Potions and Elixirs

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, July 2016

Various Authors

July 31, 2016, 08:58:53 PM

# Potions and Elixirs

### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, July 2016

by etrelley  
  
  
Bea rightly pointed out that there haven't been many "traditional" story prompts this year. We did a lot of extravagant stuff like Breaking the Fourth Wall, Random Wikipedia Article or last month's Story Generator and it was great fun but for August we decided to go with something more "normal".  
Outside of RPGs and adventure games, potions haven't been very popular until a certain Professor humiliated a little wizard student lesson after lesson in his potion class.  
This month I want you to show me that there is more about potions than Severus Snape, Felix Felices and Polyjuice Potion.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(aug-2016)-potions-and-elixirs/(aug-2016)-potions-and-elixirs-submission-thread/>

# Table of Contents

1. [The\_Gem\_Cutter by The\_Gem\_Cutter](#story1)
2. [Life Everlasting by Alex Hormann](#story2)
3. [Elixir by wakarimasen](#story3)
4. [Love Potion by m3mnoch](#story4)
5. [The Birthday Potion by WarbossTae](#story5)
6. [The Potionmaker's Lament by jauerbach](#story6)
7. [Goldenfoot, The Brave by night\_wrtr](#story7)
8. [The Case of the Cat in the Rose Garden by Mr.J](#story8)
9. [Ominous Things by AFrasier](#story9)
10. [The Cabinet of Mal Zabir by Jmack](#story10)
11. [The Last Ingredient by Nora](#story11)
12. [The True Origins of Bjord the Commanding, Washer of Sheets, Undisputed Ruler of Absenthia by tebakutis](#story12)
13. [Ingredients needed by stridercovenant](#story13)
14. [Untitled by Bradley Darewood](#story14)
15. [The\_Gem\_Cutter by The\_Gem\_Cutter](#story15)
16. [Life Everlasting by Alex Hormann](#story16)
17. [Elixir by wakarimasen](#story17)
18. [Love Potion by m3mnoch](#story18)
19. [The Birthday Potion by WarbossTae](#story19)
20. [The Potionmaker's Lament by jauerbach](#story20)
21. [Goldenfoot, The Brave by night\_wrtr](#story21)
22. [The Case of the Cat in the Rose Garden by Mr.J](#story22)
23. [Ominous Things by AFrasier](#story23)
24. [The Cabinet of Mal Zabir by Jmack](#story24)
25. [The Last Ingredient by Nora](#story25)
26. [The True Origins of Bjord the Commanding, Washer of Sheets, Undisputed Ruler of Absenthia by tebakutis](#story26)
27. [Ingredients needed by stridercovenant](#story27)
28. [Untitled by Bradley Darewood](#story28)
29. [The\_Gem\_Cutter by The\_Gem\_Cutter](#story29)
30. [Life Everlasting by Alex Hormann](#story30)
31. [Elixir by wakarimasen](#story31)
32. [Love Potion by m3mnoch](#story32)
33. [The Birthday Potion by WarbossTae](#story33)
34. [The Potionmaker's Lament by jauerbach](#story34)
35. [Goldenfoot, The Brave by night\_wrtr](#story35)
36. [The Case of the Cat in the Rose Garden by Mr.J](#story36)
37. [Ominous Things by AFrasier](#story37)
38. [The Cabinet of Mal Zabir by Jmack](#story38)
39. [The Last Ingredient by Nora](#story39)
40. [The True Origins of Bjord the Commanding, Washer of Sheets, Undisputed Ruler of Absenthia by tebakutis](#story40)
41. [Ingredients needed by stridercovenant](#story41)
42. [Untitled by Bradley Darewood](#story42)

# The\_Gem\_Cutter

A darkling daughter came one night and on the mantle did alight.

Before the gathered court she sprang. Ere drawn was sword she clearly sang,

Of silver webs that bound them all, both noble lord and lady tall,

Encircling mighty crown and land in falsely fragile mind and hand.

The king and queen their captain shame, send slinking from their court like knave,

For drawing weapon threatening, then happy eyes watch maiden sing.

“And would this court so fair and wise, not profit from the loss of guise,

obscuring greater deeds and dreams that otherwise beyond you seem?”

"What gifts have you to change this land?" asked silver bearded king his grand

and queenly wife upbraiding laughs, but darkling daughter shrugs "My draughts."

"Draughts?" queenly wizened matron frowns, and wrinkles smooths from well-worn gowns,

Once fair on shoulders smooth they hung. "Draughts - potions like I saw when young?"

"Nay fair haired queen thou never saw, such potions peerless with no flaw,

Imbued with powers deep and strong, to limber limb and make life long.”

"No powers these thy drinks command – my butcher's meats also make grand

The body's sinews, strength, and size, what other power in you lies?”

"Great powers vast I summon for the sweetly dripping dews I pour,

‘Neath moonlit skies with thunderous dread to fill the vials blue and red,

With starlight caught on skein of silk, I weave the pearly drops like milk,

In glen remote ‘Neath heaven’s stairs, where neither man nor maiden fares.”

“O! Maiden fair we plainly see, great craft you wield and mightily,

Now plainly boons and gains do tell, so we might craven council quell.”

"More deep the power I implore, than any else hast held before,

To quicken mind and senses hone, to give youth’s strength to anchor throne."

"Your price young maiden quickly say, what wicked thing desired to pay?"

“My single fee: to welcome me, as daughter of thy family,

When time has sped and from you fled, your crown shall rest upon my head.

The sole exception that be said, thy choice in husband I shall wed.

So fully joined our powers would, the land and kingdom do great good.”

Thus spoke the king in mighty voice, uplifting court his cry: “Rejoice!

Her price is but a second boon, to powers offered and right soon,

No heirs have come to ancient line, this maiden comes with offer fine,

No children ever here have roamed, small price is this: to grow our home!”

The darkling daughter potions brings, the red to queen, the blue to king,

Corks then to courtly floor they cast, a joyful look they share – one last.

And drinking down the bitter draught, says maiden to the court “At last!

My bargain is complete you see, from poison strong they cannot flee,

For never should a land be ruled, by those so swiftly, surely fooled.

Bring Captain wise to me for groom, our wedding feast will now this room.”

# Life Everlasting

*Should you wish to live for all time,*

You would do well to remember this rhyme.

Dafyn Waulo had but one goal in life, and that was to make himself immortal. Songs and plays of his many deeds did not interest him, not in the way that kings and foreign emperors alike fussed over them. What was the use of his name being known if he was not there to partake of his glory? No, Dafyn wanted immortality of a rather more tangible variety. An old man now, he had devoted some fifty years of his fragile existence to the quest for life everlasting. Thus far, nothing had quite ended how he desired.

Many years ago, when Dafyn was in his prime, there had been a wandering soldier whose wounds healed within hours of coming near death. He had made bold claims of having found a lake in the mountains where the water granted great healing abilities and Dafyn, like a foolish youth, had gone in search of it. He'd found nothing, and upon his return he ordered the soldier beheaded. The man had not healed that wound.

In later years there was tell of a great black boar that would grant everlasting youth to the man who could catch it. Not much of a hunter himself, Dafyn had convinced his king to lead a great hunt. Alas, the endeavour had ended only in the death of his king at the hands, or rather the paws, of a large and particularly aggressive pack of wolves. No one had wanted to pursue beasts of legend after that incident.

Now, aged eighty-three and living on time best described as borrowed, Dafyn had found one last opportunity to reach his goal. The Cauldron of Pefach. Once the right mixture of ingredients was stirred into the great pot, or so it was said, the drinker would be granted immortality. Unfortunately, as was the way with these things, the ingredients of this particular elixir were rather hard to come by.

*To fill the cauldron with elixir of life,*

First find a king and cut him with a knife.

As an advisor to his king, just as he had advised the past three generations of the royal family, Dafyn had easy access to his king's person in even the most dire of circumstances. He waved his way past the twin guards outside the king's door and had himself announced. Soon he found himself sitting on the floor opposite his liege.

"Goodman Waulo," beamed King Hetcau, his young and somewhat chubby features glowing in the early morning light. "Is there a reason for your visit, or are you lonely in your tower?"

Dafyn returned the smile. "I have been studying the stars, my king," he said. "I fear there is some great calamity approaching us."

"Gods protect us," uttered Hetcau, making a ward across his chest. "Have you ascertained the nature of this evil?"

"I am afraid not, my king. Nothing brought about by men, that much I know. Perhaps some evil spirit seeking to enter your hall. Or the wrath of an angered god."

"Are they not pleased? I have made offerings every day."

"Then a spirit it must be." Dafyn shook his head sadly.

Hetcau looked imploringly at his advisor. "What can we do, Waulo?"

Dafyn paused, as if deep in thought. "I can endeavour to make a ward for you, to banish spirits from your home. I would however, require a small amount of your blood."

"My blood?" The King recoiled in disgust.

"Yes, my king. Spirits cannot stand any part of the body. It reminds them of what they no longer have." He smiled calmly. "I would only need a few drops, no more."

"Very well," Hetcau agreed, and placed him hand out, palm upward.

Dafyn bowed, and drew his knife. Crimson spilled across the blade, and he collected it in a small bottle. Then he made his excuses and left.

*When king's blood has touched the pot,*

Stir in redthorn, not little but a lot.

Redthorn. Where am I to find redthorn? wondered Dafyn. It was a rare tree, and none grew in the kingdom so far as he knew. And yet the name had been mentioned recently? But when? And in what context? He wandered the corridors of the king's hall for many hours before he found his answer.

"Have you seen the Queen of late?" Dafyn heard one courtier asking another.

"No," replied the second man. "Not for a week, that I can think of."

"She can't still be in her garden can she? How many flowers can one woman need?"

"There's more there than flowers from what I hear. All sorts of herbs and roots."

Dafyn didn't hear the rest of the conversation. He was already heading for the garden. *Of course*, he thought. *The Queen had redthorn imported for her garden. Though gods alone know what she wants it for. Horrible stuff.*

The garden was peaceful when he arrived. A small fountain bubbling away at the far end, great green bushes swaying in the gentle wind. The Queen was at the foot of one of those bushes, rummaging among the roots,

But Dafyn did not concern himself with the Queen. His eyes were fixed on the redthorn tree before him. He carefully reached in amongst the branches, fearful of impaling himself on those wicked hooked barbs. He broke off a large twig, removed his arm from the matted tree and slipped out of the garden before he was noticed.

*With blood and thorn entwined together,*

Add a dose of southern weather.

Far to the south, Dafyn knew, lay a great mountain empire where there was only one type of weather. The snowfall there was the stuff of legend. Deep enough to bury a man twice over and to freeze the beer in a man's cup. So he needed snow, but could he afford to wait for winter? Old age may have already finished him off by that point.

Then he remembered a gift the King had been given a few months before by an ambassador from that distant land. Dafyn hurried towards the lower levels of the hall.

Deep underground the gift was kept, where it was cold enough that you could see your breath even in the height of summer. Dafyn's shaking fingers fumbled with each door he encountered, but he was relentless in his descent. One door, two doors, three, a dozen. They all blurred into one in his failing memory. And then there were no more doors. Just a room.

At the centre of the room was a gift fit for a king. To keep his drinks cool in the summer, allegedly. A most bizarre gift, but one Dafyn was now profoundly grateful for.

A solid block, one metre across, of pure, southern ice.

*And should any man choose to drink,*

His life will be longer than he could ever think.

Dafyn stirred his elixir in the Cauldron of Pefach. There was not as much as he had hoped, but there would certainly be enough for him. The ice had melted, leaving the mixture a pale and watery red with shards of twig floating in it. For nearly an hour he stirred, until he was sure that the redthorn had infused the drink with its essence.

By rule of nature, the redthorn would surely kill him in such a quantity, but the ancients who devised the Cauldron had been knowledgeable about a great many things, and so Dafyn put his faith in them. His life in their power. At his age, he had very little to lose.

Dafyn dipped a goblet into the Cauldron, scooping in as much as he could. He lifted it to his lips, and then paused. "Gods bless me," he murmured. And then he drank.

The goblet fell to the floor as Dafyn staggered back. The flavour was vile, worse than rotting meat. He forced himself to swallow it all, redthorn and all. After that he waited. He waited until his limbs grew heavy, and his eyelids started to drop. He felt twice his age. Weak and powerless. Had he done something wrong? He tried to open his eyes, but found he couldn't. He willed his legs to move, but they refused. His heart pumped faster, his panic rising. he couldn't move, couldn't see. Couldn't do anything. He felt cold, his skin unnaturally dry.

*What have I done wrong?* he wondered.

It was hours before they found him. But they didn't help him. Even if they had known he needed help, they wouldn't have known how. They moved him to the temple, thinking that was the right place for him. And for centuries after, men would still come to that temple, and marvel at the statue that wept.

# Elixir

The deck lurched downward as a stabiliser tore off. Merovech grabbed the tarnished rail with his spare hand and laughed. Scrabbling to find their footing, the two women scowled back.

"Oh come on!" He shouted above tortured groans of the ship. "You must see the irony here. We're all about to die over an elixir that promises eternal life."

Bracing her feet against an ornate girder, Jeren wobbled to a halt.

"Give us the flask, Merovech. This isn't the time for your insanity."

She checked her friend, crouched against another metal rib that vaulted the control room.

"Can you take him from there?"

Molia's hair spilled around her face, as red as the flames licking the outside of the glass bulkheads. She shook her head. Merovech tucked the steel flask into the sash at his waist.

"I love that you two are just as ruthless as I thought!" He grinned and pulled himself closer to the console. "It's just so..." He searched for the word with an excited shiver. "...diabolical!"

Somewhere, something very important exploded from its moorings and the whole ship rolled.The violent turn threw all three from their perches.

Molia caught the worst of the floor's reassignment to wall. She fell the shortest distance but with a sharp twist. She cracked her head against the girder and fell ragged, thought extinguished in a bloody instant. Jeren smacked into the glass beside her, scrabbling toward her friend as Merovech joined them with a whoop, landing heavily on his shoulder.

The assassin cradled her friend, ignoring the forest a thousand feet below. She tapped a bloody cheek and whispered the red head's name. Merovech dragged himself to them, eyes fixed on the sparking ruin of the console above.

"If that thing drops we're fucked." He looked down through the glass wall at the fast approaching ground. "Ah. Actually, we're properly fucked anyway. Nice job girls."

"Piss off Merovech. We never expected you to get airborne. This was supposed to blow before it got off the ground." Jeren did not turn from her friend.

"Typical. Even when I exceed expectations I still end up getting dropped in the shit." He looked thoughtfully down. "And this shit has a particularly high drop. Is she alright?"

The question caught Jeren off guard, finally turning her attention.

"What the fuck do you care?"

Merovech tutted, then shrugged.

"I don't. He does."

Jeren spat. "You fucking psycho. Which one is it now?"

"Me." Merovech's face softened, his brown eyes turning blue.

"The Monk? Oh that's just great." Jeren shook her head. "No offence, but you've never been much use to anyone."

"You are much like my companions in that regard. They too discount the usefulness of compassion. I doubt this will change their minds, but perhaps it may change yours."

Merovech pulled the canister from his waist and slid it along the glass, a mild smile spreading in his grey streaked beard. Jeren snatched at it with disbelief.

"I believe there is enough in there for two measures. I do not believe your partner will last long without hers. I doubt you will last much longer without the other." He looked significantly at the slowly spinning slopes.

Jeren hastily unscrewed the flask and lifted it to her friend. The other woman stirred immediately. Before Merovech could change his minds Jeren slugged back the rest of the flask and tossed it away.

"NO!" Merovech stood, eyes blazing to green. "You stupid bastard!"

Both women scampered back, pulling at weapons in their tunics. What remained of the ship rocked with another explosion, returning Merovech to his hands and knees. When he looked up, green had been replaced by brown and he was chuckling.

"Wow." He sat back, gobsmacked. "I'll never hear the end of that. I'm going to want to kill me for the rest of our days. Or day might be more accurate."

Neither woman relaxed their hands on hidden blades. Molia lent in to her friend.

"We need to jump. I don't know how good this stuff is, but I don't want to our first test to be dropping a hundred tons of skyship onto ourselves."

Merovech nodded. "She has a point Jeren. You'd best be quick. It's been a singular and somewhat final pleasure ladies." He tried to bow whilst sitting cross-legged.

The iron leaves and scrollwork that decorated the ship's visible skeleton provided plenty of purchase for keen climbers and none could be keener than the two women that were fleeing for their lives. Jenen had shot through the hatch toward the escape kite in seconds. Molia paused at its mouth and looked back at Merovech.

"Come with us."

"Ah, Mol. I don't think so." He waved his hand dismissively. "That kite is only meant for one so, as it is, you two are in for a heavy landing. Without the potion I'd never make it anyway."

He regarded her for a second, curled like a spooked forest fox about to dive for the safety of its den.

"Seriously. Go. You're forgiven. At least by me, but if you stick around much longer I can't guarantee I won't try and shoot you." He pulled a thick nosed pistol from it's holster and laid it on his lap. The red fox bolted.

Merovech sat calmly on the glass, watching the world turn in a way it should not. He tossed the gun aside and smiled.



Jenen watched the plume of smoke on the distant hill. The skyship had come down almost straight, not carving much of a gully to its grave. Unlike their escape kite, which had dragged them through a mile of branches, steadfastly refusing to break anything but their bones. She could feel her legs knitting together now, it tickled.

"He really was a mad bastard." Molia guessed her thoughts.

"Completely. I kind of liked him."

"Me too. Why do you think he did it?"

"Fuck knows. Like you say.... a mad bastard. At first I thought he had switched the flask, like he did with the necklace back in that casino."

Molia barked a laugh at the memory.

"Shit that was good. The look on that fat bitch's face."

"Yeah. It was nice getting one over on her for a change. Let's hope she thinks we all died in the ship. Then we won't have to keep looking over our shoulders."

"Mmmm. He didn't though. Switch it I mean." Molia was serious again.

"No he didn't."

The crashed skyship had failed to inflame the damp autumn forest, but it was still a mighty blaze. The two sat together as their bodies rejuvenated, watching the mechanical funeral pyre.

"Mad bastard." Jenen repeated.



If any forest foxes had been brave enough to inspect the edges of the twisted wreckage, they might have seen tendons striking like cobras at a burnt mound. Threads of bone fired like boarding lines then drew tight scattered pieces of corpse, thickening to their purpose before the cobras enclosed them. Gradually the shape of a man began to rise from the scorched floor. If that was not enough to set any creature to flight they may have heard his muttered conversation.

"The Abbot will not be happy with us, creating two more immortals....

Screw him, he lost his sense of humour a dozen centuries ago, some of us still like to have a little fun....

You call this fun? I swear, when we get out of this I'm going to find a bar and get so drunk you two fall asleep, then I'm going kick the shit out of someone....

Well, I'm all in for the getting drunk part, after that you can do what you like....

Why harm the innocent? I am surprised that you do not approve of our rash actions....

Why would I....?

I think he means that those girls were good fun in the drunken punch up stakes. It's a bit of a shock you don't appreciate their ascendance....

I suppose. They were quite handy when we got cornered by the Duke's men. Yeah, I guess they could be fun to have a long for the ride...

It is a long ride, brother. All company becomes welcome eventually, during eternity....

That's why we keep ending up back at the temple....

Our next visit may be a while, as I say, the Abbot will not be happy with our choices....

And as I said, screw him. He sent us to close down the fountain and we did. He didn't say anything about destroying any elixir it might have already produced....

Probably thought we'd just destroy everything as usual. I would've if you'd given me a chance...

Good job we didn't then. Now... "

The figure trod uncertainly forward, testing new formed feet.

"...let's find that bar and get drunk."

# Love Potion



The girl stirred from where she was lashed to the bed posts. Lying face down, she shifted on the stained mattress, groaning as she recovered from the trichloromethane. Bojan, arms folded, decided she was probably 12. Maybe 13. Exactly what he needed.

The basement room in the dilapidated two-story was dark and sparse. The copper smell reminiscent of what happens in this room. A bed had been shoved against the opposite wall, with a lone, narrow table just inside the door. The girl's backpack had been flung beneath, and an oil lamp flickered on top.

After the grab team had finished strapping down her limp form, Bojan had considered removing her clothes, but had decided he couldn't stomach stripping the child himself. And the thugs would have asked for more money had he made them come back and do it. That was extra money he needed.

No, the Colonel was going to have to deal with a fully-clothed victim. The sick bastard probably preferred ripping their clothes off himself anyway.

"Wha . . ." The girl opened a blackened eye and mumbled.

Bojan waited by the open door.

"What happened? Where am I?" She pulled at her restraints, trying to get her head around to see the rest of the room. Confusion and fear in her voice. "What's going on?"

"Shut up, whore. Stay quiet or I will cut you." Bojan had mastered softening up the girls before his clients laid into them.

He dropped his arms to his side as she flexed, red-faced, taut, and straining hard on the lashings. After a moment, she gave up and stopped struggling. For a brief second, Bojan had thought the old bed post might have given way. She was strong for a little girl.

She lifted her head and whispered, voice breaking, "Please, just take me back to Kneza Mihaila. My family . . . They'll be looking for me."

"You were alone. We were watching." Bojan took a step toward the bed and kicked the post with a heavy boot. "You belong to us now."

She dropped her face back into the spotted mattress, hair showering across the back of her neck, sliding off her shoulders. Had she a future, she might have eventually grown into a beautiful woman. Such a shame. It was days like this when he felt the uncomfortable prod from regret. But, he'd already made his decision. He was sticking to his plan.

A knock on the doorframe behind him caused Bojan to turn around. It was the desk man, Nikola, with his strange, black-on-black eyes. "Yes?"

"The Colonel is in the waiting room, sir. He's getting agitated."

Bojan glanced back to the girl. She hadn't moved.

"She's not ready yet." Digging in his coat pocket, Bojan produced a glass vial sloshing with an amber liquid. "Here, give him this."

Nikola took the item, examining its plastic stopper.

"Tell him it's a 'Love Potion'. Feed him a line about it being an ancient formula. From the cradle of humanity or something. Whatever." Bojan shrugged. "Just make sure he knows it takes fifteen minutes for potency. Tell him it'll increase his stamina. I'm sure he'll like that."

The man nodded, lips puckered and scratching his chest.

"That should give me enough time to get the girl crying like he asked."

At his words, she lifted her head again and strained to see who he was talking to.

Nikola bobbed his head again, avoided her gaze, and hurried out of the room, love potion secured in his fist.

"I'm . . . So, I'm supposed to cry?"

That was his goal anyway. "The Colonel likes his girls to be slobbery messes. Young, slobbery messes."

She seemed to relax. "Why are you doing this?"

For a child, perched yawning over the precipice of ruin, she was calm. Again, he questioned his motives. He questioned his need for escape. If the ends justified the means. For a quiet life hidden in the hills of northern Italy. This last job would give him enough money to survive until the olives started coming on. Then, he would be free.

His face hard, he ground out the words, "Because I'm evil, girl."

"Speaking of, I need my medicine. I have to take it every day. It's in my pack."

"I promise it won't matter. Because you're not going to live long enough to care."

"And, *I* promise *you* will care if I don't get it. It's going to come spraying out of me, all messy-like."

Bojan, hands on his hips, took a deep breath, counted to three, and exhaled. It seemed he wasn't going to make this one cry.

"Fine. I'll get your medicine." He bent and rummaged through her bag. "What's it look like."

"It's that pink bottle. The one that says 'Pepto' on it."

Snatching the container from the bag, he stomped over to her bedside. "This one?"

"Yeah. Help me turn over."

He unscrewed the cap and poured most of it out on the ground next to the bed. Closing the cap, he tossed it back over by the table.

She glared at him.

"Scream and puke all over him. I don't care." He stalked back to the still-open door.

"Just remember. I warned you."

Over his shoulder, "Shut up, bitch." One more day. Just one more day.

Leaning out the door, he shouted down the hallway, "Nikola! Bring the Colonel back. He's going to have to break this one himself. Maybe he'll like the challenge."

Bojan leaned against the doorframe and waited, watching the girl tied to the bed, hoping she would spontaneously errupt into sobs, wondering why she didn't. Wondering why it made him nervous. After a moment, he heard the rhythm of stark bootsteps echoing through the hall.

"I promise. If I don't get it soon, the Colonel isn't going to love me."

Bojan opened his mouth to reply when a thick accent behind him filled the room.

"How could I not love you, dearest?" The Colonel, grinning at Bojan, entered and started unbuttoning his shirt, exposing a sweaty undershirt beneath, and crept up on the girl as if she was a skittish doe, ready to bolt, and not a child tied to filthy bedding.

"You are so beautiful. I can't wait to . . ."

The girl made a sudden, violent retching sound and he stopped moving. She convulsed, pulling fiercely at her bonds, and made the noise again, this time wet and horrible. The Colonel turned his bald pate and gray mustache toward Bojan, about to ask what was happening.

What happened was everything went sideways.

The girl tugged one last time, bending the metal bed posts, her restraints parting like they were egg noodles instead of leather. She sat in the middle of the bed, facing them, grinning wide. Eyes wide. Everything was too wide.

Her mouth opened, jaw impossibly unhinged, revealing an opening into which Bojan could have easily slipped both his meaty, unclenched hands. But, it continued opening, her lips folding back over the girl's head, almost as if she was turning inside out.

As her face unfolded, reverse-swallowing her tiny body, she began bloating from inside, piles of sticky pink and red blossoming out of the hole and growing in size, swelled out past the edge of the bed.

The thick tentacle, once the little girl's tongue, shot out and wrapped the Colonel's arm, constricting. Squeezing. A sharp, whiplike snap shot down the length, and the man's arm tore from its socket, leaving an empty, gore-squirting hole where his shoulder used to be.

The Colonel screamed.

No longer a child, the beast continued to swell, filling the room. More tentacles, thick as 100-year oaks poured out, lashing wildly, pulverizing clay, brick and foundation alike. More than a dozen. More than two dozen. All jerking around, like giant, loosed firehoses.

One swept Bojan's feet out from under him, powdering the bones in his legs. He fell, losing sight of everything except the swelling monster in front of him. Mouth agape, he could do nothing but stare.

Two massive, stump appendages formed beneath the creature, each with thick tentacles completing a flailing, paw-like foot. Big around as the now-flattened bed was wide.

The mass soon filled the room, pressing out the walls and ceiling. Plaster, wood, and brick rained down on Bojan as the thing rose into the air, exploding out of the building.

The last thing Bojan saw was the chimney collapsing on top of him.



Faustina, blonde once more and naked in the morning sun, examined the carnage around her. The building had been torn down, pulverized to almost nothing. The earth scarred. Wildlife fled.

Luckily, because of their business requirements, there were no nearby neighbors. She'd tried to warn them about her medicine. They didn't know it was only in the pink bottle because that made it easier to get through customs.

Granted, if she was honest with herself, she hadn't really felt the need to explain that part.

# The Birthday Potion

The potion smelled like vomit. Rotting garbage. Carrion left too long to spoil in the summer sun.

Bartholomeo couldn’t quite decide.

Whatever it was, it was certainly disgusting. One of the worst smells he could remember. Bartholomeo immediately pulled the vial away from his assaulted nostrils, and shoved the cork back in.

The syrupy liquid was the color of post-drinking-binge urine. Tiny green particles sat in the yellow molasses, like insects trapped in prehistoric amber.

Bartholomeo scowled. After a final moment of consideration, he vigorously shook his head.

“No. I don’t like it.” Bartholomeo said at last.

“What do you mean, little one?” The crone’s voice was sweet, condescending.

“Please don’t ‘little one’ me, madame.” Bartholomeo snapped in annoyance. “And, please, take it. I’m sorry, but this was a mistake. The smell-and, and, and, because-I mean, it just looks-no, you can’t expect-I’m sorry, this was a mistake.”

His eyes scanned the wares on display in the large covered wagon: dusty leather-bound tomes, a dried monkey’s paw, something that looked like a jar of eyeballs in pickling fluid. There were trinkets made of crystal, totems carved from wood and bone. Everything was haphazardly placed, seemingly at random, on the shelves and tables in the tiny wagon.

Bartholomeo sighed. If the old gypsy wasn’t a witch, she certainly gave off that impression.

“You hesitate.” the crone purred. Her accent was thick and coarse, like the snarling of a wild animal. “You are not magically inclined, and this potion seems too good to be true, so of course you are wary. But young man, even without a sensitivity to the arcane, you must feel it.”

“Feel it? Feel what?”

“The magic within that vial.”

“I don’t…I mean, really. What assurances do-”

A liver-spotted claw of a hand shot out and gripped his arm. It took everything in Bartholomeo to keep from crying out as the crone leaned in and hissed.

“Little man, what do I care for assurances? You come into my wagon and ask for the magic to make you bigger. Stronger. To give you confidence. You are a worm, so of course you want these things, and this…what you hold in your frail little girl’s hand, is the answer!”

“Stop!” Bartholomeo squeaked. “Please! Just take it back already!”

“Can you even grasp the concept of magic, tiny sir? Not the sleight-of-hand practiced by sidewalk charlatans in the city, but actual magic? The building blocks of reality? The energy flowing through all things?”

Bartholomeo shook his head. Even though the crone’s eyes were milky and clouded, he felt extremely uneasy, as if she were boring holes into his brain.

“Magic was not meant for humans to ever understand. It is too ancient. It has built our world, but it is not of this world. Magic is raw power. It is unlimited potential. It is the infinite unknowable truth of all things, and I have captured it! Yes, I have sucked it out of the air, and the roots, and the earth, and the water. I have bottled it, distilled it, and shaped it into what you hold in front of you like so much rubbish. Fool! You don’t like the smell? I can’t be bothered making the infinite unknowable truth of the universe smell like strawberries and baby’s farts!”

“Now, see here-”

“Forgive my sister, good sir!”

Bartholomeo turned to see another old woman standing in the doorway of the wagon. She was just as ugly and wretched as the one he was talking to. She dropped the basket of herbs she had been collecting outside and swooped in like a bird of prey. Before he knew it, Bartholomeo found this old woman’s hands clutching his shoulders. Trapped on both sides, he felt like a piece of meat about to be devoured by two hungry predators.

“Please, sir, my dear sister is not of sound mind, as of late. This summer heat agitates her and puts her in foul mood.”

“Don’t speak for me, Florinda!” the first crone snarled, her rotten teeth grinding. “I refuse to let this city-dwelling praklova demean what we do! Shav’roska! Nielisch aun dashlinkov!”

Bartholomeo threw up his arms.

“Please! Please don’t!”

“Sir, fear not! She raves in the language of our ancestors, she isn’t casting a spell on you.”

“You’d know it if I was! Dumpfkleish.”

“Lucinda! Sir, please, come out from under the table, now. Let’s resume discussion with calm and civil voices. Lucinda, sister, brew us some tea, if you would. The lavender one, with some honey.”

Lucinda muttered as she hobbled away.

“Now, sir, from what I was able to catch, you seek to…”

“To change. Myself, that is.” Bartholomeo croaked, his throat dry. Was it his imagination, or had the wagon become unbearably stuffy?

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Do you know the town of Blackwood? Down river from here?”

“No, I’m afraid my sister and I never stay in one place for long. We come and go with the moon, and I believe that it is our first time in the area.”

“I see. Well, Blackwood used to be called Autumn’s Hearth, but it was gutted decades ago by a great fire. My grandfather was alderman at the time, you see. He was among the only survivors.”

“How tragic.”

“The town has been rebuilt, but, well, grandfather has renamed it Blackwood, and I believe it has been…cursed, ever since. My family, specifically.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I am the heir. My eighteenth birthday is tomorrow and I am to go on a hunt, as rite of passage. But, I am afraid. I had three older brothers. When father died, Elias was to inherit. But on his birthday hunt, his stallion threw him and his neck snapped. Then there was Peytar. On his birthday hunt, he was gored by the stag he was tracking. Next was Winthrop. He tried to break the curse by refusing the birthday hunt.”

“Wise.”

“Yes. I was just fourteen, and already terrified of what the villagers called The Von Richtmann Curse. But Winthrop, he was sure that he would break the curse. He would have been a wonderful alderman. Winthrop the Wise.”

“Except…”

“He choked to death on a turkey bone.”

“I see…”

“I am no believer of magic, madame.” At this point, the second crone, Lucinda, had returned with a mug of warm tea. Bartholomeo accepted it with shaking hands. “Thank you. But-you see, I have grown to manhood with this…shadow…hanging over my head. Like a shroud. My death shroud, waiting to fall.”

The two crones said nothing.

“The birthday hunt has always been a Von Richtmann tradition. But grandfather is just as afraid, maybe even more so, than I am. So, I need this magic potion. I must be strong to stay on my horse. I must be fast to sidestep a charging stag. I must be wise and alert, to avoid choking to death, or tripping on the stair, or being crushed by a chandelier. Do you understand? I do not believe in magic. But I believe that…something…wants to end my family.”

Florinda sighed. It was the tired and resigned exhalation of a soul who had lived too long, and seen too much. Lucinda said nothing.

