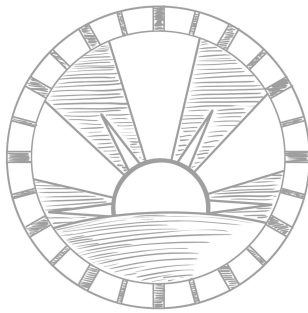


Adventures in Dawnmore *from Forest to Town*



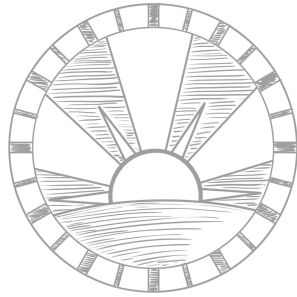
by Lucien S. Beatrice



Table of Contents

I	Grasshoppers in Grenning	6
II	Festival Furor	15
III	Cowherds and Curiosities	23
IV	The Rambler's Root	30
V	Hearken with Haste	38
VI	An Evening of Epiphanies	46
VII	The Sharp Shoplifter	54
VIII	Dancing Divinations	62
IX	Wayward Worshipers in the Woods	72
	Epilogue	82





Chapter I

Grasshoppers in Grenning

“It’s too fast,” Tristen said. He stood up and brushed some dirt off of his greaves.

“Keep trying,” said his twin sister, Josie, from a ways down the forest path.

“I mean, they’re *everywhere*, bouncy little buggers, but I can’t catch ’em.”

“See if you can at least spot one.”

“I just said they’re everywhere—Are you even listening?”

“Um... I must admit... my focus wavered, and my attention has been redirected toward drawing in the dirt with this magnificently bendy stick that I found.”

Tristen stomped over to her, the axes at his side clanking against the crossbow and glaive he had on his back, his chainmail rattling. In the dirt by his sister’s feet were some funny looking squiggles.

“Really, Josie?” he said, gesturing to the path, now desecrated with doodles. “It was *your* idea to catch a grasshopper for a new spell or whatever, and now I’m doing all the work!”

“I’ve been preoccupied with another project,” Josie replied. She scratched out the crude runes she’d drawn in the dirt, keeping them in the back of her mind for later. “Anyway, we need a grasshopper leg for a speed spell to help *you*, you quisby. If I went face to face with monsters every day, like you, I’d want to be supernaturally fast the next time I challenged one. Remember how slow you were, knee deep in swamp water, when you fought the troll?”

“Yet I still managed to kill it, and taking down that sludge monster was

easier than catching a regular, old, grasshopper, apparently!” He waved furiously to the tall, green grass, teeming with bugs. He shook his head. “But it didn’t even matter, because you made me leave the troll head behind in the swamp, even though we could have been paid a *great* reward for slaying it when we reached town—”

“You are a boorish clodhopper who can withstand the smell of decaying flesh for a journey through the forest, but I, a civilized person, think it’s better that we left the stench behind in the swamp,” Josie said, crossing her arms and souring her face. “I will never get used to all the blood and gunk out here in the wilderness.”

“Oo la la, Josie’s so fancy! After she’s done bragging about her sensitive nose, she’s gonna go back to drawing in the dirt with a stick!”

“I’m running low on paper!”

“Are you cleaning your shoes with it or something? We just bought some!”

“It would be futile for me to try to impart the benefit of research and study to a stampcrab such as yourself.”

Tristen slumped against a tree, lowering himself into the grass like a spoon into molasses. A ladybug landed on his head, a colorful contrast to his chainmail.

Josie giggled, then she sighed and scratched her chin with the stick. Such a magnificent stick. So many knots and not a single leaf. It would make a stately wand someday, if she could figure out how to enchant it.

“We’re just... tired, is all,” she said, wedging the stick between her belt and the waist of her dress and kneeling on the ground beside her brother. Grasshoppers danced all around them like tavern goers after one too many. “We’ve been traveling for a while. We need a break.”

“Yeah.”

“But, while we’re here, in the largest woods in all the kingdom that is simply swarming with insect life, we should see if we can catch just a *single* grasshopper. We wouldn’t want to travel all the way to town and then have to come back out here, after all.”

Tristen grimaced. “We need *just one* leg? And then we’ll never have to do this again?”

“With one grasshopper leg, you can be quick-footed whenever you want,” Josie said with a proud grin. “As long as I am with you and I haven’t yet run out of energy, that is.”

Tristen rolled his eyes, but smiled. “Maybe we can grab a spare leg, just in case. I mean, we should get two at a time anyway, unless we catch a very unlucky grasshopper. Hold on, how many legs do they even—”

“Tristen, there’s one on your knee, and it’s just sitting there!”

Tristen froze. “Well don’t hesitate! Get it!”



"This is truly the mightiest foe we have ever faced."

Josie retrieved an empty vial from her pouch, then dove at her brother's leg. She landed, he let out a shout. The grasshopper leaped to freedom. Both twins lay on the forest floor, defeated. The woods around them buzzed with the lives of a thousand grasshoppers.

"This is truly the mightiest foe we have ever faced," said Josie.

"Pass me the vial," said Tristen. "I'll catch you a stupid bug."

Josie tossed the component vial blindly in the direction of her brother.

She wondered why someone as clever as herself could not think of how to trap a bug. She wondered if she'd be good enough to cast this new spell, even if she had a grasshopper leg. She thought about how easy it would be to catch a bug if she'd only learned a slowing spell. She wondered if the knotted stick could be useful somehow in catching the grasshopper. She wondered, and thought, but no solutions came.

Tristen lay still and watched the grass rustling in the breeze. A caterpillar crawled across his finger. A bee landed on his shoulder before buzzing off into the trees. He waited with patience, until one of the little green insects landed on the lip of the component vial. With a flick of his wrist, Tristen scooped it up and trapped it in the glass.

"How much longer until we reach Grenning?" Josie asked as she skipped ten feet in front of her brother.

She hopped over roots and balanced on rocks and kicked twigs that had fallen. Tristen followed, struggling to keep both his and his sister's packs on his shoulders while turning a map in his hands, pondering over it at each new angle.

"Less than an hour," he replied. "Or, just over an hour. Maybe ten minutes. I've never been good at reading maps."

"Yes, I find them boring," said Josie.

"This one says that soon we should come across a giant letter 'E'."

"That's the title of the map, you dullard."

"Oh, 'E' as in 'Dawnmore'."

The Kingdom of Dawnmore, that in which they traveled, was filled with many villages, a handful of larger towns, and the crowning, capital city of Ecrin. The kingdom's borders stretched from the mountains in the east to the ocean in the west, and in between were a land of fertile meadows and rich forests.

"I wish we could have stayed in Lastrest," Tristen said. "*That* town was interesting."

"It was very crowded and close to the city, though, you never know who we could have encountered," said Josie. "We'll have an easier time going unnoticed in a quieter place like, well, just like Grenning."

Past the trees ahead of them, the wide Forest Road wound up the hill

towards the threshold of a town. Music and laughter could be heard on the wind.

Tristen raised an eyebrow. “Quiet, you say?”

Grenning, the eastern most settlement of Dawnmore, sat deep in the forest at the base of Mount Golry. The town was built on a low slope, clinging to the mountain like mushrooms on a tree.

The buildings of Grenning varied drastically in shape and size. Some were wide and short like logs, and some were tall and thin like sunflower stems. Most were wooden, a rare few were stone, all were wrapped in vines or had flowers sprouting from cracks in the walls or blanketing the roofs in little, wild gardens. Nestled between the houses were alder, oak, and hawthorn. Flower boxes hung from every window and the speckled shadows of leaves patterned the architecture. The crisp, mountain air carried the scent of sweet flowers and dry bark.

Ancient trees grew from the ruins of once grand walls that surrounded the town, their roots bound the rubble to the forest. A wide, slow river wound through the buildings and greenery like a blue scarf draped down the mountain. The bubbling of the water could be heard throughout town, like the low thrumming of a drum, in harmony with the buzz of insects and the songs of birds. Stone bridges carried the road over the water. Josie and Tristen trod on a path of dirt and moss that led along the river, upstream.

Tristen reexamined his map. “We’re *much* closer to town than I thought.”

The pair found the streets relatively empty, the music and distinct thunder of a boisterous crowd was coming from deeper in.

“Sounds like a party,” Tristen said.

“It does... and I’ll wager every person in town is there...” Josie replied.

“Let’s go!” Tristen hastened toward the noise, his armor, bag, and weapons rattling like a sack of cowbells.

Josie followed, her pace steadily increasing by the top-heaviness of her own pack.

Grenning’s plaza was surrounded by a circular canal that was fed by the river coming down from the east and drained by it flowing away to the west. Four bridges radiated from the plaza and led over the canal. The tallest houses and shops in town, most of which had turrets and healthy ivy, guarded the canal and the plaza like a castle wall. In the very center of all this was a garden, flowers and shrubs of all kinds and colors resting among the roots of a massive tree. Its autumn canopy was a sunset sky of gold and red that hung above even the highest rooftop.

The plaza was brimming with colorful townsfolk like a bowl full of buttons. The roads were lined with carts and temporary wooden stalls, some of which had rings and tops and bells for festival games. Others sold salted meats, fresh fruit, glazed pastries, and more carnival eats. Troupes of musicians, sprinkled amongst the crowd, broke their melodies as people went to congregate around the center of



Its autumn canopy was a sunset sky of gold and red that hung above even the highest rooftop.

the plaza. The roar of the festival fell to a low hum.

A wooden stage was set up in the garden, at the base of the great tree. The planks of the stage bowed in the middle beneath a chair and the gold encrusted nobleman who sat atop it.

“I wonder what all this is for, it seems excessive for just a regular harvest festival,” said Tristen as he crossed one of the bridges that led to the plaza. He stopped a short ways from the townsfolk and, thanks to his height, could see right over the crowd. “Who’s that on the stage?”

Josie stopped beside him, panting, liberating herself of her pack. It slumped to the ground. “Who?” she said, standing on her tiptoes. “I can’t see anything.”

“Let me give you a boost,” Tristen offered.

“No! I’ve got it.”

Josie pulled a coin-sized ball of clay from a pouch on her belt, rolled it in her fingers, said “*meyada*”, and pulled the clay so it stretched, vertically, a foot long. There was a flapping sound like a hundred butterfly wings all fluttering at once, and Josie’s form expanded upwards until she was eight feet tall and thin as a blade of grass. Then another pop and her body became wide enough to compensate for its new height.

A few townsfolk lingering at the edge of the crowd stared at the conspicuous wizard as if waiting for a street performance to begin. After getting a good look at the stage and a few too many glances in her direction, Josie dispelled her magic and reverted to her usual size. She stayed wary of the unwanted onlookers until their attention was redirected toward something besides the particularly mundane wizard’s spell.

“That must be Grenning’s leading nobleman,” she said, “I think his name is Priffy-blather or Puffy-Something III. Maybe IV, I don’t remember.” She moved closer to her brother for camouflage.

The noble in question wore a vest that strained to keep its three buttons intact. The stripes on his pants swelled like sails in the wind. His tiny feet in their ribboned shoes dangled just above the stage. On his head he wore a puffy hat, like cream on a pastry, and in his hand he held a rod of gold and jewels. He could barely see the crowd over the steep mound of his belly.

“He reminds me of home,” said Tristen.

“Yes, he looks like a right loiter-sack,” Josie added.

“Hey, you two!” a man with a graying beard and arms as thin as twigs turned from his place at the edge of the crowd. “Lord Penauric is gonna speak, show some respect,” he hissed.

He turned back to the stage too soon to see Josie give a sneer in his direction.

“We of Grenning have fought hard this past year,” Lord Penauric bellowed

across the square. “We toiled and sweated to bury the remains of war. We dug until there was dirt under our fingernails. We drudged until we came home hungry.”

“Oh for Luxabian’s sake,” Josie cursed, rolling her eyes. “These paltry nobles...”

“We were hit the worst by the great conflict,” Lord Penauric continued. “Our children, our parents, our husbands and wives, slain on the front lines. Our bodies are scarred, our hearts are maimed. We will forever be wounded by all that we have suffered...”

Farmers nodded and lumbermen listened with tight jaws.

“...But we have risen above it. This harvest, the third since the end of The Last War, marks the return of prosperity! So, for today, we rest. Enjoy the harvest festival!”

The crowd applauded. Farmers cheered. Children hollered. The minstrels exploded into song as the people dispersed across the plaza to revel in the celebrations.

“What luck! Isn’t it amazing that we arrive in town *right* as they’re having a festival?” Tristen said, grinning. “You were just saying how we deserve a break, Josie!”

“What luck, indeed,” Josie muttered.

“Over here!” Tristen waved to a young woman who was fluttering about the plaza like a bird in springtime, handing out flowers to every person she passed.

“Hello!” the woman said. She strained to put a white flower behind Tristen’s lofty ear. He bent forward so she could reach.

“What a lovely festival,” said Tristen. “We just arrived in town, and I was telling my sister how fortunate our timing was.”

“That is lucky indeed!” said the woman, tucking a yellow flower in Josie’s half-ponytail. “This is only the first of three days of celebration. The festival ends on the fall equinox.”

“Three days! Well, that *is* exciting,” Tristen said.

“Yes! Have a happy harvest festival!” said the woman, skipping away in her flowing skirts.

Tristen waved to her as she went, then scanned the plaza. “What’s this? Town number four? What does *this* place have to offer... A soup recipe contest—I can’t believe someone is lucky enough to be *paid* to judge that. Oh, and look at that cow!”

“Oh my, another town with cows in it,” said Josie, “how exciting.”

“But look at the size of it! I’ve never seen one that big. It’s all muscle, and those horns could hold up a house. Ooo, are those cupcakes?” Tristen held a hand to his stomach. “Gods, I’m so hungry.”

“You’re always hungry, and I *wish* that was an exaggeration.”

“Too bad we don’t have enough money for games or treats or whatever those cows are here for,” Tristen said. “Maybe we *would* if we had brought a *troll head* with us...”

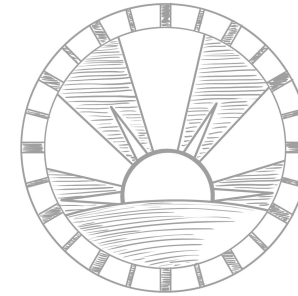
“At least the flowers are free,” Josie replied, taking the yellow blossom from her hair and tucking it behind her brother’s other ear. He pouted, which looked ridiculous when his face was framed by flowers.

Tristen caught a scent in the air. “Is that... pie?” His focus narrowed in on a long table covered with tarts, strudels, and savory pastries. “An eating contest! That’s *one* way to get a free meal.”

“Disgusting. I’ll meet you by the tree in an hour. I’m going shopping.”

“Okay. Hold on, with what money, Josie?”

“I’m going *window* shopping.”



Chapter II Festival Furor

The smallest shop in Grenning’s town center was stuffed between two larger buildings like a pillow in a pipe. It was two stories of light wood, the second jutting out just farther than the first. On the upper floor was a round window beside a square one; on the lower there was only room for a door, above which hung a sign that read “Mella’s Repository of Miracles and Oddities.” On the roof sat four grey jays; the fifth rested on the sign, pecking at the paint.

Josie observed that most of the townsfolk walked right past Mella’s Repository. The shop seemed to go as unnoticed as her. She pinched two copper coins, nearly the last of her resources, between her fingers, waved her hand in front of them, and they were gold.

As she peaked her head through the door, a bronze bell jingled. The inside of Mella’s Repository of Miracles and Oddities was dark except for a candle by the back wall, farther away than Josie expected, as the shop was much deeper than it was wide. Shelves along the walls were so cluttered that not even Josie’s sharp eyes could absorb all they contained.

She saw thin books, thick tomes, and scrolls of purple and gold paper. She smelled smoke from colored candles and the earthy fragrance of dried herbs. There were bestial skulls and monster-sized teeth and jars of red and white liquid. A black carpet covered in asymmetrical, gold runes led from the door to a desk at the back by the lone candle.

“Come in,” said a figure, stepping from the darkness to stand behind the desk. She wore a long dress with sleeves down to her wrists, and a black bandana

with shimmering runes like the carpet. She had a tall shadow that stretched above her head like horns.

“Are you Mella?” Josie asked as she moved further into the shop. The light from the doorway struggled to permeate the darkness of the interior.

“*What a clever conclusion,*” the woman said in a voice like bittersweet jam. Josie felt her cheeks flush.

The woman donned a thin but wide smile and spoke with more bearing, “I know *all* the arcane practitioners in Grenning, but I don’t think I’ve seen your face before...” Mella read her customer with her yellow eyes. “I assume you’re here for books?” she rested her palms on the table, “Or perhaps some paper and ink?” She melted a bit, barely holding herself up by her hands on the desk. “*How very predictable that would be.*”

“Oh, um, well, yes,” Josie cleared her throat, “I’m sure it’s apparent to a... a practiced dealer such as yourself that I study wizardry,” she said, tugging a bit at her hair and checking her dress for dirt or stains. “I do need paper, and, as for books, might you have something instrumental to the growth of an aspiring transmuter?”

Mella straightened and her eyes widened. “Oh, so you’re endeavoring to be a wizard of transmutation. I don’t get one of you every jingle of the bell,” she moved around the desk and became backlit by the candle, but Josie could still see her eyes roll. “*Too many artless mages only want to perform parlor tricks or make use of crude explosions.*”

“Really? I would have thought more people had things they want to change.”

