beast's companion. A spacious room with a large hearth, cupboards full of the many ingredients the Beast used in his baking, the sideboard dusted with remnants of flour, the air heavy with the pleasant scent of rising bread, the kitchen always seemed to Corbin evidence of the Beast's humanity.

But no matter how thoroughly Corbin tried to pretend otherwise, the Beast was not human and the five-pointed star drawn onto flagstone where only hours earlier they'd sat together and finished off a breakfast of fresh eggs and out-of-season strawberries only served as a painful reminder. Contained in a perfectly symmetrical circle and surrounded by crisply chalked sigils, the pentagram took up most of the kitchen floor, turning a cozy room into a supernatural workspace.

The hair on the back of Corbin's neck rose. He must have made a sound of dismay because the Beast glanced up sharply from where he crouched to light one of the five tapers placed around the star.

"Red," he said. A long match flickered in his hand, though Corbin knew from experience he could summon flame with a word. "Be not afraid. This is quite unlike the gate in our cellar. There is no need for worry. Trust me."

But Corbin hesitated even as David grew heavier in his arms. He could not help but remember the Beast speaking gruffly, answering long ago questions about the gleaming demon gate hidden in the manor dungeon.

*"What's on the other side?"*

*"Sleep. Deep, dreamless, dark. The sleep of the dead, or those who wish to be."*

"Corbin!" Nell struggled to pull David from his arms, expression verging on grief, and that was enough of to incite Corbin to movement. Because they would not grieve for David this day, so long as he had a say in the matter.

The Beast rose quickly to his feet. Together they arranged David carefully on the kitchen floor, head aligned with the pentagram's top-most point, arms and legs splayed to match the bottom four.

"Don't disturb the markings!" the Beast warned again. "Inside the circle or out. If I have to begin anew we will lose him for certain."

David moaned when Nell began to unwrap the bandages around his ruined arm. Corbin's heart beat faster in relief. His friend had felt too much like carrion in his arms since they'd passed the manor gates.

The Beast peered over Nell's shoulder, examining David's swollen limb. In the flickering light of the tapers and the banked hearth his narrow face grew somber.

"An incubus did this, you say?" he inquired, frowning doubtfully. "I had not heard there was one of my kin in France."

"Then your sources are failing you," David whispered, surprising them all. His eyelids flickered but did not open. "As there are at least two. Corbin?"

"Here," Corbin squeezed David's hand. "Lie still. You're safe now. The Beast will take the poison from your arm."

"The Beast knows better than to make promises he may not keep," chided the fiend. "Nell, why is your patient still awake? Did you or did you not empty the whole of the opium into his tea as I suggested?"

"I did," Nell responded grimly, "but that was hours ago. And it was less of a suggestion, as I recall, than a decree. I warned you your calculations were off." She ran the palms of her hands up and down just a hair's breadth above David's arm, murmuring under her breath.

"My calculations? At least *I* wasn't pinning all hope on eye of newt and toe of frog!"

"Aye, and that makes two of us. Frog toes are used in love philters,

not healing spells." All at once she dug the nails of one hand firmly into the back of David's swollen hand.

David's shoulders quivered. With dread, Corbin realized he was suppressing laughter, and not pain. David didn't react at all to Nell's touch. Where once the lightest contact caused his friend agony, now he felt nothing.

"No time to waste," the Beast said briskly. "Corbin, move out of my circle, if you please. There's hot water and clean rags on the hearth. Wash that bite on your neck thoroughly. Dwarves are filthy parasites."

Corbin tried to rise but David protested. "Medea's Phial?" he asked. "Your sword?"

The Beast's dark brows drew down over the bridge of his nose.

"Aye, we have them both," Corbin replied. "They're here." He rose reluctantly, leaving David to the Beast.

"Come." Nell steered him toward the hearth. "Let me help you with that bite."

Corbin glanced over his shoulder in time to see the Beast chalking a final curve around the pentagram, closing himself into the circle with David. He knew enough from his lessons at White Hill that no demon willingly sealed himself into a containment circle.

A large pot of water simmered in the hearth above glowing embers. Snow white linens were folded and stacked nearby. Nell used a pair of burnished tongs to dip a strip of bandage into the hot water, then waved it gently back and forth in the air until it cooled enough to press against Corbin's neck.

"Christ, that hurts!" But the pain made it easier to resist looking back around at the pentagram.

"Hold still," ordered Nell as she washed his wound. "The Mother's Wart I packed it with works well enough for clotting but does little for cleansing."

"Mother's Wart? Looked and smelled like forest mud to me."

"Your mum would have taught you better, had she been around to do so." The first cloth came away spotted with blood and soil. Standing on her toes, Nell applied a second. "Your da had no patience for the ways of the wood. This will need sutures, I'm afraid. Had David not interfered, the little monster would have torn out your throat."

"Later." Corbin wriggled away, ignoring Nell's sighs when he straightened to his full height, escaping her reach. "He needs me."

She caught at his elbow again before he could turn.

"It will have to come off, you know. His hand, at least, and possibly higher up. The nerves are dead, rotted through. Even if your Beast chases out the poison, the damage will remain. Corbin, if we're truly to save him, I'll need your help."

He resisted the urge to press a fist against his souring stomach.

"You'll have it."

AT FIRST IT SEEMED THERE WAS LITTLE TO DO BUT WATCH AS THE Beast prepared whatever devilish sorcery he had in mind. Corbin had grown used to living with magic. Their home flitted through time and consistently rearranged rooms and walls. The manor garden had once housed a dragon in the hedge maze, the three-tiered fountain alternately splashed cleanly or clogged with what seemed a lifetime's worth of moss, the statues in the rose garden routinely changed stony poses, and as far as Corbin knew no animal other than songbirds—and occasionally Nell's ginger tomcat—dared pass the iron gates.

The Beast kept a magpie's collection of extraordinary toys and machines in his ballroom alongside an equally extravagant collection of human bones. Most belonged to futures the fiend had walked, and Corbin hoped never to see.

"Technology," the Beast explained, when he turned the handle on the gramophone so the Corbin could dance, or wrote in one of his precious library books with a 'ballpoint pen'.

Privately, Corbin thought 'technology' was only another word for magic. Often interesting, sometimes useful, and usually unexplainable.

Inside the closed pentagram the Beast knelt on David's left side, taking care not to smudge the sigils. Bracing one hand on David's shoulder, he used the other to touch first David's forehead and then grip his chin, turning David's head this way and that before leaning close and sniffing audibly at his mouth. David groaned against the intrusion, then subsided, falling limp.

Whatever the Beast scented made him pull away, nose wrinkling in disgust.

"Not poison," he told Corbin, both hands now working their way down David's torso, prodding firmly here and there. David lay still beneath his examination, insensible at last. "Disease. The incubus whom David attacked suffered a blight. It was dying already. Bad luck that it shed disease as it did so, infecting David through the open wound."

"Is that possible?" Nell edged close to the circle for a better look. "Sickness transferred from devil to man?"

"And back again." The Beast walked his fingers more slowly down the length of David's left arm. "Why, just last season Corbin shared with me the most disgusting grippe I've encountered in centuries. Brought it back from Littleton and the both of us were barking like sea lions for weeks after." His hand paused just above David's mottled wrist. He frowned in thought. "I'm sorry to say Nell is quite correct. I can cleanse the disease from his body, but it's beyond my power to repair the hand. If you wish to save him, it will have to come off." The corners of his mouth turned further down. "And a one-handed alchemist would not be much of an alchemist at all, assuming he survives Nell's butchering. "

Nell sputtered beneath Corbin's restraining hand. "My patients are not livestock!"

"In my opinion, it would be kinder to let him die now. He is very close."

Nell ceased her swearing. Corbin's heart skipped a painful beat.

"He's insensible," the Beast said gently. "The decision is yours, Red. Best make it quickly."

It was not as difficult a decision as the Beast seemed to believe. Corbin had repeated the vow throughout the day too many times to count, silently to himself, or fiercely to David. He was not about to break that promise now.

Besides which, surely a man was more than the sum of his limbs. David, who prized knowledge over physical prowess, would certainly rather live to see the world turn than die of a putrid wound.

"He does not die today."

"As you wish." The Beast plucked a pretty jeweled dagger from thin air. It was Corbin's favorite knife, snatched from his quarters by the devil's wish. "Step away from the circle, both of you."

Corbin obeyed, tugging Nell after. But Nell dragged her heels.

"That's my patient you've got there in your circle, fiend! For his sake, I'd rather keep a watchful eye on your progress."

The Beast smiled as he extended his right arm, wrist up, baring the veins beneath dusky skin. "Then 'ware the hem of your trousers, witch."

He used the point of Corbin's dagger to slice a line down the center of his forearm, from crook of elbow to turn of wrist, biting deep. Corbin kept the blade honed to sharpness; it split demon flesh as easily as human, but it could not kill the devil. The Littleton Fiend, as he took great pleasure in reminding Corbin, was cursed to die only by way of a broken heart.

Blood burst from the Beast's arm, falling in a red shower across the kitchen floor, turning white chalk pink, speckling David from head to toe, making the tapers placed on each point of the pentagram smoke.

"Like a hell-broth boil and bubble," the Beast intoned, smiling faintly as if in secret amusement, "fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

At once the blood-soaked chalk went up in flame, orange-red tongues rising in a burst around the circle. The sigils flared and the five-pointed star kindled. Nell leapt sideways to avoid the conflagration, swearing. Only Corbin's complete confidence in the Beast kept him from charging through flame to David's rescue.

And if he thought to question his instincts the chance was quickly lost. Fire rose past the Beast's thigh, and then to his shoulder, and then high above his head. It roared as it licked at the kitchen ceiling, obscuring David and the fiend from view. The heat of it threatened to blister Corbin's face and hands as he wrestled Nell away from danger, tumbling them both onto the floor until they fetched up against the farthest wall.

"Jésus Christ." Nell was on her feet before Corbin managed to roll onto his knees.

It occurred to Corbin with some dismay that he no longer had the immediate resilience of a lad of fifteen. Certainly, he was in no shape to

hunt and kill the French king's demon. He'd lost his fighting edge the day he'd returned his sword to Charles' treasury and resolved to live in peace with the Littleton Fiend.

Da, he thought as he struggled upright, would be very disappointed.

"Shouldn't we...do something?" Nell muttered, reaching for Corbin's axe on her belt. "Does he mean to burn down the manor?"

"Even the Beast cannot wreck this prison," Corbin replied, knowing the devil would not appreciate that secret confessed. "It's beyond all of our influence. Look, do you see? The flames lick the ceiling but do the rafters no harm."

"I find that very small consolation." Nell gritted her teeth even as she linked quivering fingers with Corbin's. "You do realize this is madness?"

"Even now they're dying down."

Gradually, the roaring flames began to shrink, recoiling away from the ceiling as if repelled. Red-orange tongues dwindled until they were no higher than Corbin's head, and then his breast, revealing the Beast, smirking at them from inside the circle. At last they receded to gleeful blue flickers racing over each neatly chalked line.

"Bit showy, don't you think?" Nell scoffed, though she still held tightly to Corbin's fingers. "I don't see how scorching the kitchen ceiling helps anything."

"Concealment," Corbin explained, attention focused on David and the gentle rise and fall of his naked chest. "The Beast prefers not to bare his true form to mortal eyes."

"Completely for your own protection, I assure you." Pretending nonchalance exactly as Nell pretended bravery, the Beast cleaned nails with the bloodied end of Corbin's knife.

His outward composure didn't fool Corbin. The Beast's hair fell now in matted tangles around his shoulders, sweat soaked his white shirt all down the front of his chest, and his bare feet had gone coal black around the edges.

"Yet you'll put poor David on display" admonished Nell, though Corbin could not help noticing she did not hesitate to inspect the alchemist's naked body from a distance.

"The disease required burning out," the Beast explained as Nell started to pace around the circle. "I didn't think it prudent to waste energies needed to sustain his body on preserving his clothes. Best begin your surgery now, witch. He will not wake for some time yet, not while my fire lingers in his veins, but it would be unkind to delay lest he wakes mid-surgery. You'll find everything you need there on the credenza, including a bone saw and sturdy tourniquet. There's a cauterizing knife already in the fire." He exhaled through his nose. "Red, we'll need that bottle of brandy from the top cupboard shelf. You remember the one. I believe Charles sent it with the last fool who came a-courting your sword arm."

"I prefer boiling water and crushed garlic to alcohol for open wounds," Nell said archly. "Are you going to let us into the circle or not? I need to assess what damage you've done him."

"As to that"—and Corbin reaching for the brandy bottle was struck motionless by the diffidence in the Beast's tone—"I'm afraid by the law of the jinn you will have to let *me* out."

DAVID'S BLOOD TURNED THE WATER IN THE BASIN PINK. CORBIN dipped his hands into the bowl a third time, scrubbing flecks of red from around his knuckles and fingernails. He'd missed a sticky patch on his wrist. He scratched at it absently while songbirds watched him from atop the bedroom armoire. Dawn crept through broken windows and across faded rugs, reaching for the bed in the center of the chamber.

A small, square piece of looking glass stood propped against the basin. Corbin used it for shaving, and for trimming the ends of his hair when it grew too long and threatened to fall into his eyes. It was a perfectly ordinary piece of reflective glass, not in the least bit enchanted, which was why Corbin preferred it. He never had to fear that if once he glanced past his reflection in just the right direction he'd see into the future or the past.

In the first light, the glass showed him more of David's blood, crimson specks across the bridge of his nose, clots drying in his beard.



He was not unused to gore. He was, after all, both a trained killer and the son of a farmer.

He did not like to think himself a coward, but the face looking back at him from the glass was bone-white beneath blood and freckles, the mouth a thin line of shame.

"Ah, good! Planning a shave at last, I hope!" The Beast entered their chamber the mortal way, through the door after a curt knock. It was so unlike him that Corbin turned from the mirror in surprise.

Last he'd seen the Beast he'd been ruffled and blood-stained, grim as he'd held David by the shoulders while Nell gripped David's ankles and Corbin, the strongest of the three, sat on David's chest working the bone-saw. The Beast smiling now on the threshold had reverted to his usual immaculate self except for the lack of velvet coat and the charring around the edges of his bare feet.

The Beast's grin faded. "You're bleeding again. Nell was right. That needs sutures." He shut the chamber door behind him and opened the wardrobe, scattering songbirds in a storm of vibrant plumage. "I know I restocked our kit after the incident with the leprechaun come up through the cellar. I still shudder when I recall how close it came to tearing out your liver."

Corbin had forgotten about the bite on his neck. He rinsed his hands once more in the basin. It smelled faintly of iron and vomit.

The Beast placed a square box on the bed. Made of stiff leather and about the size of a chamber pot, the Beast called the box a 'first aid kit'. He kept it stocked with bandages, hooked needles, and sutures along with a large flask of witch hazel for killing 'germs'. Corbin had yet to fully understand why the small box was considered the firstmost in aid, but he had been lectured so often on the danger of germs—invisible, supernatural creatures that often turned a body putrid—that he could not doubt their danger.

"We must keep germs from David's arm." He told the Beast, dismayed that the thought had only just occurred to him. "Mayhap some of those 'antibiotics' you keep with your treasure hoard. In fact, I'll just go and get them now."

"No," said the Beast. "My supply of penicillin has dwindled dangerously. It's meant to be kept back only for life and death situations,

specifically yours." Before Corbin could protest, he held up a finger. "If it comes to it, we'll negotiate, but for the moment David is in no more danger of dying than he was yesterday or the day before. Less, in fact. With my fire bolstering his body, his chances of a full recovery are greatly increased. I'm exponentially more powerful than penicillin."

He tapped the bed. "Come, Red. Sit and let me tend your wound."