“Your grandfather. What is he like?” Florinda asked quietly.

“Maximillian Von Richtmann…was a force of nature in his day. Stern, but fair. Strong and brave. He was the greatest warrior in the land, and wise as a sage. But, that was years ago. He has not been himself since the fire. I fear he will never be himself again.”

Another silence.

Lucinda finally spoke.

“Go home, young master. Take the potion, drink it at sundown. It will change you. At midnight, my sister and I will toast to your long and happy life.”

\* \* \*

When Bartholomeo had left, the crones sat for a long time without speaking.

Outside, the wind rustled through the branches. Nearby, a wolf howled.

At long last, Florinda croaked.

“Max is alive.”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think he’ll be surprised to see us?”

Lucinda smiled. “I don’t see why. We haven’t aged a day!”

The two old crones cackled.

\* \* \*

A shaggy wolf skulked up to the covered wagon sitting at the side of the road. It growled warily.

The flaps of the wagon opened and out stepped two ravishingly beautiful women.

The wolf fell silent.

The women laughed, flashing smiles that would make any grown man’s heart melt.

“Such a beautiful night for a stroll.” One of them giggled.

“If only Camilla were here.” The second beauty cooed.

“Let us finish this for our sister, then. For Camilla.” The first woman tucked a wicked dagger into a sheath hidden beneath her cloak.

“Yes. For Camilla.” They set off together, arm in arm, down the path.

Somewhere in the distance, a bell was ringing, and the screams of terrified village folk filled the air.

# The Potionmaker's Lament

Some say potion making is a science, others, an art. I say it’s a Nayru-damn fucking hassle.

I’ve apprenticed with literally the creme de la creme of potion making for the past 40 years. 40 fucking years! That’s how long it takes to learn how to make every one of the 912 potions in Kotake’s Mysteries of Potion. Why that woman sat around thinking up so many recipes, I have no clue. By the 25th year, it was just making the previous 251 potions except in different random colors. Do you know how many colors there are?

Finally, when I reach the end of my training, Rauru, my teacher, gives me a 15-minute spiel about the business of selling potions and then kicks me out the door. I’m 52, single, and have been sleeping in a dusty basement for my entire adult life. But now I’m a potions master! Chicks dig that, right?

In addition to imparting the ancient potion-making wisdom on me, Rauru] was also kind of enough to rent out a small shoppe for me in Kakariko. With the starter set of herbs and other potion stuff he gave me, I figure I’ve got about six months of runway, which should be enough to get going.

It takes three weeks in the back of a wagon before I finally reach Kakariko but as soon as my feet hit the muddy road, I bolt down the thoroughfare to see my shoppe. When I arrive, I realize I should have savored the walk over.

It’s. A. Fucking. Dump.

The wood facade is crumbling, the door is resting in front of the misshapen hole where the door should go and the less said about the landscaping the better. I look to the left and right to see if I am the proud renter of a dump on a street of dumps or the bad neighbor that is lowering everyone else’s property values and am dismayed to realize that it’s the latter. Luckily everyone is still asleep so I walk quietly up the front stairs and try to pick up the door to rest it on the front wall silently hoping that the added weight does not send the structure toppling over. Thank goodness it doesn’t.

I could bore you with the details of how I was able to spruce up the ol’ shoppe in just under three months, but this story is already too depressing as it is. Let’s just cut to my grand-opening celebration where the whole town turns out to sample my wares and I make lots of new friends and even a potential love interest.

At least that’s how it went in my dreams the night before. I need to stop taking those fucking dream potions every night. They are messing with my perception of reality.

The opening was an unmitigated disaster. I ended up over-boiling the Eye of Newt stock solution, which is used in 86% of all potions, so the whole town spent the night vomiting on my front stoop.

But when Din closes a door, she opens a window right?

I had been trying too hard to make up for lost time, when I should have kept things simple. One potion (the Potion of Rejuvenation, which given how last night went seems prudent), two strengths, and that’s it. Let’s call it a pivot. No splashy opening, I’m going to just clean up this vomit and do a free giveaway week or something.

Weeks pass.

There are no customers.

Evidently making everyone in the town vomit was bad for business. Fine. I get it.

So I spend my days either staring at the door hoping someone walks in or in the back trying to perfect a love potion to help me woo the mayor’s older sister.

One afternoon I’m minding my business, trying to recall from memory the 361 steps to making the Elixir of Youth when the entrance bell begins to jingle and the door slowly opens.

A customer!

“Welcome to Steve’s Potions Emporium!” I say. “We’ve got only two potions but they can’t be beat.”

I look at my potential first customer. He’s dressed in all green - green pants, shirt, and hat, and carrying a wooden shield and a wooden sword. He can’t be more than 15 years old, but maybe he’s the son of a rich noble or something. He eyes the potions silently.

“I haven’t seen you around town. Are you new or just visiting?”

He looks at me and starts opening his mouth to respond, but then closes it again. Instead, he walks over to the lower-strength potion and taps it with his wooden sword.

“Interested in that one? That’ll be 100 rupees.”

The green-clad customer looks at me with an perturbed expression before he bolts out of the shoppe. So close.

The next morning though, he returns. Even though his clothes are green, I can see a smattering of grass stains on his pants and shirt. He walks up to the same potion, taps it with his sword again and detaches a pouch from his belt. I take the pouch, weighing the amount with just my hand (another one of my activities to pass the time) and nod.

“The potion is yours. Just need your bottle.”

He again looks at me like I’m a crazy person, but fishes around inside one of the other pouches on his belt and pulls out something to show me.

“No, that’s a glass, not a bottle. Potions can only be stored in bottles. Surely you must know that!”

He shakes his head no.

“OK, well, I don’t have any bottles for sale, but the guy down the street has one I think. It’s 4000 rupees.”

The customer’s eyes go wide. He holds out the glass again.

“No, sorry, there’s nothing I can do. If I get caught selling potions to people without bottles, I’ll lose my license.”

The customer frowns, stares at the potion vat again, before quickly grabbing the pouch of rupees out my hand and bolting out of the store.

Farore-damn it. I should have been a bottlemaker.

# Goldenfoot, The Brave

The old gray-haired rabbit tossed his apron on the table and plopped onto the bench opposite Theo. Tears stained his eyes, his ears limp. “I’ll never see you again, will I?"

Theo looked away from his father, and found himself staring at the ragged sack on the bench next to him. What could he say? Maybe he would be back one day? It wouldn’t fix anything. Give his father hope and it would tear his heart every day that he didn’t return. No, he couldn’t avoid this. “I-”

His father hopped to his hindfeet, wrapped his arms around Theo, and wept.

“I knew this was coming,” father said a time later, glancing at the sack. “You hear rumors when it comes to things like this.”

“We’re out of options,” Theo said.

“Turning into a monster is an option?” Father shook his head. “Why you, Theodore?”

There were plenty of others willing, that was certain. But, in the end, he only trusted himself to do this. “I have to go,” he said, grabbing the sack. His father walked him to the bar door where they hugged a long while.

“I love you, son.”

“I love you.”

The moment he turned and walked away was the hardest thing he had ever done.

He arrived at Senator Swayback's burrow an hour later. Deep below the main keep were secret tunnels that connected every major rabbit’s home in the entire warren. And, most importantly, it had tunnels that led far away from the warren into the open forest.

Seven rabbits filled the small chamber. All were members of the Senate or Presidential family, with the exception of Eloine. The only ones, apart from his father, that knew exactly what he was about to do.

He handed the sack to Eloine who dumped the contents onto her workbench. “This is everything I asked for?”

Theo nodded to the chemist. “Lady blossoms from across the plain, two husks of lok root, five blades of blue grass, the eye of a golden kangaroo rat, mineral dust from the caves of the highland bats-“

“And a very special tooth,” Eloine said, holding up the massive thing to inspect. “Perfect.” She began combining the ingredients into a pot and added a blue liquid that had been boiling when he entered.

Senator Swayback shuffled over, whiskers low and voice lower. “Theo, we all know you’re a brave rabbit. Carrots man, everyone will know your name by morning. But, how in Garden’s Sanctuary did you get the eye of a kangaroo rat?”

Theo smiled as he watched the tooth disintegrate into the liquid. “Some things, Senator, are best left to the imagination.”

Eloine poured the neon potion into a small glass vial and stoppered it with cork. “Now,” she said, voice serious. “Take this when you are clear of the tunnel. If they catch you with it, you may not have a chance to drink.”

“How long will I have?” Theo reached out and took the vial delicately.

“I have never made a potion of this magnitude as I made perfectly clear before. With any luck, it will be immediate. The most important part of this will be your memory.”

He squeezed his free forefoot tight. He hadn’t told his father this part. How do you explain to someone that not only were you going away forever, but you would no longer have any memory of what you left behind?

“You’ll have a day. Maybe two at best.” He nodded, doing his best to keep his ears up.

President Silvercoat stood at the front of the room. “Thank you, Theodore Goldenfoot. Violence must always be a last resort, but we cannot allow the Nightstalkers to continue their attacks. Your sacrifice will save this warren. Tomorrow, we will celebrate you.” Everyone in the burrow thumped a foot to that.

Shortly afterward, when all had given their thanks and praise, Theodore Goldenfoot traveled the mile and a half of tunnel that led away from the warren and into the district of Tall Trees. He reached the end of the tunnel just before it turned upward to the surface. He took out the vial, popped the cork, said a prayer, and let the bitter potion ooze down his throat. He waited several minutes, heart thumping, whiskers jerking.

Nothing.

Doubt crept into his mind. Eloine did say she had never made a potion like this before. What did she get wrong? He’d have to go back!

Dirt peppered him from above as massive arms wrapped around him. He was hauled up into the cold night air, then slammed onto the ground. His breath was kicked from him as he struggled to stand. “I got one!” A deep voice called out. Footsteps rushed toward him from behind. “Hidin’ in this here hole, he was.”

Theo caught his breath, finally able to focus on the red faces around him. Wide, toothy faces. Nightstalker foxes. “Let’s rip him apart.”

“Calm down, Ferrel,” one said, placing a claw below Theo’s chin. “I’ve seen him before. Was at the parley last week when we brought back those pelts.”

“You sure, Trot?”

“Oh yeah,” Trot said, coming closer, eyes wide with hunger. “I had my eye on him, all right.” Why in all Garden’s Sanctuary did the potion not work! Carrots! Work!

Calm yourself. Think through this. Theo found the words that had felt so far away. “I am the negotiator,” he said. “I have an offer for your skulk chief.”

Theo’s nose twitched, then he lost all scent. “I have authority from our herd's President to offer payment.” The two foxes laughed, then shackled his wrists in twig cuffs.

“Well,” Trot said. “On to the chief.” They led him deep into the Tall Trees until they reached a place where two fallen trees joined together. Below was a dug out den which was guarded by four Nightstalkers.

Ferrel kept him close while Trot spoke with one of the guards. Theo winced as a sharp pain struck his hind leg, his muscles convulsing, then it was gone. Ferrel chuckled. “Legs gon’ limp, have they?” Theo growled under his breath, then gasped.

He had growled. Rabbits don’t growl.

Castor, the Nightstalker chief, appeared a moment later and walked right up to Theo, slashing him with his claws. Theo fell backward, his cheek on fire. Blood seeped into his fur, but the pain faded as a hot surge engulfed every inch of his body. Theo’s ears began to tingle. “I have already given my terms,” Castor said, his voice a high-pitched squawk. “Fifty of your thickest bunnies. That is the only offer. Anything less and we will continue to pick your warren apart. One. By. One.”

The others laughed, showing their teeth. Theo tried to speak, but his throat slammed shut, his chest was so tight it felt ready to burst. “I have grown tired with your deliberations,” Castor said, pacing around Theo. “We are Nightstalkers!” His skulk cheered, raising their paws. He stopped in front of Theo, grabbing him by the ear. “The fact is, we won’t ever stop.” He threw Theo to the ground. “Four other warrens have all fallen. Yours will be next. But, it won’t be the last.”

That moment, Theo let out a breath that carried a wisp of blue smoke. Then, he lurched forward and screeched as if struck by a hawk. He could hear their laughter once more. The shackles broke before Theo knew what was happening. He felt like he was flying, raised high above the ground. He felt power entering his legs, a tight wrapping of muscle and sinew. Thick skin and fur replaced his soft plush, his ears tightened, his nose straightened. His tongue poked from his mighty jaws, licking the backside of his long, massive teeth.

Laughter gave way to cries of horror. Castor backed away, terror clear on his face. “I offer our response to your terms,” Theo said, his voice the booming bark of a grey wolf. He lunged, caught Castor in his jaws and thrashed.

He dropped the Nightstalker’s chief’s body, then leapt at Ferrel, tearing a fatal gash into his hide. He dealt with Trot in the same manner, then chased down the guards who had run and tore them to pieces.

Theo sat on his hind legs, panting. He felt the triumph first, then the weight of his actions crashed down on top of him. Nightstalker bodies lay scattered about, the entire skulk eliminated. The warren was safe.

Tears fell as his father’s face appeared in the back of his mind. He smiled, howled a long mournful note that would travel back to the warren and pierce its tunnels, then ran. He ran as hard as his new body would take him. He had to get as far away from the warren as he could, before his memories of the rabbits were gone, and all that remained was the wolf.

# The Case of the Cat in the Rose Garden

‘The cat’s dead’ My father shouted from the garden.

We cried. I touched my brother’s face, his cheeks wet.

I carried the cat out in a little box. His tortoise shell fur still moving with the breeze, bony legs crumpled from squishing him in his final resting place. Limbs cold and stiff. It was like using one of my wooden puppets in the nursery. That made me sadder than I had felt when we found him.

We had a strange relationship, the cat and me. Estranged.

It’s not that I don’t like cats, more that the cat never particularly liked humans. Specifically, me. I do not know why. I never gave him cause, insulted him or trod on his tail accidentally.

It frustrated me I could never ask him.

Though I tried, once. Just in case he turned to me with his big yellow eyes and pointed whiskers as white as the winter snows and sharp and thin as straw, and sniffed discourteously as if I were a fool for even dare asking the obvious. Or grunt a noncommittal, ‘Well if you even have to ask…’

Which was what I read in his face when I asked him, at night when we were alone in my room. He had been sleeping on my bed all day during the balmy summer.

Now I wish he had given me an answer.

He did not deserve such a death; alone among the bed of roses and fur damp from the rains. My father stomped around, the black waxed hairs of his moustache dancing across his upper lip like a worm, unable to show his anger.

He liked the cat more than he would admit, retiring to his study muttering some excuse about an investigation. I could tell his face was wet too.

No one else had taken it upon themselves to bury the cat, I found him soon after still lying limp on the conservatory table. I tutted and carried him here, to the stream at the very edge of our grounds.

I knew he liked it here, the cat. I did too. I would come to write, and draw leaves, and bugs if they didn’t run away. Before burying him by the trickling water I tried to shut his mouth, still open a crack and flashing his sharp teeth.

A few were yellowed now in his middle age, but still young and healthy. The cat had never been sick. The fur around the edge of his mouth looked different, discoloured. I peered as close as I dared and pulled the mouth down, revealing his gums. They were an unhealthy, dark shade of bruised black red.

After burying him in the soft dirt in his box, piling stones on top to mark his grave and the animals from digging up his bones for a snack, I marched back to our house and was called to supper.

When I came downstairs and greeted the strangers politely by curtsying, ignoring the far too interested gaze of one of the older men, I felt the mood shift towards a gentleman in a long black coat, smoking a large yellow pipe in a leather armchair. He had pale blonde hair and was younger than I thought. My father motioned to him proudly.

‘This is Inspector Spicer, Millicent. I telegrammed for his presence immediately.’

‘What are you here to inspect, Inspector Spicer?’ I said, quite fairly I thought. Though it still ruminated numerous rumblings of chortling from the rest of the adults behind me. I kept my gaze on the man, still puffing idly in my father’s favourite chair, barely paying me any regard.

‘Your dead pet, my dear. How old are you?’ Spicer said, raising himself from the grip of the leather with a crunch. I was eleven but I refused to answer him. He inhaled the last remnants of his smoke and exhaled it around himself, snorting it back through flaring nostrils.

‘I am terribly sorry for your loss.’ He said, blankly with a smooth and velvety voice that did not fit his bony and boyish face at all.

‘I will find out first.’ I said to him. Spicer guffawed, his cheeks puffing like a fish. His cold and pale skin gripped my hand gently. His touch was like a girl’s as he leaned down to me, close enough to kiss. I refused to recoil, my cheeks burning.

‘Bless you.’ He said, smirking.

I let go and marched out of the room, a mixture of laughter, confusion, and reprimands from my mother following my exit.

I knew exactly what happened. The cat was poisoned. It could have been an accident, but I knew him better than that.

The cat was a smart thing, far more sensible and possessed with more brains than all the stupid girls I was forced to attend school lessons with at the Burkham Plantation. He would never eat something dangerous.

I passed one of the servants dashing about the corridor, carrying sheets and blankets to the guest room. They were fixing it up for the Inspector, she told me.

My parent’s room was next door. It was locked as usual, but I’d learned to pick the old metal network inside before. It was easy. The setting sun trickled through the white net curtains, waving at me in the wind as I entered. It was as still and immovable as their room usually was, my parents being very practical and rigid people. But it felt off.

I checked the window sill, faint muddy paw prints etched against the wooden surface. The cat had snuck in here too then, just like I had. He must have climbed up the tall rose trees, their crooked ashen branches perfect for a cat’s claws.

I followed the paw prints and turned my gaze to the bedside table, the glass bottle of milk my father liked to drink, to help him sleep. The lid was off, its stopper resting by its side.

Flecks of milk were still resting on its surface. I picked it up and sniffed the bottle.

I returned to the dining room in the midst of adult chatter. Inspector Spicer was sat opposite me, munching on some bread idly. He pointed at me with the crust, grinning like he was possessed by a feline creature himself.

‘I’ve thought about your little proposal, young Millicent, and I will accept your challenge.’ He said with a patronising gusto. I left a pause and nodded firmly, extending my hand again across the steaming pile of food on the table, just above the spiced bird glazed with sticky honey and fat.

‘I accept. But the loser has to leave the house, forever. And give the other an item of their clothing.’

Spicer paused at this, an eyebrow keenly raised. He was interested, his sharp jaw masticating on his bread as hungrily as his green eyes peered at me. My father coughed awkwardly and my mother hissed under her breath at my forwardness.

‘Very well then.’ The inspector shook my hand. ‘You drive a hard bargain, young Millicent.’ He said, guffawing again with the fellow guests.

I waited for the laughter to die down, and turned to my father.

‘I have solved the case, papa. The cat was poisoned with One-Eyed Poppy Juice. It’s the same colour as milk. The milk the cat drank from the lid of your bottle by your bedside. The one laced with poison. I gave a drop to the maid to test it. She’s in the bathroom being sick now.’

A random lady gave a start of horror, a delicate hand to her chest. My father tried to interrupt. I cut him off his stammering.

‘I presumed you must have given him milk from there before, otherwise he wouldn’t have known to have looked for it.’ I said, watching him snap his mouth shut and nod slightly, sadly. ‘So the Inspector Spicer poisoned your milk, papa. Though I am not sure what he would gain from that.’ I said, unaware of the guests glancing to my mother’s shocked figure at the head of the table.

‘You telegrammed him but a few hours ago, and yet he arrived even before the message would have been sent. There was a fire in town at the Royal Office, it was reported in the Daily Royal Newspaper. Therefore Inspector Spicer killed our cat.’

I picked up my knife and fork and cut into my bird, letting the gravy drip down the utensil. I was famished. The blonde man’s jaw was drooped, aghast and stammering with burning cheeks as my father glared at him, the guests fumbling with themselves awkwardly. I popped a wodge of food in my mouth and chewed happily. It was delicious.

‘Oh. I would like your coat please Inspector Spicer. It will suit me nicely in the winter’ I said, between mouthfuls.

‘And don’t ever come back.’

# Ominous Things

Tanon didn’t care for Alchemists. They were arrogant, secretive, and in his opinion, batshit crazy. But he mostly didn’t like them because they knew too damn much about things he didn’t, and for all his skepticism, he’d seen them accomplish things even he couldn’t explain. So while he stood there in the dark, dusty room, watching the crooked old creature pour over pyramids of worn out tomes, making those terrible eldritch sighs he always made, Tanon couldn’t help but smirk and shudder at the same time.

“You’re late,” the man barked, eyes glued to the clutter sprawled upon one of his many ancient desks.

Tanon cringed. That *voice*. “Been a while, Vekrys.”

Vekrys shifted his attention to an immense chalkboard, adding new members to intricate clusters of numbers, letters and arcane symbols.

“Not long enough in your opinion,” Vekrys said. It wasn’t a question.

Tanon frowned. Vekrys had a nasty penchant for saying whatever Tanon was thinking at the time, another reason Tanon didn’t relish these encounters.

“Well?” Vekrys said. “Out with it. You can see I’m very busy.”

“As compared to all those times when you’re not?”

“A scientist’s work is never done,” Vekrys mused. “To make knowledge your life’s pursuit is to accept that your life’s pursuit will never be fully realized.”

Tanon snickered. “You’re a ‘scientist’ now? What would the Tevichi Scholars say?”

“*The Tevichi Scholars*,” Vekrys scoffed, turning to him. “Bureaucratic frauds too prideful to admit they’re only playing at science. Too afraid to ask the *important* questions, to take the necessary steps to true *enlightenment*.”

Tanon’s skin always crawled at the sight of the decrepit man’s face. It was as wrinkled and leathery as his books, his teeth as yellow as the pages within. His pale eyes seemed to look deeper into Tanon than any ordinary man. Tanon’s hand was resting on the grip of his holstered pistol before he realized it.

The Alchemist noticed, and smiled. “The law has nothing to fear here. Why have you come?”

Tanon feigned nonchalance, turning to a shelf packed with obscure contrivances. He could feel Vekrys’s gaze. “The Chancellor of Olsanth is dead.”

Vekrys turned back to his work. “Shame. Heard he was a true ‘champion of the people’. I’m sure he will be missed greatly.”

“Even by you?” Tanon said. “The Chancellor hated Alchemists.”

“Politicians have always used religious dogma to further their careers,” Vekrys said. “He’s not the first to associate Alchemy with blasphemy. He won’t be the last.”

“He was murdered,” Tanon said.

Vekrys stopped writing. “Tragic.”

“Thought you could shed some light.”

Vekrys eyed Tanon contemplatively. “Do you know why I offer my services to you and no other Badgemen?”

Tanon shrugged. “Because I’m so delightfully agreeable?”

“You’ve seen the darkness,” Vekrys said. “You’ve seen war. Famine. Corruption. You know what men are capable of. What they’ll do to hide it. We have that in common.”

“And I *pay*,” Tanon said, dropping a leather purse on a stool with a bitter thump.

Vekrys smiled. “And you pay. But I must say I’m surprised you’d come to me concerning this matter. Olsanth is practically on the border, much farther than any man my age could travel. I’m not sure what help I’d provide.”

Tanon procured an ornate bronze syringe from his coat pocket. He tossed it to Vekrys, who snatched it with surprising dexterity, running his fingers tenderly over its entirety. He sniffed the needle and grimaced. “Where did you get this?”

“Next to the Chancellor’s body,” Tanon said. “Thought you might have some idea what it contained. I’m pretty familiar with most poisons. This one I can’t place.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Vekrys murmured. “Few men could identify this particular elixir. Even fewer could manufacture it I daresay”

“What is it?”

Vekrys crept to a shelf and grabbed a small, wooden chest that appeared as antique as him. He stationed himself at a desk littered with countless apparatus. Funnels and tubes criss-crossed over beakers and burners. Fluids dripped and gurgled. He went to work, opening the chest and removing several unrecognizable substances. He mixed them meticulously into a mortar and crushed them until they resolved into a deep red powder. He then added the powder to a solution and heated it over a flame placed directly beneath a complicated web of glass tubing. The flame made it rise and travel through the tubes like a serpent, hissing violently as it went.

“Wanna tell me what you’re doing?” Tanon asked.

“I have good news,” Vekrys said, eyeing the passage of the liquid through his instruments and into a vial. “Your Chancellor isn’t dead.”

Tanon snorted. “That’s very interesting, seeing as I saw the body myself. No pulse, icy skin, empty eyes. If he’s not dead he’s a damn good actor.”

“The miraculous effect of that syringe’s contents,” Vekrys said. “The Chancellor’s body is a corpse yes, but his *mind*, his *consciousness*, those I assure you are still very much alive. They are simply elsewhere at the moment.”

“Uh-huh. Where might that be?”

“Hard question to answer. There’s no literal name. It's a place that goes beyond our full comprehension. We can only theorize as to its true nature. All we know for certain is that it exists.”

Vekrys’s concoction was complete. He reached back into the chest and removed an object unlike anything Tanon had ever seen. It was an elaborate device comprised of both stone and metal. Cogs ran between sets of golden rings which surrounded a

plum-sized orb of black marble. A myriad of symbols and measurements were etched upon each ring. He set it down carefully and took the now filled vial in his hands.

“And with the right tools,” he continued, “one may interact with it.”

Tanon’s muscles tensed. “How could that be possible? And if you say ‘magic’ I’m going to find the most expensive-looking thing here and drop it.”

Vekrys simpered. “*Magic*. Such a misguided word. To call something magic is to assume there’s no explanation for it, no mechanics to illuminate how or why it is. But everything has an explanation. Some are merely unexposed.”

“Why not just kill him? What good is it to remove his consciousness?”

Vekrys looked down. “Only an Alchemist could create that substance,” he said. “But an Alchemist would know that. They’d also know that any Alchemist worth their weight could identify it. To leave that syringe would be foolish, nonetheless careless. Whoever placed the Chancellor in his current state either wanted that syringe to be found or, more likely, was unable to finish their work and wanted you on the wrong trail.”

“Finish their work?”

Vekrys frowned. “It is the theory of some that if a person’s consciousness can be removed from their body, it stands to reason that one may replace it with another, thereby controlling the body.” He met Tanon’s eyes. “Can you think of anyone who might stand to gain from controlling the body of a man like our beloved Chancellor?”

Tanon’s heart skipped. *Plenty*. “But if not an Alchemist, then who?”

“Intriguing question.” Vekrys held the vial towards Tanon. “Perhaps you’d like to ask him.”

“Who?”

Vekrys raised his eyebrows. “The Chancellor.”

Tanon stared at the vial and frowned.

“Don’t fear my friend,” Vekrys said. “Ominous things tend to have ominous traits, but I have no wish to kill you, though your body is a fine specimen. If you should die in your prime, I’m sure there are several ways I could put it to good use.”

Tanon hesitated, then took the vial. “Not today I think.” He drank.

The reaction was instant. His tasted ash and smelled decay. His vision blurred and the room went quiet. The device on the table suddenly came to life. The rings rotated around the orb, humming vigorously, as if the device had sensed that Tanon drank the liquid, and was excited.

Tanon gagged, clutching his throat. “*What have you done to me*?”

Vekrys smiled his wraithlike smile. “I’ve enlightened you.” He gestured towards the device.

Tanon approached it. The orb glowed vibrantly despite its pitch-black hue, beautiful and menacing. It drew him in.

“Call to him,” Vekrys instructed. “Not with your voice. Don’t take your eyes off the orb.”

Tanon stared deeper into the orb’s light. The slightest sound crept into his mind. The room slowly faded until there was nothing but him and the light, that luscious, incandescent light. The sound became whispers, too numerous and distant to decipher. Tanon gazed deeper. The whispers grew in number and volume. They became voices, then cries, then screams, a haunting cacophony that filled Tanon with an overwhelming dread. They grew relentlessly until Tanon thought his head might burst. The orb shone brighter than ever, then went out completely. The voices dissipated and Tanon was left in darkness and silence that lasted a lifetime. Then a single voice called out from the void, clear and distinct.

Tanon recognized the voice immediately as the Chancellor’s, and his skepticism was put to the test once again.

# The Cabinet of Mal Zabir

This time, the students were birds, which was why iron rods barred the ceiling window of the lecture hall. Professor Stark told them about one eighth-form boy that left the window open as a joke, and an entire class of sixth-formers flew off, never to be seen again.

Birds today - white potions smelling of feathers and rain - dogs last week. That first transformation had been a wild mess as the class tried to understand how to hold on to their human minds. But they’d learned, and now most of them calmly perched on the rafters.

Nothing in magic is as cool as this, Brand thought, folding his wings and coming to rest on a beam. One little potion and you were a dog, an eagle, or... anything you had a potion for. So far, they’d learned to mix the potions and most could resist the instincts surging in their transformed bodies, but they’d no idea how it all worked. “You’re not ready for that yet” were Brand’s absolute least favorite words.

And some students *weren't* ready. A sparrow-girl was flitting carelessly through the air until a hawk-boy dropped onto her unprotected back, talons wide. Suddenly, an explosive clap shook the room, and green smoke filled every corner. Nineteen students dropped to the floor, enchantments stripped away like mist before the sun. Professor Stark pulled the hawk-boy off the girl, Mathia, the best student in the whole sixth form.

"Shame on you! Control yourself!" Stark shook him hard, until his eyes focused. Then she rounded on Mathia. "And you! You may know books, but if you cannot master the effects of a potion, you've learned nothing!"

Brand looked down on his classmates from the rafters. He'd inhaled just the smallest bit of the green smoke that broke the enchantments, and found he could balance between human and bird. He let it go, dropping softly to the floor while the Professor droned on and on.

He patted a vial in the pocket of his robe, where he’d saved back enough eagle potion to practice on his own.

........

The next day, hawk-boy was gone. They'd packed his bags in the middle of the night, and sent him off on the morning ferry, back to home and normal life. Mathia was dropped back eight places, to an embarrassing middle desk - right next to Brand’s.

It was Thursday - Philosophy and Origins of Magic, which was usually long on philosophy and short on origins. Brand’s mind wandered, until he glanced at Mathia. Her mouth was open and her eyes were riveted on Professor Stark. If Mathia was learning something new, maybe Brand should pay attention.

"In tranformations, what is the source of each creature, each thing we become?" That’s easy, thought Brand. Each potion was based on ingredients. They were the source. "This term, you've been learning the secret name for each powder, each tincture, each extract. But the names of each, while extremely important, and you must memorize, memorize, memorize - these names aren’t the things themselves."

“Indeed, they are not,” said an accented voice at the classroom door. Nineteen heads swiveled to see a stick-like old man ducking his head through the doorway. "A name is not the thing itself.” Brand craned to see over the front row of students, who were half standing in their chairs to get a better look. "Think of meat," continued the stranger. “Do we call it flesh? or muscle? No! Pig becomes pork. Cow linguistically transforms into beef. It all sounds so much... cleaner.”

Professor Stark interrupted. "Class, please greet your instructor for today, the honorable Mal Zabir." She gave the man her best glare. "Master Zabir, do try not to give my students nightmares.”

Mal Zabir continued as though she hadn't spoken. "*Coripanish* has an exotic sound, does it not? But that is only because it is ancient Lemurian. Our modern tongue would render it as - extract of house cat."

"Gross!" sang the students, except for Brand and Mathia.

"Yesterday, when you were flitting about in the air, were you thinking where the *gentabus* powder came from for making starling potions? Or the *arginish* for an owl?” Mal Zabir crooked a finger, and two slyly grinning eighth-formers carried in a tall cupboard bound with metal chains and padlocks. He spoke a single Word of power, and the chains clanked to the floor in a heap. "Today you will learn the true source of transformational potions.” He spread the cupboard doors wide.

Inside, rows of tiny wooden drawers framed a little worktable covered with strange apparatus. A glass cylinder was suspended from a metal arm attached to the back of the cabinet. Its surface was steamed with condensation, but something moved inside, scrabbling at the glass with tiny claws.

"Behold the common grey squirrel!" Mal Zabir flipped a switch on the worktable, and a current of power entered the glass. The squirrel began to scream. "*Parsivirex*,” said Mal Zabor over the noise. “What a lovely word for extract of squirrel." The power rose and rose to a high pitch, until with a gruesome pop, the squirrel exploded in red blood and grey hair, painting the inside of the cylinder.

The class erupted, and one student at the front was ill. Brand studied the cabinet. There were so many drawers, and some were secured with tiny, brass locks. Mathia caught his eye, and for the first time in a long while, Brand felt a connection with a fellow student.

.....

"If they don't want us to break into things," said Brand, "they shouldn't teach us acids." He blew away the last of the acrid smoke and swung open the doors of Mal Zabir's cupboard. "Told you it wouldn't take long."

"I could have used a spell," said Mathia.

"And woken half the teachers. They've got alarms for spell-casting, remember.”

They studied the opened cabinet in the dim light from a shuttered lamp. The apparatus and its awful results had been removed, but what interested Brand were the twenty brass-locked drawers, each labeled in faded blue ink.

"*Madon Caraginan*," read Mathia, sounding out the Lemurian letters on one label.

"What's that?"

"Who. Caraginan means warrior. Madon means sword.”