“I’m sure they do, but many are too... simple... to succeed. *Deficient, rash, shortsighted,*” Mella moved toward a bookshelf that ascended into darkness. “Tell me, what is your level of experience?” Then, under her breath, “*Let’s see if there’s is a sliver of competence.*”

“Oh, um, you see, I’ve... I’ve mastered basic elemental transitions, such as water to air and air to water. I, um, I do know a bit about temperatures. I’ve only been practicing a few years, though, and I’m self taught,” Josie replied, straightening her posture to emit sophistication. “But I’m very enthusiastic, and I’m a fast learner!”

“*Hmm... a passable start... how unexpected...*”

Josie smiled, then furrowed her brow, then decided to stick with the smile.

Mella rifled through a stack of books on the floor. “I suppose you’ve begun to learn ways of altering the body, of changing living things?”

“Yes, um, I can change size, some more delicate abilities such as seeing in the dark, I’m currently working on a speed spell... I want to know so much more, though.”



“I assume you’re here for books?”

“Of course you do,” then, mumbling, “*Only a fool wouldn't.*”
Mella pulled a hefty tome from near the bottom of the stack and handed it to the young wizard.

“Thank you. Wow, it’s so new,” Josie remarked.

“*Every naive wizard wants to find magic in ancient spellbooks,*” Mella spat. “However, those are often unnecessarily difficult to decipher. For a beginner such as yourself, I would start with Marse Loberman’s second publishing on transmutation. It’s not too boring for someone as obviously... *curious* as you are, and it’s not too challenging for an *aspirer.*”

“Oh, right, okay.”

Mella went behind the desk, retrieving some paper and ink from one of the drawers. Josie tried to flip through the pages of the book, but the cover stuck.

“*Pay first,*” said Mella, dropping a mound of paper on the book in Josie’s arms, topping the stack with a bottle of ink. Then, with a glowing smile, “I know how good you wizards are at memorizing.”

Josie pondered. “How much for all of this?”

“One gold, eight silver.”

Josie reached into her coin purse. Her fingers found eight copper, barely enough for a warm meal. She felt the heavy book in her arms, the weight of every page that it held. She hesitated, then pulled out the two coins she had turned to gold, and placed them on the desk.

“I’ll give you two gold,” she said, her mouth dry.

Mella held up the coins. Her eyes went back and forth between them and her customer. The candlelight sparkled across the engravings of the royal family of Dawnmore molded into the gold. Josie held her breath, waiting for her meager deception to inevitably fail.

“You look pretty as the princesses,” was all that Mella said.

Josie’s shoulders relaxed and she held the book to her chest.

“*You must be rich as them too, if you have this much coin to throw around,*” Mella continued.

“Hah! No,” Josie huffed and shook her head. “No, no, no, I’m not like those scobberlocher nobles.”

Mella assessed her customer. “Shows just how much you’re willing to invest in your studies, then,” she said with narrowed eyes.

“Yes... that’s it... just how much...” Josie nodded a few too many times.

Mella spread a grin across her face. “Thank you for your patronage... what was your name?”

Before Josie could answer, Mella’s wooden smile fell and her head snapped towards the door. A moment later Josie heard it: a shout, and the sound of splintering wood.

The young wizard stuffed her paper, ink, and new book into her pack, and rushed out of the shop.

Tristen wiped the pie crumbs from his face and stood on his stool, scanning the plaza.

“What was that?” said one of his competitors who had some blueberries stuck in her braids.

Others paused their celebrations, searching, trying to ascertain if the commotion was from standard, festival rowdiness or something more intriguing.

A person across the plaza was thrown into the air and landed on a cart.

Tristen stomped down the long table, narrowly missing half-eaten pastries as he went, leaping off the end and breaking into a run. He charged past people, some wore unsettled faces, others seemed curious. He advanced toward the noise until he found the cause of the disturbance.

It was the already quite monstrous cow that had, apparently, just been awarded a ribbon for it’s immensity. It was stumbling and struggling amongst the ruins of the victor’s pedestal it had been tied to. A circle had cleared around the animal which swung its massive head around and slammed its horns into crates and baskets of food. Foam was at the corners of its mouth and its eyes were red.

Josie emerged from Mella’s Repository of Miracles and Oddities and immediately located the source of the commotion. She saw her brother push through the crowd and shed his pack, piercing the bubble that had formed around the beast.

“Not *again,*” she muttered, jogging reluctantly toward the impending duel.

The creature swayed its massive head to face its challenger.

Tristen saw something red and hungry in the animal’s eyes. He unfixed his glaive from behind his back and held it in both hands. The animal barreled toward him with an open maw.

Tristen’s glaive met the side of the cow’s jaw like axe against tree. The pole bowed against the pressure. Cows were strong, Tristen thought, but this one was something else. The beast pressed forward. Hoof scraped on stone. Tristen’s feet remained solidly planted as the animal’s bulk bent him backward. Those unsettling teeth were getting much too close.

Tristen thought the same thought that he did every morning: *I will not be bitten today.*

From his feet, to his core, through his arms, a force swelled like a wave and thrust the glaive forward. The cow’s head was rocked back. One by one the uneasy townsfolk were overcome with marvel and delight, so enraptured by the excitement of a duel between the largest cow in town and a courageous young fighter, that they failed to notice the absurdity of it all.



The animal barreled toward him with an open maw.

Tristen ran, leading the creature toward the garden. The crowd followed, washing Josie along with them like a sea shell in the tide. The cow's gallop cracked like thunder, people were cheering and hollering, the festival filled with life and excitement.

Tristen thought the same thought that he did every sunrise: *I will not be trampled today.*

The cow hurled its head into the ground where the agile fighter once stood, but Tristen was even harder to catch than one of those grasshoppers. He leapt and landed, skidded, and whirled around. The enamored audience waved scarves and flags. Those not already watching the duel were beckoned to join the excitement, and the crowd grew.

Josie, finally weaseling her way to her brother's discarded pack, rolled her eyes. "Here we go again," she muttered. She began to drag it with her as she went deeper into the throng.

The cow yanked and strained with one horn stuck in the dirt of the garden. Tristen advanced, gaining speed. He planted the haft of his weapon in the ground, squeezing the pole and pushing his might downward. The town went sideways, Tristen's feet shot upwards, he launched himself into the air.

Wide eyes followed the arc of his leap. He plummeted upon the cow like a hawk on its prey, pressing the flat of his glaive into the back of the beast's neck, pinning it to the road. Gasps and cheers arose from the audience. Confident that the beast was under his control, Tristen smiled and waved to his audience.

But then, *the tingling.*

Tristen's breath left him. He looked to his left hand with horror.

Ethereal, yellow ribbons unraveled from his wrist—he was shedding a transparent skin. Where the magic left, the ribbons revealed a hand that was less brawny and much softer than it had been, a hand that Tristen never wanted to see again. And much worse, the unmasking was continuing, rapidly, up his arm. Tristen was drowning in dread. A familiar panic consumed him. He was still as stone.

The beast felt its opponent's might waver. It lurched and shoved the fighter from its back. Tristen flew and landed hard on the stone of the plaza. His glaive skittered to the side.

The crowd gasped, waiting for the fighter to stand. Tristen could do nothing but clutch his arm to his chest as the ribbons unraveled further. Some folks withdrew, others covered their eyes. Tristen's breath was quickening. The beast faced him from across the circle. Steam huffed from its nostrils and foam gathered around its mouth.

Struggling through the crowd, Josie opened her white spellbook, the one she always carried with her. No one watched. She muttered something that no one heard. She raised her hand towards her brother, and no one saw.

The ethereal ribbons rewrapped themselves around Tristen's arm. He took a breath and the tension melted from his body.

"Josie..." he whispered. "Thank the gods."

Like an arrow, he shot towards his weapon, and wrapped his fingers around its sturdy haft. The cow charged, roaring, and Tristen was still on the ground in a vulnerable position.

He thought the same thought that he did every morning: *I will not be defeated today. I will not be defeated today*, he thought.

With every muscle in his body, Tristen surged up and forward, driving the blade at the creature's face. The beast let out a noise that was both a moo and a roar.

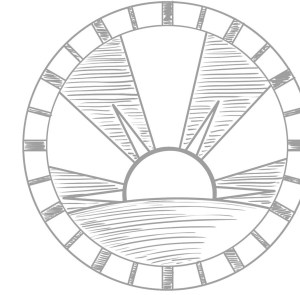
The sight of blood rekindled the crowd's excitement. Josie let out a sigh of relief and hugged her spellbook to her chest.

Tristen slashed the other side of the creature's maw, then stood, moving forward step by step, swinging with wild precision. He cornered the creature between the canal and his glaive.

The beast fell with a thud that shook the square.

Grenning exploded with adoration and relief, the bubble around Tristen imploded as the crowd rushed to praise him.

Josie was lost in the wave.



Chapter III

Cowherds and Curiosities

"They gave me a reward!" Tristen called as he approached his sister, holding up a burlap sack.

Josie ignored him. "Tristen, I saw that your spell... my spell... the spell on you... um...it wore off," she said quietly. "Don't worry, I don't think anyone noticed. I mean, you saw, I was able to reestablish it before it was completely gone and keep you in your preferred form."

"My *chosen* form, my *real* form," Tristen corrected. His eyes followed the other people in the square to make sure no one was listening.

"Right," Josie said. "I, um, I have a new spellbook, I found it in a shop. Maybe there's something in there that will make the transformation permanent."

"But I thought you said you weren't going to buy anything?"

"I didn't *exactly* say that, and I *had* to get it. For you."

"It doesn't matter, anyway," Tristen said, crossing his arms. "If you got a book for less than ten copper, it can't do the impossible. Nothing from some small town magic shop could... could *fix* this."

Josie put a hand on her brother's folded arms. "I believe it is an enlightening book, it can help me in my discipline, at least. I do owe the dealer a few gold. But now I can pay for it," she poked the sack that Tristen held and gave him a weak smile. "And once I've mastered this book, perhaps I will be capable of learning from a more complex volume that teaches about writing one's own spells."

"Slow down. You're still in debt." Tristen opened the sack to reveal only a humble collection of apples, yams, rolls, and a fist-sized wheel of cheese. "It's all

the townsfolk could spare.”

“Oh,” Josie said. “Damn.”

“Anyway, I told the guards that we would remove the cow’s body, but only because I thought you might want to take a look at her.” Tristen closed the sack and went toward the dead cow.

Josie’s eyes lingered on her brother, but he was turned away, so she moved on. She rolled back her flowing sleeves and hiked up her skirts, stepping into the slowly spreading pool of bovine blood.

“So, this is the part where you figure out what’s going on here and then you tell me who I have to go kill,” Tristen said.

“That has been our practice, yes, however I didn’t get as close to the cow as you,” Josie said. “Do you have any useful information to report?”

“She had glowing red eyes,” Tristen shrugged. “Maybe it was a demon possession?”

“It wasn’t on fire, though,” Josie replied. “Demons usually are.” She stretched her neck to examine the face of the creature. Its eyes were no longer red. They were still, like black glass.

“What about a changeling? Don’t people suddenly go mad when they’re switched with a fey version of themselves?”

“Cows aren’t exactly *people*, Tristen. And I don’t think the fey are in the habit of swapping fairy-cows for regular cows.” Josie circled the dead beast, her boots squishing into the ichor. Nothing seemed out of place.

“Hmm... maybe it’s—”

“A curse...” Josie speculated, squelching toward the cow’s belly.

“Who would want to curse a cow, though?” Tristen countered. “And what on earth could the cow have done to provoke them?”

“The cow wouldn’t be the target of the curse, not unless we’re dealing with a vengeful donkey who learned how to use magic. Maybe its owner was the intended victim, though if that was the case the cow probably would have died of a disease or made poison milk or something.” Josie furrowed her brow. “I can think of a hundred reasons that would cause a pocket of malicious magic to open in town in a way that would affect this poor creature. So, we’re looking for someone or something, that may have some evil essence, lurking somewhere in town.”

“Well at least we have a solid idea of what to do next,” Tristen snickered.

“Hah, hah.”

“Just do one of your sparkly magic-y things to see what kind of curse it was or something.”

“There wouldn’t be a trace left, now that the cow is dead.” Josie squatted so she could investigate the creature’s stomach while keeping her dress out of the gunk. “You didn’t *pierce* this animal, you only gashed its face, right?”

“That’s right,” Tristen replied, “Why?”

Josie pointed to the middle of the cow’s belly. Below the rib cage there was a wound. A neat, round puncture that had healed over, but only a bit, as if it had happened within the past day.

“How strange...” Josie muttered, measuring the size of the wound with her thumb.

“You there!” A plump, middle-aged woman wearing a scowl and worn, leather bracers marched up to Tristen. Just behind her was a man with a bald head and a face that drooped like the leaves of a willow.

The woman grabbed Tristen’s collar and yanked him down so they were eye to eye.

“Is everything alright, Ma’am?” Tristen asked.

“*Is everything alright?* Everything is terrible!” the woman shouted. “What in all the hells happened to my prize-winning cow!?”

“Oh, that’s *your* cow!” Tristen said. “Good! We were just speaking about whoever might be the owner—”

“Good? *Good?*” The woman’s grip tightened. “What about this is good!?”

Josie took careful steps until she was out of the blood puddle, then moved over to the encounter, tracking red footprints. “Please release my brother!” she begged.

Tristen rose slowly, like a drawbridge, until the woman was forced to let go or else dangle from his collar. “Ask anyone in the square, ma’am,” he said. “Your cow went on a rampage. She injured a guy selling fruit. She would’ve killed somebody if I hadn’t... um...”

“Oh dear gods, our poor Daisy!” the bald man wept, falling to his knees. “She had so much life ahead of her...”

“I left her tied to the victor’s pedestal for hardly a few moments!” the woman shrieked.

“Our Daisy never acted mean in all her life... such a sweet girl...” the man moaned.

“Don’t worry, my sister and I are going to figure out what happened,” Tristen assured him. “This is Josie, and I’m Tristen.”

“Carol Curhyde, and this mound is my husband, Curt,” the woman said. “We’re the best cowherds in Grenning, and don’t you forget it!” She aimed a finger at Tristen’s nose.

“Okay...?” Tristen said.

“Mr. Curhyde, you mentioned that this was an uncharacteristic outburst for your cow...” Josie probed.

“I can’t even imagine my Daisy being anything but gentle as a... well, as a daisy,” Curt sniffed.

“Is this the only instance of something unexplainable occurring amidst this community, in the recent past?” Josie continued.

“She’s asking if anything else strange has happened lately,” Tristen translated.

Mr. Curhyde staggered to his feet. “It’s been raining a lot lately, which isn’t too unusual, but now I’m sure it was an omen of poor Daisy’s death,” he said. “Also, the biscuits at the Rambler’s Root have lost their flavor, our farms and orchards don’t thrive as much as they used to... Nothing will ever be as good as it was...”

“I thought Lord Pomp—or whatever, said your agriculture was back to normal,” Tristen said.

“What does he know?” Josie growled.

“Curt’s only exaggerating,” Carol hissed. “Everything’s fine.”

“Mrs. Curhyde, in the past few days, was anyone beside you or your husband left alone with your cow?” Josie asked.

“NO! Absolutely not!” Carol’s face went red and her eyes grew wide. “Our Daisy has been under strict training and careful watch! We locked her in the barn when we went out.”

“You inspected and groomed her often?” Josie ventured.

“Yes, and I loved spending all that time with her.” Curt sagged.

“You didn’t notice anything unusual?” Josie pressed.

“What are you going on about?” Carol snapped. “We told you, nothing was wrong with her!” Then the cowherd’s face tightened into a grimace. “Oh, well, there was Lya.”

Curt raised a finger that shook like a twig in a storm. “I don’t think that Lya would—”

“You don’t know anything, Curt!” Carol knocked her husband on the shoulder.

“Who’s Lya?” Josie narrowed her eyes.

“Our son’s betrothed,” the man answered, tears welling again. “She’s a kind girl, just like Daisy was. I can’t believe she would ever—”

“She stole Curt’s late mother’s wedding ring!” Carol snapped. “We found her in our house, the little sneak, after we came home from the market.”

Curt choked up and held a hand to his mouth. “It was a family heirloom!” he cried.

“But Daisy was locked in the barn?” Josie asked.

“Well, no,” Carol said. “No, it wasn’t locked, I must have forgotten just that day because I was so busy with festival preparations. But Daisy was still safe inside the barn, and I always made sure to lock it after that!”

“So Lya could have gotten to Daisy that day” Tristen said.

“I suppose,” Carol spat. “But I’m sure Lya just wanted the ring, and only for the money. What’s making you think someone did something to my best cow, anyway?”

“There’s a puncture wound in its stomach,” Josie said. She stepped aside to show the injury to the cowherds.

Curt covered his mouth with both hands.

“Well that’s...” Carol’s thick brow furrowed. “That’s hardly anything! Daisy could’ve hurt herself on a bush or something.”

“Hold on,” Tristen said, gathering the attention of his sister and the cowherds with the wave of his hand. “Let’s go back to the theft for a moment. If Lya’s going to be a part of your family, why would she steal a ring from you? And what did your son think of all this?”

“Oh, well.” Curt began to shake even more. “He was a soldier, you see, and...”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but our boy didn’t come back from the war,” Carol finished. “Lya is not a part of our family any longer.”

“Hmm, sounds like there might be a motive for theft somewhere in there,” Josie thought aloud.

“We’re very sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Curhyde,” Tristen said, giving his sister a quick, disapproving look. “I apologize if this conversation brought back any difficult memories.”

“Well, since you two like *investigating* and all that, then maybe *you* can get that ring back for us,” Carol said. “We’ll pay you.”

Tristen shook his head. “Oh, that’s not the kind of thing that we—”

“We will do some analysis of this situation and get back to you,” Josie interrupted.

