Scavenger Hunt!

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, March 2017

Various Authors

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This month I want you to write about a fantastical scavenger hunt. \* Can be comedic but that's not a requirement. Would be cool to see if you'd manage to write a grimdark scavenger hunt or something similar unfitting. Be creative!

*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/(apr-2017)/(apr-2017)-scavenger-hunt-submission-thread/>

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# TANGLED SKEINS

Mother N’koi had sucked her teeth and looked at the small, twisted body lying on the purple grass in the fading light of the afternoon sun. In most respects the baby zarl had been a fine specimen: a good size, its skin a healthy grey, with a strong neck and... well, that had been the problem, really. It had *two* strong necks, and a head atop each of them. The beast hadn’t survived the birth, and its mother had been pacing nearby uttering agitated bleats.

‘Well?’ Chief Zolasta had demanded. He hadn’t been able to hide his own discomfort: for such a thing to happen to the headman’s herd was troubling indeed.

‘Has anyone moved it?’ she'd asked him.

‘No one,’ Zolasta had replied. ‘It’s as I found it.’

Mother N’koi had rubbed her chin and studied the little body, taking in the curls of the twin necks and the angles of the legs, then had retrieved a pinch of dreamdust from the zarlskin pouch that hung around her neck and inhaled it deeply. She’d needed a few seconds to blink away the dancing sparks in her vision and steady herself, then had opened her eyes fully and surveyed the ground in front of her again.

The deformed zarl calf had suddenly been at the centre of throbbing, angry threads of light, tied into a much wider tapestry that stretched across the land. The calf wasn’t the source of the problem, but it was connected to it. With her newly-enhanced vision Mother N’koi had been able to read the shape of things, to see what the gods had intended when they’d caused the unnatural beast to fall in this way, with its legs and necks arranged just so, a message left for anyone with the eyes and wit to read it…

She’d shaken her head grimly, sending her greying braids swinging, and sucked her teeth again. ‘Death comes. Untimely and unlooked for.’

‘The rains are already failing,’ Zolasta had said, trying to keep despair from his voice but not completely succeeding. ‘Now you give me this ill news?’

‘You called me here,’ Mother N’Koi had replied, glancing at him reproachfully. ‘Why call your witch if you don’t want to hear her words?’

‘You know what this means I must do,’ Zolasta had declared, his lip twitching.

‘I know what this means you *will* do,’ Mother N’Koi had sighed, turning away from the deformed calf and stumping past the headman. ‘Do not pretend the gods have left you with no alternative.’

And that was how they’d come to this, in the cold light of the next morning, with half the village assembled next to the river and Mother N’koi nursing a bastard headache from using the dreamdust the previous day. The roaring of the water wasn’t helping her aching brain one bit, either. The river was still in spate, charged with meltwater cascading down from the mountains, but Zolasta had spoken truthfully on one issue at least: the rains here *were* failing, and if that continued then, once all the snow that was going to melt had melted, the river’s water would soon no longer be enough to be diverted across the village’s fields and compensate for that. Hunger threatened, along with the stark choice that would follow: to let the village starve, or to take up weapons while the fighters still had strength and seek to raid food from elsewhere, with the inevitable danger and risk of retaliation that would come with such a decision. Death untimely and unlooked for, indeed.

It was certainly a hard choice, which was presumably why Zolasta had opted for a sacrifice instead.

She was a girl named Shirai, fourteen summers old, and a virgin by all accounts save those of herself and her father, but neither of them could name the man who had lain with her and Mother N’koi could practically smell the falsehood on their lips. It was a desperate attempt to save her from Zolasta’s blade, and Mother N’Koi couldn’t blame them for it, but all they were essentially saying was *kill another girl instead*. She sucked her teeth and hummed tunelessly to herself as young Shirai was hauled forward with tears streaming down her cheeks and her hands bound behind her, and her parents were held back. The girl wore a plain cotton shift, to further emphasise to the waiting gods her purity and innocence.

‘You are certain of what you saw?’ Zolasta muttered to Mother N’koi.

‘The threads were clear,’ she snapped. ‘Death comes. Besides, you never questioned my sight eight summers back when I said you would be our next headman.’ Her headache wasn’t improving her temper, else she might not have added that last, but Zolasta simply scowled at her and, although he drew the long chief’s knife from its sheath, she was not its intended victim. He turned away from her and walked to the bank of the river to meet Shirai, where the two men holding her arms forced her to her knees and then stepped back.

‘My people!’ Zolasta declared, raising his voice. He had the voice of a chief, deep and powerful, and had the look of one as well, with keloids marking the wounds taken in service to the village in his youth. ‘You all know the rains are failing. Now the wise Mother N’koi–’

N’koi rolled her eyes and began stuffing leaf into her pipe.

‘–has declared that death is coming, untimely and unlooked for. I will not let this happen. We will give a life to the waters, so the gods will send us water to give us life.’

There was a general murmuring amongst the assembled villagers. Mother N’koi couldn’t have said if it was agreement, or general relief that it wasn’t them kneeling before Zolasta’s blade. She checked no one was looking at her, then hurriedly sparked an ember into the bowl of her pipe with her thumb.

Threads flashed into view for a moment as she did so, and she blinked in sudden confusion as she took her first puff. That had almost looked like…

Zolasta looked down at Shirai. ‘I am sorry, child. This will be over in a moment.’

He raised his knife.

Shirai jerked her head forward and butted him in the crotch as hard as she could.

Zolasta let out a strangled yelp and bent double, the knife dropping from his suddenly nerveless fingers. Shirai, unrestricted in her movements by the simple shift, rolled onto her back and drew her bound wrists past her ankles with the suppleness of youth, then snatched up the knife from where it had fallen and plunged it into Zolasta’s chest with a scream of rage and fear. The chief sank to his knees as his eyes bulged, then bright red fluid gouted from the wound left behind as Shirai snatched the knife back out in what looked like apparent terror at what she’d just done.

Mother N’koi raised her eyebrows and took a long draw on her pipe, and everyone else started shouting.