Corbin sat. The mattress flexed beneath his weight, coverlet sighing. The Beast's fingers were warm on his jaw, tilting his head, exposing his throat. His breath tickled Corbin's ear and sent goosebumps rising on Corbin's collarbone. The ache in his gut began to ease.

"There," the Beast said quietly. "It's an ugly bite, but not nearly as deep as I feared." He selected a needle from the kit, measured out a length of thread, uncapped the flask of witch hazel. "How's the pain?"

"A welcome distraction to the remembered feel of David's bone coming apart beneath my blade." He confessed, "I think I vomited up two days' worth of meals, after."

"And into my favorite cooking pot," scolded the Beast without heat. "Hold still, now."

He daubed witch hazel onto Corbin's neck. It tingled unpleasantly. Corbin winced when the needle first pierced his flesh, then closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing through each painful tug.

"You're in shock, that's all." The Beast had a sure hand with the needle. He worked quickly, for which Corbin was grateful. "It was a nasty business, and you did the worst of it."

"It was easier than it should have been. No more difficult than sawing through a tree branch. Such a large thing for so little effort."

The Beast pulled the last suture tight before snipping off the needle with a pair of small sheers.

"Humans are delicate, short-lived creatures." Gently, he pressed a kiss to Corbin's throat, between collarbone and newly closed wound, mouth cool against Corbin's angry flesh. Corbin exhaled reluctant pleasure.

The Beast laughed softly as he moved to sit astride Corbin's lap, pressed brow against brow, breathing as Corbin breathed. Corbin's body responded as it always did, waking at the solid feel of him, and

the familiar perfume of sulfur and pine sap. He caught a flash of amused yellow as their noses bumped.

"There are things one can do," suggested the Beast, rubbing his cheek against Corbin's beard, "to help with the shock."

Despite himself, Corbin laughed. "My mouth tastes of sour vomit and I've David's blood under my nails and in my beard."

"Oh, Red." The Beast sighed while at the same time executing a dramatic wriggle against Corbin's thighs. "Believe you me, I'll take your favors however I can get them."

The mockery was meant to coax out a smile, but at the same time, Corbin knew the devil meant it. And somehow that simple, impossible, immutable certainty lessened the cramp of guilt and sorrow around his heart.

He lowered his chin, and took the kiss as offered.

The Beast opened his mouth in welcome, moving now deliberately in Corbin's lap until he gasped. Corbin reached up, closing his hands on the Beast's shoulders, tugging him closer. They collapsed together onto the mattress, falling sideways into a nest of silk and goose-down, clashing like two blades, mouth and hip, tongue and teeth, dueling.

The Beast lifted his head just long enough to point out: "Sex is an age-old antidote to violence, Red. I imagine it works very well against shock, too."

"Shut up," said Corbin, in no mood for a lecture, cock throbbing. "And get on with it."

As reply the Beast sucked hard on the pale skin just below Michael's bead on its string of bones around Corbin's neck, adding his own mark beneath the archangel's. Corbin groaned aloud, arched up off the mattress, dug his fingers into the Beast's upper arms until the demon hissed.

In the beginning there was little tenderness. They writhed and grappled and scraped and bucked, chasing abandonment in pain, release in combat. Corbin lost his boots, and then his trousers to the Beast's clever fingers. In retaliation he tore the Beast's white shirt asunder, popping buttons, growling as he nipped his way along the Beast's muscular chest. The Beast snarled, and grabbed Corbin's beard,

yanking him up for more kisses, plundering Corbin's mouth as his free hand worked between them.

"God." Pleasure raced outward from Corbin's cock and along every nerve. The Beast's fingers in his beard, the grind of his bony hips, the pulse of blood behind sutures and love bites only made gratification more poignant. "Jésus, Beast, now!"

"Yes," the Beast promised. He bit down hard on Corbin's lip, drawing blood, while at the same time running light fingers around the head of Corbin's cock, just the way Corbin liked it, twisting once and then again.

Like tinder held too close to the fire Corbin ignited, shouting as he convulsed, painting the Beast's hand and the silk coverlet beneath them.

"Ah," said his lover, dipping his head to bestow much gentler kisses on Corbin's chin. "Perfect. That's perfect. You're perfect."

Panting, Corbin lifted a heavy hand, reaching, but the Beast nudged him gently away.

"No," he said. "It's enough for me to have you back here in our bed, safe and whole. Now, sleep."

"I need to check on David." But exhaustion lapped at his bones.

"Nell is keeping watch on David, and I shall keep watch on them both. Sleep. And when you wake, we rid you of this rat's nest you call a beard."

WHEN CORBIN STIRRED AGAIN, THE SUN WAS RISING ON A NEW DAY. The songbirds fluttered one by one or in chattering flocks from their perches on the wardrobe and bed canopy through long-shattered windows out into the garden. No matter Corbin's unreliable temper or the Beast's sometimes explosive eccentricities, more and more often the smallest of the wild creatures preferred their shared bedchamber to the hazards of the black forest after sunset. Each night multi-colored songbirds roosted on every available surface while families of field mice and tiny forest voles sheltered in the mattress, in the cupboard, and most distressingly, in Corbin's shoes.

"Someday I'm going to forget to check for mouse pups before I

step into a boot," Corbin complained as he shaved the last of his beard under the Beast's watchful eye. It had been difficult, upon waking, not to hurry at once to David's side, but the Beast had convinced him to first spend time with hot water, a razor, and a set of clean clothes. For the sake of preventing germs.

The Beast, sitting cross-legged on the edge of the mattress, was busily rubbing lotion from a little pot onto his blistered feet.

"That would be very unfortunate," he said. "As lately the manor has become more protective than a broody wyrm when comes it to the birds and beasts within the garden gates. It turns aside every charm I try to keep them outside our walls. Why, if not for Nell's tom my kitchen would be completely unsanitary."

"You hate Cat." Corbin poked at his sutures and found them good. "Promised to throw him off the east gable if Nell didn't stop sending him over the wall to keep an eye on us."

"Hardly a canny spy but lately he's proven himself a competent mouser." The Beast pulled a face. "Although I suppose one can't complain about mouse droppings when one has fresh human blood all over one's pastry table. It's been centuries since I've been so lucky."

Ignoring Corbin's disapproving sigh, he frowned out the broken windows at the blue sky beyond. "Come to think of it, the last time this house started acting the nervous nanny was..." He trailed off, expression gone carefully blank.

"Aye?" Corbin prompted.

Flapping a dismissive hand, the Beast set aside his pot and hopped off the bed, wincing when he landed on damaged feet. He showed the edges of his sharp teeth when Corbin arched a brow.

"Forgotten history. Look at us both, the walking wounded, and David up in the Blue Room will never be whole again. Here: take my arm, Red, and help me upstairs. Some days I cannot but feel my age through and through. Two centuries ago an elementary cleansing spell would not have left me so burnt about the edges."

Corbin was used to the Beast bemoaning his longevity. The demon often used his age as a bargaining chip to avoid particularly odious tasks he'd prefer Corbin do instead, as an excuse for his mercurial and sometimes dangerous moods, and as an outright bid for sympathy

when he was in need of cossetting. Corbin always understood it was only a game played. The Littleton Fiend, the most dangerous creature in the black forest and perhaps all of Normandy, was as far from creaky as the moon was from the sea.

But there was something in the way the Beast gripped Corbin's forearm, limping along faded rose-patterned carpet and up the grand staircase toward the manor's topmost floor, that spoke of honest melancholy.

*Every century or two, he'd once told Corbin, I lose interest and sleep. A long sleep, while the manor crumbles and falls.*

"Beast," Corbin blurted as they were halfway up the curving staircase. "Would you rather...Mayhap it's not just David who needs recovery. Would you prefer to...rest?"

It was the Beast's turn to express incredulity, dark brows quirked high.

"Whatever are you implying? I napped last night, after you collapsed so very well sated, my name still on your lips." He shook his arm from beneath Corbin's hand. "Ah. You prefer to speak to David alone, is that it? Well. I'm afraid you're doomed to disappointment. What happens under my roof is my business, as I'm sure you've learned by now, especially if that business comes in the form of your first infatuation." Leaning on the banister instead of Corbin for support, he continued up the staircase, spine rigid.

Corbin closed his mouth with a snap. He knew he should correct the Beast's assumption before it brought trouble upon David's head. The devil was prone to displays of jealousy. But he could not. It soothed some indistinct, nameless fear to see the spark of emotion in the Beast's clenched jaw. And, if Corbin were being honest, it also thrilled a dark and secret part of himself that burgeoned under the Beast's attention.

The Littleton Fiend was not yet ready to retreat to dreamless sleep as time unwound around him, and no small piece of that had to do with Corbin de Beaumont.

"Forgive me, Father, for my trespasses." Corbin stopped to sketch the cross in the air in the remote chance God might yet forgive him a multitude of sins he could not find it in himself to regret.

"What was that?" the Beast snapped from several strides ahead.

"Nothing." Corbin chased after, easily closing the distance. Reaching the top of the stairs, they walked shoulder-to-shoulder down a crooked corridor papered with dusty, peeling wall-paper the color of sunset.

The manor shifted its layout almost as often as the sun rose over the wildwood. Though the Beast seemed to always find his way from room to room, Corbin was not so lucky. The first few seasons spent in the manor had found him wasting long evenings searching for the chamber he'd claimed as his own until the house took pity on him or he gave up and slept on the nearest serviceable piece of furniture. Mornings were easier; so long as he followed the perfume of freshly baked bread or cooking sausage he rarely went astray.

But being lost in one's own home was impractical, especially on those rare days the Beast was too busy or too temperamental to cook, or after a long winter's afternoon spent hunting. What a man wanted most after hours spent floundering through snow drifts was a hot drink, dry clothes and his own bed, not an everlasting trudge through drafty, unfamiliar halls, empty stomach growling.

"Time," the Beast explained early on, when Corbin finally gave up and confronted him over the manor's eccentricities. "After an eon or two spent within these walls you'll learn to guess the house's inclinations. Also," he added, smiling at Corbin over the top of a battered treatise on musical theory, "if you'd been paying attention instead of stomping about dripping on my good floors, you might have realized by now that there are only fifteen rooms in this house, not including the basement or the solarium, and no room has the same door. Some are more individual than others. Still," he added, "when one bothers to pay attention, one discovers every door is remarkably dissimilar from the next. Either your eyes are failing, Red, or you're dangerously self-absorbed."

The door to the Blue Room was notable for its bold indigo hue and heavy brass hardware decorated all over with engravings of owls caught mid-flight. The room behind the door was remarkable only for its cleanliness. The plank floor was swept free of dust, the sea-green wall tapestries and bed-hangings appeared newly laundered, and the blue

silk chaise and matching chairs were distinctly lacking in stains or tears. Even the jagged glass pains in the broken windows were spotless.

When they entered, Nell turned away from a view through those windows over the manor garden, placing one finger against her lips. Corbin spared her a nod before he crossed the room in three long strides, eyes only for the man on the narrow bed.

Too pale against indigo, David looked braced for disappoint even in slumber. The passing years had been kind to him, whittling away baby fat, turning a lad on the cusp of adulthood into a fully grown man. There were crows-feet in around his eyes and laugh lines bracketing his mouth.

Time had made him stronger. He appeared sturdier than Corbin remembered, muscled in places where he'd been fragile before. Swordsman's muscles, Corbin realized, and wondered if his friend had given up the library for the armory.

Corbin bent over the bed. David sighed in his sleep, the fingers of his one remaining hand opening and closing on velvet.

The empty space on the coverlet where his left arm ended below the elbow made Corbin swallow, the bandaged stump a painful rebuke.

*I took that from him. He's changed forever, because I made a promise I wouldn't break. Couldn't break.*

"He's sleeping," Nell murmured. "Which is to be expected. I recharged my stones" —she indicated the fragments of black crystal arranged in a line along the mattress near David's left thigh, from shoulder blade to stump, and the silver bowl of pungent herbs smoking on the bedside table — "and the Beast refilled David's wee potion." She scowled at the familiar bottle set between the herbs and a pitcher of red wine.

"Laudanum," the Beast corrected from where he'd taken up Nell's position by the window. "Less potent than David's family recipe, but also less dangerous. It won't be invented for another several hundred years, but I laid away a nice supply in trade with Coleridge for help with his silly poem."

Corbin did not know who Coleridge was, nor did he care. "Will he recover?"

"So long as he does not catch infection or fall to wound hysteria,"



Nell assured him. "He survived the amputation and the hot knife after. Rest is what he needs most, and careful monitoring. The Beast and I can ease his pain and encourage sleep, but a friend at his side will ease his heart."

The Beast scoffed. Turning a blind eye to devil's contempt, Corbin dragged a blue-silk chair across the room and took up position at the head of the mattress.

"I'll sit with him," he said, for David's benefit, and for the Beast's. "You'll be wanting food, Nell. Go and eat. After, the Beast will find you a room suitable for your stay."

"He means he wants to be left alone," the Beast said, "to rend his clothes in sorrow and tear at his hair in guilt."

"You saved his life," Nell told Corbin gently. "Whether or not he realizes it at first, eventually he will thank you for it."

Corbin lightly touched David's furrowed brow, smoothing away unhappy lines with the ball of his thumb. It may have been his imagination, but the tension in David's body seemed to lessen at his touch.

"I'll be back before the herbs burn out," Nell said, turning her scowl on the Beast. "Come, fiend. Jealousy does not suit you, and we have my accommodations to discuss."

THE BEAST RETURNED BEFORE NELL, DAVID'S BAG IN HAND, Corbin's sword in its chest over one shoulder.

"I didn't believe him," he admitted, dropping the chest unceremoniously at Corbin's feet, "when he said he had your sword. Whatever persuaded Charles to part with it again?"

Corbin's spine creaked when he straightened. He'd lost track of time sitting at David's side, absorbed in watching his friend sleep. A glance around the room showed him Nell's herbs were still smoking but through the broken windows afternoon warmed the garden.

"Trouble in Paris." Corbin stared past the toes of his boots at the old chest. Long and narrow, it was deceptively plain except for the gold padlock closed on the latch. He'd seen it last in Fontainebleau before Charles had ordered it returned to the royal treasury.

In the following years he'd learned not to miss it, schooled himself

to stop reaching for the sword on his back or the chest under his bed. Once it had been as much as part of him as any limb. He'd been trained since childhood on the blade, hours spent daily in practice, every drill a promise to his Da—and his sisters Beauty, Hope, and Faith—that he would find the demon who killed their mother, and cut out its heart.

He'd found the demon but instead of carving out the Beast's heart he'd claimed it for his own.

"There's always trouble in Paris. All this time and he's never bothered us before."

Corbin couldn't guess whether the Beast meant Charles or David.

"I understand it's a specific sort of trouble. One not easily handled by the usual means."

"White Hill wasn't up to the job," the Beast translated. "So, not a vampire, ghoul or goblin." He placed David's bag on the floor with more care than he'd given to Corbin's sword.

"I'll admit, I'm intrigued. What monster plagues King Charles' court that requires a sword powerful enough to kill the rare demon, and the only man in Normandy trained to wield it?"

"A rare demon, I'm told," Corbin replied dryly. "One that first spins cloth-of-gold from commonplace sheep's wool, beguiling all of Paris, and later—when he's found out—runs off with the king's young bride."

Any other time Corbin might have laughed at the Beast's shocked face. But he feared disturbing David, and he suspected the hilarity bubbling behind his ribs was more bitterness than genuine mirth.

"You're not wrong," he continued. "When White Hill wasn't up to the job, David thought of me. He needed a swordsman he was certain could employ the blade, you see, and one reluctant to turn his back on the requirements of friendship. He had a very convincing speech prepared." Corbin blinked sadly at his sleeping friend. "And all for naught."