“Oh yes, yes, right.” Tristen’s head-shaking morphed into a nod.

“Can you tell us where we might find Lya?” Josie asked.

“She works at her family’s brewery, Lee Barry Spirits,” Carol answered, “More often than not you can find her running deliveries to the Rambler’s Root and such.”

“Thank you for the information, Mrs. and Mr. Curhyde,” Josie said, taking out the coin-sized ball of clay. “You were very helpful.” She marched off back to the cow’s body.

Tristen received a teary smile from Curt and a rough pat on the shoulder from Carol before the couple retired from the conversation and returned to the festival.

Once they were gone, Josie aggressively squished the clay in her palm. “*Laida*,” she uttered, then there was a sound like a cork being wedged into a bottle and Daisy shrunk to only a foot long. Josie waved her hands over the blood

puddle, muttering “*glani, glani, glani*”, until all the gunk was pushed into the river.

“There’s definitely something that we’re missing,” she said. “What is the cause of the puncture wound? Was it Lya? Why did Lya steal a ring from her almost-in-laws? Once we’ve cleaned up this body, we should go talk to her.”

“Hey! This was supposed to be a vacation!” Tristen protested. “Can’t you wait one day, until the festival is over?”

“We need the money. We hardly have enough for living expenses,” Josie lamented. “Damn, I still owe Mella two gold!”

“Did I mention that, in addition to the sack of yams, we were also awarded a free room at the Rambler’s Root Inn? I heard it’s the peak of luxury for broke travelers who have no standards.”

“Tristen, there’s more danger here than just an markedly irritable cow,” Josie insisted.

“Yes, I know. But I’m only suggesting we rest for a few hours. Are you saying that you *lack* the *discipline* to take *one evening* off?” Tristen raised an eyebrow. Josie replied with a long, dull stare that would shake anyone except he who had faced it for years. Tristen lifted Daisy’s miniature body by the legs and hoisted it on his back. “Come on, let’s go bury a cow.”

Tristen returned to the celebrations, but Josie spent the rest of the festival at the edge of the plaza. She rested on a bench under the shade of a tree while reading her new book.

Marse Loberman’s second publishing on transmutation had some familiar spells, and some that were new. Seeing in the dark—Josie had that one. Pulling water from thin air—simple. Turning any weapon into ice or fire—Josie marked that one down to learn it later. It was only a temporary transformation, but then, what wasn’t?

A posse of fighting enthusiasts and other burly folks competed for Tristen’s attention. The young woman with the basket of flowers accompanied him for a few hours, then the two of them took part in some clumsy folk dance. Josie couldn’t relax, she couldn’t dance. She wondered how anyone could after what had happened that day.

She returned to her book. It included a version of the speed spell, one that also required a grasshopper leg. Flying, water breathing, a spell for slowing enemies (or grasshoppers)—these were all of interest to the budding wizard. She knew they would take a while to learn and some required components she didn’t yet have. (Though reeds and molasses seemed easier to acquire than a grasshopper leg, and she already had a feather.)

Josie’s mind wandered to thoughts of the cow’s body, which had barely made it into the dirt before popping back to its full size (and full stench). She

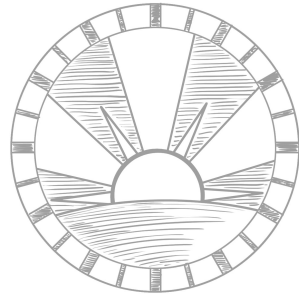
thought about Curt and Carol’s son. She remembered Tristen’s face when the ethereal ribbons unraveled from his hands.

Back to her book.

She scanned the rest of the pages. The book was a good one, a great one even, well worth the two gold (or rather, the two copper). But it didn’t have *exactly* what she was searching for. And to her continued disappointment, of course, not a single one of the transformation spells was *permanent*.

The sun eventually set, fireflies and stars lit the plaza, the sound of cicadas and owls hummed beneath the blanket of night. Folks returned to their homes, the festival came to a close, but the young wizard had made no progress.

Josie had much farther to go than she thought.



Chapter IV

The Rambler's Root

The Rambler's Root Tap House and Inn drowsed under a willow tree beside the river, just outside the ruined walls of Grenning. It was newer than most taverns, its construction occurring after the war's end to house travelers destined for Mount Golry and beyond. The favored destination for these adventures were the caverns in the mountain, just a day or so walk from the Rambler's Root.

The caverns had been dug by the opposing force during the Last War as a point of entry through the mountains and into the Kingdom of Dawnmore. They were a labyrinth where the silver elves and their orc generals made their camps but, after their armies retreated, the caves had been abandoned. In them were troves of wartime treasures, open to any daring enough to venture there. But the years passed, and most of the gold and glory was cleared out. Adventurer interest in the caverns and therefore the tap house was dwindling. The tavern by the willow tree became little more than a drinking spot for the poorer citizens of Grenning.

Tristen awoke just before dawn in his room at the Rambler's Root. While his sister slept soundly, her new spellbook open on her chest, he crept downstairs to sniff out some breakfast. Few were up, as early as it was, especially the day after a festival. There was a short woman with a thick white beard and matching eyebrows scraping at an iron skillet behind the bar, a man with a stained apron and circles around his eyes sitting at a table counting gold and flipping through a ledger, and an elven lumberman drinking in the corner like he had been since the night before.

Tristen loped over to the bar and sat on one of the stools.

"Morning, barkeep," he said. "What's for breakfast?"

"Bacon and biscuits," the white-bearded woman grumbled. "Same as every day."

"I heard talk of your biscuits last night. They're a legend around Grenning, you know. How much will it cost me? I'm low on coin but maybe you'll accept a couple of yams. Or are there rats in your cellar you need taken care of or anything?"

The woman dropped a plate of food on the bar so hard that crumbs and grease scattered across the counter and the front of Tristen's tunic.

"Mister O'Bell says you eat free," the woman grumbled, returning to her pan.

The man counting coins gave a bashful wave, and Tristen returned a nod.

"This really is a beautiful town!" Tristen said, digging into his breakfast. He took an eager bite of one of the biscuits, but then chewed slowly. "Huh... To each their own, I guess..." he said, eyeing the flavorless biscuit.

The man closed the ledger with a thud and made his way over to Tristen. He looked healthy enough, but he shook like a leaf in the breeze.

"The hero of Grenning!" said the man. "It's been a long time since we've had an adventurer like yourself staying at the Rambler's Root. I'm Durrant O'Bell, I do hope your sleep was alright."

"Yes!" Tristen swallowed a bite of food. "Thanks for the hospitality."

"Has everything been to your liking? I'm sorry if it hasn't. Is the food acceptable? Oh, dear, it's all horrible, isn't it?"

"No, no, everything's great, thank you," Tristen responded, taking a big bite of his biscuit to prove it.

"Oh, good." Mister O'Bell held his chest as if staving off a heart attack, then shuffled over to serve the drunk lumberman in the corner.

"Good morning, everyone!" All heads turned to the woman standing on the staircase.

She was an intimidating height, even taller than Tristen, with rich, dark, green skin, large, tattered ears, yellow eyes, and tusks among her lower teeth. She wore colorful and high-waisted pants with high boots. Long necklaces draped across her chest, gold bracelets hung from her wrists, and stacks of rings consumed her fingers. Her shoulders were broad and she wore the deepest V neckline Tristen had ever seen. She descended the stairs like a princess entering a ball and took the seat beside him.

"Good morning, Golda," she said to the cook in a sweet, deep voice.

"You're up early, Zara," the cook responded.

"Inspiration is a fickle mistress, and she insisted on gracing me with her presence before dawn this morning," Zara said, with open arms to address as many people as she could, like an actor on a stage. "I've been awake for hours, I just



She descended the stairs like a princess entering a ball and took the seat beside him.

finished writing a new song.”

“I’m sure *this* one will be a hit,” Golda muttered into her pan of bacon.

Zara leaned over to Tristen so she could speak quieter. “She bitter because she just wants to get home and see her adorable granddaughters.” She reached out a hand with black-painted fingernails. “I’m Zara. Oh, my, you’re that swordsman who murdered the cow! Torsten, right?”

“*Tristen*,” he said, shaking her hand. “And it was a dangerous, monster cow, killed to protect the noble citizens of Grenning.”

The drunken lumberman burped and gave an aggressive laugh in response to something the innkeeper said. Tristen kept an eye on their conversation.

“Also, I wield a *glaiive*, not a sword,” Tristen corrected. “What do *you* do?”

“I’m a performer!” Zara raised her hands to the sky. “I play here, every night.”

Mister O’Bell moved to leave the drunkard, but the elf caught his arm and pulled him back to say one last thing. The innkeeper seemed startled and unsettled by this (and he already looked one good sneeze away from toppling over). The elf released him, and he made his way back to the bar.

“Come on, Durry, we have fun!” the elf lumberman called after him.

“Mister O’Bell, have you seen the salt?” the cook asked the innkeeper as he passed, but she got no answer before he disappeared into the back room.

“Rodney seems unusually bothersome today,” Zara said, eyeing the drunk elf.

“I think he’s rude,” said Tristen.

“Yes, he is. He has been since he came back from the war. He used to be feisty and up for anything. There was a noble ambition in his intensity. But now he’s always either boozed or asleep. And do you know how much alcohol it takes to keep an elf drunk?”

Rodney stood and his chair fell back with a thud. Tristen’s head whipped around, but only Zara’s eyes moved.

“Durry, come back!” the elf said, stumbling across the tap house, bumping against chairs and tables as he passed. “I said come back, Durry!”

Tristen intercepted him, placing a square hand on the elf’s chest.

“Why don’t you sit down,” he said. “You can sober up a bit before you start chasing people.”

Rodney lashed forward with a burst of energy and control that was incongruous with his drunken stupor. He pinned Tristen on the bar, pressing his hands into the fighter’s neck. Zara gave a squeak of surprise and excitement while Golda wasn’t bothered to turn from her stove.

“Whoa!” Tristen choked. “I suggest we speak instead of fight, shall we?”

But Rodney pushed with no less intensity. Tristen kned him in the stomach

and kicked him back. The elf's shoulders tightened, something red and wild bloomed in his eyes.

Rodney drew a dagger and pounced.

Tristen, weaponless, leapt back, but he knocked his shoulder against a wooden pillar. He hated fighting in such close quarters. He kicked forward in defense, but the elf sprang back like a cat, untouched. Rodney came down with one tight fist and a dagger. Tristen barely caught him by the wrists.

Zara watched from her seat, draped over the bar, nibbling at the food left on Tristen's plate.

Rodney shook against Tristen's force, trying to bring the dagger down onto the fighter's shoulder. While the elf had agility, he lacked Tristen's brute strength. Tristen twisted the dagger away from his face and forced the elf across the room. Rodney struggled to catch himself and landed onto one of the tavern tables, knocking it over. He slipped to his feet, rocking from side to side.

Then a near-empty tankard hit him so hard in the back of the head that it sent a spray of leftover ale and a little bit of blood through the air. Rodney stumbled forward, then snapped his head around to see who had hit him. Josie, descending the stairs, glared with a hand stretched forward, arcane tendrils swirled around her fingers.

Tristen's foot collided into the side of Rodney's knee, knocking him to the floor. The knife skittered underneath a nearby table. Tristen rushed to retrieve it. He stood above Rodney with the blade aimed down.

"Thanks for the morning exercise," Tristen said, "but it's over now. Get up."

The elf leapt at the fighter with bared teeth but, anticipating such a response, Tristen knocked him on the side of the head with the hilt of the dagger. The cloud of ale returned to Rodney's eyes. He stumbled, wavered, leaned back, and dropped to the tavern floor like a felled tree.

"Finally," grumbled Golda from her stove. "Maybe now he'll be quiet."

"Morning, Josie," Tristen said. "What got you up so early?"

"You, starting a bar fight in an empty tavern," Josie replied, stomping down the stairs.

"That was marvelous!" Zara applauded. "Who is this deft caster?"

"Me?" the young wizard coughed. "I'm, um... I'm Josie. It was nothing, it's a very simple spell. I, um, I like your shiny bracelets."

"Thank you. They're enchanted silver."

"Is that better than regular silver?"

"No, they're brass. I just enchanted them to *look* silver. Less expensive, still shiny."

"Oh, that's just *illusion* magic, then, they're not actually *enchanted*," Josie said. "That makes more sense because typically objects can't be *enchanted*, only

creatures can. Though many people do use the word 'enchant' when referring to imbuing an item with any kind of magic, even if it isn't explicitly of the enchantment school, which, to me, seems unnecessarily confusing."

"Anyhoo," Zara said. "You two are a charming little party. I appreciate the matching outfits, and actually the general similarities in your appearance..."

"We're twins," Tristen answered flatly.

"But you have black hair, and she has white hair," Zara observed.

"She's a magical wizard person," said Tristen.

"Yes, I have incomprehensible arcane power," Josie added.

"Is it typical of wizards with epic power to keep dirty sticks in their belts?" Zara asked.

"Huh?" Josie felt along her waist until her hand met the wonky, magnificent stick she'd collected in the woods the day before. "Oh! Well, yes, that's my wand. Or, it *will* be my wand when I learn how to enchant it, or when I can pay for someone to enchant it for me..."

"Oh my, that sentence was an adventure," said Zara.

Josie blushed and studied the wood grain of the floorboards.

"I think we need to ask Rodney some questions when he wakes up," Tristen said. "He reminded me of a certain cow."

"How intriguing." Zara raised an eyebrow.

"I think Mister O'Bell, the innkeeper, might know something, too," Tristen added.

"I'll go find Mister O'Bell," Golda muttered, wiping her greasy hands on her apron. "Keep an eye on that napping fiend." She exited to the back room.

"I can wake Rodney for you, if you put him in a more dignified position," Zara gestured to the elf strewn gracelessly across the tavern floor.

Tristen propped Rodney, a bit lopsided, in one of the chairs. He checked the elf for any hidden weapons, then stepped back to give Zara some room. The bard placed a finger on each of Rodney's temples and a warm, purple light grew there. She hummed to herself, for the spell or her own amusement the twins could not tell. Rodney blinked to consciousness, his eyes glassy and tired.

"There we are," said Zara.

"Aw, bloody hell, I feel awful," Rodney slurred.

"Worse than normal?" Zara said.

Rodney rolled his eyes. "Zara, just the face I wanna wake up to."

"These two adventurers have questions for you," Zara continued. "And after interrupting this young man's breakfast with your dagger, the least you can do is answer."

"Yeah, first question: What the hell's wrong with you?" Tristen said.

"Dagger...?" Rodney pat his belt and his hands found an empty sheath.

What's going on?" he wiped a little bit of drool from his chin and squinted at the morning sun that was finally shining through the windows. "I don't think I..."

"The common drunkard is a wildly simple yet grotesque beast," Josie said. "I'm continuously disappointed by its belligerence."

"Hold on," Rodney held a hand up to shade his eyes. "I may be a bit crude once I've had a few, but who isn't? I'd never start a scrap, that's for sure. I don't get mad when I'm tanked. And I'd know, cause I do it a lot and no one's come to me later with any stab wounds."

"Though he's repulsive, he's not wrong," Zara said to the twins. "He's always rude, and gassy, but I've seen him here almost everyday for years and I never even knew he carried a weapon."

"If you're always so pleasant, then why were you going after Mister O'Bell when he clearly was trying to get away from you?" Tristen asked. "He looked pretty shaken."

"He was afraid...?" Rodney's face fell, he swayed a bit in his seat. "Wha-what? Is-is he okay? D-d-did I hurt *Durry*?"

Josie and Tristen made eye contact. Tristen raised an eyebrow and Josie shrugged.

"He's fine, we think," Zara said. "What were you talking to him about?" she asked, before Tristen could.

"I don't... I don't remember. But *Durry* and I have been seeing each other for a few weeks," Rodney said. "He's a little unstable, he has is quirks, but so do I. It works out alright."

"Oh! Isn't that lovely!" Zara grinned and gave Rodney a situationally inappropriate hug. "So glad to see you opening up to someone, Rodney. I had no idea you two were together, how sweet."

Rodney gave a loud and unpleasant sniff and hung his head in his hands. "I can't believe I scared him..."

"Tristen?" Josie beckoned her brother to the corner of the room.

Tristen hesitated to leave the elf with Zara, but Josie's eyes were insistent. The twins stood close with their backs turned to Rodney.

"Something is changing the temperaments of *Grenning*'s citizens," said Josie.

"When he attacked me, his eyes were just like *Daisy*'s," Tristen agreed.

"My healing spell seems to have stopped whatever was affecting him," Zara wormed her way into the huddle which broke after her invasion of it.

"You have the power to stop a curse?" Tristen asked.

"No, no, whatever I purged from Rodney wasn't a curse, at least not directly."

"Right," Josie said. "Some healing magic can cure victims suffering from

the side effects of *close proximity* to a curse, or some other kind of mind-altering magic."

"Exactly," Zara nodded.

"Oh," Tristen frowned.

Golda the barkeep returned from the back room. "Mister O'Bell is out, he's probably gone to the morning market," she said, scratching her beard. "I'll let him know you're looking for him when he comes back."

"Thank you," Josie said. "Ma'am, could you also let us know if a young woman named *Lya* from *Lee Barry Spirits* comes by today?"

"Well, now I gotta start writing all this down," the barkeep huffed, returning to the back room.

"I'll get my gear and then we can go visit that brewery," Tristen said, leaving Rodney's dagger on one of the tables and taking the stairs two at a time back to their room.

"What an interesting morning," Zara said to Josie.

