When the World Was Young
A Prehistoric Anthology

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Content warnings:

Let Him that Speaketh Fate to Man Have No Fate of His Own

by Rob MacWolf

The Isle of Ocrit was not a mighty power. No great battles had been fought there. No tales were told of it. No riches were to be found there. It would be a half-century or so yet, ere the cultivation of grapes would make its slow migration from the mountains beyond the east horizon, so it had no vineyards. It would be nigh onto a dozen centuries before the great empires rose and matured enough to crave silphium, so it remained only a pale yellow flower in the woods and a savory tang in meat broth. Anyway, Ocrit did not have so very much silphium, either.

What Ocrit had was a true and genuine Oracle. And a true and genuine Oracle, even if it were not so famous or prestigious as the Cybeles of Delphi or Iliun or Cumae would one day be, was worth a journey.

Let us imagine some tyrant, brooding on next season's harvest of conquest. Or perhaps an heiress, seeking an interpretation of a troubling dream. Or an oratorical nobleman, seeking an advantageous marriage for his favorite nephew. They would come to the small harbor, make their way up the winding path through the sighing cedars. They would begin to question, more than once, if they had lost their path, only to soon see, ahead in the dim forest, an oil lamp guttering

in the constant cool sea wind. They would hear ahead in the darkness of night—for the Oracle would speak to none unless the moon were overhead—something wild and dark played on a haunting pipe, invisible beyond the trees. And just when they would consider going back—surely a seasoned war leader can make do without prophecies, surely a village wise woman can interpret a dream, surely one's dear nephew can find his own way into a marriage bed—the trees would open up, and the sky would reappear.

On the left hand would be goat-grazed cliffs down to the lights of town and harbor, where the sailors who had brought them here sat in the taverns in the company of that most enviable of lovers: a full belly, plenty of beer, and a warm fireside. But on the right hand would be the sanctuary.

I have heard it claimed it was a lightless palace of obsidian columns, where chthonic vapors from the underworld took the shapes of shades of the dead and vengeful spirits. But I would not believe such things. Obsidian makes poor columns. And what vapors there were would have come from the braziers, not the underworld. Such things are for oracles as they are imagined, not as they are—or were, rather, I know of none today. More likely it was like any other shrine to a little god among the little islands in those little days, magnified to terrifying and august by the darkness of the hour and the loneliness of the journey.

Now follow our hypothetical pilgrims in. See them startle as a masked acolyte steps forth from the shadows. The warrior blusters, perhaps, and the heiress pouts, but they are told to enter of their own free will, to speak only once, and that only to ask the question they have brought.

Then in through black curtains, to an inner chamber. The only light, the moon through a single high window and the smoldering of something sharp-smelling and smothering in the braziers all about the room. Perhaps the orator is curious, steps near to examine one of them, and staggers back at a sharp word from a masked acolyte. The same one who led him in? Ah, impossible to say! They are all about

the room he now can see, and all hooded and cloaked the same. And something in the braziers made him lightheaded.

Best to be done with this unworldly business and away. So they speak. They ask,

"Shall I see victory when I lay siege to the clan of the northwest?" says the eagle.

"I dreamed that my grandmother, dead these thirteen years now, pierced me through the heart with a spindle, and left me hanging in the fig tree. What does it mean?" says the goat.

"Young Tammuz is of a marrying age, will he make an advantageous match?" says the stag.

And then they wait, nervous, while their question rolls away into the close heavy darkness. They cannot even see who it is they are asking. Until they can.

Across the room, hunched over one of the smoldering braziers, smoke and darkness wreathed about their head—and a fearsome head it was indeed—Behold! The oracle would turn toward them ominously just after they were noticed—and how it was the oracle knew when to turn, when to stay statue still, who can say—then rise to an impossible height and stand in the shaft of moonlight. A great mask, some primeval and forgotten monster of a bird, cruel bulwark of a beak and imperious eyes, like a vulture god risen from the underworld. It would stare, yet how could it stare, with eyes of blank stone? Yet not a one, of all the years of pilgrims, had not felt the weight of the oracle's regard as surely as they felt their own breathing.

And when the tension was just a hair from becoming unbearable, the oracle would speak:

Thou would be conqueror, thy snows fall red.
The oldest mountains turn their backs on thee.
The serpent shall lie burning in thy bed
Ere you return to set it laughing free.

Or,

Go ask the spindle what the fig tree means.
Go ask the beehives what the spindle spake.

Go seek for thirteen months of sleep and find
The spindle cracks, and all the skeins unwind.
Thy grandmother has left her shawl behind
And somebody must wear it to the wake.
Or perhaps,
The golden apple, lovely to behold.
But green is sweeter on the tongue than gold.

And that would be that. And then an acolyte—did it matter if it was the same one?—would usher them out again, to ponder on what it could have meant—the eagle sullenly over a now-less-likely campaign, the goat pensive as if picturing herself in her grandmother's place at the table, the stag uneasy and now less sure if that favorite nephew really is his favorite after all. Perhaps, for some additional alms, beyond what they had given to be admitted? Ah, but of course, the acolyte would confess, the deep meaning of the oracle's wisdom could be explained, by one who had initiation and familiarity, perhaps on the way down the path to the village, for it is dark now indeed...

And that was how the art of an Oracle was practiced, in those days.

Historians today, I suppose, would shrug, would say it was some drug, to induce trance in a practitioner who would then believe themselves possessed by Apollo—or at least something close enough it might as well be called 'Apollo' in the history books—and deliver whatever pronouncements bubbled up in their brain.

And they would not be wrong about this, in the way a man who calls a fresco only plaster and paint, who says a mosaic is only a great many fragments of broken glass, who says a sacrificial cake is only corn and honey and fat, much as one eats every day, so what is the difference really, is not strictly speaking wrong.

But what the historians do not, could not know, is that after our pilgrims left, and the doors were locked for the night, the oracle would fumble his way out the back. Would slip off the trailing androgenous robes, pull off the top-heavy bird mask, and take deep breaths of clean clear air until there was no oracle there at all.

Only a young dog called Talzu—brindle coat, darkened to an ash-brown mask around his face—naked and shivering till he staggered exhausted into the bed in his little hut, hidden behind the oracle's sanctuary.

Talzu remembered very little before his life on Ocrit Isle. And that which he did remember, he held of no consequence.

His mother—perhaps as oracle he could have said where she was now if he cared to, but he did not—had seen some signs in him. Perhaps she had a touch of foresight herself, perhaps there was some omen or augury, perhaps she saw he showed no fondness for girls at the age it was to be looked for, and any oldwife will tell you that means a man's path in life leads to the mysteries of the half-world.

Perhaps she merely needed to rid her house of another mouth to feed.

Whyever it was done, Talzu had been sent to the nearest oracle—for 'nearest' was the oracle of Ocrit Isle's most notable quality—in the midst of his tenth summer. He had served as an acolyte. He had lit the lanterns in the woods, he had played the haunting pipe in a hidden alcove, and had never thought to go farther. Most did not. But he did. And when he did, his life truly began.

"You are dwelling on the past again," Histuman would have said, had he been there.

Talzu walked among the cedars on the upper slopes, down the path the orator, the heiress, the general would have trod last night. It was late morning, and in the light of the sun the woods were less aweful and numinous. Working at night meant he could sleep as late as he liked, do whatever he liked in the day. Some of the acolytes, he supposed, expected him to remain in his room. Perhaps he would have, were he a grander oracle, if anyone cared to pry after his secrets, if there were luxuries for him to send acolytes to fetch. But on Ocrit Isle the only luxury to be had was freedom, so it was what he took, when he could.

"You could have more," Histuman would have said. "Those who come for what we do, they pay well."

"You're chatty today," Talzu muttered and picked up the pace toward the market.

"You could send an acolyte to the market for you," Histuman would have maintained, "as you used to go for me. You could send a ship to fetch you fine linens and rich spices."

"There is none," Talzu navigated the stepping stones across the gully where, during the spring rains, there would flow a busy creek. "Who could bring aught I want."

To that, Histuman would have had no answer.

If Talzu gets to dwell on the past, tis only fair we do as well. So let us look back at Talzu the acolyte, when he has been tending the pomegranates in the side garden, where pilgrims were led if they were too overcome with fear or sorrow on hearing their prophecy. It did not see much use, and the pomegranate bushes never set fruit for they did not grow well on this side of the mountain, but there was little else to do to keep busy until the next pilgrim arrived.

But when the step of a bare foot sounded on the wind-worn stone behind him, Talzu straightened and froze.

"Somehow," the voice of a wolf, dried to gravel with irony, had said, "you knew I was no pilgrim, eh lad?" Had Talzu not already straightened and froze, he would have done so again. Histuman the Oracle sat himself on the stone bench just beside one of his sworn-silent acolytes, the only ones to know his identity, and looked Talzu up and down like a farmer considering whether to buy a prize bull at market.

"What would you have of me?" Talzu had said. It was forbidden for him to kneel, or use any titles of reverence, for that might reveal who it was to whom he spoke. But he could not wholly keep a tremble of fear from his voice.

"Much, boy, I fear very much indeed," the old wolf chuckled. "How many years do you wear?"

"This coming harvest will be my nineteenth."

"And in all that time," Histuman's eyes strayed to the sunset over the edge of the sea, "have you yearned to leave this island? Forsake

my service and secrets? Go out, see the world, and win glory in it, eh?"

The dog shrugged. "I know of nowhere I would go."

If Histuman were disappointed at that, he showed it not. "And there is no woman whose favors you seek?"

"I... no, I don't..." Talzu blurted.

"No ruddy maiden at the market? No plump matron? No prosperous widow?"

Talzu had felt a growl rise in his throat. "I have never lain with a woman, if that's what you mean."

"But you have," Histuman glanced at the young dog slyly, "disported between Kuruhdu's knees of a night, when the two of you were on vigil together. Aye, and warmed his bed of a morning after long sleepless watch."

Talzu's breath had caught in his throat. But then... this old wolf tormenting him was Oracle, was he not? What man could have secrets from him?

"You will not have long to love him. Within a moon, a trading ship will come by, unexpectedly, bearing a hired blade who hails from the far Cimmerians. A great sabrecat of a woman, and Kuruhdu will be so enamored of her, though she will be twice his height, that he will seek release from his vows and my service. Which I will give him, of course, why not? He will sail away with her, and that will be the last we ever see of him. Now, when you went to the market, a morning ere last," Histuamn had been suddenly done with that line of discourse, "You brought back chickpeas, leek, beets, and a good bit of lamb."

Talzu had nodded, confused. The wolf had tossed all of these into a stew—and Histuman almost never cooked himself—with a good helping of barley to make it go round, and it had been a very fine meal indeed for the oracle and his four acolytes.

"How did you know," Histuman had pressed him, "to bring back the makings of the equinox stew my mother used to make, when I was yet a boy among the cities of the plain? Which I have not tasted since?"

"I..." Talzu had had no idea what Histuman was talking about. "I did not."

"Oh, was there nothing else to be had in the market that day?"

"No, there was..." the dog had wracked his mind to remember, "there were pears and salt cheese and tunny fish..."

"And why is it, boy," the wolf had interrupted, had risen to his feet, had suddenly and softly stroked Talzu's cheek with the back of his hand, "that I have never once heard you speak a lie?"

The memory of that still put cold fingers between Talzu's shoulderblades.

"You know the answer to your own questions," Talzu had said. Had been unsure if he were begging an answer, or making an accusation.

"An oracle who knows his business," Histuman had answered, "rarely asks a question to which he does not know the answer."

And that had been the day Talzu had been no more acolyte, but apprentice. Every moment, waking and sleeping, he had spent with the old wolf. Learning not just signs and omens, in the stars, in the clouds, in the patterns the curls of smoke from the sanctuary braziers wrote on the air, but how to stand amid them and see the whole story they told as a woodwise hunter may stand amid trees and understand the whole forest. Learning not just the rites, but the multitude of meanings behind the rites, how they meant the moon journeying to the underworld and returning with its secrets, but also meant the man hung living on a sacred tree as sacrifice from whose heart's blood all harvests sprang, but also meant the unnamable watchers who stand motionless and stern at the gates of death in the uttermost west keeping secrets no mortal mind could know and live.

Learning, aye, but also practicing. Tasting with his breath the bitter secret mix of incense and oily seeds and sacred herbs burned in the braziers and fighting to keep his head steady amid the warm and weightless rapids that would then swell within his ears as he held that fume-filled breath, a little longer each time. Memorizing whatever verse the sanctuary could remember, much of it nonsense,

and then changing it, a word at a time, so that nothing remained but the rhythm and rhyme, that whatever visions might come, his tongue would have the agility to tessellate into verse on the spot. Balancing the heavy mask, until he could sit with it, stand with it, turn with it as if it were his true face.

By the time the ship had come, just as Histuman had said it would, and Kuruhdu had disappeared to sea with his saber-mawed warrior, just as Histuman had said he would, Talzu had begun to see. Or rather, had begun to realize he had been seeing, all along. How the present burned down the future like the wick of a lamp, fixing it into the past even as it consumed it. He understood, though he couldn't have put it into words, how the old wolf did what he did, and therefore, he supposed, how the young dog did also what they did. He began to know the answers to questions before he asked them, once he had learned to ask them the right way round.

And when he awoke just before dawn, with Histuman's arms around him, with the old wolf's taste on his breath, with the oracle's kiss on his forehead, Talzu would feel the future rolling towards him, clearer every day, like a great island-swallowing tide.

But now, of course, that future had dwindled to mere present. Histuman had been among the things its tide had swept away, and Talzu had taken his place as oracle, just as foreseen. And who was to know the difference? The other acolytes were just as sworn to secrecy as ever, and anyway by now they had been all replaced. Arikimra, now keeper of the island's smaller tavern, was the only one still to dwell on Ocrit Isle, and he had been released from his vows while Histuman yet lived. As far as he, or anyone else on the isle could say, Talzu was just another of the acolytes.

"You miss me," Histuman would have said, as Talzu approached the buildings clustered about the harbor, "more than usual."

"So what if I do?" Talzu returned an idle salute from a sow driving a herd of goats toward the upper pastures. She had no idea to whom it was she offered an upraised hoof in casual greeting. Two moons ago he had told her that either her next child would be stillborn, or the birthing of it would cost her life, and now rumor said

she had put off her husband, he had gone, with great bitterness, to be a fisherman with his brother on the next island southward.

"You know very well," the old wolf's voice would have been peevish, but he would have nuzzled the young dog's ears as he spoke, "what. Find yourself a distraction. A cheese dumpling or a bowl of beer or a handsome fellow, well, handsome enough, here."

"All the same distractions," Talzu shook his head, "as have distracted me less and less with each passing of winter. You know what it is to grow old, old man."

"I am glad I did not live," Histuman would have said, "to hear a mere lad of single score and seven winters call himself 'old.' "

Talzu stopped at the pile of stones at the crossroad—the only crossroad on the island, in truth, worth piling stones at—to add a pious-enough pebble to the windward side. He paused a while there, and before continuing spoke.

"A lifetime is a road before us each.
The man who sees his road laid plain unto
The gates of death, though yet so far away,
May call himself an old man, and speak truth."

Talzu stood in silence a while before his feet found the will to walk again.

"How long have you been brooding on that one?" Even in death, the former oracle would not have asked a question to which he did not already know the answer.

"Long enough," Talzu whispered.

And it may be the old wolf would have taken pity on Talzu, had he been there. It may be his teacher would have appreciated the passive despair he had not meant to teach. It may be that is why he would not have said anything as the dog he'd loved in life walked to the harbor, for it may be he would have known that even an Oracle needs to be surprised from time to time.

It may be that is why Talzu had no warning, either natural or unworldly, of the proud ship with the saffron colored sails and the burnished copper prow beached comfortably in the harbor, nor of what twist of destiny it had delivered to the Oracle of Ocrit Isle.

You will not have heard, I daresay, of Ouanaxes, whom some called Pirate King. The kingdom of which he was both prince and exile has no name in the remembrances of mortals. He lived too soon for the invention of history. And though epics indeed were sung of him, and tales told, the only one to make its way, limping and exhausted, to these cold latter days is this.

Ouanaxes was not such a man as to have any care for whether you and I had heard of him.

Imagine him, then, as Talzu first saw him. Begin with a lion, give him all the strength and royalty a lion ought to have, but take from him all concern, and all dignity, for he is free. His silt-brown fur knows well the touch of sunlight, the indistinct pebble-grey stripes are acquainted with the storm-streaked clouds they resemble, the dun mane smells of salt spray.

Rather than princely finery, give him a kilt of toughened leather, the kind divided for easy movement, a sash of brightly woven cloth across his chest, and a trusty sword in a worn scabbard, with the hilt of which, just as you catch sight of him, he has gestured some of his men up toward the woods. In his other hand put a bowl of ale, brought out by the tavernkeeper, whom he pays by tugging free one of the dangling golden beads sewn to his sash. It is the most wealth she has ever seen at once, in her life. Then around him picture a whirl of activity, sailors and pirates, fighting beasts all. The ram barters for provisions, the cormorant fills jars of fresh water, the ibex seeks carpenters to repair those bits of the ship, the hoopoe seeks smiths to sharpen these spears, or the rats and foxes and seals merely look for a comfortable bed and a willing wench. A chaos of seaborn manhood, at least by the standards of Ocrit Isle, and at its epicenter is Ouanaxes, as if it emanates from him as the philosophers claim the true natures of things emanate from the gods, with heavy sandals undone and bare paws at ease, as if he had no more cares than an innocent shepherd in the golden age of lost Arcadia.

It may be he did not.

It took Talzu some time to make his way through the storm of activity to the lion that was its eye. This was good. It gave him time to consider what to say.

But he would consider in vain, for the pirate spoke first. "Well met, honored sir. I presume you king of this fair island?"

"We have no king here," Talzu said, cautiously, "in all honesty, we have not folk enough even for a chieftain."

"Why, it's a thousand pardons I must beg!" Ouanaxes' eyes sparkled, Talzu would come to know, whenever he grinned like that. "I took you for a king at least, for it's myself and you alone who take a breath of leisure amid this bustle. Come then, take that breath with me? If your fair isle has offered my poor band hospitality, why, it's only fair I offer it back!"