The two men who’d been holding Shirai lunged forwards, far too late to be of any use to their chief. Shirai took one look at them and clearly didn’t like what she saw as she turned and threw herself into the roaring water, still clutching Zolasta’s knife. She went under, but after a few seconds Mother N’koi saw the girl’s head break the surface again, further downstream and being swept away faster than a man could run. It looked like she’d transferred the blade to her mouth, and was now trying to rub the cords that bound her hands on its keen edge, but she was borne out of sight before Mother N’koi could see if Shirai succeeded in freeing herself. She certainly stood little chance of avoiding drowning otherwise.

Zolasta tried to rise, but his legs buckled beneath him and he too fell into the river. When he surfaced again he was facedown and motionless, a life given to the waters.

‘The gods showed me death, untimely and unlooked for,’ Mother N’koi observed to no one in particular, and blew a smoke ring. ‘They did not show me who, or how.’

She sucked her teeth.

‘They tend to leave such details to us…’

# A Tale of Omens

“Coryl, dearer than daughter,” the bedridden old woman wheezed, “have I told you how I won the Battle of Presswolde?”

“No, mistress Verna,” Coryl lied, dipping the cloth in mint-water again. It was a good tale, and the old witch’s deathwatch was nearly at its end. She dabbed the pale forehead, heard the others milling around beyond the door. Birds sang in the meadow outside. Afternoon sunshine shone through the window, casting the braids Coryl had woven into Verna’s silver hair in a warm and golden light.

“Caraskander the Elder was king then, and accounted wise.” Verna grinned her knowing, crooked smile that was also a frown. “But I knew his caution was both a strength and a weakness.”

“Oh?” Coryl smoothed the wisps at Verna’s temples. So soft, the skin of the old.

“His caution was well-founded. Gregor the Black had the backing of sixteen warlords. Lesser chieftains, perhaps. But sixteen!”

Coryl smiled and dipped the cloth again.

“He wanted signs.” Verna’s voice slid into wet coughs, and Coryl held her hand, fragile like a baby bird. The spasm passed. “Omens,” Verna gasped. “Confounded things. You’ll want to manage them, Coryl. Signs that do not help you, hurt you.”

Coryl nodded. “Yes, mistress.”

“I had Caraskander send his bravest scout on a perilous mission – I needed something Gregor had touched, or better, some piece of him: hair, toenail, a turd. Whatever.”

“Who was sent?” Coryl ran the cloth over her mistress’s feeble arms, as she would later, before she wrapped Verna in her funeral shroud.

“Trevrah, the hill woman, eldest of the Cunning Folk in those days, and lover to my master, in the old days, as we thought them then. Now, that was a woman. Tall, fierce, and fearless. Gregor’s encampment sprawled across the western valley like a plague. But she went, Trevrah did, without hesitation.”

“But mistress,” Coryl said as she soothed Verna’s cheeks with the cloth, “isn’t the Presswolde a mountain?” She knew her mistress’s favorite points in all her stories.

“Ah,” Verna smiled, her cloudy gray eyes sliding closed. “Indeed. But … the Battle of Presswolde would not … not be decided there. No, I knew …” Verna’s head sagged, and a chilling fear ran through Coryl. Verna’s mouth went slack, but her eyes fluttered open again. “… I knew … wherever the battle happened, it would be won or lost long before, not in the lands of any realm, but in the hearts of people.”

“Did Trevrah succeed?”

Verna’s thin fingers patted Coryl’s, weightless and soft, like the soft strokes of a starling’s wings. “Of course. The Cunning Folk do not fail.” Her eyes slid up to Coryl’s. For the last time? “Remember that when I am gone.”

Coryl nodded and lowered her lips to her mistress’s palsied hands. She kissed them, remembering their steady strength over the years. “I will.”

“With nothing but a waterskin and a shirt that showed much cleavage, Trevrah walked right into the fiercest invading army this land has ever known. She watered Gregor’s men, slit three throats in the night, and brought back Gregor’s comb a day later. Ah, what a woman. The balls of her!” Verna’s eyes rounded and her voice fell to a whisper. “If you would rule this coven, girl, you must learn to see the steel beneath the skin, as I did. You will need to find your Trevrah.”

Coryl nodded wanly and dampened the cloth once more. “What good did the comb do?”

Verna smiled and closed her eyes. “That pissant Caraskander was tighter than a tick, so I set into him. Kicked his ass out of his own great hall for a day and a night! I sent his servants to fetch me twine and pins from virgins. I sent his soldiers to gather water in the helms of fallen men by moonlight in every river within twenty miles, and gather it in a trough I made them drag into the hall. I made the smiths grind bones of long-dead knights and pour the dust into their forges, and strike every piece of armor and every weapon in Caraskander’s army. What a racket they made!” Verna’s giggle tumbled into a coughing fit that left her lips blue.

Coryl dabbed the spittle from her mistress’s chin. “And the comb?”

“When Caraskander returned, he found the web I wove with the twine and pins across the floor of his hall, in patterns that echoed the stars. From the comb, I drew seven silver hairs and laid them across the threads of the web, carefully, so they did not touch the ground.”

“And then?”

Verna blinked, her smile fading. “I told him the hairs showed that Gregor was doomed. The seven gray hairs matched Gregor’s seven rivals: two sons, two cousins, two uncles, and one brother. They revealed that Gregor was fearful. His hair was falling out from worry: worry that his hold of the warlords was slipping, worry that his children, cousins, and uncles would move against him. But more than anything, he feared facing Caraskander’s army in the open if he did not have advantage.”

Verna panted quietly, her collarbone seeming to stick out as she worked for her breath. Coryl missed the passion Verna used to have for the climax of her cleverness, but drawing breath was as clever as Verna could muster.

“Caraskander,” Verna said, eyes clenched, thin fists balling in the sheet, “led his army out and around the enemy, stormed … stormed Gregor’s encampment. Dead of night … from the west, at the foot of the Presswolde as Gregor approached. His great victory.” Verna shifted as her spirit sped. Her fists settled against the bed.

“No, mistress,” Coryl whispered. The first tear, hot and swift, sped down her cheek. She rose and smoothed Verna’s hair, caressed the tension from Verna’s brow. Gently, Coryl opened Verna’s fists and laid them across her mistress’s chest. “Your victory.”

She faced the door. “Come.”

Calling on her mistress’s wisdom, Coryl watched as her coven-sisters came in, one by one. Sweet Skellia came first, sniffling, her eyes red and swollen, followed by hard-hearted Gruina, who would challenge Coryl to the death and win, if Coryl did not manage this moment well. The sisters Haleth and Junis filed in, hands clasped as always. And finally Kabraella, bold and impatient as ever, strode into the room and stood over Verna, her strong hands futilely eager for something worth doing.