Mathia spent every spare hour reading. Brand only needed to hear something once, so he never bothered with books. "So, *Madon Caraginan* is a sword warrior?"

"A swordsman."

Brand slid a metal rod through the thin hasp of the lock.

“Don’t!” cried Mathia, but he yanked down and broke off the lock with a tiny ping. Brand still couldn't believe Mathia had gone along with this. And now, she was like always - no fun at all. He pulled open the drawer and slid out a vial of silver fluid.

"Essence of swordsman," he said, grinning.

"That can't be right," protested Mathia. "They wouldn’t do that to a person."

"They did it to the squirrel." Brand tried to picture it. They must have human-sized vessels for denaturing people into meat, and bone, and spirit. "Pick another," he said.

“You should stop,” said Mathia, but Brand just glared at her. She sighed, then carefully counted over three drawers and up two. "*Kanath Magdath*," she read quietly. "Black sorcerer."

"Oh, yes," breathed Brand. He popped the lock, and drew out a black vial that froze his fingers one moment and burned them the next. "And they give us bird potions and puppies." He held it up to the light.

“Don't take that,” said Mathia.

"No," said a voice from a dark corner. “No, young Brand certainly should not take what is not his.” Mal Zabir stepped out of the shadows. "Give up the potion, boy. It is not for you.”

Brand gulped and stepped back. “We just want to know,” he complained. "They never teach us everything. We want to learn!"

"You'll learn nothing more from this school," said Professor Stark, striding into the room. "Very good, Mathia. There's one like him in every class. Master Zabir flushes them out every time." Mathia gave Brand a look filled with apology and moved away. Professor Stark stepped forward.

Brand snatched a vial from his robe and shattered it on the floor. Brown gas bloomed up in a thick cloud. He looked up to the barred window, and shouted the Word of unlocking he’d heard that morning from Mal Zabir.

"He's getting away!" coughed Mathia.

Brand swallowed the last of his bird potion, spread his powerful wings and arrowed through the portal.

"Let him go," said Mal Zabir. "I am certain he will not get far. Those labels are not real. That black potion he stole? You know your Lemurian, young lady. How would you translate *ghal kordathish*?"

Mathia puzzled it through. "Essence of... granite?"

“Oh, quite," laughed Mal Zabir. “And one cannot change back from stone. Such an eager boy. We will look for him in the morning."

On the ledge outside the window, an eagle-boy listened briefly, then launched himself into the wide, wild dark.

# The Last Ingredient

A little bell peels in the air somewhere, comes muffled to our ears and makes me smile. It is proof that time still flows, that soon we'll return indoors, where breathing through your nose doesn't trigger a gagging reflex.

"Rachar, do you think the weather was a selling point when they decided to build our prison here?" I ask, panting.

"Totally. I can see the ad, 'atmosphere of the 6th circle of Hell, hot, humid, and thick as pudding.'"

I stare up at the ever shifting pattern of lush and exotic leaves, criss-crossing above our heads in a breeze we can see but never quite feel. Rachar, halfway through his thirty years sentence, jest as he might, is much more acclimatised than I ever wish to become.

"Don't you need my help for gathering more ingredients, Ira? I quite enjoy the rush of danger from those errands."

"No. No more errands," I say, "I only need one last ingredient, and..." I make a fluttering motion with my hand, mimic myself flying away. Free. "Soon now."

This news makes my friend stir and sit up. After three years of secretly brewing this potion, he must have thought me all talk.

"What is it, this last ingredient?"

I make a face up at him, peering into the eyes smouldering behind his own little jungle of tangled hair.

"It's something I'm not sure I can get."

"For real? But you've been so keen on escaping this whole time... Well, maybe it's for the best. Considered what they'd do to you if they catch you. I kinda like you, you know. I'd rather not see *that* done to you. No one gets out of here unless their time is up."

I don't know if it's respect or pity I feel surging in me when he speaks like this, him who won't rebel, won't try to escape. Who sits day after day in this green hell of a place, knowing there will be endless tomorrows made of the same infernal heat, the same corrosive dullness, the same absence of freedom.

Making it out doesn't even matter. Trying is my only way to remain sane. I can't relate to his defeatism and meek acceptance. Not that it's easy to ever relate to Rachar, who was done in for running the biggest, most lethal cartel of drugs for were-animals Europe had ever seen, and killing, in his werebear form, five of the special-ops werewolves that were sent to arrest him. A sleek piece of remorseless trash, though a decent fellow one-on-one.

"Ira, you're growling."

"Sorry, mind wandered."

Rachar laughs, pats my hair with a hand monstrous enough to crush my skull in a squeeze. "Think of the future. When you finish brewing that potion of yours and pull a Shawshank over the eyes of Erikson and the crew."

"Don't go talking so loud, naming names and mentioning potions!" I sit up, unnerved. "The break is almost over."

"Ease up Ira, I'd know if anyone were around. I wouldn't let them lock you down with the bloodies either."

"Aye, like you could help it if they decided to."

Which is not the real problem. To determine the strength of new inmate magi, the prison's surgeons test the glands that secrete magica, always found in the armpits and throat. That test labelled me as a mere C-class magus, hardly a trouble to handle here.

In comparison, A-class magi, like blood witches, are near impossible to catch alive. Meaning the handful of them we have in the basement make my werebear-druglord friend look like a philanthropist. They're kept with their hands in wet casts so they can't sharpen spelling tools, their teeth in moulds to keep them from biting themselves bloody.

Not enviable.

But people like me, with a little known organ tucked away behind the stomach, who can brew potions in their own bodies–potion being the romantic name for a magical bile–are extremely rare, and impossible to safely detain. A-class treatment wouldn't cut it. So long as I'm fed, I can always brew something annoying or even lethal to my handlers.

S-class, maybe? As in Straight-to-firing-squad-class.

"Surely Erikson wouldn't let them take you away. The man is fond of you."

"Brewers are thought extinct since the mid 20th century. They'd probably dissect me, Rachar. Officers would not care for my being some guardian's pet prisoner."

"Eurk–well, I won't talk so... What's that last ingredient anyway?" His hand flies up before I can answer. "Speaking of the Devil," he mutters.

"Rachar, Ira, you two deaf? Didn't hear the second bell?"

The Devil indeed.

"Ah, Erikson. We were busy exchanging news, so much has happened since yesterday after all."

"You crazies shouldn't even be allowed to meet."

"Crazy? Nonsense, I'm a lamb."

"And I'm perfectly conscious of my actions."

"That just makes you a horrible person, Rachar."

Back in the cool bliss of air-con, I nod to him, a discrete salute I mean as an adieu, his looks are worried, but he tips me an invisible hat before turning away. So long, crazy friend.

Up the stairs now, and following Erikson. Like every evening, my aisle is a mess of supernatural creatures and their supernatural gaolers, but I only have eyes for mine.

Erikson. I watch his blond head, his shoulders shifting under his miraculously crisp white shirt–what spell does the man use to keep them dry, I still wonder.

By habit, I match his steps. Hateful habit, that makes my face relax, almost smile for him when he looks my way. Too long he's been my mindful captor. The man answering my calls, opening my door. The hand feeding me, the hand swiping me little things, when no one watches. He's a decent guy under the rough persona one needs to work in this jail, and I'm neck deep in Stockholm syndrome.

Erickson, for three years blind to my careful plotting. I hid it all from him, always playing the nice, reasonable lass, caught up in troubles bigger than her. Not the weirdo woman bargaining favours at every turn to obtain samples of hair, skin, blood, fabrics, spices... Stealing food, making some rot, pre-digesting others for the desired effects. Anything that might contain the ingredients my gut craves to continue its infernal distillation.

Behind his broad back I've licked the walls of my cell, scratching my tongue over the lead paint till I nearly poisoned myself. It's an organic, messy trade.

For three years I've brewed this concoction. Haltingly, with no known recipe, brought forth by my instinct and my need to escape, disappear, melt through walls–any will do so long as I get far away. Where Erikson won't be tearing at my mind, brushing my heart with the very fingers that turn the key in the lock of my cage.

"Ira, you're growling."

"Funny, that's the second time I've been told today." I pace down my little cell and back up to him.

"What is making you so tense?" he asks, leaning against the bars to talk with me.

Erikson. My last ingredient.

"Some internal turmoil over something I need but struggle to obtain."

"That's the point of jails."

"Aye, but smuggling doesn't usually get a magus in jail."

"You were smuggling human flesh!"

I shrug, give him a sad grin. "How would I have known? It was spelled."

He smiles back at me, a show of dimples. "Save it for the judges. Your appeal won't be delayed forever."

Erikson, who believes me when I lie.

I step closer, curl my fingers around the cold steel bars. Looking up at him, I whisper, "will you miss me, when I'm gone?"

He frowns.

Is it hatred, or love, festering in my pounding chest, that makes me flush and quiver as I wait for his answer?

"I'd like that; missing you. If it means you're acquitted."

The idea of missing him makes my mind trip over itself.

"I think I'd miss you too," I surprise myself saying, "but I don't think I'd like that at all."

I dive in the grey pools of his eyes, so close, like full moons pulling at the tides of my emotions. Erikson murmurs my name like a warning, but doesn't move. I'm on the tip of my toes and my fingers rubbing against the wondrous white shirt and the warm flesh behind it.

His breath smells like mints and beer and magica. His lips are hot, firm but hesitant, like a cliched first kiss. His fingers are trailing my jaws, scorching my skin.

In one strong bite his blood comes gushing into my mouth. He cries, rending my heart–part free woman, part betrayer. I swallow my feelings along with coppery blood. There is a burning sensation in my guts as the last ingredient creates a chain reaction.

The world dissipates in clouds of matter around me. Erikson's hands reach out but pass right through me. Through my victorious smile and my farewell nod like through a gentle wind.

I'm immaterial.

I'm free.

# The True Origins of Bjord the Commanding, Washer of Sheets, Undisputed Ruler of Absenthia

*"Psst."*

"What?"

*"Pssssst."*

"You don't have to *psst* me, Neesh. There's no one here, and I can see you just fine."

"Just keep your voice down."

"The library's empty. I've checked."

"You can't be too careful."

"*You* can't be too careful. I don't even know why I'm here."

"I did it."

"Did what? Why couldn't this wait until morning?"

"I've mixed the potion, Artur! The Potion of Command Galidor mentioned in his historical journals."

"You did not."

"It's right here."

"Let me see that!"

"Well? Look at it!"

"Sure, this looks like a potion, Neesh. So do all the flasks we mixed last week."

"It's not a potion. It's *the* potion. Don't ask me what I had to go through to get my hands on a Yuk-Yuk's heart."

"What did you have to go through to get your hands on—?"

"I told you not to ask!"

"It probably wasn't even a real Yuk-Yuk. Old King Harold killed all the Yuk-Yuks, after his son's nose fell off. Every noble in Absenthia assumed he was snorting faerie dust."

"Look, I have it on extremely good authority that it was a Yuk-Yuk ... I mean, the flying possum from which the heart was cut ... and the instructions said that adding it would create a poof of green smoke that smelled specifically of mint and goat."

"I think one of those smells will overpower the other."

"Not for a nose like mine. The smoke was green, a nice poof of it, and the smell was minty goat."

"When have you ever spelled a minty goat?"

"The weight's just right, too. I checked it against the figures Galidor left in his journals."

"Did you remember to add a half-crown for the weight of the flask?"

"Of course I remembered the half-crown. I'm not an idiot."

"Well, you did tell Alchemaster Palu that the difference between a Potion of Short Flight and Long Flight was the length of the feather you ground—"

"That was an honest mistake! And besides, you mixed up green sand and red in reagents class."

"That's because I'm colorblind, you insensitive dolt."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Artur. I just don't like it when you belittle me. Alchemaster Tonjold always belittles me, and you know what he thinks about smallfolk becoming alchemasters."

"Look, Tonjold's an old prick, and I'm not belittling you, Neesh. I'm just being realistic. I just don't think anyone is ever going to be able to replicate Galidor's Potion of Command."

"But I just did."

"Well, if you think so, how do you plan to test it?"

"That's why you're here."

"Oh, no."

"I'm going to drink the potion, and then I'm going to tell you to do something. If you do it—"

"Absolutely not happening."

"—then we'll know the potion works!"

"What were you going to tell me to do?"

"I don't know, um ... hop on one leg, maybe?"

"How would you know I'm not just messing with you?"

"Because you wouldn't do that! How long have we known each other, Artur?"

"Too long. Far too long."

"I know you wouldn't mess with me like that. You're nothing if not brutally honest."

"Well, I suppose that's true."

"So, stand right there, and I'll—"

"Stop!"

"Hey, let go!"

"You can't just drink it, you dolt. What if you got the formula wrong?"

"I didn’t."

"You could end up attracting slugs, or turn into a purple mushroom and migrate spores all over the library, like that second year that ground up a tree frog."

"There's no tree frogs in this potion."

"Or you could end up burping crickets."

"Name one time that's happened."

"Potions Exhibition, last year. Dilution training, four months ago. Smell control, last—"

"Name one time recently."

"All I'm saying is, if you really think this does what it does, we should test it first. On someone else."

"Oh. Well ... let's think. Who do we know who's stupid enough to drink a potion without asking what it is?"

"We're at a school of potion makers, Neesh. The stupid ones never make it through the first year."

"Haha, true. Oh hey, do you remember that long-nosed guy from Estonir, the one with the ponytail? What was his name?"

"Lejo something."

"Lejori?"

"Yes, Lejori. That's the first and last time I've ever seen anyone projectile vomit their own tongue."

"Okay, fine, let's say we do it your way. We still need someone who's not part of the school."

"A mundane?"

"Why not? We'll just tell them it's a love potion or something."

"Love potions are illegal, and if he reports us—"

"He won't report us, Artur. They don't even let mundanes in the guild anymore, not since the last peasant uprising. Steward Snodgrass had to order eight-dozen new vials from the Illusion Embassy."

"Didn't they get into the reserves as well? Some rumor about strength potions they could use to bash through the king's guards?"

"Honestly, I think that's where all the new statues in the hedge maze came from."

"All right, so, we'll go find a mundane. But we're not going to tell them it's a love potion. Maybe a truth potion, instead."

"Ha! That's a bit ironic, isn't it?"

"Not if you know what that word means."

"I like this plan. I like it a lot. So, first thing tomorrow?"

"Yes. Fine. But we should only offer the mundane a single drop. Assuming Galidor's old journals aren't all donkey scat, a single drop should give him the power of command for ... ten minutes, tops."

"Say, um ... what if he commands us to give him more?"

"That's why we take a dropper, with one drop, and hide the rest of the potion in your room."

"Ooh, good idea."

"Mix up a bit of ForgetMeSo. We'll both take a drop before we leave tomorrow. That way, neither of us will know where the potion is, so even if he commands us to give it to him, we won't be able to. "

"But ... how will we find it again?"

"When the ForgetMeSo wears off. Assuming you mix it right, that's less than a day."

"Oh, good idea! That's why I always call you, Artur. You have all the good ideas."

"Well, Seven forbid, if you have managed to somehow replicate Galidor's Potion of Command, you'll be the one with all the good ideas, Neesh. They'll promote you to alchemaster for sure."

"Gosh, you really think so?"

"They promoted Bujor, and all he did was turn the Potion Master's cat into a slightly larger cat."

"Alchemixed milk, wasn't it?"

"He's lucky the cat didn't explode."

"Okay. I'll hide the potion tonight. Tomorrow, we prove it works, and tomorrow afternoon—"

"Alchemaster Neesh becomes the new head of the Galidor Restoration Project!"

"With his new Steward of Potions, of course, Artur Rainwater."

"I like the sound of Steward Rainwater. He sounds very rich."

"I could be Galidor, Artur! They could speak of me like Galidor someday!"

"Just remember to hide the potion better than the Potion of Flatulence you mixed last year, for Jester's Day. Old Bjord always turns down the bunks. If he turns down your bunk—"

"Seven take me, I couldn't go in the dorms for a week after that! But he won't find it."

"He'll drink anything he sees, Neesh. It's a compulsion he's had since he mixed up the ingredients in his Dietary Elixir. That's why they demoted him the Dorm Master."

"Head sheet washer, you mean. I still don't see why they don't just fire him."

"Honestly, how do you pass anything? He's the last member of Galidor's tenure track."

"Tenure track?"

"That's why you become an alchemaster, Neesh! So you get tenure. So no one can ever fire you."

"Oh, right."

"No one can fire Bjord even if he lacks the wits the Seven gave a caterpillar, which is why they have him turning down bunks."

"He won't find it. Besides, we'll be back before turn down."

"Just don't hide it in your bunk."

"I told you, Artur, I'm not an idiot!"

"I know. I know you're not an idiot, Neesh. I'm with you."

"Really?"

"We're doing this. We're going to be the toast of the Absenthia, thanks to your alchemical brilliance, and my political brilliance."

"But mostly my brilliance?"

"Whatever you want to put on the wall."

"Seven take me, Artur, we'll be famous!"

"And rich, remember, but only if your potion works."

"It'll work! I know it'll work!"

"Well I suppose we'll see tomorrow, won't we?"

THE END

# Ingredients needed

Starn reached into a round hollow in the tree trunk and felt around. Post. He pulled out the parchment. It read:

For the attention of Starn, Hero of the siege of Arkan, Ranger General of Yunkar (Disgraced).

The resident apothecary at Castle Seaview requires the following:

One Owl (plucked and roasted over wood);

A lock of red hair;

Harnriss penis (extracted whilst the creature still lives);

Meet me at the docks when the moon is full for the final ingredient.

This job should suit your considerable skills, friend. I don't care how you get the ingredients but before you have any moral qualms, remember it was your little mistake that got you discharged from the Imperial Rangers. Your wife and children Starn. You need the gold to keep a roof after their heads. You have two weeks until the full moon. Apparently some fat noble has a problem with getting his cock to work and needs the potion for his wedding night. Don't be late or you won't get paid.

Good luck friend,

Vish

Starn stuffed the parchment into a pocket inside his cloak and started to walk further into the forest.

\*\*\*

Starn slathered mud from a fetid puddle on his face and wondered how he had gone from commanding the Emperor's Rangers to trying to poach an owl in the said Emperor's private hunting forest. He wiped the excess grime onto his trousers and strung his bow as the forest devoured the last of the sunlight. Bow strung, Starn sat and listened for the call of an owl. *I am such an idiot. Why did I do it?* His musings were interrupted by a distant hoot, which he preceded to follow. He stalked though the ancient trees following the owl's call until he reached the edge of the forest. The owl would return from the open fields and back to the forest. Starn had gambled it would return the same way it left. Starn watched the moon move across the night sky until the distinctive silhouette of a large grey owl glided across his vision. He smoothly aimed his bow, calculated the required power and angle, then released the bowstring. The owl screeched as the arrow slammed into its body. It's once noble and graceful form tumbled inelegantly to the ground. Starn couldn't help feeling some empathy with the creature.

\*\*\*

Starn threw the owl carcass on the kitchen table.

"I found some work Neave."

His wife fixed him with the same empty glare he had been greeted with everyday since the incident.

"I need this plucked and roasted over wood. It's for the apothecary. Where are the children?"

She gestured toward the stairs.

"Asleep"

She turned away and carried on cleaning a large pot.

"Look I am trying my best here. I know I made a mistake but..."

Neave interrupted his protestations.

"I don't want your self pity. I want gold to feed the children. Since you ... did what you did ... there's not been much of that around. So go and kiss your children goodnight, if you can manage to stop thinking about yourself. Then I want you to go out and get some gold. A dead owl is not going to keep a roof over our heads".

Starn shuffled out and up the stairs to look in on his two daughters. He felt the same bottomless love he always experienced when he was with them. Only now that pure and wonderful feeling was despoiled with guilt. He gave them each a kiss on the forehead, careful not to wake them, and crept out.

"Well lieutenant, your a wonder between the sheets"

Sabine let her long red hair out of the tight bun it was bound in. Starn watched it cascade down her ivory skin until it obscured her breasts. He attempted to feel revolted by himself. He had removed a few medals from his old dress uniform and died his hair to ensure he wasn't recognised. Sabine had proved easy to charm into bed.

"Where did you learn to pleasure a women like that".

*With my wife.* He thought regretfully.

"I am going to go to the bar and get us some drinks. Make yourself comfy lover."

Sabine swept out of the room after pulling on her dress.

Starn wasted no time turning out Sabine's drawers. He rummaged until he found her hairbrush and pocketed the hair that had accumulated on it. He exited via the open window and began to climb down the back of the tavern to ground. *If only I had done this last time. No, if only I had asked her name. If only I had been a good husband*.

Haris was lot fatter and balder than when Starn had said goodbye to him after the Seige of Arkan.

"Hey Haris. It's been a while".

"Who the fuck are you? I don't associated with anybody who wears flea ridden rags. Off with you now, unless you want to fight in this 'ere arena behind me."

"Actually that's exactly what I want."

Starn placed his thumb and little finger together before extending the remain three toward his old comrade.

"I'm surprised you've forgotten how I rescued your sorry arse from the wrong side of Castle Arkan's wall when you decided to fall of".

"General...Starn. I didn't recognise you. I'm sorry sir. No one has seen you since...the incident with the High Judge's daughter." Haris reciprocated the hand signal.

"Look I don't want to talk about it. I need you to get me into the arena for the beast fights. I need to kill a Harnriss. Then I need you to get me out again. Hence why I am dressed as a down on my luck criminal. Which I pretty much am these days."

"Look Starn, I know things must be bad but what your contemplating is suicide".

"Desperate times and all that. Just like at Arkan."

"You saved a lot of people at the siege sir. I'll see what I can do."

\*\*\*

The Harnriss ripped at the throat of a hapless combatant in the arena. The man's spear kept glancing weakly off the creatures scales. The serpentine beast had five sets of short but powerful legs jutting out of its segmented body. It's jaws formed a cross shape with four sets of teeth when open and were as wide and tall as its body. Starn stood at the side of the arena as it sinuously wove around the helpless criminals in the arena, tearing them apart. It would be coming for him soon. He had read extensively about them in Ranger training but had never faced one. The last man fell, bitten in half. Starn backed up to the towering wall of the arena hoping his strategy was sound. The Harnriss kicked up a minor dust storm as it careened toward him. Starn held his ground and wedged his spear between the bottom of the arena floor and wall at an angle. The beast leapt at his throat. Starn rolled at last second. He felt teeth tear jagged slices in his arm. Then he heard the bestial howl as the creature impaled itself on his spear. He didn't have long. Knife in hand, Starn carefully approached the rear of the creature. It's thrashing reached a crescendo as the blade went up through a small hole between its legs and sliced the penis clean off in one fluid motion. Starn sprinted toward the arena gate as the poison he had coated on his blade finished the creature off.

\*\*\*

"I have the ingredients Vish. I am here for the last item and my money."

"Well done friend. You have always excelled. First in the military, now in crime. We will need some help for the final ingredient Starn."

Starn counted five heavily built men emerge from behind some shipping crates.

"Pin him down boys"

Starn stood dumbfounded as the heavies rushed him.

"What is this Vish?"

"Bring me his woman"

Two new thugs hauled Neave out of a barrel and threw her at Vish's feet.

"What have you done with my children?"

"Sold I'm afraid. To the slavers. Perhaps you can find them when this is over."

Vish grabbed Neave by the hair and slashed her throat.

"You bastard."

Tears came unbidden as the only women he had ever loved bled out on the slimy dock side. A thug grabbed him round the neck and scraped a vial up his cheek.

"The last ingredient are tears shed in grief. Thank you for those Starn. Now, don't be sad. Just think, your cock bought doom to you and yours but it did mean this miraculous cock healing potion could be brewed. I am sure the little noble will be pleased. If you boys stopped thinking through your members, then you'd all be rich like me. Bye now".

Starn crawled over to Naeve and cradled her in his arms, wondering where he could find a potion to kill a man.

# Untitled

Eye of newt

and a serpent’s tail

When the storm calls

the gods you’ll hail

The first spring’s dew

and a mushroom’s rot

Clear your mind

and burn your thoughts

A rose still green

and a moss blood red

On the thirteenth day

beg the blessings of the dead

A newborn’s tears

stolen each night

to draw the glyph

and seal the rite

To prove your desire

to the gods above

the bloody heart

of the one you love

A single taste

and your fate is sealed

the darkness inside

all wounds shall heal

free from the pain

that mortals feel

Eye of newt

and a serpent’s tail

When the storm calls

the gods you’ll hail.

# The\_Gem\_Cutter

A darkling daughter came one night and on the mantle did alight.

Before the gathered court she sprang. Ere drawn was sword she clearly sang,

Of silver webs that bound them all, both noble lord and lady tall,

Encircling mighty crown and land in falsely fragile mind and hand.

The king and queen their captain shame, send slinking from their court like knave,

For drawing weapon threatening, then happy eyes watch maiden sing.

“And would this court so fair and wise, not profit from the loss of guise,

obscuring greater deeds and dreams that otherwise beyond you seem?”

"What gifts have you to change this land?" asked silver bearded king his grand

and queenly wife upbraiding laughs, but darkling daughter shrugs "My draughts."

"Draughts?" queenly wizened matron frowns, and wrinkles smooths from well-worn gowns,

Once fair on shoulders smooth they hung. "Draughts - potions like I saw when young?"

"Nay fair haired queen thou never saw, such potions peerless with no flaw,

Imbued with powers deep and strong, to limber limb and make life long.”

"No powers these thy drinks command – my butcher's meats also make grand

The body's sinews, strength, and size, what other power in you lies?”

"Great powers vast I summon for the sweetly dripping dews I pour,

‘Neath moonlit skies with thunderous dread to fill the vials blue and red,

With starlight caught on skein of silk, I weave the pearly drops like milk,

In glen remote ‘Neath heaven’s stairs, where neither man nor maiden fares.”

“O! Maiden fair we plainly see, great craft you wield and mightily,

Now plainly boons and gains do tell, so we might craven council quell.”

"More deep the power I implore, than any else hast held before,

To quicken mind and senses hone, to give youth’s strength to anchor throne."

"Your price young maiden quickly say, what wicked thing desired to pay?"

“My single fee: to welcome me, as daughter of thy family,

When time has sped and from you fled, your crown shall rest upon my head.

The sole exception that be said, thy choice in husband I shall wed.

So fully joined our powers would, the land and kingdom do great good.”

Thus spoke the king in mighty voice, uplifting court his cry: “Rejoice!

Her price is but a second boon, to powers offered and right soon,

No heirs have come to ancient line, this maiden comes with offer fine,

No children ever here have roamed, small price is this: to grow our home!”

The darkling daughter potions brings, the red to queen, the blue to king,

Corks then to courtly floor they cast, a joyful look they share – one last.

And drinking down the bitter draught, says maiden to the court “At last!

My bargain is complete you see, from poison strong they cannot flee,

For never should a land be ruled, by those so swiftly, surely fooled.

Bring Captain wise to me for groom, our wedding feast will now this room.”

# Life Everlasting

*Should you wish to live for all time,*

You would do well to remember this rhyme.

Dafyn Waulo had but one goal in life, and that was to make himself immortal. Songs and plays of his many deeds did not interest him, not in the way that kings and foreign emperors alike fussed over them. What was the use of his name being known if he was not there to partake of his glory? No, Dafyn wanted immortality of a rather more tangible variety. An old man now, he had devoted some fifty years of his fragile existence to the quest for life everlasting. Thus far, nothing had quite ended how he desired.

Many years ago, when Dafyn was in his prime, there had been a wandering soldier whose wounds healed within hours of coming near death. He had made bold claims of having found a lake in the mountains where the water granted great healing abilities and Dafyn, like a foolish youth, had gone in search of it. He'd found nothing, and upon his return he ordered the soldier beheaded. The man had not healed that wound.

In later years there was tell of a great black boar that would grant everlasting youth to the man who could catch it. Not much of a hunter himself, Dafyn had convinced his king to lead a great hunt. Alas, the endeavour had ended only in the death of his king at the hands, or rather the paws, of a large and particularly aggressive pack of wolves. No one had wanted to pursue beasts of legend after that incident.

Now, aged eighty-three and living on time best described as borrowed, Dafyn had found one last opportunity to reach his goal. The Cauldron of Pefach. Once the right mixture of ingredients was stirred into the great pot, or so it was said, the drinker would be granted immortality. Unfortunately, as was the way with these things, the ingredients of this particular elixir were rather hard to come by.

*To fill the cauldron with elixir of life,*

First find a king and cut him with a knife.

As an advisor to his king, just as he had advised the past three generations of the royal family, Dafyn had easy access to his king's person in even the most dire of circumstances. He waved his way past the twin guards outside the king's door and had himself announced. Soon he found himself sitting on the floor opposite his liege.

"Goodman Waulo," beamed King Hetcau, his young and somewhat chubby features glowing in the early morning light. "Is there a reason for your visit, or are you lonely in your tower?"

Dafyn returned the smile. "I have been studying the stars, my king," he said. "I fear there is some great calamity approaching us."

"Gods protect us," uttered Hetcau, making a ward across his chest. "Have you ascertained the nature of this evil?"

"I am afraid not, my king. Nothing brought about by men, that much I know. Perhaps some evil spirit seeking to enter your hall. Or the wrath of an angered god."

"Are they not pleased? I have made offerings every day."

"Then a spirit it must be." Dafyn shook his head sadly.

Hetcau looked imploringly at his advisor. "What can we do, Waulo?"

Dafyn paused, as if deep in thought. "I can endeavour to make a ward for you, to banish spirits from your home. I would however, require a small amount of your blood."

"My blood?" The King recoiled in disgust.

"Yes, my king. Spirits cannot stand any part of the body. It reminds them of what they no longer have." He smiled calmly. "I would only need a few drops, no more."

"Very well," Hetcau agreed, and placed him hand out, palm upward.

Dafyn bowed, and drew his knife. Crimson spilled across the blade, and he collected it in a small bottle. Then he made his excuses and left.

*When king's blood has touched the pot,*

Stir in redthorn, not little but a lot.

Redthorn. Where am I to find redthorn? wondered Dafyn. It was a rare tree, and none grew in the kingdom so far as he knew. And yet the name had been mentioned recently? But when? And in what context? He wandered the corridors of the king's hall for many hours before he found his answer.

"Have you seen the Queen of late?" Dafyn heard one courtier asking another.

"No," replied the second man. "Not for a week, that I can think of."

"She can't still be in her garden can she? How many flowers can one woman need?"

"There's more there than flowers from what I hear. All sorts of herbs and roots."

Dafyn didn't hear the rest of the conversation. He was already heading for the garden. *Of course*, he thought. *The Queen had redthorn imported for her garden. Though gods alone know what she wants it for. Horrible stuff.*

The garden was peaceful when he arrived. A small fountain bubbling away at the far end, great green bushes swaying in the gentle wind. The Queen was at the foot of one of those bushes, rummaging among the roots,

But Dafyn did not concern himself with the Queen. His eyes were fixed on the redthorn tree before him. He carefully reached in amongst the branches, fearful of impaling himself on those wicked hooked barbs. He broke off a large twig, removed his arm from the matted tree and slipped out of the garden before he was noticed.

*With blood and thorn entwined together,*

Add a dose of southern weather.

Far to the south, Dafyn knew, lay a great mountain empire where there was only one type of weather. The snowfall there was the stuff of legend. Deep enough to bury a man twice over and to freeze the beer in a man's cup. So he needed snow, but could he afford to wait for winter? Old age may have already finished him off by that point.

Then he remembered a gift the King had been given a few months before by an ambassador from that distant land. Dafyn hurried towards the lower levels of the hall.

Deep underground the gift was kept, where it was cold enough that you could see your breath even in the height of summer. Dafyn's shaking fingers fumbled with each door he encountered, but he was relentless in his descent. One door, two doors, three, a dozen. They all blurred into one in his failing memory. And then there were no more doors. Just a room.

At the centre of the room was a gift fit for a king. To keep his drinks cool in the summer, allegedly. A most bizarre gift, but one Dafyn was now profoundly grateful for.

A solid block, one metre across, of pure, southern ice.

*And should any man choose to drink,*

His life will be longer than he could ever think.

Dafyn stirred his elixir in the Cauldron of Pefach. There was not as much as he had hoped, but there would certainly be enough for him. The ice had melted, leaving the mixture a pale and watery red with shards of twig floating in it. For nearly an hour he stirred, until he was sure that the redthorn had infused the drink with its essence.

By rule of nature, the redthorn would surely kill him in such a quantity, but the ancients who devised the Cauldron had been knowledgeable about a great many things, and so Dafyn put his faith in them. His life in their power. At his age, he had very little to lose.

Dafyn dipped a goblet into the Cauldron, scooping in as much as he could. He lifted it to his lips, and then paused. "Gods bless me," he murmured. And then he drank.

The goblet fell to the floor as Dafyn staggered back. The flavour was vile, worse than rotting meat. He forced himself to swallow it all, redthorn and all. After that he waited. He waited until his limbs grew heavy, and his eyelids started to drop. He felt twice his age. Weak and powerless. Had he done something wrong? He tried to open his eyes, but found he couldn't. He willed his legs to move, but they refused. His heart pumped faster, his panic rising. he couldn't move, couldn't see. Couldn't do anything. He felt cold, his skin unnaturally dry.