And that was a better opening than Talzu guessed he would have been able to plan. "If you but saw us when no pirates had made harbor," the dog took a seat beside the lion, "you would find little else but leisure here."

"Pirate, you say?" Ouanaxes affected great innocence and drained his bowl of beer.

"An islander," Talzu shrugged, "knows a pirate when they see one. You would not see a hubbub like this for a fisherman!"

"I daresay not!" Ouanaxes laughed.

"Nay, for a fisherman brings no wealth from the treasure barges. As never a one of them thinks to stop here themselves, we islanders are not like to see any of it save what a pirate comes to spend."

"Ah." The lion seemed, for the first time, less than perfectly at ease. "You have trade with pirates often, then?"

"Here? Never." Talzu accepted a bowl of ale from the tavernkeeper, who then gave another to Ouanaxes and bustled away before the dog could pay her. "Other islands, to be sure, but Ocrit is overlooked by all save those who seek the Oracle."

"Oracle?" The lion perked his ears, and oh the sound of his voice was stirring like promise of a journey begun just at dawn.

"If you come not seeking the Oracle, you are the first," Talzu huffed.

"In good faith, I heard not there was such a thing until now." Ouanaxes ran claws through his windblown mane, and oh the roll of dusky fur over the muscles of his bare shoulder was a perilous thing to see. "I saw only an island where an honest captain might rest his crew, patch his hull, and fill his belly."

The dog glanced down the shore at the slender ship beached there. Several oars were broken, and more than a few arrows, hafts snapped off, heads buried, studded the starboard side like the stubble of an old boar's chin. "How long it will be safe to do that," Talzu said, very carefully, as he finished his bowl of ale, "may take an Oracle to say. If you will excuse me, captain, I must be about my business."

"Perhaps we two can share drink and speech again?" Ouanaxes stretched to his feet as Talzu rose to go, and oh the possibility of laying upon that fur seemed more comforting than any bed. "If I might ask to know you better, of course."

"They call me Talzu," the dog said. "Any of the islanders, I trust, can tell you where to find me."

"Then find you I shall," smiled the lion.

And oh, that smile was more intoxicating than the fumes of a dozen oracular braziers.

Talzu strode away from the harbor, back toward the heights and his sanctuary.

"Are you then in love so quickly as that?" Histuman would have asked, greatly amused.

Talzu saw no purpose in replying. An oracle rarely asks a question to which he does not already know the answer.

It was a few days yet, ere Ouanaxes visited the oracle.

Betimes Talzu met him every day in the market, or the tavern, or the shore. Every day the lion had another task in hand—his men were scouting the coast for a cove where a ship might anchor out of sight, or seeking a woodcutter to see about felling a cedar for a new mast, or trading necklaces strung with amber and lazuli beads for flatbread and dried fish, or merely all heaving stores into the hold, naked and sweating and unashamed as primordial gods at

their world-shaping labor, before he charged with them, laughing, splashing, into the surf to bathe. And every day he would set whatever task aside long enough to smile at the dog whom he knew as nothing more than a fellow man, and talk, and share a bowl of beer.

Every day Talzu felt his heart become a little less his own, and foresaw that tomorrow it would be even less so.

When finally Ouanaxes took him by the paw, pulled him without a word onto the ship, and led him to the stern where cushions were laid under the canopy, Talzu accepted that his heart was lost entirely.

"How did you know?" Talzu asked, when their muzzles had parted. The taste of the pirate's lips clung to his.

"I am not a fool, my friend," Ouanaxes gently unfastened the dog's tunic, pulled him free of it and down into his arms. "I know enough to know when a man wants me." The same motion of the lion's paw somehow contrived to run up the dog's side, explore the shape of his flank and underarm, then take him by the wrist and lead Talzu's paw down Ouanxes's chest to rest between his bare thighs. "And I know," it took only the smallest motion of his hand to touch the other man fully, but the lion had left that motion to Talzu to make, "that I want someone who wants me."

No man had touched Talzu, had held him, had loved him thus since Histuman had died.

"Tonight," the lion whispered, after, to the dog who lay in his arms, head on his breast, clutching him tightly. "I must at last go and seek your Oracle after all." Ouanaxes gently stroked Talzu's ears, and if the lion felt the dog freeze, for just a moment, he acknowledged it not.

"What is it you seek to know? I may be able to answer it myself."

"Alas, I ask not after your heart, my friend. That," the pirate kissed him, slowly, gently, "I mean to win wholly myself. I'll not suffer fate's interference there. No, someone advised me, when I first arrived, that the oracle might tell me how long it were safe to remain here. I needed to be ready, if it's an unfriendly answer I'm given, to go at once."

"And you lay with me now." Talzu's brow furrowed, "knowing you might be about to leave?"

"It was the last thing," Ouanaxes smiled, "I had need to see completed, ere I could bear to depart."

Talzu had but barely enough time to make it back to the sanctuary, don his robes and mask, and calm himself before Ouanaxes came to seek the Oracle.

"If you falsify prophecy, boy, because you wish to keep him..." Histuman would have whispered ominously in his ear, had the former oracle been there, "then may your spirit never again know peace."

"I know!" hissed Talzu, without moving. "Distracting me will not help!"

The two nearest acolytes shared a worried look, behind their masks. But there was no time for concern, so the one went to the entrance, to meet the pirate, to command him to speak but once, and that to ask the question he had brought.

It twisted Talzu's heart within him to see the lion, so near, yet be unseen, be unknown. But Talzu's heart was not what was wanted here, was it? Talzu was not who this man had come to seek. He sought the Oracle, did he not? And Ouanaxes needed the Oracle, no matter what the Oracle had to say, not Talzu.

That thought proved enough to stiffen his will and empty his mind. He breathed in the fumes, steadily and silently, and felt fate fill him like a rising sap in spring fills the unfurling leaves. Just in time.

"If I make harbor here, if I return here, from my raiding, when my ship and men have need," the lion wore a cloak across his shoulders, drab and rough. Perhaps he meant to be disguised, seem less the warrior, more the peasant? Or perhaps he meant to seem humble before whatever divinity moved in the darkness before him? "will it remain for us a safe refuge?" But in fact it only made him seem the larger and more solid, like a wall hung with tapestries, "Or will we be discovered here?"

He was not the only one in this room, was he, whose concealing garments made him into something larger than he was? But of the two of them, the dog could see through the embellishing disguise to the man beneath, tense and uncertain, and the lion could not. That was, perhaps, the burden of being an oracle.

This was the last thought in Talzu's head before prophecy chased it out, to rattle about the inside of the mask, while the oracle declaimed,

"Thy throne upon the sunset's pillars calls
In vain. From these obscure haunts you shall flee
No more. Forsake you all that you could be,
And frail old age you may yet live to see
Beneath the hand of these oracular halls."

Surprised relief flashed across the pirate's face. Whatever he had expected to hear, it was not that. Talzu's head swam, his senses returned, and he first credited them not, for he thought he saw Ouanaxes on his knees, arms spread and palms raised in supplication. And only when the lion raised his face again, opened his mouth, eyes shining, for effusive thanks that never came because he remembered, just in time, he was not to speak again, did the Oracle understand that somehow his soothsaying had indeed been in both their favors.

There had been no need to adulterate or bend it to keep his beloved. Fate, at least the piece of it Ouanaxes had asked, the piece Talzu had spoken, had been on their side.

The lion left the sanctuary the one way, his step lightened, his eyes lifted up. The dog, after a time, left it the other way, shaken and scarce able to believe what his own mouth had said.

Talzu found himself collapsed beneath the fruitless pomegranates he had once tended. One of his acolytes pressed his shoulder, gently, relieved to see he yet drew breath.

"You spoke true, lad?" Histuman would have helped him to his feet by now, if he had been here. "That was prophesy indeed?"

"I did," Talzu croaked, and the acolyte startled, for he knew not to whom Talzu spoke, "It came on me so strong that I couldn't have resisted if I'd tried."

"Why then, rejoice," Histuman would have said.

"Please, can you stand?" whispered the acolyte.

"I will try." Talzu answered both of them.

"Some good fortune even we do not foresee, so it may as well fall to you, eh?" Histuman would have shook his head, baffled, as he was left behind in the tiny side garden to think on how strange the ways of fate had become.

And as Talzu let himself collapse into bed, into sleep, he was grateful Histuman was not there to ask what else he had seen, of which he had spoken not a word.

Now step forward, in your imaginings, a month or so. The season had turned, and Ouanaxes announced the winds had turned with them. Those ships which went north and east, he said, bearing gold and incense from the God-Kings in the south, have weathered the summer becalming and now mean to bear back cargos of rare metals and jewels, from the unknown shores of the north and whatever nomad warlords they could find to trade with there. So the season was come for piracy.

"I will bring you back," Ouanaxes bid farewell to his dog, on the shore, with a great abundance of kisses, "a gold ring for your tail. Set with amethysts, maybe."

"I would rather," Talzu returned every kiss his lion gave him, "you bring me back your self, safe and unhurt." But there was little fear in him. Three among his crew had visited the Oracle, the night before, and all had asked if any among the pirates would be slain. Each time the answer had been no.

"Still, amethysts would look most striking against your fur!" Ouanaxes laughed, and his eyes glinted, and he went aboard.

Once the boat took the surf, and passed the breakers, Talzu went to the high bluff, to watch it drive west on a score and six oars until the sail caught the wind to carry them toward the sunset.

"You said yourself," Histuman would have reassured him, "he will not be harmed."

"Aye," said Talzu. "But it will be wearisome, waiting for him to return."

Over the next fortnight, an architect came to ask if the hill on which he planned a fortified place for a local despot were firm and stable, a rich matriarch came asking to which gods she should make sacrifice so that her yet-to-be-born grandchildren would live healthy and prosperous, and a lovesick young fool came wanting to know if a woman to whom he had never spoken loved him.

Each night, after he had answered them, Talzu's dreams were a torment.

The first, he dreamed of Ouanaxes, robed and crowned, seated in a high place to deliver verdicts both just and merciful.

In the next, he dreamed of Ouanaxes bearing a sacred torch, on a quest through haunted mountains, to relight the altar fires at an abandoned temple and appease the curse of an angry god on a whole people.

On the last, he dreamed of a city fully in celebration, dancing and singing in the marketplace and on all the rooftops, as their prince, long promised, returned from exile to take the throne and restore peace and plenty. And below, Ouanaxes's ship drew into the harbor, stately, on sea as smooth as beaten metal and clear as glass, under showers of silver apple petals cast upon the breeze.

"Sleep has failed you, lad," Histuman would have said, if he could have sat beside Talzu, "and this is a poor place for breaking your fast."

"True," the dog clutched his breakfast cup in the sanctuary garden as the stewed grains and sweet herbs in it grew cold, "but it faces west."

"When other men are troubled by dreams of ill portent," Histuman would have sighed, "they consult an oracle."

Talzu scowled at where the old wolf would have been sitting.

"Break your fast first, lad." Histuman would have said. "What will your pirate think if you waste away to nothing before he returns?"

Talzu's scowl deepened, but he gulped down his gruel and curds. "Did you ever," he said, "know more than what you were asked?"

"Aye," Histuman's voice would have grown cautious and grave. "Rare it was, but from time to time there would come one on whom the fates had laid a finger. Those with great and noble destinies, or monstrous and horrific ones. And whatsoever they actually asked, some part of the deeds they would someday do would bear down upon me like a deluge."

Talzu bit his lip.

"I have heard, indeed, I have seen, what may happen if it be too much." Histuman would have relaxed easily into lecture, "I was not apprenticed here, you know. I learned at a temple on the mainland, and that land is thick with heroes. When they would come, my teacher, an old and august woman, a leopard, she would sometime snap, deliver them prophesies unasked for, that she had not the strength to hold back. Many was the time they could not even speak their question entire. It became, I think, a part of her fame—that you might be told not what you wanted to hear, but what you needed to know—but it broke her in the end. Her soul could bear the weight no more. And that is why, when I came to the mastery of my foresight, I sought out an obscure sanctuary, to unknown gods, where few would think to bring anything so pestilent as a hero's destiny."

Histuaman would have fallen silent, then, on first noticing how tight Talzu gripped the cup, how wide the dog's eyes were, and how fixed on the horizon toward which Ouanaxes had gone. And the old wolf, who would have known better than to ask what his student had seen, would have only put an arm around the dog's shoulders and held him close.

The day the ship returned, Talzu was awake before the sunrise, and down waiting at the harbor hours before he sighted it.

Ouanaxes was standing on the prow, leaning forward. He was too distant for what he shouted when he saw Talzu waiting to be heard, but he dove off and swam ashore without waiting for the ship to make land, so his feelings were not difficult to infer.

It would perhaps be thought very shocking, in these days, for man to kiss one he loved in full view of all the island and a shipful of his sailors, but those were simpler times.

When they at last lay, peacefully, blissfully, in one another's arms, all appetites sated—which had taken no little doing to accomplish—Ouanaxes kissed Talzu again, on the side of the neck, and said "I suspect it's as sorely as I missed you, that you have missed me."

"That may be," Talzu said. "But it's also that you are a man whom it is a joy to welcome."

"Oh, I am welcome, then?"

"Must I welcome you still further, to make you understand?"

"Let it never be said," the lion nuzzled him, "that I rejected offered hospitality."

The raid, indeed, had been a brilliant success. They had come upon a barge heavy-laden with tribute, bound for a warrior queen—who purposed to build a palace that outshone her father's in splendor—in an attempt to win the allyship of her armies. Because these armies were so desperately needed, no warriors had been spared for the ship, and they had taken the whole cargo with but little bloodshed. They unloaded all manner of rich and comfortable furniture—as well as the to-be-expected gold, silver, fine patterned linens, incense and spices, and all manner of jewels—and the homes of Ocrit Isle were suddenly all more gracious than they had ever before dreamed of being.

And there was indeed a tailring of amethysts set in gold for Talzu, as promised.

But for all the time the pirate and the oracle spent in eachother's arms, rather than seeing to the treasure, you would have thought neither of them cared a bean for any of it.

The next three years passed much as has been described. There was plunder and victory on the sea, and there was love and comfort on the return.

For the dog's part, when Ouanaxes was gone the dreams of his beloved's glory and heroism, if he but left him and his isle, would

haunt him. Then when the lion was in his arms again, they would recede like the tide, always threatening a return.

"So, when I am away," Ouanaxes said, "you are some manner of priest at the sanctuary of the Oracle?" His head lay in Talzu's lap, in the whitewashed brick cottage the pirate had taken, a half hour's walk from the harbor, to be his dwelling on Ocrit Isle.

"If I were," Talzu stroked the lion's ears, "I would be bound by sacred oaths not to reveal it."

Here discourse was obliged to wait for a time, while Ouanaxes's tongue attended to more important matters.

"I do recall," the lion nuzzled the belly that cradled his face, "a number of mysterious fellows, their faces all hidden, who attended my audience when I went. If I were to ask if you had been one among them, what then might you say?"

"I suppose," Talzu laughed, "I would ask you to tell me about your country. Where did the journey that brought you to my bed begin?"

So Ouanaxes, who was no fool and could see plainly what was plain enough, moved up beside Talzu on the bed, and told the dog of an entire city that was a palace, of the topless towers, and the temples on the high places. Of eating melons cooled in springwater and meat skewers hot from the grill in the market square, of the warm and steaming public baths, and the festival parades on the holy days dedicated to the queen of the night sky, and the lady of the underworld, and the sacred king of the harvest between them. And if his voice grew low and wistful, heavy with nostalgia, and if he slowed to a halt, and shied away from any mention of why he was not there now, or how when folk spoke of the absent prince they oft used the words 'banished' or 'exile,' then Talzu mentioned it not.

They each understood what it was for the other to have secrets.

"I understand what you are doing, lad," Histuman would have said, "but do you?"

Talzu turned not away from Ouanaxes's ship, departing on what the pirate said was likely the last sortie before winter storms came to shut all the merchants in their ports.

"You have not said you saw more of his fate," the old wolf would have followed Talzu as he strode up the path, past the cottage where he meant to spend the winter with his lion, and into the forest toward the heights and the sanctuary. "But neither have you made it hard to guess. Will you tell me, at least, what grim future you fear in your dreams? What keeps you from restful sleep every night you are not with him? What does my shade linger with you for, if not to give you counsel?"

Talzu strode faster.

"If some danger awaits him, or even death inescapable," Histuman would have been snarling by now, "what good does it do, to keep this from him?"

"I saw he was going to leave!" Talzu turned on his heel in the sanctuary gates to howl back at the empty forest. "I saw the grand and glorious destiny—throne, triumph, and a hero's renown—that awaits him if he leaves this place and never returns! Fate means him to be much more than mine, and by the gods, if any man knows he can indeed be much more, it is I!"

Histuman would have been too shaken to reply.

"Yet as long as I do not tell him, as long as the oracle stays silent," Talzu shot a disgusted look at the hall where he had stood, masked and robed, to tell Ouanaxes it would be safe to dwell here, "he has no wish to leave! He is happy with me, I am happy with him, and I'd be glad to count whatsoever glory might have been as worth nothing, as a thing that will never exist and therefore matters not, if it were not that I cannot unsee what I saw!" The dog could not keep a whine out of his voice, "Every dream grows clearer. In each of them he is more glorious. And in none of them am I anywhere to be found."

"Is that not his choice to make?" Histuman would have drawn near, tentatively, as if trying not to startle away a frightened animal, "If you lay the two futures before him, and let him decide?"

"He will decide to stay, because he will decide not to hurt me."

"You have foreseen this?"

"I do not need to."

"Then," Histuman would have said, "all will be well. Why this woe?"

"Because he should go! It is an unjust thing to deprive a rightful king of his kingdom, is it not? Is that not what I am doing, old man?" Talzu retreated into the sanctuary proper, hushed the concerned acolyte with a gesture, and strode into the hall. The braziers were unlit, the mask set aside in an alcove shrine. "And what of the fates? What plagues will they send on my head, or on his, if I continue to defy them?"

"If you wish," Histuman would have stood by the mask he had worn in life, one paw on it, wistfully, "I will play the oracle for you, lad. You journeyed to the sanctuary, you came within, you asked your question."

Talzu could hear his own heartbeat in his ears as he nodded.