Gruina cleared her throat, swept her dark eyes from Verna’s repose to Coryl’s downcast face. “Tomorrow, we-” she began.

“Silence, sister,” Kabraella spat. “What signs, Coryl? What omens did you see?”

Coryl set her jaw askew and shook her head, even as Vendra often had in anxious moments. “She told a tale of omens, sisters.”

“Did she finish?” Gruina asked, fists on her hips.

“She didn’t die mid-sentence, did she?” gasped Skellia. As one, all the sisters’ fingers made signs of warding.

Coryl shook her head. “No ill-omens today. She finished her tale with her final breath.”

They sighed with relief.

Coryl looked at each of them in turn as she chose her words. “The signs are clear that we must summon the omen we would read.” She faced the two sisters. “You two, fetch me the quilt Verna made for me, and draw from it five lengths of thread. Skellia, dear, stop crying. Run to the village, find me ten pins that have never been used – and do not touch them! Gruina, go into the woods and search for a tree that stands apart, as Verna did, in the open where the moonlight reaches the ground. You must be patient and stand vigilant tonight and see that no ill omens appear there. We will meet there at dawn, tomorrow.”

Coryl knit her brow into a knot. No one was moving. “Go! Now!”

Skellia bolted out the door, her tears already coming on again. The sisters bowed their heads and left. Gruina frowned at Coryl, pursed her lips, then stalked from the room.

“And me?” Kabraella.

Coryl reached beneath Verna’s pillow, drew out the ancient dagger with its black handle and curved blade. “This once belonged to Trevrah, eldest of the Cunning Folk. What a woman! Fearless, strong, and wise. Verna wanted you to have this and to be our Trevrah, now.”

Eyes rounded with awe, Kabraella took the weapon.

“The signs are clear: the coven must be one,” Coryl said. She gripped Kabraella by the shoulders, felt the steel beneath the skin. Coryl leaned close and kissed Kabraella’s cheek, slipped her lips to her coven-sister’s ear, and whispered. “You will either end my life, or you will follow Gruina and end hers. One of us must be cut from the coven. Only you have the strength, Trevrah.”

Coryl turned away, held her breath, and closed her eyes.

A long and silent moment passed. Kabraella closed the door when she left.

Coryl sighed and closed the window.

# Shing. Shing. Shing.

A hand landed on Mereney’s shoulder. Mereney looked behind her, to see Lailyn standing there. Lailyn took a seat next to her on the log.

“I believe your axe is sharp enough.”

Mereney put her grindstone on the ground. “I have to be ready for tomorrow.”

Lailyn gave her a small smile. “You are as ready as you are ever going to be. We all are.” She inclined her head behind them, towards the revelling soldiers. “Now come on. Have a drink. This could be our last night alive, after all.”

Mereney chuckled. Lailyn lifted her hand away and Mereney sheathed her axes in the holster on her back.

The battle began early the next day, and by the time the sun was at its highest point in the sky, the air was filled with unsettled dust and the stench of blood. Mereney’s axes were crimson, as were her face and clothes. A single drop of blood dripped down her face; she licked it away.

She adjusted her grip on her axes, gave a bloodthirsty grin, and charged her next enemy.

The soldier she faced next was wielding a two-handed sword. His face was hidden beneath his thick steel helmet, so only his gritted and dirty teeth were visible.

He gave a roar and swung his sword to cleave Mereney in two, but Mereney jumped backwards and slammed the blade of her right axe into the blade of the sword.

The move jarred her shoulder, and the momentum carried her around in a pivot until she had her back to the soldier.

He grabbed her shoulder to hold her in place.

He thrust his sword into her back.

It protruded through her front.

Mereney choked. Her arms hung limp at her sides, and the blades of her axes dragged on the ground.

The soldier wrenched his blade from her body and let her go, running off to his next battle. Mereney fell backwards onto the ground and stared up at the sky, watching as it darkened with each passing second…

Before she had even opened her eyes, she was assaulted with the smell of ale. Mereney scrunched her eyes, then opened them, then blinked away the blurriness.

She pushed herself into a sitting position, and found herself on a tavern bench. The tavern was bustling and noisy. Men with swords and women with bows sat around tables with drinks, laughing and telling stories. Off in the far corner, a bard was playing *The Wild Rover*.

From somewhere to her left, a man gave a hearty chuckle. She turned her head.

The bench was on one side of a table. Another bench was on the other side, and sitting upon it with a flagon of ale was a plump man with a full beard but a receding hairline. His ale was sploshing over his grey shirt.

Mereney swivelled on the bench and put her elbows on the table. She narrowed her eyes at the man. “What am I doing here?”

The man grinned. “What do you think you’re doing here?”

Mereney reached a hand up to her abdomen, where the sword had run her through. The wound was not there.

“I was dying.”

The man inclined his head. “You still are.”

Mereney snapped her head up. “What is this place?”

“What do you think this place is?”

Mereney curled her hand into a fist and brought it down on the table. “Damn it, give me a straight answer!”

The man blinked. His lips curled into a smile. “You are a fiery one. We were right to give you red hair.”

Mereney’s face fell. She sat back on the bench and sank into it. Her fist loosened.

“Who are you?”

The man took a long swig of his ale. He wiped the froth from his mouth. He put his flagon down on the table.

“I have had many names, and I have many names, and I will have many names. To some I am the Creator, and to others I am the Warrior. Some believe I purged the Chaos from the world, others think that there was no Chaos for me to purge. Yet all look to me in their final hours.”

The man met Mereney’s eyes.

“Who do you say I am?”

Mereney’s eyes widened. She sat back against the back of the bench. She licked her lips.

“You are the Aa.”

The man’s eyes twinkled. “And what does that mean to you?”

“That I will see Vohana.”

“When?”

“When I have been judged.”

“Do you wish to be judged?”

Mereney sneered. “Does anyone?”

The man gave a hearty laugh.

“You have wit. I have always admired that in you. Now, tell me, do you believe in judgement?”

Mereney paused. “Yes.”

Aa nodded. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a playing card: the Ace of Hearts. “Have you ever played Pilgrimage?”