*What have I done wrong?* he wondered.

It was hours before they found him. But they didn't help him. Even if they had known he needed help, they wouldn't have known how. They moved him to the temple, thinking that was the right place for him. And for centuries after, men would still come to that temple, and marvel at the statue that wept.

# Elixir

The deck lurched downward as a stabiliser tore off. Merovech grabbed the tarnished rail with his spare hand and laughed. Scrabbling to find their footing, the two women scowled back.

"Oh come on!" He shouted above tortured groans of the ship. "You must see the irony here. We're all about to die over an elixir that promises eternal life."

Bracing her feet against an ornate girder, Jeren wobbled to a halt.

"Give us the flask, Merovech. This isn't the time for your insanity."

She checked her friend, crouched against another metal rib that vaulted the control room.

"Can you take him from there?"

Molia's hair spilled around her face, as red as the flames licking the outside of the glass bulkheads. She shook her head. Merovech tucked the steel flask into the sash at his waist.

"I love that you two are just as ruthless as I thought!" He grinned and pulled himself closer to the console. "It's just so..." He searched for the word with an excited shiver. "...diabolical!"

Somewhere, something very important exploded from its moorings and the whole ship rolled.The violent turn threw all three from their perches.

Molia caught the worst of the floor's reassignment to wall. She fell the shortest distance but with a sharp twist. She cracked her head against the girder and fell ragged, thought extinguished in a bloody instant. Jeren smacked into the glass beside her, scrabbling toward her friend as Merovech joined them with a whoop, landing heavily on his shoulder.

The assassin cradled her friend, ignoring the forest a thousand feet below. She tapped a bloody cheek and whispered the red head's name. Merovech dragged himself to them, eyes fixed on the sparking ruin of the console above.

"If that thing drops we're fucked." He looked down through the glass wall at the fast approaching ground. "Ah. Actually, we're properly fucked anyway. Nice job girls."

"Piss off Merovech. We never expected you to get airborne. This was supposed to blow before it got off the ground." Jeren did not turn from her friend.

"Typical. Even when I exceed expectations I still end up getting dropped in the shit." He looked thoughtfully down. "And this shit has a particularly high drop. Is she alright?"

The question caught Jeren off guard, finally turning her attention.

"What the fuck do you care?"

Merovech tutted, then shrugged.

"I don't. He does."

Jeren spat. "You fucking psycho. Which one is it now?"

"Me." Merovech's face softened, his brown eyes turning blue.

"The Monk? Oh that's just great." Jeren shook her head. "No offence, but you've never been much use to anyone."

"You are much like my companions in that regard. They too discount the usefulness of compassion. I doubt this will change their minds, but perhaps it may change yours."

Merovech pulled the canister from his waist and slid it along the glass, a mild smile spreading in his grey streaked beard. Jeren snatched at it with disbelief.

"I believe there is enough in there for two measures. I do not believe your partner will last long without hers. I doubt you will last much longer without the other." He looked significantly at the slowly spinning slopes.

Jeren hastily unscrewed the flask and lifted it to her friend. The other woman stirred immediately. Before Merovech could change his minds Jeren slugged back the rest of the flask and tossed it away.

"NO!" Merovech stood, eyes blazing to green. "You stupid bastard!"

Both women scampered back, pulling at weapons in their tunics. What remained of the ship rocked with another explosion, returning Merovech to his hands and knees. When he looked up, green had been replaced by brown and he was chuckling.

"Wow." He sat back, gobsmacked. "I'll never hear the end of that. I'm going to want to kill me for the rest of our days. Or day might be more accurate."

Neither woman relaxed their hands on hidden blades. Molia lent in to her friend.

"We need to jump. I don't know how good this stuff is, but I don't want to our first test to be dropping a hundred tons of skyship onto ourselves."

Merovech nodded. "She has a point Jeren. You'd best be quick. It's been a singular and somewhat final pleasure ladies." He tried to bow whilst sitting cross-legged.

The iron leaves and scrollwork that decorated the ship's visible skeleton provided plenty of purchase for keen climbers and none could be keener than the two women that were fleeing for their lives. Jenen had shot through the hatch toward the escape kite in seconds. Molia paused at its mouth and looked back at Merovech.

"Come with us."

"Ah, Mol. I don't think so." He waved his hand dismissively. "That kite is only meant for one so, as it is, you two are in for a heavy landing. Without the potion I'd never make it anyway."

He regarded her for a second, curled like a spooked forest fox about to dive for the safety of its den.

"Seriously. Go. You're forgiven. At least by me, but if you stick around much longer I can't guarantee I won't try and shoot you." He pulled a thick nosed pistol from it's holster and laid it on his lap. The red fox bolted.

Merovech sat calmly on the glass, watching the world turn in a way it should not. He tossed the gun aside and smiled.



Jenen watched the plume of smoke on the distant hill. The skyship had come down almost straight, not carving much of a gully to its grave. Unlike their escape kite, which had dragged them through a mile of branches, steadfastly refusing to break anything but their bones. She could feel her legs knitting together now, it tickled.

"He really was a mad bastard." Molia guessed her thoughts.

"Completely. I kind of liked him."

"Me too. Why do you think he did it?"

"Fuck knows. Like you say.... a mad bastard. At first I thought he had switched the flask, like he did with the necklace back in that casino."

Molia barked a laugh at the memory.

"Shit that was good. The look on that fat bitch's face."

"Yeah. It was nice getting one over on her for a change. Let's hope she thinks we all died in the ship. Then we won't have to keep looking over our shoulders."

"Mmmm. He didn't though. Switch it I mean." Molia was serious again.

"No he didn't."

The crashed skyship had failed to inflame the damp autumn forest, but it was still a mighty blaze. The two sat together as their bodies rejuvenated, watching the mechanical funeral pyre.

"Mad bastard." Jenen repeated.



If any forest foxes had been brave enough to inspect the edges of the twisted wreckage, they might have seen tendons striking like cobras at a burnt mound. Threads of bone fired like boarding lines then drew tight scattered pieces of corpse, thickening to their purpose before the cobras enclosed them. Gradually the shape of a man began to rise from the scorched floor. If that was not enough to set any creature to flight they may have heard his muttered conversation.

"The Abbot will not be happy with us, creating two more immortals....

Screw him, he lost his sense of humour a dozen centuries ago, some of us still like to have a little fun....

You call this fun? I swear, when we get out of this I'm going to find a bar and get so drunk you two fall asleep, then I'm going kick the shit out of someone....

Well, I'm all in for the getting drunk part, after that you can do what you like....

Why harm the innocent? I am surprised that you do not approve of our rash actions....

Why would I....?

I think he means that those girls were good fun in the drunken punch up stakes. It's a bit of a shock you don't appreciate their ascendance....

I suppose. They were quite handy when we got cornered by the Duke's men. Yeah, I guess they could be fun to have a long for the ride...

It is a long ride, brother. All company becomes welcome eventually, during eternity....

That's why we keep ending up back at the temple....

Our next visit may be a while, as I say, the Abbot will not be happy with our choices....

And as I said, screw him. He sent us to close down the fountain and we did. He didn't say anything about destroying any elixir it might have already produced....

Probably thought we'd just destroy everything as usual. I would've if you'd given me a chance...

Good job we didn't then. Now... "

The figure trod uncertainly forward, testing new formed feet.

"...let's find that bar and get drunk."

# Love Potion



The girl stirred from where she was lashed to the bed posts. Lying face down, she shifted on the stained mattress, groaning as she recovered from the trichloromethane. Bojan, arms folded, decided she was probably 12. Maybe 13. Exactly what he needed.

The basement room in the dilapidated two-story was dark and sparse. The copper smell reminiscent of what happens in this room. A bed had been shoved against the opposite wall, with a lone, narrow table just inside the door. The girl's backpack had been flung beneath, and an oil lamp flickered on top.

After the grab team had finished strapping down her limp form, Bojan had considered removing her clothes, but had decided he couldn't stomach stripping the child himself. And the thugs would have asked for more money had he made them come back and do it. That was extra money he needed.

No, the Colonel was going to have to deal with a fully-clothed victim. The sick bastard probably preferred ripping their clothes off himself anyway.

"Wha . . ." The girl opened a blackened eye and mumbled.

Bojan waited by the open door.

"What happened? Where am I?" She pulled at her restraints, trying to get her head around to see the rest of the room. Confusion and fear in her voice. "What's going on?"

"Shut up, whore. Stay quiet or I will cut you." Bojan had mastered softening up the girls before his clients laid into them.

He dropped his arms to his side as she flexed, red-faced, taut, and straining hard on the lashings. After a moment, she gave up and stopped struggling. For a brief second, Bojan had thought the old bed post might have given way. She was strong for a little girl.

She lifted her head and whispered, voice breaking, "Please, just take me back to Kneza Mihaila. My family . . . They'll be looking for me."

"You were alone. We were watching." Bojan took a step toward the bed and kicked the post with a heavy boot. "You belong to us now."

She dropped her face back into the spotted mattress, hair showering across the back of her neck, sliding off her shoulders. Had she a future, she might have eventually grown into a beautiful woman. Such a shame. It was days like this when he felt the uncomfortable prod from regret. But, he'd already made his decision. He was sticking to his plan.

A knock on the doorframe behind him caused Bojan to turn around. It was the desk man, Nikola, with his strange, black-on-black eyes. "Yes?"

"The Colonel is in the waiting room, sir. He's getting agitated."

Bojan glanced back to the girl. She hadn't moved.

"She's not ready yet." Digging in his coat pocket, Bojan produced a glass vial sloshing with an amber liquid. "Here, give him this."

Nikola took the item, examining its plastic stopper.

"Tell him it's a 'Love Potion'. Feed him a line about it being an ancient formula. From the cradle of humanity or something. Whatever." Bojan shrugged. "Just make sure he knows it takes fifteen minutes for potency. Tell him it'll increase his stamina. I'm sure he'll like that."

The man nodded, lips puckered and scratching his chest.

"That should give me enough time to get the girl crying like he asked."

At his words, she lifted her head again and strained to see who he was talking to.

Nikola bobbed his head again, avoided her gaze, and hurried out of the room, love potion secured in his fist.

"I'm . . . So, I'm supposed to cry?"

That was his goal anyway. "The Colonel likes his girls to be slobbery messes. Young, slobbery messes."

She seemed to relax. "Why are you doing this?"

For a child, perched yawning over the precipice of ruin, she was calm. Again, he questioned his motives. He questioned his need for escape. If the ends justified the means. For a quiet life hidden in the hills of northern Italy. This last job would give him enough money to survive until the olives started coming on. Then, he would be free.

His face hard, he ground out the words, "Because I'm evil, girl."

"Speaking of, I need my medicine. I have to take it every day. It's in my pack."

"I promise it won't matter. Because you're not going to live long enough to care."

"And, *I* promise *you* will care if I don't get it. It's going to come spraying out of me, all messy-like."

Bojan, hands on his hips, took a deep breath, counted to three, and exhaled. It seemed he wasn't going to make this one cry.

"Fine. I'll get your medicine." He bent and rummaged through her bag. "What's it look like."

"It's that pink bottle. The one that says 'Pepto' on it."

Snatching the container from the bag, he stomped over to her bedside. "This one?"

"Yeah. Help me turn over."

He unscrewed the cap and poured most of it out on the ground next to the bed. Closing the cap, he tossed it back over by the table.

She glared at him.

"Scream and puke all over him. I don't care." He stalked back to the still-open door.

"Just remember. I warned you."

Over his shoulder, "Shut up, bitch." One more day. Just one more day.

Leaning out the door, he shouted down the hallway, "Nikola! Bring the Colonel back. He's going to have to break this one himself. Maybe he'll like the challenge."

Bojan leaned against the doorframe and waited, watching the girl tied to the bed, hoping she would spontaneously errupt into sobs, wondering why she didn't. Wondering why it made him nervous. After a moment, he heard the rhythm of stark bootsteps echoing through the hall.

"I promise. If I don't get it soon, the Colonel isn't going to love me."

Bojan opened his mouth to reply when a thick accent behind him filled the room.

"How could I not love you, dearest?" The Colonel, grinning at Bojan, entered and started unbuttoning his shirt, exposing a sweaty undershirt beneath, and crept up on the girl as if she was a skittish doe, ready to bolt, and not a child tied to filthy bedding.

"You are so beautiful. I can't wait to . . ."

The girl made a sudden, violent retching sound and he stopped moving. She convulsed, pulling fiercely at her bonds, and made the noise again, this time wet and horrible. The Colonel turned his bald pate and gray mustache toward Bojan, about to ask what was happening.

What happened was everything went sideways.

The girl tugged one last time, bending the metal bed posts, her restraints parting like they were egg noodles instead of leather. She sat in the middle of the bed, facing them, grinning wide. Eyes wide. Everything was too wide.

Her mouth opened, jaw impossibly unhinged, revealing an opening into which Bojan could have easily slipped both his meaty, unclenched hands. But, it continued opening, her lips folding back over the girl's head, almost as if she was turning inside out.

As her face unfolded, reverse-swallowing her tiny body, she began bloating from inside, piles of sticky pink and red blossoming out of the hole and growing in size, swelled out past the edge of the bed.

The thick tentacle, once the little girl's tongue, shot out and wrapped the Colonel's arm, constricting. Squeezing. A sharp, whiplike snap shot down the length, and the man's arm tore from its socket, leaving an empty, gore-squirting hole where his shoulder used to be.

The Colonel screamed.

No longer a child, the beast continued to swell, filling the room. More tentacles, thick as 100-year oaks poured out, lashing wildly, pulverizing clay, brick and foundation alike. More than a dozen. More than two dozen. All jerking around, like giant, loosed firehoses.

One swept Bojan's feet out from under him, powdering the bones in his legs. He fell, losing sight of everything except the swelling monster in front of him. Mouth agape, he could do nothing but stare.

Two massive, stump appendages formed beneath the creature, each with thick tentacles completing a flailing, paw-like foot. Big around as the now-flattened bed was wide.

The mass soon filled the room, pressing out the walls and ceiling. Plaster, wood, and brick rained down on Bojan as the thing rose into the air, exploding out of the building.

The last thing Bojan saw was the chimney collapsing on top of him.



Faustina, blonde once more and naked in the morning sun, examined the carnage around her. The building had been torn down, pulverized to almost nothing. The earth scarred. Wildlife fled.

Luckily, because of their business requirements, there were no nearby neighbors. She'd tried to warn them about her medicine. They didn't know it was only in the pink bottle because that made it easier to get through customs.

Granted, if she was honest with herself, she hadn't really felt the need to explain that part.

# The Birthday Potion

The potion smelled like vomit. Rotting garbage. Carrion left too long to spoil in the summer sun.

Bartholomeo couldn’t quite decide.

Whatever it was, it was certainly disgusting. One of the worst smells he could remember. Bartholomeo immediately pulled the vial away from his assaulted nostrils, and shoved the cork back in.

The syrupy liquid was the color of post-drinking-binge urine. Tiny green particles sat in the yellow molasses, like insects trapped in prehistoric amber.

Bartholomeo scowled. After a final moment of consideration, he vigorously shook his head.

“No. I don’t like it.” Bartholomeo said at last.

“What do you mean, little one?” The crone’s voice was sweet, condescending.

“Please don’t ‘little one’ me, madame.” Bartholomeo snapped in annoyance. “And, please, take it. I’m sorry, but this was a mistake. The smell-and, and, and, because-I mean, it just looks-no, you can’t expect-I’m sorry, this was a mistake.”

His eyes scanned the wares on display in the large covered wagon: dusty leather-bound tomes, a dried monkey’s paw, something that looked like a jar of eyeballs in pickling fluid. There were trinkets made of crystal, totems carved from wood and bone. Everything was haphazardly placed, seemingly at random, on the shelves and tables in the tiny wagon.

Bartholomeo sighed. If the old gypsy wasn’t a witch, she certainly gave off that impression.

“You hesitate.” the crone purred. Her accent was thick and coarse, like the snarling of a wild animal. “You are not magically inclined, and this potion seems too good to be true, so of course you are wary. But young man, even without a sensitivity to the arcane, you must feel it.”

“Feel it? Feel what?”

“The magic within that vial.”

“I don’t…I mean, really. What assurances do-”

A liver-spotted claw of a hand shot out and gripped his arm. It took everything in Bartholomeo to keep from crying out as the crone leaned in and hissed.

“Little man, what do I care for assurances? You come into my wagon and ask for the magic to make you bigger. Stronger. To give you confidence. You are a worm, so of course you want these things, and this…what you hold in your frail little girl’s hand, is the answer!”

“Stop!” Bartholomeo squeaked. “Please! Just take it back already!”

“Can you even grasp the concept of magic, tiny sir? Not the sleight-of-hand practiced by sidewalk charlatans in the city, but actual magic? The building blocks of reality? The energy flowing through all things?”

Bartholomeo shook his head. Even though the crone’s eyes were milky and clouded, he felt extremely uneasy, as if she were boring holes into his brain.

“Magic was not meant for humans to ever understand. It is too ancient. It has built our world, but it is not of this world. Magic is raw power. It is unlimited potential. It is the infinite unknowable truth of all things, and I have captured it! Yes, I have sucked it out of the air, and the roots, and the earth, and the water. I have bottled it, distilled it, and shaped it into what you hold in front of you like so much rubbish. Fool! You don’t like the smell? I can’t be bothered making the infinite unknowable truth of the universe smell like strawberries and baby’s farts!”

“Now, see here-”

“Forgive my sister, good sir!”

Bartholomeo turned to see another old woman standing in the doorway of the wagon. She was just as ugly and wretched as the one he was talking to. She dropped the basket of herbs she had been collecting outside and swooped in like a bird of prey. Before he knew it, Bartholomeo found this old woman’s hands clutching his shoulders. Trapped on both sides, he felt like a piece of meat about to be devoured by two hungry predators.

“Please, sir, my dear sister is not of sound mind, as of late. This summer heat agitates her and puts her in foul mood.”

“Don’t speak for me, Florinda!” the first crone snarled, her rotten teeth grinding. “I refuse to let this city-dwelling praklova demean what we do! Shav’roska! Nielisch aun dashlinkov!”

Bartholomeo threw up his arms.

“Please! Please don’t!”

“Sir, fear not! She raves in the language of our ancestors, she isn’t casting a spell on you.”

“You’d know it if I was! Dumpfkleish.”

“Lucinda! Sir, please, come out from under the table, now. Let’s resume discussion with calm and civil voices. Lucinda, sister, brew us some tea, if you would. The lavender one, with some honey.”

Lucinda muttered as she hobbled away.

“Now, sir, from what I was able to catch, you seek to…”

“To change. Myself, that is.” Bartholomeo croaked, his throat dry. Was it his imagination, or had the wagon become unbearably stuffy?

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Do you know the town of Blackwood? Down river from here?”

“No, I’m afraid my sister and I never stay in one place for long. We come and go with the moon, and I believe that it is our first time in the area.”

“I see. Well, Blackwood used to be called Autumn’s Hearth, but it was gutted decades ago by a great fire. My grandfather was alderman at the time, you see. He was among the only survivors.”

“How tragic.”

“The town has been rebuilt, but, well, grandfather has renamed it Blackwood, and I believe it has been…cursed, ever since. My family, specifically.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I am the heir. My eighteenth birthday is tomorrow and I am to go on a hunt, as rite of passage. But, I am afraid. I had three older brothers. When father died, Elias was to inherit. But on his birthday hunt, his stallion threw him and his neck snapped. Then there was Peytar. On his birthday hunt, he was gored by the stag he was tracking. Next was Winthrop. He tried to break the curse by refusing the birthday hunt.”

“Wise.”

“Yes. I was just fourteen, and already terrified of what the villagers called The Von Richtmann Curse. But Winthrop, he was sure that he would break the curse. He would have been a wonderful alderman. Winthrop the Wise.”

“Except…”

“He choked to death on a turkey bone.”

“I see…”

“I am no believer of magic, madame.” At this point, the second crone, Lucinda, had returned with a mug of warm tea. Bartholomeo accepted it with shaking hands. “Thank you. But-you see, I have grown to manhood with this…shadow…hanging over my head. Like a shroud. My death shroud, waiting to fall.”

The two crones said nothing.

“The birthday hunt has always been a Von Richtmann tradition. But grandfather is just as afraid, maybe even more so, than I am. So, I need this magic potion. I must be strong to stay on my horse. I must be fast to sidestep a charging stag. I must be wise and alert, to avoid choking to death, or tripping on the stair, or being crushed by a chandelier. Do you understand? I do not believe in magic. But I believe that…something…wants to end my family.”

Florinda sighed. It was the tired and resigned exhalation of a soul who had lived too long, and seen too much. Lucinda said nothing.

“Your grandfather. What is he like?” Florinda asked quietly.

“Maximillian Von Richtmann…was a force of nature in his day. Stern, but fair. Strong and brave. He was the greatest warrior in the land, and wise as a sage. But, that was years ago. He has not been himself since the fire. I fear he will never be himself again.”

Another silence.

Lucinda finally spoke.

“Go home, young master. Take the potion, drink it at sundown. It will change you. At midnight, my sister and I will toast to your long and happy life.”

\* \* \*

When Bartholomeo had left, the crones sat for a long time without speaking.

Outside, the wind rustled through the branches. Nearby, a wolf howled.

At long last, Florinda croaked.

“Max is alive.”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think he’ll be surprised to see us?”

Lucinda smiled. “I don’t see why. We haven’t aged a day!”

The two old crones cackled.

\* \* \*

A shaggy wolf skulked up to the covered wagon sitting at the side of the road. It growled warily.

The flaps of the wagon opened and out stepped two ravishingly beautiful women.

The wolf fell silent.

The women laughed, flashing smiles that would make any grown man’s heart melt.

“Such a beautiful night for a stroll.” One of them giggled.

“If only Camilla were here.” The second beauty cooed.

“Let us finish this for our sister, then. For Camilla.” The first woman tucked a wicked dagger into a sheath hidden beneath her cloak.

“Yes. For Camilla.” They set off together, arm in arm, down the path.

Somewhere in the distance, a bell was ringing, and the screams of terrified village folk filled the air.

# The Potionmaker's Lament

Some say potion making is a science, others, an art. I say it’s a Nayru-damn fucking hassle.

I’ve apprenticed with literally the creme de la creme of potion making for the past 40 years. 40 fucking years! That’s how long it takes to learn how to make every one of the 912 potions in Kotake’s Mysteries of Potion. Why that woman sat around thinking up so many recipes, I have no clue. By the 25th year, it was just making the previous 251 potions except in different random colors. Do you know how many colors there are?

Finally, when I reach the end of my training, Rauru, my teacher, gives me a 15-minute spiel about the business of selling potions and then kicks me out the door. I’m 52, single, and have been sleeping in a dusty basement for my entire adult life. But now I’m a potions master! Chicks dig that, right?

In addition to imparting the ancient potion-making wisdom on me, Rauru] was also kind of enough to rent out a small shoppe for me in Kakariko. With the starter set of herbs and other potion stuff he gave me, I figure I’ve got about six months of runway, which should be enough to get going.

It takes three weeks in the back of a wagon before I finally reach Kakariko but as soon as my feet hit the muddy road, I bolt down the thoroughfare to see my shoppe. When I arrive, I realize I should have savored the walk over.

It’s. A. Fucking. Dump.

The wood facade is crumbling, the door is resting in front of the misshapen hole where the door should go and the less said about the landscaping the better. I look to the left and right to see if I am the proud renter of a dump on a street of dumps or the bad neighbor that is lowering everyone else’s property values and am dismayed to realize that it’s the latter. Luckily everyone is still asleep so I walk quietly up the front stairs and try to pick up the door to rest it on the front wall silently hoping that the added weight does not send the structure toppling over. Thank goodness it doesn’t.

I could bore you with the details of how I was able to spruce up the ol’ shoppe in just under three months, but this story is already too depressing as it is. Let’s just cut to my grand-opening celebration where the whole town turns out to sample my wares and I make lots of new friends and even a potential love interest.

At least that’s how it went in my dreams the night before. I need to stop taking those fucking dream potions every night. They are messing with my perception of reality.

The opening was an unmitigated disaster. I ended up over-boiling the Eye of Newt stock solution, which is used in 86% of all potions, so the whole town spent the night vomiting on my front stoop.

But when Din closes a door, she opens a window right?

I had been trying too hard to make up for lost time, when I should have kept things simple. One potion (the Potion of Rejuvenation, which given how last night went seems prudent), two strengths, and that’s it. Let’s call it a pivot. No splashy opening, I’m going to just clean up this vomit and do a free giveaway week or something.

Weeks pass.

There are no customers.

Evidently making everyone in the town vomit was bad for business. Fine. I get it.

So I spend my days either staring at the door hoping someone walks in or in the back trying to perfect a love potion to help me woo the mayor’s older sister.

One afternoon I’m minding my business, trying to recall from memory the 361 steps to making the Elixir of Youth when the entrance bell begins to jingle and the door slowly opens.

A customer!

“Welcome to Steve’s Potions Emporium!” I say. “We’ve got only two potions but they can’t be beat.”

I look at my potential first customer. He’s dressed in all green - green pants, shirt, and hat, and carrying a wooden shield and a wooden sword. He can’t be more than 15 years old, but maybe he’s the son of a rich noble or something. He eyes the potions silently.

“I haven’t seen you around town. Are you new or just visiting?”

He looks at me and starts opening his mouth to respond, but then closes it again. Instead, he walks over to the lower-strength potion and taps it with his wooden sword.

“Interested in that one? That’ll be 100 rupees.”

The green-clad customer looks at me with an perturbed expression before he bolts out of the shoppe. So close.

The next morning though, he returns. Even though his clothes are green, I can see a smattering of grass stains on his pants and shirt. He walks up to the same potion, taps it with his sword again and detaches a pouch from his belt. I take the pouch, weighing the amount with just my hand (another one of my activities to pass the time) and nod.

“The potion is yours. Just need your bottle.”

He again looks at me like I’m a crazy person, but fishes around inside one of the other pouches on his belt and pulls out something to show me.

“No, that’s a glass, not a bottle. Potions can only be stored in bottles. Surely you must know that!”

He shakes his head no.

“OK, well, I don’t have any bottles for sale, but the guy down the street has one I think. It’s 4000 rupees.”

The customer’s eyes go wide. He holds out the glass again.

“No, sorry, there’s nothing I can do. If I get caught selling potions to people without bottles, I’ll lose my license.”

The customer frowns, stares at the potion vat again, before quickly grabbing the pouch of rupees out my hand and bolting out of the store.

Farore-damn it. I should have been a bottlemaker.

# Goldenfoot, The Brave

The old gray-haired rabbit tossed his apron on the table and plopped onto the bench opposite Theo. Tears stained his eyes, his ears limp. “I’ll never see you again, will I?"

Theo looked away from his father, and found himself staring at the ragged sack on the bench next to him. What could he say? Maybe he would be back one day? It wouldn’t fix anything. Give his father hope and it would tear his heart every day that he didn’t return. No, he couldn’t avoid this. “I-”

His father hopped to his hindfeet, wrapped his arms around Theo, and wept.

“I knew this was coming,” father said a time later, glancing at the sack. “You hear rumors when it comes to things like this.”

“We’re out of options,” Theo said.

“Turning into a monster is an option?” Father shook his head. “Why you, Theodore?”

There were plenty of others willing, that was certain. But, in the end, he only trusted himself to do this. “I have to go,” he said, grabbing the sack. His father walked him to the bar door where they hugged a long while.

“I love you, son.”

“I love you.”

The moment he turned and walked away was the hardest thing he had ever done.

He arrived at Senator Swayback's burrow an hour later. Deep below the main keep were secret tunnels that connected every major rabbit’s home in the entire warren. And, most importantly, it had tunnels that led far away from the warren into the open forest.

Seven rabbits filled the small chamber. All were members of the Senate or Presidential family, with the exception of Eloine. The only ones, apart from his father, that knew exactly what he was about to do.

He handed the sack to Eloine who dumped the contents onto her workbench. “This is everything I asked for?”

Theo nodded to the chemist. “Lady blossoms from across the plain, two husks of lok root, five blades of blue grass, the eye of a golden kangaroo rat, mineral dust from the caves of the highland bats-“

“And a very special tooth,” Eloine said, holding up the massive thing to inspect. “Perfect.” She began combining the ingredients into a pot and added a blue liquid that had been boiling when he entered.

Senator Swayback shuffled over, whiskers low and voice lower. “Theo, we all know you’re a brave rabbit. Carrots man, everyone will know your name by morning. But, how in Garden’s Sanctuary did you get the eye of a kangaroo rat?”

Theo smiled as he watched the tooth disintegrate into the liquid. “Some things, Senator, are best left to the imagination.”

Eloine poured the neon potion into a small glass vial and stoppered it with cork. “Now,” she said, voice serious. “Take this when you are clear of the tunnel. If they catch you with it, you may not have a chance to drink.”

“How long will I have?” Theo reached out and took the vial delicately.

“I have never made a potion of this magnitude as I made perfectly clear before. With any luck, it will be immediate. The most important part of this will be your memory.”

He squeezed his free forefoot tight. He hadn’t told his father this part. How do you explain to someone that not only were you going away forever, but you would no longer have any memory of what you left behind?

“You’ll have a day. Maybe two at best.” He nodded, doing his best to keep his ears up.

President Silvercoat stood at the front of the room. “Thank you, Theodore Goldenfoot. Violence must always be a last resort, but we cannot allow the Nightstalkers to continue their attacks. Your sacrifice will save this warren. Tomorrow, we will celebrate you.” Everyone in the burrow thumped a foot to that.

Shortly afterward, when all had given their thanks and praise, Theodore Goldenfoot traveled the mile and a half of tunnel that led away from the warren and into the district of Tall Trees. He reached the end of the tunnel just before it turned upward to the surface. He took out the vial, popped the cork, said a prayer, and let the bitter potion ooze down his throat. He waited several minutes, heart thumping, whiskers jerking.

Nothing.

Doubt crept into his mind. Eloine did say she had never made a potion like this before. What did she get wrong? He’d have to go back!

Dirt peppered him from above as massive arms wrapped around him. He was hauled up into the cold night air, then slammed onto the ground. His breath was kicked from him as he struggled to stand. “I got one!” A deep voice called out. Footsteps rushed toward him from behind. “Hidin’ in this here hole, he was.”

Theo caught his breath, finally able to focus on the red faces around him. Wide, toothy faces. Nightstalker foxes. “Let’s rip him apart.”

“Calm down, Ferrel,” one said, placing a claw below Theo’s chin. “I’ve seen him before. Was at the parley last week when we brought back those pelts.”

“You sure, Trot?”

“Oh yeah,” Trot said, coming closer, eyes wide with hunger. “I had my eye on him, all right.” Why in all Garden’s Sanctuary did the potion not work! Carrots! Work!

Calm yourself. Think through this. Theo found the words that had felt so far away. “I am the negotiator,” he said. “I have an offer for your skulk chief.”

Theo’s nose twitched, then he lost all scent. “I have authority from our herd's President to offer payment.” The two foxes laughed, then shackled his wrists in twig cuffs.

“Well,” Trot said. “On to the chief.” They led him deep into the Tall Trees until they reached a place where two fallen trees joined together. Below was a dug out den which was guarded by four Nightstalkers.

Ferrel kept him close while Trot spoke with one of the guards. Theo winced as a sharp pain struck his hind leg, his muscles convulsing, then it was gone. Ferrel chuckled. “Legs gon’ limp, have they?” Theo growled under his breath, then gasped.

He had growled. Rabbits don’t growl.

Castor, the Nightstalker chief, appeared a moment later and walked right up to Theo, slashing him with his claws. Theo fell backward, his cheek on fire. Blood seeped into his fur, but the pain faded as a hot surge engulfed every inch of his body. Theo’s ears began to tingle. “I have already given my terms,” Castor said, his voice a high-pitched squawk. “Fifty of your thickest bunnies. That is the only offer. Anything less and we will continue to pick your warren apart. One. By. One.”

The others laughed, showing their teeth. Theo tried to speak, but his throat slammed shut, his chest was so tight it felt ready to burst. “I have grown tired with your deliberations,” Castor said, pacing around Theo. “We are Nightstalkers!” His skulk cheered, raising their paws. He stopped in front of Theo, grabbing him by the ear. “The fact is, we won’t ever stop.” He threw Theo to the ground. “Four other warrens have all fallen. Yours will be next. But, it won’t be the last.”

That moment, Theo let out a breath that carried a wisp of blue smoke. Then, he lurched forward and screeched as if struck by a hawk. He could hear their laughter once more. The shackles broke before Theo knew what was happening. He felt like he was flying, raised high above the ground. He felt power entering his legs, a tight wrapping of muscle and sinew. Thick skin and fur replaced his soft plush, his ears tightened, his nose straightened. His tongue poked from his mighty jaws, licking the backside of his long, massive teeth.