"That was... um... the way you interviewed Rodney, and how you are, how you talk, with people, I mean," Josie fumbled. "That is not my brother's strength. He's friendly but not always smart enough, and I guess I'm no good either, more cause I'm smart enough but maybe not as friendly. And anyway I missed most of what happened this morning..."

"No problem, Ms. Mage," Zara gave a tusky grin.

"Would you consider, perhaps, working with us? Maybe we can find out what's wrong with *Grenning*," Josie cleared her throat.

"Oh? Is something wrong?" Zara held a finger to her chin. "I hadn't noticed."

"Right, well, you see, just the rampaging cow, and then Rodney, and um—"

"I was joking, Ms. Mage. I can see that things aren't as they should be."

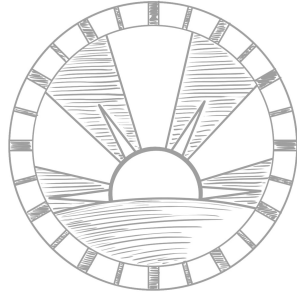
"Oh, right, of course," Josie laughed uncomfortably. "Well, you obviously know more about the people in this town than most. We'd love the assistance and you could have a cut of whatever reward money we may get, if there is a reward..."

"Hmm..." Zara pondered, scratching her neck with a black-painted fingernail. "Well, I did have a big day of lounging and eating planned, but what kind of bard would I be if I missed out a good adventure?"

"Not a very good one?" Josie guessed.

Zara shrugged. "Why not! I'll guide you and your brother around town. It's a lovely day for a tour, after all."

Josie pursed her lips to hide a smile. "Sounds splendid."



Chapter V

Hearken with Haste

It was still early in the morning, but many people were headed towards the market. Most wore the bitter countenance of those suffering headaches from the night before.

“Just ahead of you, you will see Lee Barry Spirits,” Zara said, gesturing to the two story building on the corner, across the street from where they stood. “This brewery is as old as Grenning, though it was only bought by the Barry family a few generations ago.”

“Let’s go speak to Lya,” said Tristen as he went for the door.

“Marvelous enthusiasm, little knight,” Zara said, stopping him. “But if you want to talk to Lya, I would recommend you wait. Mr. Barry is very protective of his daughters, even if they are adults. Lya should leave for her deliveries soon.”

Within the half hour, the door to Lee Barry Spirits opened and a woman exited carrying a crate in one arm. It weighed so much, she leaned very far to one side so that she was almost falling over. She had dark hair in huge curls, a bag at her side overflowing with scrolls and papers, and her left sleeve was knotted closed at the elbow.

“Tada!” Zara said. “Ms. Lya Barry. Though we should wait a moment longer, it looks as though she’s up to something.”

Lya made her way along the northern road, but came to a halt not far from the brewery. She set the crate down beside a barrel and covered it with a tarp.

“How could you tell?” Josie whispered.

“I’m good at reading people, I’ve been told,” Zara answered.

“Wow, I’m just good at plain old reading.”

“What an odd thing to say,” Zara smiled.

“Um... well... I think we should follow her.”

“Good idea.” Zara shook her bracelets and they rang like wind chimes. Her figure shimmered, all of her colors blurred, and when she came back into focus, she looked like a human farmhand. “Though I will, unfortunately, have to keep my beautiful self hidden.”

“Is it just an illusion again?” Josie ran a finger down Zara’s ear. Josie frowned. She still felt the tattered half-orc edge of it, even though Zara looked like a pale, smooth human.

“I’ve never had that trick met with such disappointment before,” Zara said with a chuckle. Josie blushed and pulled her hand away.

“If it’s alright with you two, we should get going before we lose her,” Tristen interrupted.

The three of them trailed Lya from a distance as she walked purposefully towards the market. When they arrived, they had to stop to take in the scene.

Two men were in a shouting match over the price of fish, and a woman shopping for fruit wept as she stared at an apple in her hand.

“Move, sir! I need to tie up my horse!” said a soldier in a red cape to a man sitting on a worn blanket underneath the hitching rail. “I am a war hero, please show me some respect!”

“I was a soldier, too!” said the man. “Where’s *my* fancy horse?”

“I think this bag of potatoes is worth only *one* silver,” said a red-headed elf, a bit of purple smoke curling from his fingers towards the eyes of the potato seller.

“Did you just try to charm me?” she replied angrily.

Despite the obvious, rampant unhappiness, everyone pushed forward through their day, as if the chaos was a part of life, and they were simply accustomed to it.

Lya, unaffected by the tumultuous market, went from stall to stall, but never bought anything. Every so often she would look up, searching, then she would move on.

“She’s following somebody,” Josie said.

“I’ll find out who,” Tristen replied.

“Be subtle!” Josie hissed as he went.

Tristen approached the baker’s cart that Lya was browsing. He pretended to examine the rolls, then thought about actually buying some, then remembered why he had come to the cart in the first place. Lya’s gaze went up from a loaf of rye bread. Tristen leaned to see who was the target of her attention. It was difficult to tell at first, but then he recognized the drooping face of Mr. Curhyde.

“Lya Barry?” Tristen said. She spun to face him with wide eyes. “Might I

have a word—”

She took off into the market crowd.

“Hey!” Tristen shouted, running after her.

“What did I just tell him?” Josie said to herself. “Well, now’s as good a time as any.” She whipped out the grasshopper leg and used it to trace an invisible symbol in the air. “*Defir*,” she said, holding it in the direction of her brother and tensing her shoulders all the way up to her ears.

A bolt of yellow light flew at Tristen and hit him in the lower back. His body began to vibrate, like there were three of him in a blurry, drunken vision—and then he shot forward with supernatural speed.

“Marvelous! Okay, now do me!” Zara said, still in her illusory form, spreading her arms wide.

“I can’t, only one person at a time,” Josie replied as she jogged to catch up to her brother.

“So now we have to try and keep up with him?”

“I’m already used to it. This new speed spell just makes it a whole lot worse.”

Tristen ricocheted off people, carts, and buildings like a slingshot. He hit a farmer in the shoulder and nearly pushed her over. “Excuse me!” he said. He bounced into a cart of vegetables, knocking radishes onto the road. “So sorry!” He rammed into the fountain and then a barrel, smashing it into the side of a building and sending a spray of water in a ten foot radius. The gasps and shouts of the townsfolk stacked upon the chaos of the market.

Josie and Zara followed Tristen’s wide, zig-zagging path of destruction, waving apologetically to everyone they passed.

Lya wove through the crowd, carts, and buildings with precision and experience. It was evident to Tristen that she knew the town well, and used every shortcut to try and outrun him. She slipped between two buildings, down an alley.

One step pushed Tristen five feet forward, and just a tilt in any direction sent him careening. He focused on the balls of his feet rolling on the ground, he stared ahead, unblinking, to stay balanced, and with a flick of his ankle, shot down the alley after Lya.

He emerged onto a main road that was perpendicular to the alley, flying into a stone wall with a thwack before redirecting his propulsion. With a sputter, a kick, and a few shoulder checks against the buildings lining the street, he passed Lya and spun to face her, sending a spray of dirt into the air as he did.

“Lya, my name is Tristen,” he said, his voice shaking like someone was hitting him on the back as he spoke. “I would like to have a friendly word.”

“You lizardfolk will not catch me!” Lya screamed. “I will never be a prisoner of Inkrune!”

She turned to retreat the way she came, but Tristen was learning to control his speed, and rushed to the other side of her.

“Inkrune? Why would someone from Inkrune want to capture you?” he said.

“Inkrune assassins are always after Dawnmore soldiers, to get revenge!” Lya lurched to the right, then left, trying to fake out Tristen, but he stayed in front of her.

“Do I look like a lizardfolk to you?”

Lya took a waterskin from her side, popped it open, and splashed water in Tristen’s face. He spat and shook his wet hair like a dog.

“That feels unnecessary!” he sputtered.

“Huh... that’s odd... lizardfolk’s skin usually sizzles when it touches water,” Lya said, relaxing. “Well, I guess you’re not an Inkrune spy, but what do you want?”

“I’m trying to find out what happened to the cow at the festival yesterday,” Tristen said, drying his face with his sleeve.

“Why ask me? It was killed by a traveling swordsman or something!”

“I killed her! And I don’t have a sword, I have a glaive! For Luxabian’s sake...” Tristen blinked, trying to focus his shaking vision. “I meant that I’m trying to find out *why* she went crazy. I want to know what happened to her *before* the festival. I know she belonged to the Curhydes.”

“I don’t want to talk about those people,” Lya said.

“They told me that you broke into their house and stole a ring.” Water shook off Tristen as the speed spell still rattled him. “I just want to know if that’s true.”

Lya sniffed and her voice wavered. “You mean *this* ring?” She raised the back of her hand towards Tristen’s face to show him a golden band on her finger.

“Well I never knew what it looked like, but let’s just go with ‘yes’.”

“This is my wedding ring,” Lya said. “The love of my life gave it to me *years* ago, right before he died, when we were both soldiers stationed in the Hill-ands. *I didn’t steal it.*”

Lya rubbed her thumb against the ring and took deep breaths through her nose. Tristen stopped vibrating as the speed spell, another one of Josie’s temporary transformations, wore off.

“I’m so sorry, Lya,” Tristen said with unwavering eye contact. “I lost my mother in the final raid on Inkrune. She was part of the queen’s army of paladins, they died ending the war, *right* before it was over.”

Lya sniffed. “Then I’m sorry, too. Well, you must not be an Inkrune spy. They never reveal anything about their lives to anybody. And anyway, lizardfolk hatch from eggs and have very little attachment to their mothers.”

“I’m not a spy, or a lizard,” Tristen chuckled. “I’m just a traveler, and I want



“Inkrune assassins are always after Dawnmore soldiers, to get revenge!”

to fix this town. But I think I need your help.”

Lya nodded. “I know about the Curhydes, and I know why everyone has gone crazy.”

Josie and Zara (dropping her illusion) approached, both panting.

“Lya, this is my sister, Josie,” Tristen began. “And that’s Zara from the Rambler’s Root.”

“We’ve met a few times,” Zara waved. “Greetings, Ms. Barry!”

“Lya was just about to share what she knows about what’s going wrong in town,” Tristen said.

“Oh was she?” said Zara “How would everyone like to have a mug of cider in the garden?”



“The first thing I noticed was that Gerald, the baker from the east side of town, replaced his honey cakes with mushroom cakes,” Lya said, taking a sip from a cup of cider.

Zara and Josie looked to Tristen doubtfully, but he listened to Lya with intent.

“Then I saw it spreading,” Lya continued. “Fabric shops that usually made such soft dresses were producing rough garments. The egg cart sold increasingly smaller eggs. I started following the people that were close to these strange phenomena. Turns out Gerald and a few others had been sneaking out to the forest at night, and when they came back they were... different. Whatever happened in the woods made them change somehow.”

“That’s why you were following Mr. Curhyde,” Tristen nodded.

“That, and he’s trying to become a warlock of a storm spirit.”

“What?” Josie exclaimed. “How did you figure this out?”

Lya put down her cup on a nearby rock so she could empty her bag and spread notebooks across her lap and the garden. “Well, you see, a month ago, Mr. Curhyde turned 57. The year 57 was when the god of storms, the overseer of the storm spirits, broke free from the cage in which the water god imprisoned him for hundreds of years. Also, if you rearrange the letters in Curt’s name, you get Turc. If you add an ‘a’, it becomes Turac: one of the many names used by the storm spirit that, legend says, lives at the peak of Mount Golry.”

“What’s a storm spirit?” Tristen asked.

“A myth,” Josie replied. “It’s a name that some use for an elemental that they have misidentified.”

“Or is the name ‘elemental’ the lie!” Lya exclaimed.

“I am absolutely certain it is not,” Josie said. “But even if I didn’t know that, you came about those conclusions through arbitrary connections—”

“Fascinating observations, Ms. Barry,” Zara interrupted. “Though maybe we can return to the forest goers? Lya, who did you see enter the woods? Beside poor Gerald, that is.”

“I have a long list,” Lya said, selecting a different notebook and flipping through it. “Mrs. Curhyde, of course, Madison McNiell, those three guys from the shoemaker’s shop, Angelica Hamon the weaver, Sara and her daughter whose name I don’t know, four others I didn’t recognize, and Mr. O’Bell.”

“Mr. O’Bell!?” Zara exclaimed, exchanging a glance with Josie who furrowed her brow.

“Oh, man,” Tristen said. “Mr. O’Bell gave me free food, I thought he was nice.”

“Well that is a substantial list you have, Lya,” said Zara.

“Yes, but Madison’s red hair and love of plants mean she’s probably just a dryad,” Lya continued. “So, if we subtract her, then that’s exactly *thirteen* people. Thirteen! That number is a favorite of hag’s! You know what else forest hags love? Mushrooms, just like Gerald’s new cakes.”

Tristen scratched his head. “What does this all mean?” he asked.

“It means a hag has moved into the forest, and is mind-controlling the citizens of Grenning to make them bring her ingredients for her malevolent potions!” Lya exclaimed.

“That’s nonsensical, you’re mixing fact with theory,” Josie said.

“Yes.” Zara cleared her throat. “Lya, did you actually *see* anyone bringing anything into the forest?”

“Of course. Not everyone, but Gerald and a few others did,” Lya said, flipping to a new page in her notebook. “Gerald had a lumpy bag, Mrs. Curhyde had a very small barrel, and Mr. O’Bell had a sack of whitish powder. I saw him spill a little on the way. He’s very shaky.”

“Salt!” Tristen said. “The biscuits at the Rambler’s Root had no salt. *That’s* why they didn’t taste good.”

“Okay, then we have to figure out what was in Mrs. Curhyde’s barrel, and Gerald’s sack,” Josie asserted.

“Don’t worry, I already know,” Lya smiled proudly. “I thought Mr. O’Bell might have been carrying sugar, but salt makes sense, too. Gerald definitely had a sack of animal skins, and Mrs. Curhyde had a barrel of swamp water.”

“Why would you need to bring a barrel of swamp water into the wilderness?” Tristen asked. “That’s like bringing a ale to a tavern.”

“Lya, did you actually *see* the animal skins and the swamp water, like you did the salt?” Zara pressed.

“Well no, but both are commonly used as potion ingredients by hags. And I assume animal skins are what Gerald was stealing when he was breaking into people’s houses.”

“He was stealing?” Zara said.

“Oh, did I fail to mention that?” Lya bit her lip and scanned her notes.

“Yes, I saw him break into lots of people’s houses over the course of many days. It became so much of a routine, actually, that I moved onto more interesting parts of my investigation.”

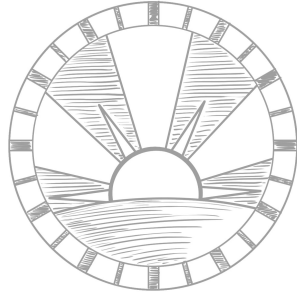
“We should find out *for certain* what it is that Gerald and Mrs. Curhyde carried into the forest,” Josie said. “I think Lya’s right in one respect: whatever Gerald was stealing was likely what he brought.”

“Your research is very impressive, Lya, but it can’t hurt to be sure,” Tristen added.

“We should have a word with the Groveminders,” Zara suggested. “They’ll know what’s been stolen.”

“If you do, don’t talk to Daniel,” Lya said. “He’s the one that’s trying to start a werewolf pack, and he might bite you if you get too close.”

Zara laughed loudly. “Never a dry conversation with you, Lya.”



Chapter VI

An Evening of Epiphanies

The Groveminder guildhall was a tall, square, wooden structure with a little door off to one side and a roof that sagged in the middle. It was large, relative to the humble surrounding shops and houses, and its exterior walls seemed even vaster due to their plainness. There were very few windows, and they were all on the top floor. It was the only building close to the center of town that had a yard, and it was even bordered by a neat wooden fence. Strands of rich, green ivy adorned the white wood of the guildhall and colorful wildflowers sprouted across the yard.

“Wow, I guess the guild isn’t what it used to be,” Tristen remarked.

“Actually, it was always like this,” said Zara.

“Oh, wow, okay.”

As Josie, Tristen, and Zara approached, they found that the door was open.

“This looks like an invitation to me,” Zara said, entering the building.

Tristen went to follow but Josie stopped him. “Hold on,” she said, “Maybe we shouldn’t go in there.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t break any laws,” Tristen assured her. “We’ll just see if anyone’s home and, if they’re not, then we’ll leave.”

“It’s not that. The Groveminders are one of the few guilds of Dawnmore sanctioned and protected by *the king*.”

“Good for them?”

“The king knows them *personally*, Tristen.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have guessed they’re *that* important. I’ve never heard of them before.”



The Groveminder guildhall was a tall, square, wooden structure with a little door off to one side and a roof that sagged in the middle.

“They’re the smallest official guild in the kingdom. They only became a part of the royal orders due to their bravery in the Last War. Some of the larger guilds still refuse to recognize them as equals.”

“Okay so... I still don’t understand why we shouldn’t go in.”

Josie traced a finger around her face and down her neck, and whispered, “*Areg*.” She morphed into a different young woman, this one with black instead of white hair.

“Now *that’s* no illusion,” Tristen said proudly, poking his sister’s now slightly thinner cheeks. “But why the disguise?”

Josie took a shaky breath. “I just don’t want them to recognize me.”

The interior of the Groveminder guildhall was a cluttered mess. The only light came from torches on the wall. A staircase led up the left side, and the rest of the room was a collection of chairs, tables, and benches bunched together like the building was only being used as a storage shed. The room smelled of mildew and damp tree bark. Longbows, short bows, and short swords hung haphazardly across the back wall. A blanket of crumpled papers and half eaten meals covered the furniture.