Mereney looked at the Ace, and nodded.

“Do you understand what I am asking you to do?”

“Yes.”

Aa slotted the Ace of Hearts back into his pocket. “Have fun.”

Mereney got to her feet and began searching the tavern for the four Aces.

She asked each person there if they had seen any of them, or if they had any of them, but she had no luck until she spoke to the bard.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. He looked at her, but did not stop playing.

“Do you have the card?” she asked him, her voice loud to be heard over the music.

The bard smiled and nodded. He lifted his lute to show its underside to her. The Ace of Clubs was stuck to the back of the lute. She plucked it free, nodded her thanks, and went off in search of the others.

No one else seemed to know where they were. She went for the bartender, and waited to be served.

“I’ll have an Ace.”

The bartender nodded and disappeared for a couple of minutes. She returned with a drink, and placed it in front of Mereney.

Mereney quirked her brow, and made to question the bartender, but she had skulked off and was nowhere to be seen.

Mereney lifted the flagon and downed the drink, then checked the bottom for an Ace. There was nothing there.

She checked inside; again, nothing.

She sighed, and slammed the flagon down onto the counter.

She sat there for a moment, or two, then slid the flagon out of her way and leant over the counter.

“Ha!”

The Ace of Diamonds was stuck to the nearest keg.

Next, she checked the walls. They were adorned with mounted animal heads, but even once she had lifted them off the walls, there was no Ace to be found.

It was only when she got to the front door that she noticed there was a rug just in front of it: a strange addition to a common tavern.

She lifted it, and there was the Ace of Spades.

Yet her joy was short-lived; she had nowhere else to look. The Ace of Hearts was nowhere to be found.

A hand landed on her shoulder, and she turned to see Aa standing behind her.

“How goes your hunt?”

Mereney held up the three Aces she had found.

“Oh, dear. Only three?”

Mereney bowed her head. “I admit I cannot find the fourth. I accept my judgement.”

Aa lifted his hand away. “Now, let us not be overly hasty. Where might it be?”

Mereney shook her head. “I have searched everywhere. There is nowhere else.”

Aa put a finger under her chin and raised her head. “Are you sure?”

Mereney furrowed her brow, and Aa gave a mischievous smile. He reached back into his pocket, and pulled out the Ace of Hearts.

He handed it to Mereney.

“Go, Mereney. Your fight is over.”

Mereney eyed the Ace for a long while. “I…”

Aa squeezed her shoulder. “You have done what you must, Mereney. You need worry no longer. Take the Ace, and enjoy your rest. Lailyn is waiting for you.”

Mereney licked her lips. She held out her hand, and hovered her thumb and forefinger half an inch either side of the Ace.

She looked up at Aa.

“Thank you.”

Aa smiled and inclined his head.

Mereney closed her fingers around the Ace, and the world whited out around her.

# Magic

A man walks across the street, and a car misses him by an inch.

A Slurpee cup sails from the car window, and misses him by an inch.

It smacks the pavement, spraying red ice across black tar.

It could have been him.

It could have been blood.

An omen.

He knows it.

It shivers down his spine.

He will not die today.

The man walks into a bank, finger pointed inside his pocket.

Steals away with a thousand dollars.

The ink pack is a dud.

He laughs, and skips a little skip.

The man swims across another man's pool

to drink from his glass and smoke his cigar.

He winks at the man's wife, and escapes, giggling.

A gun shot, a ripple of air, and nothing more.

The man flies a plane, dances a tango,

races a train, dodges a mango

thrown by a dude in a pool hall

down on Durango.

And, finally, stops, and wonders.

He climbs a mountain,

reaching the top as the sun declines,

and the magical day

ends.

Why? he asks the sky.

Why me, and why today?

A rock falls from the stars,

striking the cliffs,

missing him by a mile.

An omen.

He knows it.

It drops the bottom from his heart.

He could die today.

Like any day.

Like any other magical day.

# Prophecy Bones

Deep within a temple mighty, prayers are uttered day and nightly

And sacrifices made upon an altar of blackest stone.

Then there comes a novice priestess, apologising for the mess

To the high priest who sharply says, "Can't you leave me to work alone?

You wretched, wasted, hideous hag! You cringing decrepit crone.

Go fetch my prophecy bones."

So out from the room she stumbles while behind her the priest mumbles

About all the dark secrets of the world that remain unknown.

She heads for the storage room, where any a thief has met their doom

By tripping over in the gloom, but she knows this place like her home.

She brushes aside the wisps of web, though some cling to her clothes

Now, where were those prophecy bones?

Here's a map that's written on skin, there a half dissected chicken

And a great golden crate within which there are forbidden tomes

Of ancient curses and wicked spells, the pages rotten and - oh!" How it smells.

She passes a lamp in which a demon dwells, and a hat shaped like a cone

That whispers all sorts of promises, but she keeps her mind her own.

No sign of the prophecy bones.

Then at last she reaches her goal, for in the wall there is a hole

Above which is a rusty sign which reads: Here are the prophecy bones.

The hole itself is dark as sin, so with both hands she reaches in

And then she screams: A riotous din. Nibbling, gnawing nasties call this hole their home.

The chewing, crunching creatures claim the poor priestess for their own.

Stripping her flesh clean from the bone.

The high priest leaves his isolation, trying to ascertain the situation

That has caused his assistant such a delay in gathering simple bones.

In the store room he finds her corpse, and feels not a shred of remorse.

It's her own fault of course! She made a mistake, he's willing to bet.

He has a look in the hole but the bones are gone. And yet . . .

Now he's got a brand new set.

# On The Fire Escape



Most evenings after work Hatori Sonzai can be found sitting just outside his lounge's window, on the fire escape that hugs the side of his building, watching over the city as the sky is set ablaze by the setting sun, before it fades and darkens like a bruise blooming under cold skin. The best are the short minutes before the terminator comes rushing over the land, when both electric and natural light cohabit, giving a warm, scattered glow to the relentless streets.

Day after day and as the seasons change, Hatori drinks this view like precious mead. Sometimes staying minutes under the rain or snow, sometimes long hours into a cool summer night. He has turned this moment of silent contemplation into a personal ritual that helps centre himself and shake off his clients' turmoils that often parasite him long hours after work.

The other reason Hatori has gained in the last months to cultivate this habit is coming down the fire escape's metal stairs with beers in her hands.