Then, without ceremony—perhaps the dead need not the things, to see fate, that do the living—Histuman would have recited,

"Trade crown for heart for crown, and be forevermore alone.
Lose all thy self within the masks you did not ask to bear,
But none but those outside of them can read what masks fate wears.
Let him that speaketh fate to men have no fate of his own."

If there had been an acolyte who had the gift to hear what Histuman would have prophesied, then perhaps for some additional alms, beyond that he had paid to be admitted to this place—and Talzu indeed felt he had paid much, by now—someone could have offered an interpretation.

But there was none but himself.

"What did that mean?" he asked, quietly.

"I suppose," Histuman would have sighed, as he gestured for Talzu to follow him into the garden, "you have not foreseen wrongly. If he leaves, if he returns wherever it was he came from, he finds glory there. And aye, that may be what the fates intended for him."

"But if he does," mulled Talzu, "he loses himself in kingship, in the mask of it? The same as I was becoming nothing but the oracle, ere he arrived."

"A likely reading, lad," Histuman would have nodded, "what make you of 'those outside' who 'read the masks fate wears'?"

"I suppose that means us." Talzu said. "Means me. In order to foretell fate, I had to shake loose of it, to be without it. That is why all that can be interpreted of what you said is about him, not me."

"If all I can do is foresee of him, then I shall tell you what I foresee." Histuman would have taken a good breath, gathered his thoughts. "On the one path, he leaves you, and all is as you have foretold. Glory and a throne, the kind of destiny all men dream of and few attain to. On the other, he remains with you all his days, and those are unremarkable. Eventually the petty kingdoms know better than to send their ships past here, they will have learned to fear the peoples they meet on the sea. By then he will scarce care. He will have brought wealth enough to make Ocrit Isle a comfortable place for himself, for the one he loves, to live out the rest of their days."

Talzu wore the face of a man who expects a trap.

"The dreams, on this path, either fade, taking much of your foresight with them, or they grow until your mind snaps under the strain. And one day," Histuman would have growled, "some strange and foolish people may discover your forgotten tomb, look on your bones and his, lying paw in paw and arm in arm, and say 'they must have been brothers.' " He would have pointed a finger at Talzu without looking at the young dog, "And it is you, lad, that must choose, not he. He came to you, the oracle though he knew it not. And aye, he had a glorious destiny before him, but if keeping him is what you choose, and all that comes with it, why, is that not a destiny too? Is that not a path the fates have set before the man, just as much as is the glory you saw?"

"And perhaps," Talzu whispered quietly, "I would rather be broken in his arms, than whole and alone?"

Histuman would have had nothing to say to that. Which is hardly to be wondered at, since he was not there. He was dead.

The dog squeezed his eyes shut against his tears, managed to contain them. "I would you had not died. That I were still only your apprentice. That I could know, if I let Ouanaxes go, I would still have

your bed, and your arms, to take comfort in." And Talzu hoped Histuman would have said something like, 'But then you would not be Oracle. And you are a greater Oracle than I.' But there was nobody there, save himself, to say it.

Thus did Talzu set his shoulders, and dry his tears, and turn to do as a great oracle would do: To choose the future, by choosing which prophecy to say, and which to leave unspoken.

So it was, alas, that I must tell you: when Ouanaxes returned—empty handed, as he had said, the season of storms when none could safely set sail was all but upon them—it was to see Talzu waiting, as ever, at a high place above the harbor. But this time it was without eagerness.

"The oracle has summoned you," he told the lion, his face all concern, "they say there is something they must say."

"You cannot warn me what it is?"

The dog shook his head.

"It is uncommon, is it not," Ouanaxes ran a paw through his mane, and oh the way the fur rolled over the muscles was a precious and bittersweet sight, "for the Oracle to call for a man? Usually tis pilgrims who seek them out."

"I have never known it to happen before," agreed Talzu.

"When?"

"As soon as can be."

"Very well," Ouanaxes breathed in his courage, like the hero Talzu had foreseen him into, "lead the way."

When they reached the sanctuary, Talzu stopped him. "You must wait here. An acolyte will come to fetch you, in the Oracle's own time."

"Will that acolyte be you?" Ouanaxes asked, very earnestly.

"I..." Talzu shook his head, "...cannot say."

The oracle was lighting one of the braziers when the lion was admitted. He had not had to wait very long. The room was lighter than usual, for rarely was a pilgrim permitted to see it during the day.

"Hail. I was told," Ouanaxes went to one knee, "you would have words with me?"

The oracle nodded, slowly, for they had to be careful with the enormous mask. No moon was overhead, no sacred herbs burned in the braziers, no rites had been performed. But it seemed, today, such things were not needed. The oracle spoke, quietly, casually, as would two citizens who met in the street:

"Why do you tarry, King Ouanaxes, here?
Thy house sits empty, and thy crown unclaimed.
Thy uncle is unseated and undone
And, jeered out of the orphan's gate, is fled.
His treachery can no more threaten thee.
The goddess waits, upon her lantern hill,
To crown again her sacred king, and cries:
"Why do you tarry, King Ouanaxes, there?"

The lion flinched back, as if he had been struck. He opened his mouth, thought better of it, closed it again.

Someone observing very close might have seen the oracle's mask tremble.

Finally, Ouanaxes gathered himself again, bowed graciously, and made for the door. But when he reached it, he stopped. "I know it's forbidden to speak more than once, but it would not be the first time I dared do what I must, for I knew it was banishment for me already, and nothing had I to lose. So I will say: may I know if Talzu is here among you?"

The oracle turned their back.

"Well, whether or not he is, I would say this: I will never forget him. I swear it."

The acolytes all looked to the oracle, who whispered "It will be made known to him."

If any noticed the tail, visible beneath the oracle's robes, with a ring of amethysts set in gold, none dared remark on it.

Talzu walked the path down through the cedars utterly alone.

It would be well, he supposed, to retrieve all his worldly possessions from the whitewashed cottage in which he had meant to spend

the winter, return them to the hut behind the sanctuary. Without his beloved, what use had he for the place?

The dog froze as he stepped through the doorway. "You are yet here?"

"You thought I would go," replied the lion sitting on the bed, awake with a lamp though it was after midnight, "before I saw you at least once more?"

"I feared-" was all the dog managed to say before the lion was upon him, clutching him tight, kissing him with a desperate hunger.

"Nay," sobbed the lion, between kisses, "never. To be with you is the last thing I must see completed, before I may leave."

In the morning, the Pirate King gathered his men on the shore.

He spoke to them of his homeland, which many of them shared, and told them the tale of his banishment, as a youth, by his mother's brother. He warned them they might face dangers—for it was nigh to winter, and the season of storms where only fools and desperate men set sail was upon them—and battle at journey's end, for who could say how many of his uncle's party might yet remain? But any man who sailed with him, he would regard forever as a hero, and if the gods were with them and he did reclaim his throne, their names would be etched in stone to be remembered for as long as his house endured.

Alas, no, I can tell you none of those names now.

He would not command any of them go. "Let any man speak," said Ouanaxes, "and then I will lead those who will follow, and I shall think no less of any who choose to remain, for aye," and he could not keep his eyes from straying to the high bluff above the harbor, where Talzu watched, "Ocrit has been a home to us indeed."

In the end, some stayed, and some of the islanders of Ocrit left. For such is the way of the lives woven for mortals by the fates: they intersect, they tangle with eachother, and never do they meet but some go their separate ways. And yes, it was a hard voyage. The storms were dire, but some god of the winds must have been with them. For yes, they arrived safely. The lookouts on the lantern hill spotted the burnished copper prow and saffron sails. And yes in-

deed, Ouanaxes entered into his city, amid rejoicing, under showers of silver apple petals, and he relit the altar fires, and was crowned, and ruled both justly and with mercy. Just as the oracle of a distant island had once foreseen.

And some have said that when the time and signs were right, the dog left the island. Left behind the oracle's mask. Another acolyte took it up but had not the gift, and the Oracle of Ocrit Isle was no more renowned, faded into curiosity and mere fortune-telling, until it was forgotten. But Talzu, they say, journeyed across the seas and found his hero once again, found the city he ruled, and there they lived as many years of destiny and noble deeds, in eachother's arms, as mortals might dare to have.

But others have said not. Have said that is all lies of poets, a drop of honey at the end, to make the tale more palatable. They say Talzu remained at his duty, passed the rest of his days as Oracle, though from that day on when he took off the mask he went not to the market or the tavern, but to the high bluffs to watch the sun set over the western seas. And he slept no more in the hut behind the sanctuary. Though it were a longer walk, each night, he made his dwelling instead in a whitewashed cottage, about half an hour's walk from the harbor.

And still others say they both wander the earth to this day, seeking one another. For being reunited is the last task they must see complete, ere they depart this life together.

But I cannot tell you which of these, if any, is the truth.

I am no oracle.

Worn-Out Tools

by Huskyteer

The grass rustled.

Bont flicked his ears, and his beady, gentle eyes blinked. Just the wind, blowing across the steppe. He kept walking, aiming for the village below the mountains. His steady three-toed plod had brought him little by little across the vast distance, and he was nearly at his destination.

"Hairy one!"

Bont turned to face the voice, snorting. A young hyena, all legs and teeth, erupted from the grass. Bont snorted again and lowered his head. The forward and greater of his two horns, as long as the hyena's body, sliced his view of the enemy in two. He blew out through his lips.

"Hairy one!" The second attack came from his left flank, but as he wheeled to face it, a third and fourth hyena closed in on his right. The four formed a box around Bont, galloping in to snap at him whenever his ample rear was exposed.

He wheeled and stamped, stamped and wheeled. The hyenas danced around him, and although they backed off when he lowered his head, they were gradually wearing out his strength. Bont tightened his grip on the skin sack he carried. It would have held all four hyenas comfortably, if he could have gathered them into it.

The biggest hyena, growing bold, sprang on his back and clung to his wool. Its teeth gnashed at Bont's hump, but couldn't penetrate

the fur and fat. Bont shook it off. It rolled on the ground and jumped back up, thrashing its tail.

Bont broke into a lumbering run. Hyenas bounced off him, scrabbling for purchase. When they grew too close to his front, he swept his horns low, tripping them. In his time he had gored lions with his primary horn; broken skulls with a blow from the shorter secondary. Yelps and hoots accompanied every swing he made. His eyes, made for seeing all around, caught movement everywhere he looked.

They were so fast, moving over the grass like clouds in the sky! The spots and shading of their coats let them hide in clumps of grass or flat against the earth, bamboozling Bont so he could no longer count their number.

The village was close. He aimed his horns at the collection of skin shelters and snorted.

He stumbled as the smallest hyena rushed between his legs, and fell on the trampled pathway with a crash that shook the ground. Dust filled his eyes and his nose. The hyenas, triumphant, bounced on his hump and chased each other up and down his back.

"You cubs stop that!"

The mother hyena spoke in grunts and gestures, but her meaning was clear. The four cubs scattered, but the largest was not quick enough, and she smacked it with the side of her muzzle. Bared teeth clonked against its skull. Bont, who reared a single calf each year with his wife and would have died before he hurt it, winced.

"Welcome, hairy one," the mother hyena smiled.

Bont stood, brushing earth from his knees, and followed her to the largest of the skin shelters. The hyena village was bigger than last year, and it had pushed further north as the steppe receded. It was hard for Bont to see pictures in his mind, but as he looked at the sheets of sunbleached skin, flapping stiffly against branch props, he thought of the deer people, their soft eyes, and the graceful dances they performed.

He lifted the entrance flap and ducked to enter. He sat, and was brought water in a skin bag. The other hyenas entered one by one: the toolmaker, the hunters, and the ones who looked after the cubs.

Bont thought there were more hunters, more cubs than before, but he soon reached the limit of his counting.

"I would like some of the small things that hold small things, and a new grind stick," Bont said when he was refreshed.

"Skin pouches and a pestle, got it, got it." The mother hyena nodded enthusiastically.

Since he started his trading visits as a young woolly rhino, the hyenas had changed leader more times than Bont had toes and horns. Back then, he had understood their speech as well as they understood his. Now, they used noises when they spoke to each other that Bont could not follow. The old, simple words and gestures were for cubs, and for him.

"And what do you have for us?" asked the mother hyena. The cubs had come sneaking in along with the adults. The four that were hers, the ones who had hunted Bont, lolled panting around her.

Bont opened his skin bag. It was hyena-made, and it held many things, more than he could carry even though his hands were large. Inside, smaller pouches held herbs and mosses so they wouldn't get all mixed up.

The hyenas were so smart! They fitted flint to wooden shafts, like teeth that could bite their prey from afar, or chew the branches from trees. They made containers so they could carry and store their food and water. They made shelters for sleep, because their hides weren't thick and woolly like his. But they couldn't seek out plants the way Bont could, and they didn't have his nose for separating the ones that harmed from those that healed.

He showed the contents of his pack, spreading the dried plants out or holding the pouch of seeds up to be sniffed.

"For stomachs," he told them by pointing to his own, "for heads, for bones. This one stops bleeding. This one stops wounds going bad. This one stops pain. And *this* one—" His hand hesitated over the small, dark leaves. "This one...stops. When there is nothing more you can do."

They ate, when the bargaining was done. Bont was brought fruit in a stone bowl. The hyena mother conveyed that it was the four cubs

who had gathered them for Bont's arrival, when the wind brought his scent to the village. Bont rumbled his approval and patted heads.

The toolmaker brought him what he wanted, and a new thing, too: like a spear, but with a bigger point and short shaft. The toolmaker showed that it was for digging, instead of Bont's horn. Now he could pull up delicate plants without crushing them.

Bont was fond of the toolmaker, who spoke little and watched everything. Like Bont, he looked for things and he found them, but unlike plants, the things the toolmaker sought did not exist until he found them with his mind and made them real.

The smallest hyena cub crept close to Bont and snuggled up against his side. His fingers worked the soft fur of its neck ruff. The cub stretched, splaying its overlarge paws, and laid its chin in Bont's hand.

When stomachs were full and eyes were closing, the mother leaned close to Bont.

"And the other plant?" she asked. "The danger one?"

Gently, so as not to disturb the cub at his side, Bont reached for his bag and brought out the greyish moss with its strong, bitter smell.

"Not too much," he cautioned, breaking off a tiny piece that would suit a hyena, with its light body and quick heartbeat.

"Or die," the hyena mother confirmed.

"No. Too much and come back without, without..." he tapped his head, where his mind lived.

She took the supply he gave, and left to conceal it in some secret corner.

The hyena cub slept, its head in Bont's palm. Its ears flicked and its closed eyes crinkled as it dreamed. So many thoughts in a little soft head that Bont could break like an egg!

It was warmer here than in Bont's high, far home; warmer than it had been when he first began visiting. Too warm to lie under skins, surrounded by fur and hot breath. He slid his hand out from under the sleeping cub and moved carefully between the sprawled bodies, back through the skin flap into the breeze.

He turned his head so the curved length of his horns caught the setting sun. The forward, longer than his skull, was chipped and worn from a lifetime of uprooting trees, fighting lions, and keeping other men away from his wife.

The horns were heavy, and his wool was heavy too. He lay on the ground and closed his eyes against the orange sun.

#

He woke to the sound of many paws running, and to yips and yelps of concern. Every hyena was in motion—in and out of the shelters, sniffing and calling. Trying to follow them all with his eyes made Bont dizzy.

When the mother hyena loped by, her eyes wide with worry and her tongue hanging out, Bont stopped her with an outstretched arm and pressed her haunches to the ground. He made her drink from his water bag and he asked what was wrong.

She conveyed that her cub—yes, the smallest, no, not the biggest or the middle-sized ones—was gone. Lost. No scent to follow. The hairy one will help look, yes? He is big and he is good at finding things. The smallest cub likes him.

Bont's eyes and nose were not as good as the hyenas', nor could his legs cover distances quickly. He could travel further than they could, yes, but too slowly to be of use to a lost cub. How long had it been missing? Hyena bodies, warm and small, cooled more quickly than Bont's large frame. And the cub was smaller than small. He wiggled his fingers as if he could still feel the flowerhead weight in his hand.

Bont was not good at seeing pictures in his mind. But he was good with plants.

"I will help," he promised.

He found a quiet spot in the shade, behind the largest shelter. The calls and footfalls of the hunting hyenas were fainter here. He opened his pack and took out the danger moss.

He had warned the mother hyena about it: how it could take you on a journey and return you changed, a shell with the nut gone. Bont had used it as many times as he had fingers and he had always come

back, but he could feel that a little of himself was taken away each time, as the pestle that grinds the herbs grinds itself away too.

He broke off a section of the dried moss. Crumbs fell from it to the ground, and he carefully collected them on a damp finger so no cub could lick them up. He placed the moss in his mouth and chewed.

When it was reduced to a wet, dense clump, he tucked it with his tongue between his bottom lip and his teeth. His mouth tingled from the chewing. He settled into a comfortable sit and felt the numbness spread from his lower jaw to his neck and spine. His arms and legs got heavy, and the weight of his horns forced his head down on to his chest.

First he was falling. The ground was above him and he fell into the sky, and it was more frightening than falling the other way because there was nothing there to end the fall.

The world flipped and he was looking down from above. Had a bird of prey taken the cub? Was that the message of the moss? He saw the hyena village below him, and his self, still and calm in the middle of all the activity. With a tug to his stomach, he was lifted higher. Now he could see the whole steppe. There were his wife and this year's calf, tiny as insects but clear in every detail. He reached out to touch them, but they disappeared into the grass.

The steppe shrank. The large people, like Bont's kind and the mammoth, retreated with the grasses, huddling together, dropping in number until none remained. Meanwhile, the hyena village grew, pushing up into the former cold places, and the dancing deer people ran from the hyenas. Soon the hyenas were so many, the deer so few, that the hunters became fighters who killed hyenas from other villages and took their food.

Now the tents in the village lay empty. They fell and disappeared. The hyenas were gone like the mammoth and woolly rhino.

Too far. I need near. I need *now*. He thrashed his limbs, trying to swim back to the hyena village and his body. Instead, the sky over the vanished steppe went from blue to purple to black. Bont was closed in by walls. He stretched his arms and touched rock. At his feet, a small whimper told him he had found the hyena cub.