Laughter gave way to cries of horror. Castor backed away, terror clear on his face. “I offer our response to your terms,” Theo said, his voice the booming bark of a grey wolf. He lunged, caught Castor in his jaws and thrashed.

He dropped the Nightstalker’s chief’s body, then leapt at Ferrel, tearing a fatal gash into his hide. He dealt with Trot in the same manner, then chased down the guards who had run and tore them to pieces.

Theo sat on his hind legs, panting. He felt the triumph first, then the weight of his actions crashed down on top of him. Nightstalker bodies lay scattered about, the entire skulk eliminated. The warren was safe.

Tears fell as his father’s face appeared in the back of his mind. He smiled, howled a long mournful note that would travel back to the warren and pierce its tunnels, then ran. He ran as hard as his new body would take him. He had to get as far away from the warren as he could, before his memories of the rabbits were gone, and all that remained was the wolf.

# The Case of the Cat in the Rose Garden

‘The cat’s dead’ My father shouted from the garden.

We cried. I touched my brother’s face, his cheeks wet.

I carried the cat out in a little box. His tortoise shell fur still moving with the breeze, bony legs crumpled from squishing him in his final resting place. Limbs cold and stiff. It was like using one of my wooden puppets in the nursery. That made me sadder than I had felt when we found him.

We had a strange relationship, the cat and me. Estranged.

It’s not that I don’t like cats, more that the cat never particularly liked humans. Specifically, me. I do not know why. I never gave him cause, insulted him or trod on his tail accidentally.

It frustrated me I could never ask him.

Though I tried, once. Just in case he turned to me with his big yellow eyes and pointed whiskers as white as the winter snows and sharp and thin as straw, and sniffed discourteously as if I were a fool for even dare asking the obvious. Or grunt a noncommittal, ‘Well if you even have to ask…’

Which was what I read in his face when I asked him, at night when we were alone in my room. He had been sleeping on my bed all day during the balmy summer.

Now I wish he had given me an answer.

He did not deserve such a death; alone among the bed of roses and fur damp from the rains. My father stomped around, the black waxed hairs of his moustache dancing across his upper lip like a worm, unable to show his anger.

He liked the cat more than he would admit, retiring to his study muttering some excuse about an investigation. I could tell his face was wet too.

No one else had taken it upon themselves to bury the cat, I found him soon after still lying limp on the conservatory table. I tutted and carried him here, to the stream at the very edge of our grounds.

I knew he liked it here, the cat. I did too. I would come to write, and draw leaves, and bugs if they didn’t run away. Before burying him by the trickling water I tried to shut his mouth, still open a crack and flashing his sharp teeth.

A few were yellowed now in his middle age, but still young and healthy. The cat had never been sick. The fur around the edge of his mouth looked different, discoloured. I peered as close as I dared and pulled the mouth down, revealing his gums. They were an unhealthy, dark shade of bruised black red.

After burying him in the soft dirt in his box, piling stones on top to mark his grave and the animals from digging up his bones for a snack, I marched back to our house and was called to supper.

When I came downstairs and greeted the strangers politely by curtsying, ignoring the far too interested gaze of one of the older men, I felt the mood shift towards a gentleman in a long black coat, smoking a large yellow pipe in a leather armchair. He had pale blonde hair and was younger than I thought. My father motioned to him proudly.

‘This is Inspector Spicer, Millicent. I telegrammed for his presence immediately.’

‘What are you here to inspect, Inspector Spicer?’ I said, quite fairly I thought. Though it still ruminated numerous rumblings of chortling from the rest of the adults behind me. I kept my gaze on the man, still puffing idly in my father’s favourite chair, barely paying me any regard.

‘Your dead pet, my dear. How old are you?’ Spicer said, raising himself from the grip of the leather with a crunch. I was eleven but I refused to answer him. He inhaled the last remnants of his smoke and exhaled it around himself, snorting it back through flaring nostrils.

‘I am terribly sorry for your loss.’ He said, blankly with a smooth and velvety voice that did not fit his bony and boyish face at all.

‘I will find out first.’ I said to him. Spicer guffawed, his cheeks puffing like a fish. His cold and pale skin gripped my hand gently. His touch was like a girl’s as he leaned down to me, close enough to kiss. I refused to recoil, my cheeks burning.

‘Bless you.’ He said, smirking.

I let go and marched out of the room, a mixture of laughter, confusion, and reprimands from my mother following my exit.

I knew exactly what happened. The cat was poisoned. It could have been an accident, but I knew him better than that.

The cat was a smart thing, far more sensible and possessed with more brains than all the stupid girls I was forced to attend school lessons with at the Burkham Plantation. He would never eat something dangerous.

I passed one of the servants dashing about the corridor, carrying sheets and blankets to the guest room. They were fixing it up for the Inspector, she told me.

My parent’s room was next door. It was locked as usual, but I’d learned to pick the old metal network inside before. It was easy. The setting sun trickled through the white net curtains, waving at me in the wind as I entered. It was as still and immovable as their room usually was, my parents being very practical and rigid people. But it felt off.

I checked the window sill, faint muddy paw prints etched against the wooden surface. The cat had snuck in here too then, just like I had. He must have climbed up the tall rose trees, their crooked ashen branches perfect for a cat’s claws.

I followed the paw prints and turned my gaze to the bedside table, the glass bottle of milk my father liked to drink, to help him sleep. The lid was off, its stopper resting by its side.

Flecks of milk were still resting on its surface. I picked it up and sniffed the bottle.

I returned to the dining room in the midst of adult chatter. Inspector Spicer was sat opposite me, munching on some bread idly. He pointed at me with the crust, grinning like he was possessed by a feline creature himself.

‘I’ve thought about your little proposal, young Millicent, and I will accept your challenge.’ He said with a patronising gusto. I left a pause and nodded firmly, extending my hand again across the steaming pile of food on the table, just above the spiced bird glazed with sticky honey and fat.

‘I accept. But the loser has to leave the house, forever. And give the other an item of their clothing.’

Spicer paused at this, an eyebrow keenly raised. He was interested, his sharp jaw masticating on his bread as hungrily as his green eyes peered at me. My father coughed awkwardly and my mother hissed under her breath at my forwardness.

‘Very well then.’ The inspector shook my hand. ‘You drive a hard bargain, young Millicent.’ He said, guffawing again with the fellow guests.

I waited for the laughter to die down, and turned to my father.

‘I have solved the case, papa. The cat was poisoned with One-Eyed Poppy Juice. It’s the same colour as milk. The milk the cat drank from the lid of your bottle by your bedside. The one laced with poison. I gave a drop to the maid to test it. She’s in the bathroom being sick now.’

A random lady gave a start of horror, a delicate hand to her chest. My father tried to interrupt. I cut him off his stammering.

‘I presumed you must have given him milk from there before, otherwise he wouldn’t have known to have looked for it.’ I said, watching him snap his mouth shut and nod slightly, sadly. ‘So the Inspector Spicer poisoned your milk, papa. Though I am not sure what he would gain from that.’ I said, unaware of the guests glancing to my mother’s shocked figure at the head of the table.

‘You telegrammed him but a few hours ago, and yet he arrived even before the message would have been sent. There was a fire in town at the Royal Office, it was reported in the Daily Royal Newspaper. Therefore Inspector Spicer killed our cat.’

I picked up my knife and fork and cut into my bird, letting the gravy drip down the utensil. I was famished. The blonde man’s jaw was drooped, aghast and stammering with burning cheeks as my father glared at him, the guests fumbling with themselves awkwardly. I popped a wodge of food in my mouth and chewed happily. It was delicious.

‘Oh. I would like your coat please Inspector Spicer. It will suit me nicely in the winter’ I said, between mouthfuls.

‘And don’t ever come back.’

# Ominous Things

Tanon didn’t care for Alchemists. They were arrogant, secretive, and in his opinion, batshit crazy. But he mostly didn’t like them because they knew too damn much about things he didn’t, and for all his skepticism, he’d seen them accomplish things even he couldn’t explain. So while he stood there in the dark, dusty room, watching the crooked old creature pour over pyramids of worn out tomes, making those terrible eldritch sighs he always made, Tanon couldn’t help but smirk and shudder at the same time.

“You’re late,” the man barked, eyes glued to the clutter sprawled upon one of his many ancient desks.

Tanon cringed. That *voice*. “Been a while, Vekrys.”

Vekrys shifted his attention to an immense chalkboard, adding new members to intricate clusters of numbers, letters and arcane symbols.

“Not long enough in your opinion,” Vekrys said. It wasn’t a question.

Tanon frowned. Vekrys had a nasty penchant for saying whatever Tanon was thinking at the time, another reason Tanon didn’t relish these encounters.

“Well?” Vekrys said. “Out with it. You can see I’m very busy.”

“As compared to all those times when you’re not?”

“A scientist’s work is never done,” Vekrys mused. “To make knowledge your life’s pursuit is to accept that your life’s pursuit will never be fully realized.”

Tanon snickered. “You’re a ‘scientist’ now? What would the Tevichi Scholars say?”

“*The Tevichi Scholars*,” Vekrys scoffed, turning to him. “Bureaucratic frauds too prideful to admit they’re only playing at science. Too afraid to ask the *important* questions, to take the necessary steps to true *enlightenment*.”

Tanon’s skin always crawled at the sight of the decrepit man’s face. It was as wrinkled and leathery as his books, his teeth as yellow as the pages within. His pale eyes seemed to look deeper into Tanon than any ordinary man. Tanon’s hand was resting on the grip of his holstered pistol before he realized it.

The Alchemist noticed, and smiled. “The law has nothing to fear here. Why have you come?”

Tanon feigned nonchalance, turning to a shelf packed with obscure contrivances. He could feel Vekrys’s gaze. “The Chancellor of Olsanth is dead.”

Vekrys turned back to his work. “Shame. Heard he was a true ‘champion of the people’. I’m sure he will be missed greatly.”

“Even by you?” Tanon said. “The Chancellor hated Alchemists.”

“Politicians have always used religious dogma to further their careers,” Vekrys said. “He’s not the first to associate Alchemy with blasphemy. He won’t be the last.”

“He was murdered,” Tanon said.

Vekrys stopped writing. “Tragic.”

“Thought you could shed some light.”

Vekrys eyed Tanon contemplatively. “Do you know why I offer my services to you and no other Badgemen?”

Tanon shrugged. “Because I’m so delightfully agreeable?”

“You’ve seen the darkness,” Vekrys said. “You’ve seen war. Famine. Corruption. You know what men are capable of. What they’ll do to hide it. We have that in common.”

“And I *pay*,” Tanon said, dropping a leather purse on a stool with a bitter thump.

Vekrys smiled. “And you pay. But I must say I’m surprised you’d come to me concerning this matter. Olsanth is practically on the border, much farther than any man my age could travel. I’m not sure what help I’d provide.”

Tanon procured an ornate bronze syringe from his coat pocket. He tossed it to Vekrys, who snatched it with surprising dexterity, running his fingers tenderly over its entirety. He sniffed the needle and grimaced. “Where did you get this?”

“Next to the Chancellor’s body,” Tanon said. “Thought you might have some idea what it contained. I’m pretty familiar with most poisons. This one I can’t place.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Vekrys murmured. “Few men could identify this particular elixir. Even fewer could manufacture it I daresay”

“What is it?”

Vekrys crept to a shelf and grabbed a small, wooden chest that appeared as antique as him. He stationed himself at a desk littered with countless apparatus. Funnels and tubes criss-crossed over beakers and burners. Fluids dripped and gurgled. He went to work, opening the chest and removing several unrecognizable substances. He mixed them meticulously into a mortar and crushed them until they resolved into a deep red powder. He then added the powder to a solution and heated it over a flame placed directly beneath a complicated web of glass tubing. The flame made it rise and travel through the tubes like a serpent, hissing violently as it went.

“Wanna tell me what you’re doing?” Tanon asked.

“I have good news,” Vekrys said, eyeing the passage of the liquid through his instruments and into a vial. “Your Chancellor isn’t dead.”

Tanon snorted. “That’s very interesting, seeing as I saw the body myself. No pulse, icy skin, empty eyes. If he’s not dead he’s a damn good actor.”

“The miraculous effect of that syringe’s contents,” Vekrys said. “The Chancellor’s body is a corpse yes, but his *mind*, his *consciousness*, those I assure you are still very much alive. They are simply elsewhere at the moment.”

“Uh-huh. Where might that be?”

“Hard question to answer. There’s no literal name. It's a place that goes beyond our full comprehension. We can only theorize as to its true nature. All we know for certain is that it exists.”

Vekrys’s concoction was complete. He reached back into the chest and removed an object unlike anything Tanon had ever seen. It was an elaborate device comprised of both stone and metal. Cogs ran between sets of golden rings which surrounded a

plum-sized orb of black marble. A myriad of symbols and measurements were etched upon each ring. He set it down carefully and took the now filled vial in his hands.

“And with the right tools,” he continued, “one may interact with it.”

Tanon’s muscles tensed. “How could that be possible? And if you say ‘magic’ I’m going to find the most expensive-looking thing here and drop it.”

Vekrys simpered. “*Magic*. Such a misguided word. To call something magic is to assume there’s no explanation for it, no mechanics to illuminate how or why it is. But everything has an explanation. Some are merely unexposed.”

“Why not just kill him? What good is it to remove his consciousness?”

Vekrys looked down. “Only an Alchemist could create that substance,” he said. “But an Alchemist would know that. They’d also know that any Alchemist worth their weight could identify it. To leave that syringe would be foolish, nonetheless careless. Whoever placed the Chancellor in his current state either wanted that syringe to be found or, more likely, was unable to finish their work and wanted you on the wrong trail.”

“Finish their work?”

Vekrys frowned. “It is the theory of some that if a person’s consciousness can be removed from their body, it stands to reason that one may replace it with another, thereby controlling the body.” He met Tanon’s eyes. “Can you think of anyone who might stand to gain from controlling the body of a man like our beloved Chancellor?”

Tanon’s heart skipped. *Plenty*. “But if not an Alchemist, then who?”

“Intriguing question.” Vekrys held the vial towards Tanon. “Perhaps you’d like to ask him.”

“Who?”

Vekrys raised his eyebrows. “The Chancellor.”

Tanon stared at the vial and frowned.

“Don’t fear my friend,” Vekrys said. “Ominous things tend to have ominous traits, but I have no wish to kill you, though your body is a fine specimen. If you should die in your prime, I’m sure there are several ways I could put it to good use.”

Tanon hesitated, then took the vial. “Not today I think.” He drank.

The reaction was instant. His tasted ash and smelled decay. His vision blurred and the room went quiet. The device on the table suddenly came to life. The rings rotated around the orb, humming vigorously, as if the device had sensed that Tanon drank the liquid, and was excited.

Tanon gagged, clutching his throat. “*What have you done to me*?”

Vekrys smiled his wraithlike smile. “I’ve enlightened you.” He gestured towards the device.

Tanon approached it. The orb glowed vibrantly despite its pitch-black hue, beautiful and menacing. It drew him in.

“Call to him,” Vekrys instructed. “Not with your voice. Don’t take your eyes off the orb.”

Tanon stared deeper into the orb’s light. The slightest sound crept into his mind. The room slowly faded until there was nothing but him and the light, that luscious, incandescent light. The sound became whispers, too numerous and distant to decipher. Tanon gazed deeper. The whispers grew in number and volume. They became voices, then cries, then screams, a haunting cacophony that filled Tanon with an overwhelming dread. They grew relentlessly until Tanon thought his head might burst. The orb shone brighter than ever, then went out completely. The voices dissipated and Tanon was left in darkness and silence that lasted a lifetime. Then a single voice called out from the void, clear and distinct.

Tanon recognized the voice immediately as the Chancellor’s, and his skepticism was put to the test once again.

# The Cabinet of Mal Zabir

This time, the students were birds, which was why iron rods barred the ceiling window of the lecture hall. Professor Stark told them about one eighth-form boy that left the window open as a joke, and an entire class of sixth-formers flew off, never to be seen again.

Birds today - white potions smelling of feathers and rain - dogs last week. That first transformation had been a wild mess as the class tried to understand how to hold on to their human minds. But they’d learned, and now most of them calmly perched on the rafters.

Nothing in magic is as cool as this, Brand thought, folding his wings and coming to rest on a beam. One little potion and you were a dog, an eagle, or... anything you had a potion for. So far, they’d learned to mix the potions and most could resist the instincts surging in their transformed bodies, but they’d no idea how it all worked. “You’re not ready for that yet” were Brand’s absolute least favorite words.

And some students *weren't* ready. A sparrow-girl was flitting carelessly through the air until a hawk-boy dropped onto her unprotected back, talons wide. Suddenly, an explosive clap shook the room, and green smoke filled every corner. Nineteen students dropped to the floor, enchantments stripped away like mist before the sun. Professor Stark pulled the hawk-boy off the girl, Mathia, the best student in the whole sixth form.

"Shame on you! Control yourself!" Stark shook him hard, until his eyes focused. Then she rounded on Mathia. "And you! You may know books, but if you cannot master the effects of a potion, you've learned nothing!"

Brand looked down on his classmates from the rafters. He'd inhaled just the smallest bit of the green smoke that broke the enchantments, and found he could balance between human and bird. He let it go, dropping softly to the floor while the Professor droned on and on.

He patted a vial in the pocket of his robe, where he’d saved back enough eagle potion to practice on his own.

........

The next day, hawk-boy was gone. They'd packed his bags in the middle of the night, and sent him off on the morning ferry, back to home and normal life. Mathia was dropped back eight places, to an embarrassing middle desk - right next to Brand’s.

It was Thursday - Philosophy and Origins of Magic, which was usually long on philosophy and short on origins. Brand’s mind wandered, until he glanced at Mathia. Her mouth was open and her eyes were riveted on Professor Stark. If Mathia was learning something new, maybe Brand should pay attention.

"In tranformations, what is the source of each creature, each thing we become?" That’s easy, thought Brand. Each potion was based on ingredients. They were the source. "This term, you've been learning the secret name for each powder, each tincture, each extract. But the names of each, while extremely important, and you must memorize, memorize, memorize - these names aren’t the things themselves."

“Indeed, they are not,” said an accented voice at the classroom door. Nineteen heads swiveled to see a stick-like old man ducking his head through the doorway. "A name is not the thing itself.” Brand craned to see over the front row of students, who were half standing in their chairs to get a better look. "Think of meat," continued the stranger. “Do we call it flesh? or muscle? No! Pig becomes pork. Cow linguistically transforms into beef. It all sounds so much... cleaner.”

Professor Stark interrupted. "Class, please greet your instructor for today, the honorable Mal Zabir." She gave the man her best glare. "Master Zabir, do try not to give my students nightmares.”

Mal Zabir continued as though she hadn't spoken. "*Coripanish* has an exotic sound, does it not? But that is only because it is ancient Lemurian. Our modern tongue would render it as - extract of house cat."

"Gross!" sang the students, except for Brand and Mathia.

"Yesterday, when you were flitting about in the air, were you thinking where the *gentabus* powder came from for making starling potions? Or the *arginish* for an owl?” Mal Zabir crooked a finger, and two slyly grinning eighth-formers carried in a tall cupboard bound with metal chains and padlocks. He spoke a single Word of power, and the chains clanked to the floor in a heap. "Today you will learn the true source of transformational potions.” He spread the cupboard doors wide.

Inside, rows of tiny wooden drawers framed a little worktable covered with strange apparatus. A glass cylinder was suspended from a metal arm attached to the back of the cabinet. Its surface was steamed with condensation, but something moved inside, scrabbling at the glass with tiny claws.

"Behold the common grey squirrel!" Mal Zabir flipped a switch on the worktable, and a current of power entered the glass. The squirrel began to scream. "*Parsivirex*,” said Mal Zabor over the noise. “What a lovely word for extract of squirrel." The power rose and rose to a high pitch, until with a gruesome pop, the squirrel exploded in red blood and grey hair, painting the inside of the cylinder.

The class erupted, and one student at the front was ill. Brand studied the cabinet. There were so many drawers, and some were secured with tiny, brass locks. Mathia caught his eye, and for the first time in a long while, Brand felt a connection with a fellow student.

.....

"If they don't want us to break into things," said Brand, "they shouldn't teach us acids." He blew away the last of the acrid smoke and swung open the doors of Mal Zabir's cupboard. "Told you it wouldn't take long."

"I could have used a spell," said Mathia.

"And woken half the teachers. They've got alarms for spell-casting, remember.”

They studied the opened cabinet in the dim light from a shuttered lamp. The apparatus and its awful results had been removed, but what interested Brand were the twenty brass-locked drawers, each labeled in faded blue ink.

"*Madon Caraginan*," read Mathia, sounding out the Lemurian letters on one label.

"What's that?"

"Who. Caraginan means warrior. Madon means sword.”

Mathia spent every spare hour reading. Brand only needed to hear something once, so he never bothered with books. "So, *Madon Caraginan* is a sword warrior?"

"A swordsman."

Brand slid a metal rod through the thin hasp of the lock.

“Don’t!” cried Mathia, but he yanked down and broke off the lock with a tiny ping. Brand still couldn't believe Mathia had gone along with this. And now, she was like always - no fun at all. He pulled open the drawer and slid out a vial of silver fluid.

"Essence of swordsman," he said, grinning.

"That can't be right," protested Mathia. "They wouldn’t do that to a person."

"They did it to the squirrel." Brand tried to picture it. They must have human-sized vessels for denaturing people into meat, and bone, and spirit. "Pick another," he said.

“You should stop,” said Mathia, but Brand just glared at her. She sighed, then carefully counted over three drawers and up two. "*Kanath Magdath*," she read quietly. "Black sorcerer."

"Oh, yes," breathed Brand. He popped the lock, and drew out a black vial that froze his fingers one moment and burned them the next. "And they give us bird potions and puppies." He held it up to the light.

“Don't take that,” said Mathia.

"No," said a voice from a dark corner. “No, young Brand certainly should not take what is not his.” Mal Zabir stepped out of the shadows. "Give up the potion, boy. It is not for you.”

Brand gulped and stepped back. “We just want to know,” he complained. "They never teach us everything. We want to learn!"

"You'll learn nothing more from this school," said Professor Stark, striding into the room. "Very good, Mathia. There's one like him in every class. Master Zabir flushes them out every time." Mathia gave Brand a look filled with apology and moved away. Professor Stark stepped forward.

Brand snatched a vial from his robe and shattered it on the floor. Brown gas bloomed up in a thick cloud. He looked up to the barred window, and shouted the Word of unlocking he’d heard that morning from Mal Zabir.

"He's getting away!" coughed Mathia.

Brand swallowed the last of his bird potion, spread his powerful wings and arrowed through the portal.

"Let him go," said Mal Zabir. "I am certain he will not get far. Those labels are not real. That black potion he stole? You know your Lemurian, young lady. How would you translate *ghal kordathish*?"

Mathia puzzled it through. "Essence of... granite?"

“Oh, quite," laughed Mal Zabir. “And one cannot change back from stone. Such an eager boy. We will look for him in the morning."

On the ledge outside the window, an eagle-boy listened briefly, then launched himself into the wide, wild dark.

# The Last Ingredient

A little bell peels in the air somewhere, comes muffled to our ears and makes me smile. It is proof that time still flows, that soon we'll return indoors, where breathing through your nose doesn't trigger a gagging reflex.

"Rachar, do you think the weather was a selling point when they decided to build our prison here?" I ask, panting.

"Totally. I can see the ad, 'atmosphere of the 6th circle of Hell, hot, humid, and thick as pudding.'"

I stare up at the ever shifting pattern of lush and exotic leaves, criss-crossing above our heads in a breeze we can see but never quite feel. Rachar, halfway through his thirty years sentence, jest as he might, is much more acclimatised than I ever wish to become.

"Don't you need my help for gathering more ingredients, Ira? I quite enjoy the rush of danger from those errands."

"No. No more errands," I say, "I only need one last ingredient, and..." I make a fluttering motion with my hand, mimic myself flying away. Free. "Soon now."

This news makes my friend stir and sit up. After three years of secretly brewing this potion, he must have thought me all talk.

"What is it, this last ingredient?"

I make a face up at him, peering into the eyes smouldering behind his own little jungle of tangled hair.

"It's something I'm not sure I can get."

"For real? But you've been so keen on escaping this whole time... Well, maybe it's for the best. Considered what they'd do to you if they catch you. I kinda like you, you know. I'd rather not see *that* done to you. No one gets out of here unless their time is up."

I don't know if it's respect or pity I feel surging in me when he speaks like this, him who won't rebel, won't try to escape. Who sits day after day in this green hell of a place, knowing there will be endless tomorrows made of the same infernal heat, the same corrosive dullness, the same absence of freedom.

Making it out doesn't even matter. Trying is my only way to remain sane. I can't relate to his defeatism and meek acceptance. Not that it's easy to ever relate to Rachar, who was done in for running the biggest, most lethal cartel of drugs for were-animals Europe had ever seen, and killing, in his werebear form, five of the special-ops werewolves that were sent to arrest him. A sleek piece of remorseless trash, though a decent fellow one-on-one.

"Ira, you're growling."

"Sorry, mind wandered."

Rachar laughs, pats my hair with a hand monstrous enough to crush my skull in a squeeze. "Think of the future. When you finish brewing that potion of yours and pull a Shawshank over the eyes of Erikson and the crew."

"Don't go talking so loud, naming names and mentioning potions!" I sit up, unnerved. "The break is almost over."

"Ease up Ira, I'd know if anyone were around. I wouldn't let them lock you down with the bloodies either."

"Aye, like you could help it if they decided to."

Which is not the real problem. To determine the strength of new inmate magi, the prison's surgeons test the glands that secrete magica, always found in the armpits and throat. That test labelled me as a mere C-class magus, hardly a trouble to handle here.

In comparison, A-class magi, like blood witches, are near impossible to catch alive. Meaning the handful of them we have in the basement make my werebear-druglord friend look like a philanthropist. They're kept with their hands in wet casts so they can't sharpen spelling tools, their teeth in moulds to keep them from biting themselves bloody.

Not enviable.

But people like me, with a little known organ tucked away behind the stomach, who can brew potions in their own bodies–potion being the romantic name for a magical bile–are extremely rare, and impossible to safely detain. A-class treatment wouldn't cut it. So long as I'm fed, I can always brew something annoying or even lethal to my handlers.

S-class, maybe? As in Straight-to-firing-squad-class.

"Surely Erikson wouldn't let them take you away. The man is fond of you."

"Brewers are thought extinct since the mid 20th century. They'd probably dissect me, Rachar. Officers would not care for my being some guardian's pet prisoner."

"Eurk–well, I won't talk so... What's that last ingredient anyway?" His hand flies up before I can answer. "Speaking of the Devil," he mutters.

"Rachar, Ira, you two deaf? Didn't hear the second bell?"

The Devil indeed.

"Ah, Erikson. We were busy exchanging news, so much has happened since yesterday after all."

"You crazies shouldn't even be allowed to meet."

"Crazy? Nonsense, I'm a lamb."

"And I'm perfectly conscious of my actions."

"That just makes you a horrible person, Rachar."

Back in the cool bliss of air-con, I nod to him, a discrete salute I mean as an adieu, his looks are worried, but he tips me an invisible hat before turning away. So long, crazy friend.

Up the stairs now, and following Erikson. Like every evening, my aisle is a mess of supernatural creatures and their supernatural gaolers, but I only have eyes for mine.

Erikson. I watch his blond head, his shoulders shifting under his miraculously crisp white shirt–what spell does the man use to keep them dry, I still wonder.

By habit, I match his steps. Hateful habit, that makes my face relax, almost smile for him when he looks my way. Too long he's been my mindful captor. The man answering my calls, opening my door. The hand feeding me, the hand swiping me little things, when no one watches. He's a decent guy under the rough persona one needs to work in this jail, and I'm neck deep in Stockholm syndrome.

Erickson, for three years blind to my careful plotting. I hid it all from him, always playing the nice, reasonable lass, caught up in troubles bigger than her. Not the weirdo woman bargaining favours at every turn to obtain samples of hair, skin, blood, fabrics, spices... Stealing food, making some rot, pre-digesting others for the desired effects. Anything that might contain the ingredients my gut craves to continue its infernal distillation.

Behind his broad back I've licked the walls of my cell, scratching my tongue over the lead paint till I nearly poisoned myself. It's an organic, messy trade.

For three years I've brewed this concoction. Haltingly, with no known recipe, brought forth by my instinct and my need to escape, disappear, melt through walls–any will do so long as I get far away. Where Erikson won't be tearing at my mind, brushing my heart with the very fingers that turn the key in the lock of my cage.

"Ira, you're growling."

"Funny, that's the second time I've been told today." I pace down my little cell and back up to him.

"What is making you so tense?" he asks, leaning against the bars to talk with me.

Erikson. My last ingredient.

"Some internal turmoil over something I need but struggle to obtain."

"That's the point of jails."

"Aye, but smuggling doesn't usually get a magus in jail."

"You were smuggling human flesh!"

I shrug, give him a sad grin. "How would I have known? It was spelled."

He smiles back at me, a show of dimples. "Save it for the judges. Your appeal won't be delayed forever."

Erikson, who believes me when I lie.

I step closer, curl my fingers around the cold steel bars. Looking up at him, I whisper, "will you miss me, when I'm gone?"

He frowns.

Is it hatred, or love, festering in my pounding chest, that makes me flush and quiver as I wait for his answer?

"I'd like that; missing you. If it means you're acquitted."

The idea of missing him makes my mind trip over itself.

"I think I'd miss you too," I surprise myself saying, "but I don't think I'd like that at all."

I dive in the grey pools of his eyes, so close, like full moons pulling at the tides of my emotions. Erikson murmurs my name like a warning, but doesn't move. I'm on the tip of my toes and my fingers rubbing against the wondrous white shirt and the warm flesh behind it.

His breath smells like mints and beer and magica. His lips are hot, firm but hesitant, like a cliched first kiss. His fingers are trailing my jaws, scorching my skin.

In one strong bite his blood comes gushing into my mouth. He cries, rending my heart–part free woman, part betrayer. I swallow my feelings along with coppery blood. There is a burning sensation in my guts as the last ingredient creates a chain reaction.

The world dissipates in clouds of matter around me. Erikson's hands reach out but pass right through me. Through my victorious smile and my farewell nod like through a gentle wind.

I'm immaterial.

I'm free.

# The True Origins of Bjord the Commanding, Washer of Sheets, Undisputed Ruler of Absenthia

*"Psst."*

"What?"

*"Pssssst."*

"You don't have to *psst* me, Neesh. There's no one here, and I can see you just fine."

"Just keep your voice down."

"The library's empty. I've checked."

"You can't be too careful."

"*You* can't be too careful. I don't even know why I'm here."

"I did it."

"Did what? Why couldn't this wait until morning?"

"I've mixed the potion, Artur! The Potion of Command Galidor mentioned in his historical journals."

"You did not."

"It's right here."

"Let me see that!"

"Well? Look at it!"

"Sure, this looks like a potion, Neesh. So do all the flasks we mixed last week."

"It's not a potion. It's *the* potion. Don't ask me what I had to go through to get my hands on a Yuk-Yuk's heart."

"What did you have to go through to get your hands on—?"

"I told you not to ask!"

"It probably wasn't even a real Yuk-Yuk. Old King Harold killed all the Yuk-Yuks, after his son's nose fell off. Every noble in Absenthia assumed he was snorting faerie dust."

"Look, I have it on extremely good authority that it was a Yuk-Yuk ... I mean, the flying possum from which the heart was cut ... and the instructions said that adding it would create a poof of green smoke that smelled specifically of mint and goat."

"I think one of those smells will overpower the other."

"Not for a nose like mine. The smoke was green, a nice poof of it, and the smell was minty goat."

"When have you ever spelled a minty goat?"

"The weight's just right, too. I checked it against the figures Galidor left in his journals."

"Did you remember to add a half-crown for the weight of the flask?"

"Of course I remembered the half-crown. I'm not an idiot."

"Well, you did tell Alchemaster Palu that the difference between a Potion of Short Flight and Long Flight was the length of the feather you ground—"

"That was an honest mistake! And besides, you mixed up green sand and red in reagents class."

"That's because I'm colorblind, you insensitive dolt."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Artur. I just don't like it when you belittle me. Alchemaster Tonjold always belittles me, and you know what he thinks about smallfolk becoming alchemasters."

"Look, Tonjold's an old prick, and I'm not belittling you, Neesh. I'm just being realistic. I just don't think anyone is ever going to be able to replicate Galidor's Potion of Command."

"But I just did."

"Well, if you think so, how do you plan to test it?"

"That's why you're here."

"Oh, no."

"I'm going to drink the potion, and then I'm going to tell you to do something. If you do it—"

"Absolutely not happening."

"—then we'll know the potion works!"

"What were you going to tell me to do?"

"I don't know, um ... hop on one leg, maybe?"

"How would you know I'm not just messing with you?"