"Sorry I'm late Ha-san! How are you?"

"That's alright, I'm okay. You?"

"Just okay? Well same here, but look, this should sort us out!"

Hatori needs no invite to take a look. Though it's the bottles she's showing off, it's Jean's curly blond hair, her easy smile and warm manners that captivate him, how they're so at odds with his own straight jet black hair, his dour face and formal attitude, shaped both by work and the reverential distance people often keep augures like him at.

She sits by him, folding her legs neatly on a little flat cushion she brings out with her when the weather permits, and proceeds to tell him about her day, how she found one of her students being bullied in the alley behind the studio, how she fought the bullies off, walked the student home and thus discovered the micro-brewery whose hipster product they are enjoying.

Though he listens intently, Hatori struggles with the emotions inside him.

The way Jean's curls tumble as she tilts her head, how she calls him Ha-san with just enough irony to be perfectly adorable, her quiet, self assured attitude as she shows off her scratched knuckles in the last rays of slanting light, it's all there somewhere, what he loves about his neighbour–but overshadowed by a feeling of loss and yearning for someone else.

A betrayal made all the more terrible that it is for a someone he cannot remember. He hates it, how being an augure and helping others can come at the expense of his own private life.

"Whoa, Ha-san? Hatori?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you alright? You seem dazed."

"Sorry, you were saying?"

"Well, I was asking you how was Open Day, but now I assume it wasn't so good?"

"That's right, today's lot was rough. I'm having a hard time going back to my usual self, sorry."

"Oh." Jean's eyes widen a bit, her beer stopped mid swig. "Shit. Want to talk about it, or..?"

Hatori shrugs. It's often the same stories, Open Day is just a bit more desperate. People come to augures with their most pressing questions, to ask the Gods and receive their omens.

Booking an augure costs a lot, but regular "Open Days" give anyone who can't afford the usual fee the opportunity to win a free reading; allowing Hatori and his colleagues the chance to confirm that human misery knows no social bounds.

"I first had a man who wanted to know if a late change in career would benefit him. A teacher who'd always dreamt of baking."

Hatori smiles, remembering the gentle mannered man, his soft brown eyes lost behind silver spectacles; tidy, well worn corduroy clothes almost screaming his profession, and only a slight paunch to hint at a love for baked goods.

"I only had to cast the cords for him."

Hatori's beautifully woven strings had fallen down in patterns only meaningful to him, and their message had been rather favourable. *"Follow your heart, the omen is good but the Gods bid you know it will be hard work."* That's the other side of the job, more counsellor than divine spokesman.

"The second one had a husband who wouldn't give her a penny to spend on getting news of their estranged son. She wanted to know if he was well."

"Was he?"

Cords are for questions about oneself. Asking about others requires deeper connection between augure and client. Hatori had taken the woman's frail hand, put his forehead and nose to hers, and so invited her feelings and memories to flood him. She had asked and the Gods had whispered their answer.

Each time, it feels like waking from a dream, saddened by the loss of someone you couldn't remember, yet had loved deeply till you woke.

"I told her he needed her and she had to make a hard choice." Not a very good omen. "Then came the real hard one."

Jean twirls her bottle, patiently waiting for him, and even through the numbness of his heart, he feels warmth for the woman who understands so well.

"She wanted to know if her daughter was still alive."

A poor mother whose child had disappeared without a trace, leaving nothing behind but harrowing doubts and a criminal investigation file covered in dust by years without clues. Hatori had not cared to know how many times the woman had applied to Open Days before getting the audience to ask the question she almost didn't want an answer to. Uncertainty left room for hope.

In the States, where an omen is word of law, Hatori's verdict would seal the case.

"From the long face I take it she was dead?"

"Yes. And long dead, at that."

Hatori had performed the connection, heard the question, and felt the crushing wave of years of motherly love engulfing him, followed by the crippling cold tide of loss, like a great current had swept him under polar ice and pinned him there, trapped in time even as agonizing months ticked by, the face of a daughter he'd never had unchanging before his ageing eyes.

It had punched a hole in his heart in the shape of a little girl, and through it had poured the Gods' ill omen. *Long dead*.

"At least she can grieve now," Jean says, rubbing his shoulder.

"Then I had a last lady for the cords," Hatori says, shaking himself up. "Jealous, like so often... Left John and Wu to share my last two people."

Being the head augure of his western-style shrine had to come with some sort of benefit. In the cases where the clients enquires after someone they hate, the augure is often left pointlessly angry and irritated. Many augures of his standing had long stopped doing Open Days, so Hatori figured he could at least cut himself some well needed slack.

"Too bad," Jean sighs, looking back over the city, "I thought maybe I'd ask you for an omen tonight."

Hatori gapes at her, stunned.

An omen for Jean, who makes a bigger deal of his having a car to borrow than the Gods' words to share? Who hasn't even asked for a word of luck or a forecast in all the months since she moved in and joined him on the fire escape?

He cannot tell if it's terror or excitement he's feeling, if he wants to please her or dreads the sort of question that would be important enough for her to ask.

He looks at her, smiling at him and waiting. He knows she'd leave him be if he asked, but curiosity burns too deep.

"What kind of omen were you after?"

"I wanted to know–" Her hand falls on his.

"Wha–"

Her body twists, propelling her too close, too fast to avoid collision. Her forehead bumps into his, and her voice explodes through his skull–*"If the man I love loves me back."*

The vision rushes in, and Hatori feels his heart swell, anxious–her feelings, not his. Jean, shy and timid? He has no time to wonder. There is a man she loves, and he sees him through her eyes–his dark hair he lets her pleat, the way his M shaped mouth curls and brightens his serious face when he smiles just for her, his quiet regard and attentions, and the kindness that flows not from what he says but the way she sees him lead his life...

It takes the longest time for him to realise–Hatori has never seen himself in a vision.

But the instant her question makes sense, the silence in his mind becomes loud, resounding! There is no voice whispering the truth to him, no push from the Gods. He needs none.

In that moment, Hatori *is* a God, who knows the answer, who can speak for himself.

"Yes, he does."

Their noses bump, she kisses him, and laughs, and wipes his cheeks.

"I do, I do," he says against her lips, "I love you too!"