"Impossible. The incubus I might forgive myself—they make very little noise, comparatively, and it's not inconceivable I missed it..." The Beast licked his lips, shifted his yellow gaze from Corbin to David and back again, and came very close to stomping a bare foot before

recalling blistered toes. "A demon capable of working transformative magic, turning fleece to gold? I should have sensed its presence the moment it materialized in my domain."

"Paris is not the black forest."

Now he did stomp a foot. Corbin flinched in sympathy but if the Beast felt any pain he was too far roused to notice. "Nor is the black forest my domain. *France* is my territory, Red, all of it. No djinn would dare intrude, not willingly, and certainly not for reasons so trivial as 'beguiling Paris!' And my senses are not so dulled I wouldn't notice if one were compelled!"

"Calm yourself, Beast," murmured Corbin when David rolled his head restlessly on the mattress, eyelids fluttering, five fingers flexing in silk. "Perhaps Charles was somehow mistaken. Not a demon after all, but an elven glamour or," he tried to remember Sir Thomas' catalog of supernatural creatures, "an unusually strong Will O' Wisp."

"That turns wool into gold?" the Beast screeched in a whisper. Before Corbin could move stop him, he dropped to the floor and began sorting through David's pack.

"What are you doing?" Corbin abandoned the chair for his knees on the floor beside the Beast. "Stop! You can't just rifle through his things."

"Don't be naive. I can, and I will!"

They paused nose to nose, breathing indignation. Corbin moved first, but the Beast was faster, flashing across the room with preternatural speed, emptying the contents of the bag one by one onto the floor so quickly Corbin didn't see his hands move.

"Ah-ha!" the Beast cried, lifting high a slim hide-bound book. "If Charles had any doubt at all, would he lower himself to send all the way to Rome for this?"

"What is it?"

"I have no idea," the devil snarled, "but it reeks of papistry and everyone knows Sixtus doesn't give anything away for free. Whatever it is, it must have cost Charles a fortune, and no one wastes good coin on hunting a Will O' the Wisp!"

"He's not wrong," David said into the boiling silence, "though it was Duke Berry's purse that suffered and not Charles' treasury."

Nine

*ACCORDING TO LEGEND, THE BLESSED VIRGIN HERSELF CAME TO YOUNG Albert—then of Lauingen—in a vision, and convinced him to enter the Dominican Order. Whether or not the legend is true, Brother Albert quickly became a rising star in all things theoretical. A scientist, philosopher, theologian and diplomat, his lectures were in great demand across Europe. His knowledge of the natural sciences was surprisingly accurate for the time; he's credited with the discovery of arsenic. His best student, Thomas Aquinas, claimed that together they used the philosopher's stone to transmute mercury into gold.*

*But when Albert was canonized by Pope Pius XI, it wasn't because the Catholic church appreciated his scientific advances. It was in recognition of the secret war he'd waged for fifty years against demonkind, the mass annihilation he'd carried out in the Virgin Mary's name.*

IT WAS NOT A PLEASANT RETURN TO CONSCIOUSNESS. THE BEAST loomed over David, white teeth bared in a snarl. The demon's shadow

—much too large for the small frame he wore—was a dark stain spreading over the mattress. He gripped Brother Albert's writings in both hands as if he planned to tear the priceless book asunder.

"Albert of Cologne? You dare bring that man's grimoire into my house? I should have let you die!"

Corbin shouldered the Beast aside, using his bulk to shield David from the devil's temper. Even as David struggled to make sense of his surroundings, it did not escape his notice that the Beast fell back as if Corbin's greater size mattered.

If the Beast so desired, David knew, he could rend Corbin to bloody pieces in the blink of an eye. That the demon made a show of temper and yet never let his chosen disguise falter alarmed David more than the Beast's snarling display.

But that alarm was fleeting in the face of Corbin's brilliant smile.

"You're awake." He touched his fingers to David's brow, checking for fever. The move was so natural David couldn't help but think it wasn't the first time, or the tenth, that Corbin had done so since they'd reached the manor.

He also could not help but secretly wish he'd had a chance to appreciate that intimacy. Then he recalled that Corbin was waiting for confirmation and hurried to reassure his friend.

"The two of you make enough noise to raise all the dead on Mount Olivet." His voice was mortifyingly weak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "How long?"

"A day. Almost two." Corbin's smile faltered. "How do you feel?"

"Everything hurts, especially my hand." David struggled to sit up but lost the war against muscles gone feeble and a veritable mountain of blue silk tucked around his body. He blinked owlishly, trying to put the room in focus. "But I'll confess I'm overjoyed to be in the land of the living. My spectacles? And will you help me up? Please."

As Corbin turned away from the bed, the Beast ducked around his side.

"Let me help you," the demon purred, brimming with false sincerity. His hands were surprisingly gentle as he eased David up and back against an embankment of pillows, plumping silk expertly as he

smirked. "No, don't apologize. You'll have to get used to asking for help now that your circumstances are so altered."

"My God, Beast!" cried Corbin. "Are you completely lacking in tact?"

"If by tact you mean prevarication"—the Beast snatched David's spectacles from Corbin's grip—"then yes. In circumstances such as these, Red, it's kinder to be blunt. Rip the Band-Aid off quickly and it hurts less, or so I've been told."

David gaped, trying to make sense of the Beast's odd humor and Corbin's unusual diffidence. The fiend offered up his spectacles with a mocking bow. Dismay gave David strength to reach up from underneath the heavy coverlet, charged his muscles to obey. He was more than half certain the Beast meant to grind the lenses to grit between his long fingers as some dark torment.

For a heartbeat he refused to accept the inconceivable lack below his left elbow. Then shock made his ears pop. Understanding tumbled over into horror.

"Left-handed? That's a shame." The Beast set the spectacles on the coverlet with a gentle pat. "Still overjoyed to be in the land of the living?"

"My hand!" Anguish threatened to clog David's throat. "*My arm!*"

"David."

Corbin reached out but David twisted away. "Don't touch me." He hunched protectively over the bandaged stump, head bowed, teeth clenched against sudden, bitter tears.

*I've failed. White Hill is lost.*

"David," Corbin said again, and then added, speaking rapidly: "It was necessary to save your life. It wasn't venom, or poison, but an infection, a disease. A demonic disease. The Beast was able to burn the...germs...out of you, but there was too much damage already done."

*Affrodille will be heartbroken. And Micah, and Tarwet, and Rolo. Where will they go now?*

"David? Are you listening? It was your arm or your life, and I promised I wouldn't let you die."

"Give him a moment to mourn the loss, Red. But no longer than a

moment, do you hear me, David Chevalier? You owe me an explanation and patience is not my fort . You've dared smuggle the Vatican's filthy propaganda under my roof and I demand satisfaction, one way or the other."

*Sir Thomas must be rolling in his grave.*

"Stand down, Beast."

Corbin made the mistake of laying a palm on David's head. David lashed out with the same cold savagery he'd used in the wildwood against the dwarf, though this time it was Corbin he pummeled with his remaining hand, oblivious to pain.

"Get out!" he shouted, vibrating between wretchedness and rage. He buried his face in his knees. "Get out get out get out!"

SOMETIME LATER THE DOOR OPENED AND SHUT SOFTLY, USHERING into the room the scent of spring rain and hyacinths.

"I waited as long as I could, but the herbs need tending," said Nell. "It's time to recharge the stones. And you could do with another dose of tea."

Fumbling one-handed for his spectacles, David lifted his aching head. He felt wrung out by weeping, dry as old parchment, unable to summon another tear.

"I can still feel it. My arm. My hand. Even as I see the bandages, know that it's gone, I can still feel it. It cramps and throbs like the wound is still festering."

"It takes people that way sometimes, at first." Nell crossed the room, Cat padding at her heels. There were twigs in her short hair and mud on the knees of her trousers. She took two handfuls of herbs from a pouch on her belt and dropped them into a silver bowl on a table by one of the room's broken windows. "And sometimes for a long time after. I once knew a man who survived a rogue troll in Calais. Lost both legs and still tried to get up out of his chair and dance when he was in his cups."

"I'm well aware of the affliction!" David snapped, swiveling on the mattress to glare as she lit the herbs with the flame of a nearby taper.

"And I don't want any tea." Though his mouth was as parched as the rest of him. "I just want to be left alone."

"Aye, you made that obvious. My da used to say that physickers are the worst patients. Though he was talking about my mum, and she had a prickly nature in the best of times." Instead of pouring out more tea Nell picked up *Theatrum Chemicum* from where it lay abandoned on the floor. "Though I'll admit I'd pay good coin to learn how you chased the Littleton Fiend from your room."

"Be careful with that. Keep it away from the candles. It's costly beyond measure."

"Hmm." Nell brought the book with her to David's side. She perched on the edge of the mattress, oblivious to the mud her trousers left on blue silk. Cat jumped up beside her, landing lightly, and awarded David a lopsided wink. "So is friendship. I hope you're not willing to let a rare one go up in flames."

The pungent smoke in the room did nothing to ease the ache behind David's eyes. He could feel pain expanding as the charge in Nell's stones waned, an encroaching army threatening conquest.

Nell said, "It was Corbin who took off your hand. I'm telling you so he doesn't have to. He's suffering over it."

"He has the required strength for the surgery," David agreed bitterly. It stung to hear his suspicion confirmed.

"And you think our demonic host doesn't? Nay, Corbin took on the burden because he'd made you a promise and knew the consequences would be hard."

"Made me a promise?" David recognized the animosity in his tone and didn't care. "Surely you've noticed by now Corbin's life is all about making promises. To his abusive father, to his spoilt sisters. To Sir Thomas who needed another White Hill hero to hold over court. And finally, of all the people in the world, to the monster *I* trained him to kill. Corbin needs to stop making promises. They never turn out well for anyone involved."

Instead of agreeing, Nell studied *Theatrum Chemicum's* cover. "This is what you've been guarding like a hen with one egg?"

"That and the phial that goes with it." Moving cautiously, David lay



back on mounded pillows, groaning when pain sang through his arm. Nell didn't offer to help. "Useless now, both of them."

"Why useless?" Nell opened the book and squinted at the first page.

"It's a spell book. An alchemic grimoire. Full of a few very rare, very powerful incantations."

"And?"

David scowled up at the ceiling. It was painted the color of the Seine just after sunset, a lapis blue so beautiful it surprised more tears from a well gone dry.

"To be of any use, an alchemic grimoire requires an alchemist. A grimoire such as that one requires not just an alchemist, but a highly skilled practitioner of the art. How many accomplished alchemists do you know?"

"Just you, I'm thinking. And that only because Corbin says you're the best chemist in all of Normandy."

"Not anymore." Gritting his teeth, David held up his diminished arm, framing the bandages against lapis blue. "Not ever again."

HE LET NELL RECHARGE HER BLACK STONES AND DOSE HIM WITH opium in willow bark tea, if only so she'd leave him alone. He wouldn't let her help him with the chamber pot, though she offered, and his bladder was near to bursting with tea. The lack of his hand made crawling out from beneath bedding awkward. His body seemed to have lost its sense of balance and the Beast's potion didn't help. Cat watched his progress with interest from atop a mountain of pillows. When David swung his legs over the edge of the mattress his head swam. He was grateful for the simplicity of the thin nightshift and the absence of underclothes beneath; if he'd been left in trousers, he thought he would have pissed himself in the time it took undo the laces with his right hand.

*Reduced to infancy in a single stroke*, he thought bitterly.

The smoldering herbs in their shallow bowl made him sneeze. Muffled agony stabbed through the hand he could clearly see wasn't there. Hating Nell for her interference, hating Corbin for his loyalty,

but most of all hating himself, David padded unsteadily across the room, snatched the silver bowl by the rim and overturned its contents out the nearest broken window onto the hedges below.

It was a petty revenge, but gratifying.

"Don't you judge," he warned Cat as he stiffly poured the remnants of tea out over the casement. The fresh afternoon air through the shattered panes was a welcome change to the smell of sickroom. Nell wasn't wrong. The few times in the past he'd found himself playing the role of patient instead of healer, he'd been terrible, driving Sir Thomas to fits of swearing.

"While I'm exceedingly surprised and grudgingly impressed to see you've a spine after all, David Chevalier, if you toss that laudanum down onto the boxwood, we'll have more of a problem than we already do. I didn't suffer through countless recitations of *Kubla Khan* only to watch you lose my nepenthe prize in a fit of temper."

A demon is a naturally furtive creature. A demon practicing stealth is capable of startling even the canniest of felines. From his nest on the cushions Cat bristled and spat. David, though inclined do the same, managed to retain a semblance of calm.

"Kubla Khan? I'm beginning to think you delight in speaking nonsense for the single purpose of confounding your audience. How does Corbin stand it?"

"Corbin asks questions," the Littleton Fiend replied, laying out a miniature feast of fruit, cheese, and pastries on the table David had just cleared of Nell's medicines. "It's one of the things I most admire about him. He's not too proud to confess ignorance."

"And where is Corbin now?"

The Beast's eyes glittered. David had the distinct impression the devil knew he regretted sending Corbin away.

"In the wildwood. Hunting venison for our supper. My larders are fully stocked, mind you. But it's a habit he falls back on when he needs to clear his head. More often than not he comes back with less venison and more bruises. My forest is a dangerous place, especially when one is looking for trouble."

The Beast swept low, executing an elegant half-bow, the tails of his velvet coat fluttering. "Sit, eat. The rolls are freshly baked, the cheese

from Littleton. You need sustenance for strength, as I understand time is of the essence and you'll be leaving here very soon."

Each important thing David knew about demons he'd learned in White Hill's library. The list was very short—books on demonology were hard to come by, even for a well-connected man like Sir Thomas—but topmost on the index was emotion.

Whether it was because they were without true sentiment of their own and longed for even the tiniest modicum of passion, or because human emotions were brighter, vivid, *tastier*, the lore agreed on one thing: from Lilith's lesser children like the incubus to their much more powerful cousins, the winged *shedim*, every devil hungered for humanity's excess of feeling.

The Littleton Fiend, bound as he was by a curse to a capricious dwelling, could not be the most powerful of his kind. But neither was he a minor demon. By all accounts Littleton's devil was very old, and very eccentric, and very, *very* dangerous.

*It doesn't matter*, David thought as he matched the monster's genial smile with one of his own. *It doesn't matter that you want to tear me into pieces and make my skull into your stewpot. You won't dare. Because I have what you desire most.*

He took the chair the Beast offered, resting his bandaged arm carefully against his ribs, and looked out over breakfast. The rolls steamed enticingly. Rare oranges and stewed strawberries were prettily arranged next to a thick wedge of cheese.

"You won't feel hungry. Trauma confuses the stomach, as does laudanum." The Beast leaned against the wall, arms crossed. The disguise he'd chosen to cloak his true form was as different from the fanged, wolfish monstrosity depicted in book and portrait as any David could imagine. A small, dapper young man dressed in breeches and a clean white shirt beneath dusty velvet, his wide smile showed only white, even teeth. His fingernails were clipped tidily short.

Vanity? Or straightforward subterfuge?

"My fire bolsters you still," the devil added. "But you'll need all your strength for the task ahead."

"Task?" David reached for a roll, remembering just in time to use his right hand.

He took a tentative bite and was rewarded with the taste of butter and rare cinnamon. Delight stirred his reluctant stomach. Whether it was the opium or the Beast's obviously talented cook, the bread, the cheese, and even the stewed strawberries exactly sated a hollowness he hadn't noticed. Concluding the Beast was unlikely to eviscerate him quite yet, David contented himself with eating. He did so slowly so as not to spill a crumb.

When the platter was empty and his stomach full, David looked up and caught his host eying *Theatrum Chemicum* where it lay on the bed.

"My compliments to your cook." He wondered if the devil had stolen away some unlucky chef from court. "He rivals even Monsieur Taillevent."