"Because you wouldn't do that! How long have we known each other, Artur?"

"Too long. Far too long."

"I know you wouldn't mess with me like that. You're nothing if not brutally honest."

"Well, I suppose that's true."

"So, stand right there, and I'll—"

"Stop!"

"Hey, let go!"

"You can't just drink it, you dolt. What if you got the formula wrong?"

"I didn’t."

"You could end up attracting slugs, or turn into a purple mushroom and migrate spores all over the library, like that second year that ground up a tree frog."

"There's no tree frogs in this potion."

"Or you could end up burping crickets."

"Name one time that's happened."

"Potions Exhibition, last year. Dilution training, four months ago. Smell control, last—"

"Name one time recently."

"All I'm saying is, if you really think this does what it does, we should test it first. On someone else."

"Oh. Well ... let's think. Who do we know who's stupid enough to drink a potion without asking what it is?"

"We're at a school of potion makers, Neesh. The stupid ones never make it through the first year."

"Haha, true. Oh hey, do you remember that long-nosed guy from Estonir, the one with the ponytail? What was his name?"

"Lejo something."

"Lejori?"

"Yes, Lejori. That's the first and last time I've ever seen anyone projectile vomit their own tongue."

"Okay, fine, let's say we do it your way. We still need someone who's not part of the school."

"A mundane?"

"Why not? We'll just tell them it's a love potion or something."

"Love potions are illegal, and if he reports us—"

"He won't report us, Artur. They don't even let mundanes in the guild anymore, not since the last peasant uprising. Steward Snodgrass had to order eight-dozen new vials from the Illusion Embassy."

"Didn't they get into the reserves as well? Some rumor about strength potions they could use to bash through the king's guards?"

"Honestly, I think that's where all the new statues in the hedge maze came from."

"All right, so, we'll go find a mundane. But we're not going to tell them it's a love potion. Maybe a truth potion, instead."

"Ha! That's a bit ironic, isn't it?"

"Not if you know what that word means."

"I like this plan. I like it a lot. So, first thing tomorrow?"

"Yes. Fine. But we should only offer the mundane a single drop. Assuming Galidor's old journals aren't all donkey scat, a single drop should give him the power of command for ... ten minutes, tops."

"Say, um ... what if he commands us to give him more?"

"That's why we take a dropper, with one drop, and hide the rest of the potion in your room."

"Ooh, good idea."

"Mix up a bit of ForgetMeSo. We'll both take a drop before we leave tomorrow. That way, neither of us will know where the potion is, so even if he commands us to give it to him, we won't be able to. "

"But ... how will we find it again?"

"When the ForgetMeSo wears off. Assuming you mix it right, that's less than a day."

"Oh, good idea! That's why I always call you, Artur. You have all the good ideas."

"Well, Seven forbid, if you have managed to somehow replicate Galidor's Potion of Command, you'll be the one with all the good ideas, Neesh. They'll promote you to alchemaster for sure."

"Gosh, you really think so?"

"They promoted Bujor, and all he did was turn the Potion Master's cat into a slightly larger cat."

"Alchemixed milk, wasn't it?"

"He's lucky the cat didn't explode."

"Okay. I'll hide the potion tonight. Tomorrow, we prove it works, and tomorrow afternoon—"

"Alchemaster Neesh becomes the new head of the Galidor Restoration Project!"

"With his new Steward of Potions, of course, Artur Rainwater."

"I like the sound of Steward Rainwater. He sounds very rich."

"I could be Galidor, Artur! They could speak of me like Galidor someday!"

"Just remember to hide the potion better than the Potion of Flatulence you mixed last year, for Jester's Day. Old Bjord always turns down the bunks. If he turns down your bunk—"

"Seven take me, I couldn't go in the dorms for a week after that! But he won't find it."

"He'll drink anything he sees, Neesh. It's a compulsion he's had since he mixed up the ingredients in his Dietary Elixir. That's why they demoted him the Dorm Master."

"Head sheet washer, you mean. I still don't see why they don't just fire him."

"Honestly, how do you pass anything? He's the last member of Galidor's tenure track."

"Tenure track?"

"That's why you become an alchemaster, Neesh! So you get tenure. So no one can ever fire you."

"Oh, right."

"No one can fire Bjord even if he lacks the wits the Seven gave a caterpillar, which is why they have him turning down bunks."

"He won't find it. Besides, we'll be back before turn down."

"Just don't hide it in your bunk."

"I told you, Artur, I'm not an idiot!"

"I know. I know you're not an idiot, Neesh. I'm with you."

"Really?"

"We're doing this. We're going to be the toast of the Absenthia, thanks to your alchemical brilliance, and my political brilliance."

"But mostly my brilliance?"

"Whatever you want to put on the wall."

"Seven take me, Artur, we'll be famous!"

"And rich, remember, but only if your potion works."

"It'll work! I know it'll work!"

"Well I suppose we'll see tomorrow, won't we?"

THE END

# Ingredients needed

Starn reached into a round hollow in the tree trunk and felt around. Post. He pulled out the parchment. It read:

For the attention of Starn, Hero of the siege of Arkan, Ranger General of Yunkar (Disgraced).

The resident apothecary at Castle Seaview requires the following:

One Owl (plucked and roasted over wood);

A lock of red hair;

Harnriss penis (extracted whilst the creature still lives);

Meet me at the docks when the moon is full for the final ingredient.

This job should suit your considerable skills, friend. I don't care how you get the ingredients but before you have any moral qualms, remember it was your little mistake that got you discharged from the Imperial Rangers. Your wife and children Starn. You need the gold to keep a roof after their heads. You have two weeks until the full moon. Apparently some fat noble has a problem with getting his cock to work and needs the potion for his wedding night. Don't be late or you won't get paid.

Good luck friend,

Vish

Starn stuffed the parchment into a pocket inside his cloak and started to walk further into the forest.

\*\*\*

Starn slathered mud from a fetid puddle on his face and wondered how he had gone from commanding the Emperor's Rangers to trying to poach an owl in the said Emperor's private hunting forest. He wiped the excess grime onto his trousers and strung his bow as the forest devoured the last of the sunlight. Bow strung, Starn sat and listened for the call of an owl. *I am such an idiot. Why did I do it?* His musings were interrupted by a distant hoot, which he preceded to follow. He stalked though the ancient trees following the owl's call until he reached the edge of the forest. The owl would return from the open fields and back to the forest. Starn had gambled it would return the same way it left. Starn watched the moon move across the night sky until the distinctive silhouette of a large grey owl glided across his vision. He smoothly aimed his bow, calculated the required power and angle, then released the bowstring. The owl screeched as the arrow slammed into its body. It's once noble and graceful form tumbled inelegantly to the ground. Starn couldn't help feeling some empathy with the creature.

\*\*\*

Starn threw the owl carcass on the kitchen table.

"I found some work Neave."

His wife fixed him with the same empty glare he had been greeted with everyday since the incident.

"I need this plucked and roasted over wood. It's for the apothecary. Where are the children?"

She gestured toward the stairs.

"Asleep"

She turned away and carried on cleaning a large pot.

"Look I am trying my best here. I know I made a mistake but..."

Neave interrupted his protestations.

"I don't want your self pity. I want gold to feed the children. Since you ... did what you did ... there's not been much of that around. So go and kiss your children goodnight, if you can manage to stop thinking about yourself. Then I want you to go out and get some gold. A dead owl is not going to keep a roof over our heads".

Starn shuffled out and up the stairs to look in on his two daughters. He felt the same bottomless love he always experienced when he was with them. Only now that pure and wonderful feeling was despoiled with guilt. He gave them each a kiss on the forehead, careful not to wake them, and crept out.

"Well lieutenant, your a wonder between the sheets"

Sabine let her long red hair out of the tight bun it was bound in. Starn watched it cascade down her ivory skin until it obscured her breasts. He attempted to feel revolted by himself. He had removed a few medals from his old dress uniform and died his hair to ensure he wasn't recognised. Sabine had proved easy to charm into bed.

"Where did you learn to pleasure a women like that".

*With my wife.* He thought regretfully.

"I am going to go to the bar and get us some drinks. Make yourself comfy lover."

Sabine swept out of the room after pulling on her dress.

Starn wasted no time turning out Sabine's drawers. He rummaged until he found her hairbrush and pocketed the hair that had accumulated on it. He exited via the open window and began to climb down the back of the tavern to ground. *If only I had done this last time. No, if only I had asked her name. If only I had been a good husband*.

Haris was lot fatter and balder than when Starn had said goodbye to him after the Seige of Arkan.

"Hey Haris. It's been a while".

"Who the fuck are you? I don't associated with anybody who wears flea ridden rags. Off with you now, unless you want to fight in this 'ere arena behind me."

"Actually that's exactly what I want."

Starn placed his thumb and little finger together before extending the remain three toward his old comrade.

"I'm surprised you've forgotten how I rescued your sorry arse from the wrong side of Castle Arkan's wall when you decided to fall of".

"General...Starn. I didn't recognise you. I'm sorry sir. No one has seen you since...the incident with the High Judge's daughter." Haris reciprocated the hand signal.

"Look I don't want to talk about it. I need you to get me into the arena for the beast fights. I need to kill a Harnriss. Then I need you to get me out again. Hence why I am dressed as a down on my luck criminal. Which I pretty much am these days."

"Look Starn, I know things must be bad but what your contemplating is suicide".

"Desperate times and all that. Just like at Arkan."

"You saved a lot of people at the siege sir. I'll see what I can do."

\*\*\*

The Harnriss ripped at the throat of a hapless combatant in the arena. The man's spear kept glancing weakly off the creatures scales. The serpentine beast had five sets of short but powerful legs jutting out of its segmented body. It's jaws formed a cross shape with four sets of teeth when open and were as wide and tall as its body. Starn stood at the side of the arena as it sinuously wove around the helpless criminals in the arena, tearing them apart. It would be coming for him soon. He had read extensively about them in Ranger training but had never faced one. The last man fell, bitten in half. Starn backed up to the towering wall of the arena hoping his strategy was sound. The Harnriss kicked up a minor dust storm as it careened toward him. Starn held his ground and wedged his spear between the bottom of the arena floor and wall at an angle. The beast leapt at his throat. Starn rolled at last second. He felt teeth tear jagged slices in his arm. Then he heard the bestial howl as the creature impaled itself on his spear. He didn't have long. Knife in hand, Starn carefully approached the rear of the creature. It's thrashing reached a crescendo as the blade went up through a small hole between its legs and sliced the penis clean off in one fluid motion. Starn sprinted toward the arena gate as the poison he had coated on his blade finished the creature off.

\*\*\*

"I have the ingredients Vish. I am here for the last item and my money."

"Well done friend. You have always excelled. First in the military, now in crime. We will need some help for the final ingredient Starn."

Starn counted five heavily built men emerge from behind some shipping crates.

"Pin him down boys"

Starn stood dumbfounded as the heavies rushed him.

"What is this Vish?"

"Bring me his woman"

Two new thugs hauled Neave out of a barrel and threw her at Vish's feet.

"What have you done with my children?"

"Sold I'm afraid. To the slavers. Perhaps you can find them when this is over."

Vish grabbed Neave by the hair and slashed her throat.

"You bastard."

Tears came unbidden as the only women he had ever loved bled out on the slimy dock side. A thug grabbed him round the neck and scraped a vial up his cheek.

"The last ingredient are tears shed in grief. Thank you for those Starn. Now, don't be sad. Just think, your cock bought doom to you and yours but it did mean this miraculous cock healing potion could be brewed. I am sure the little noble will be pleased. If you boys stopped thinking through your members, then you'd all be rich like me. Bye now".

Starn crawled over to Naeve and cradled her in his arms, wondering where he could find a potion to kill a man.

# Untitled

Eye of newt

and a serpent’s tail

When the storm calls

the gods you’ll hail

The first spring’s dew

and a mushroom’s rot

Clear your mind

and burn your thoughts

A rose still green

and a moss blood red

On the thirteenth day

beg the blessings of the dead

A newborn’s tears

stolen each night

to draw the glyph

and seal the rite

To prove your desire

to the gods above

the bloody heart

of the one you love

A single taste

and your fate is sealed

the darkness inside

all wounds shall heal

free from the pain

that mortals feel

Eye of newt

and a serpent’s tail

When the storm calls

the gods you’ll hail.

# The\_Gem\_Cutter

A darkling daughter came one night and on the mantle did alight.

Before the gathered court she sprang. Ere drawn was sword she clearly sang,

Of silver webs that bound them all, both noble lord and lady tall,

Encircling mighty crown and land in falsely fragile mind and hand.

The king and queen their captain shame, send slinking from their court like knave,

For drawing weapon threatening, then happy eyes watch maiden sing.

“And would this court so fair and wise, not profit from the loss of guise,

obscuring greater deeds and dreams that otherwise beyond you seem?”

"What gifts have you to change this land?" asked silver bearded king his grand

and queenly wife upbraiding laughs, but darkling daughter shrugs "My draughts."

"Draughts?" queenly wizened matron frowns, and wrinkles smooths from well-worn gowns,

Once fair on shoulders smooth they hung. "Draughts - potions like I saw when young?"

"Nay fair haired queen thou never saw, such potions peerless with no flaw,

Imbued with powers deep and strong, to limber limb and make life long.”

"No powers these thy drinks command – my butcher's meats also make grand

The body's sinews, strength, and size, what other power in you lies?”

"Great powers vast I summon for the sweetly dripping dews I pour,

‘Neath moonlit skies with thunderous dread to fill the vials blue and red,

With starlight caught on skein of silk, I weave the pearly drops like milk,

In glen remote ‘Neath heaven’s stairs, where neither man nor maiden fares.”

“O! Maiden fair we plainly see, great craft you wield and mightily,

Now plainly boons and gains do tell, so we might craven council quell.”

"More deep the power I implore, than any else hast held before,

To quicken mind and senses hone, to give youth’s strength to anchor throne."

"Your price young maiden quickly say, what wicked thing desired to pay?"

“My single fee: to welcome me, as daughter of thy family,

When time has sped and from you fled, your crown shall rest upon my head.

The sole exception that be said, thy choice in husband I shall wed.

So fully joined our powers would, the land and kingdom do great good.”

Thus spoke the king in mighty voice, uplifting court his cry: “Rejoice!

Her price is but a second boon, to powers offered and right soon,

No heirs have come to ancient line, this maiden comes with offer fine,

No children ever here have roamed, small price is this: to grow our home!”

The darkling daughter potions brings, the red to queen, the blue to king,

Corks then to courtly floor they cast, a joyful look they share – one last.

And drinking down the bitter draught, says maiden to the court “At last!

My bargain is complete you see, from poison strong they cannot flee,

For never should a land be ruled, by those so swiftly, surely fooled.

Bring Captain wise to me for groom, our wedding feast will now this room.”

# Life Everlasting

*Should you wish to live for all time,*

You would do well to remember this rhyme.

Dafyn Waulo had but one goal in life, and that was to make himself immortal. Songs and plays of his many deeds did not interest him, not in the way that kings and foreign emperors alike fussed over them. What was the use of his name being known if he was not there to partake of his glory? No, Dafyn wanted immortality of a rather more tangible variety. An old man now, he had devoted some fifty years of his fragile existence to the quest for life everlasting. Thus far, nothing had quite ended how he desired.

Many years ago, when Dafyn was in his prime, there had been a wandering soldier whose wounds healed within hours of coming near death. He had made bold claims of having found a lake in the mountains where the water granted great healing abilities and Dafyn, like a foolish youth, had gone in search of it. He'd found nothing, and upon his return he ordered the soldier beheaded. The man had not healed that wound.

In later years there was tell of a great black boar that would grant everlasting youth to the man who could catch it. Not much of a hunter himself, Dafyn had convinced his king to lead a great hunt. Alas, the endeavour had ended only in the death of his king at the hands, or rather the paws, of a large and particularly aggressive pack of wolves. No one had wanted to pursue beasts of legend after that incident.

Now, aged eighty-three and living on time best described as borrowed, Dafyn had found one last opportunity to reach his goal. The Cauldron of Pefach. Once the right mixture of ingredients was stirred into the great pot, or so it was said, the drinker would be granted immortality. Unfortunately, as was the way with these things, the ingredients of this particular elixir were rather hard to come by.

*To fill the cauldron with elixir of life,*

First find a king and cut him with a knife.

As an advisor to his king, just as he had advised the past three generations of the royal family, Dafyn had easy access to his king's person in even the most dire of circumstances. He waved his way past the twin guards outside the king's door and had himself announced. Soon he found himself sitting on the floor opposite his liege.

"Goodman Waulo," beamed King Hetcau, his young and somewhat chubby features glowing in the early morning light. "Is there a reason for your visit, or are you lonely in your tower?"

Dafyn returned the smile. "I have been studying the stars, my king," he said. "I fear there is some great calamity approaching us."

"Gods protect us," uttered Hetcau, making a ward across his chest. "Have you ascertained the nature of this evil?"

"I am afraid not, my king. Nothing brought about by men, that much I know. Perhaps some evil spirit seeking to enter your hall. Or the wrath of an angered god."

"Are they not pleased? I have made offerings every day."

"Then a spirit it must be." Dafyn shook his head sadly.

Hetcau looked imploringly at his advisor. "What can we do, Waulo?"

Dafyn paused, as if deep in thought. "I can endeavour to make a ward for you, to banish spirits from your home. I would however, require a small amount of your blood."

"My blood?" The King recoiled in disgust.

"Yes, my king. Spirits cannot stand any part of the body. It reminds them of what they no longer have." He smiled calmly. "I would only need a few drops, no more."

"Very well," Hetcau agreed, and placed him hand out, palm upward.

Dafyn bowed, and drew his knife. Crimson spilled across the blade, and he collected it in a small bottle. Then he made his excuses and left.

*When king's blood has touched the pot,*

Stir in redthorn, not little but a lot.

Redthorn. Where am I to find redthorn? wondered Dafyn. It was a rare tree, and none grew in the kingdom so far as he knew. And yet the name had been mentioned recently? But when? And in what context? He wandered the corridors of the king's hall for many hours before he found his answer.

"Have you seen the Queen of late?" Dafyn heard one courtier asking another.

"No," replied the second man. "Not for a week, that I can think of."

"She can't still be in her garden can she? How many flowers can one woman need?"

"There's more there than flowers from what I hear. All sorts of herbs and roots."

Dafyn didn't hear the rest of the conversation. He was already heading for the garden. *Of course*, he thought. *The Queen had redthorn imported for her garden. Though gods alone know what she wants it for. Horrible stuff.*

The garden was peaceful when he arrived. A small fountain bubbling away at the far end, great green bushes swaying in the gentle wind. The Queen was at the foot of one of those bushes, rummaging among the roots,

But Dafyn did not concern himself with the Queen. His eyes were fixed on the redthorn tree before him. He carefully reached in amongst the branches, fearful of impaling himself on those wicked hooked barbs. He broke off a large twig, removed his arm from the matted tree and slipped out of the garden before he was noticed.

*With blood and thorn entwined together,*

Add a dose of southern weather.

Far to the south, Dafyn knew, lay a great mountain empire where there was only one type of weather. The snowfall there was the stuff of legend. Deep enough to bury a man twice over and to freeze the beer in a man's cup. So he needed snow, but could he afford to wait for winter? Old age may have already finished him off by that point.

Then he remembered a gift the King had been given a few months before by an ambassador from that distant land. Dafyn hurried towards the lower levels of the hall.

Deep underground the gift was kept, where it was cold enough that you could see your breath even in the height of summer. Dafyn's shaking fingers fumbled with each door he encountered, but he was relentless in his descent. One door, two doors, three, a dozen. They all blurred into one in his failing memory. And then there were no more doors. Just a room.

At the centre of the room was a gift fit for a king. To keep his drinks cool in the summer, allegedly. A most bizarre gift, but one Dafyn was now profoundly grateful for.

A solid block, one metre across, of pure, southern ice.

*And should any man choose to drink,*

His life will be longer than he could ever think.

Dafyn stirred his elixir in the Cauldron of Pefach. There was not as much as he had hoped, but there would certainly be enough for him. The ice had melted, leaving the mixture a pale and watery red with shards of twig floating in it. For nearly an hour he stirred, until he was sure that the redthorn had infused the drink with its essence.

By rule of nature, the redthorn would surely kill him in such a quantity, but the ancients who devised the Cauldron had been knowledgeable about a great many things, and so Dafyn put his faith in them. His life in their power. At his age, he had very little to lose.

Dafyn dipped a goblet into the Cauldron, scooping in as much as he could. He lifted it to his lips, and then paused. "Gods bless me," he murmured. And then he drank.

The goblet fell to the floor as Dafyn staggered back. The flavour was vile, worse than rotting meat. He forced himself to swallow it all, redthorn and all. After that he waited. He waited until his limbs grew heavy, and his eyelids started to drop. He felt twice his age. Weak and powerless. Had he done something wrong? He tried to open his eyes, but found he couldn't. He willed his legs to move, but they refused. His heart pumped faster, his panic rising. he couldn't move, couldn't see. Couldn't do anything. He felt cold, his skin unnaturally dry.

*What have I done wrong?* he wondered.

It was hours before they found him. But they didn't help him. Even if they had known he needed help, they wouldn't have known how. They moved him to the temple, thinking that was the right place for him. And for centuries after, men would still come to that temple, and marvel at the statue that wept.

# Elixir

The deck lurched downward as a stabiliser tore off. Merovech grabbed the tarnished rail with his spare hand and laughed. Scrabbling to find their footing, the two women scowled back.

"Oh come on!" He shouted above tortured groans of the ship. "You must see the irony here. We're all about to die over an elixir that promises eternal life."

Bracing her feet against an ornate girder, Jeren wobbled to a halt.

"Give us the flask, Merovech. This isn't the time for your insanity."

She checked her friend, crouched against another metal rib that vaulted the control room.

"Can you take him from there?"

Molia's hair spilled around her face, as red as the flames licking the outside of the glass bulkheads. She shook her head. Merovech tucked the steel flask into the sash at his waist.

"I love that you two are just as ruthless as I thought!" He grinned and pulled himself closer to the console. "It's just so..." He searched for the word with an excited shiver. "...diabolical!"

Somewhere, something very important exploded from its moorings and the whole ship rolled.The violent turn threw all three from their perches.

Molia caught the worst of the floor's reassignment to wall. She fell the shortest distance but with a sharp twist. She cracked her head against the girder and fell ragged, thought extinguished in a bloody instant. Jeren smacked into the glass beside her, scrabbling toward her friend as Merovech joined them with a whoop, landing heavily on his shoulder.

The assassin cradled her friend, ignoring the forest a thousand feet below. She tapped a bloody cheek and whispered the red head's name. Merovech dragged himself to them, eyes fixed on the sparking ruin of the console above.

"If that thing drops we're fucked." He looked down through the glass wall at the fast approaching ground. "Ah. Actually, we're properly fucked anyway. Nice job girls."

"Piss off Merovech. We never expected you to get airborne. This was supposed to blow before it got off the ground." Jeren did not turn from her friend.

"Typical. Even when I exceed expectations I still end up getting dropped in the shit." He looked thoughtfully down. "And this shit has a particularly high drop. Is she alright?"

The question caught Jeren off guard, finally turning her attention.

"What the fuck do you care?"

Merovech tutted, then shrugged.

"I don't. He does."

Jeren spat. "You fucking psycho. Which one is it now?"

"Me." Merovech's face softened, his brown eyes turning blue.

"The Monk? Oh that's just great." Jeren shook her head. "No offence, but you've never been much use to anyone."

"You are much like my companions in that regard. They too discount the usefulness of compassion. I doubt this will change their minds, but perhaps it may change yours."

Merovech pulled the canister from his waist and slid it along the glass, a mild smile spreading in his grey streaked beard. Jeren snatched at it with disbelief.

"I believe there is enough in there for two measures. I do not believe your partner will last long without hers. I doubt you will last much longer without the other." He looked significantly at the slowly spinning slopes.

Jeren hastily unscrewed the flask and lifted it to her friend. The other woman stirred immediately. Before Merovech could change his minds Jeren slugged back the rest of the flask and tossed it away.

"NO!" Merovech stood, eyes blazing to green. "You stupid bastard!"

Both women scampered back, pulling at weapons in their tunics. What remained of the ship rocked with another explosion, returning Merovech to his hands and knees. When he looked up, green had been replaced by brown and he was chuckling.

"Wow." He sat back, gobsmacked. "I'll never hear the end of that. I'm going to want to kill me for the rest of our days. Or day might be more accurate."

Neither woman relaxed their hands on hidden blades. Molia lent in to her friend.

"We need to jump. I don't know how good this stuff is, but I don't want to our first test to be dropping a hundred tons of skyship onto ourselves."

Merovech nodded. "She has a point Jeren. You'd best be quick. It's been a singular and somewhat final pleasure ladies." He tried to bow whilst sitting cross-legged.

The iron leaves and scrollwork that decorated the ship's visible skeleton provided plenty of purchase for keen climbers and none could be keener than the two women that were fleeing for their lives. Jenen had shot through the hatch toward the escape kite in seconds. Molia paused at its mouth and looked back at Merovech.

"Come with us."

"Ah, Mol. I don't think so." He waved his hand dismissively. "That kite is only meant for one so, as it is, you two are in for a heavy landing. Without the potion I'd never make it anyway."

He regarded her for a second, curled like a spooked forest fox about to dive for the safety of its den.

"Seriously. Go. You're forgiven. At least by me, but if you stick around much longer I can't guarantee I won't try and shoot you." He pulled a thick nosed pistol from it's holster and laid it on his lap. The red fox bolted.

Merovech sat calmly on the glass, watching the world turn in a way it should not. He tossed the gun aside and smiled.



Jenen watched the plume of smoke on the distant hill. The skyship had come down almost straight, not carving much of a gully to its grave. Unlike their escape kite, which had dragged them through a mile of branches, steadfastly refusing to break anything but their bones. She could feel her legs knitting together now, it tickled.

"He really was a mad bastard." Molia guessed her thoughts.

"Completely. I kind of liked him."

"Me too. Why do you think he did it?"

"Fuck knows. Like you say.... a mad bastard. At first I thought he had switched the flask, like he did with the necklace back in that casino."

Molia barked a laugh at the memory.

"Shit that was good. The look on that fat bitch's face."

"Yeah. It was nice getting one over on her for a change. Let's hope she thinks we all died in the ship. Then we won't have to keep looking over our shoulders."

"Mmmm. He didn't though. Switch it I mean." Molia was serious again.

"No he didn't."

The crashed skyship had failed to inflame the damp autumn forest, but it was still a mighty blaze. The two sat together as their bodies rejuvenated, watching the mechanical funeral pyre.

"Mad bastard." Jenen repeated.



If any forest foxes had been brave enough to inspect the edges of the twisted wreckage, they might have seen tendons striking like cobras at a burnt mound. Threads of bone fired like boarding lines then drew tight scattered pieces of corpse, thickening to their purpose before the cobras enclosed them. Gradually the shape of a man began to rise from the scorched floor. If that was not enough to set any creature to flight they may have heard his muttered conversation.

"The Abbot will not be happy with us, creating two more immortals....

Screw him, he lost his sense of humour a dozen centuries ago, some of us still like to have a little fun....

You call this fun? I swear, when we get out of this I'm going to find a bar and get so drunk you two fall asleep, then I'm going kick the shit out of someone....

Well, I'm all in for the getting drunk part, after that you can do what you like....

Why harm the innocent? I am surprised that you do not approve of our rash actions....

Why would I....?

I think he means that those girls were good fun in the drunken punch up stakes. It's a bit of a shock you don't appreciate their ascendance....

I suppose. They were quite handy when we got cornered by the Duke's men. Yeah, I guess they could be fun to have a long for the ride...

It is a long ride, brother. All company becomes welcome eventually, during eternity....

That's why we keep ending up back at the temple....

Our next visit may be a while, as I say, the Abbot will not be happy with our choices....

And as I said, screw him. He sent us to close down the fountain and we did. He didn't say anything about destroying any elixir it might have already produced....

Probably thought we'd just destroy everything as usual. I would've if you'd given me a chance...

Good job we didn't then. Now... "

The figure trod uncertainly forward, testing new formed feet.

"...let's find that bar and get drunk."

# Love Potion



The girl stirred from where she was lashed to the bed posts. Lying face down, she shifted on the stained mattress, groaning as she recovered from the trichloromethane. Bojan, arms folded, decided she was probably 12. Maybe 13. Exactly what he needed.

The basement room in the dilapidated two-story was dark and sparse. The copper smell reminiscent of what happens in this room. A bed had been shoved against the opposite wall, with a lone, narrow table just inside the door. The girl's backpack had been flung beneath, and an oil lamp flickered on top.

After the grab team had finished strapping down her limp form, Bojan had considered removing her clothes, but had decided he couldn't stomach stripping the child himself. And the thugs would have asked for more money had he made them come back and do it. That was extra money he needed.

No, the Colonel was going to have to deal with a fully-clothed victim. The sick bastard probably preferred ripping their clothes off himself anyway.

"Wha . . ." The girl opened a blackened eye and mumbled.

Bojan waited by the open door.

"What happened? Where am I?" She pulled at her restraints, trying to get her head around to see the rest of the room. Confusion and fear in her voice. "What's going on?"

"Shut up, whore. Stay quiet or I will cut you." Bojan had mastered softening up the girls before his clients laid into them.

He dropped his arms to his side as she flexed, red-faced, taut, and straining hard on the lashings. After a moment, she gave up and stopped struggling. For a brief second, Bojan had thought the old bed post might have given way. She was strong for a little girl.

She lifted her head and whispered, voice breaking, "Please, just take me back to Kneza Mihaila. My family . . . They'll be looking for me."

"You were alone. We were watching." Bojan took a step toward the bed and kicked the post with a heavy boot. "You belong to us now."

She dropped her face back into the spotted mattress, hair showering across the back of her neck, sliding off her shoulders. Had she a future, she might have eventually grown into a beautiful woman. Such a shame. It was days like this when he felt the uncomfortable prod from regret. But, he'd already made his decision. He was sticking to his plan.

A knock on the doorframe behind him caused Bojan to turn around. It was the desk man, Nikola, with his strange, black-on-black eyes. "Yes?"

"The Colonel is in the waiting room, sir. He's getting agitated."

Bojan glanced back to the girl. She hadn't moved.

"She's not ready yet." Digging in his coat pocket, Bojan produced a glass vial sloshing with an amber liquid. "Here, give him this."

Nikola took the item, examining its plastic stopper.

"Tell him it's a 'Love Potion'. Feed him a line about it being an ancient formula. From the cradle of humanity or something. Whatever." Bojan shrugged. "Just make sure he knows it takes fifteen minutes for potency. Tell him it'll increase his stamina. I'm sure he'll like that."

The man nodded, lips puckered and scratching his chest.

"That should give me enough time to get the girl crying like he asked."

At his words, she lifted her head again and strained to see who he was talking to.

Nikola bobbed his head again, avoided her gaze, and hurried out of the room, love potion secured in his fist.

"I'm . . . So, I'm supposed to cry?"

That was his goal anyway. "The Colonel likes his girls to be slobbery messes. Young, slobbery messes."

She seemed to relax. "Why are you doing this?"

For a child, perched yawning over the precipice of ruin, she was calm. Again, he questioned his motives. He questioned his need for escape. If the ends justified the means. For a quiet life hidden in the hills of northern Italy. This last job would give him enough money to survive until the olives started coming on. Then, he would be free.

His face hard, he ground out the words, "Because I'm evil, girl."

"Speaking of, I need my medicine. I have to take it every day. It's in my pack."

"I promise it won't matter. Because you're not going to live long enough to care."

"And, *I* promise *you* will care if I don't get it. It's going to come spraying out of me, all messy-like."

Bojan, hands on his hips, took a deep breath, counted to three, and exhaled. It seemed he wasn't going to make this one cry.

"Fine. I'll get your medicine." He bent and rummaged through her bag. "What's it look like."

"It's that pink bottle. The one that says 'Pepto' on it."

Snatching the container from the bag, he stomped over to her bedside. "This one?"

"Yeah. Help me turn over."

He unscrewed the cap and poured most of it out on the ground next to the bed. Closing the cap, he tossed it back over by the table.

She glared at him.

"Scream and puke all over him. I don't care." He stalked back to the still-open door.

"Just remember. I warned you."

Over his shoulder, "Shut up, bitch." One more day. Just one more day.

Leaning out the door, he shouted down the hallway, "Nikola! Bring the Colonel back. He's going to have to break this one himself. Maybe he'll like the challenge."

Bojan leaned against the doorframe and waited, watching the girl tied to the bed, hoping she would spontaneously errupt into sobs, wondering why she didn't. Wondering why it made him nervous. After a moment, he heard the rhythm of stark bootsteps echoing through the hall.

"I promise. If I don't get it soon, the Colonel isn't going to love me."

Bojan opened his mouth to reply when a thick accent behind him filled the room.