# On Matters of Showmanship and Omens

Smoke burned at his throat, thick and heavy with the acrid ash of sage and rosemary. Taryn tried to focus as his master explained their craft. Yet his thoughts were heavy from perfumes and musk, his head pulsing.

“You aren't here to read futures, but people. To see what they need, but are afraid to reach for. With this knowledge we give them a push in the guise of omens and signs. What you see, however, isn't always right. Sometimes the person hesitates and fails.”

“What then, master?”

“Try and console them, to show them how else they could try,” the woman paused. Her gaze turned towards something behind Taryn. “If that fails then your retainers will deal with them.”

Taryn turned around and came face to chest with Tasto. Taryn jerked backwards in his seat only to bang his elbows against the table. The larger man place his hands on Taryn's shoulders to stabilize him and apologized. If any should be apologizing though, it should be Taryn. He'd only known Tasto for the few short weeks he'd been with his master and Taryn still wasn't use to his new retainer.

He only had Tasto at the moment, but his master, Old Anya they called her despite her youthful appearance, had three. A man and two women, though he didn't know their true names. Just what she called them. Crow, Raven, and Hawk. Just as Tasto was called Bear by any but him. She'd spoken of others once or twice, taken from her service doing their job. And she spoke of him collecting more as he got older.

“You need to be more aware of them, child. They're not just your protection, they're your anchors.”

“Anchors, master?”

“This craft to read others isn't an easy one. Even skilled readers can get lost in the weave of a person's life. Your retainers are your anchor, a beacon to keep you sane.”

They were linked, essences bound by an old ritual. He'd learn it one day she'd said, but for now he needed to focus on other things. Such as being able to sense Tasto through the mind numbing scent haze of his master's parlor.

“Both seers of the future and seers of people are associated with various tools. For far-seers these tools are foci to glimpse the future. For near-seers like us they are props to convey our message. Today we will look at a few of them.” As she spoke Raven emerged from the shadows and multitude of cloths draped from the ceiling, various items in her hand. On to the table she placed them. A deck of cards, a crystal ball, and a bag. Crow emerged to place a candle and cone of incense, both of which he lit. Hawk came last, shallow bowl of water cupped between her hands to be placed upon the table. Task done they pulled back to stand behind their master.

Master Anya moved her hand over the various items till it came to rest on the deck of cards. “Some, like these tarot cards, are hard for us to use than say the ball or bowl. The cards have their own messages they wish to send. Messages which can conflict with what we wish to say.”

“Aren't we manipulating them master? Meddling in their lives?”

“It is their choice to come to us. To hear and follow our words. Far-seers see the future as it could be. We see people as they are and want to be. Both are gifts which can help people if they let them. Though they can bring hesitance, and guilt.”

“Master?”

“Perhaps I should tell you a tale of my early years.” She paused to consider her words. “Yes, it would do you well to know all sides of our gift. Our burden. But first, Crow? Could you fetch refreshments. I'm sure we'll need them before this lesson is over.” The only male of Master Anya's retainers gave a nod, before he left the room through a door behind the drapes. “Now then, where to begin? It was many years ago, before I found Crow, Raven, or Hawk. I had but one retainer, Viper as a I called him. Though the focus of our little story is Viper's older brother. He had heard of me through Viper and had come for aid with a problem. The man was impotent, but unaware of it, and had come to find answers to his lack of children.”

Master Anya paused as Crow emerged through the drapes, a pitcher of water and cups in hand. Once he place them on the table and poured a drink for his master, Master Anya continued. “We sat for a time, drinking tea the two of us. Though it was short lived as the man soon demanded a reading. I had a fondness for tea reading back then, so I took his cup and found various symbols to shape my story.” She pause to take a drink of water. “But he misunderstood my meanings. He believed his problem was his brother was poisoning him. Curdling the seed in his loins. Though with my sight turned from him, I knew not his thoughts. It wasn't until he murdered his brother, my dear Viper, that night did I realize.”

Master Anya looked away towards the ceiling, to the varying constellation mosaics embedded into it. If he had to guess Taryn would say she stared at the snake image near the wall. It made him wonder. Did the other star signs represent other fallen retainers? Or were they just another prop of mystery as Taryn had first thought weeks ago.

“To this day I still wonder on occasion. Did I see the snake by chance? Or did I receive omens of Viper's death at his brother's hands? Alas, it is not for me to know. Even to seers not all is clear. And that perhaps, is the greatest lesson I could ever teach you.”

“Why not tell him directly?”

“In most cases they won't accept the direct route. They find it easier to accept after working it out themselves. Viper's brother, who wanted to find fault in any but himself, wouldn't have accepted directness. Many fail, however, unable to accept the truth. As with Viper's brother.” She paused to take another sip. “In the end it's all about choice, child. Their choice to come here and listen. And their choice of what to do with the information we give. Even if they make the wrong one, at least they had the choice to make.”

# Wisdom of the Night

*The lunar orb waxes and wanes*

Along with that called woman’s bane

Once a month you get a glimpse

Of the future in broad hints

Tara re-read the words carved into the wooden desk of the library. When would she start glimpsing the future? Shaking her head, she focused on the fragmented stone tablet in front of her.

*Heed the wisdom of the night*

Lest you lose your second sight

An ancient scholar had labeled this as one of Lenore’s earliest visions. Tara had doubts; it didn’t fit with the rest of Lenore’s foretellings.

Tara closed her eyes to think. This tablet appeared to be about losing a woman’s ability to glimpse the future, but Tara hoped it would help her tap her innate power. Unfortunately, the only idea she had for the “wisdom of the night” was dreaming. But she recorded her dreams every night and still hadn’t started her cycle. Besides, stacks of scrolls and tablets in the library contained women’s dreams, but none of them had particularly brilliant insights associated with them.

What else could it mean?

A thump on the door startled Tara and she jumped, nearly hitting the fragile tablet. A curse rose in her mind, but didn’t quite make it out her mouth before the door opened.

Tara scrambled to stand and offer her chair to the elderly woman with a walking stick hobbling into the library.

“Grandmother,” said Tara, inclining her head.

“Child.” Tara tensed at the title, reserved for girls who did not have their cycle yet. The woman remained standing, peering over at the tablet on the desk. “You skipped dinner again.”