The Beast wrinkled his nose in disgust. "That one wouldn't recognize *true* haute cuisine if it fell out of the sky onto his head, damn his soul. Everyone knows his recipes are filched from better kitchens. He adds dye to his fish sauce, by God!"

Eccentric and dangerous—so far, the lore appeared to be spot on. David adjusted his spectacles and rose from the table, moving cautiously not just for the sake of his arm but so as not to further prick the demon's temper.

"That task you mentioned." He followed the Beast's stare again to the book on the mattress. "You're quite right. I do owe you an explanation."

"Yes! No. That is, not quite yet. Corbin says you were raving in your sleep, asking after your cohorts on White Hill."

"Affrodille." He dreaded speaking to her but at the same time knew she must be growing concerned. "I need to contact Le Château before she does something foolhardy."

"I can help you make contact," the Beast offered. "As for fools—" He cast a last glance *Theatrum Chemicum's* way. "You'll soon find I don't tolerate them."

"CHRIST ON THE BLOODY CROSS, DAVID!" IN THE BEAST'S MIRROR Affrodille waved her arms in the air, miming exasperation. "You said two days. It's been twice that! Berry's been dispatching runners almost

hourly since yesterday. I was just about to send Tawet down the highway to see if you'd been set upon by bandits."

"I'm sorry. I was held up. Not by bandits," he added hastily, mortified. "I can handle myself against bandits, Affrodille."

"Of course you can. I know you can. It's only that we were worried. And Paris is worried. The wedding's been postponed too long. Berry writes that his majesty's nerves are fraying and, David, I'm afraid that's not the worst of it."

Affrodille paced back and forth, David's tower room shifting in and out of focus behind her. The Beast's magic mirror was the most remarkable thing in an otherwise decrepit bedchamber. Large and square, it took up most of one wall. The Beast had roused it with enviable ease, murmuring a flippant nonsensical incantation before moving out of line of sight.

The devil wasn't the only one keeping secrets. As the fog in the glass cleared, revealing Affrodille—slightly distorted through Sir Thomas' old crystal ball—David had adjusted the blanket over his shoulders, subtly checking to make sure the folds still hid his shortened arm from view.

"Tell me the worst of it."

"You were right about Aureate. He's definitely not human. It took us through the night, but Micah found him in the book. Aureate's got an entire five pages, can you believe it? And I have the feeling our scholars found him excessively disturbing. You should see the sketches in the margins. Plenty of tooth and claw and human disembowelment. Very gory, very nasty."

In the face of Affrodille's visible anxiety, David's own distress diminished. Lore was his specialty, analysis a comfort.

"Don't let it frighten you. It's a stylistic choice, exaggeration. The Littleton Fiend looks nothing at all like his portraiture, and he's yet to spit any poisonous vapors out of his mouth."

In the corner of the room the Beast examined his fingernails with rapt attention while in the mirror Affrodille couldn't decide whether to laugh or scowl.

"I suppose you're right. After all, you're standing there hale and

heartily, and I thought for sure *he'd* have you for supper rather than let you speak to Corbin. What's he like, then? And how's our lad?"

"*He's* shorter than I expected." David carefully did not look the Beast's way. "Corbin's changed very little." Stubborn, beautiful, dutiful to the point of negligence. "It's Aureate we should be concerned with."

Affrodille grimaced. "Aye. He's not called Aureate, of course, but the description's close enough that I'd lay coin he's one and the same. 'The scent of jasmine flowers followed him where he went but failed to hide completely the brimstone on his breath' and this devil definitely has a penchant for abduction. In Germania, mostly. According to the book, he would charm his way into a tribe's good graces—spinning straw or fleece into gold—and later run away with the lady of his choice. And, David, it's not the demon our mysterious scholars believe did the hacking and disemboweling. It's the tribesmen, fighting each other like mindless animals over enchanted gold."

Which explained Affrodille's disquiet. She led a life of discipline, every waking moment distilled to study or practice, every decision made deliberate. She hated losing control, hated being surprised, and most of all, David knew from hard experience, she hated being powerless.

"Whatever magic he has that turns men into covetous brutes, we'll be ready." It was the most blatant of falsehoods, and yet it tripped off his tongue with a nonchalance that made him feel like a practiced liar. David barreled on, "So long as we have his true name, that is. Tell me in this, at least, we're lucky."

From his corner the Beast murmured, "Rumpelstilzchen, and damned if he won't pay for this breach of contract." David resisted casting a glance his way.

"Rumpelstilzchen," Affrodille confirmed. "We *are* lucky. He's one of the few whose true name the scholars tracked down. And according to the book, he's been compelled by it before. With his true name, it shouldn't be too difficult to separate him from Isabeau. Separating him from his head may be harder. I hope Corbin hasn't lost his proficiency with a blade."

*I can assure you he hasn't*, David thought bitterly but said only, "He's

yet to be convinced, I'm afraid. You know he has reason to resent Charles."

Affrodille's frown distorted as she leaned in close, almost pressing her nose against the surface of Sir Thomas' crystal ball. "We don't have time for past grievances. Remind him it's the girl we're saving. Pleasing Charles and his court is secondary. If he's still not convinced, I'll show him the bloody etchings in Rumpelstilzchen's chapter. I promise you, this devil leaves carnage wherever he goes. He needs to be ended."

Ten

*LILITH'S CHILDREN HAVE NEVER BEEN KIND TO ONE ANOTHER. BACK when afreet walked the world in greater numbers, it was a question of sustenance. Mankind was not yet plentiful. We battled viciously over the small human herds that ranged the land; even as they learned the concept of territory and ownership, so did we.*

*Centuries unspooled and the world changed. Humankind flourished even as Lilitb's children became near to extinct. The afreet are an antiquated people, averse to evolution and unwilling to come together even in the face of incipient genocide. On the rare occasions we cross paths, we will continue to duel each other to the death over the smallest piece of land. Not because we fear starvation—there is now an over-abundance of prey on every continent—but because we don't know how to change.*

"RUMPELSTILZCHEN?" CORBIN ASKED DAVID THROUGH A HASTY mouthful of meat and cheese. He swallowed, brushed crumbs from his lips, and then continued more clearly, "I remember him. I recall every



devil recorded in that book—Thomas wouldn't rest until I had them each memorized—but Rumpelstilzchen stuck in my head. Peculiar name, not at all like any of the others listed."

"Not the name he was born too," agreed the Littleton Fiend. "But the name of his heart. Some cleave to their birth name. Others adopt a sobriquet more authentic to their self-regard."

"And you?" asked Nell. "Do you cleave to your birth name or have you chosen a sobriquet?"

The Beast smirked. "You'll have to be far cleverer than that. Even as-Saffah and his sons could not ferret out my name, and I promise you they were more persuasive than you would like to know." To David he said, "The book King Edward gave to Thomas Chevalier belongs to the Abbasids. It should never have left their collection."

They were all four ensconced in the manor library, a cozy space lit by a roaring fire in a sizeable hearth and by several tapers in tarnished silver candlesticks set alone or in groups on the floor. Corbin and Nell stood together in front of the fire, warming themselves against the blaze. Both had been away until well after sunset, Nell in the manor garden and Corbin in the more dangerous wildwood.

The Beast sat cross-legged on one end of the room's lone piece of furniture, a large sofa, ripped and stained in places. David slouched at the other end. The sofa, despite its age and hard use, was very comfortable.

Even the blazing hearth couldn't warm the chill between David and the Beast.

"As far as I'm concerned the book was King Edward's to give," David replied tartly. "I have no interest in returning it to Baghdad because you say otherwise."

A flicker of grudging respect crossed the demon's face before he quickly smoothed it away.

"And I have no interest in chasing after this Rumpelstilzchen." Corbin wiped more crumbs from his mouth with the back of his hand. He'd returned from the wildwood covered in mud and nettle rash, looking near as hard-worn as the manor's furniture. The Beast's solution to Corbin's bad mood had been a late supper served in the library alongside a reluctant council of war.

"I'm sorry for the lass," Corbin added, catching David's stare. A red stain crept up along his throat to his hairline. "I know I said I'd help. And it's not because I have no love for Charles that I'm refusing you now. If what Affrodille says is true...well, even with my glaive I doubt I'm much use against that sort of magic."

"Demonic compulsion," the Beast volunteered. "Similar to a glamour, but far more powerful. Rumpelstilzchen's magic is ten times that of, say, a hard-up incubus"—David suppressed a wince—"but essentially, it's the same thing. The archangel's rune on Corbin's necklace might provide him some brief protection but I wouldn't bet any part of my treasure on it holding out against an afreet of Rumpelstilzchen's age and stature."

"David would not send Corbin into a fight he cannot win," protested Nell. David was grateful for her confidence. "Nor would he waste time riding all this way on a hope and a whistle. He must have a workable plan."

"And it involves one of Alfred's damnable spells," the Beast agreed sweetly. He stretched one arm along the back of the sofa. Candlelight glinted on pointed teeth when he smiled. "I can't wait to hear it."

Wind shook the manor walls, or maybe it was the building itself shifting, rearranging its bones in the night. There were no windows in the library, no broken panes to let in spring rain or winter snow. The walls were lined floor to ceiling with shelves, the shelves filled to bursting with books and scrolls. Any other time David would have happily lost days perusing what he knew must be an impressive collection. Now the shelves seemed to press into the library, sucking up air and light, taking up too much room. The room seemed stuffy, making it hard to breath.

"Did the walls just move?" He lurched up out of the sofa, listing a little to one side until Corbin swooped under his right arm, propping him upright. "I saw the walls move."

"God's balls!" the Beast spat, rising as well. "I do not care if the manor pulls up her skirts and does the Egg Dance. You owe me an explanation and I will have it now."

"His fever is climbing again." Nell stood between David and Corbin and the Beast. She was not so foolish as to draw blade on the

devil, but her lifted chin brooked no argument. "You will have to wait."

The Beast snarled and took a threatening step forward. Nell clenched her fists at her side.

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" she ordered. David envied her steadiness. "Thou are an offense unto the Lord my God."

The Littleton Fiend gave a baleful cry. His shadow stretched long and wide, snuffing the candles when it touched them, sending orange sparks into the air. It loomed, black smoke gathering between their heads and the library ceiling. A second howl, and the Beast disappeared in blast of blue fire up the chimney, smothering the natural flame on the hearth, leaving them alone in the dark with the lingering stink of brimstone.

"Must you encourage his dramatics?" David was aghast to hear the quiver of laughter in Corbin's voice. "Besides, God holds no sway in this house."

"IF GOD HAS NO POWER IN THE MANOR, WHY ARE YOU SO frightened of Brother Alfred?"

Late night turned the world outside black. David lay on his right side to better watch the rain blow through broken windows and into the room where it ran down the walls and gathered in a large puddle in the lowest corner of the room. Wind shook blue-green tapestries, continuously snuffing the handful of candles set around the room for light.

The storm smelled deliciously of spring. David would have reveled in it if not for the fact that fever trapped him again in bed and every minute wasted meant Isabeau was closer to death. Or worse. Because David was beginning to understand that demons, much like cats, enjoyed the hunt-and-play even more than they did the kill.

"I'm hardly frightened of the man. He's dead, after all. It's his work I find vile. And, obviously, his leanings."

"His leanings?"

Every time the wind snuffed a candle the Beast rekindled it with a snap of his long fingers. Neither the storm nor the devil seemed

inclined surrender the battle, which meant David had the dubious privilege of watching the Beast pretend he wasn't becoming irritated with the game.

"Decidedly anti-demon." The storm snuffed three candles by throwing rain at them. The Beast snapped his fingers and the wicks rekindled, smoking angrily. Corbin, asleep in a chair set as far from the windows as possible, muttered but did not wake. His legs were stretched long, his boot heels threatened by the growing lake on the bedroom floor.

"Alfred spent his life warring against my kind. You can't think I'd welcome his body of work in my house. Do you know how many of my family he eliminated? Thanks to Brother Alfred, we're a much rarer people than we once were."

The candles guttered and went out. In the pitch black, Corbin began to snore. When the candles came up again the Beast's cheeks were flushed with temper.

Fever or laudanum made David laugh. "Even you cannot think to defeat the wind."

Sighing, Beast snatched up a candle, shielding it with the palm of his hand, and squatted to examine David more closely. "Your fever is very high again."

So near the Beast's face was a work of raw beauty, too perfectly symmetrical to be human. He smelled of rain on grass and candlewax, and hardly at all of brimstone. Sparks flashed in his eyes.

"I'd hoped my fire in your blood would be enough to keep back infection. But Nell tells me that's not the case."

"Even her willow bark tea seems to have lost its efficacy," David agreed with more relish than the situation deserved. Though he was grateful for Nell's knowledge, he did not miss either her tea or her smoldering herbs. "She says in the morning she'll go looking for yarrow."

"This will work much better." The Beast extended one hand. Two small tablets rested on his palm. "Penicillin."

Intrigued, David propped himself on his right elbow to better see. "I don't know it."

"Of course you don't. You're not wrong; the wind, and the time, are

ceaseless foes until one learns how to evade their attention. Penicillin won't be used in medicine for a hundred years hence. Trust me when I say 14<sup>th</sup> century sepsis is fangless against it. We'll have you cured in no time."

"One hundred years." David knew he must look as star-struck as a callow youth but he didn't care. Time shifting was almost as stimulating as live fairies. "It's true, then?"

"That the manor slips through time like a fish through water? Yes. As far as I can tell it's tethered only to the wildwood, and the wildwood is ageless. I've had a procession of interesting visitors throughout my confinement. Most come seeking my treasure, a few come seeking my head on a pike. Fewer still come in search of companionship, or a bargain struck. The latter are most inclined to share with me fragments of life outside my prison."

"A cure for sepsis," David mused, eyeing the tablets.

"Among other things. Don't be shy. If I meant to kill you now, I wouldn't have saved you earlier."

The Beast helped David sit up. He was gentle, economical of movement but compassionate in his touch. David accepted the tablets, chasing them down with a swallow of damnable willow bark tea. When he was finished the devil tucked him back under blue silk, taking care not to jar his arm.

"They're likely to make you queasy. Try to keep them down. I haven't a large supply and I hate to waste it." The Beast turned his back. "Also, let's keep this little nighttime visit between ourselves, shall we? Nell would only fuss and ask impertinent questions, and Corbin prefers to keep his bias against me intact. Cold-hearted, self-obsessed, terrifying. Family nemesis. You know the spiel."

David glanced at Corbin, snoring blissfully in the candle light, unruffled by the rain pattering against broken glass or the monster in the room. Nothing he had seen since he'd arrived in Littleton suggested Corbin—or for that matter Nell—found the forest fiend as terrifying as they should.

David, selfishly, could not help but resent his friend's untroubled sleep. After everything, what right did Corbin have to rest so peacefully?

"Thank you," he managed at last. "Your kindness is appreciated."

"Keep that kindness in mind when you're well enough to cast against me whatever abominable spell you've found in Albert's book. I have saved your life twice, now. Don't make me suffer for it." The Beast turned on his heel and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Embarrassingly long moments later David realized that, although the storm continued to rage outside the manor, the candles burned unmolested, and the angry rain had ceased dashing itself through the shattered bedroom windows.

"YOU LOOK MUCH BETTER," CORBIN TOLD DAVID WHEN THEY reconvened in the library with the dawn. "How did you sleep?"

"Not as well as you." But David relented, "The fever is gone for good I think." He could not be certain how he knew—a phsyicker's second sense, or mayhap the self-satisfied gleam lurking in the Beast's smile.

"Wonderful!" drawled the devil from the sofa. "Why, I imagine you'll be fit to ride out tomorrow, if not sooner! All is not yet lost. Granted, it is difficult to get audience with the Doge these days, and travel between Ouireham and La Serenissima is chancy in the spring..." He shrugged. "I'm sure the princess will soon be rescued, assuming Rumpelstilzchen hasn't tired of her already."