When Josie and Tristen followed Zara inside, they saw a person emerge from a pile of arrows at the back corner. He was a few feet tall with a roundish figure, clutching a longbow in one hand. He wore a green cloak fastened with a silver leaf pin and leather bracers engraved with vines and flowers.

“Good afternoon, Finnley,” Zara said.

“Hello Zara, who are your friends?” the halfling replied.

“This is the strong, the swift, the dashing hero, Tristen. And this is the clever, the observant, the lovely...” Zara squinted a bit when she saw Josie’s disguise. “... his lovely sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” Finnley said with a nod. “Now hold on a moment, you’re the fellow who took care of that frenzied cow!”

“Yes sir,” Tristen grinned and gave a nod.

“Saved me a bit of trouble! My thanks.” Finnley gave Tristen a hearty handshake. “I’m Finnley Wolfire, but you can call me Finnley just like Zara does. I’m the leader of the Groveminders of Grenning. What can I do for you? It’s a bit of a busy day but if you make it quick I think I can fit you in.” He gave a tired chuckle.

“What makes a guildhall busy? Are people in danger?” Tristen asked.

“Danger? No,” Finnley replied. “There’s always squabbles during a festival, and things have been a little rocky as of late, nothing to concern yourself with. It’s all beneath you, anyway, if you’re as good a fighter as I’ve heard!”

“Finnley, we’re here to ask about some recent thefts,” Zara said.

“Could you be more specific?” Finnley shook his head. “We’ve had a

hundred reports in the past week of things gone missing. We’ve got another hundred about break-ins. Some of them we’ve sorted out, but others are still unsolved.”

“That *is* a lot,” Tristen said. “I can see why you’re so busy.”

“Well the thefts are just one part of it. My rangers and I work day and night dealing with street fights, family drama, common misunderstandings, public displays of extreme anger or sadness... Things go up and down, it’s just been a bad few weeks. Whenever there’s a festival in town, we barely have time to scratch our noses before we’ve got to move from one problem to the next.”

“Sounds like what Lya was talking about,” Josie muttered to Tristen.

“Maybe, Finnley, could you think of thefts that stood out in some way, or perhaps many that had distinct similarities?” Zara asked.

“There was a stolen cake a few days ago, but I believe Daniel solved that one. Hmm... some missing horseshoes, flower seeds, buttons...” Finnley, scratched his head. “Now hold on! Kira and Slate are working on a series of candle thefts. Almost three hundred candles were stolen in the past few weeks. Is that unusual enough for you, Zara?”

“Candles,” Josie said, nodding. “Candles, that’s it. I know what’s going on.”

“Enlighten us!” Zara said.

“Um... perhaps... later...”

“Alright, then,” Zara said. “Finnley, you’ve been extremely helpful as always.”

Zara strolled out of the guildhall and Tristen gave Finnley another handshake before he left. On her way out, Josie stopped in the door.

“Gerald the baker, stole those candles,” she said.

“What makes you suspect him?” Finnley asked.

“An observant woman named Lya Barry. If you need an extra hand, you might have a word with her.” Josie, still disguised, gave an awkward nod before ducking outside.

“So you *also* can change your appearance through illusion,” Zara said quietly once the three of them were away from the guildhall.

“Josie’s isn’t an illusion, it’s *real*,” Tristen corrected.

“Ah.” Zara tilted her head. “Impressive. Though I’m curious as to why you would need to disguise yourself.”

“That’s not something she has to tell you,” Tristen said.

“Oh my, there’s a story here, I can tell. I suppose she doesn’t have to tell me, but I thought it may be important for me to know, if we’re working as a team.”

“Oh, um,” Josie’s eyes darted between her brother and Zara. “Perhaps I’ll explain later, once we’re somewhere more private.”

“But, more importantly,” Zara said with a smile, “You can explain what you

figured out about the candles.”



The three of them entered the Rambler’s Root an hour or so before sunset. The tap house was half-full of farmers and lumbermen, drinking and talking after a long day of work.

“I have returned!” Zara announced. “A nice light dinner and some ales, at the back table please, Golda!” she called to the barkeep.

Zara led her companions to a table by the stairs, opposite to the one Rodney usually slept in. Josie, no longer disguised, took her seat beside Tristen.

“Josie, what is it? What did you figure out?” Tristen said eagerly. “What do I get to go fight?”

“That was a mighty cliffhanger you left for us at the Groveminders,” Zara said.

Josie leaned over the table to get as close as she could to her brother and the bard, then spoke softly. “They are spell components.”

“What are spell components?” Tristen asked.

“Sometimes, when I cast a spell, I have to use an object or a material as part of the casting, like the grasshopper leg.”

“I know what they *are*,” Tristen huffed. “I meant what did you just *identify as* spell components?”

“The salt from Mr. O’Bell, and the candles that Gerald stole.”

“How can you tell those are spell components?” Zara asked. “Especially because only the gods know what was in Mrs. Curhyde’s barrel.”

“I know what was in her barrel,” Josie said.

“Oh my, well please inform us, goddess.”

Josie glanced around the room to make sure no one was paying attention. “It was a barrel of Daisy’s blood.”

Bang! A basket of biscuits dropped onto the table. “Here you go, kids,” Golda said, adding a bowl of berries, and a plate of cheese, and three mugs of ale to the meal. She hooked the now empty tray under her arm. “By the way, Lya never came by on her deliveries, and Mr. O’Bell didn’t come back. I’m a bit worried, to be honest. I thought I would have to close the Root tonight, except Rodney’s been helping wash dishes all day.”

“Oh my, that’s concerning,” Zara said. “I mean about Mr. O’Bell. Rodney being a help for once is actually quite astounding.”

Golda gave a nod before responding to a call from another table.

“Tristen, are you all right?” Josie asked.

Tristen mouth was agape in horror and disgust. “Are you saying Mrs. Curhyde *bled* Daisy?”

“Right,” Josie said. “That’s what the puncture wound was.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Josie,” Zara began, “but I’ve heard stories of bovine blood being used in certain rituals.”

“Yes,” Josie said, “and the salt and the candles indicate *what type* of ritual: The townsfolk have been trying to summon something.”

Zara’s eyes grew wide with fear and interest while Tristen nodded excitedly, shoveling food into his mouth.

“The residual magic of failed summoning attempts would cause the casters’ temperaments to become erratic,” Josie continued. “And it would stick to them, spreading to those they interact with throughout the town.”

“So Rodney went wild this morning because he’s close to Mr. O’Bell,” Zara said.

“Just like Daisy, because of the Curhydes,” said Tristen through a mouthful of cheese. “But if their summoning attempts are *failing*, then there’s nothing to worry about, right?”

“The side effects of this dark magic are dangerous enough on their own,” Josie said. “In addition, they seem to be getting worse, if we believe what Lya and Finnley told us. That suggests the townsfolk are getting closer to a successful summoning. Usually these types of rituals take a few attempts, especially when done by amateurs. We have every reason to believe they’ll figure it out eventually, probably soon.”

“Should we talk to Rodney again?” Tristen suggested. “He might have heard something from Mr. O’Bell, maybe about what they’re trying to summon.”

“Perhaps, though he seemed confused by everything,” Josie said.

“As he often is,” said Zara. “We can leave him to his dishes.”

“Mella from the magic shop knows a lot about spell components and things,” Josie said. “I bet she’ll be able to tell us what the townsfolk are trying to summon.”

“All of this is very fascinating, I’ve always been better at writing stories than I am at piecing together their mysteries,” Zara took a swig of ale and let out a long sigh. “Though, I still can’t figure out what purpose your disguise served at the Groveminders.”

Josie and Tristen exchanged a look. Tristen wiped saltless biscuit crumbs from his face, shaking his head. Josie shrugged and bit her lip, then Tristen sighed.

“We ran away from home,” he said.

“Well that doesn’t make much sense.” Zara popped a berry into her mouth. “You two are old enough to adventure on your own.”

“True, but we come from a noble family that is very protective of their

heirs,” Josie explained. “Though, it’s been a while since we left, they probably aren’t searching for us anymore. But I’m wary around any guild-member who reports to the capital city. There’s a risk they’d recognize me.”

“The capital city? You’re from Ecrin?” Zara asked.

“Yes,” Josie said.

“But why didn’t *you* have to disguise yourself, Tristen?” Zara asked.

“They wouldn’t recognize me, anymore,” he said plainly.

“Oh my, what does that mean?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Okay, then, what noble family are you two from?”

“Oh, just one of the many from Ecrin,” Josie said.

“Well you two sure know how to leave more questions than answers,” Zara huffed.

“There’s nothing more to it than that,” Josie said. “It can be difficult to live with the demands and expectations of a noble house. We both had things we wanted to do in life that we couldn’t experience if we stayed at home. That’s all.”

“I want to know the rest of this story, but I accept that it wouldn’t be told properly if I dragged it out of you,” said Zara.

Josie pretended to take a sip of ale just so she could cover her face for a moment.

“So where are you from, then?” Tristen asked the bard.

“Hardly seems like a fair question, after what little you gave me,” Zara replied.

“Well, you don’t have to—”

“I was born on a cloudy, drizzling spring day in this very town.”

“Well, alright.”

“My father was a human, but my mother, being orcish, found it hard to thrive in this Kingdom of Dawnmore,” Zara said. Josie listened with her chin in her hands. “Once I was old enough, they told me we were moving east to the Plains of Derduar, outside Dawnmore’s borders, because life there would be easier for my mother and my grandmother. My father was happy to go with them, but Grenning was all I knew—that and how to play a good song—so I stayed here.” Zara gazed wistfully out the window. “Mine is a tale of twists and turns, isn’t it?”

“Seems pretty straightforward to me,” Tristen said, chewing.

“She was being sarcastic, you dolt.” Josie hit her brother on the shoulder. Then, to Zara, “We’re new to Grenning, so we’ve never heard you play. Could... could you perhaps spoil us with a song?”

“Oh, Ms. Mage, I was planning on it even if you hadn’t asked.” Zara stood with a flourish, and retrieved her lute which hung by the stairs.

With one foot up on a chair and her instrument resting on her knee, she sang

while towering above Josie like a willow tree. She plucked a sad, sweet, slow tune and sang in a deep, warm voice.

*I was a young girl who swam through the red plains,
merry with kinship and full with life
My family chanted and sang and roamed
until the mountain was split by a knife*

*Clouds filled the sky and the plains shattered
the snow-pale army clawed up from the ground
The horn of my family rattled the wind
the plains shook deep with the sound*

*Led by the white snake, from darkness they come
I, Rua, beat my drum*

“Zara, it’s too early in the evening for a ballad, you’ll put people to sleep,” Golda called from the bar. Zara muted her strings and sighed. “Now’s the time for something upbeat,” Golda said. “Play that jaunty song about the hedgehog riding the chicken! Gods, that one’s hilarious.”

The drunk patrons of the tavern cheered in agreement.

Zara shared a knowing look with Josie, who giggled. “Perhaps I’ll play you the rest another time,” she said. Then she began to strum louder and stomp her feet, bursting into a much more jovial, simpler tune that got the whole tavern singing along. She went from table to table, sometimes standing on a chair so more people could see her as she played. Tristen clapped and smiled like the rest of them.

Josie watched the performance from the corner of the tap house, nibbling at biscuit crumbs. When Zara’s song finished, the audience requested another, and Josie knew the bard wouldn’t be joining her back at the table any time soon.

“By the way, Josie, when do you think this ritual will take place?” Tristen asked, lowering his voice so none of the tavern-goers would hear. “How much time do we have?”

Josie stopped chewing. “Oh! Oh no! Tristen, you’re right!”

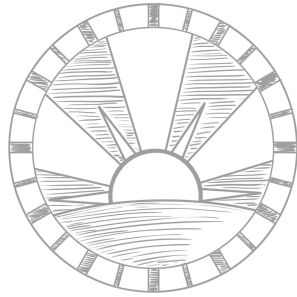
“I’m right? But I just asked a question—”

“Tomorrow is the equinox—that must be when the summoning will take place.”

“Then we don’t have much time, at all,” said Tristen.

“No. We should speak to Mella right away.”

And so, after the darkness of night had fallen upon Grenning, the twins snuck out of the Rambler’s Root.



Chapter VII

The Sharp Shoplifter

On the second night of the harvest festival, Josie and Tristen made their way to Mella's Repository of Miracles and Oddities. The celebrations that evening were smaller, and most were indoors, so brother and sister traversed the vacant streets of Grenning until they reached the white, wooden shop in the center of town.

Even from a distance, it was clear that something was amiss. The door was ajar, and there were sounds of a scuffle coming from within.

Tristen unhooked his glaive from his back and held it out to the side. Josie came up behind him and ran her fingers along the weapon. She spoke "*tira.*" Arcane, yellow flames licked the blade.

"New spell?" Tristen asked.

"Yes, now go!" Josie insisted.

Tristen rushed, fire-glaive first, into the building while Josie peaked through the doorway.

The magic shop hadn't been very organized the first time Josie visited, but now the place was in even worse disarray. Scrolls, books with torn pages, and fragments of glass from shattered vials littered the floor. At the back wall, by the lone candle, a cloaked figure had an animal skull in one hand, and the other held a knife to Mella's neck.

"Drop the dagger!" Tristen said, the flames on his glaive glowed in the supernatural darkness inside the shop.

The figure, only a pale chin beneath the shadow of a hood, turned at the fighter's words. Seeing her chance, Mella grasped the wrist of her attacker with

both hands. Where her palms made contact with his arms, his flesh burned red and hot like iron from the forge. But it wasn't enough. The cloaked figure let out a shout, and angrily plunged the dagger into Mella's collar.

Josie gasped. The cloaked man faced Tristen. Mella slumped to the floor, holding her neck and struggling to breath. Tristen's weapon whipped through the air, its fiery blade leaving streaks of light in the darkness.

"Josie!" A call came from outside. Josie saw Zara approaching the shop with her lute in hand. "You two thought you could sneak out without me? I can't be left behind so easily—"

"Zara!" Josie grabbed her by the arm and dragged her towards the shop's door.

"Oh, this is terrible!" Zara exclaimed upon witnessing the chaos.

"Heal her!" Josie commanded, pushing the bard towards Mella.

"Alright!" Zara said, making her way carefully past the brawl, towards the shopkeeper.

The assailant, with one arm wrapped around the animal skull, scurried back and forth like a rat. Tristen knew he would have to change tactics for such an agile opponent. He threw his glaive down, then drew his twin axes from his belt and held them, crossed, in front of his face, backing towards the doorway to block any escape.

The man in the cloak lunged toward Tristen's left, but the fighter predicted the feint and moved to his right instead. Dagger met twin axes.

Zara reached Mella at the back of the room, swung her lute around to her front, and plucked its strings. Purple magic wove the skin on Mella's neck closed. The shopkeeper's hand left her collar, and with it came a necklace that had been broken by the dagger. Zara turned away—too soon to see Mella's form change.

Tristen could not land a hit on the figure in the cloak no matter how hard and fast he fought. It was like the man in the cloak was made of shadow. Tristen couldn't focus on his balance and his breathing, and he couldn't predict where the assailant or his dagger was going to be next. Frustration overcame him, he swung wildly through the air hoping to hit something, anything, to finally get his opponent to actually confront him. Tristen's breathing became rapid and uncontrolled.

Then pain erupted through his body, from just below his arm. The cold, needle-like dagger was deep in his side, all the way to the hilt.

Just as quickly, the blade was withdrawn, sending a spray of blood across the cluttered bookshelves.

Tristen fell to his knees as the cloaked man made for the door.

Tristen gritted his teeth and, with cry of rage, hurled both axes at the fleeing thief. Josie jumped back from the door. One axe hit the wall with a thud but the other slashed the man's calf, causing him to trip in the doorway.

With the cloaked man right in front of her, Josie fumbled for a pouch at her side, pulling out a pinch of pepper and touching it to her tongue. Concentrating to block out the sound of her heart beating, she inhaled deeply, and on the exhale she growled: “*Drogon Smaoug.*”

Flames erupted from her lips, engulfing the cloaked man, consuming the air just outside the shop. Zara and Tristen, who was almost unconscious, watched as the flames danced in the darkness.

The fire dissipated as quickly as it had come. Josie coughed. All three of them blinked to see through the smoke that followed the fire. When it cleared, there was no sign of the cloaked man or the animal skull in sight.

“Is everyone alright?” Tristen choked.

He scanned the room, inspecting each person, starting with Josie. He clutched the wound in his side, blood trickled from between his fingers. Once he saw that everyone was safe, he tried to stand, but he had no balance. He grew so dizzy he almost couldn’t make out Josie as she moved to help him. But no, that wasn’t Josie, was it?

“One moment, champion,” Zara said as she caught him. She hummed a tune that had a ghostly echo in Tristen’s foggy mind. And then he could see clearly, and the pain lessened. As he blinked back to full consciousness, he realized he was leaning into Zara’s shoulder. He stood up and found that he felt well again.

“Thank you, Zara,” Josie said. “Thank the gods you showed up.”

“Yes,” Tristen said quietly. “I haven’t been wounded that badly in a very long time. I was outmatched, and I lost my focus. Thank you for healing me.”

“It’s just a little tune I know,” Zara said with a smile.

From the back of the room came a voice. “I must admit that *little tune* saved my life.”

Josie, Tristen and Zara turned to face the shopkeeper as she spoke. Mella did not look like she had when they entered the shop. Her skin was red, her hair was black, her eyes were solid yellow. Long horns started at her forehead and curved back, long and tall.

“Are...are you alright? What happened to you?” Tristen asked the shopkeeper. “Did that person in the cloak do this?”