"I am coming for you," he told it. He tried to pet its ears, but his hand passed through. The cub shivered and tucked itself up even smaller. Its nose was to a crack in the rock, where air and a little light came in.

The cub was alive, but where was it? He pressed himself to the cave wall, trying to push through. Something caught at his throat and he knew he had swallowed some of the moss.

There was light, so much light. He was outside the cave. With the moss fizzing inside him, there were more colours in the world than he could normally see. Everything was bright and clear, as if the noon sun shone on it.

Where was this place? He didn't recognise it. And how had the little one got in? He looked hard at the rocks, thinking. There was no sign that a cave was there.

Look up, the moss told him.

He saw a fresh pale scar on the side of the mountain, where no plants grew. The moss in his mind told him that part of the mountain had fallen to block the cave entrance and trap the littlest cub.

Who knew that rocks could act that way? The hyenas could picture many things, like skin shelters and stone bowls, but none of them had pictured this. And now he had to get that picture from his mind into theirs. He stared at the mountains. He must hold on to the shape of them, to the landscape around, so the hyenas knew where to go. This was their land, not his steppe.

Bont felt that he had left himself a long way behind. He struggled as if something sticky was holding him down. He sat behind his own eyes, unable to move.

Too deep.

Too far.

Too...

High, faint yips found his ears, and he felt himself being nipped and nuzzled. He opened his eyes and saw a blur, which shaped itself into the mother hyena.

"Hairy one!" she said, nudging him anxiously with her nose. She spoke with movements of her head and paws, and with small noises:

she'd thought he was dead! Did he take the danger moss? What about her cub? The scent of her, behind her words, told Bond she feared the cub was dead also.

Alive. Trapped. Let me tell you the place and you can find it. He used his arms to make the shapes he had seen. The picture was already fading from his mind as the moss left him, but the mother hyena was nodding.

"Yes. Yes! We know it! We will go!"

#

The hunters came with them, although Bont tried to explain there was nothing for them to hunt. The toolmaker, too. And the other cubs could not be kept away. Before the journey was halfway done, Bont was carrying two in his arms. How had the smallest come such a way by itself? It must have walked all night.

There was the mountain with the fresh scar, and there was the cave, and the rock that blocked the entrance. The mother called out, and put her head to the rock. From her face, the smallest cub had called back, but it was too faint for Bont's little ears.

The hunters prowled and sniffed, but could find no other way to get inside. It must be the rock. They put their paws on it. It did not move. They looked at Bont.

Hyenas could not do everything, and that made Bont feel happy. He looked at the rock. It was bigger than he was, and when he put his arms around it, he could not shift it either. It didn't even wobble.

He dug the tip of his forward horn into the earth, as if the rock was a plant he could uproot. The strain as he pushed made his jaws go numb and rigid. This way would not work either.

Bont walked backwards from the rock. He lined it up so his forward horn divided it into two equal parts in his view. He lowered his head.

The mountain echo turned the noise of his feet into thunder as he charged. The rock loomed up, and he closed his eyes.

He struck where he had aimed, the base of his forward horn smacking into the rock. The shock shuddered through his head and neck, and his hump trembled as it absorbed the blow.

Bont stepped back, panting. The rock had not moved. He must start from further away, run faster. He scraped the ground with a foot and paced away, counting one step for each of his toes.

The second strike sent pain shooting through his head, and little bright lights. The rock had not moved. He shook himself and tried again.

The third time, he struck wrong, and the rock tricked him so he fell. His lip was cut and bleeding. The rock had not moved.

It was harder to raise himself after he fell again. The rock had not moved. He staggered as he ran. His ears were full of bird noises and the rock wavered into two rocks. When he struck it and fell once more, the hunters leaped upon him to stop him trying again.

They poured water from a skin bag over his face, and squirted it into his mouth. The mother licked the cut on his lip with her tongue and it stopped hurting. But Bont's mind was full of the cub in the cave. Had it been scared by the banging and crashing? Or did it know Bont was trying to rescue it?

The hunters crowded the rock, trying to move it between them. But there was no room for them to push all at once in the same direction. The toolmaker barked at them to stop. When they paid no attention, he came and lay by Bont.

He had the same eyes as the smallest cub, Bont noticed, brown and gentle, and brimming with thoughts. He gazed at the rock, then back to Bont, looking up and down the curved length of the rhino's forward horn. His forehead wrinkled with the strain of all the thoughts behind it.

The mother hyena put her paws on the rock wall of the cave, as if she could touch her cub through it. Bont watched her, his chin on the ground to relieve the weight of his horns and his aching head.

The toolmaker's paw hovered above Bont's forward horn. The gentle brown eyes asked permission, and Bont nodded. He had no feeling there, so he could not sense the rough pads as they traced the dip and rise of the horn. With gestures, the toolmaker asked Bont to root up a tuft of grass from the soil in front of them.

Bont couldn't see why, but he obliged. Why not amuse the toolmaker? He was useless for anything else. He dug the tip of his horn into the earth and pulled the grass up from it with a tearing sound.

The toolmaker seemed delighted. He jumped up and began searching for something.

While his back was turned, Bont replaced the grass and covered the roots over.

The toolmaker returned with a smooth stone that filled both his paws. He placed it under Bont's forward horn, in the middle where the curve was lowest. He pointed to another tuft of grass.

The job was easier with the stone to rock his horn up and down. Bont understood, and he wanted to try the big rock immediately, but the toolmaker made him wait. He tried the stone closer to Bont's head, then closer to the rock, until he found the place where the balance was best.

Then, with the help of the hunters, the toolmaker found a bigger stone. They rolled it in front of Bont. He rested his forward horn on it and dug the tip under the rock that blocked the cave.

So many rocks and stones and people and places to keep track of! But all Bont needed to do was lift and push. The toolmaker had given him what he needed.

He rolled his shoulders, sending strength from his legs and weight from his hump into his head and horn. Resting on the stone instead of the ground gave his horn more room to swing upward, and the weight of the rock felt less.

It was still a great weight, though. Bont pushed until lights floated in his eyes again, bracing his hands and feet against the hard earth. When his feet slipped, the toolmaker scrabbled little holds for them in the ground. He pushed as if he could see the cub on the other side, as if it was his own small family trapped in the dark.

There was a dull crack, and Bont's head jerked. He fell on his side, and in the flashes in his eyes he saw his wife and calf. Something was different and wrong, so different and wrong that he could not tell what it was. He blinked away dust and saw the smallest cub scamper from a black gap in the mountain where the rock had moved.

He was not hurt? In spite of the shock and the noise, his limbs were straight, and he could turn his head.

His head. The white line of his forward horn, like a tree with no branches dividing his world, was gone from his sight. He saw it lying on the ground, a dead thing bloody at the base where it had snapped away from his head.

Bont had never seen the toolmaker so agitated. The hyena indicated with pats and waving paws that perhaps they could stick his horn back on? Or make Bont a spear, such a good spear, longer than his horn and straight instead of curved?

"No," Bont said. He lifted his head. It felt light, and he raised it higher. He stood straight. "I don't need. I will last as long as I last."

The other cubs were already playing with his horn, jumping over it and chewing it. The toolmaker moved to stop them, but Bont reached them first and picked up this piece of himself, the familiar become strange.

He handled it for a few moments, running his fingers along the chips and scratches. Then he held it out to the cubs. They took it in their mouths, fought over it and ran about with it, their tails high.

The mother hyena's voice was full of love and fear and anger. As she held and licked the smallest cub, she was asking it why. What had made it run from the village and cover such a huge distance? The squeaked and snuffled response was not one Bont could understand.

"She says she wants to be a finder and travel with things to trade," the mother told him, her voice gruff with a break in it. "Like you."

Unseeing

by Madison Scott-Clary

On the morning of every day, when days are warm and there is no rain, on days when Lyut knows when it is day and when it is night, he will gather his ingredients onto a small board and sit at the entrance to his cave and make his incense for three days hence.

Lyut, blind fisher, blind pekania, works with measured care, for he does not want to injure the pads of his paws nor nick his already-scuffed claws nor shave off any of his fur, nor, Ýng preserve him, damage his carefully honed equipment. He works with measured care and a practiced slowness, with a patience known to one who holds the highest devotion to his labor and to his lord.

Lyut works with particular care when employing the use of his knife for he has cut himself before. He has cut himself and knows that not only will this spoil his incense for the day, it will also leave his pads aching and sore, will leave his fur matted and sticky, will leave a thin layer of blood upon all he touches until the flow stops and the wound scabs over. Knows that he would have to make his way down to the river to wash. Knows, too, after a particularly bad accident with his knife, that the stick he uses to guide his way down the path gets slippery and would need to be cleaned as well, that to bind a wound with only the use of one paw carries some particular difficulty.

And so he gathers his ingredients and tools onto his board and carries them to the entrance to his cave where he sits and works with measured care.

He works from left to right because he holds the knife and hammer in his right paw, and he builds the scent from bottom to top because that is how he has laid out his ingredients, and because it is the base notes of the scent that are the most forgiving to balance.

Begins, then, with the crushed roots of nardin, which previously he had pounded and which now he lays against the board and measures ten claw-widths thereof and cuts with his knife. To this is mixed ten teardrops of common mastic the width of a claw. On holier days he may find himself using copal in its place, and indeed he may use that later. For now, he attempts to find nodules the size of one of his claws without requiring that it be cut or broken, lest his senses be dazzled and the balance lost.

The middle notes come next and Lyut takes a fingertip's length of sweetgrass and puts it into the bowl with the base notes. The scent of sweetgrass is, yes, sweet, but it provides also the bulk of the material that will burn throughout the day.

To this he adds sweet flag root which has been carefully washed and hung and dried. He grates this first with his knife before adding it to the bowl, scraping the blade almost perpendicular along the root to shave off a fibrous powder.

These are all taken together in a stone mortar and ground with a stone pestle to pulverize them into a uniform powder, which he checks with gentle touches of the last fingertip on his left hand, which is the most sensitive.

Judges with his nose and, deeming it correct, finishes, now, with the lone top note of a precious dried pod of cardamom and what he judges to be one third again in weight of makko powder to bind the incense.

To build a scent from the bottom up is to tell the first of three prayers of creation to Ýng, and Lyut works with devotion in his heart as he grinds. He does not speak his prayer; the sound of stone against stone are his words. He does not look up to the heavens where he knows Ýng to reside for sight is not a sense he possesses; allows, instead, his lord's presence to pierce his heart and travel down his limbs and guide the motions of his paws.

The powder of the incense, thus created, is sifted into a small bowl, the finest silt brushed from the mortar with the very tip of his tail.

To mature incense in the quiet and the dry and the cool is to tell the second of three prayers of creation to Ýng, and Lyut again works with devotion in his heart as he unlimbers himself from where he had been kneeling and carries the bowl to the back of the cave where it will always be driest. He does not speak his prayer; the sound of his paws padding in dirt and fingertips dragging along stone wall are his words. He does not look for the shelf containing the other two incense bowls for sight is not a sense he possesses; allows, instead, his lord's presence to pierce his heart and travel down his limbs to place the bowl beside the other two.

Lyut then cleans his board, bringing it back into his cave and replacing unused ingredients in their bowls, jars, or baskets by touch and by scent.

At last, he picks up the rightmost bowl in the line and scoots the other two up into its place and carries it to the mouth of his cave. Along the way, he bends down and lifts a dish filled with ash, and carries it with him as well.

To lay the incense trail is to tell the third and final prayer of creation to Ýng, and Lyut works still with the devotion in his heart as he tamps down the ash in the dish into a smooth plane with the tip of his finger, then draws a careful furrow in the fine powder, sowing incense in its wake. He does not speak his prayer; the rhythm of the tamping and the quiet hush of incense and ash are his words. He does not look at the boxy spiral he draws for sight is not a sense he possesses; allows, instead, his lord's presence to pierce his heart and travel down his limbs guide his left foreclaw while the right hand follows by touch, dropping the powdered incense in its wake.

The presence of his lord burns bright within him. Lyut does not know light from darkness, but were he pressed to answer, he would say that Ýng's presence is that of light, Their absence that of dark, and by this point in the day, Lyut is filled with light.

The prayers of destruction follow the prayers of creation.

Against a crease in the rock at the entrance of his cave is his fire pit. The night before, he brought in sticks and bark from the near-woods and laid them at the feet of the fire. In the mornings after preparing his incense, he begins the first prayer of destruction, of breaking down the sticks and shredding the bark into tinder and kindling. The sound of the crack of dry wood and the tear of fibrous bark his words, the spirit of his lord guiding his every movement.

The second prayer of destruction is the forging or rekindling of fire. If there are embers left, then the words of this prayer are the sound of Lyut's breath against them and the slow crackle of kindling catching alight. If the coals are out, then the words of this prayer are the singing of the bow drill between his feet, thermoception stretched taut as he strains to feel the warmth of the new flame starting in the tinder.

The third and final prayer of destruction that Lyut offers to Ýng is that of the lighting of the incense. He works with the same measured care as he lights a punk from the fire, the spirit of his lord singing along his limbs, and touches it to the small mound of incense at the center of the trail he has built. The words of this prayer are silence.

Only now does he speak his prayers aloud, and by now, he is overflowing with light. It seeps out through his fur, falls from his mouth in honeyed drops, shines from darkened eyes.

Ýng is with him now as he chants, as the smoke wreathes him, as the scent of his labors fills his cave and the clearing and rises up past the tree-tops.

Ýng is with Lyut, and I am as well.

After prayer, Lyut feeds his fire and sits for a while before it to ensure that the sound of the wood burning is just as it should be and no louder and that the heat of the fire is neither too hot nor too cool, for he knows that a hot-burning fire that roared and rushed with the voice of Ýng's anger was one that would at best burn out too soon and he had been taught that at worst it would claim souls as easily as wood.

With the smoke of the fire mingling with that of his incense, with the scent of his devotion lingering in his nose and clinging to his fur and stinging sightless eyes, he takes up his walking stick and pads slowly down the path from his cave to the section of river he calls his own. His feet guide him with soft shuffling. His stick guides him with gentle tapping. His ears guide him with the sounds of the river. Ýng guides him with Their hand on his shoulder.

At the river by his cave, there is a pool where the water flows out from between two rocks, and it is across that gap that he has strung a net.

Lyut sets his stick aside and crawls on hands and knees to one of the rocks and with a long-practiced swish of his fingers through the water, he catches up the cords of the far end of the net from where they lay on the bank and sweeps his arm around to draw the net around and back toward him.

I have smiled on him today, and in the net he feels the dancing of a fish and, upon dragging the net ashore, feels in its knots also the hard-shelled bodies of the crawfish that live their silent lives on the bottom of the silt-bedded river.

The net entire is laid flat upon the shore to let the fish and crustaceans drown in air while Lyut cleans his paws and knife in the water of the stream.

To wash in cold water is to speak a prayer of cleanliness to Ýng, but also to me, to me who knows the meaning of light dancing on clear water in a way the god of the sun cannot, in a way that blind Lyut cannot, and so I sustain myself with those prayers even as the ascetic guts the fish with measured care, washes once more in the stream, and then with practiced slowness strings his net once more, letting the constant stream of water flow brightly through the pounded and knotted reeds to catch fish, to catch food.

Dripping and naked, Lyut crawls upstream along the shore, fingers crawling among the grass until he comes across the fronds of a fiddle-head fern of which he plucks two. Washes these, then wraps in them his daily catch of fish and sluggish crustaceans, and packs around the bundle clay from the riverbank.

Takes then his stick in hand and taps his way back to his cave, where, after banking a portion of the fire, he nestles his bundle among the hot coals until it is dry and parched on the outside.

In the meantime, Lyut walks carefully into the woods perpendicular to the hill on which his cave rests, brushing aside further fronds to the place where his nose tells him he may have his toilet. After finishing, another trip to the river is made, this time carrying a jug slung over his shoulder to be filled with water for his camp.

By then, the smell of steamed fish is beginning to escape from the clay baker that he has formed, and the time to break his fast is upon him.

His walking stick, hard and long-cured, is used to drag the baked clay from the embers and the jug of water put in its place to bring to a boil. He says a short prayer to Ýng for his bounty, for his food, and for the taking of three lives in order to fill his belly, and by the time the last word is finished, the clay is cool enough to tap and crack apart to exposed his steamed food. I sup from that prayer as well, for I provided him with his meal.

He sets the spent clay aside and unfurls the ferns from around his food. His first bite is of the curled heads of the fronds, seasoned with the fat of the fish and the heady scent of crawfish. His second and third bites are the flesh of the fish scraped away from soft bones with sharp teeth. The rest of his meal is a silent contemplation of what wonderful complexities the silty life of a crustacean must hold, as he pulls the tails from the crawfish, eats the meat within, and sucks the butter from the heads.

Fish head and skeleton and crawfish shells are placed in the jug of water now boiling, the makings of a thin broth which will be his sustenance for the rest of the day.

For the third and final time, Lyut washes that day, and I revel in the act of his careful attention to his postprandial grooming. This is the time when he ensures that his pelt is clean and free of ticks and fleas. This is the time when he massages the dirt out of his pawpads. This is the time when he brushes his whiskers. This is the time when

he lays his fur in order. This is the time when he makes himself pure in body before Ýng, having already made himself pure in spirit.

Too, this is the time when he makes himself pure before me, though he knows it not. This is the time when he gives thought to the direction his fur is facing. This is the time when he gives thought to any dirt which may cover him. This is the time when he, blind pekania, blind fisher, puts thought, however abstract, into what a watcher may see.

Lyut lives his life in prayer and devotion. It is a life that is lived ascending in a steady spiral of years, for time moves upward and yet is echoed below by the change of days, the change of weeks, the change of seasons. This year, this day, this soft spring is an echo of last soft spring beneath it. It is antipodal to the autumn that will come

Cycles within cycles, spirals within spirals. This morning, too, is an echo of the day beneath it, behind it, in the past. His days are defined by the cycle of incense, prayer, fishing, foraging, meditating. He knows that it is day when he wakes when he feels the warmth from the sun. He knows when it is night when he feels the warmth fade. He knows when it is morning because he hears the birds sing. He knows that it is night when the birdsong of the day settles into the chorus of insects.