"Ride out?" exclaimed Nell, glancing up from another sumptuous banquet arranged this time on a long table against a wall that last night had been taken up with bookshelves. "The man's been attacked by a demon, had his arm sawed off, and is barely out of bed before he's struck down with fever, again. Rescuing princesses is out of the question."

"The fever's gone," David said firmly. "What do you mean, an audience with the Doge?"

"A messenger arrived very early this morning." The Beast licked strawberry compote from his fingers while Cat, perched just out of reach on the back of the sofa, watched with greedy interest. "Young fellow, sailor's tattoo on the back of his hand. Very quiet, very deter-

mined. Refused to run, even when I set my wolves on him. The message is there, near the croissant."

"Tawet!" Why Affrodille had sent word by rider instead of through the mirror, David couldn't guess. The lad must have ridden through the night and, even worse, braved the wildwood before sunrise. "Is he here?"

"My home is not an inn for wayward travelers." The Beast watched Corbin as he plucked a slip of parchment from the table. "Once the message was delivered, my wolves escorted him back to Littleton. Oh, don't look like that. They barely nipped his heels."

Swallowing back outrage, David joined Corbin by the fire where the light was better for reading. "I believe that's meant for me."

Corbin flinched guiltily. "Aye."

David scanned the message, squinting to better make out Affrodille's cramped writing. "Micah thinks she's tracked Monsieur Aureate to Italy. To Venice, more specifically, where he's apparently joined the Doge's household."

"Any sign of the lass?" Nell tossed Cat a corner of bread. He snatched it out of the air before leaping from the sofa and taking the treat to a safe corner of the room where he consumed it in growls and snarls, tail twitching.

David shook his head. "Micah's got as knack for tracking spells. She used a few personal items collected and sent down from Aureate and Isabeau's rooms. Aureate was easily traced to the Doge's palace. But there was nothing of Isabeau in the ether. Affrodille writes that they will keep trying."

"The girl's dead," proclaimed the Beast. "Tell Charles he needs to go in search of a new bride."

"Or hidden," Corbin volunteered. "If Aureate's chosen her as his latest consort, he'll have her well warded, protected from both harm and rescue."

David cleared his throat. "According to Affrodille, his majesty is encouraged by this hopeful news. He's managed to put the wedding off for another fortnight, none the wiser. Don't ask me how. Berry had a hand in it, no doubt."

"A fortnight?" Corbin scooped an apple from the breakfast

arrangement, took a thoughtful bite. "That's not enough time. It takes at least two weeks to cross from Ouistreham to Venice, and that's in clear weather."

"I have a simple wind spell—" David began eagerly before remembering that he no longer had the means to work weather magic or, for that matter, any magic at all. His heart leapt against his ribs, panic giving it wings, and before he realized what he was doing he'd crushed Affrodille's message in his one remaining hand.

"Part of your 'workable plan', is it?" the Beast challenged. "You may have a wind spell to fill the sails, but do you have a ship?"

"A ship's easy enough to hire." Corbin wrapped an arm around David's slumped shoulders, steered him gently to the sofa. "Sit down. You've gone pale. Don't worry. This is good news. You know where Aureate is. Now all you have to do is stop him before he influences all of Venice."

David sighed. "Even Sir Thomas might have thought twice before accepting this assignment." But Sir Thomas hadn't had White Hill's reputation to save. "It's a daunting task, but for poor Isabeau's sake alone I was willing to take the risk."

"Willing to let Corbin take the risk," corrected the Littleton Fiend coldly.

"No." He couldn't put it off any longer. David knew the Beast would have his explanation now or have his bones with the strawberry compote. "Corbin was part of my strategy, certainly. He has the demon-killing glaive, and of all of France he's best trained to use it." Corbin, modest as always, made a noise of dissension. David ignored him. "But I'd hardly send him into danger alone."

"Of course," retorted the Beast. "You'd be there as well. And I suppose you're proficient in the ways and means of neutralizing a greater afreet?"

"Not at all. Sadly lacking, in truth. *Țou*, on the other hand—" In any other circumstances he would have relished the Beast's look of dawning realization. "Well. I did think the two of you together might be up to the task. Assuming Brother Alfred was, indeed, as versed in demonology as you seem to believe."



"Bloody, bloody Alfred." But the Beast uncoiled from the couch, eyes snapping. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"That Brother Alfred found a rare and complicated incantation for breaking a binding curse, and recorded it in his *Theatricum Chemicum*?" David nodded quick affirmation. "And that just as Corbin is the only swordsman in France skilled enough to use the afreet glaive, I am the only magician on the continent sophisticated enough to cast the spell that breaks the curse?"

"Mother Mary!" Corbin's jaw dropped. "Do you mean..." He hesitated, brow furrowed, looking between David and the Beast, obviously afraid to say the words out loud.

"That I have the means to free the Littleton Fiend from his manor?" David did laugh, then, at the expressions on their faces. Even Nell, who seemed to David generally unflappable, looked stunned. "I do. Or, rather, I did."

Eleven

*AS CORBIN SUSPECTS, THE PENTAGRAM IN THE OUBLIETTE IS A dangerous thing. Not because it is the lock that keeps me bound to this infernal house, but because it is a door left partially open, a window cracked. The bitch did it on purpose, I imagine. It was not enough to doom me to the inevitable madness that comes with too many decades spent alone on a shifting timeline. She just couldn't resist leaving enough room for the occasional surprise visitor to slip through.*

*Before Corbin, I didn't mind the unwelcome guests that breached my home, climbing up from my cellar, usually with violent intent. They provided some distraction, and a chance to practice killing skills gone rusty.*

*While Corbin lived in the manor, I was terrified something we couldn't defend against would materialize in the wine cellar, and I spent more time than was strictly healthy waiting amongst the cheeses, keeping watch.*

"I GATHER WHEN HE'S WELL AND TRULY ANGRY HE DISPENSES WITH smoke and flame."

"When he's upset, he disappears. For a few hours, for a few days." Corbin slanted a brow David's way. "Bit of a disservice, don't you think, dangling hope like that and then snatching it away again?"

It was David's fourth day in the manor. They were sitting together on the steps outside the front door, not shoulder to shoulder as David might have preferred, but with a wedge of shadow between them. Afternoon sunlight sparkled off water droplets flung into the air by the courtyard fountain. The steps were wide and comfortable, tiled over in a mosaic of blue and yellow. David had only seen such tilework in books. He thought the mosaic was a strange and lovely addition to a home that otherwise had little to recommend.

"I didn't think," David admitted. He hadn't realized—not really—the magnitude of what he offered until he'd seen longing soften the Beast's features, and then watched them harden again when he'd taken the gift away. In hindsight, he felt uncomfortably like he'd been the monster in the library, wrenching priceless treasure from an innocent bystander, and not the other way around.

"I thought it was obvious. Without both hands I'm severely hobbled. The likelihood that I'll be able to assemble and cast any spell again is very small. One so powerful as Brother Albert's unbinding? Impossible." He cleared his throat. "Will he be disappointed for very long?"

Corbin looked at David, a half-frown turning down the edges of his mouth. "Will you?"

"I—" Emotion clogged his throat. He cleared it a second time, searching for words. "It will take some getting used to. It's all I ever wanted, since I was very small. To work for the magician on White Hill. And I got what I wanted, albeit crookedly. The old magician was dead, but Sir Thomas kept his legacy and kept it well, and I could help him do that. Even more, I was necessary. And then Sir Thomas died." He met Corbin's blue stare briefly, both of them remembering Laurie and the horror of that day in Le Château's garden. "And then somehow I *was* the magician on the Hill, and now it's all gone to shit."

"That bad, is it?"

David shrugged. "Things have been...dull." Too quiet. Vampires and ghouls gone to ground, dwarves keeping to themselves, trolls

avoiding the cities when they bothered show themselves at all. The supernatural become bashful. "And King Charles has other things on his mind, obviously. The protests in Rouen, in Paris." He picked at the edges of his bandages with his thumb, avoiding Corbin's pity. "Every year we are sent less coin, fewer students. Until we have just the three, now. Tawet, Micah, Rolo. Talented students, but farm stock. They didn't come with a purse of gold to pay their tutelage."

Corbin's laugh held a trace of bitterness. "All that coin Da might have used to buy Beauty and Faith and Hope a place at court, and instead he wasted it on vengeance."

"Be that as it may, White Hill has fallen out of favor. Or it had done, until Aureate ran away with his majesty's intended, and Paris recalled there are things in our world slightly more dangerous than civil unrest." He turned his face toward the fountain, watching lazy breezes fling water droplets into on the hydrangeas. "Berry promised us Charles' favor and full coffers if I delivered the lass safely home, and slayed the gold-spinning devil along the way. A Herculean task, really, but I was desperate enough to try. And I thought, maybe, with your help, and the Beast's...the three of us together might have made it work. I know I'm no good with the sword, or even the bow. But I am a very competent alchemist." Despite the weight on his heart he summoned a smile. "Possibly one day I'd be as talented as old Brother Alfred."

"And I took that from you." Corbin wasn't smiling. "Because *I* didn't think." He tapped his fist on his thigh. "But that's not true, because the Beast knew, and he warned me that you might prefer to be dead than maimed. And I didn't listen, because I wanted you alive." The tapping stilled. Corbin's hands curled to fists. "Can you forgive me?"

David desperately wanted to say he could, wanted to wipe the lines of guilt from his best friend's brow. But he'd never lied to Corbin, and he didn't intend to start now. And while he could certainly understand how Corbin had come to his decision—because what lengths would he, David, go to to save his friend from death? What lengths had he gone to already?—a large part of him wanted to scream, and rail, and spew vitriol until Corbin understood, really understood, what he'd taken.

"In truth," he said slowly, "I don't know."

Corbin's face fell. He nodded once. "And White Hill? Isabeau and Aureate? What will you tell the king?"

"What I told your Beast." More hard truths. "That without both hands I'm useless as an alchemist, and the lass is doomed. And, no, to answer your next question, I will not let you risk yourself to face Aureate, even if without me you could find him, even if the Beast would consent to let you go to your death."

"You think I am to him what Isabeau is to Aureate." Corbin looked genuinely surprised. "You're wrong. The Beast is not my jailer. He wouldn't stop me from riding out."

David knew better than to argue the point. "Even so. Three days ago, you wanted nothing to do this mission. Now you want to rush after Aureate just because you're feeling *guilty*. Your death will not make me whole, Corbin. Far from it. "

They sat in uncomfortable silence, David watching Corbin's face as his friend wrestled with heart and mind. Corbin was no fool. He knew futility when he heard it. For all his skill with the afreet glaive, alone he would be no match for an old demon like Rumpelstilzchen. And though he was reckless, Corbin had never been one to seek out death.

"If it helps, even with both my hands and the Beast as our ally there was no guarantee of success. The more time I've had to think it over, the less certain I am of our victory. Affrodille, I think, will agree. Aureate's tricks frighten her." David bit his lip. "I should speak to her immediately. I haven't yet told her...I mean, she doesn't yet know." He indicated his stump, shrugged. "I wasn't sure how, I suppose. Of all of us that are left, I fear Affrodille will suffer the most when White Hill becomes obsolete."

Corbin grunted, slapped a thigh in resignation, and stood up. "Aye, well, before we go searching for the mirror room, there's something I want to show you. A surprise, so to speak."

"A surprise?" David said doubtfully. Corbin had never been fond of surprises. They had that in common. "What kind of surprise?"

"The rare good kind," Corbin assured him. "Come on. This way. Around the back of the house."

. . .

AROUND THE BACK OF THE HOUSE WAS AN EXTENSIVE GARDEN, SO large David could barely make out its edges where blooming rose, meandering hedges and an army of crumbling statues ran up against stone wall and behind that, the looming wildwood. Corbin led him confidently through a confusion of flowers and scent and thorns, as enigmatic a labyrinth as the one beneath Le Château. They passed a myriad of sheltered alcoves perfect for plotting treachery or romance, a dry pond with the bones of its past occupants still in its belly, a gaily painted gazebo slumping in the sunlight, and a thorny maze guarded by a stern stone gargoyle with wings like a giant bat and a face uglier than any troll's.

Corbin noticed David staring. "Stay away from the maze, if you decide to wander on your own," he cautioned. "We cleared out the dragons, but the Beast thinks a family of basilisks has moved in. The cold weather kept them quiet, but they'll start waking up now it's turning warm again."

David, speechless, could only nod. A single basilisk he could handle, possibly two if he had a nice platter of fresh-killed rabbit to keep them occupied, but an entire family was a very different sort of problem.

"I suppose you could try poisoning the meat with garlic and nightshade," he mused, thinking out loud. "Set the trap and come back later. So as to avoid face to face combat. I understand the species as a whole has a poor sense of smell."

"Better than the Beast's idea of blindfolds and something called a 'blow-torch'. Speaking of traps. This way, here we go. What do you think?"

A small stable was tucked away between elm trees and a towering spruce. Built of limestone and thatch, it was as uncomplicated and as different from the manor's ornate disrepair as any building could be. Inside were two empty box stalls, an immaculate four-wheeled carriage, wall pegs hung with oiled tack, and a collection of shining weaponry displayed on a rack. The interior smelled of linseed oil and leather, and not at all of horse.

"I come here when I need to think," Corbin explained. "Or when I need time away. The manor can be restless, but as far as I can tell this

place is immune to its spell. Nothing here ever changes. It was a bit of a mess when I first found it, but I've cleaned it up."

"It's perfect," David said. He understood Corbin's need for a refuge, a place of his own. David's tower room was born out of the same desire for solitude.

"I think so." Corbin smiled slightly before turning and addressing a square bundle set directly in the middle of what David supposed from the array of neatly ordered tools was a workbench. "But this is what I wanted to show you."

He picked up the bundle and David saw that it was an oblong metal birdcage. Something rustled and muttered inside, plucking at thin bars, hidden by a blanket draped over the frame.

"Cold and dark keeps them mostly quiet," Corbin explained. "Much like the basilisk. But even early in the morning this lot can't resist a sweet treat." He jerked his chin at the afternoon outside. "It'll be livelier in the sunlight."

"It?" But David could guess. *As soon as you're well again I'll find you a fairy.* "Corbin, you didn't!"

"Of course I did." He set the covered cage on the ground away from the shade of the trees. The muttering from within grew to a high-pitched grumbling. "It was easier than I thought, to lure one out. I shouldn't be surprised. The Beast did say his cinnamon pasties are irresistible. Stand back."

He jerked away the blanket, stepping quickly away. David took an incautious step forward, anticipation making his pulse pound. The fairy, exposed to sunlight, looked up from the crumbs of its meal, and directly at David.

It was lovely in the sharp, too-bright way of dangerous things the world over. It filled the birdcage end to end, translucent butterfly wing—shimmering with all the muted colors of the surrounding wildwood—threatening to burst through the gaps in the bars. Its body was softly scaled in green from head to toe, its fore and back legs jointed like a dog's and clawed like a lion's. Its mouth was beaked, its chin gently rounded, and its eyes—all five of them—spun in a malevolent rainbow of colors.

David fell to his knees on the grass.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!" he exclaimed in all sincerity, clumsily adjusting his spectacles for a better look. "It's eyes! I've never glimpsed anything like that except on insects, have you? But clearly it's a vertebrate, I can practically see its skeleton through the scales! See how it watches us! Do you suppose it understands what I'm saying?" He was certain, even as the words spilled out of his mouth, that it did.

"Mother believed so. The women of Littleton leave them offerings and tell them secrets, ask for wishes granted. Mother took a bowl of milk and blood into the forest the night after Faith was born, for thanks and good luck, she said. Da laughed and called her superstitious."