“No, *you imbecile,*” Mella spat. Her eyes glowed as the rage in her voice grew. She retied the broken necklace around her neck, but the red pendant just hung there, empty. “Haven’t you ever seen a half-devil before?”

“No,” said Tristen.

Josie stepped out from behind her brother. “Pardon me, Mella, but, I—I must ask for the sake of the pursuit of knowledge, though I know this is not the best time. But I am curious, and I can’t miss the opportunity. So, if you could tell me,



Concentrating to block out the sound of her heart beating, she inhaled deeply, and on the exhale she growled: “Drogon Smaoug.”

please, h—how do you change your appearance?”

“You don’t want to know *why*?” Mella said.

“Your reasons why are personal,” Josie said. “I only want to know how.”

“It’s an illusion,” said Mella, placing the broken necklace among the other damaged items on the desk. “A permanent spell that affects the wearer of this necklace. *A very expensive object that the feral thief broke.*”

“An illusion,” Josie said. “I see.”

“You won’t tell anyone about it. None of you,” Mella insisted. “I can’t have my customers knowing about my true form. *These horns aren’t very good for business.*”

“I would have thought the opposite would be true,” said Tristen.

“*You know nothing. No one trusts half-devils, not even desperate wizards.*” Mella glared at Tristen with glowing yellow eyes. “*I could wipe your memories of this encounter if I wanted to, but I’d rather not waste the energy.*”

“Well, I do believe we’re overdue for some introductions!” Zara said. “I’ve passed your shop before but never had the chance to visit. My name is Zara, and these heroes are Josie and Tristen, and you would be Mella?”

The shopkeeper grumbled unintelligibly.

“Wonderful,” said Zara. “Pardon my curiosity, but I feel as though someone must ask: who was that fellow in the cloak?”

“I don’t know,” said Mella.

“Should we go after him?” Tristen suggested. “Maybe we could catch him.”

“He could move thirty feet in an instant,” said Josie, shaking her head. “In the matter of a foot race, not even a speed spell could catch him now. We should instead take this opportunity to analyze this encounter.”

“Sounds like a conversation over some drinks is in order,” Zara suggested. “Mella, shall we escort you to the Rambler’s Root where we—”

“*Absolutely not,*” Mella said. “I despise that I have been robbed and I want that scoundrel caught, so I’ll give you any information I have. But I will not leave my shop. *You have no idea what it’s like to have your vulnerable visage exposed against your will.*”

“Well if you insist—” Zara began.

“Absolutely, we completely understand,” said Tristen. “And I’m sorry I could not stop that guy from unmasking you like he did.”

“I commend your efforts,” Mella said. “You’re brave enough, I suppose, *even though you only have the meager resources of a sword-fighting type.*”

“I…” Tristen sighed. “Has no one in Grenning ever seen a glaive before?”

“What the devil is a glaive?” Mella raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve come to understand that it’s a long stick with a knife tied to the end of it,” Zara explained.

“That’s hardly—” Tristen started.

“Back to the mystery at hand,” Zara said.

“I don’t know who that dastard was,” said Mella. “He came in, and he stole a rare wolf skull of mine. I didn’t see much of his face and he was not familiar.”

“He didn’t say anything to you?” Zara asked.

“No.”

“Could that be Gerald the baker, stealing again?” Tristen speculated.

“Not unless he lost a hundred pounds in a week and got so sick he turned pale as the moon,” Zara said. “I didn’t recognize that fellow at all, either.”

“So we have another thief?” Tristen said. “Maybe another citizen of Grenning who is a part of this forest-ritual effort?”

“What ritual?” Mella asked.

“Huh…” Tristen said. “I would have thought a magic-type like you could, I don’t know, *sense* it or something.”

“I have better things to do than keep an eye on these *miserable townies.*”

Josie stood as tall as she could. “My hypothesis is that the townsfolk are attempting a summoning ritual in the forest outside of town,” she announced.

“Oh,” Mella said. “*Oh.*”

“We know that some people brought salt, candles, and cow blood into the woods,” Josie continued. “I would guess that this theft of a *wolf skull* is involved in the ritual as well. I was hoping you might have insight into what it could be that they are trying to summon.”

“Hmm, yes. A summoning is a common use for such components, especially animal skulls,” Mella said. “And if they’re in the forest… yes, I believe I know what they’re summoning. *It’s very boring, but that’s to be expected.*”

“Huh?” Josie said.

“What do you mean?” Zara raised an eyebrow.

“How is there such thing as a boring summoning?” Tristen asked.

“The wolf skull is a symbol of Veynari, the god of the hunt,” Mella explained. “The townsfolk are summoning one of his wolves, probably to help get more food. *How simply uncreative.*”

“Is Veynari a good guy?” Tristen scanned Mella and Josie’s faces for context.

“*As good as any god could be,*” Mella said.

“So this cloaked fellow was another citizen working on the ritual,” Zara clarified. “Just a particularly fast one that’s good with a blade, perhaps one of the many veteran soldiers we have here in Grenning.”

“That would account for his physical prowess,” Josie said.

“Hold on, now that they have all the spell components, the situation is dire!” Tristen said. “They’re going to complete the ritual sometime tomorrow, on

the equinox. We have no time to waste if we want to stop them!”

“No, no,” Josie said. “There’s... it’s nothing. There’s no danger.”

“What?” Tristen turned to his sister with a furrowed brow.

“Gods always ask for sacrifices, Tristen,” said Josie. “The god of the hunt asks his worshipers to sacrifice *peace*. I am disappointed with myself that I didn’t see this before! The disrupted temperaments are *part* of the ritual. The townsfolk’s personalities may have been taken over for a short time, but ultimately the ritual is harmless. Now that they have the wolf’s skull, they’ll complete the summoning tomorrow, have a nice hunt, and the town will go back to normal.”

“Harmless?” Tristen said. “Daisy was not harmless. That dagger that was five inches in my side was not harmless. Even if the ritually-summoned wolf is nothing to worry about, which is hard for me to believe, you can’t say that all this is harmless. If it was, you and I wouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place, Josie.”

“It’s not a perfect situation, Tristen, but they are just hungry and desperate townsfolk,” Josie argued. “They gave their sacrifice of unhappiness for a few weeks, now they will get their reward of a fruitful hunt. The real danger here is that the nobles let their citizens feel this desperate. And that’s not a problem you can just hack away with your glaive.”

“So, that’s it then?” Tristen said, crossing his arms.

“Yes.” Josie nodded with her hands on her hips. “That’s it.”

“What a relief!” Zara exclaimed. “I was beginning to think that we would have to actually confront something. It’s nice when problems work themselves out, though it may not always make for a great story.”

“If you’re all satisfied,” Mella began. “The money you owe me, young wizard. You fooled me with your minor transmutation, turning copper coins into gold. That was impressive, but unfortunately it still means you’ve underpaid for your new spellbook.”

Josie’s face felt hot with shame.

“Mella, if I may,” Zara stepped in. “Could you not waive Josie’s debt in exchange for her acts today in saving you?”

“*No, of course not. She did nothing to save me,*” Mella replied. “I am a woman of business, and so the only debt I hold is to you, bard. *Though the thought of owing a charlatan mage anything irks me deeply.*”

“In that case,” Zara continued, “Could I perhaps use that favor to ask that you forget what Josie owes you—”

“*If you would tighten your lips for one moment,* I will not ask the young transmuter for the gold,” Mella said. Josie raised her eyebrows and, for the first time, made eye contact with the half-devil. Mella continued, “Not because I am forgiving a debt, but because I’ve decided, Josie, that you are an investment.”

“A wh-what?” Josie stuttered.

Tristen uncrossed his arms.

“*Drogon Smaug,*” Mella said. “You mastered that spell in less than two days. With that cleverness, someday, *a long way away,* you might make a very knowledgeable and resourceful ally to have.”

“Oh. O-okay,” Josie stuttered.

“Two days does sound impressive,” Tristen said. “I mean, Josie, you learned that just from a book?”

“Y-yes. But it’s still new, I could have done better, especially if I’d had my wand enchanted... and besides, the thief got away anyway, so...”

“Still, maybe there really is something to this wizard stuff. We should get you *more* books.”

“And I’ll have them for you, when you’re ready,” said Mella. “Now, if all your questions are answered, I’m done with the lot of you. Leave me to my cleaning up.”

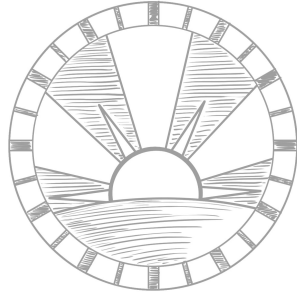
“Yes, thank you for the information,” Josie said. “And for... thank you.”

“One last thing: this favor that you owe me,” Zara began. “Is it a monetary payment? Or will it be a case where, someday, when my life is on the line, you magically appear and bring me back from the brink of death?”

“If you wouldn’t mind returning later, when I am not standing in the wreckage of my livelihood, with my horns exposed,” said Mella, “perhaps then I’d be more willing to discuss it.”

And so Josie, Tristen and Zara left Mella’s Repository of Miracles and Oddities. Josie and Zara walked side by side, marveling at the unexpectedly abrupt end to their adventure and pondering what songs Zara should play that night at the Rambler’s Root.

Tristen walked behind the other two. His gut was churning and his chest was tight. He couldn’t explain it in words, like his sister could, but he knew, deep in his heart, that this adventure was not at its end.



Chapter VIII

Dancing Divinations

Tristen shook his sister's shoulder. It was mid morning, but she was still asleep.

"Go away," Josie muttered, her face shoved deep into a pillow.

"Wake up, Josie," Tristen said.

Josie turned her head to the side so she could look at her brother without getting up. "You changed back last night," she said.

Tristen sagged his head. "Oh."

"I was up late, recasting the spell," Josie continued. "I don't know why, but it was difficult this time." Her lids fluttered and she started to mumble. "You know, if we got some help, maybe invested some time into this spell, we could probably control it better..."

Tristen tucked the flimsy blanket tighter around his sister and closed the curtains to keep the light out of their little room at the Rambler's Root. "Thanks for fixing me," he said.

"Yeah, okay," Josie muttered, her eyes finally closing.

Tristen left the tap house on his own.

A few hours later, Josie finally blinked awake. It was noon on the fall equinox, the last day of the harvest festival.

The Rambler's Root was even emptier than the day before, everyone was deeper into town for the celebrations. The only person in the tap house was Zara, playing a sweet tune on her fiddle, pacing slowly and aimlessly around the room.

"Where's Tristen?" Josie said, covering her mouth to daintily hide a yawn.

"Good morning, Josie!" Zara said, carrying on her fiddle tune. "He left a few hours ago, I think he was headed to the festival. Are you off to join him?"

"No," Josie said. "I'm not one for barnyard folk dancing."

"I may head out to the celebration later because, unlike you nobles, I'm capable of having fun."

"We enjoy dancing! It's just a different kind."

"Oh really? What kind, then? All I know are *barnyard folk dances*."

"Oh, well," Josie blushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it as an insult to you."

Zara smiled mischievously and her fiddle sang a bit faster. "Show me how you dance."

"You'd have to play something slower, like a waltz."

"A *waltz*? My god, your situation is dire."

Josie, flustered, put her hands on her hips. "Well, it doesn't matter, anyway. Without a partner it's difficult to demonstrate ballroom dancing."

"You can't dance without someone to lead you?" Zara said, playing a mockingly slow waltz.

"No necessarily *lead*, but, yes, one needs a partner to dance."

"Have you ever actually *tried* these sloppy folk dances that you dismiss so readily?"

"No, of course not," Josie said.

Zara's waltz quickened until it became the triplets of a reel. "I'll show you how you *should* dance," said the bard.

Zara tapped the heel and toe of her right foot and shuffled across the room. Then she switched feet and danced past Josie again. "Clap three times," Zara said, striking her heels together because her hands were occupied. "Then stomp your feet." Three stomps. "And then the last part!" Josie watched with amusement as Zara sashayed in a circle around her. "Come on, join me!" said the bard.

Despite herself, a smile grew on Josie's face. It was hard to not be enthralled by a dancing bard in striped pants. Josie tapped her heel.

"There you go!" said Zara, her face lighting up. "Now the steps."

Josie followed Zara, but she moved stiffly and sluggishly. The pattern of the dance was simple but surprisingly difficult for Josie to master, probably because she was being watched.

"Just relax," Zara said. "There's no wrong way to do it." The bard added a few scuffs and extra jumps to her tapping and stepping.

Josie kept her hands behind her back, focusing only on her legs, gliding around the tables and chairs. As the song went on, she found herself losing her breath, but the more tired she was the giddier she became.

"There you go!" Zara exclaimed. "Excellent dancing, princess!"

“Wh—what did you say?” Josie said, stumbling back into a chair which fell to the floor with a clang. The fiddle music screeched to a halt.

“Are you alright?” Zara asked. “I only commended your performance!”

“Oh,” Josie said, letting out a breathless laugh. “I’m alright, just tired.”

The young wizard took a seat in one of the chairs. “You... you never played me the rest of your song, about Rua and the drum,” she said. “I wanted to know what it was about.”

Zara set her fiddle down on the table and sat beside her. “There’s no greater compliment to a bard, but I’ll need a moment to catch my breath,” she said. “And, even if you heard the song, you would not know the whole story.”

“Then will you tell me what it’s about?” Josie asked.

“Miss Mage, the hardest story to tell is one’s own. But I will forge ahead, for the sake of my craft. Rua is my grandmother, I wrote that song for her.”

“She was from the Red Plains?”

“You know of them?”

“They’re the fields to the northeast, once home to many orc tribes,” Josie said. “But when the silver elves of Inkrune arrived, they forced the orcs to join their armies. The tribes were recruited, or had to flee.”

“Yes, many don’t know that truth,” Zara said. “My grandmother’s tribe was one of the last. She escaped with my mother to Dawnmore, they met my father, my parents married, and eventually the world was made a little more colorful when I was finally born.” Zara tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Overtime, however, it was clear that not everyone in this kingdom is like my father. I’m only half-orc, and still people constantly remind me that they don’t like my deep voice and my tusks.” Zara stretched her mouth in a goofy grin to show off her large teeth.

Josie laughed and Zara couldn’t help but let out a chuckle.

Josie regained a ladylike composure. “You mentioned that your family moved, so why did you stay?” she asked.

“Where else would I go? Not to Derduar, like my parents, there’s no career for a bard in those sparsely populated, shepherd villages.”

“You could be a traveler, like me and Tristen.”

“I *still* don’t know why you two left your home.”

“I know you’re changing the subject, but I feel like I owe you a story,” Josie said. “I am from a noble family of Ecrin, as I told you. My parents wanted me to become a cleric of Luxabian, the Lifebringer, because that is a great honor in this kingdom. But I didn’t want my limits to be defined by a god who would give me only what he thought I deserved. I wanted my limits to be my own intelligence and diligence.”

“You wanted to be a wizard!” Zara said. “Ah, yes, I feel like we know each other better already.”

“I—I, um,” Josie began, “I study transmutation. I change things.” She reached a hand towards Zara’s lips. The bard raised an eyebrow as sparkling, yellow energy coalesced around Josie’s fingers. “I can fix whatever you think is wrong,” Josie said as the energy began to shrink and round Zara’s lower teeth.

“No,” Zara said, moving Josie’s hand away. The energy faded and Zara’s teeth returned to be as sharp as they always were. “That’s kind of you, but the only thing wrong with my tusks is that other people don’t like them.”

“O—oh,” Josie said. “I’m sorry. I... I do actually like your tusks, I mean, they’re fine, and your voice, when you sing, and when you don’t. I mean, I only thought that, perhaps, you wanted a change.”

“I know you meant to help,” Zara said. “Like how you help Tristen.”

Josie bit her lip and tried to keep her face expressionless.

“Tristen is different than he was when you two left home, isn’t he?” Zara said. “He didn’t always look like he does now, and I can tell that eats at him. Forgive me, but I can’t help wanting to know what’s so wrong with him that you have to keep his form maintained through a spell.”

“*Nothing!*” Josie snapped. Her heart pounded, she felt angry. “*Nothing* is wrong with him. He... he *is* transformed. But it’s not a very extreme transformation, and once I figure out how to make the spell permanent, it won’t bother him at all.”

“Okay, okay,” Zara said. She rested a hand on Josie’s tense shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not, it’s...it’s difficult. I—I can’t figure out how to make the spell permanent.”

Josie’s head fell into her hands and Zara’s hand receded.

“Maybe I can help,” Zara said. Josie peaked up at the bard, but didn’t say anything. “I’m sorry that my words upset you,” said Zara. “If I understood more, I would know better how to speak about your situation.”

“I will not explain Tristen’s *situation* for the sake of anyone else’s comfort,” Josie said quietly.

“It’s not a matter of my comfort,” said Zara. “I just wanted to understand so that I could help. But if you can’t tell me, that’s alright too.”

Josie swallowed and felt a lump go down to her gut. She took a deep breath in and let it out slowly, and with it went the tightness in her body. Cautiously, and a bit shakily, she opened her white spellbook, the one she always carried with her, to the most important page.

“There are some things I can’t share without Tristen here,” Josie said. “But I can show you this.”

She placed the book open on the table. There was a drawing of a figure in the center of the page. Below it were little maps with Xs on distant mountains,

forests, and far out in the ocean. Glyphs of varying sizes and shapes were scrawled across the page. There were lists of spell components, some crossed out, and then some re-written. Among the notes were dates going back at least a few years.

Across the top in chicken scratch was the title: “Josie’s Absolute Alteration.”



Tristen wandered through Grenning under the noontime sun on the equinox. He needed to find someone with knowledge of the gods that were worshiped in this part of the kingdom.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to a lumberman.