Tara did not say anything. She did always not have the strength to face the women watching her eat, advising on her portions, and commenting on her body. Tonight, the night before her seventeenth nameday, her shame had defeated her hunger. She had sought shelter and knowledge in the library instead.

The Grandmother waved a hand, dismissing the subject. “What do you make of this?” she asked, still staring at the tablet.

“I do not think it is one of Lenore’s foretellings.” Tara had proven herself an able student long before she could have started her cycle. Some of the women remembered.

“I am not interested in the origin of this fragment.” The woman turned to look Tara in the eyes. “What does it mean?”

“It has long been interpreted to refer to dreaming. Women have –“

“I did not ask you to tell me how it has been interpreted.” Scorn filled the Grandmother’s quiet voice. She waved her stick toward the cabinets of dream records. “All of those useless records are because of this tiny fragment. I ask again, what do these lines mean?”

Tara hung her head. “I don’t know.”

Something knocked her on the head. The woman’s stick. “Do not be ashamed that you do not know what it means.” Tara resisted the urge to massage her head. “Be ashamed if you do not do what you can to figure it out.”

“I am-“

“-sitting in a musty old library. What do you do at night?”

Bewildered, Tara gave an answer that was more of a question. “Sleep?”

“And perhaps there is wisdom in that. Though, since old people are supposed to be wise and cannot sleep, perhaps not.” The woman sighed, moving around the table to sit in the chair.

The Grandmother closed her eyes. Tara waited. She glanced at the tablet, then back at the woman. Thinking she had fallen asleep, Tara took a step toward the table, ready to put away the tablet and escape.

“Child.”

“Yes, Grandmother?” said Tara, suppressing a sigh.

“There has never been a child so old without a single cycle.” As if Tara didn’t already know that. “It is making the women think.” The elder opened her eyes. “You would not like to hear some of their ideas.”

Tara had heard. The women usually saw her before they could expound on how to do deal with such an unnatural person. But not always.

“Why are you telling me this?” Women’s talk was never shared with children.

“As far as we know, none of this has been foreseen.” A shiver slid down Tara’s spine. Everything the community had experienced for years had been foreseen, in one way or another. Famines, skirmishes, births. And minor incidents, like broken fingers and rainy days. Tara glanced at the tablet. *Lest you lose…* She shivered again.

The Grandmother spoke. “You spend as much time in the library as anyone. Have you seen anything that sounds like children getting their cycles late?”

“No.” Anything like that would have immediately drawn Tara’s attention. Belatedly, Tara realized the Grandmother probably knew that.

The elder nodded. “Go.”

Tara saw no reason to prolong her stay. She reached for her lamp and received a rapping on the knuckles. “I want it. You can find your way back.”

Tara did not argue. She should be able to find her way back without artificial light, but she preferred to carry a lamp.

She grabbed her cloak from the wall near the door and wrapped it tight around her before emerging into the damp fall night. She closed the door behind her and waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. When they did not, Tara glanced up at the sky. A few stars twinkled, but the darkness of a new moon pervaded.

She sighed and set off down the soft dirt trail. The library sat away from the rest of the village, where lights in the houses would help her find her way.

*Heed the wisdom of the night.* What was so wise about wandering around in the dark? Getting lost, tripping on roots, smacking your head on branches. How could blindness be wise? Wasn’t that what the visions were for? To avoid moving through time blindly?

A cold wind buffeted Tara’s face, and she tripped on another root, stumbling three steps into a bramble. Thorns ripped her shirt, and the wet plant soaked her skin. She extricated herself from the briar patch, plucking thorns from her arms. She looked around for the path. She had come from that direction, right? Her feet found a dirt trail, and Tara continued walking. A warm fire was starting to sound worth the price of being confronted about skipping dinner. Father would have saved some food for her.

She held her hands up to blow warm air on them. Her muscles ached, especially her lower back. Surely the walk to the village wasn’t this long, though Tara knew time passed more slowly in the dark.

Just as she started to think about turning around, she saw a glimmer ahead. Relieved, her shoulders relaxed. Until a woman spoke.

“Tara.” She didn’t recognize the voice.

“Yes?” Tara could see the woman’s outline, but she wasn’t holding a lamp. Maybe there was a house further down? That didn’t make sense. Coming from the library, there should have been a lit cairn before the first house. Had she wandered off the main path and managed to find a game trail that led to the village?

And how had the woman recognized her in the dark?

“Are you so lost?” The woman sounded…regretful? Why would she be regretful?

“Not so lost. I made it back.”

When the woman didn’t say more, Tara walked forward, passing her to get home. But the village was not on the other side of the woman. Just darkness.

She turned around. The woman was still there, a silvery shimmer solidifying in the air. Tara stumbled back, her breath catching.

“Your village has forgotten me.” The woman’s voice grew deep, resonant, strong.

Tara froze.

“Our pact is broken.”

Mind spinning, complex thoughts eluded Tara. “Pact?”

The woman shook her head. “In your people’s obsession with the future, you have lost any interest in the past.”

Tara grabbed on to the only part of their conversation she understood. “That’s not true! We keep records of everything.”

The woman ignored her.

“The pact is ended. You were given a warning, but paid no heed to it.”

A warning?

“You forgot me, the one who gave you the power to prepare for a future.”

The visions of her village…came from this woman?

“But your worse offense was to live within only that future. You need a little light to see, but too much blinds you.”

The woman shone brighter and began chanting.

“No more the future will you know

It’s to the past that you must go”

\*

Tara woke before dawn.

It was wet between her legs.

She had seen her first vision. The pact Lenore had made for their village. With a warning.

*Heed the Wisdom of the night*

Lest you lose your second sight.

# signs of balance

The burden of recognizing omens brings with it black and sticky work. Especially when you read the dark lines between. The ones that demand death.

As Shelam’s hunter, death is the work I’ve always done. On this grim night, the omens I track reveal themselves to be especially viscid. They’re wet and sullen. While the threads joining them sag, loose and hanging.

They mourn because a devoted life has been taken. The balance upset. In order to relieve the distress, three lives are owed as payment, else the world will spin out of equilibrium.

I stop walking and listen for the scuff of boots in the alley. I’ve lost him for the moment.

Earlier, the rolling thunderclouds had gone blood-red as the sun set, portending the labor ahead of me. The storm had raged, booming and heavy, but all I hear now is the steady drip from a corroded gutter, bloated with runoff from the evening’s downpour.