"How could I not love you, dearest?" The Colonel, grinning at Bojan, entered and started unbuttoning his shirt, exposing a sweaty undershirt beneath, and crept up on the girl as if she was a skittish doe, ready to bolt, and not a child tied to filthy bedding.

"You are so beautiful. I can't wait to . . ."

The girl made a sudden, violent retching sound and he stopped moving. She convulsed, pulling fiercely at her bonds, and made the noise again, this time wet and horrible. The Colonel turned his bald pate and gray mustache toward Bojan, about to ask what was happening.

What happened was everything went sideways.

The girl tugged one last time, bending the metal bed posts, her restraints parting like they were egg noodles instead of leather. She sat in the middle of the bed, facing them, grinning wide. Eyes wide. Everything was too wide.

Her mouth opened, jaw impossibly unhinged, revealing an opening into which Bojan could have easily slipped both his meaty, unclenched hands. But, it continued opening, her lips folding back over the girl's head, almost as if she was turning inside out.

As her face unfolded, reverse-swallowing her tiny body, she began bloating from inside, piles of sticky pink and red blossoming out of the hole and growing in size, swelled out past the edge of the bed.

The thick tentacle, once the little girl's tongue, shot out and wrapped the Colonel's arm, constricting. Squeezing. A sharp, whiplike snap shot down the length, and the man's arm tore from its socket, leaving an empty, gore-squirting hole where his shoulder used to be.

The Colonel screamed.

No longer a child, the beast continued to swell, filling the room. More tentacles, thick as 100-year oaks poured out, lashing wildly, pulverizing clay, brick and foundation alike. More than a dozen. More than two dozen. All jerking around, like giant, loosed firehoses.

One swept Bojan's feet out from under him, powdering the bones in his legs. He fell, losing sight of everything except the swelling monster in front of him. Mouth agape, he could do nothing but stare.

Two massive, stump appendages formed beneath the creature, each with thick tentacles completing a flailing, paw-like foot. Big around as the now-flattened bed was wide.

The mass soon filled the room, pressing out the walls and ceiling. Plaster, wood, and brick rained down on Bojan as the thing rose into the air, exploding out of the building.

The last thing Bojan saw was the chimney collapsing on top of him.



Faustina, blonde once more and naked in the morning sun, examined the carnage around her. The building had been torn down, pulverized to almost nothing. The earth scarred. Wildlife fled.

Luckily, because of their business requirements, there were no nearby neighbors. She'd tried to warn them about her medicine. They didn't know it was only in the pink bottle because that made it easier to get through customs.

Granted, if she was honest with herself, she hadn't really felt the need to explain that part.

# The Birthday Potion

The potion smelled like vomit. Rotting garbage. Carrion left too long to spoil in the summer sun.

Bartholomeo couldn’t quite decide.

Whatever it was, it was certainly disgusting. One of the worst smells he could remember. Bartholomeo immediately pulled the vial away from his assaulted nostrils, and shoved the cork back in.

The syrupy liquid was the color of post-drinking-binge urine. Tiny green particles sat in the yellow molasses, like insects trapped in prehistoric amber.

Bartholomeo scowled. After a final moment of consideration, he vigorously shook his head.

“No. I don’t like it.” Bartholomeo said at last.

“What do you mean, little one?” The crone’s voice was sweet, condescending.

“Please don’t ‘little one’ me, madame.” Bartholomeo snapped in annoyance. “And, please, take it. I’m sorry, but this was a mistake. The smell-and, and, and, because-I mean, it just looks-no, you can’t expect-I’m sorry, this was a mistake.”

His eyes scanned the wares on display in the large covered wagon: dusty leather-bound tomes, a dried monkey’s paw, something that looked like a jar of eyeballs in pickling fluid. There were trinkets made of crystal, totems carved from wood and bone. Everything was haphazardly placed, seemingly at random, on the shelves and tables in the tiny wagon.

Bartholomeo sighed. If the old gypsy wasn’t a witch, she certainly gave off that impression.

“You hesitate.” the crone purred. Her accent was thick and coarse, like the snarling of a wild animal. “You are not magically inclined, and this potion seems too good to be true, so of course you are wary. But young man, even without a sensitivity to the arcane, you must feel it.”

“Feel it? Feel what?”

“The magic within that vial.”

“I don’t…I mean, really. What assurances do-”

A liver-spotted claw of a hand shot out and gripped his arm. It took everything in Bartholomeo to keep from crying out as the crone leaned in and hissed.

“Little man, what do I care for assurances? You come into my wagon and ask for the magic to make you bigger. Stronger. To give you confidence. You are a worm, so of course you want these things, and this…what you hold in your frail little girl’s hand, is the answer!”

“Stop!” Bartholomeo squeaked. “Please! Just take it back already!”

“Can you even grasp the concept of magic, tiny sir? Not the sleight-of-hand practiced by sidewalk charlatans in the city, but actual magic? The building blocks of reality? The energy flowing through all things?”

Bartholomeo shook his head. Even though the crone’s eyes were milky and clouded, he felt extremely uneasy, as if she were boring holes into his brain.

“Magic was not meant for humans to ever understand. It is too ancient. It has built our world, but it is not of this world. Magic is raw power. It is unlimited potential. It is the infinite unknowable truth of all things, and I have captured it! Yes, I have sucked it out of the air, and the roots, and the earth, and the water. I have bottled it, distilled it, and shaped it into what you hold in front of you like so much rubbish. Fool! You don’t like the smell? I can’t be bothered making the infinite unknowable truth of the universe smell like strawberries and baby’s farts!”

“Now, see here-”

“Forgive my sister, good sir!”

Bartholomeo turned to see another old woman standing in the doorway of the wagon. She was just as ugly and wretched as the one he was talking to. She dropped the basket of herbs she had been collecting outside and swooped in like a bird of prey. Before he knew it, Bartholomeo found this old woman’s hands clutching his shoulders. Trapped on both sides, he felt like a piece of meat about to be devoured by two hungry predators.

“Please, sir, my dear sister is not of sound mind, as of late. This summer heat agitates her and puts her in foul mood.”

“Don’t speak for me, Florinda!” the first crone snarled, her rotten teeth grinding. “I refuse to let this city-dwelling praklova demean what we do! Shav’roska! Nielisch aun dashlinkov!”

Bartholomeo threw up his arms.

“Please! Please don’t!”

“Sir, fear not! She raves in the language of our ancestors, she isn’t casting a spell on you.”

“You’d know it if I was! Dumpfkleish.”

“Lucinda! Sir, please, come out from under the table, now. Let’s resume discussion with calm and civil voices. Lucinda, sister, brew us some tea, if you would. The lavender one, with some honey.”

Lucinda muttered as she hobbled away.

“Now, sir, from what I was able to catch, you seek to…”

“To change. Myself, that is.” Bartholomeo croaked, his throat dry. Was it his imagination, or had the wagon become unbearably stuffy?

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Do you know the town of Blackwood? Down river from here?”

“No, I’m afraid my sister and I never stay in one place for long. We come and go with the moon, and I believe that it is our first time in the area.”

“I see. Well, Blackwood used to be called Autumn’s Hearth, but it was gutted decades ago by a great fire. My grandfather was alderman at the time, you see. He was among the only survivors.”

“How tragic.”

“The town has been rebuilt, but, well, grandfather has renamed it Blackwood, and I believe it has been…cursed, ever since. My family, specifically.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I am the heir. My eighteenth birthday is tomorrow and I am to go on a hunt, as rite of passage. But, I am afraid. I had three older brothers. When father died, Elias was to inherit. But on his birthday hunt, his stallion threw him and his neck snapped. Then there was Peytar. On his birthday hunt, he was gored by the stag he was tracking. Next was Winthrop. He tried to break the curse by refusing the birthday hunt.”

“Wise.”

“Yes. I was just fourteen, and already terrified of what the villagers called The Von Richtmann Curse. But Winthrop, he was sure that he would break the curse. He would have been a wonderful alderman. Winthrop the Wise.”

“Except…”

“He choked to death on a turkey bone.”

“I see…”

“I am no believer of magic, madame.” At this point, the second crone, Lucinda, had returned with a mug of warm tea. Bartholomeo accepted it with shaking hands. “Thank you. But-you see, I have grown to manhood with this…shadow…hanging over my head. Like a shroud. My death shroud, waiting to fall.”

The two crones said nothing.

“The birthday hunt has always been a Von Richtmann tradition. But grandfather is just as afraid, maybe even more so, than I am. So, I need this magic potion. I must be strong to stay on my horse. I must be fast to sidestep a charging stag. I must be wise and alert, to avoid choking to death, or tripping on the stair, or being crushed by a chandelier. Do you understand? I do not believe in magic. But I believe that…something…wants to end my family.”

Florinda sighed. It was the tired and resigned exhalation of a soul who had lived too long, and seen too much. Lucinda said nothing.

“Your grandfather. What is he like?” Florinda asked quietly.

“Maximillian Von Richtmann…was a force of nature in his day. Stern, but fair. Strong and brave. He was the greatest warrior in the land, and wise as a sage. But, that was years ago. He has not been himself since the fire. I fear he will never be himself again.”

Another silence.

Lucinda finally spoke.

“Go home, young master. Take the potion, drink it at sundown. It will change you. At midnight, my sister and I will toast to your long and happy life.”

\* \* \*

When Bartholomeo had left, the crones sat for a long time without speaking.

Outside, the wind rustled through the branches. Nearby, a wolf howled.

At long last, Florinda croaked.

“Max is alive.”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think he’ll be surprised to see us?”

Lucinda smiled. “I don’t see why. We haven’t aged a day!”

The two old crones cackled.

\* \* \*

A shaggy wolf skulked up to the covered wagon sitting at the side of the road. It growled warily.

The flaps of the wagon opened and out stepped two ravishingly beautiful women.

The wolf fell silent.

The women laughed, flashing smiles that would make any grown man’s heart melt.

“Such a beautiful night for a stroll.” One of them giggled.

“If only Camilla were here.” The second beauty cooed.

“Let us finish this for our sister, then. For Camilla.” The first woman tucked a wicked dagger into a sheath hidden beneath her cloak.

“Yes. For Camilla.” They set off together, arm in arm, down the path.

Somewhere in the distance, a bell was ringing, and the screams of terrified village folk filled the air.

# The Potionmaker's Lament

Some say potion making is a science, others, an art. I say it’s a Nayru-damn fucking hassle.

I’ve apprenticed with literally the creme de la creme of potion making for the past 40 years. 40 fucking years! That’s how long it takes to learn how to make every one of the 912 potions in Kotake’s Mysteries of Potion. Why that woman sat around thinking up so many recipes, I have no clue. By the 25th year, it was just making the previous 251 potions except in different random colors. Do you know how many colors there are?

Finally, when I reach the end of my training, Rauru, my teacher, gives me a 15-minute spiel about the business of selling potions and then kicks me out the door. I’m 52, single, and have been sleeping in a dusty basement for my entire adult life. But now I’m a potions master! Chicks dig that, right?

In addition to imparting the ancient potion-making wisdom on me, Rauru] was also kind of enough to rent out a small shoppe for me in Kakariko. With the starter set of herbs and other potion stuff he gave me, I figure I’ve got about six months of runway, which should be enough to get going.

It takes three weeks in the back of a wagon before I finally reach Kakariko but as soon as my feet hit the muddy road, I bolt down the thoroughfare to see my shoppe. When I arrive, I realize I should have savored the walk over.

It’s. A. Fucking. Dump.

The wood facade is crumbling, the door is resting in front of the misshapen hole where the door should go and the less said about the landscaping the better. I look to the left and right to see if I am the proud renter of a dump on a street of dumps or the bad neighbor that is lowering everyone else’s property values and am dismayed to realize that it’s the latter. Luckily everyone is still asleep so I walk quietly up the front stairs and try to pick up the door to rest it on the front wall silently hoping that the added weight does not send the structure toppling over. Thank goodness it doesn’t.

I could bore you with the details of how I was able to spruce up the ol’ shoppe in just under three months, but this story is already too depressing as it is. Let’s just cut to my grand-opening celebration where the whole town turns out to sample my wares and I make lots of new friends and even a potential love interest.

At least that’s how it went in my dreams the night before. I need to stop taking those fucking dream potions every night. They are messing with my perception of reality.

The opening was an unmitigated disaster. I ended up over-boiling the Eye of Newt stock solution, which is used in 86% of all potions, so the whole town spent the night vomiting on my front stoop.

But when Din closes a door, she opens a window right?

I had been trying too hard to make up for lost time, when I should have kept things simple. One potion (the Potion of Rejuvenation, which given how last night went seems prudent), two strengths, and that’s it. Let’s call it a pivot. No splashy opening, I’m going to just clean up this vomit and do a free giveaway week or something.

Weeks pass.

There are no customers.

Evidently making everyone in the town vomit was bad for business. Fine. I get it.

So I spend my days either staring at the door hoping someone walks in or in the back trying to perfect a love potion to help me woo the mayor’s older sister.

One afternoon I’m minding my business, trying to recall from memory the 361 steps to making the Elixir of Youth when the entrance bell begins to jingle and the door slowly opens.

A customer!

“Welcome to Steve’s Potions Emporium!” I say. “We’ve got only two potions but they can’t be beat.”

I look at my potential first customer. He’s dressed in all green - green pants, shirt, and hat, and carrying a wooden shield and a wooden sword. He can’t be more than 15 years old, but maybe he’s the son of a rich noble or something. He eyes the potions silently.

“I haven’t seen you around town. Are you new or just visiting?”

He looks at me and starts opening his mouth to respond, but then closes it again. Instead, he walks over to the lower-strength potion and taps it with his wooden sword.

“Interested in that one? That’ll be 100 rupees.”

The green-clad customer looks at me with an perturbed expression before he bolts out of the shoppe. So close.

The next morning though, he returns. Even though his clothes are green, I can see a smattering of grass stains on his pants and shirt. He walks up to the same potion, taps it with his sword again and detaches a pouch from his belt. I take the pouch, weighing the amount with just my hand (another one of my activities to pass the time) and nod.

“The potion is yours. Just need your bottle.”

He again looks at me like I’m a crazy person, but fishes around inside one of the other pouches on his belt and pulls out something to show me.

“No, that’s a glass, not a bottle. Potions can only be stored in bottles. Surely you must know that!”

He shakes his head no.

“OK, well, I don’t have any bottles for sale, but the guy down the street has one I think. It’s 4000 rupees.”

The customer’s eyes go wide. He holds out the glass again.

“No, sorry, there’s nothing I can do. If I get caught selling potions to people without bottles, I’ll lose my license.”

The customer frowns, stares at the potion vat again, before quickly grabbing the pouch of rupees out my hand and bolting out of the store.

Farore-damn it. I should have been a bottlemaker.

# Goldenfoot, The Brave

The old gray-haired rabbit tossed his apron on the table and plopped onto the bench opposite Theo. Tears stained his eyes, his ears limp. “I’ll never see you again, will I?"

Theo looked away from his father, and found himself staring at the ragged sack on the bench next to him. What could he say? Maybe he would be back one day? It wouldn’t fix anything. Give his father hope and it would tear his heart every day that he didn’t return. No, he couldn’t avoid this. “I-”

His father hopped to his hindfeet, wrapped his arms around Theo, and wept.

“I knew this was coming,” father said a time later, glancing at the sack. “You hear rumors when it comes to things like this.”

“We’re out of options,” Theo said.

“Turning into a monster is an option?” Father shook his head. “Why you, Theodore?”

There were plenty of others willing, that was certain. But, in the end, he only trusted himself to do this. “I have to go,” he said, grabbing the sack. His father walked him to the bar door where they hugged a long while.

“I love you, son.”

“I love you.”

The moment he turned and walked away was the hardest thing he had ever done.

He arrived at Senator Swayback's burrow an hour later. Deep below the main keep were secret tunnels that connected every major rabbit’s home in the entire warren. And, most importantly, it had tunnels that led far away from the warren into the open forest.

Seven rabbits filled the small chamber. All were members of the Senate or Presidential family, with the exception of Eloine. The only ones, apart from his father, that knew exactly what he was about to do.

He handed the sack to Eloine who dumped the contents onto her workbench. “This is everything I asked for?”

Theo nodded to the chemist. “Lady blossoms from across the plain, two husks of lok root, five blades of blue grass, the eye of a golden kangaroo rat, mineral dust from the caves of the highland bats-“

“And a very special tooth,” Eloine said, holding up the massive thing to inspect. “Perfect.” She began combining the ingredients into a pot and added a blue liquid that had been boiling when he entered.

Senator Swayback shuffled over, whiskers low and voice lower. “Theo, we all know you’re a brave rabbit. Carrots man, everyone will know your name by morning. But, how in Garden’s Sanctuary did you get the eye of a kangaroo rat?”

Theo smiled as he watched the tooth disintegrate into the liquid. “Some things, Senator, are best left to the imagination.”

Eloine poured the neon potion into a small glass vial and stoppered it with cork. “Now,” she said, voice serious. “Take this when you are clear of the tunnel. If they catch you with it, you may not have a chance to drink.”

“How long will I have?” Theo reached out and took the vial delicately.

“I have never made a potion of this magnitude as I made perfectly clear before. With any luck, it will be immediate. The most important part of this will be your memory.”

He squeezed his free forefoot tight. He hadn’t told his father this part. How do you explain to someone that not only were you going away forever, but you would no longer have any memory of what you left behind?

“You’ll have a day. Maybe two at best.” He nodded, doing his best to keep his ears up.

President Silvercoat stood at the front of the room. “Thank you, Theodore Goldenfoot. Violence must always be a last resort, but we cannot allow the Nightstalkers to continue their attacks. Your sacrifice will save this warren. Tomorrow, we will celebrate you.” Everyone in the burrow thumped a foot to that.

Shortly afterward, when all had given their thanks and praise, Theodore Goldenfoot traveled the mile and a half of tunnel that led away from the warren and into the district of Tall Trees. He reached the end of the tunnel just before it turned upward to the surface. He took out the vial, popped the cork, said a prayer, and let the bitter potion ooze down his throat. He waited several minutes, heart thumping, whiskers jerking.

Nothing.

Doubt crept into his mind. Eloine did say she had never made a potion like this before. What did she get wrong? He’d have to go back!

Dirt peppered him from above as massive arms wrapped around him. He was hauled up into the cold night air, then slammed onto the ground. His breath was kicked from him as he struggled to stand. “I got one!” A deep voice called out. Footsteps rushed toward him from behind. “Hidin’ in this here hole, he was.”

Theo caught his breath, finally able to focus on the red faces around him. Wide, toothy faces. Nightstalker foxes. “Let’s rip him apart.”

“Calm down, Ferrel,” one said, placing a claw below Theo’s chin. “I’ve seen him before. Was at the parley last week when we brought back those pelts.”

“You sure, Trot?”

“Oh yeah,” Trot said, coming closer, eyes wide with hunger. “I had my eye on him, all right.” Why in all Garden’s Sanctuary did the potion not work! Carrots! Work!

Calm yourself. Think through this. Theo found the words that had felt so far away. “I am the negotiator,” he said. “I have an offer for your skulk chief.”

Theo’s nose twitched, then he lost all scent. “I have authority from our herd's President to offer payment.” The two foxes laughed, then shackled his wrists in twig cuffs.

“Well,” Trot said. “On to the chief.” They led him deep into the Tall Trees until they reached a place where two fallen trees joined together. Below was a dug out den which was guarded by four Nightstalkers.

Ferrel kept him close while Trot spoke with one of the guards. Theo winced as a sharp pain struck his hind leg, his muscles convulsing, then it was gone. Ferrel chuckled. “Legs gon’ limp, have they?” Theo growled under his breath, then gasped.

He had growled. Rabbits don’t growl.

Castor, the Nightstalker chief, appeared a moment later and walked right up to Theo, slashing him with his claws. Theo fell backward, his cheek on fire. Blood seeped into his fur, but the pain faded as a hot surge engulfed every inch of his body. Theo’s ears began to tingle. “I have already given my terms,” Castor said, his voice a high-pitched squawk. “Fifty of your thickest bunnies. That is the only offer. Anything less and we will continue to pick your warren apart. One. By. One.”

The others laughed, showing their teeth. Theo tried to speak, but his throat slammed shut, his chest was so tight it felt ready to burst. “I have grown tired with your deliberations,” Castor said, pacing around Theo. “We are Nightstalkers!” His skulk cheered, raising their paws. He stopped in front of Theo, grabbing him by the ear. “The fact is, we won’t ever stop.” He threw Theo to the ground. “Four other warrens have all fallen. Yours will be next. But, it won’t be the last.”

That moment, Theo let out a breath that carried a wisp of blue smoke. Then, he lurched forward and screeched as if struck by a hawk. He could hear their laughter once more. The shackles broke before Theo knew what was happening. He felt like he was flying, raised high above the ground. He felt power entering his legs, a tight wrapping of muscle and sinew. Thick skin and fur replaced his soft plush, his ears tightened, his nose straightened. His tongue poked from his mighty jaws, licking the backside of his long, massive teeth.

Laughter gave way to cries of horror. Castor backed away, terror clear on his face. “I offer our response to your terms,” Theo said, his voice the booming bark of a grey wolf. He lunged, caught Castor in his jaws and thrashed.

He dropped the Nightstalker’s chief’s body, then leapt at Ferrel, tearing a fatal gash into his hide. He dealt with Trot in the same manner, then chased down the guards who had run and tore them to pieces.

Theo sat on his hind legs, panting. He felt the triumph first, then the weight of his actions crashed down on top of him. Nightstalker bodies lay scattered about, the entire skulk eliminated. The warren was safe.

Tears fell as his father’s face appeared in the back of his mind. He smiled, howled a long mournful note that would travel back to the warren and pierce its tunnels, then ran. He ran as hard as his new body would take him. He had to get as far away from the warren as he could, before his memories of the rabbits were gone, and all that remained was the wolf.

# The Case of the Cat in the Rose Garden

‘The cat’s dead’ My father shouted from the garden.

We cried. I touched my brother’s face, his cheeks wet.

I carried the cat out in a little box. His tortoise shell fur still moving with the breeze, bony legs crumpled from squishing him in his final resting place. Limbs cold and stiff. It was like using one of my wooden puppets in the nursery. That made me sadder than I had felt when we found him.

We had a strange relationship, the cat and me. Estranged.

It’s not that I don’t like cats, more that the cat never particularly liked humans. Specifically, me. I do not know why. I never gave him cause, insulted him or trod on his tail accidentally.

It frustrated me I could never ask him.

Though I tried, once. Just in case he turned to me with his big yellow eyes and pointed whiskers as white as the winter snows and sharp and thin as straw, and sniffed discourteously as if I were a fool for even dare asking the obvious. Or grunt a noncommittal, ‘Well if you even have to ask…’

Which was what I read in his face when I asked him, at night when we were alone in my room. He had been sleeping on my bed all day during the balmy summer.

Now I wish he had given me an answer.

He did not deserve such a death; alone among the bed of roses and fur damp from the rains. My father stomped around, the black waxed hairs of his moustache dancing across his upper lip like a worm, unable to show his anger.

He liked the cat more than he would admit, retiring to his study muttering some excuse about an investigation. I could tell his face was wet too.

No one else had taken it upon themselves to bury the cat, I found him soon after still lying limp on the conservatory table. I tutted and carried him here, to the stream at the very edge of our grounds.

I knew he liked it here, the cat. I did too. I would come to write, and draw leaves, and bugs if they didn’t run away. Before burying him by the trickling water I tried to shut his mouth, still open a crack and flashing his sharp teeth.

A few were yellowed now in his middle age, but still young and healthy. The cat had never been sick. The fur around the edge of his mouth looked different, discoloured. I peered as close as I dared and pulled the mouth down, revealing his gums. They were an unhealthy, dark shade of bruised black red.

After burying him in the soft dirt in his box, piling stones on top to mark his grave and the animals from digging up his bones for a snack, I marched back to our house and was called to supper.

When I came downstairs and greeted the strangers politely by curtsying, ignoring the far too interested gaze of one of the older men, I felt the mood shift towards a gentleman in a long black coat, smoking a large yellow pipe in a leather armchair. He had pale blonde hair and was younger than I thought. My father motioned to him proudly.

‘This is Inspector Spicer, Millicent. I telegrammed for his presence immediately.’

‘What are you here to inspect, Inspector Spicer?’ I said, quite fairly I thought. Though it still ruminated numerous rumblings of chortling from the rest of the adults behind me. I kept my gaze on the man, still puffing idly in my father’s favourite chair, barely paying me any regard.

‘Your dead pet, my dear. How old are you?’ Spicer said, raising himself from the grip of the leather with a crunch. I was eleven but I refused to answer him. He inhaled the last remnants of his smoke and exhaled it around himself, snorting it back through flaring nostrils.

‘I am terribly sorry for your loss.’ He said, blankly with a smooth and velvety voice that did not fit his bony and boyish face at all.

‘I will find out first.’ I said to him. Spicer guffawed, his cheeks puffing like a fish. His cold and pale skin gripped my hand gently. His touch was like a girl’s as he leaned down to me, close enough to kiss. I refused to recoil, my cheeks burning.

‘Bless you.’ He said, smirking.

I let go and marched out of the room, a mixture of laughter, confusion, and reprimands from my mother following my exit.

I knew exactly what happened. The cat was poisoned. It could have been an accident, but I knew him better than that.

The cat was a smart thing, far more sensible and possessed with more brains than all the stupid girls I was forced to attend school lessons with at the Burkham Plantation. He would never eat something dangerous.

I passed one of the servants dashing about the corridor, carrying sheets and blankets to the guest room. They were fixing it up for the Inspector, she told me.

My parent’s room was next door. It was locked as usual, but I’d learned to pick the old metal network inside before. It was easy. The setting sun trickled through the white net curtains, waving at me in the wind as I entered. It was as still and immovable as their room usually was, my parents being very practical and rigid people. But it felt off.

I checked the window sill, faint muddy paw prints etched against the wooden surface. The cat had snuck in here too then, just like I had. He must have climbed up the tall rose trees, their crooked ashen branches perfect for a cat’s claws.

I followed the paw prints and turned my gaze to the bedside table, the glass bottle of milk my father liked to drink, to help him sleep. The lid was off, its stopper resting by its side.

Flecks of milk were still resting on its surface. I picked it up and sniffed the bottle.

I returned to the dining room in the midst of adult chatter. Inspector Spicer was sat opposite me, munching on some bread idly. He pointed at me with the crust, grinning like he was possessed by a feline creature himself.

‘I’ve thought about your little proposal, young Millicent, and I will accept your challenge.’ He said with a patronising gusto. I left a pause and nodded firmly, extending my hand again across the steaming pile of food on the table, just above the spiced bird glazed with sticky honey and fat.

‘I accept. But the loser has to leave the house, forever. And give the other an item of their clothing.’

Spicer paused at this, an eyebrow keenly raised. He was interested, his sharp jaw masticating on his bread as hungrily as his green eyes peered at me. My father coughed awkwardly and my mother hissed under her breath at my forwardness.

‘Very well then.’ The inspector shook my hand. ‘You drive a hard bargain, young Millicent.’ He said, guffawing again with the fellow guests.

I waited for the laughter to die down, and turned to my father.

‘I have solved the case, papa. The cat was poisoned with One-Eyed Poppy Juice. It’s the same colour as milk. The milk the cat drank from the lid of your bottle by your bedside. The one laced with poison. I gave a drop to the maid to test it. She’s in the bathroom being sick now.’

A random lady gave a start of horror, a delicate hand to her chest. My father tried to interrupt. I cut him off his stammering.

‘I presumed you must have given him milk from there before, otherwise he wouldn’t have known to have looked for it.’ I said, watching him snap his mouth shut and nod slightly, sadly. ‘So the Inspector Spicer poisoned your milk, papa. Though I am not sure what he would gain from that.’ I said, unaware of the guests glancing to my mother’s shocked figure at the head of the table.

‘You telegrammed him but a few hours ago, and yet he arrived even before the message would have been sent. There was a fire in town at the Royal Office, it was reported in the Daily Royal Newspaper. Therefore Inspector Spicer killed our cat.’

I picked up my knife and fork and cut into my bird, letting the gravy drip down the utensil. I was famished. The blonde man’s jaw was drooped, aghast and stammering with burning cheeks as my father glared at him, the guests fumbling with themselves awkwardly. I popped a wodge of food in my mouth and chewed happily. It was delicious.

‘Oh. I would like your coat please Inspector Spicer. It will suit me nicely in the winter’ I said, between mouthfuls.

‘And don’t ever come back.’

# Ominous Things

Tanon didn’t care for Alchemists. They were arrogant, secretive, and in his opinion, batshit crazy. But he mostly didn’t like them because they knew too damn much about things he didn’t, and for all his skepticism, he’d seen them accomplish things even he couldn’t explain. So while he stood there in the dark, dusty room, watching the crooked old creature pour over pyramids of worn out tomes, making those terrible eldritch sighs he always made, Tanon couldn’t help but smirk and shudder at the same time.

“You’re late,” the man barked, eyes glued to the clutter sprawled upon one of his many ancient desks.

Tanon cringed. That *voice*. “Been a while, Vekrys.”

Vekrys shifted his attention to an immense chalkboard, adding new members to intricate clusters of numbers, letters and arcane symbols.

“Not long enough in your opinion,” Vekrys said. It wasn’t a question.

Tanon frowned. Vekrys had a nasty penchant for saying whatever Tanon was thinking at the time, another reason Tanon didn’t relish these encounters.

“Well?” Vekrys said. “Out with it. You can see I’m very busy.”

“As compared to all those times when you’re not?”

“A scientist’s work is never done,” Vekrys mused. “To make knowledge your life’s pursuit is to accept that your life’s pursuit will never be fully realized.”

Tanon snickered. “You’re a ‘scientist’ now? What would the Tevichi Scholars say?”

“*The Tevichi Scholars*,” Vekrys scoffed, turning to him. “Bureaucratic frauds too prideful to admit they’re only playing at science. Too afraid to ask the *important* questions, to take the necessary steps to true *enlightenment*.”

Tanon’s skin always crawled at the sight of the decrepit man’s face. It was as wrinkled and leathery as his books, his teeth as yellow as the pages within. His pale eyes seemed to look deeper into Tanon than any ordinary man. Tanon’s hand was resting on the grip of his holstered pistol before he realized it.

The Alchemist noticed, and smiled. “The law has nothing to fear here. Why have you come?”

Tanon feigned nonchalance, turning to a shelf packed with obscure contrivances. He could feel Vekrys’s gaze. “The Chancellor of Olsanth is dead.”

Vekrys turned back to his work. “Shame. Heard he was a true ‘champion of the people’. I’m sure he will be missed greatly.”

“Even by you?” Tanon said. “The Chancellor hated Alchemists.”

“Politicians have always used religious dogma to further their careers,” Vekrys said. “He’s not the first to associate Alchemy with blasphemy. He won’t be the last.”

“He was murdered,” Tanon said.

Vekrys stopped writing. “Tragic.”

“Thought you could shed some light.”

Vekrys eyed Tanon contemplatively. “Do you know why I offer my services to you and no other Badgemen?”

Tanon shrugged. “Because I’m so delightfully agreeable?”

“You’ve seen the darkness,” Vekrys said. “You’ve seen war. Famine. Corruption. You know what men are capable of. What they’ll do to hide it. We have that in common.”

“And I *pay*,” Tanon said, dropping a leather purse on a stool with a bitter thump.

Vekrys smiled. “And you pay. But I must say I’m surprised you’d come to me concerning this matter. Olsanth is practically on the border, much farther than any man my age could travel. I’m not sure what help I’d provide.”

Tanon procured an ornate bronze syringe from his coat pocket. He tossed it to Vekrys, who snatched it with surprising dexterity, running his fingers tenderly over its entirety. He sniffed the needle and grimaced. “Where did you get this?”

“Next to the Chancellor’s body,” Tanon said. “Thought you might have some idea what it contained. I’m pretty familiar with most poisons. This one I can’t place.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Vekrys murmured. “Few men could identify this particular elixir. Even fewer could manufacture it I daresay”

“What is it?”

Vekrys crept to a shelf and grabbed a small, wooden chest that appeared as antique as him. He stationed himself at a desk littered with countless apparatus. Funnels and tubes criss-crossed over beakers and burners. Fluids dripped and gurgled. He went to work, opening the chest and removing several unrecognizable substances. He mixed them meticulously into a mortar and crushed them until they resolved into a deep red powder. He then added the powder to a solution and heated it over a flame placed directly beneath a complicated web of glass tubing. The flame made it rise and travel through the tubes like a serpent, hissing violently as it went.

“Wanna tell me what you’re doing?” Tanon asked.

“I have good news,” Vekrys said, eyeing the passage of the liquid through his instruments and into a vial. “Your Chancellor isn’t dead.”

Tanon snorted. “That’s very interesting, seeing as I saw the body myself. No pulse, icy skin, empty eyes. If he’s not dead he’s a damn good actor.”