“Leave me alone,” the man grumbled, moving past him.

“What do you want, kid?” said another unhelpful citizen.

“Miss, could you help me?” Tristen asked a woman. “I’m looking for clergymen.”

“Only thing we have here is the nature temple, north side of town,” said the woman.

“Thank you,” Tristen replied.

He had to stop and ask for directions a few more times, but eventually he found himself at the doorstep of a temple. It was the only building made of stone that he had seen in Grenning.

The temple was so embedded in the forest that only the large, stone doors and the circular glass window above them were clearly visible. The rest of the temple receded into the trees, shrouded in vines, covered with flowers and mushrooms, and engulfed in the rich, leafy canopy. One of the doors was etched with depictions of wheat, radishes, cows, and sheep, the other with trees, swampland, reeds, and wolves. In the center, overlapping both doors, was a carving of a unicorn’s head, which split down the middle as Tristen entered.

The interior was not like an interior at all. There were stone walls, but trees grew within the room and the ceiling was made of their canopy and nothing else. The ground was a web of stone pathways, the spaces between them little gardens filled with plants. Squirrels scurried across the paths, bees hummed above the flowers, and birds nested in the tree branches.

Tristen made his way to the back of the great chamber, passing many open archways along the way that led off of the main room. Each passage looked as if it opened back into the forest, but there was an eerie feeling from them that implied something more.

Tristen reached the back wall and stood in awe beneath the stone carving

that spanned it. The great image towered to a height of forty feet. On one side was a woman wearing a dress of flowers, her hands reaching towards a man in the center. He had elven features and wore leather armor, the hair on his chin and head grew out like leaves. On his other side was a woman balancing a basket of fruit on her head and holding a pitcher in one hand. Three smaller figures were beneath the larger ones—an elven archer riding on the back of a unicorn, a woman cradling a baby, and a man stooped beside a wolf.

“Hello,” said a voice behind Tristen. He turned to see a woman wearing green robes and carrying a staff. She had freckles across her nose and flowers in her messy braids.

“Hello,” said Tristen. “I need help.”

“What kind?” asked the woman.

“Advice, information.”

“I’ll give it, if I can,” said the woman, taking a seat right on the ground.

Tristen knelt. “With salt, candles, cow’s blood, and a wolf skull, what would that summon?”

“Are you attempting a ritual?”

“No, I’m trying to stop one.”

“Oh, much better,” said the woman.

“My sister told me that it was nothing to worry about, that it would only summon a wolf of Venari.”

“Veynari?” The woman tilted her head. She lay her staff on the ground, and crawled toward the stone carving of the man beside the wolf. She rested a hand on the wolf’s muzzle and the man’s nose, as if petting them both. “The wolf is sacred to Veynari, the skull of such a beast would never be used in one of his rituals. To kill a wolf or desecrate its body would anger him greatly.”

“Oh.”

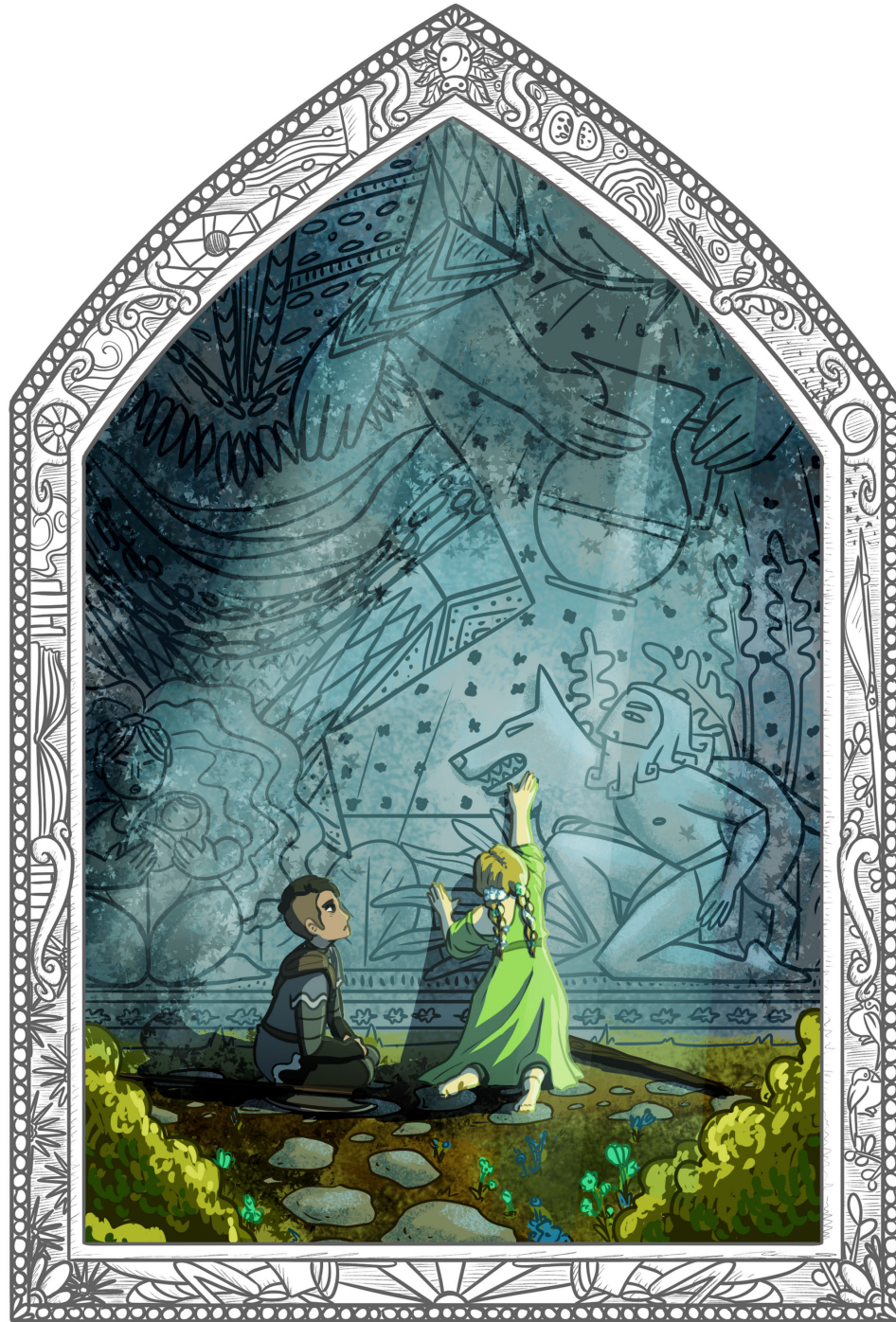
The woman gave Tristen a curious look. “What makes you think there is a summoning?”

“My sister is a wizard, and she identified the spell components,” Tristen explained, shifting to sit with his legs crossed. “She and another wizard said that Veynari asks his worshipers to sacrifice peace for his help, and that would explain why Grenning’s citizens are so riled.”

“Belligerence,” the woman said, her face falling. A squirrel ran from a nearby bush and onto her lap. “Veynari has a brother, Dunaru, the beast of murder and mutilation. His worshipers also suffer unrest, but unlike Veynari, the skulls of hunting animals *are* used in his rituals.”

“They’re worshiping *Dunaru*...” Tristen furrowed his brow, then his eyes widened. “The townsfolk have been planning something evil.”

“Not to their knowledge,” said the woman. She gently stroked the squirrel’s



“The wolf is sacred to Veynari, the skull of such a beast would never be used in one of his rituals.”

head. “You’ve seen that even intelligent wizards can confuse the two brothers. So many cultic leaders parade one god as another, for an endless list of reasons.”

“Someone is misleading them,” Tristen said. “The townsfolk are being lied to!”

“Sunset is the holiest of hours on the equinox. If all you’ve said is true, warrior, then you must make sure that Dunaru and his followers do not complete this ritual. And you don’t have much time left.”



“A *permanent* transformation spell,” Zara said, scanning the page of Josie’s spellbook. “I can see why this is causing you some trouble.”

“Do you think you can help?” Josie asked.

“I think I’m definitely going to try.”

Tristen burst into the Rambler’s Root, out of breath from running all the way across town.

“Josie!” he said. “Josie, I found something!”

“Tristen! Perfect!” said Zara. “I was about to help your sister with this special spell of hers, but she said we would need your presence before I could be given the whole story.”

“I know I should have asked you first, Tristen,” Josie said, standing, “but I’ve been struggling with your spell and Zara offered to help us. Things have been the same way for too long. We need to trust somebody.”

Tristen saw the begging in his sister’s eyes and the curious concern on Zara’s face, but louder was his heart pounding for the fight he knew was upon them. This curse of his was always slowing him down, putting up walls, looming over him when there were bigger and more important things to be done. “We don’t have enough time,” he said.

“Tristen, please—” Josie said.

“So, do it quickly,” he finished.

“Oh, o-okay,” Josie stammered. She turned to Zara who was waiting eagerly. “Tristen is my brother,” Josie said. “In his heart, he always was. But when we were born, my parents got it wrong.”

“This will take forever!” Tristen said, placing both hands on the table to speak to Zara directly. “Josie and I were born sisters,” he said. “Josie’s spell transforms me into my true self. And we’re in hiding because we were the twin princesses of Dawnmore.”

At this, the bard’s eyes widened and her lips parted, but she said nothing at first.

“Tristen!” Josie hit her brother’s shoulder. “That’s more than I was going to share!”

“I thought you wanted to trust her with everything,” Tristen said.

“I mean, I suppose...”

Zara, blinking, said, “So the mystery of the twin princesses is true... I thought it was just a hollow folk tale.” She paused, then smiled. “I found the lost heirs of Dawnmore! What a great story this’ll make!”

“You can’t tell anyone,” said Josie.

“Of course, I’m kidding,” Zara said. “You ran away from home, after all. We don’t want you sent back to that horrible place... I’m assuming?”

“Our family does love us,” Josie said. “But Tristen and I had our lives laid out for us, and we didn’t fit into those lives.”

“Josie didn’t fit,” Tristen said. “I wasn’t understood, and so I wasn’t wanted.” He crossed his arms. “So now that you know everything, Zara, we can get back to what’s important. I spoke with the nature clergy. The townsfolk are not sacrificing to Veynari, they’re sacrificing to Dunaru.”

“W—what?” Josie said.

“A cleric told me that wolf skulls aren’t used in Veynari’s rituals, but they are in Dunaru’s,” Tristen stated.

“Who or what is Dunaru?” Zara asked.

“Venari’s evil brother,” Tristen replied.

Josie gasped, then smacked her forehead. “I can’t believe I... I was so distracted at Mella’s shop...”

“Don’t agonize over a mistake, Josie,” Tristen said. “We need your magic-mind to be clear and focused, okay?”

Josie nodded.

“Does the daring hero also require the assistance of a bard on this endeavor?” Zara asked. “Or does he not wish to share the spoils of victory?”

“Of course we want you to join us, Zara,” Tristen said. “I’d always rather have help than credit.”

“Then I shall accompany you!” said the bard. “For I declare that we are friends. And friends don’t let friends battle neo-cults alone, even if friends are scared of evil summonings, and just found out a very big twist about their friends’ lives—”

“Zara,” said Tristen.

“Right, no time to waste!” said the bard. “But before we go, I must acknowledge that I’m honored you two have trusted me with this secret. Although, do I have to bow to you now?” She chuckled at her own joke.

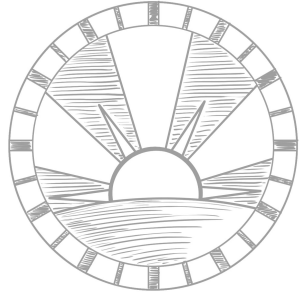
“Of course not,” Josie said, collecting her spellbook.

“Oh, and, to show that I trust you as well, you should know my full name is

Olozara, but the shorter version sounds less orc-ish so that’s what I go by most.”

“Okay, Olozara,” Tristen said. “We have to get going!”

“Right, right,” Zara said. “Off to stop a summoning!”



Chapter IX
**Wayward Worshipers
in the Woods**

Tristen, Josie, and Zara entered the Dawnmore Forest as the sun descended towards the treetops. Armed with glaive, spellbook, and fiddle, they made their way deeper into the brush and farther from the warm streetlights of Grenning.

Josie traced her finger around her eyes and said “*airig-drio.*” A yellow glow haloed her brown irises. “I can see a trail of conjuration magic leading south,” she said. “It’s less than an hour old.”

“Let’s hurry,” said Tristen. “We need to find them before the sun sets.”

Shadows stretched taller, and the green of the forest mixed with the deep red of sunset, until everything was in darkness. They eventually reached a clearing, and a red glow like a fire flickered in the spaces between the leaves. The three adventurers knelt behind a grass and dirt covered boulder and peered past the branches and into the clearing ahead.

Twelve or so townsfolk crouched around a ring of salt and lit candles, all their eyes were closed. In the center of everything was a man in a hooded cloak, pouring dark ichor onto the dirt ground. On his right wrist were two burn marks in the shape of hands.

“That must be the guy who’s been tricking the townspeople,” Tristen said. “I can’t see his face, though, it’s too dark.”

“We know he can really fight, so we should be careful,” said Josie.

“What’s the plan, then?” Zara asked. “I’m afraid I don’t have much use in battle. What good is music and laughter when your goal is to kill or capture your audience?”



*In the center of everything was a man in a hooded cloak,
pouring dark ichor onto the dirt ground.*

“I used to feel a similar way, but I learned to use my skills creatively,” said Josie. “You can do the same thing, Zara.”

“Try to convince the townsfolk to leave,” Tristen said. “I’ll hold back the guy in the hood while Josie gets rid of all the magic stuff. Okay, go!”

Tristen crept into the darkness until he vanished from sight.

“Oh, yes, sure, I’ll just do that, no problem,” said Josie, crawling much more clumsily than her brother in the opposite direction.

Once they were both gone, Zara stood, brushed some leaves off of her striped pants, and entered the clearing.

“What a fine evening this is!” she announced.

All eyes flew open, and turned to face her. The hooded man curled around, snarling at the bard like a half-starved wolf. Zara’s eyes fell to the circle of blood on which he stood. The man had drawn an abstract symbol of lines and shapes and at the center was the wolf skull, its hollow sockets dripping with the cow’s blood.

“Zara?” Mr. O’Bell exclaimed, his face red with embarrassment.

“What’s *she* doing here?” Mrs. Curhyde growled.

“I love a good party, even one in the middle of the woods at night around a circle of candles that definitely don’t give off a cult-y atmosphere,” said Zara. “However, I think it’s best we all go back to Grenning. I’ll buy a drink for everyone! Who’ll join me at the Rambler’s Root *right now?*”

A man in a leather apron stood but was yanked back down by one of his friends.

“*Who do you think you are, interrupting a sacred ritual to Veynari?*” the hooded man said in a voice that was sharp like venom.

“This is no sacred ritual to the god of the hunt,” said Zara. She opened her arms wide to address everyone. “Why do you all trust him? Who is he?”

“He’s a cleric, a healer, a messenger of the gods,” said a woman in a simple but finely pressed dress.

“Sent by Veynari to bring us more food before the winter,” said Gerald the baker who sat at the back in his stained apron.

“He’s helping us when our leaders won’t even acknowledge our suffering,” said Mrs. Curhyde, standing. “He knows that we will work for our food and fight for the sake of Grenning. He’s here to finally give us relief after all those years of war and loss.”

The other townspeople shouted in agreement.

“I see, you have your reasons,” Zara said, lifting her fiddle to her chin. “But you must trust me.”

Zara’s bow flew across her fiddle strings and the forest came to life with the upbeat melody of a jig. Pinkish-purple light illuminated the eyes of the townspeople. Some shook it off and grew angry, but others were enthralled by the

bard and got to their feet. As Zara stepped towards Grenning, they followed her like ducklings marching behind their mother.

“Stop them!” shouted Mrs. Curhyde, one of those who had resisted Zara’s charm. She grabbed the collar of a younger man while Mr. O’Bell was restrained by the woman in the pressed dress.

Half of the townspeople were struggling to leave, others were holding their friends back, and only a few remained kneeling around the circle, concentrating to hold its magic in place.

“*Sit down!*” the hooded fellow screamed as he set down his pitcher of blood and drew his dagger. “We’ve almost completed the—*oof!*”

Tristen’s body slammed into the cloaked man, knocking them both to the ground. The two of them rolled around among the kicking and screaming of the divided townspeople.

Josie crept in under the chaos, unnoticed as usual, and crawled up to the sigil of blood in the center of the clearing. She said “*airig-ruaig*” and slammed both palms into it, but the magic was not dispelled. Then she tried “*glani*” to wash the blood away, but it remained. She clawed at sigil, digging into the dirt with her fingers, but the red lines were relentless as if they had been seared into the earth.

But Josie observed that a few townsfolk were still concentrating on the ritual. She snapped her wrists as if shaking the water from her hands. “*Areg!*” she said as long, sharp claws grew from her fingers. She wrapped her arms around one of the kneeling townspeople and yanked him back with all her body weight. The man screamed and shook, trying to dislodge the thrashing wizard, but his concentration had already been broken.

“There’s more of them!” shouted Mrs. Curhyde as she chased after Zara.

At her call, a man with broad shoulders and a thick waist dropped the two departing townspeople he was restraining and made his way to Josie. Two burly hands grabbed Josie by the shoulders and lifted her high into the air, away from the man she had distracted from the ritual. The wizard squeaked like a startled bird.

The hooded man’s attention drifted from Tristen and towards Josie for a brief moment. Tristen took the chance to twist his arm until he dropped the dagger, then rolled them both away from the blade. They tumbled with their hands at each other’s throats.