"As I said, they're almost extinct in France." David inched forward in the grass, wishing desperately for pen and paper, a chance to sketch even with only his right hand. The fairy hissed, guarding the remnants of its meal, beak clicking a warning. "The foresters and farmers destroy a nest when they find one. It's put about that they're unlucky, bad for crops, dangerous to cattle. Completely the opposite, of course. The land suffers as more and more of them die off."

The fairy's eyes whirled, accusatory. David thought he caught a whiff of something on the afternoon air, a tendril of promise, an enticing perfume. He leaned in.

Corbin bellowed. "David!"

Too late. The fairy was up against the top of the cage, small hands reaching through the bars, claws snapping in the air, barely missing David's face. He reared back, gasping, as the creature began to shriek its fury, rattling the cage with its feet and wings.

"What," demanded Nell, stepping out of the surrounding trees, a clutch of snared rabbits in hand, "are you two fools doing?"

"It smelled like..." *Knowledge*, David thought. *Old secrets and lost treasure. Enlightenment.*

Nell dropped her rabbits in the grass and marched between David and the cage.

"You didn't learn your lesson with the incubus?" The fairy quieted as Nell bent over the cage. "That's the problem with scholars, isn't it? Think you're prepared just because you've read a few books."



"Oi," Corbin protested, affronted. "I'm a Littleton man. The cage is iron and the lock's stuck tight."

"Jammed," Nell agreed, tugging at the hasp. "What did you do, break off a pin?" She hummed wordlessly down at the fairy as it struggled, a soothing, nonsensical melody.

"There are garden sheers in the stable," David said, climbing to his feet. Now that he realized what Nell must have seen—two grown men tormenting a caged creature—he felt ashamed. "I'll just get them."

"No need," said Nell grimly. She set her fingers just above the cage. A wrinkle of concentration appeared above her nose as her singing dipped to wordless humming. As David watched, incredulous, the metal directly beneath her hands began to glow, turning from orange to yellow to blue as it heated.

"Iron's difficult," she added, grimacing, eyes on the sagging metal. The fairy cowered as far away from the heat as possible. "But not hopelessly so."

She took her hands away, lifted a booted foot, and brought her heel down hard on cage. Metal split, collapsing inward. In another instant the fairy was free, screaming like a hawk as it leapt into the air, wings flapping. It disappeared above the trees, blending with green elm and blue afternoon sky, leaving behind a hole in David's heart.

"The both of you'll be lucky if it hasn't wished ill on your families." Nell fisted her hands on her hips. "The Littleton fae aren't playthings, nor pets, nor something to be stuck in a cage and studied for curiosity's sake." She glanced sideways at the ruined cage. "Saving grace that you thought to offer it a good pasty, I think."

"How did you do that?" David demanded. "Heat the iron to melting?"

Nell scoffed. "I told you. My mum taught me a trick or two. Useful cantrips. Setting things afire can be helpful when the wood's too wet to kindle naturally, or there's winter ice on the Mill Pond when you're wanting fish for stew."

"She sings to the fish," Corbin added helpfully, "sings until they come right up and take the hook. She's got a real knack for it."

With a struggle David pulled his gaze from melted iron. He

thought maybe the fairy wasn't, after all, the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"What else," he asked Nell, ignoring the stubborn jut of her chin, "can you do?"

"YOU DISTRUST MY HERBS AND STONES, POUR OUT MY HEALING TEAS when you think I won't notice." Nell scowled down at the small assortment of alchemical tools laid out on the Beast's sideboard. "But you'll trust me with your ridiculous magical bottles? What happens if I make a mistake and they break?"

"This set has been spelled for traveling. They're difficult to break. Besides which," David added hurriedly, "while your herbs make my head ache, your little stones are remarkably adept at muffling pain. And thanks to your teas my fever is gone." Willow bark tea or the Beast's penicillin, it hardly mattered to David where the credit lay so long as the fever stayed away. "I trust you, Nell. If you'll trust me?"

"Aye." But she crossed her arms defensively in front of her chest. "I suppose."

"This is a cucurbit." David indicated the squat glass pot. "It's used for simmering liquids and powders. When liquids heat, they change form, releasing vapors, usually invisible, that rise up into the air."

"Not just liquids," said Nell. "Or have you never smelled the *vapors* come off a dead fish left too long in on the beach?"

"Solids will cook down into liquids and vapors. Not all vapors have a smell. In fact, some of the most dangerous ones are scentless. Corbin might remember his second alchemic lesson over my tower alembic, a beginner's tincture using a mixture of lead shavings, red primrose, and troll spit. Properly concocted, the tincture was meant to allow one to walk silently under moonlight."

Corbin grimaced. "I couldn't tolerate direct sunlight for a week after."

"Me neither." David smiled fondly. "There was a crack in my cap, you see, Nell. The vapors started escaping into the room instead of collecting as condensation here"—he touched the top of the glass cap,

walked his five remaining fingers down the glass tube—"and dripping down the spout into the receiver as they should have. Unfortunately, the troll spit was not troll spit at all, but vampire perspiration mislabeled. And the escaped vapors had no scent. By the time we realized what was happening, we'd been exposed."

"Thank Christ Sir Thomas never guessed." Corbin grinned. "Or we'd both have been tongue-lashed for not checking our equipment."

"I didn't know you'd had lessons in anything other than swordwork." Nell eyed the pieces of David's travelers' alembic with grudging interest. "Are you saying you learnt potions as well?"

"Thomas insisted I learned whatever I could whilst I was there." Corbin shrugged. "In the hopes that I'd stumble upon another skill that might help in slaying the Littleton Fiend, I imagine. But I never had a talent for potions or spell books."

"But you do," David told Nell. "Cantrips, hedge witchery. It's magic, whatever you like to call it, and it's in you as it is in me, as it was to some extent in Sir Thomas, and very much so in White Hill's old magician before him."

"And so?" Nell hunched her shoulders as if to ward off a blow. "I'm not the only Littleton woman what the wildwood favors. I'm not different than the rest."

Corbin snorted. "Don't be modest, Nell. There's asking a blessing and having it granted because you leave fresh milk and honey beneath the correct tree, and then there's setting fire to iron with the tips of your fingers. The two don't compare. It's nothing to be ashamed of, and your mum should have taught you that too."

"I'll say so now." David wondered how many times she'd been told she was different even as she wished with all her heart she wasn't. "What's in you is precious, and powerful, and something to be proud of so long as you use it for the betterment of others."

"As you do?" Some of the affront had left Nell's face, leaving her dark eyes soft and thoughtful.

David felt a pang. He pushed it angrily away, concentrating instead on Nell.

"As I did. Everyone's different. Alchemy is tied to book learning,

tied to the rituals recorded on old pages and ancient scrolls, the specific way a magician must crook his fingers, for instance, or hold both hands as he recites an incantation over the stove. The more powerful the spell, the more complicated the ritual. The precise number of times he stirs powders into liquids, whether he uses his right or left hand on the mortar and pestle, the way he holds his body, even the number of breaths he takes. Geometry and ritual."

Nell's gaze filled with pity. David stood unmoving before it.

*This is how it will be, from now on*, he thought.

She waved a hand over the traveler's alembic. "You want me to do it instead. Whatever this is?"

"I want to *see* if you can do it. I want to see if I can teach you. If there's any chance, any chance at all, that what the wildwood has blessed you with is enough to make up for the practice you lack."

Nell's brows steepled beneath her dark fringe. "And to do what? Cook a magic potion that frees the Beast from his prison? And why, exactly, would I want to do that even if I could? Trapping an innocent fae isn't enough havoc for one day? Now the both of you want me to release the devil upon France? Has it not occurred to either of you he's imprisoned for good reason? Is the lass' life really worth so much you'd disregard the rest of us?"

"The Beast wouldn't hurt you," Corbin protested.

"Oh, do you think so? I've seen the pile of bones in his ballroom."

"Aureate is a bigger threat to France than the Littleton Fiend," David said. "He's powerful, and as far as I can tell, completely uncontained. Trust me when I say a demon of that aptitude won't be sated on Paris, or Venice. Unstopped, he'll run amok until there's naught left of the continent but smoke and ashes. As for the Beast"—David carefully did not look Corbin's way—"the spell I have in mind can't free him from the manor forever. It won't break his curse. It *will* bend it. For a little while."

Nell didn't seem at all reassured. "If I can make your potions work. If you can teach me."

David nodded without speaking. She would trust him enough to try despite her misgivings, or she wouldn't. Even Corbin kept his

thoughts to himself, expression guarded, though David knew his friend well enough to recognize the tension in his spine.

Corbin wanted Nell to say yes. For David's sake, or the Beast's?

In the end, did it really matter?

"Fine, then," Nell said. "But only because the both of you look like dogs without a bone." She puffed out a breath. "What do we do first?"

Twelve

*THE TROUBLE WITH ALCHEMY IS THAT IT OFTEN GOES WRONG. NEITHER magic nor enchantment, it is the bastard child born of chemistry and sorcery, highly volatile and generally unreliable. Only a handful of magicians were able to make a successful practice of it: Van Helmont, Ge Hong, Paracelsus, Isaac Newton.*

*Though he never let on, Bendit Farissol believed his nephew, David, would be one of the greatest, equal even to Maria Hebraea. And so he might have been, if not for an incubus wandering lost in White Hill's labyrinth—a place where none of Lilith's children had any right to be.*

"WHAT EXACTLY," THE BEAST ASKED CORBIN AS THEY STOOD framed together in the bedroom window and looked down upon David and Nell in the garden, "is it supposed to do?"

"Not that, I think. It's the wind spell again. The one we'll need to hurry the boat."

"Ship," the Beast corrected absently, engrossed in the spectacle below.

To be fair, Corbin was finding it hard to look away himself. It was the sixth morning since David had awoken, alive but forever changed, and the second since Nell had begun her training as journeyman alchemist. It was not going well. Even Corbin, who had failed each of David's attempts to teach him the ways and means of the alembic, had not failed so spectacularly as Nell.

"If it's meant to be a wind spell," the Beast enquired, "why is my garden coming up toads?"

Yesterday had been red-tailed lizards. When, after hours of grinding, mixing, heating and distilling—every second under David's watchful eye and to David's exact specifications—Nell had tentatively tried to summon wind by pouring a vicious purple liquid into a pail of cold water, that pail had boiled over not with wind but with hundreds of very confused lizards. Today, though the potion was decidedly more blue than purple and slightly less vicious, the only wind summoned was that of the rush of another hundred fat, disgruntled, dish-sized toads.

"I don't know," admitted Corbin, while down in the garden David shook his head and adjusted Nell's thumb position. "I never got lizards or toads."

It must be a good sign that Nell was conjuring anything at all, or so he hoped. As it was, they were sorely behind schedule and unless Nell improved dramatically, racing quickly out of options.

"Ah!" The Beast turned suddenly away from the window. "Ignore the toadies in my garden. Come, Red. The delivery I told you about has arrived, and just in time."

He hastened from their chamber, a bounce returned to his step. His blistered feet had healed up rapidly in the way of his kind, and the dark mood that had kept him from Corbin's side for the last two nights appeared to have worked itself out as the Beast's melancholy periods always eventually did. He'd come to Corbin's bed early in the morning, yellow eyes blazing, skin smelling of thunderstorms and smoke, and made his return immediately and thoroughly known.

"Delivery?" Stomping into his boots, Corbin hurried after. Although

his memory was hazy in the way it often was after hours spent as the focus of his lover's mind and body, he was certain the Beast had said nothing about deliveries. "What delivery?" he demanded.

The Beast waved a hand over his head. "I'm sure I must have mentioned it. I know I meant to. Good news! I've found us a ship!"

Corbin took the steps of the grand staircase two at a time in order to catch up. "A ship? *Us*?"

"Have faith, Red. Today it's toads. Tomorrow it's one spell to break my curse and another to conjure wind in our sails all the way to Venice." Throwing open the manor door, he beamed down at the small group gathered in front of the bubbling fountain. "It took some convincing, but our Valentine was more than willing to loan us use of her ship, and of Rolande, so long as we promise not to damage either."

The odd-eyed tradesman displayed his own teeth in a mirthless smile. "I can take care of herself, my lord. The ship is our livelihood. You'll understand if we're hesitant to see her sent into danger."

"Hardly danger, Rolande," the demon replied airily. "Just a jaunt 'round the boot, so to speak. Hello, Valentine. You're looking well. Recently fed, I assume?"

Valentine flashed her dimple Corbin's way. "Aye. We met a nasty little brigand on the way through the wood. People do get so turned around off the paths. He'd been lost for days, poor fellow. Just fell on his knees and begged for our help." Her dimple deepened. "Hello, village boy. It's been a while. Picked me that spring tulip yet?"

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?" CORBIN LOOMED OVER THE BEAST, embarrassment pounding a red tide in his cheeks. "How could you bring them here? Inside the gates, with David and Nell!"

He'd pulled his lover back just out of sight into the manor, and though he doubted the shadows behind the open door provided much in the way of privacy, at least he could pretend not to see Valentine's smug amusement.

"They're dangerous!"

"I hate to break this to you, but so am I. And so are you. And so is Rumpelstilzchen, if it comes to it." The Beast tilted his chin quizzically.



cally. "Rolande and Valentine are in my considerable debt. They have a fast ship and a good captain, and sailors who know how to be discreet. Valentine may look like sex wrapped in leather, but underneath the show she's a keen mind and a practiced businesswoman. She's got contacts in every port. If anyone can get us in to see the Doge, it is she."

Corbin swallowed a rude remark. The Beast, he knew, would not allow Nell or David to come to harm under his roof. Nor would Rolande or Valentine dare challenge the Littleton Fiend's authority. But Valentine never ceased to taunt him as if he were indeed still the village boy, a virgin made uncomfortable in the face of forthright sensuality.

But it wasn't just that. It wasn't that at all.

"She's a monster." Low-voiced and stiff-backed, he pointed out the obvious. "She all but confessed to eating some poor bastard gone off the forest path. And, in case you've forgotten, David's sworn to hunt monsters down. For the safety of the kingdom!"

"If the chevalier is making allowances for me, I suppose he'll be willing to do the same for Valentine." The Beast shrugged. "David does seem quite desperate to get this job done, don't you think? Bending rules and cutting corners. Sacrificing a limb. Why do you suppose that is?"

"It's none of your business, nor mine." Corbin resisted the urge to pull at his hair in frustration. "You really think this is happening! Christ Jésus. You, me, us. Leaving the manor, going on a jaunt, rescuing the lass!"

"Clearing my territory of a rival? I look forward to it." He paused. "Is that why you're so incensed? It's not Valentine at all. You really don't think it will happen. You're worried I'll be disappointed. Oh, Red. That's very sweet." Grabbing Corbin's shirt by the lapels, he stretched up on his toes until he could look Corbin in the face, and his eyes were full of fire. "But a trifle disappointing. Remember who you are, Corbin de Beaumont. Put on this earth to slay demons, and there's one out there *I very much want dead*."

. . .

"A VAMPIRE?" DAVID ECHOED. HE STOOD AT CORBIN'S SIDE, THORNY white rose bushes blooming at their back, and watched as Nell and the Beast helped Valentine and Rolande unload one large chest and a collection of saddlebags from a wagon pulled by a nervous packhorse now hobbled outside the manor gate. "Walking in full sunlight? No, I don't think so. Not human, I'll give you that. But not a vampire. I'm not sure what she is."

Because he was David, he looked intrigued rather than alarmed, mouth slightly ajar, brow furrowed in fascination. As Corbin stared, unable to understand his friend's obvious captivation, David wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue, and suddenly Corbin couldn't look away.

"She's dangerous," Corbin insisted gruffly, transported back to the long, bewildering months spent pining after David on White Hill, before Laurie, in his plainspoken manner, squashed the small hope Corbin had dared nurse that David might return the favor.