Clean now, he meditates on this. He meditates on cycles. He meditates on warmth and coolness. He meditates on his relation to it, and on his relationship to Ýng.

He has surmised, for instance, that his fur is of a particular quality that the sun is drawn to, and he has surmised that this is as worthy of prayer as the incense he makes, for was not the sun with Ýng? The sun is drawn to him as it is drawn to the rocks and the dirt and the bark of the trees. It is drawn to them and it dwells within them, for the sun powers him as warmth, and the sun fills the trees with a captive warmth that is released by fire.

And are there not things that the sun shies away from? The sun shies away from night, from water, from the cool fresh leaves that

interrupt it, for one need not sight to understand directionality, to understand shade as a consequence of sun's arrow.

Lyut lays on his back to let sun's arrow dry him, to let that warmth pull the water from his fur and the chill from his bones, and then he lays on his front and lets Ýng's light bathe his back as well.

Not all prayer, Lyut knows, is in ritual.

In ritual lies comfort. In ritual lies service. In ritual lies the active participation of worship, that portion of devotion that is a conversation with his lord. The time of ritual is the time when Lyut may speak up and say to Ýng: I am here, I am yours, I am your vessel of light and all that I do is in service to you and by my very existence, my every action, I serve your glory.

Not all prayer is in service to Ýng, either, for some of it is to Their servant, to himself.

In service of Their servant, he keeps himself clean and free of sin and distraction. In service of Their servant and to Their servants, he prepares the incense that wreathes himself and the village below. In service of Their servant and servants, he subsists only off a single meal drawn from the river and whatever alms the village cares to provide him along with the ingredients for the incense that he makes in turn.

But in meditation lies the comfortable companionship. In meditation lies love. In meditation lies reassurance and trust. The time of meditation is the time when Lyut may sit next to Ýng in silence and appreciate the wonder of Them and the world that They have made.

So this morning, he lays in the sun next to Ýng, beside Ýng, and revels in all that Ýng has created rather than singing praises to Them, because it is important even for the ascetic to understand the beauty of the world, the wonder and delight in it. It is as important for Lyut to feel the way his fur tugs at the sun, collects the warmth, and the way the sun pulls the water from him. It is important for Lyut to feel the ground beneath him and hear in its silence the praises to his lord. It is important for Lyut to marvel in the way Ýng's sun shuns the underside of leaves and follows the bark of the

trees on the side it faces. It is important for Lyut to bake until he's panting and gulping in breaths of air, and then it is important for him to crawl back into his cave, stricken from the sun by the laws of directionality that he understands on a visceral level in lieu of a visual one, for sight is not a sense he possesses.

And then it is time for him to remove his simmering broth from the fire and to sip it from the cool shade of his cave, straining it through sharp teeth to prevent fine carapaces and finer bones from getting caught in his throat, unsalted but nonetheless savory, until, despite the heat of the broth, his thirst is quenched.

This, Lyut knows, Lyut relishes, is the cycle of the day, the cycle of the year, and, his lord promises him, the cycle of his life, for he will surely be reborn when the hours of his life slow to a stop.

In this, Ýng is a liar, but it is a kind lie, a lie of omission, for when Lyut dies, *I* will take him unto me. I will take him and his acts in life together into my bowl and crush and knead and he will rejoice with me and I will rejoice with him and then whatever rest he has now, whatever glory he knows now, whatever elation he may feel shall be pale in comparison to what comes after.

Lyut prays and works for the rest of the day, for today is the day that he makes incense for the town below.

This week is the week of fasting and next week is the week of rejoicing, and so this week he must prepare for them three times the normal amount of incense, as this is the week they subsist on smoke until they cannot tell, Zita promises him, the white thread from the black after the sun sets and the cool night comes. This is the week they live on prayer and next is the week they live on celebration, when they bake small cakes in the heat of their fires, in the heat of their ovens, and five of which Zita will leave for him.

Zita may or may not be her name, or perhaps only her title. He does not know, because beyond a few kind words, she will only pray with him and pick up the incense from the edge of the clearing before his cave and leave in its place the alms that the village provides, of flatbreads and berries, of the ingredients for the incense which

they grow or perhaps purchase from other villages, who may purchase in turn from villages going south, going south and east.

So today he retrieves his board once more from his cave and on it stacks all of the ingredients for the incense of the week of fasting that will feed the village and the two amphorae that will hold it. He sings wordless hymns to himself as he works with measured care to cut the sweetgrass, to shave the calamus root, to count the cardamom pods. He sings to Ýng as he pounds and grinds batch after batch of incense until his hands are humming, until his pads are singing along with him.

And then he takes his board back into the cave and returns with the stack of ingredients for the incense of the week of feasting, with the base notes of cassia and vanilla, the middle notes of ginger and turmeric, and the top note of star anise, the spices that season the cakes that they bake in celebration, and these he pounds with laughter and with tears, for with celebration comes mourning and with devotion comes the sudden feeling of loneliness brought on by laughing by oneself.

It is evening and he can feel the sun's arrow striking horizontal by the time he finishes, and when he steps out of his cave, cradling his three amphorae to his chest, he can smell even above the incense Zita sitting at the entrance to the clearing. He walks carefully until he can hear her breathing and then sits cross-legged before her and sets the vases down between them, and they pray together:

They who make the world, They who end it, They who bring the thunder, In Tsuari which fell, In Tsuari which rose from the ashes, We offer up the words of our forefathers, We offer up the smoke of our forefathers We offer up our hearts to you. In Ýng's name we pray, In Ýng's world we pray, In Ýng's own voice we pray, By the light of the sun we pray, By the heat of the fire we pray.

And on until the sun's arrow has wandered off course and into the night sky.

This week, this week of fasting, Zita has not brought him alms. There are no soft leaves of flatbread or ingredients for incense, just

as one year ago there were no leaves of bread, and one year before that, there were no leaves of bread.

This week, Lyut does not smile kindly to Zita as she collects the amphorae and walks the path down the slope to the village, because the fasting of prayer is also a fasting from emotions and worldly attachments.

And the next day, it is truly a fast, for there are no fish in his net, and if there are no fish in his net, he knows that he must not collect the fiddlehead ferns, and instead of savory broth, Lyut drinks only boiled water, hot and cleansed by fire, and he spends the rest of the day in meditation, and he goes to bed hungry.

I watch as he sleeps, fitful, and leave for him two fish in his net for his unknowing devotion to me.

It is the last night of the week of fasting and it is the thirtieth year that Lyut has served Ýng and myself that I have decided to change him and by changing him, change the world, for while I am the god of the water and the god of watching and the god of death, am I not also a trickster god?

I am the trickster god who confounded Ýng in his creation of the smooth plains of the world by carving the land with my rivers. I am the trickster god who confounded the lord by setting the moon in the sky to tug at the waters of Their oceans in tides, even when the moon is not seen. I am the trickster god who brought death to Ýng's ever-living world.

I am the trickster god and my trouble will come back on me thirtyfold, I am sure, but Lyut is the thirtieth ascetic who has served me and I am ready.

Lyut has once more gone to sleep hungry, belly filled with prayer and contrition and boiled water. No fish in the net, no ferns to be had, no stale leaves of flatbread or sun-dried berries. I come to him then. I come to him and I touch the back of his neck, then the crown of his head, then the lids of his eyes and the scars around them, and then I sit in the clearing and wait for him to waken. I sit and watch, for that is my jurisdiction.

When the pekania stirs at the slow warming of day, his eyes drift open as usual to the slit of relaxed muscles that is his habit, and then he shouts.

He shouts because I am a trickster god and after forty years of life, after thirty times thirty years of blind ascetics serving Ýng and myself, I am ready for change and I have given him sight.

I know his thoughts: I know that when he perceives the light of the sun for the first time in his forty years, blurry and bright, that he is struck with a mighty pain and a fear far greater than any accident with a knife could cause. I know his terror, his confusion, and his instinctual need to escape, and so I watch him scramble back into his cave and press his face to the back wall for minutes on end, barely breathing, eyes clenched shut.

"Ýng!" he cries at last. "My lord, my lord, what is happening?"

I answer in Ýng's stead: "You see."

He pants into the silence that follows. I know his thoughts: I know that he hears Ýng within his heart and within his bones and within his breath. I know that I have spoken to him in the language of sound, and that this brings with it its own fear.

"You see," I say again.

"You are not Ýng."

"I am Týw. I am the god of the moon and the water and of watching and of death."

"Týw?"

"Týw," I repeat, and smile at his confusion.

"But Ýng is the god of all things. How are you the god of those things?"

"Ýng is the god of all things, and They are the god of me, but of those things not under Their direct dominion, some are under mine, and I am the god of watching, of looking, of seeing. I am the god of water, and I am with you when you fish and bathe. I am the god of the moon, and when it shines down on you, I am with you. When Ýng is with you, I am as well. When you serve Ýng in these ways, you also serve me."

Tears course freely down his cheeks, and he says: "It hurts to see."

"You have never seen before. Come out of your cave."

He does not move, and so I wait. I know that he will need to attend to his day soon, and I know that he is praying to Ýng and feels the compulsion to perform his acts of service, his rituals, and I know that the village below is waking up to ready itself for a day and night and week of celebration. So I wait.

Too, Ýng waits, because although I sense Their wrath on the horizon, I think that it will not come yet, because this is also new for Them, and They also watch.

Eventually, Lyut crawls, eyes clenched shut, on hands and knees, crawls out into the sun, and sits cross-legged in the center of his clearing.

"Open your eyes."

He does not. I know that he can see the warmth of the sun behind closed eyelids, showing dusky orange through them. I know that he can sense the shadows cast in the sun's arrow by the leaves above and around him. I know that even this seeing is too much for him.

"Open your eyes, Lyut, faithful."

"You are not Ýng, you cannot command me."

"No," I say. "I cannot command you, but you are as faithful to me as you are to Them in the ways that I have described, and so I ask for this small obeyance."

Lyut ponders this for a long while, his tail flitting agitatedly behind him, drawing praises to me in the packed earth. Finally, he opens his eyes, a crack, a squint. He opens his eyes and looks at the ground before him. He looks at his naked body. He looks at the clearing and at the trees around him. Looks in wonder. Looks in awe. Looks in terror and in panic. Looks at the ground and the trees and the sky. Tries, even, to look at the sun, and learns that the sun's arrows are keenest above all to the eyes.

"It hurts! It hurts!"

"Do not look directly at the sun, faithful," I laugh. "Ýng has decreed that the sun provides your life, and so it is too dear for you to behold."

He grinds his palms against his eyes and smears his fur with tears and with dirt. Even as he cries, he is marveling at the flashes and swirls of light that come to him now, and each phosphene that blooms in pink and white and green is a prayer to me, so I allow him this moment of non-darkness until the moment passes and he can open his eyes once more without pain.

"Where are you, Týw?"

"I am with you."

"Can I see you?"

"We are also too dear for you to see with your eyes, Ýng and I, but do you not feel the way we pierce your heart and burn along your arms as you prepare the incense for our offering?"

Lyut is silent once more, still once more. He prays. He prays to Ýng with a fervor he has not yet shown in his forty years. Tears stain tracks down his cheeks as he struggles with the sudden, overwhelming sight. Sight, a sense he now possesses.

"Go and prepare for your day, faithful. I am with you."

Lyut is slow to begin moving, and when he does, he walks as though a great dream has come upon him. He lets Ýng guide his movements and I stand apart from the lord and Their servant.

Lyut moves as though a great dream has come upon him and lets Ýng guide him, and even so his morning task of making incense is far slower than usual, for his eyes water constantly and he marvels at just how drab the ingredients, so bright and colorful in the nostrils and so familiar to the touch, are to behold. He has not known the comparison of color before, but even to one for whom sight is a new sense, he is surprised to find that the crushed root of nardin and the shaved root of sweet flag look so similar despite the vast difference in aromas and purposes, that the mastic, that steadfast base of a scent, nearly glitters in the sun while the jewel-bright scent of cardamom is belied by so dun a color.

He moves as though a great dream has come upon him until it is time to lay the powdered incense in the bowl of ash, that third prayer of creation, and he realizes that he can see the furrow he digs in ash with his claw, can see the tan powder that he packs in its place, and can see the spiral he builds, and then tears come upon him once more, and all of his prayers of destruction are completed through sight blurred by shock, and he relies on his habits and Ýng's guidance to make it through to the end without burning himself.

I stand apart from the lord and Their servant and watch, and drink in what prayers I may along the way.

At last, the time for ritual passes and Lyut stumbles into the woods to tend to his toilet and lingers a while in wonder at the sight of his own body, the sight of the woods and the leaves and humus on the forest floor, before returning to his cave and, out of the habit of so many years, grabbing his stick to guide him down to the river.

"Do you need that, faithful?"

After a moment's confusion, the fisher laughs. "I suppose I do not, Týw."

"Will you leave it behind?"

His answer is a long time in coming. "It is comforting in my paw. I will take it with me."

Guided still by habit — and perhaps by Ýng, for I do not know the lord's every thought — Lyut taps his way down the path to the water, and perhaps it is for the best that he has brought the stick, for his eyes are drawn constantly to every detail along the way, from the way the suns arrow strikes the leaves to the way their shadows dance across the ground when the wind moves across them. His eyes water still, for he is overflowing with sensation. A life lived without a sense is still a full life, and to one born without that sense, raised without that sense, he did not think of himself as blind except in comparison to Zita who picked up the amphorae of incense with such ease that he had never known.

Stops, at last, at the edge of the stream and stares at my domain, mouth open as though to speak, though no words come forth.

I wait a while, and then ask: "Faithful, do you see the wonder of my creation? My friend the water?"

"I had never imagined that it looked like this." His voice is barely above a whisper, and his eyes drink deep of the sight of the stream. "I did not know that something could be as beautiful."

This fills me more than any prayer yet that day. "I am the god of the water and the god of watching and the god of the moon and death. When you come here to fish, when you come here to bathe, when you come here to drink, those are praises that you sing to me."

Lyut tilts his head. "Is Ýng not the god of all things? I am sorry for asking again, but I must know."

"They are the god of many things, and They are the god of me. To sing praises to me is to sing praises to Them in turn." At this, I feel the lord's anger at me soften, though it does not wholly retreat.

"I do not know the words to any prayers to you, Týw."

"That is alright, faithful. You may pray all the same by fishing and bathing and drinking, by rejoicing in those things that are under my jurisdiction."

Lyut nods and steps into the water. This is not the usual order of his mornings, but as the wonder on his face at the sight of the water moving around his legs fills me to overflowing, I do not complain. He stands in the middle of the section of the stream that is his own, in the pool held up by the narrow gap across which he strings his net, in the cool water where the sun's arrow pierces the canopy of the trees. He stands there and he watches the way that the light reflects off the surface of the water. Watches, too, the way the water eddies around rocks, around his legs, explores the funnels of whirlpools with his fingers, peers through clear water to the silt and rocks and algae below the surface.

"What am I now, Týw?"

"What do you mean, faithful?"

"Before this morning, before today, when I did not see, I was complete."

I remain silent.

"I am sorry, god of water and of watching. I do not doubt you, for your gift has spoken for you. I do not turn away your gift, and I offer my praise to you. But if I was complete before and a servant to Ýng, then what am I now?"

I watch him curiously, this servant of mine and of my lord's, standing in the middle of a pool in a stream where his thighs are steeped in the cool water. "You are Lyut, faithful of Ýng, faithful of Týw. Has that changed with your sight?"

He runs his hand above the water, feeling the boundary between water and air with his pawpads. He feels the surface tension of the pool, and through him I feel his wonder. He tests and plays as might a kit of his people even as he begins bathing. Each time he comes up for air, he sings a line of praise to Ýng, and every time he is beneath the water, I know that he is thinking about what he is now. Each time he dives, he is singing his praises to me as well, and now he is cognizant of this as well.

After he has said his prayer and cleaned himself he wades to his net in which he finds three small fish. He gives thanks to Ýng and, after a moment, to me as well.

With the fish on the shore, wrapped in net and stunned, gasping and drowning in air, Lyut watches. He watches them glitter and wiggle. He watches them die their slow deaths. He traces sun-struck scales with a claw and asks: "Do the fish see beneath the water, Týw?"

"Yes, faithful. They see my domain and all its beauties."

"Do they smell beneath the water?"

"After a fashion, yes."

"Do they smell my incense?"

"No, faithful. The boundary between the domain of air and the domain of water is too firm for the smoke of your incense to pass. After all, do you smell your incense beneath water?"

"No, I do not breathe under the water." Lyut looks angry, then laughs. "Only, I wonder."

"Yes, Lyut?"

"I wonder if the fish upon the shore here has the chance to smell the incense and hear the prayers to Ýng before it dies."

I do not answer directly, saying instead: "You are not going to die, faithful."

He looks satisfied at this answer and I realize that I have said what he needed to hear. I know that Lyut holds terror in his breast even still, that he will hold it there until the end of his days, for I have taken his innocence from him. I am pleased to see his satisfaction, and I sense Ýng's bemusement at my anxiety over pleasing a servant.

I am pleased all the same, and I remain with my servant.

I am with Lyut as he gathers his fiddlehead ferns and pawfuls of clay. I am with him as he sets his net once more. I am with him as he cleans his fish and heads back to his cave to prepare his daily meal.

Three times, he closes his eyes and his whiskers droop as he attempts to settle back into his unseeing routine. He is testing himself, I know, and I do not stop him. I do not stop him because I know that when his eyes are open, he is closer to me, to Týw the watchful, and when his eyes are closed, he is closer to our lord, Ýng, the god of all things, and it is good for him to understand this.

He closes his eyes to shut out the sight of preparing his meal, too confused by the twisting of the ferns around his fish. The leaves which make so much sense to his long-practiced fingers do not behave to his eyes the ways in which he expects.

He closes his eyes to eat his food after cracking open the clay baker, for the sight of the fish changed by fire is unnerving. The change in texture he had always known had changed, as too with the taste, for Lyut was no stranger to the flavor of raw fish. Now, sight-ridden, he finds the taste of the fish reduced when his eyes are opened, as though too much of him, of his mind, his being, is taken up processing that which he sees.

And he closes his eyes, last, when he lays on the ground to dry and meditate.

He closes his eyes as he lays on his front, and then when he rolls onto his back, he keeps them closed, and I see his cheeks wet with tears.