The hooded man rolled to his back and kicked Tristen into the trunk of a thick tree, knocking the wind out of him. Tristen lunged for his opponent, but the hooded man shot forward and landed a deep jab into his stomach, bruising him deeper than Tristen thought was possible. The hooded man slipped away, towards his pitcher of blood.

“The pitcher!” Josie called to her comrades.

Tristen took great strides towards his quarry but was intercepted by a

fuming Mrs. Curhyde.

Half the townspeople had succumbed to Zara's charm and fled into the woods, and of those who remained, only three were still kneeling around the summoning circle. Zara, now unencumbered by the Mrs. Curhyde, brought her bow down on two of her fiddle strings at once, summoning a bright white flash of energy as if the sun itself had blinked in and out of the clearing. The harmonic shout of her music echoed through the woods.

Zara's charming, upbeat tune changed to a deep and fast humming as she kept her eyes trained on the hooded man. He stopped pouring blood and waved his hands around in front of him.

"He's blinded!" Josie shouted to her brother.

Tristen whipped out his glaive and used it like a broom to sweep Mrs. Curhyde out of the way. She grabbed the haft of the weapon with both hands and held on tight. Tristen let it go, and bolted for the summoning circle.

With Zara's focus on her blindness spell, her initial enchantment was dispelled. Mr. O'Bell regained his senses, so he and the woman who was restraining him rushed to pull Zara's fiddle away. The music faltered, and the hooded man frantically resumed his work. He began the last lines on his sigil.

Tristen leapt for him, but the hooded man rolled to dodge the attack and Tristen was sent across the clearing by his own momentum. He slammed into the burly man holding Josie aloft, who did not budge an inch.

Tristen lifted an arm. In his hand, he held a dark grey hood.

In the center of the clearing, the unmasked figure stood slowly like a corpse rising from the grave. Mr. O'Bell stopped struggling against Zara, and those still kneeling recoiled in fear. His skin was pale like snow and clear like fish scales. His eyes were narrow and pink. Pointed ears dipped down from his head and long, ivory hair billowed out behind him.

"A silver elf!" shouted Mrs. Curhyde. "A scourge from Inkrune! The ancient enemy of our kingdom!"

The last of the cow's blood dripped from the pitcher as the pale figure spoke: "*Dawnmore will fall!*"

The red lines of the sigil ignited. The flames grew until a bonfire danced before them, and from the flames came a monster of tooth and bone. Four long, spindly legs supported an emaciated, wiry body. Tough grey skin wrinkled at every joint. A whip-like tail flowed from a spine of spiked, protruding bones and a torn face erupted with huge teeth. The creature gave a roar that filled the forest to the brim.

The man holding Josie dropped her on her brother before fleeing into the woods. Mr. O'Bell and the others scrambled to make their escape as well.

The flames dispersed, the painted sigil vanished, and Dunaru's spawn



"Dawnmore will fall!"

loomed before everyone in all its hideousness.

It unhinged its massive jaw to show a gaping mouth crowded with teeth, then it inhaled, shaking the forest and consuming the wind, drawing smoky, black tendrils from Josie, Tristen, Zara, and the remaining townspeople, seeping the very life and breath from them. The monster's jaw snapped closed, and its once twig-like body became bloated and meaty.

"We've never fought a demon before, Josie," Tristen said. "Do you think we can defeat it?"

"I think we have to," she replied.

The monster lashed forward with talons the size of tree roots towards a weakened Mr. O'Bell, lifting him towards its mouth.

An axe spun through the air and embedded itself in the monster's arm like a meat cleaver. The beast wailed, its fingers uncurling, dropping its prey. Mr. O'Bell slumped to the ground and crawled away. The monster's attention turned to Tristen as he sprinted across the circle to reunite with his glaive.

The creature swept a long arm across the clearing like a scythe in a wheat field. Tristen jumped and Josie ducked. Zara played note after note of a discordant melody, hitting the creature with bludgeoning waves of thunder. Josie dropped a pinch of powder on her tongue and let loose a burst of fire from her lips that seared the monster's skin. The space between Tristen and the monster was a storm of blade and claws. With each blow the monster's wailing became louder and more panicked. Its wrinkling, gray body withered and dissolved where Josie had burned it.

Surrounded, seeking to escape, the beast roared and charged towards Tristen on all fours. The fighter leapt back into the forest, wedging the creature's bulbous body between two thick trees. Limping on a gashed leg, Tristen ran to his sister who was coughing from the life-sucking breath.

"I think I can defeat it," he said, also wheezing. "But I need to get above its claws. I don't suppose you have anything in your books for that, do you?"

"Eh, well," Josie said.

"What do you mean by that?" Tristen said, concerned.

Josie took a feather from her pouch and used it to draw a pattern across her brother's chest. "*Etil*," she said.

Tristen's limbs became lighter than air and he floated up, then hovered above the forest floor. Josie floated Tristen until he was twenty feet high, well above the monster's head.

"This is awesome!" Tristen said, flailing his arms in an unsuccessful attempt to swim through the air.

"Only *I* can move you, Tristen," Josie called.

"What? Oh no, no, no, this is *not* awesome," he said.

Wood groaned as the creature fought to escape from the trees. With a loud snap, the monster freed itself, reared back, and roared, its mouth open below Tristen like a gaping pit into the hells.

Zara came up behind Josie and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, sending a wave of life energy and purple healing magic through her body.

"Feel better, please," said Zara.

"Th-thank you," Josie said. "Where are you going?"

"Our visitor from Inkrune is making an escape!" Zara called as she headed for the trees.

Tristen flailed erratically with his glaive, missing the monster at every attempt. "Lower, Josie!" he said. Josie lifted him ten feet higher, out of the way of the beast's gnashing teeth. "That's the opposite of what I said!" he shouted.

No matter what strange angle he found himself floating at, Tristen attacked the beast with the long reach of his glaive. Josie righted her brother as best she could, and kept him as close to the monster as she felt was safe. Tristen made many strikes with his weapon that sprayed black blood across the clearing. The beast was growing weaker, but the more wounded it became the fiercer it retaliated with a gashes across Tristen's legs and chest.

"This spell is so stupid!" Tristen shouted.

"No it's not, you're killing it!" said Josie.

At the sound of her voice, the beast perked its tattered ears and turned its head, as if becoming aware of the wizard for the first time. Its focus was instantly overtaken by the more attainable prey.

"Oh no," Josie said as it lumbered toward her.

She dropped Tristen who landed in the charred remains of the summoning circle so hard he bounced a little. Dunaru's spawn loped forward on all fours like a half-decayed wolf. Josie took a jar of molasses from her component pouch, scooped some up with her finger, and flicked it towards the creature.

"*Maoul!*" she shouted, drawing out the vowels.

The monster's limbs slowed incrementally, like a land-bound creature running into the ocean, losing speed as they reach deeper waves. Even the wiry hairs on its back moved sluggishly as if the beast was submerged in syrup.

"Tristen!" Josie shouted as she ran from the monster. Her short and uneven steps matched the creature's slowed stride.

"I really do love that new book of hers," Tristen said to himself.

He wiped a bloody palm across his tunic, spun his glaive, and headed for the beast. The creature's eyes turned ever so slowly at the oncoming fighter. Tristen ran up its arched back like it was a ramp, dragging his blade behind him and leaving a gash in its wake. He leaped in the air above the monster's head and brought his glaive down right between its eyes.

Josie's slow spell shattered as the beast roared and shook. From the tip of its tail to its sharp teeth, it disintegrated like paper in a fire until all that was left was a pile of ash.



The silver elf was fast. Zara's yellow eyes could see him getting away from her through the darkness.

"You Inkrune soldiers are cowards!" she called. The silver elf winced and a bit of blood dripped from his ears. "You always make others do your fighting for you!" said Zara.

The elf crumpled to his knees, holding the sides of his head. Zara wove through the trees to catch up to him.

"What do you know of war?" the silver elf said through clenched teeth. "You may have orc blood, but you're only a trickster, only a bard. This kingdom you fight for has no want, no need for you."

"Actually," said Zara, a bit of purple magic sparkling in her eyes, "I think that today I proved that my presence can be *instrumental*."

The silver elf squinted. Then he let out a snort. Then a chuckle. Then a cackle burst from him even as he tried to keep his lips closed. He fell to the ground, laughing hysterically, holding his sides and hitting his fists against the ground.

Zara tossed her hair back and smiled through glowing, purple eyes. "I know. I'm hilarious."



"Ha ha!" Tristen exclaimed, dropping his glaive and wrapping both arms around his sister. "We've done it again, Josie!" He tried to lift her into the air, but the wounds on his chest and arms stopped him. "Ow, ow, everything hurts," he said.

"I can levitate *you*, not the other way around," said Josie.

"Not that it worked very well when you did."

"It did! You just don't like looking a little stupid. Now come on, we have to help Zara capture that scoundrel from Inkrune!"

Josie grabbed her brother by the arm and they ran for the trees, just as Zara emerged into the clearing with the silver elf over her shoulder. He was bound at the wrists and ankles by lute strings.

"You're both alive!" Zara said. "I don't mean to sound surprised, only happy. I'm sorry I missed the end of this battle, but I had good reason."

"You can slay our people and wound our city, but you can never snuff out

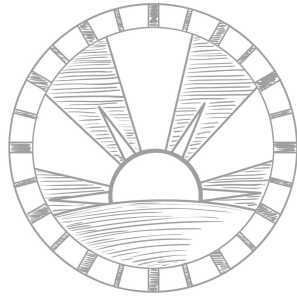
our enmity!" the silver elf growled between spurts of hysterical laughter. "I am not the only Inkrune soldier inside your borders."

"I think Finnley will know what to do with him," Tristen said. "But how did you catch him all on your own, Zara?"

"I just had to use my spells in a creative way," Zara said, grinning.

"That's what adventurers do," said Josie.

Tristen put an arm around his sister and his other hand on Zara's free shoulder. "This is one I'll remember," he said as they all started the long walk back to Grenning.



Epilogue

“Good morning, Finnley,” said Tristen as he approached the Groveminder guildhall early the next day. “Did your prisoner give you much trouble last night?”

“None at all,” replied Finnley. “He let us know that he’s a mage from the house of Bel’luil, in Inkrune. We think we can arrange to trade him for the safe return of at least a dozen Dawnmore soldiers still imprisoned there. Their families have likely given up hope of their return. I’m sure it’s an understatement to say they will be glad to have them home again.”

“That’s great news,” said Tristen.

“And on top of that, I heard that you and your sister saved many lives by slaying the demon that the silver elf summoned before it could reach our town! We really can’t thank you enough.”

“Not without Zara’s help. You can thank her for catching this guy,” said Tristen. “I just wish the townspeople didn’t feel so desperate, and that the nobles wouldn’t let things get this bad. I wish we could do more.”

“Now, that kind of talk ignores your great victory!” said Finnley, giving Tristen a punch in the arm. “Don’t worry about us anymore. I spoke to Lya after your sister mentioned her. She has the makings of a great investigator, and so I’m enlisting her as a trainee. She’s not the only new member we have, either. With extra hands, I believe the Groveminders can do much good for Grenning.” Finnley squeezed Tristen’s arm and gave him a wide smile. “So, we *must* do something to thank you,” he said.

“Oh, no, there’s no need,” Tristen said. “My sister and I are setting off

today, anyway.”

“Horses then! The two most recent heroes of Grenning are certainly deserving of horses.”

“That’s more than I could ask for, Finnley, you don’t—”

“Rodney!” Finnley called towards the back of the guildhall. “Tack up Arrow and Biscuit.”

“Alright, alright,” came the elf’s voice in response.

“Rodney?” Tristen said.

“Yes, would you believe that Rodney is one of our new Groveminders?” said Finnley. “He’s one of the best bowmen this side of the forest, if you’d believe it, and he’s finally putting it to good use again after the Last War.”

“Then things really are looking up for Grenning,” said Tristen.



“Why do you get Arrow and I’m stuck with Biscuit?” Josie said as Tristen handed her the reins of a sandy-white horse.

The two of them stood at the southern edge of town beside Grenning’s ruined stone walls.

“They’re exactly the same, Josie,” Tristen replied. “It doesn’t even matter.”

“I thought you *loved* biscuits.”

“Don’t try to distract me with the mention of food!”

“Come on! *I* want the cool horse!”

“Have you ever even shot an arrow? No. No you haven’t. I get the horse with the cool name.”

“Aha! So you *admit* he’s better!”

“Only his name! We’ll take turns if you’re really gonna be a bug about it. By the way, where’s Zara? Wasn’t she supposed to meet us here to say goodbye?”

“Yes, but she’s never on time.”

“Hey!” called the bard as she approached from down the road. She had a lute on her back, a fiddle in her hand, and a rather large satchel in her arms. “You’re going to regret speaking ill of me when you see the present I have for you.”

“For me?” said Josie, placing a delicate hand on her chest.

Tristen rolled his eyes.

Zara reached into her satchel and produced a gnarled stick.

“How did you get that?” Josie asked.

“It’s a stick, Josie, they’re everywhere,” said Tristen.

“Not *that* stick,” said Josie.

“It’s not a stick!” said Zara. She waved a hand around it to add extra

emphasis. “It’s your new wand.”

Josie’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open in a shocked smile. “How did you... how did you enchant it?”

“You were there when Mella insisted that she owed me a favor. Here, give it a try.”

Josie took the wand, handling it reverently like it was made of glass. She gave a squeak and then flicked it towards her brother. With a bright pop of energy, his tunic was a harlequin pattern of pink and yellow diamonds.

“Hey!” he said.

Another flick and his tunic was embroidered with depictions of biscuits and bacon.

“You—!” Tristen reached for the wand but Josie resisted, and they fought until Josie turned Tristen’s tunic back to blue.

“It’s amazing, Zara!” Josie said, giving the bard hug, reaching awkwardly around everything she carried. “Thank you so much.”

“And this is for you,” Zara said, tossing a cloth bundle to Tristen. It was warm in his hands. He untied the knot to find a dozen biscuits were inside. “They have the right amount of salt and everything,” said Zara.

Tristen shoved a whole biscuit in his mouth and picked up another to have it at the ready. “They *are* delicious!” he said, barely understandable. Josie reached for a biscuit but Tristen slapped her hand away. “My biscuits! You have your stick thingy.”

“I had to make sure you tried the real thing before you left Grenning,” Zara said.

Tristen swallowed. “Thanks. But what’s in the rest of the bag?” he asked.

“Well, I, um,” Zara cleared her throat. “After our battle, I was up all night pondering my situation. The walls of the Rambler’s Root have a little less color after you’ve just fought a malevolent archmage from the city of darkness and the murderous demon-spawn that he summoned. I think it’s time that I moved on. I have learned all I can from Grenning. If you allow me, I would like to try the life of a traveler and accompany you on your journey, wherever it may lead.”

Josie gave Tristen a wide, excited grin and he replied with a smile.

“Are you sure you can handle it, Zara?” Tristen asked. “A summoned hell-beast is just the beginning. We’ll likely face greater trials, dragons, curses, traveling for miles without access to a tavern.”

“Thanks to you two, I’ve learned my skills are more useful than I first thought,” said Zara. “I may not be a seasoned warrior, but I have wit and confidence, and sometimes words hurt more than any knife.”

“That sounds like someone who’s never been stabbed,” Tristen said, laughing.

“You can add your things to Biscuit, Zara,” said Josie, hitting her brother on the shoulder. “Tristen and I will take Arrow.”

“Maybe now she’ll stop whining about which horse is cooler,” said Tristen, mounting the horse. He hoisted his sister, not so gracefully, onto the saddle behind him.

Zara beamed as she loaded her pack and climbed onto Biscuit. “So where are we headed?”

“South, towards the Well’s Woods,” said Tristen, getting Arrow to a trot. “Our first journey beyond the kingdom’s borders.”

“Why there?” asked Zara, following with Biscuit.

“We’re going to figure out Josie’s Absolute Alteration,” said Tristen. “Or at least, we’re finally going to try.”

“A tribe of druids live in that valley,” Josie explained. “They’re masters of changing shape. They only transform into animals, but I think they could still teach me a few things.”

“This is a most noble venture! I’m excited to see this spell created,” said Zara. “Though, surely the druids will not share their magic for free.”

“Oh, gods, no,” said Tristen. “We’ll have to do something in return. Slay a monster threatening their crops, find a rare flower on top of a mountain, mediate an argument between two warring families—we won’t know what we’ll find until we get there.”

“And we still have to travel through all of Dawnmore before we’re even close,” Josie added. “We could even come across something along the way that might help us.”

“She means book shops,” said Tristen. “She’s always stopping at book shops, and unfortunately we’ll go through many towns with such establishments on our journey. Get ready for some boring shopping days sprinkled in with all the epic battles.”

“Those sound like they’ll be welcome respites,” said the bard. “It seems there’s a long and difficult adventure ahead of us.”

“Are you having doubts, Olozara?” Tristen said with a smile.

“Yes... but I hope we’ll be too far from Grenning by the time I lose all confidence.”

“In that case, we better get going.”

Tristen sped up until Arrow was almost at a gallop, Josie clung to him so she wouldn’t fall off. Zara and Biscuit followed on a much less straight path.

They all traveled south beneath the tall, stone arch of Grenning’s crumbling walls, delving back into the vast, green forest and deeper into the kingdom of Dawnmore.



They all traveled south beneath the tall, stone arch of Grenning's crumbling walls, delving back into the vast, green forest and deeper into the kingdom of Dawnmore.

(c) 2021 Lucien Beatrice