*"That one's not for kissing or any of the rest of it. Lads or lasses, doesn't matter, I hear he's rebuffed anyone who dared try..."*

"Dangerous, and strong," he continued hastily, before David caught him staring. "Don't let her appearance fool you. She looks like a lovely lassie but she's a man-eater underneath. Literally."

David said, "I've met her companion before. Just recently, in fact. Though he was dressed quite differently and styled himself a lord and a healer. Rolande. Rolande L'Herboriste."

"He's neither a lord nor a healer, though he does sometimes present himself as such at court, among other things. They're thieves." Corbin glowered in Rolande's direction. "Rolande is Valentine's manservant."

"Don't let Valentine hear you call him that," the Beast cautioned, poking his head around the rose bush. "It's rude. Rolande is a prosperous jack-of-trades in his own right. He's flourished under Valentine's care, made quite a name for himself as a peddler of rare items and a collector of the unusual. Why, you and he, David Chevalier, doubtless have much in common. Let me introduce you."

He led David away. David went willingly, jaw set. He did not like

being lied to, Corbin knew, and if Rolande had pretended to be something he wasn't David wouldn't stand for it.

Which would be, Corbin realized belatedly, exactly the sort of entertainment the Beast enjoyed.

"He's like a kitten in the cream," remarked Valentine, coming to stand at Corbin's shoulder. She'd tied her golden hair back into a severe braid for traveling. He suspected the leather jerkin and salt-stained breeches she wore were chosen to accentuate her curves.

"We don't get many visitors. Tinkers, sometimes. A Huntsmen come to claim the bounty on his head." But he watched the Beast thoughtfully as he leaned in to better hear whatever it was David had said to make Rolande scowl. "I forget he's not solitary by choice."

"I daresay even a temporary freedom will go straight to his head. I'll thank you to keep him out of trouble on my ship. The last thing we need is one mad devil in our midst whilst we hunt a second."

"What makes you think I have any say in the matter?"

"You've got his heartstrings wrapped around your cock, haven't you?" She batted lashes gold as her hair but tipped black as night.

She meant to make him blush and stammer. Corbin thought of the first time he'd met her, of the human heart he'd carried in a box from her cabin to the Beast, and the many similar tributes she'd sent after, and he shivered instead. Not a vampire, after all. Mayhap something worse.

Valentine laughed. "Such indignation. Just because he's more inconspicuous in his feedings doesn't mean he's less *man-eater underneath*. Keep him out of my hair once we sail, Corbin, or all of his treasure won't prevent me from tossing the both of you overboard."

"If not for the Beast I'd have put a sword through you the day I realized what you are," Corbin replied with a casualness that belied his rising temper. "I still might."

"Many older and wiser have tried and failed. Lucky for you, village boy, because I'm your key to the Doge."

"VENICE," VALENTINE EXPLAINED LATER WHEN THEY GATHERED

again as a group in the library where she'd insisted her coffers and saddlebags be carried—"Because the Littleton Fiend wards his books more thoroughly than even his gold."—and where she declared Rolande would make his bed while they were guests in the manor to better guard whatever treasure they contained, "is tricky right about now. And I don't mean just the weather. While outwardly the Council of Ten appears content to adhere to the peace hammered out on Turin, internally there's considerable vexation and a growing lack of trust. Every household suspects another of being in Genoese favor. The Council is often at odds behind closed doors. As for the Doge?" She spread her gloved hands. "I hear the old man is in ill health and not seeing visitors."

"Convenient for your Aureate if he has in truth taken shelter with Isabeau in Morosini's household," supplied Rolande, who sat perched on the largest of Valentine's coffers, Cat in his lap, and sipped from a glass of the Beast's finest Bordeaux.

"He's there now," asserted David. "And probably has been before. It was Doge Morosini's recommendation that secured Aureate a place in Charles' court. Whether Morosini knows or cares what he harbors, I can't say. And Aureate cannot think his majesty will let Isabeau go without pursuit. We'll need to be extremely circumspect."

"Our *Lady Tulip* is built to slide in and out of port without notice when needs must." Rolande smiled. "And Valentine can get you into the palazzo unnoticed. Circumspection is our specialty, as my lord well knows." He tilted his head the Beast's direction.

"Thank you," said David stiffly, apparently having decided to tolerate the tradesman despite his clear dislike.

*David does seem quite desperate to get this job done, don't you think? Why do you suppose that is?*

Corbin caught the Beast's eye from across the room. The Beast lifted his own glass of wine in subtle toast.

"That's settled, then," the Littleton Fiend proclaimed with satisfaction. "You can thank *me* later, David Chevalier, when we're shipboard. Speaking of. I care not whether Charles is wed or dead, but if you intend to meet his deadline and win his approval, time grows dangerously short. A plague of frogs will not put wind in *Lady Tulip's* sails, or free me. Perhaps it's time to send to White Hill for help."

"No need." David stood a little taller, straightening his shoulders, forgetting the protective hunch he'd begun to prefer since he'd lost his arm.

It was the same proud stance he'd taken in front of Sir Thomas whenever he came bearing good news, pride in a puzzle solved. Seeing it, Corbin felt his throat constrict in dismay. He feared this particular puzzle solved meant his world was about to change, and not for the better.

"Don't tell me." The Beast set down his drink with uncharacteristic clumsiness. "Wait. What am I saying? Tell me." He wheeled on Nell who had until then been standing almost forgotten against a dusty bookcase, regarding Rolande and Valentine with disapproval. "Please tell me you've worked it out."

"It was my intention that was off," Nell acknowledged with the same casualness she'd used to explain metal melting beneath her fingertips. "Not my grinding, nor stirring, nor even the way I held my fingers or the words I said over the flame. The wildwood didn't understand my intention, not at first. Why would I want wind for over the sea when everything important is here, in our small corner of the world? And the wildwood's not wrong, aye? Why would I want to leave Littleton proper?"

"Only," said Corbin slowly, realization dawning, "you do?"

Nell tossed him a quick, wide grin. "Aye, I do. While the rest of you were busy arguing over whether it was safe to invite Valentine and Rolande into the manor, David and I were practicing. Before, it was lizards and frogs and snakes because my heart wasn't in it, I was doing the work for David, because David wanted it, with no concern for myself. My intention—mum used to call it the *fairy wish*—well, it had nothing to do with me, did it? Which is why I couldn't get it to come out right. But then David said Littleton is as far south as he'd ever been, that he was missing his books, and his home, that he preferred to read about new places than visit. And I thought, how different David and I are, because I'd like nothing more than to see what the world holds beyond my cottage."

"Nell." The wistfulness in her tone pained Corbin almost as much as the avidity in the Beast's wide smile.

But she shook her head, rushing past his protest. "I do want to see new places, with my own eyes, I always have but before there was the farm to tend, and Jasper. But now Jasper's grown, and he can look after the farm, and what's keeping me here, really? Because I think I might like to see Venice for myself, what with how David says the streets are water instead of dirt, and the houses are built up instead of over, and people from all over the world come there to trade."

"Christ Jésus!" Corbin threw up both hands. "Then go and see the world, Nell. And good luck with it. But don't use Aureate as an excuse. This isn't a pleasant walking tour David's proposing."

She met his eye without flinching. "I know that. But the lass needs our help. David's help. And mine."

He didn't know how he could refuse her, nor was it his choice to make. Nell was a woman grown, fearless, and she'd never appreciated his interference, even when she was a motherless child.

That didn't stop Corbin from trying. "You realize you're throwing yourself headlong into danger. Even without Aureate to contend with, a shipboard journey this time of year—"

"Survivable, I assure you," promised Rolande. "So long as you remember who your captain is. Once we've set sail, your lives are in my hands, and when I say jump you don't ask any questions."

"Never mind that!" the Beast cried, startling Cat from Rolande's lap. He looked between Nell and David, yellow eyes flashing. Corbin thought he might be the only one in the room who recognized the fear beneath the demon's temper. "Did she get the spell to work or not?"

"Show them," David told Nell, satisfaction making his expression deceptively stern.

Pushing off the bookcase, Nell freed a small, capped jar from her trouser pocket. She displayed it on her palm like mummer about to perform a favorite trick. Rolande, Corbin, and even Valentine leaned away. The Beast made the mistake of leaning in.

"Voilà!" Nell exclaimed, and threw the little jar hard against the library floor.

It shattered, scattering pieces of dust and a fine black powder across the worn carpet. Cat sneezed loudly and darted from the room, tail bristling.

Just long enough for Corbin to think the spell had failed, nothing happened. But as the Beast began to shake his head, a sudden blast of air erupted from the floor, making him rear back in surprise. Picking up pieces of broken pottery and specks of powder from the carpet in a narrow, angry whirlwind that reached from floor to ceiling, the blast made pages flap and scrolls flutter on their shelves, and overturned the Beast's abandoned goblet. Rolande cursed as he tried to shield his face from the miniature gale. Valentine clapped her hands.

"Well done!" she cried over the rattle of windswept books. "But can you make it bigger?"

"Not in the library," Corbin said quickly. His eyes stung and his nose itched. The library, like every other room in the manor except the kitchen, was weighted with the dust of ages, now stirred violently into the air. "Nell! Can you make it stop?" He desperately hoped so.

"Would I have started if I couldn't?" With much less fanfare than before, she drew forth a second, seemingly identical jar, balanced it again on her palm, and whistled. The unnatural wind, as obedient to Nell's summons as one of her forest creatures, reversed course, spiraling with disconcerting speed back from every corner of the room and into the small container, shedding dust and powder and crockery at Nell's feet.

When the air in the library was still again, Nell corked the jar and returned it to her pocket.

"It will keep until the powder erodes," David said, shaking his windswept curls back into order. "And that depends on the magician. Nell's strength is as yet untested, so I can't guess for certain how long each compound will last. For safety's sake, we'll have to make several jars' worth." He regarded Valentine, and although Corbin knew he tried to hide his fascination from the rest of the room, David had never been very good at hiding anything from *him*. Corbin could hear enthusiasm in his friend's voice as he added, "To answer your question—yes, it must be much bigger to be of any use shipboard. And I'm fairly certain that we can do that, now that Nell's heart is in the process. Would you like to watch us try?"

. . .

"YOU'RE JEALOUS," THE BEAST SAID TO CORBIN WHEN THEY WERE alone again. "You've only ever known him to be infatuated with you. Now there's a new apple of his eye, and you miss his attention."

"That's not it at all." Corbin bristled. He hated that sometimes the Littleton Fiend seemed to know him better than he did himself. "And, anyway, David isn't like that. His heart is in his studies. His interest in Valentine is scholarly." He exhaled a sigh that felt as blustery as Nell's whirlwind. "Things have changed between us, and I feel the lack. That's it."

"An unfortunate turn of phrase." The Beast paused in plaiting back his dark hair to toss Corbin an unsympathetic wink. "He'll either forgive you or he won't, Red. Mooning won't restore his hand, or his regard."

He secured the braid with a twist of ribbon, let it fall over his shoulder against the velvet of his coat. Then he essayed a courtly bow, sweeping nearly to the floor before extending a hand Corbin's way, dark lashes lowered coyly against the surprise of his yellow stare. Red demon fire kindled suddenly around his hands from wrist to fingertips, lambent, a promise.

"Care to dance?"

They stood alone in the manor's vast ballroom. Ravel played softly on the Beast's rehabilitated phonograph, murmured against the room's gilded walls and rolled back across the glossy dance floor, a river of sound eddying around them. Flickering candlelight made the grisly human skull set atop the large pile of bones that resided always in a far corner seem to blink and smile in appreciation.

Corbin thought he'd rather snarl than waltz, but the Beast's mood of clandestine joy was impossible to ignore. He took his lover's hand, pleasure shivering down his spine as tongues of demon fire jumped between them, caressing Corbin's fingers and wreathing his thumb, setting his nerves alight. The Beast, though shorter by a head, always led. He yanked Corbin close against his chest, crushing velvet, sharp edges and long planes rubbing in all the right places as they began to dance.

It had become a private and precious thing between them, the waltz. Begun as a diversion to please the Beast, now it was a habit, a



midnight joining of bodies and minds, communication begun without words, an experiment in partnership.

Corbin closed his eyes as the Beast spun him across the ballroom floor. His eager cock was already half-hard in anticipation. His body quivered and jerked as a tongue of demon fire found its way along of their linked fingers and down his shirt, trailing gooseflesh in its wake. It felt good. It felt *very* good.

Even better was the promise of things to come.

It was not the first time since they'd accidentally learned of Corbin's receptiveness to demon fire that the Beast had used it to shameless advantage.

"You," Corbin said, body matching the Beast's at every turn. They had danced this dance so many times together that he no longer feared the Beast would lead him astray, "are in a rare mood."

"I can almost taste freedom," confessed the Beast. The curve of his smile was predatory as he waltzed them across marble. "Like Heracles waiting upon Athena's ambrosia, I am inflamed by the mere perfume."

Corbin, ordinarily charmed by the Beast's obscure references, was not in the mood for a parable. The Beast's demon fire was licking a greedy trail around the base of his spine and between his thighs, leaving Corbin completely incapable of caring about anything but the press of the other man against his front. The Beast, hardly oblivious to Corbin's arousal, threw back his head in a delighted laugh, rare humor turning his usually ageless mien surprisingly young.

"Oh, Red, I don't deserve you. And I don't care. Once we're free of this house, I'll have you panting my name beneath the stars every night, and again when the sun rises in the east."

His remarkable elation was as effective as a splash of ice-cold water in Corbin's face.

"Don't let it go to your head," he warned, "not yet. A magical breeze is not an ancient curse broken."

"Ah, but." The Beast heaved a sigh and one hundred tiny tongues of demon fire paused in their ministrations, allowing Corbin a moment of clarity. The Beast by this time was as attuned to Corbin's body as his own, and for all the demon's practiced seduction, he could be chivalrous to the point of tenderness. "It's as close as I've come in centuries,

and I'll admit our somber chevalier has set even my cynical heart alight to hope." He squeezed Corbin's fingers gently as danced past the observant skull on its pile of human bones. "*Twice* beneath the stars, Red, and a third as the sun rises, until you've gone hoarse with begging."

Corbin closed his eyes on a groan. He dipped his chin and buried his nose in the Beast's dark hair, silk strands tickling his mouth. He didn't need demon fire to provoke longing. The scent of his lover worked equally well.

"You're a kitten in cream," he confirmed, feeling the truth of Valentine's dry observation in the pit of his stomach. "Promise me you'll be sensible."

The Littleton Fiend only laughed and stood on his toes to lick into Corbin's mouth. Corbin welcomed the onslaught, opening to the kiss, thrilling to the intrusion as Ravel surged to crescendo.

### Thirteen

*CORBIN'S SWORD WAS FORGED IN SARACEN FIRES FOR THE EXPRESS purpose of killing Lilith's children great and small. It is one of a set of four stolen out of Damascus by Frankish invaders. Three of the blades eventually ended up in the hands of House Valois, who will insist the swords were given to the throne in good faith by a desert prince intent on diplomacy. This is, of course, a lie. Swords so powerful as those three are never willingly relinquished.*

*But Corbin's glaive came to France in a more roundabout manner, on the Lady Tulip, after Valentine and Rolande took it—on my order—from a disreputable pirate king who haunted Spanish waters and had a reputation for keel-hauling more of his crew than he paid. The pirate king wouldn't give up his enchanted blade without a fight, which was fine with Valentine and Rolande.*

*They hauled him around and under the keel a dozen times until there was nothing left of him but gristle and bone, hung his mangled corpse from the topmast, and then saw the fourth Saracen blade safely to Caen.*

"SOME CURSES," VALENTINE TOLD DAVID IN THE DRY TONE HE'D

learned she favored, "are better off unbroken. Has it occurred to you that the sorceress who bound him here had good reason?"