“The miraculous effect of that syringe’s contents,” Vekrys said. “The Chancellor’s body is a corpse yes, but his *mind*, his *consciousness*, those I assure you are still very much alive. They are simply elsewhere at the moment.”

“Uh-huh. Where might that be?”

“Hard question to answer. There’s no literal name. It's a place that goes beyond our full comprehension. We can only theorize as to its true nature. All we know for certain is that it exists.”

Vekrys’s concoction was complete. He reached back into the chest and removed an object unlike anything Tanon had ever seen. It was an elaborate device comprised of both stone and metal. Cogs ran between sets of golden rings which surrounded a

plum-sized orb of black marble. A myriad of symbols and measurements were etched upon each ring. He set it down carefully and took the now filled vial in his hands.

“And with the right tools,” he continued, “one may interact with it.”

Tanon’s muscles tensed. “How could that be possible? And if you say ‘magic’ I’m going to find the most expensive-looking thing here and drop it.”

Vekrys simpered. “*Magic*. Such a misguided word. To call something magic is to assume there’s no explanation for it, no mechanics to illuminate how or why it is. But everything has an explanation. Some are merely unexposed.”

“Why not just kill him? What good is it to remove his consciousness?”

Vekrys looked down. “Only an Alchemist could create that substance,” he said. “But an Alchemist would know that. They’d also know that any Alchemist worth their weight could identify it. To leave that syringe would be foolish, nonetheless careless. Whoever placed the Chancellor in his current state either wanted that syringe to be found or, more likely, was unable to finish their work and wanted you on the wrong trail.”

“Finish their work?”

Vekrys frowned. “It is the theory of some that if a person’s consciousness can be removed from their body, it stands to reason that one may replace it with another, thereby controlling the body.” He met Tanon’s eyes. “Can you think of anyone who might stand to gain from controlling the body of a man like our beloved Chancellor?”

Tanon’s heart skipped. *Plenty*. “But if not an Alchemist, then who?”

“Intriguing question.” Vekrys held the vial towards Tanon. “Perhaps you’d like to ask him.”

“Who?”

Vekrys raised his eyebrows. “The Chancellor.”

Tanon stared at the vial and frowned.

“Don’t fear my friend,” Vekrys said. “Ominous things tend to have ominous traits, but I have no wish to kill you, though your body is a fine specimen. If you should die in your prime, I’m sure there are several ways I could put it to good use.”

Tanon hesitated, then took the vial. “Not today I think.” He drank.

The reaction was instant. His tasted ash and smelled decay. His vision blurred and the room went quiet. The device on the table suddenly came to life. The rings rotated around the orb, humming vigorously, as if the device had sensed that Tanon drank the liquid, and was excited.

Tanon gagged, clutching his throat. “*What have you done to me*?”

Vekrys smiled his wraithlike smile. “I’ve enlightened you.” He gestured towards the device.

Tanon approached it. The orb glowed vibrantly despite its pitch-black hue, beautiful and menacing. It drew him in.

“Call to him,” Vekrys instructed. “Not with your voice. Don’t take your eyes off the orb.”

Tanon stared deeper into the orb’s light. The slightest sound crept into his mind. The room slowly faded until there was nothing but him and the light, that luscious, incandescent light. The sound became whispers, too numerous and distant to decipher. Tanon gazed deeper. The whispers grew in number and volume. They became voices, then cries, then screams, a haunting cacophony that filled Tanon with an overwhelming dread. They grew relentlessly until Tanon thought his head might burst. The orb shone brighter than ever, then went out completely. The voices dissipated and Tanon was left in darkness and silence that lasted a lifetime. Then a single voice called out from the void, clear and distinct.

Tanon recognized the voice immediately as the Chancellor’s, and his skepticism was put to the test once again.

# The Cabinet of Mal Zabir

This time, the students were birds, which was why iron rods barred the ceiling window of the lecture hall. Professor Stark told them about one eighth-form boy that left the window open as a joke, and an entire class of sixth-formers flew off, never to be seen again.

Birds today - white potions smelling of feathers and rain - dogs last week. That first transformation had been a wild mess as the class tried to understand how to hold on to their human minds. But they’d learned, and now most of them calmly perched on the rafters.

Nothing in magic is as cool as this, Brand thought, folding his wings and coming to rest on a beam. One little potion and you were a dog, an eagle, or... anything you had a potion for. So far, they’d learned to mix the potions and most could resist the instincts surging in their transformed bodies, but they’d no idea how it all worked. “You’re not ready for that yet” were Brand’s absolute least favorite words.

And some students *weren't* ready. A sparrow-girl was flitting carelessly through the air until a hawk-boy dropped onto her unprotected back, talons wide. Suddenly, an explosive clap shook the room, and green smoke filled every corner. Nineteen students dropped to the floor, enchantments stripped away like mist before the sun. Professor Stark pulled the hawk-boy off the girl, Mathia, the best student in the whole sixth form.

"Shame on you! Control yourself!" Stark shook him hard, until his eyes focused. Then she rounded on Mathia. "And you! You may know books, but if you cannot master the effects of a potion, you've learned nothing!"

Brand looked down on his classmates from the rafters. He'd inhaled just the smallest bit of the green smoke that broke the enchantments, and found he could balance between human and bird. He let it go, dropping softly to the floor while the Professor droned on and on.

He patted a vial in the pocket of his robe, where he’d saved back enough eagle potion to practice on his own.

........

The next day, hawk-boy was gone. They'd packed his bags in the middle of the night, and sent him off on the morning ferry, back to home and normal life. Mathia was dropped back eight places, to an embarrassing middle desk - right next to Brand’s.

It was Thursday - Philosophy and Origins of Magic, which was usually long on philosophy and short on origins. Brand’s mind wandered, until he glanced at Mathia. Her mouth was open and her eyes were riveted on Professor Stark. If Mathia was learning something new, maybe Brand should pay attention.

"In tranformations, what is the source of each creature, each thing we become?" That’s easy, thought Brand. Each potion was based on ingredients. They were the source. "This term, you've been learning the secret name for each powder, each tincture, each extract. But the names of each, while extremely important, and you must memorize, memorize, memorize - these names aren’t the things themselves."

“Indeed, they are not,” said an accented voice at the classroom door. Nineteen heads swiveled to see a stick-like old man ducking his head through the doorway. "A name is not the thing itself.” Brand craned to see over the front row of students, who were half standing in their chairs to get a better look. "Think of meat," continued the stranger. “Do we call it flesh? or muscle? No! Pig becomes pork. Cow linguistically transforms into beef. It all sounds so much... cleaner.”

Professor Stark interrupted. "Class, please greet your instructor for today, the honorable Mal Zabir." She gave the man her best glare. "Master Zabir, do try not to give my students nightmares.”

Mal Zabir continued as though she hadn't spoken. "*Coripanish* has an exotic sound, does it not? But that is only because it is ancient Lemurian. Our modern tongue would render it as - extract of house cat."

"Gross!" sang the students, except for Brand and Mathia.

"Yesterday, when you were flitting about in the air, were you thinking where the *gentabus* powder came from for making starling potions? Or the *arginish* for an owl?” Mal Zabir crooked a finger, and two slyly grinning eighth-formers carried in a tall cupboard bound with metal chains and padlocks. He spoke a single Word of power, and the chains clanked to the floor in a heap. "Today you will learn the true source of transformational potions.” He spread the cupboard doors wide.

Inside, rows of tiny wooden drawers framed a little worktable covered with strange apparatus. A glass cylinder was suspended from a metal arm attached to the back of the cabinet. Its surface was steamed with condensation, but something moved inside, scrabbling at the glass with tiny claws.

"Behold the common grey squirrel!" Mal Zabir flipped a switch on the worktable, and a current of power entered the glass. The squirrel began to scream. "*Parsivirex*,” said Mal Zabor over the noise. “What a lovely word for extract of squirrel." The power rose and rose to a high pitch, until with a gruesome pop, the squirrel exploded in red blood and grey hair, painting the inside of the cylinder.

The class erupted, and one student at the front was ill. Brand studied the cabinet. There were so many drawers, and some were secured with tiny, brass locks. Mathia caught his eye, and for the first time in a long while, Brand felt a connection with a fellow student.

.....

"If they don't want us to break into things," said Brand, "they shouldn't teach us acids." He blew away the last of the acrid smoke and swung open the doors of Mal Zabir's cupboard. "Told you it wouldn't take long."

"I could have used a spell," said Mathia.

"And woken half the teachers. They've got alarms for spell-casting, remember.”

They studied the opened cabinet in the dim light from a shuttered lamp. The apparatus and its awful results had been removed, but what interested Brand were the twenty brass-locked drawers, each labeled in faded blue ink.

"*Madon Caraginan*," read Mathia, sounding out the Lemurian letters on one label.

"What's that?"

"Who. Caraginan means warrior. Madon means sword.”

Mathia spent every spare hour reading. Brand only needed to hear something once, so he never bothered with books. "So, *Madon Caraginan* is a sword warrior?"

"A swordsman."

Brand slid a metal rod through the thin hasp of the lock.

“Don’t!” cried Mathia, but he yanked down and broke off the lock with a tiny ping. Brand still couldn't believe Mathia had gone along with this. And now, she was like always - no fun at all. He pulled open the drawer and slid out a vial of silver fluid.

"Essence of swordsman," he said, grinning.

"That can't be right," protested Mathia. "They wouldn’t do that to a person."

"They did it to the squirrel." Brand tried to picture it. They must have human-sized vessels for denaturing people into meat, and bone, and spirit. "Pick another," he said.

“You should stop,” said Mathia, but Brand just glared at her. She sighed, then carefully counted over three drawers and up two. "*Kanath Magdath*," she read quietly. "Black sorcerer."

"Oh, yes," breathed Brand. He popped the lock, and drew out a black vial that froze his fingers one moment and burned them the next. "And they give us bird potions and puppies." He held it up to the light.

“Don't take that,” said Mathia.

"No," said a voice from a dark corner. “No, young Brand certainly should not take what is not his.” Mal Zabir stepped out of the shadows. "Give up the potion, boy. It is not for you.”

Brand gulped and stepped back. “We just want to know,” he complained. "They never teach us everything. We want to learn!"

"You'll learn nothing more from this school," said Professor Stark, striding into the room. "Very good, Mathia. There's one like him in every class. Master Zabir flushes them out every time." Mathia gave Brand a look filled with apology and moved away. Professor Stark stepped forward.

Brand snatched a vial from his robe and shattered it on the floor. Brown gas bloomed up in a thick cloud. He looked up to the barred window, and shouted the Word of unlocking he’d heard that morning from Mal Zabir.

"He's getting away!" coughed Mathia.

Brand swallowed the last of his bird potion, spread his powerful wings and arrowed through the portal.

"Let him go," said Mal Zabir. "I am certain he will not get far. Those labels are not real. That black potion he stole? You know your Lemurian, young lady. How would you translate *ghal kordathish*?"

Mathia puzzled it through. "Essence of... granite?"

“Oh, quite," laughed Mal Zabir. “And one cannot change back from stone. Such an eager boy. We will look for him in the morning."

On the ledge outside the window, an eagle-boy listened briefly, then launched himself into the wide, wild dark.

# The Last Ingredient

A little bell peels in the air somewhere, comes muffled to our ears and makes me smile. It is proof that time still flows, that soon we'll return indoors, where breathing through your nose doesn't trigger a gagging reflex.

"Rachar, do you think the weather was a selling point when they decided to build our prison here?" I ask, panting.

"Totally. I can see the ad, 'atmosphere of the 6th circle of Hell, hot, humid, and thick as pudding.'"

I stare up at the ever shifting pattern of lush and exotic leaves, criss-crossing above our heads in a breeze we can see but never quite feel. Rachar, halfway through his thirty years sentence, jest as he might, is much more acclimatised than I ever wish to become.

"Don't you need my help for gathering more ingredients, Ira? I quite enjoy the rush of danger from those errands."

"No. No more errands," I say, "I only need one last ingredient, and..." I make a fluttering motion with my hand, mimic myself flying away. Free. "Soon now."

This news makes my friend stir and sit up. After three years of secretly brewing this potion, he must have thought me all talk.

"What is it, this last ingredient?"

I make a face up at him, peering into the eyes smouldering behind his own little jungle of tangled hair.

"It's something I'm not sure I can get."

"For real? But you've been so keen on escaping this whole time... Well, maybe it's for the best. Considered what they'd do to you if they catch you. I kinda like you, you know. I'd rather not see *that* done to you. No one gets out of here unless their time is up."

I don't know if it's respect or pity I feel surging in me when he speaks like this, him who won't rebel, won't try to escape. Who sits day after day in this green hell of a place, knowing there will be endless tomorrows made of the same infernal heat, the same corrosive dullness, the same absence of freedom.

Making it out doesn't even matter. Trying is my only way to remain sane. I can't relate to his defeatism and meek acceptance. Not that it's easy to ever relate to Rachar, who was done in for running the biggest, most lethal cartel of drugs for were-animals Europe had ever seen, and killing, in his werebear form, five of the special-ops werewolves that were sent to arrest him. A sleek piece of remorseless trash, though a decent fellow one-on-one.

"Ira, you're growling."

"Sorry, mind wandered."

Rachar laughs, pats my hair with a hand monstrous enough to crush my skull in a squeeze. "Think of the future. When you finish brewing that potion of yours and pull a Shawshank over the eyes of Erikson and the crew."

"Don't go talking so loud, naming names and mentioning potions!" I sit up, unnerved. "The break is almost over."

"Ease up Ira, I'd know if anyone were around. I wouldn't let them lock you down with the bloodies either."

"Aye, like you could help it if they decided to."

Which is not the real problem. To determine the strength of new inmate magi, the prison's surgeons test the glands that secrete magica, always found in the armpits and throat. That test labelled me as a mere C-class magus, hardly a trouble to handle here.

In comparison, A-class magi, like blood witches, are near impossible to catch alive. Meaning the handful of them we have in the basement make my werebear-druglord friend look like a philanthropist. They're kept with their hands in wet casts so they can't sharpen spelling tools, their teeth in moulds to keep them from biting themselves bloody.

Not enviable.

But people like me, with a little known organ tucked away behind the stomach, who can brew potions in their own bodies–potion being the romantic name for a magical bile–are extremely rare, and impossible to safely detain. A-class treatment wouldn't cut it. So long as I'm fed, I can always brew something annoying or even lethal to my handlers.

S-class, maybe? As in Straight-to-firing-squad-class.

"Surely Erikson wouldn't let them take you away. The man is fond of you."

"Brewers are thought extinct since the mid 20th century. They'd probably dissect me, Rachar. Officers would not care for my being some guardian's pet prisoner."

"Eurk–well, I won't talk so... What's that last ingredient anyway?" His hand flies up before I can answer. "Speaking of the Devil," he mutters.

"Rachar, Ira, you two deaf? Didn't hear the second bell?"

The Devil indeed.

"Ah, Erikson. We were busy exchanging news, so much has happened since yesterday after all."

"You crazies shouldn't even be allowed to meet."

"Crazy? Nonsense, I'm a lamb."

"And I'm perfectly conscious of my actions."

"That just makes you a horrible person, Rachar."

Back in the cool bliss of air-con, I nod to him, a discrete salute I mean as an adieu, his looks are worried, but he tips me an invisible hat before turning away. So long, crazy friend.

Up the stairs now, and following Erikson. Like every evening, my aisle is a mess of supernatural creatures and their supernatural gaolers, but I only have eyes for mine.

Erikson. I watch his blond head, his shoulders shifting under his miraculously crisp white shirt–what spell does the man use to keep them dry, I still wonder.

By habit, I match his steps. Hateful habit, that makes my face relax, almost smile for him when he looks my way. Too long he's been my mindful captor. The man answering my calls, opening my door. The hand feeding me, the hand swiping me little things, when no one watches. He's a decent guy under the rough persona one needs to work in this jail, and I'm neck deep in Stockholm syndrome.

Erickson, for three years blind to my careful plotting. I hid it all from him, always playing the nice, reasonable lass, caught up in troubles bigger than her. Not the weirdo woman bargaining favours at every turn to obtain samples of hair, skin, blood, fabrics, spices... Stealing food, making some rot, pre-digesting others for the desired effects. Anything that might contain the ingredients my gut craves to continue its infernal distillation.

Behind his broad back I've licked the walls of my cell, scratching my tongue over the lead paint till I nearly poisoned myself. It's an organic, messy trade.

For three years I've brewed this concoction. Haltingly, with no known recipe, brought forth by my instinct and my need to escape, disappear, melt through walls–any will do so long as I get far away. Where Erikson won't be tearing at my mind, brushing my heart with the very fingers that turn the key in the lock of my cage.

"Ira, you're growling."

"Funny, that's the second time I've been told today." I pace down my little cell and back up to him.

"What is making you so tense?" he asks, leaning against the bars to talk with me.

Erikson. My last ingredient.

"Some internal turmoil over something I need but struggle to obtain."

"That's the point of jails."

"Aye, but smuggling doesn't usually get a magus in jail."

"You were smuggling human flesh!"

I shrug, give him a sad grin. "How would I have known? It was spelled."

He smiles back at me, a show of dimples. "Save it for the judges. Your appeal won't be delayed forever."

Erikson, who believes me when I lie.

I step closer, curl my fingers around the cold steel bars. Looking up at him, I whisper, "will you miss me, when I'm gone?"

He frowns.

Is it hatred, or love, festering in my pounding chest, that makes me flush and quiver as I wait for his answer?

"I'd like that; missing you. If it means you're acquitted."

The idea of missing him makes my mind trip over itself.

"I think I'd miss you too," I surprise myself saying, "but I don't think I'd like that at all."

I dive in the grey pools of his eyes, so close, like full moons pulling at the tides of my emotions. Erikson murmurs my name like a warning, but doesn't move. I'm on the tip of my toes and my fingers rubbing against the wondrous white shirt and the warm flesh behind it.

His breath smells like mints and beer and magica. His lips are hot, firm but hesitant, like a cliched first kiss. His fingers are trailing my jaws, scorching my skin.

In one strong bite his blood comes gushing into my mouth. He cries, rending my heart–part free woman, part betrayer. I swallow my feelings along with coppery blood. There is a burning sensation in my guts as the last ingredient creates a chain reaction.

The world dissipates in clouds of matter around me. Erikson's hands reach out but pass right through me. Through my victorious smile and my farewell nod like through a gentle wind.

I'm immaterial.

I'm free.

# The True Origins of Bjord the Commanding, Washer of Sheets, Undisputed Ruler of Absenthia

*"Psst."*

"What?"

*"Pssssst."*

"You don't have to *psst* me, Neesh. There's no one here, and I can see you just fine."

"Just keep your voice down."

"The library's empty. I've checked."

"You can't be too careful."

"*You* can't be too careful. I don't even know why I'm here."

"I did it."

"Did what? Why couldn't this wait until morning?"

"I've mixed the potion, Artur! The Potion of Command Galidor mentioned in his historical journals."

"You did not."

"It's right here."

"Let me see that!"

"Well? Look at it!"

"Sure, this looks like a potion, Neesh. So do all the flasks we mixed last week."

"It's not a potion. It's *the* potion. Don't ask me what I had to go through to get my hands on a Yuk-Yuk's heart."

"What did you have to go through to get your hands on—?"

"I told you not to ask!"

"It probably wasn't even a real Yuk-Yuk. Old King Harold killed all the Yuk-Yuks, after his son's nose fell off. Every noble in Absenthia assumed he was snorting faerie dust."

"Look, I have it on extremely good authority that it was a Yuk-Yuk ... I mean, the flying possum from which the heart was cut ... and the instructions said that adding it would create a poof of green smoke that smelled specifically of mint and goat."

"I think one of those smells will overpower the other."

"Not for a nose like mine. The smoke was green, a nice poof of it, and the smell was minty goat."

"When have you ever spelled a minty goat?"

"The weight's just right, too. I checked it against the figures Galidor left in his journals."

"Did you remember to add a half-crown for the weight of the flask?"

"Of course I remembered the half-crown. I'm not an idiot."

"Well, you did tell Alchemaster Palu that the difference between a Potion of Short Flight and Long Flight was the length of the feather you ground—"

"That was an honest mistake! And besides, you mixed up green sand and red in reagents class."

"That's because I'm colorblind, you insensitive dolt."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Artur. I just don't like it when you belittle me. Alchemaster Tonjold always belittles me, and you know what he thinks about smallfolk becoming alchemasters."

"Look, Tonjold's an old prick, and I'm not belittling you, Neesh. I'm just being realistic. I just don't think anyone is ever going to be able to replicate Galidor's Potion of Command."

"But I just did."

"Well, if you think so, how do you plan to test it?"

"That's why you're here."

"Oh, no."

"I'm going to drink the potion, and then I'm going to tell you to do something. If you do it—"

"Absolutely not happening."

"—then we'll know the potion works!"

"What were you going to tell me to do?"

"I don't know, um ... hop on one leg, maybe?"

"How would you know I'm not just messing with you?"

"Because you wouldn't do that! How long have we known each other, Artur?"

"Too long. Far too long."

"I know you wouldn't mess with me like that. You're nothing if not brutally honest."

"Well, I suppose that's true."

"So, stand right there, and I'll—"

"Stop!"

"Hey, let go!"

"You can't just drink it, you dolt. What if you got the formula wrong?"

"I didn’t."

"You could end up attracting slugs, or turn into a purple mushroom and migrate spores all over the library, like that second year that ground up a tree frog."

"There's no tree frogs in this potion."

"Or you could end up burping crickets."

"Name one time that's happened."

"Potions Exhibition, last year. Dilution training, four months ago. Smell control, last—"

"Name one time recently."

"All I'm saying is, if you really think this does what it does, we should test it first. On someone else."

"Oh. Well ... let's think. Who do we know who's stupid enough to drink a potion without asking what it is?"

"We're at a school of potion makers, Neesh. The stupid ones never make it through the first year."

"Haha, true. Oh hey, do you remember that long-nosed guy from Estonir, the one with the ponytail? What was his name?"

"Lejo something."

"Lejori?"

"Yes, Lejori. That's the first and last time I've ever seen anyone projectile vomit their own tongue."

"Okay, fine, let's say we do it your way. We still need someone who's not part of the school."

"A mundane?"

"Why not? We'll just tell them it's a love potion or something."

"Love potions are illegal, and if he reports us—"

"He won't report us, Artur. They don't even let mundanes in the guild anymore, not since the last peasant uprising. Steward Snodgrass had to order eight-dozen new vials from the Illusion Embassy."

"Didn't they get into the reserves as well? Some rumor about strength potions they could use to bash through the king's guards?"

"Honestly, I think that's where all the new statues in the hedge maze came from."

"All right, so, we'll go find a mundane. But we're not going to tell them it's a love potion. Maybe a truth potion, instead."

"Ha! That's a bit ironic, isn't it?"

"Not if you know what that word means."

"I like this plan. I like it a lot. So, first thing tomorrow?"

"Yes. Fine. But we should only offer the mundane a single drop. Assuming Galidor's old journals aren't all donkey scat, a single drop should give him the power of command for ... ten minutes, tops."

"Say, um ... what if he commands us to give him more?"

"That's why we take a dropper, with one drop, and hide the rest of the potion in your room."

"Ooh, good idea."

"Mix up a bit of ForgetMeSo. We'll both take a drop before we leave tomorrow. That way, neither of us will know where the potion is, so even if he commands us to give it to him, we won't be able to. "

"But ... how will we find it again?"

"When the ForgetMeSo wears off. Assuming you mix it right, that's less than a day."

"Oh, good idea! That's why I always call you, Artur. You have all the good ideas."

"Well, Seven forbid, if you have managed to somehow replicate Galidor's Potion of Command, you'll be the one with all the good ideas, Neesh. They'll promote you to alchemaster for sure."

"Gosh, you really think so?"

"They promoted Bujor, and all he did was turn the Potion Master's cat into a slightly larger cat."

"Alchemixed milk, wasn't it?"

"He's lucky the cat didn't explode."

"Okay. I'll hide the potion tonight. Tomorrow, we prove it works, and tomorrow afternoon—"

"Alchemaster Neesh becomes the new head of the Galidor Restoration Project!"

"With his new Steward of Potions, of course, Artur Rainwater."

"I like the sound of Steward Rainwater. He sounds very rich."

"I could be Galidor, Artur! They could speak of me like Galidor someday!"

"Just remember to hide the potion better than the Potion of Flatulence you mixed last year, for Jester's Day. Old Bjord always turns down the bunks. If he turns down your bunk—"

"Seven take me, I couldn't go in the dorms for a week after that! But he won't find it."

"He'll drink anything he sees, Neesh. It's a compulsion he's had since he mixed up the ingredients in his Dietary Elixir. That's why they demoted him the Dorm Master."

"Head sheet washer, you mean. I still don't see why they don't just fire him."

"Honestly, how do you pass anything? He's the last member of Galidor's tenure track."

"Tenure track?"

"That's why you become an alchemaster, Neesh! So you get tenure. So no one can ever fire you."

"Oh, right."

"No one can fire Bjord even if he lacks the wits the Seven gave a caterpillar, which is why they have him turning down bunks."

"He won't find it. Besides, we'll be back before turn down."

"Just don't hide it in your bunk."

"I told you, Artur, I'm not an idiot!"

"I know. I know you're not an idiot, Neesh. I'm with you."

"Really?"

"We're doing this. We're going to be the toast of the Absenthia, thanks to your alchemical brilliance, and my political brilliance."

"But mostly my brilliance?"

"Whatever you want to put on the wall."

"Seven take me, Artur, we'll be famous!"

"And rich, remember, but only if your potion works."

"It'll work! I know it'll work!"

"Well I suppose we'll see tomorrow, won't we?"

THE END

# Ingredients needed

Starn reached into a round hollow in the tree trunk and felt around. Post. He pulled out the parchment. It read:

For the attention of Starn, Hero of the siege of Arkan, Ranger General of Yunkar (Disgraced).

The resident apothecary at Castle Seaview requires the following:

One Owl (plucked and roasted over wood);

A lock of red hair;

Harnriss penis (extracted whilst the creature still lives);

Meet me at the docks when the moon is full for the final ingredient.

This job should suit your considerable skills, friend. I don't care how you get the ingredients but before you have any moral qualms, remember it was your little mistake that got you discharged from the Imperial Rangers. Your wife and children Starn. You need the gold to keep a roof after their heads. You have two weeks until the full moon. Apparently some fat noble has a problem with getting his cock to work and needs the potion for his wedding night. Don't be late or you won't get paid.

Good luck friend,

Vish

Starn stuffed the parchment into a pocket inside his cloak and started to walk further into the forest.

\*\*\*

Starn slathered mud from a fetid puddle on his face and wondered how he had gone from commanding the Emperor's Rangers to trying to poach an owl in the said Emperor's private hunting forest. He wiped the excess grime onto his trousers and strung his bow as the forest devoured the last of the sunlight. Bow strung, Starn sat and listened for the call of an owl. *I am such an idiot. Why did I do it?* His musings were interrupted by a distant hoot, which he preceded to follow. He stalked though the ancient trees following the owl's call until he reached the edge of the forest. The owl would return from the open fields and back to the forest. Starn had gambled it would return the same way it left. Starn watched the moon move across the night sky until the distinctive silhouette of a large grey owl glided across his vision. He smoothly aimed his bow, calculated the required power and angle, then released the bowstring. The owl screeched as the arrow slammed into its body. It's once noble and graceful form tumbled inelegantly to the ground. Starn couldn't help feeling some empathy with the creature.

\*\*\*

Starn threw the owl carcass on the kitchen table.

"I found some work Neave."

His wife fixed him with the same empty glare he had been greeted with everyday since the incident.

"I need this plucked and roasted over wood. It's for the apothecary. Where are the children?"

She gestured toward the stairs.

"Asleep"

She turned away and carried on cleaning a large pot.

"Look I am trying my best here. I know I made a mistake but..."

Neave interrupted his protestations.

"I don't want your self pity. I want gold to feed the children. Since you ... did what you did ... there's not been much of that around. So go and kiss your children goodnight, if you can manage to stop thinking about yourself. Then I want you to go out and get some gold. A dead owl is not going to keep a roof over our heads".

Starn shuffled out and up the stairs to look in on his two daughters. He felt the same bottomless love he always experienced when he was with them. Only now that pure and wonderful feeling was despoiled with guilt. He gave them each a kiss on the forehead, careful not to wake them, and crept out.

"Well lieutenant, your a wonder between the sheets"

Sabine let her long red hair out of the tight bun it was bound in. Starn watched it cascade down her ivory skin until it obscured her breasts. He attempted to feel revolted by himself. He had removed a few medals from his old dress uniform and died his hair to ensure he wasn't recognised. Sabine had proved easy to charm into bed.

"Where did you learn to pleasure a women like that".

*With my wife.* He thought regretfully.

"I am going to go to the bar and get us some drinks. Make yourself comfy lover."

Sabine swept out of the room after pulling on her dress.

Starn wasted no time turning out Sabine's drawers. He rummaged until he found her hairbrush and pocketed the hair that had accumulated on it. He exited via the open window and began to climb down the back of the tavern to ground. *If only I had done this last time. No, if only I had asked her name. If only I had been a good husband*.

Haris was lot fatter and balder than when Starn had said goodbye to him after the Seige of Arkan.

"Hey Haris. It's been a while".

"Who the fuck are you? I don't associated with anybody who wears flea ridden rags. Off with you now, unless you want to fight in this 'ere arena behind me."

"Actually that's exactly what I want."

Starn placed his thumb and little finger together before extending the remain three toward his old comrade.

"I'm surprised you've forgotten how I rescued your sorry arse from the wrong side of Castle Arkan's wall when you decided to fall of".

"General...Starn. I didn't recognise you. I'm sorry sir. No one has seen you since...the incident with the High Judge's daughter." Haris reciprocated the hand signal.

"Look I don't want to talk about it. I need you to get me into the arena for the beast fights. I need to kill a Harnriss. Then I need you to get me out again. Hence why I am dressed as a down on my luck criminal. Which I pretty much am these days."

"Look Starn, I know things must be bad but what your contemplating is suicide".

"Desperate times and all that. Just like at Arkan."

"You saved a lot of people at the siege sir. I'll see what I can do."

\*\*\*

The Harnriss ripped at the throat of a hapless combatant in the arena. The man's spear kept glancing weakly off the creatures scales. The serpentine beast had five sets of short but powerful legs jutting out of its segmented body. It's jaws formed a cross shape with four sets of teeth when open and were as wide and tall as its body. Starn stood at the side of the arena as it sinuously wove around the helpless criminals in the arena, tearing them apart. It would be coming for him soon. He had read extensively about them in Ranger training but had never faced one. The last man fell, bitten in half. Starn backed up to the towering wall of the arena hoping his strategy was sound. The Harnriss kicked up a minor dust storm as it careened toward him. Starn held his ground and wedged his spear between the bottom of the arena floor and wall at an angle. The beast leapt at his throat. Starn rolled at last second. He felt teeth tear jagged slices in his arm. Then he heard the bestial howl as the creature impaled itself on his spear. He didn't have long. Knife in hand, Starn carefully approached the rear of the creature. It's thrashing reached a crescendo as the blade went up through a small hole between its legs and sliced the penis clean off in one fluid motion. Starn sprinted toward the arena gate as the poison he had coated on his blade finished the creature off.

\*\*\*

"I have the ingredients Vish. I am here for the last item and my money."

"Well done friend. You have always excelled. First in the military, now in crime. We will need some help for the final ingredient Starn."

Starn counted five heavily built men emerge from behind some shipping crates.

"Pin him down boys"

Starn stood dumbfounded as the heavies rushed him.

"What is this Vish?"

"Bring me his woman"

Two new thugs hauled Neave out of a barrel and threw her at Vish's feet.

"What have you done with my children?"

"Sold I'm afraid. To the slavers. Perhaps you can find them when this is over."

Vish grabbed Neave by the hair and slashed her throat.

"You bastard."

Tears came unbidden as the only women he had ever loved bled out on the slimy dock side. A thug grabbed him round the neck and scraped a vial up his cheek.

"The last ingredient are tears shed in grief. Thank you for those Starn. Now, don't be sad. Just think, your cock bought doom to you and yours but it did mean this miraculous cock healing potion could be brewed. I am sure the little noble will be pleased. If you boys stopped thinking through your members, then you'd all be rich like me. Bye now".

Starn crawled over to Naeve and cradled her in his arms, wondering where he could find a potion to kill a man.

# Untitled

Eye of newt

and a serpent’s tail

When the storm calls

the gods you’ll hail

The first spring’s dew

and a mushroom’s rot

Clear your mind

and burn your thoughts

A rose still green

and a moss blood red

On the thirteenth day

beg the blessings of the dead

A newborn’s tears

stolen each night

to draw the glyph

and seal the rite

To prove your desire

to the gods above

the bloody heart

of the one you love

A single taste

and your fate is sealed

the darkness inside

all wounds shall heal

free from the pain

that mortals feel

Eye of newt

and a serpent’s tail

When the storm calls

the gods you’ll hail.