"Speak to me, faithful. Why are you troubled?"

"You say that you are the god of watching, yes?"

"I am."

"Must watching always be with sight?"

Again, I do not answer directly. "Do you wish now that you had not regained your sight?"

"It is too much, Týw."

"You are strong, faithful."

"It is too much." He shakes his head. "I feel less holy. I feel less pure when distracted by seeing. How can I serve Ýng as faithfully now that my time spent watching is time spent serving you?"

I feel Ýng's anger rising against me once more, and I answer carefully. "To live is to be holy, to live and rejoice in life, to be pure and clean in your actions and words. Ýng is the lord of all things, and to Their servants They gave life as a way for the universe to recognize its own beauty and wonder."

Lyut's face twists in anger. "And yet I cannot hear Ýng as well today as I did yesterday. He is with me, I know, but..."

"The only mind which can hear as purely as it sees when both eyes and ears are open is that of Ýng, true, and yet in seeing, do you not also praise Them? It was They who made seeing as well as hearing. It was They who made me."

At this his features soften. His words are slow, and he processes his thoughts and feelings aloud. "I, as a servant, do not understand the hierarchy of the gods, but, yes, if Ýng made the light and the sun and colors and also you, then I suppose I pray to him as easily by rejoicing in sight as I do in sound and touch."

The sun is overhead and tipping down its long path through the afternoon. The colors of the trees are bright and I am with Lyut. "Rejoice, then, in your sight, faithful, for in doing so, you offer prayer to Ýng and to myself."

A slow minute passes as the fisher meditates. At last, he opens his eyes and looks up to the trees and cloudless sky.

"I will try, Týw."

"That is all we ever ask of our servants, Lyut."

When Zita comes up from the village, bearing an armload of flatbread and a small basket full of spice cakes for Lyut, he had since ceased his conversation with me and had ceased meditating by laying on the ground, and had instead settled for sitting cross-legged in the entrance to his cave looking out. Zita sang as she walked, as she had for the last ten festival weeks that this had been her duty, and so Lyut hears her before he saw her.

He debates for thirty heartbeats whether or not he is willing to keep his eyes open for her arrival. He debates whether or not he is willing to see, to perceive someone with senses other than those he had been born with.

Lyut makes up his mind and closes his eyes when he hears Zita rounding the curve of the path toward the clearing before his cave. He sees her shadow move in the trees, he sees a hint of her between the trunks, and all courage fails him in that moment.

"Faithful, why do you close your eyes?"

Lyut stays silent.

"As you wish, faithful, but know: while some miracles are private and must be held close to the heart, not all of them must, and to hide this one would be to live a lie before me and before the village."

"I am not brave enough."

Zita's singing crescendos as she enters the clearing, then abruptly stops. Lyut supposes that because he is not sitting in the customary place with the customary smile on his face, that she must sense in him some change beyond her ken, and at this, his fear only grows.

He turns over what I had said within his head. He turns it over ten times and considers the ramifications of it. Were he to keep his newfound sense a secret, then yes, he would in some way be living a lie. He would have sight at his disposal and yet the village would know not of the incredible power of the gods that had granted it to him. And yet there was terror to be had at the thought of anyone finding out. He was holy in part because of his unseeing, was he not? He was pure before Ýng at all times, and he was pure in the ways that

the village could not be, for that was his role as the ascetic, as the incense-maker, as blind Lyut.

And yet to lie is to sully oneself. To lie before the village was to betray his role as ascetic and to make himself less holy in the eyes of Ýng. To tell the truth was to test the village and change tradition, but to lie was to destroy it for the sake of the village.

To live a lie until Ýng took him and decided at what point in the endless cycle should be placed his death was too terrible a thought, and the need to tell truth, to remain as pure as he could be, won over in his mind.

"Lyut?" Zita speaks, tentative.

And so he opens his eyes. He opens his eyes. He opens his seeing eyes and looks across the clearing and sees Zita there, shorter than him, softer and rounder than him. Too, she is better fed than him — though that is not his place in the world — but she is different on a level more fundamental than any he could have imagined. She is, he thinks, unlike anything he had expected her to be.

He smiles. "Zita."

That he had opened his eyes and looked upon her seems to startle Zita, and she takes a half-pace back away from the cave.

He speaks as calmly as he is able, but he does so quickly as to preempt her leaving. "Zita, Ýng has blessed me this day. Ýng and his servant have blessed me, and when I awoke and opened my eyes, I saw. I saw for the first time."

She frowns and walks toward him. She moves slowly, and then steps a few paces to the side when she is halfway across the clearing to approach him from a diagonal. It is a test, I know, and when his eyes track her movements, she rushes to him and sets down the bread and cakes beside him.

"Ýng has done this?" she says quickly and quietly. "Ýng has worked a wonder! Such a wonder!"

"Yes," Lyut says. It is a small lie, but one easily fixed when first the topic of me, of the god of sight and of watching comes up. "Ýng has granted me sight. I have been praying and meditating, and I do not yet wholly know the reason why."

Zita's eyes dart this way and that as though to take in all of his face, to look at his eyes and to check for the scars that Lyut had sometimes felt beneath his fur while washing, though he knew not where they came from. At last, she looks into his eyes for a long while.

This makes Lyut uncomfortable, and he does not rightly know why. Was there something to behold there? He can see her eyes, and is seeing them for the first time, and to do so fills him with anxiety. They are round and dark, and seem to be made of a ring of brown surrounding a circle of black, and as her eyes move, he sees that the circle of black sometimes grows larger or smaller, though perhaps it is some trick of the light.

But those were simply the mechanics of sight. He can see her eyes, yet he feels that to look directly into the eyes of someone else is to *truly* see them, and he worries that, on some level, Zita will be able to read his thoughts and fears, that she will know deeper secrets about him than he could possibly ever know about her. Was this some knowledge of the sighted that he must someday learn himself?

As well, this close to her and he can smell her better than he ever had before, and she is in no way, in no sense unpleasant.

The feeling of being sullied and unholy hangs around him like a cloud.

He asks, then, quietly: "What do you see, Zita?"

"I see you as I always see you, but I see you with your eyes open and clear, where they used to be cloudy and dim, and I see your fur brown and thick without the scars that my mother says have lined your eyes since you were born."

"Yes, but what do you *see*?"

Zita finally averts her eyes, though only to pick up a cake from the basket and split it in two, holding out one half for Lyut and keeping the other for herself. The cake is the color of the sun and bespecked with the cassia and cardamom which had gone into the incense. "I see that Ýng has wrought a miracle and that our time of fasting and keeping holy has led to something truly wondrous."

Lyut lets his shoulders relax from a tenseness he had not known he was holding, and he accepts the spiced cake from her. "I see.

Thank you, Zita. I have been praying and meditating on this all day, and though I know I must not, I doubted this miracle and felt unholy."

She bites into her cake and chews, her eyes focusing seemingly on nothing. Lyut can hardly read her expression, so new is his sight, so he remains silent. She swallows her cake and says: "I think that you are as holy now as you were at the beginning of the time of fasting. You have kept holy as have those who came before you, and the village has kept holy, and perhaps the whole world has kept holy, and now Ýng has provided for us a new thing."

Lyut eats his spice cake and thinks on this. He thinks about what I had told him. He thinks about the shock of sight, still so new to him that the brightness and colors in the world sting his eyes and bring him to tears. He thinks of the newness in things that have always been there. He thinks of how overwhelmed he is by this mere fact, and he thinks about how small he is before me and smaller still before his lord.

He thinks about how small he is and realizes that his devotion burns more strongly within him than it had ever before. And, though he does not know or understand my motives, he knows that any servant, that *every* servant of Ýng's is master of him, for the most holy are truly the servants of servants.

He thinks about this and then he smiles to Zita once more and nods. "Yes. Yes, this is a new thing that Ýng and his servant Týw have done, and in their presence I will continue to be holy."

Zita tilts her head to one side, and Lyut wonders if perhaps she had not heard well. "Who is Týw?"

I break my long silence and say, "I am."

Lyut stiffens and Zita startles to her feet.

"I am Týw, and I am the god of the water and of the moon and of watching and of death, and I am servant to Ýng, and I have given sight to Lyut."

When Zita understands, she falls to her knees and prostrates herself before Lyut, seeing no one else to bow before. "A spirit! A spirit!"

Lyut laughs at this, though not unkindly. "I believe Týw, that they are the god of the water and of watching, though I know not what the moon is. I have prayed to Ýng about this and I believe that Týw is Their servant."

"I am. I have given Lyut sight and Ýng is watching all of us."

"I cannot see you, though," Zita says.

"As the sun is too dear to look at, so are the gods, faithful."

"How can I be your faithful?" There is an edge of frustration to her voice, and her tail dances about behind her. I accept her agitation just as I accepted that of Lyut.

"Every time you bathe or drink pure water, every time you keep watch on the world, every time you behold the beauty of the moon, and every time you mourn the dead, you give praise to me, for not all prayers are in words, as Lyut well knows."

He nods in agreement.

"These things are my dominion and Ýng is my lord in turn."

Zita sits up slowly. Still frowning, she considers this. "Why have you given Lyut sight?"

"That is not for you to know, faithful, not yet. There will be a time when you may, however."

She relaxes at my words, for she knows the workings of the gods and the mystery therein almost as well as Lyut does.

"Now, it is almost evening," I say. "Put away the bread and the cakes lest the night animals take them."

Zita nods and moves to help Lyut gather his food before remembering that he can see the basket and the flat loaves of bread as well as she, and they laugh together.

After the food is put away, both fishers kneel together and begin to pray aloud to Ýng.

They who make the world, They who end it, They who bring the thunder, In Tsuari which fell...

I let them finish their prayer and bask in the jubilant way that Zita's voice rings out to her lord.

When they finish, Zita smiles to Lyut and stands once more. "I must go down to the village and tell them of this miracle. Tonight

you will see the moon, holy one, and know its beauty and that will be your praise to Týw."

The thought fills me with joy, for the moon is indeed beautiful, and I watch Zita put her arms around Lyut in an embrace — his first in many years — before departing down to the village once more.

Lyut stays up late into the night at the promise of the moon. Night is not day, this he knew, and the subconscious understanding that the sun brought light would mean that the absence of the sun would bring darkness does not surprise him.

He remains curious about all things. He marvels at the red and pulsing glow of the embers of his fire. He wonders at the way the sun's arrow disappearing colors the sky pink, purple, navy, black. He drinks in the way in which the color drains from the world.

The first night of the week of feasting is the night of the full moon, which Lyut had known but had not understood, but now he does. He understands the moon and its importance when first it creeps into view of his clearing. He understands its beauty, and he weeps. He weeps for my creation, and I am filled with praise unclouded by words. Filled to overflowing as I have never been since Ýng created me at the beginning of all things.

And that night is the night when Ýng comes to me and makes his decision.

The next morning, a second strange occurrence greets Lyut when he opens his eyes. Sitting at the entrance to his cave is a creature very much like him in many ways, but in many ways different. Long and lithe, yes, strong and slender, yes, but shorter, and with fur of the purest white as opposed to the dark brown of his own. A face more slender and ears larger, and on the tip of his tail, the fur is dark black.

"Who are you?"

I smile to him. "It is I, faithful. It is Týw."

A look of confusion comes over his face, and I must hold back amusement as the fisher sits up and rubs his eyes, looking around as though the answers were to be found in the air itself.

"Týw?"

"Yes, faithful."

"I thought that the gods were too dear to be seen?"

I close my eyes. I revel in the blackness this brings. I revel in the feeling of terror and the exaltation that come with being embodied. I revel in the power of our lord. "Yes, this is true. This has always been true through the long years and longer millennia. However, I was not completely honest with you yesterday, Lyut."

He frowns, staring intently at me in my new form. "If you are a god and you are holy, how can you lie?"

"It was a lie by omission, for I am the god of water and of watching and of the moon and of death, but I am also a trickster god. I am the god who sows chaos while Ýng brings order. Forever we work together or strive against each other. Forever we move in a cycle. This is our very nature. This is the way of things, for Ýng must have something to strive against that time move forward and his creations grow and change with it."

Lyut sits cross-legged and bows his head as he thinks on this. He knows that, on some level, it must be true, for there are times when the weather is bad for days on end and he cannot — or could not — tell the difference between day and night, and there are times when he will go a week without food from the river, and once there was even a time when something happened to the water of his section of the stream that caused it to taste bitter and plant-like, and no amount of boiling could remove the flavor and he was sick with fever.

"You sow chaos and Ýng fixes it?"

"There is no fixing chaos, faithful. I sow chaos because that is who and what I am. Ýng brings order because that is what They are. There is no moral ground on which to judge the chaos that I sow, just as there is no judgment to be made on the order of our lord. Both are holy in their own way, because they are the chaos and order of gods."

"Is the chaos of your servants not holy, then?"

"It is not. It is my role in the world to sow chaos so that you may learn and become better for it, but when you sow chaos for each other, you lower yourselves in our eyes." I see confusion on his face and sense questions in his mind, but he does not speak, so I con-

tinue. "The chaos sown by living beings is an exchange of power. Inevitable, perhaps, but it bespeaks a lack of devotion."

Lyut frowns as he considers this.

I give my servant time, for he has learned more in the past day than any of his predecessors have in their spans.

"So then," he says at last. "How can I see you now? What are you?"

"I am the god of watching and of water, of the moon and of death, and I am a trickster god, but all of these things are a part of the world separate from you. I am, this body is, the concrete manifestation of myself and I will take this form for a time. I am this concrete manifestation because I committed a concrete act by giving you sight, and the ramifications to me are also concrete."

"You made it so that I can see you?"

"No, faithful. Ýng has made it so that you can see me, for They are my lord and I am Their servant, and I sowed chaos and They have in turn brought order to *me*. At least, for a while."

Lyut looks startled at this. "Is it a wicked thing that you have given me sight? Have you made us both unholy?"

"No, faithful, dear Lyut." I smile and hold up my hands. "It is good and holy that you may see, and Ýng agrees. However, They control the balance, and so they have decided that the balance, the exchange, for you seeing is for me to be seen. I will live for thirty years among the world in this embodied form, and you will find that the chaos that I bring is vastly reduced while I am here, for in this form, I cannot work my usual methods."

"Is that not a punishment, for a god to have their power lessened?"

I laugh. "No, I do not think so. Ýng was at first angry with me and perhaps They wished at one point to punish me. But They understand now, and this is instead a matter of me experiencing what you experience in the way that only a god can, for gods must learn and change along with their servants."

He thinks for a long while on this, and I know that he is praying to Ýng throughout, that he is closing his eyes so that his hearing is

sharper and his smell is more keen and perhaps his sense of the holy is as well. I do not interrupt his prayer, for Ýng is with both of us. I pray with him. We sit in silence in the cave and hear the wind and the stream and the birds, and we smell the cassia and cardamom and copal, and we share our prayers.

"Týw," he says at last. "I have faith in Ýng and I have faith in you that I will remain pure and that the world will remain pure with us. I do not understand, but I have faith."

"Good. Now, I will teach you to see, faithful, and you will teach me to be seen, for everything — *everything* — will be different now."

Requiem

by Pascal Farful

"Come in."

Bodarn, a badger amidst his 24th summer, stepped into the shrine.

In the centre sat Zohan, a fox clad in a loincloth and covered from eartip to toe in intricate bodypaint and tattoos. They were a Dreamweaver, a religious leader and spiritual interpreter for the community. Much of their role emphasised music and dancing and bright, colourful use of body decoration. They were devoted to the celebration of the Gods' will, and particularly to the most significant part in that will: Love.

On the walls behind them was a statue of a canine, bearing three eyes. These motifs were continued all around the room. In the artwork and the drawings, and in small statuettes placed about the abode.

The fox turned and smiled at the badger, but this smile faded as Bodarn's discomfort was apparent.

"I have questions," Bodarn began, his throat catching, then releasing. "About the spirits of the dead."

Zohan nodded and gestured the badger forward to sit. "It's about your father, isn't it?" they whispered. "May you have reprieve from grieving."

"It's not that simple," Bodarn said, sitting down on one of the benches, trying to keep his paws still and to his side, but failing.

"Nothing ever is," Zohan assured him. "But your father loved you, and you loved him."

Bodarn stared abruptly up into the fox's eyes. "No. That's precisely the problem."

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The shrine was a sprawling pyramid, located in a jungle clearing. It was surrounded on all but one side with thick trees and dense bogs. The steps up the pyramid gave way to large, open floors, then sprouted more steps from the centre to climb higher, thus producing external walkways around the diameter of the structure.

For now it was bright and the sky was clear, thus Zohan invited Bodarn outside with him to make the most of it. Rainstorms were common and divine, but were ideal for singing, dancing, and celebrating, not the kind of guidance Bodarn needed.

"My father and I... couldn't decide what I was to be," Bodarn explained. "He wanted me to be close, to be protected from the wilds of the world. And I was perhaps less than keen to adhere. I wanted to be like the others, out in the jungles, learning, exploring, adventuring. In the garden of the Gods." He came to a stop at one of the sets of stairs, looking into the trees where a trap had been set. "You remember when Father had the accident with the snare?"

"How could I forget," Zohan nodded. "I performed the incantations while the botanists did what they could to heal. And heal well he did." The fox nodded. "But you were there too. The son was beside the father in the time of need. As was he with you in yours. He gave you that jade necklace, do you remember?"

Bodarn nodded. "The necklace, yes. He'd crafted it just prior to the accident. He was going to wear it on the hunt, but after the accident he gave it to me so I can remember him when I hunt in his stead." The badger took a long breath. "The pain he was in after that. It drove him mad," he explained, continuing to walk, descending down the pyramid stairs to the next floor. "Few people outside myself and my mother knew of how the pain was affecting him. Few saw him, and those that did only saw him when we had enough herbs

to numb the demons." Bodarn stopped again, staring towards the village they called home. "I just remember the pain," he muttered.

The pair embraced and Zohan held Bodarn's head to their chest. "You did what you could."

"No, I didn't," the badger replied.

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"May you rest from grieving."

"Thank you," Bodarn replied, looking at the jar that contained his father's remains, loaded with care upon a pallet such that it could be transported to the burial site.