"I thought the same. But David's convinced me otherwise." Nell bit her lip as she frowned down at *Theatrum Chemicum* where it lay open on the floor in the center of an unfinished chalk circle. "We're not breaking the binding, just bending it for a time."

They were standing in one of the manor's many neglected rooms, this one papered floor to ceiling with garish scarlet paper, unfurnished except for a single spindly-legged chair. David and Nell had stumbled upon the room while in search of a remote space in which to attempt Brother Alfred's magic without attracting the Beast's increasingly anxious attention.

Valentine had joined them without invitation. David didn't know how she'd found them, if she'd somehow followed them unnoticed through the manor's winding corridors. What mattered is that she had refused every suggestion, subtle or otherwise, that David and Nell preferred to work alone.

"Bending it?" she asked now, eyeing Medea's Phial. She kept safely outside the chalked circle, her hands folded behind her back. David was pleased to see she knew better than to touch. "Is that so? And for how long a time do you have in mind?"

David was having less trouble reconciling himself to Valentine's continued presence than was strictly correct in a man who had sworn an oath to protect the kingdom from supernatural threat. In truth, he should have attempted to strike her down the moment she'd stepped through the manor gate, or at least insisted Corbin do so, as cutting the head from even the weakest of monsters would be difficult one-handed, and David's kill record wasn't impressive to begin with.

It Corbin hadn't insisted Valentine was supernatural, even David's knowledgeable eye might have missed her tells. She shammed humanity to near perfection, partaking of meat and bread and ale at supper alongside the rest of the manor guests, later nodding off in the library with utter unconcern, stretched out on the Beast's battered sofa. She delighted in tormenting Corbin, laughing uproariously and with what looked like honest pleasure when he blushed at her innuendo.

She played her part almost to perfection. But her coffers were bound in gold, an expensive and impractical choice unless one had a strong aversion to iron, and she never removed her thick leather gloves, even when eating, two foibles that would have made David suspicious even without Corbin's accusation.

Also, David had doctored her glass of Bordeaux with a small dose of holy water when she was distracted by Corbin's blushes. She'd avoided the goblet for the rest of dinner, nostrils flaring in thinly concealed disgust, either at the waste of good wine or at his clumsy attempt to draw her out.

No, she wasn't human. David would bet his spectacles on it. But she wasn't vampire, or ghoul, dwarf, fairy or—obviously—troll. Nor ghoul or lycanthrope. All of those he could recognize without difficulty.

So what was she?

"David!" Nell said, and he realized with a start that it wasn't the first time she had said his name. "Are you listening? Now is hardly the time for woolgathering!"

Blinking rapidly, David shook himself back to attention, embarrassed that he'd been caught out. Nell was right. Valentine was a puzzle to be put aside for another day. "Yes."

"I said," Nell repeated with some exasperation, "that Valentine makes a good point. We don't know how long the spell will last, once the Beast swallows the tincture, assuming it's potent in the first place. And doesn't that make things tricky? What happens to the devil when the casting loses strength and he's stranded away from the manor? Does your little book have any answers?"

"None," David confessed. "I'm not certain Brother Albert knew. The addendum is but a compilation of spells—recipes, if you like." In fact, Albert had left almost nothing of himself in those last pages, few helpful notes in the margin, no descriptive sketches to guide the alchemic practitioner.

Reluctantly, he added: "In fact, I cannot guarantee he ever used this particular spell. I expect Medea's Phial has been buried in White Hill's treasure chambers for a very long time."

Nell and Valentine stared at him with equal expressions of horror.

"You mean you don't know if it will work at all." Valentine shook her head. "It's a very stupid man who makes a bad bargain with the Littleton Fiend."

"Corbin will never forgive us if we mistakenly magic the Beast into a toad," agreed Nell. "Or, worse, send him back from whence he came. Wasn't your monk famous for returning devils to perdition?"

"He was also famous for his exactitude," David replied tartly. "The spell will do as Albert promises. Your reluctance worries me, Nell. If your heart is not in this after all, if you are more concerned with Corbin's feelings than France's safety. Well. Then, I am afraid we are in trouble."

It was unkind, he knew, bordering on cruel. But David had learned from years as both pupil and master that sometimes challenge worked better than encouragement, and he was just desperate enough to choose the stick over the carrot.

Nell set her jaw. "Don't you test me, David Chevalier." She turned again to the half-closed circle. "I said I was ready, and I am."

David frowned at Valentine, indicating the door with a tilt of his head. Valentine crossed her arms on her chest.

"I intend to stay," she stated. "Like it or not, I've a stake in this mischief. I may be of help, if only to put out any fires the two of you start." When she smiled her teeth were blunt as any human's. The Beast had sharper fangs by far. "And good luck throwing me out. I'm stronger than I look."

David didn't doubt it.

"As you like," he conceded. "But I'll put you to work. Nell, close the circle, don't touch the chalk. Valentine, pass Nell that bag there, if you please. Gently!" he scolded when glass against glass sounded a warning bell. The warding spells wrapped around his tools were sufficient protection against the wear and tear of travel, but not outright carelessness. "A cracked alembic will not increase our chances of success."

Inside the circle Nell assembled the alchemical still piece by piece as they'd practiced—cucurbit, receiver and swan-necked glass tube—while David freed Medea's Phial from its protective coffer. Straw and soil clung to the glass bottle, which wouldn't do at all. The smallest

speck of dirt would throw the whole of the distillation off, contaminating the spell. It would need to be thoroughly cleaned.

But the rag tucked in his belt for just that purpose was useless when he had only the one hand at his disposal. He could not hold the delicate phial and wipe it clean at the same time. He froze, a rabbit caught in a wolf's gaze, as grief and rage stared him down, pinning him in place.

He could not even manage this simplest of alchemical rituals. What was he thinking, that he could still be of any use to his majesty at all?

"Here," Valentine said, "you're going about it backwards." Before he could protest, she snapped the square of silk cloth from his belt and spread it neatly on the floor. "Wrap the damn thing up like a babe in swaddling and scrub it one-handed, like so." She snatched the phial from David's stiff fingers then crouched on the floor over the cloth.

"You're not the first lack-handed man I've met," she told him, not unkindly, as she demonstrated, buffing silk against glass. "Nor even the tenth. Sailing is dangerous work. Men lose limbs to the job, it's the way of the sea. A good captain compensates his sailor for the loss, but even the plumpest purse won't keep a man fed for more than a year. Most stay on for the wage, learn to work around the short-coming, and do well." She straightened, passed David the clean phial still wrapped in silk. "You're too afraid of failure. Stop worrying about what you can't do and learn what you can."

Her frank appraisal hit too close to the mark. Chagrin flushed his cheeks. He wanted to howl. *The wound hasn't yet scabbed over! I need more time!* But they didn't have time to spare and besides, he had a horrible suspicion Valentine's observation would have been the same if he'd had both hands. *Too afraid of failure.*

"Thank you," he said instead, and was relieved when the words came cleanly past the strangle in his throat. He turned his back on Valentine's steady regard and addressed Nell instead. "Let us begin."

NELL PROVED AS READY AS SHE CLAIMED, QUICKLY PUTTING DAVID'S remaining doubts to rest as she closed the circle, David's chalk firm in

her left hand, and then lit the flame beneath the alembic with the same spell she used to kindle her cottage hearth. She'd drawn the circle to David's specifications. He'd found her surprisingly apt at freehand for a neophyte. She'd been patient, working without complaint through the hours it took to prepare Brother Albert's recipe—exact quantities of pine sap, barud, bone dust, herbs, brimstone and, of course, the *prima materia*—while reciting from *Theatricum Chemicum* over mortar and pestle. When David made her chalk the circle again and again until she got the dimensions prescribed by Albert exact, she did not complain. He hoped she believed him when he stressed the importance of ritual and geometry in the working, but he knew how difficult it could be to put faith in the unfamiliar. If he'd not experienced them for himself, he would have doubted the potency of her small black stones, and he had seen many unbelievable things since he'd made While Hill his home.

He thought she trusted him because Corbin did. For now, that would have to be enough.

"Do you draw a bloody great circle every time you cook a love philter?" Valentine asked with undisguised skepticism.

"My laboratory is warded." With chalk and salt mixed into the mortar and the bones of forgotten martyrs set into keystones at North, East, South and West. It was no coincidence the old magician had built a circular tower room around his alchemic forge. "This room is not. In fact"—David cast a dubious look around the space—"I very much suspect it is the opposite. This whole house has the feel of too many windows left carelessly open to unfriendly skies. Whatever it is that lurks here with the Littleton Fiend, I don't want it tainting our distillation or, worse, causing Nell any harm."

"Thank you," Nell said dryly from within the circle. "But it's not me who has to drink the potion. Speaking of." She checked the cucurbit. "It's beginning to bubble. Shall I?"

This was the most delicate part. Though David had a clear view of the alembic from where he stood just outside the perimeter of the circle, and could see the gentle rise of air bubbles from the bottom of the flask, he was not close enough to gauge the solvent's readiness either by testing the heat with the back of his fingers or judging the



boil by instinct. But David always knew when the time was right and that, Sir Thomas had promised him, was an innate talent only the most successful of alchemists could claim.

And Nell, though magically inclined, was not an alchemist born. A few days under David's tutelage could hardly provide even a fraction of the experience needed to attempt such a difficult working on her own.

*Your talent with solvents is rarer than the knack of seeing London in a bowl of water; lad, Sir Thomas had insisted. So stop moping over my fish pond and be grateful for the gift God's given you.*

"Not...quite yet," David said. It wasn't a guess, it was a certainty that tingled in the tips of his remaining five fingers and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, a response to the magic brewing in his alembic. He suppressed a shiver as the familiar sensation spread throughout his body. "On my say so. Ready the blood."

The blood—the Littleton Fiend's blood, twelve precise drops mixed into a simple tincture of boiled sugar and then captured in a small glass tube, had not been easily obtained. The Beast, even as he'd exhorted David to work harder and faster, had blanched and backed into a corner of his kitchen when Nell and David had searched him out with sharp knife and collecting tube in hand.

"What?" Nell had demanded, "Surely you're not afraid of a little pinprick? I know you're not frightened of blood. I've seen what you do to men come to claim your head for the Huntsman's bounty!" David could not tell if she was disgusted or impressed.

"I'm not a fool to give away my bodily fluids hither and thither," snapped the Beast, keeping Nell at bay with a large cleaver. "And shame, David Chevalier, for indulging in blood magic."

"It does not make me happy, either," David told him wearily. "But just as the curse must have required your blood, Beast, so does the breaking of it. Albert's treatise is quite clear. I'm afraid you'll have to trust me on this."

The Beast had snarled: "Trust you! I don't even *like* you!" But in the end, he'd been reluctantly swayed, mayhap less reluctantly than he pretended. He'd cursed Nell roundly when she'd cut him, and then watched with badly disguised interest as she squeezed twelve ruby drops from his thumb into sugar water.

The prickle throughout David's body increased abruptly, a frisson across his nerves as much pleasure as pain. He opened eyes he didn't remember closing.

"Now," he said.

Nell tilted the glass tube slowly into the bubbling cucurbit. David was pleased to see her hand was steady. Drop by drop the pink concoction of blood and sugar struck boiling water. David felt each drop, the buzz of one hundred bees vibrating through his bones, a confirmation.

The sensation of this tincture coalescing was stronger than any he'd felt before. Was it the vitality of blood magic that made him quiver so? Or the role of observer outside the circle without physical ritual to distract his mind from his body? Or could it be the Nell's earthy power influencing Albert's recipe?

He didn't care. He welcomed the singing in his nerves as proof that he hadn't lost everything to the bone saw.

When the last trickle of the Beast's blood had been consumed by the cucurbit, Nell set the tube aside. Working quickly, she capped the pot with the glass swan's neck, checking twice to make sure the seal was tight before at last sitting back on her heels and glancing David's way.

"Now we wait." It wasn't a question.

"Now we wait," David agreed. The buzz in his bones had grown to a rather alarming roaring in his ears. He couldn't help but ask, "How do you feel?"

"Like my teeth may shiver right out of my head." Nell grimaced. "Like there are fleas hopping under my skin. It feels *wrong*. I don't know how you stand it."

"Look!" Valentine exclaimed. David had forgotten she was there. "It's beginning to rise!"

"That was quick." Panic showed on Nell's face. "It didn't happen so quickly when we cooked the wind."

"Every process is different." David clenched and unclenched his fist, resisting the urge to step across the chalk. The continuous wave of pleasure-and-pain throughout his body meant Nell had the spell in hand. "Position Medea's Phial beneath the spout. Every drop of elixir caught might mean extra time for the Beast. And remember, Albert

says the closing chant must be repeated out loud as the first drop falls into the phial and until the last of the vapor expires."

Nell nodded. Determination straightened her shoulders. Sitting cross-legged alongside the simmering alembic, she opened the *Theatricum* on her lap and began to read aloud.

"BY GOD!" EXCLAIMED THE BEAST, SITTING ABRUPTLY UP FROM where he reclined on the library sofa, dislodging Corbin who sat at his feet and Cat, who sat on Corbin's lap. "What is that?"

"Brimstone," retorted David. "You must recognize it."

"Not the brimstone."

Leaving the sofa, he took three strides across the room, reaching for the blue bottle Nell clutched in her hands. David stepped quickly between them, blocking the Beast from his prize. They shared a look, yellow eyes meeting brown, and David's over-sensitized body quivered in response.

"Yes, *that*." The Beast's brows rose in inquiry. "What is it?"

"Smells like sex," said Rolande from his position near Valentine's coffers. He bared his teeth at Nell and David in a lascivious smile. "Looks like it, too."

"Not sex." The Beast addressed the phial in Nell's hand. "Titillation. You both reek of it."

"Blood magic is very potent," David said evenly, staring past the top of the Beast's head at Corbin. "It takes people different ways."

"The hedge witch vomited in her circle and the Jew fainted at the end." Valentine confirmed, slipping into the library. "It was all very entertaining. Brother Albert must have had a marvelous sense of humor."

"Are you alright? Did it work?" Corbin rose. Some of the color had left his face. The freckles across his nose and cheeks stood out. David thought they were lovely.

"Only one way to tell." The Beast grabbed again for Medea's Phial. Again, David blocked his reach.

The Beast bared his teeth. It did not escape David's notice that,

did he so desire, the Littleton Fiend could easily knock him out of the way.

*If I meant to kill you now, I wouldn't have saved you earlier.*

He cleared his throat. "Wait, Beast. Once you swallow the tincture, time begins winding down until the original curse is reinstated. Medea's Phial is charmed to prevent any magic from leaching free until the potion is needed. Nell will keep it safe until we're ready to leave the manor."

"And I will keep Nell safe." Valentine smiled at the Beast. "So. Keep your greedy paws to yourself."

"Thank you, but I don't need anyone's protection." Nell slipped the corked phial into a pocket. The grin she shot the Beast was wider and brighter than Valentine's. "You'll have your freedom tomorrow at dawn, not a moment before." She patted the knife on her belt. "Interfere, fiend, and I'll make you a eunuch. Much as I hate to see Corbin weep."

"Indeed." Corbin placed a hand on the Beast's shoulder, propelling him around and away from Nell. "Come, now. Think of Aureate. We'll not be rid of him without your help. A few hours of your freedom wasted may ruin our chances."

David expected more fiery dramatics, but to his relief the Beast allowed himself to be led back to the sofa where he collapsed with all the composure of a sulky child being robbed of a sweet.

"Don't trust him," Valentine warned quietly. "I'd bet my cargo you'll find him in your room tonight, Nell, sniffing and snuffling after that phial."

"Not if I chalk the perimeter first." Nell tossed David a tired wink. "I've learned a useful thing or three since White Hill's chevalier came riding onto my farm."

Spun, Part II, coming from Madison Place Press in 2020.

Read the first part of Corbin and the Beast's adventure [here](#).

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