Moonlight reflects off the mud and drainage, streaming across my bare foot. Here, even as I struggle in my pursuit, another sign shows itself.

A cat hisses. A bottle rattles. My prey is on the move ahead, entering a doorway. The omens are persistent.

I wrap my habit tight around my body, to quiet any rustle, and slip in behind him.

By murdering the votary of Shelam, the man guaranteed my attention. Justice demands him punished for his deeds. Requires his blight scourged. I am but a vessel through which *She* works.

The hallway is dark, cramped. He fumbles at a lantern at the far end. Something hisses, and light drenches the corridor, yellow and sour. The smell of urine is strong.

He turns, too late, and opens his mouth to yell. I’m there, and my knife slides into his kidney, my hand pushes up on his jaw, closing his mouth, and bangs his head against the oak stanchion. He tries to squeal as I pull the blade free and punch it deep into his lungs, then his heart, and finally, as he crumples to the damp floor, his neck.

I extinguish the lamp and darkness returns to the hallway.

Wiping my knife on his trousers, I slip back into the alley, trusting, as the omens promised, the rain to wash away any trace of my passage.

One of the lives has been remitted, but the presage still requires two more tonight.

The ground, cold and slick, feels brisk, even refreshing under my feet as I pad toward the sounds of the inn. The wind cuts through my garment. A chill suddenly rends the night, unerring and just as the omens foretold. I look up as a crow flies south and a star shoots east. All is as it should be.

I stand under the sign outside a large wooden building, *The Two Rabbits Inn*. Another omen telling of death for the woman and her babe on the second floor.

The door cracks open, then pulls at my hand, like a wooden sail caught in the wind, dragging me inside. Straining, I use all my weight and push the door closed with a thump. The momentarily interested patrons soon bend back to their mugs, unaware and unintimidated by an unattractive woman in acolyte clothing, adjusting her robe and walking to the bartender. However, the curious, scattered glances do not cease completely.

I receive a mug of watered wine and sit on a stool near the end of the bar and watch for the signs.

The cry from a baby draws my attention to the back stairs. It is almost time.

A man gets up, claps his companions on the shoulders and walks to the door, daring to challenge the wind outside. As he struggles to pull it shut behind him, a small rat slips around the corner of the doorframe, and follows the man out into the night. The door closes, and an owl hoots.

The Goddess Shelam speaks so strongly tonight.

Standing up, I head for the stairs, my cup untouched. Again, I wrap my habit close, leery of it snagging on the banister.

Upon reaching the second floor, I head for the second-to-last room. Low murmurs and the intermittent cooing of a mother originate from the other side of the scarred oak door. Again, the omens are clear.

I still myself and close my eyes, perching outside her room. It will just be the mother and the child. The swirling milk in my tea that morning had promised it.

The handle moves easily in my hand, as I knew it would. I enter and the woman on the bed looks up, no doubt expecting to see her dry nurse.

“Oh, hello, Sister.” The woman’s eyes narrow, but only slightly. “Where’s Silva?”

“She’ll be along shortly.” The omens say so.

The room is well-ordered. The luggage and travel basinet are of quality. The woman comes from a mercantile house, a family with enough money to be comfortable, but not enough for any substantial influence.

Even if her father had the proper influence, it wouldn’t have mattered.

She fidgets with her son’s tiny hands, obviously considering speaking again, while I watch the lone candle on the night stand. A door bangs open downstairs, the flame gutters, then snuffs to a thin ribbon of rising smoke.

In a swift motion, I snatch the boy from her arms, gripping a pudgy leg, and smash him, wailing, to the floor. The infant’s cry cuts off sharply and the woman screams.

My blade is out before she can scramble from beneath the bedsheets. I kneel, and after an exacting stroke, the now-silent baby’s throat is laid open. Absolute finality is required.

Quickly, I stand, and stride from the room. The mother lunges, collapsing to the side of the dead child. She wails incoherently between sobs.

In the hall, another woman, the child’s nurse, streams by me, racing to the room. The expected shriek of horror crashes past me, sharp and jagged.

Down in the common room, the inn is now a bustle of bright lamps and noise. Most men cluster and chatter like schoolchildren. Two charge up the stairs, scrambling towards the screeching women. I step lightly to my stool, sit, and wait for the next sign.

While the child had done no wrong, it had been his unfortunate destiny to be birthed at the very moment the murderer had taken the life of my goddess’s votary. Shelam, Mistress of Signs, requires recompense, and it must be paid to maintain order.

All actions are connected, balanced. If that scale is disturbed, balance must be restored. An innocent life for innocent life.

Three lives plucked, the guiltless counterweight now lies in balance. One debt remains to compensate for guilty men.

They return, cascading down the stairs with eyes wide, and shout, “The woman! The woman priest! Where is she? She’s murdered a baby!”

I watch as the horrified barmaid, standing near the base of the stairway, spins and thrusts her finger in my direction, “She’s there!” At the motion, the tray she’d been carrying jolts sideways, and a brass mug of dark liquid tumbles to the ground. I stare as the cup strikes the ground, upright, and not a drop of its contents spill.

I smile at the omen.

A man at a nearby table shouts, “Witchcraft!”

The door to *The Two Rabbits Inn* bangs open again and a small host of City Militia file in. Their leader, a lieutenant, steps forward, dark eyes casting about for the source of what drew them out on such a rain-slick evening.

He spots me, and immediately identifies me as an important figure in the drama playing out. He pulls a well-worn saber from where it had hung by his side. He flips a silent signal to his men, and they spread to cover exits. Two of them rush the stairs, swords in-hand.

Comfortably in control of the room, he barks at the crowd, “Damn you lot. Back up. No one leaves *The Rabbits* until I have some answers.”

I pull my knife, one final time tonight, and feign to strike the Lieutenant. It is futile and obvious, but the debt must be paid quickly. We cannot wait for the court’s justice to repair the dangling threads.

The Lieutenant is skilled and swift. He knocks aside my assumed attack and strikes, stabbing the tip of his sword neatly between my ribs.

The crowd, as one, bites off a sharp breath.

Mine accounts for the final death, my soul now saturated with the thick guilt that comes with murdering an innocent child. Innocent life paid for the innocent life taken. Guilty owed for guilty.

The pact is complete, the world rebalanced.