"Do you know where they are to be buried?" the morgue-keeper asked.

Bodarn nodded. "In the grove by the brook. It's where we used to sit when I was young," the badger said. "Back when we talked."

The last comment puzzled the vulture, but the bird nodded and tilted her bill, and the badger bowed in return.

Bodarn led the vulture outside, helping to wheel the large ceramic jar out of the morgue. Outside, they met Zohan again, and the three made their way with the jar through the village, across the muddy holy bogs to the north and towards the burial site.

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Within an hour, the jar had been moved to the grove. The badger thanked the vulture, who retired back to the town, leaving Zohan and Bodarn with the large burial jar.

In the silence, Zohan broached the question.

"Do you feel his death was your fault?"

"No, I..." the badger stammered. "I don't pretend to understand life and death. I know only of myself and of how my father and I were. And I know when he died we were father and son in name alone."

Bodarn stared off towards the river, holding himself firm and letting anger rise, bubble, then fall and decay. The whisper of the wind wafted through the evening air.

He could hear the voices ringing in it.

The shouting.

The fighting.
A memory cast into the sky.

"As the pain grew worse, so did my father's temper. He was never violent, not did he threaten it. But he had high expectations of me, and was very controlling. I couldn't always give him what he wanted and he would get mad and I would hide away," Bodarn explained.

He began to dig into the ground where he would lay the jar, with Zohan helping. The terrain here was soft soil. Wet from the rainfall, reasonably fertile, but too close to the river to be useful as farmland. It was easy for the badger's paws to scoop through it, but it remained fairly solid to be piled up, unlike the thick, comfortable mud of the bogs or the strong, hard ground onto which the town was built.

When Bodarn's arms tired, he sat back and spoke again.
"I didn't want to anger him, or to hurt him. I just... couldn't give him what he wanted. And as he grew more angry and we fought, I grew to resent his control and his temper. I wasn't as helpful, as kind and considerate as perhaps I could have been. He'd do things that would hurt me, probably not on purpose but... I could never tell him he'd hurt me and have him understand. When I went to see a healer, he demanded to know what was wrong. When I didn't want to tell him why, he grew so terribly cross. Eventually, he deceived me into telling him. I couldn't handle the shame." The badger grunted. "I must believe that I had done things in kind, but by the time he passed, we were so incapable of talking, I don't think we'd ever be able to apologise for our transgressions."

"These are the questions I have," Bodarn said at last, once the trench was dug. "Will my father, in death, know what I feel inside? Will he see that I don't love him anymore? And if he knows... can he hurt me?"

Zohan sat up and took a deep breath. "Have you ever read closely the parable of Three-Eye?" they asked. "The wolf who was given the gift of a third eye by the Gods? Capable of seeing the past and the present in one perfect image?"

Bodarn shook his head. "Not particularly closely. Only what you've said of them at ceremonies."

The fox nodded. “When Three-Eye saw the past, they could see their mistakes and their failures. But what is forgotten is that Three-Eye also saw their achievements and their sacrifices.” Zohan reached into the river water, lifting it up in their cupped hands, then bringing it to the grave, pouring it slowly over the jar. “Thus it is important to remember that sometimes, in family and in friends, we will have failed. But sometimes, we will have succeeded in great ways too.”

The pair moved to lift the jar, slowly easing it down into the dirt, manoeuvring it to lie flat, the stone only a foot or two under the top of the grass.

“We are not expected by the Gods to be perfect and this is true of both you and your father. Not even the Gods can achieve perfection, and they have powers beyond our wildest dreams.” They took a deep sigh. “But what you describe, transgressions which divide both you and your father to the point where your love is severed, that is not...” The fox paused and considered. “That is not a sin. It is a disappointment, a pity, a shame. But not a sin.”

The fox stood back up again. With the jar lowered into the grave, the fox looked back up to Bodarn. “To find but a lack of love in your heart in the face of such adversity is... understandable. It is simply, as I’m sure you feel, a shame that it is this way.” Zohan looked back towards the jar. “The Gods give love, they can take it away, but they can also let it fade. Love is the most powerful force in the land, and if the Gods saw fit not to preserve it between you... it is the Gods’ will, not yours, nor mine, nor your father’s.”

“But will he still be angry?” the badger replied. “Will he have hate for me for not being able to love him anymore?” Bodarn deflated. “He was affected so by the way I stopped saying that I loved him. When he feared it was true. Now he knows his fear is correct.”

Zohan and Bodarn sat in silence. They stared into the distance, the intangible far. Hoping that something from the Gods might hand them the words, the actions, the divine wisdom.

None was forthcoming.

"We should collect the adornments for the jar before the burial," Zohan said at last.

The badger nodded and got to his feet, the pair beginning to walk back towards the village.

"It is a great disappointment that it fell that way," the fox continued. "Fault is wrong, fault is not the right word. It is a shame. A miserable shame," they muttered. "The Gods may judge you for your failures, and for his, but they will judge you both for your sacrifices, your attempts, your will to try. They will not judge for the dimming of the love. It... is beyond your control. If your father is angry and hateful for that failure, then the Gods will judge him too. Some situations are unfortunate, like his injury, and what befell of your kinship." Zohan paused abruptly at the temple of Three-Eye. "But if what you say is true, then... it is just that. A tragedy of mutual transgression and entropy." They put their paw on the badger's shoulder. "I wish you peace from your sorrow."

Bodarn nodded, looking quietly up at the fox, before pulling in tightly, pressing his head to the fox's shoulder and beginning to weep.

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Inside the family home, now quiet but for himself, Bodarn reached into a small box and pulled out the jade necklace.

The stone was cold. Like his father.

He put the box back, but kept the necklace in his paw. He began the walk to the burial site, as other mourners slowly began to congregate.

It was a small crowd, maybe 20 folk. But each had a story to tell. One of their experiences with Bodarn and his father. How much they resembled each other. How much they remembered how well they got on in a public capacity. That special bond of father and son.

What once was.

What might have once become.

The throng of people parted such that Bodarn could walk to the grave.

The jar lay quietly, dirt ready to cover it, while Zohan stood beyond it. They had been freshly adorned with intricate body paint, giving the fox an ethereal look, breaking up their outline in a series of dazzling patterns.

People took their places.

For a moment, there was quiet.

Wind rushed out of the trees, across the congregation. The badger tried not to listen to its words. Not to imagine the voice.

A deep breath.

Bodarn held out the necklace, up to the sunlight.

The crowd stirred in understanding, and Zohan spoke an incantation to bless the piece. When the fox lowered their voice, Bodarn eased the necklace around the neck of the jar, then stood back up.

"Why did it have to end like this?" the badger whispered. And it was for this, not for the loss, that the badger began to weep.

Those each side of him, an otter and wolf, took gentle hold of the badger in an effort to comfort him, as Zohan began the ceremony.

"Calhaan is in the arms of the Gods now," they began. "When they saw Calhaan, they saw a man who wanted the best for his family and did what he could to see out that vision. When times became tough, he remained steadfast and strong as best he could. In the end, the Gods saw that making this sacrifice endure was unfair, and relieved Calhaan of his pain. We must imagine Calhaan happy, pain free at last. In a place of peace."

The winds blew again, the fox pausing to let them flutter through.

Hedges bustled.

Trees rustled.

Bodarn screwed his eyes shut.

Tried to close his ears too.

He didn't want to hear, or to notice.

"Please, just make it stop." was his silent prayer.

When the wind was quiet, Zohan continued.

"Calhaan is survived by his son, Bodarn," the fox said, looking at the badger for a moment, then back to the sky. "His son shares

the sharp eye, the astute curiosity, and the cunning determination that is embodied in his father's spirit. His destiny will be unique, different to his father, but no less holy than that of Calhaan. Though the destiny of Bodarn, as decided by the Gods, will not match that which Calhaan had requested, we know that with hindsight and divine foresight, we shall see Calhaan proud of Bodarn for their accomplishments, both past and in future."

With the speech concluded, the Dreamweaver stood back, and the crowd turned towards Bodarn, inviting him to speak.

It was tradition to speak. For someone from the family to make a departing speech at the funeral. Sometimes, the survivor is so over encumbered with feeling that this is, understandably, not possible.

Bodarn had no idea what to say.

It wasn't so much that he hadn't prepared.

More that nothing could prepare him.

On Calhaan, he had nothing to say.

On the resultant shards of broken feelings, he could speak for years.

As he stood, with those around awaiting him to speak, he spoke not a word.

The silence hung for a while. It was awkward. Uncomfortable.

At last, Bodarn sighed and uttered, ever so simply. "I'm sorry."

It was said without direction.

To the Gods.

To Zohan.

To the attending masses.

To Calhaan.

To all of them.

To none of them.

Bodarn stepped back into the throng of people, now confused and uneasy. As Zohan stepped back forward, they were the only person, other than the Gods, Bodarn, and Calhaan to properly understand what was going on. People seemed to understand that something wasn't right, but they were all far too polite to ask. Certainly not right now.

To conclude the proceedings, the Dreamweaver began to sing a slow, lumbering piece of throat music. People joined in once the piece reached more comfortable registers, but that too was awkward, abashed, and uneasy.

The badger joined in with the song, and, as Zohan stopped singing to let the crowd carry it onwards, stepped forth again to aid the fox in laying the dirt over the jar. The act of adding the dirt was done communally, led by the family, but all assembled would participate, for as a community they were burying one of their own too.

With all hands, paws, and wings on deck, as the sun set down to touch the horizon, the last handful of dirt was cast over the jar.

Calhaan was gone.

Bodarn knelt by the grave, breathless, while the rest of the congregation paid their respects in near silence and one by one, departed back for home.

Many would look upon Bodarn and seem keen, so, so keen to say something. To broach the enormous silence, but stopped themselves short.

When Bodarn and Zohan were alone, the badger spoke at last.

"It is done," he said.

"It is," Zohan replied.

The badger sighed and got to his feet. "I think I'm going to have to answer a lot of questions in the coming months."

"Tell them the truth, if you feel you want to," the fox replied, putting an arm over the badger's shoulder. "The truth can only set people free."

"People won't want to hear it, that's for sure."

"Perhaps." Zohan nodded. "But that's true of all great truths, isn't it?"

The Last Giant

by J.S. Hawthorne

The Eyeshine of the Soothsayer

by NightEyes DaySpring

8 Days

by Huldra

Breathless

by SakaraFox

Lids

by Utunu

Howling to the Moon

by J.F.R. Coates

Eternal Spring

Darius Davis

The Shrine of T-am-ădad

by Thomas "Faux" Steele

Mark of the Stranger

Casimir Laski

Mark of the Stranger

By Casimir Laski

The wanderer's torch cut a blazing red swath through the sea of stars as he trod down the beaten path. Golden waves trickled and lapped over the coarse brown fur of his outstretched arm, and he raised his other paw, shielding his eyes from the glare, wondering what company an open flame might summon at this hour. Out there, somewhere, the crows who had haunted his steps since crossing into the foothills of Illyria still lingered beyond the sharp shadows, waiting. But he wasn't carrion yet.

A distant jackal-dog bayed its ghostly song to the slender moon, and even farther off, an invisible companion gave answer. Sikarios paused, careful to keep his tail from drooping to the muck of the road, and pulled his cloak tighter with his free hand. To the weary marten, the night's chill had teeth as sharp as any prowling beast. Months of winter rain had left mountain streams pregnant with bubbling snowmelt, and the feet of a thousand passersby had churned the once-sturdy highways to muck and mire, leaving his pads raw and aching. He had traded his finer clothes for thick traveling garb in a small village a few leagues outside of Aigos, now regretting that he had not bartered for a bristle-boar pelt or a hat of lynx fur.

Trudging on, the marten strained his ears for the telltale trickle of a brook, then hunted the free-flowing water down to slake his

thirst and wash his muddied feet. Afterwards he let his canteen drink its fill. The moon was a slender bronzed sickle in the sky, like a shield battered and rent. Sikarios settled down against a cold granite outcrop, studying it. In his heart, the marten knew he should press on, should claw as much distance as possible between himself and the battlefield that had rent his heart and damned his soul. But where was he to go that his sins would not follow him? Even if he were to slog his way up the coastline of the Adriatik, to seek employment in Istria or try for the wilderness beyond it, the shade of Alexios would still find him every time he lay down to sleep.

At the thought of his brother, Sikarios raised a trembling paw to the wound over his left eye, running his claws over the still-tender trio of gouges carved from his flesh. They were far from the only marks marring his body, but the rest had been cloaked by fur, a hidden map charting the course of these last four years. His mother had once compared the tinge of his pelt to cherry wood, but when he looked at it now he could not help but see dried blood. At least time had erased those wounds from the reach of wandering eyes.

The scars over his eye had never healed so; the fur there had grown back in a frail grey where it had done so at all, leaving him marked before gods and kounavi. As if he even deserved to be counted among his own people anymore. He could be named many things—Degenerate, Oathbreaker, Kinslayer—but not one of *them*. His father had lost two sons that day.

A scattering of pebbles clattered over his resting form, and Sikarios stumbled to his feet. He didn't even recall drawing his kopis; the short, curved blade burned softly in the moonlight, eager for blood. As the marten scoured the darkness with his good eye, the prior four years washed over him in a tide of burning, vivid clarity: he heard the tread of a thousand boots over the charred and torn Morrean soil, and felt the blood of a dear friend quench the fire in his own heart as the nearby Aegean churned and spat in indifference. When the ash cleared to reveal a sprawling starscape, and the tortured face of his companion bled into the shadows of the torch-lit crags before him, each breath was its own fresh battle. Sikarios

staggered back, slipping to the grass, the blades still glistening with the leavings of the evening's rainstorm.

The rugged hill country lay silent around him. The gods, too were silent, as they had always been. Sikarios drew breaths deep and steady as the ocean waves, like his mother had taught him a lifetime ago, and her words whispered through the years on the nightly breeze. *You are stronger than you know.*

The trebled yap of a jackal-dog shook him back to the present. The creature was close, and their kind seldom traveled alone. The crafty mongrels who roamed the wilds of Epirus stood more than half the height of the average kounavi; even a marten would be hard-pressed to fight one off alone. Trusting that the burning light of his torch would prove more help than hindrance, he stumbled upright and wound his way among the rocks, seeking shelter. The cries continued to sound, and the thrill of being hunted washed the festering guilt from his mind like vinegar pressed to a fresh wound: a welcome sting, a reminder that he was still alive. He soon found a cave set into the side of a small hill, his fire throwing sharp shadows into the earthen recesses. Before he could investigate further, the marten's ears caught the telltale scuff of paws padding over dirt.

He whirled, thrusting the torch forward and drawing his kopis once more, this time with the practiced whisk of a warrior. Beyond the gaping mouth of the cave, a pair of golden eyes lurked within a shifting shadow. Savage teeth caught the firelight as the beast drew nearer, shedding the black of night for a patchwork of tawny fur with hints of russet and silver. A predatory spark gleamed in its eyes, that of one vagabond beast to another. Sikarios had seen jackal-dogs before, but never this close; from here the creature reminded him of the foxes his father's shepherds had fielded to guard their flocks, only twice as large and with a slender tail sharpened to a dagger's tip. He tried to picture his smaller kin standing before one of the canids: a mink or a weasel, perhaps a stoat from the northern forests or a polecat of the wandering clans. Herders were wise to fear them so, but the lone beast's efforts would be wasted here. With a final

parting glance, and a strangely sly wrinkle of the face, the jackal-dog turned and slunk off into the night.

Sikarios watched for another few moments, just to be certain, before trudging deeper into the cave and laying down his traveling sack. He added his torch to a pile of dry wood, kindling a little flame in the earthen chamber and trying not to picture it as a tomb. As he huddled close to the low-burning tongues, doing his best to enjoy a meal of stale bread and an overripe apple he had salvaged from a flock of greedy magpies, his eyes returned to the far wall of the cave.

The shadows that had first drawn his attention were not shadows at all, but paintings: figures and beasts in black and carmine and ochre, a story stained into the very rock. Gritting through the final bite of bread, Sikarios forced his aching body upright and approached. The renderings were crude but easy to decipher; following the tale from left to right, he saw flames descend in strokes of white and orange, and from the ashes of the World Before, the familiar forms of his own people rising to inherit the earth. As he gazed at depictions of hunts and battles, seeing great beasts fall and heroes triumph, he wondered how long ago this must have been painted, if the marten or weasel who had dragged his claws over the rockface had seen the mighty cities of the Ancient Ones with his own eyes. And at the end of the tale, he found a hundred pawprints pressed into the stone, all a deep crimson, radiating outward from a central mark, like stars around the moon. He raised his own to the ghostly trace of his anonymous ancestor.

But when he pressed his pad to the mark, his paws were still slick with the blood of his brother, enough to paint every one of his sins upon the cold stone. The scars over his eye burned once more, and Sikarios turned from the mural, feeling suddenly unworthy to stand in its presence, to feel even a drop of kinship with this long-dead clan. He returned to the fire, and his worn cloth sack, rummaging through his few remaining possessions. Beneath a smaller pouch, heavy with three drachma and a pawful of obols, the marten found what he was looking for: a slender knife and a block of wood.

When he strained his eyes, Sikarios could see the lion lurking within the silver birch, waiting to be unleashed. Briefly he tried to recall the one Elias had carved, but seeking the memory was like probing an aching tooth with his tongue. Wincing, he set his mind to the present task, and began to steadily whittle away at the mane. He took little note of the fire's dwindling. By the time a majestic leonine face had emerged from the wood, drawn forth by fingers now trembling in the dark, the flames huddled close to the embers, like a mother eagle shielding her fledglings. Fearing what sleep would bring, and yet knowing that his body needed rest, Sikarios tenderly tucked the carving away before drawing his cloak tighter and laying his head upon the sack.

Sleep came quickly, and when it did, as always, he dreamt of his brothers: the one he had buried, and the one he knew was coming to bury him.

***

In his dreams he was young once more, loping through fields gilded with wild wheat as the first hints of autumn stirred on the breeze. His brothers were with him, and his family was still whole; Kypros, the stalwart firstborn, lead the way with a stick raised high, charging ranks of invisible foes as Sikarios and Alexios raced behind. The low walls of Nalanthis stood just beyond the tree line, calm and quiet in the shadow of the acropolis, from which their noble father ruled and their mother bore all the world's love in her breast. When their younger brother stumbled, Kypros was there to help him up, and when Sikarios scraped his arm after falling from an oak Kypros found a patch of aloi to temper the wound's sting. He relived their expedition to the summit of Mount Nikthis: poor Alexi, legs still hobbled by youth, staggering the final league of the journey as their older brother sought out a cool-flowing mountain stream. Elias had come along that day, as he often did, and Sikarios and his friend had lingered near a ledge, choosing stones to hurl into a sky as vivid as the tourmaline necklace his mother was so fond of, listening and laughing as the rocks clattered their way down the slopes.

The memory of Elias' fur catching the evening light, the kine's amber coat bronzed with the lifeblood of summer, was like a knife through his heart. Slowly, the sorrow dredged Sikarios from the depths of the dream, and the marten awoke to find himself back in the cave. When he turned, a pair of vulpine eyes were peering into his own down a pointed snout.

Sikarios straightened, but at the first shift of his paw the fox snarled, then yapped sharply. The warning bark brought back a brief yet vivid memory of trespassing through a pasture with a pack of other young kines, the angry shouts of the shepherd following at their heels. It took the marten a moment to realize that he *was* hearing voices—only those of kits, whispering from somewhere beyond the snarling fox. A kine and a doe, he was fairly certain. Straining his ears, Sikarios began to catch words from the murmuring.

"...told you he wasn't dead." That was the doe.

"Maybe he's a dhampir," the kine shot back.

"Quiet! I think he's waking up."

The fox sniffed tentatively, then scampered back to the mouth of the cave when the marten heaved himself upright. "I'm not dead," he called to the silhouettes peering in from the wall of light. It had been several days since he had heard his own voice; the sound was harsher than he remembered, raspier. Sikarios shaded his eyes, then gathered his belongings and staggered forward. He heard the pair scurry out of his way.

The late-morning light, trapped and mirrored beneath a covering of thick, pale grey clouds, left him momentarily blinded. Rubbing his eyes, the marten took in the landscape, and found two young weasels standing a few paces away, watching him with bated breath and wary gazes. Each wore a loose-fitting cloth tunic, their feet clad in sandals. The kine, glaring from beneath a broad-brimmed hat, dangled a sling loosely from one paw, while the doe, standing a full head taller, had her claws wrapped tightly around a hooked staff. The vixen, nearly coming to the doe's waist, stood attentively between them, russet fur bristling, joined by a larger fox with a patchy black-and-white coat. Both bared their fangs in silence.

"Stay back!" the kine shouted, sling hand twitching. The doe hunched slightly, as if she were ready to crack Sikarios over the head. The marten raised his hands slowly, fingers splayed, pads outward. At least they still spoke Elladian here.

"I mean no harm to either of you, or your flock. I was merely passing through, and sought shelter for the night. If I have trespassed upon your land, I—"

A bestial shriek cut his words short, and all three kounavi shifted their attention east, to the shade of the tree line. The larger fox took off at once, leaving the two weasels and the vixen to glance back to him before a second shrill cry drew them as well. Curious, Sikarios shadowed them from a distance, following through a ridge of trees before clawing his way out into open range. A dozen sheep heavy and bloated with wool clustered nearby. He caught sight of the children sprinting to the far end of the pasture, and a moment later noticed the black shapes circling overhead like shades loosed from the underworld.

By the time he reached the kits, the kine had already launched several stones at the razor-hawks, while the doe stood swinging her crook, attempting to keep the flock from the wounded ewe. The foxes snarled and barked, snapping whenever one of the raptors drew too near, the scent of their fear sizzling on the air. Some of the birds had lighted on the nearby trees, while others continued to slice through the air, veering in only to sweep away.

Sikarios knew all too well what a pack of razor-hawks could do even to a grown kounavi. Racing to the stricken sheep, his drew his kopis and shouted. Dagger-sharp talons strangled branches in anticipation of the kill, and eyes rich with murderous desire shifted to focus on his ragged form. The scars over his eye burned with the memory of violence.

"Keep close to me!" he shouted at the weasels. The pair shared a glance before hurrying to his side. Sikarios had hoped that the pack would flee, but the raptors were aflame with the blood they had already drawn. He lowered his voice. "Good kits. Now, when they rush in, do not break—that's what they want. Stand your ground."

His brother's words, a distant part of him remembered. From the corner of his eye, he saw the kine cock his head, eyes narrowing. The doe—his sister, Sikarios figured—nudged him roughly.

Two of the razor-hawks launched from their perches, catching the wind with feathers splayed. Sikarios steadied himself. But as they swept down, one of the birds tumbled from the sky, thudding to the earth with white plumage spouting from its breast. The other raptors veered sharply for the cover of the trees, and the trio turned to see a figure striding toward them across the meadow, a slender bow grasped firmly and another arrow already nocked. The marten finally let himself draw a normal breath, shuddering as he slunk to the welcoming coolness of the grass.

"Have you fought razor-hawks before?" the doe asked, still clutching her crook so tightly it looked about to snap.

Sikarios drew several more breaths, then looked to her. "I've seen my share of bloodshed."

"Father!" the kine cried, waving his paws wildly. The approaching figure quickened his pace, and Sikarios turned his attention to the prize that had drawn the ravening pack. The young ewe lay on her side, chest rising and falling with labored breaths, her white neck stained with carmine. Sikarios ran his fingers over her flesh, searching out the wound, feeling the beast shudder as his claws traced the gash. He looked up to find the doe staring at him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"...Uh...Aeda." Her voice was shaking almost as much as his own paws.

"And him?" Sikarios inclined his head.

"That's Mylo, my—my brother." As she answered, their father arrived, and the marten rose to meet him. The new kine was a weasel like them, much older than Sikarios himself, sharing the golden-brown pelts of his offspring, only speckled with stony grey. The cream-colored fur of his chin and neck made the marten think of the one time he had seen snowfall. The grown weasel, slender in the manner of his kind, barely came up to Sikarios' neck, and he found himself suddenly conscious of how he must look to these poor shep-

herds, scarred and disheveled, with the wild eyes of a fugitive, armed with a blade likely worth more than their entire flock. The older weasel whistled sharply, and the two foxes bounded off toward the rest of the sheep. The marten whirled back to the wounded animal and stooped to his knees.

"We need yarrow," he said, trying his best to sound like his father, as if calm command were his birthright. He turned to the kits. "You know what that is?" The doe nodded, though her eyes were uncertain. "You may know it as woundwort, or staunchweed," he explained, shifting his gaze back to the ewe. "Green stem, and serrated leaves, with clumps of small white-petaled flowers around golden seeds. Grows in high, dry places with ample sunlight." He retrieved his canteen, then tore a strip of cloth from the rags in his sack. When he looked back up, the kits were still staring at him. He thrust his chin up. "You should be able to find some nearby."

The two scampered off, leaving their father to watch this strange marten tend to his livestock. Sikarios saw the kine's shadow fall across him, and scooted over for the smaller kounavi to join him.

"I am Tamyris," the stranger said. Sikarios merely nodded, and the weasel cleared his throat. "Thank you for your aid. I have never known a razor-hawk pack to be so brazen, especially not this close to town."

Sikarios nearly mentioned that the raptors who haunted battlefields often grew quite bold after gorging themselves on corpses. That there was a small gap between the dead and the dying, and only a slightly larger leap from that to preying on the able-bodied. Instead, he simply asked, "And what town might that be?"

"Dalma," the kine said, pointing to the northwest. "It lies about half a league that way." He spoke Elladian without flaw, though his rugged Illyrian accent churned his words like a plow turning rich soil. "You... have some knowledge of medicine, marten?" Sikarios caught the slightest hesitation before the final word, a cautious probing.

"Enough to help here, at least." The patter of sandals echoed from the tree line, and a moment later Mylo and Aeda reappeared,

each clutching a pawful of yarrow as if it were jewelry. "This will be plenty," he said, spitting into his own paws before gently kneading the flowers into a pulpy paste. The ewe winced when he daubed it on her wound, but did not cry out. "She should be fine," he said, running his claws delicately through her clumpy winter coat," so long as you continue to apply that daily, until the wound seals. Let's help her up."

Together the four kounavi guided the ewe upright, grunting as her cloven hooves fought for footing. From there it was a short walk back to their cottage, where the foxes stood vigilant as the rest of the flock crowded into a cobblestone pen. The kits hurried forward to meet their faithful companions.

"Oh, *Pyrra*," Aeda crooned, kneeling to ruffle the fur of the russet vixen. "And Kokkin, good Kokkin," she added, turning to pat the dog fox before he whirled to lick Mylo's muzzle. Sikarios could not help but smile at the sight. After the injured ewe had been reunited with her flock, and the gate securely set over the thatch-roofed pen, the four kounavi retired to the cottage for a lunch of dried fish, legumes, bread and cheese. To the marten's surprise, the family washed their meal down with milk rather than water or wine, a barbarian custom he had heard rumors of from youth. Above the doorway hung a crude wooden rendition of a weasel with a bow, poised to strike down some unseen wild beast: Iluvex, goddess of the wilds, an import from Sikarios' own homeland. Here, on the fringes of the Elladene, he suspected they would know her by another name.

The four ate in silence, and Sikarios felt his presence as a weight around their necks, growing heavier with each passing moment, with each question left unasked. The young kine, Mylo, was the first to speak.

"So... where'd you get that scar?" he asked, the innocence in his voice underscored by a touch of awe. The marten froze as if a knife had been pressed to his throat. He heard his brother's voice, *I won't let you*, felt the dagger clatter from his blood-slicked paw. Saw the eyes he had known all his life staring back at him in shock and hor-

ror as the light trickled from them into the shadows of the tent. His nostrils filled with the scents of iron and fear and betrayal.

He jumped as a paw clutched at his tunic, finding himself back in the cottage, the doe watching him as if he were a wild jackal-dog. He swallowed, blinking rapidly, and cleared his throat.

"I..." Words trickled through his grasp like water. Tamyris cut in.

"There's no need to pry, son." He set a firm paw on the kine's shoulder, turning his gaze slowly to their guest. "By the look of things, you've been on the road for quite some time, stranger." As before, he stressed the final word, curving it up slightly, almost making it a question.

"Meletos," the marten said, hoping to keep the quaver from his voice. "And yes, I've—it's been quite some time. I... I have a long journey ahead of me."

The weasel met his gaze coolly from across the table, then drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, folding his hands over his stomach. "Kits, could you check on the animals?" He turned to his daughter. "Just to make sure they're all settled in nicely."

"But we just—" Mylos's protest was cut short by his sister.

"Of course, father." She ushered her brother out the door, shooting a lingering glance at Sikarios before closing it firmly behind her.

Tamyris held his gaze, then straightened in his chair. "We truly are indebted to you for your help today," he began, before storm clouds of worry drifted behind his eyes. "But I know when a kine is running from something." Sikarios opened his mouth to speak, but the weasel forestalled him with the wave of a paw. "Don't worry—I don't mean to ask any questions you aren't prepared to answer... *Meleos*, was it?"

The marten nodded absently. His host lifted a paw, running his claws through the cream-colored tufts beneath his jaw.

"Well, we are gods-fearing folk, and by rights we will offer you what hospitality we can reasonably spare. And I can tell you are no common brigand." He nodded to the sheath propped against the wall, beneath Sikarios' cloak. "You could've already accosted us and been on your way, were you so inclined. What I mean to say is... I just

want your assurance that whatever trouble it is you're running from, you won't pass it on to anyone here. Not the townsfolk, not myself..." He trailed off briefly, and for a moment his eyes smoldered like the noonday sun. "...And most importantly, not my kits."

Sikarios had stared death in the face, had looked into the eyes of a kine prepared to kill enough times to recognize that same readiness here. His mind wandered over questions he knew needed asking: *How long could he afford to linger here? Was it truly wise to stay for even a single night? Should here merely push on to Istria?* But he was tired, so tired. Brushing his doubts aside, the marten nodded again, more sharply. "I was just hoping for a place to rest for a few days, that's all. Whatever needs doing, I can earn my keep, and then I'll be moving on." He raised his paws. "Like I wasn't even here. You have my word."

Tamyris' eyes slid down to the table. He was quiet a long time. "I could pay, if you'd prefer," Sikarios added hesitantly, trusting the weasel's rugged rural pride to decline for him. "I don't have much, but—"

"A bit of labor will suffice. Nothing too strenuous, I assure you." The older kine's gentle smile thrust him back to the days of his youth; it was strange how the slender weasel could in that moment look so much like the father he had once known.

"Thank you," the marten whispered, feeling a millstone lift from his chest. He offered a silent prayer of thanksgiving to Pallas Mashena, Lady of Wisdom, his former patron. It was the first in months, and despite the fear festering deep within his heart—that the gods had forsaken him, that the best he could hope for was to avoid their notice altogether—Sikarios could not deny he felt a flicker of solace.

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The rest of the day passed quickly, a flurry of mundane tasks that drained the hours until dusk crept up from the eastern depths as an indigo haze. The razor-hawks did not dare show themselves again within range of Tamyris' deadly bow, and under the shepherds' watchful eyes the flock returned to the meadow to graze con-

tentedly. When nightfall came and the sheep had been safely ushered back to their pen, the four retired to the cottage once more for supper.

After a meal of salted fish, grapes and olives, Tamyris turned to his children. "Meletos here will be staying with us for a few days." Mylo sat straighter at once, the kine's bright blues eyes tinged with reverent curiosity. Aeda simply said, "Should I make room for him in here?" She looked to the doorway, to the only other room in the cottage.

Sikarios cleared his throat. "I can sleep in this room—I wouldn't want to impose any more than I already have."

Tamyris nodded. "If you have need of anything, do not hesitate to ask."

Later, when the three weasels had retired to their sleeping quarters, Sikarios spread his cloak in the corner and stretched out, enjoying the simple luxury of secure walls and a sturdy roof. The gentle rhythmic breathing of the kits soon drifted to his ears from the other room, a comfort the marten had not realized he had so dearly missed. Somewhere beyond the mud-brick exterior of the cottage, the ghostly cry of an owl danced through the night. He let the strangely familiar environment draw him back, back to the days of his youth, when the world had made sense. And once more, he thought of Elias.

After years of youthful friendship, their shared fondness had given way to something more, something deeper. Sikarios had been frightened at first—they both had, fumbling for each other in the darkness as the autumn winds wound through the halls of his father's palace—but beneath the anxiety and peculiar, nameless shame he had found joy, and warmth beyond measure to brace himself against the cold of night. Familiarity soon smoothed the edges of their fear; the halcyon days had melted into one another, a time without true endings, where every parting was brief and every dusk promised a brighter dawn. Their bond had been like a secret fire, always in danger of being doused by an interloper or clumsy passerby,

and yet all the more cherished for that vulnerability. But like all secrets, it could not hope to endure forever.

With a shudder, Sikarios recalled the night he had left the warmth of their bed to find his younger brother frozen in the hallway, eyes wide with shock and revulsion. Alexios had stared at his outstretched paw as if it were a burning brand.

"Alexi, please, wait." His desperate pleas washed over the young kine like sea spray against granite. "Listen to me, *please*," he said, lowering his voice, crouching down, wishing that the darkness could swallow him. "Please, don't tell anyone. Not father, not mother, not Kyrios or anyone. Can you promise me?" he asked, holding out his own paw once more, palm up, like a supplicant begging his liege lord. Tenderly, he clasped his brother's paw, hating the way the kine winced. "Promise me you won't tell anyone else?"

Alexi had closed his eyes slowly and nodded, his voice fragile as a shaft of moonlight. "I promise." On the other side of the wall, Elias had shifted in his sleep, still blissfully oblivious. The thought had made his heart ache. It still did, all these years later.

At the time, Sikarios had believed their secret to be safe. He recognized the truth only with hindsight: that it was a splinter from an arrowhead lodged deep within the beating heart of his family, cloaked from the eye and yet slowly festering, year by year. If only he had known then what he did now, lying beneath a stranger's roof, having donned a stranger's name. If only.

Tamyris and his family slept soundly only paces away, and the marten found a part of himself wishing that the life of a prince could be traded for something as simple and honest as theirs. By reflex his paw sought another, and found only empty air.

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Sikarios awoke well before daybreak, the memories that had shepherded him into sleep still swirling behind his eyes. The cottage lay in the peaceful almost-silence of pre-dawn darkness. As his body livened, preparing to face another day, the marten dug through his sack and once more retrieved the block of silver birch, a lion's face now showing clearly. With the aid of the knife, his fingers freed more

of the beast, wood melting away to reveal the back and chest. The work was strangely calming; his mind emptied of everything else as shaving after shaving drifted into his lap. By the time his ears caught the first stirrings of his host family, he had begun to shape the lion's mighty legs.

Scooping the wood shavings into a paw, he stepped into the twilight and let them drift away on the chill breeze before returning to help with breakfast. The children prepared a meal of tagenites, a kind of pancake consisting of wheat flour, olive oil and curdled milk, topped with goat's cheese and drizzled in honey. As they worked, Tamyris showed Sikarios to the nearest well, located on the borders of their farm and shared by their neighbors, a family of goatherds. The sheep pen lay quiet as they trotted past, the occasion muffled bleat echoing from beneath the thatch roof. Aside from that, the farm contained a small shed and a chicken coop surrounded by a low fence.

After drawing two buckets of water from the well, the pair returned to the cottage, where the scent of crackling pastries sizzled on the air, a smell of spring mornings and easy laughter. Watching the steady, measured bites of his hosts, Sikarios had to stay the temptation to devour his own meal like a starving jackal-dog. This time, however, they did not eat in silence; Tamyris, chewing around a mouthful of the cake, walked his guest through the routine he would be learning.

In addition to sixteen head of sheep, and two foxes to aid in watching over them, the family possessed a good two dozen chickens. Several of his ewes were pregnant, though none would give birth until later in the winter, leaving the family dependent on barter for milk, and on the eggs of his other livestock for the material with which to do so. "We've considered acquiring a goat or two," he told Sikarios, "but with only three of us to watch over everything, we've got our paws full as it is, eh?" The marten chewed and nodded silently, watching the kits' faces for the telltale flashes of grief: every death leaves its mark in the world of the living, a gap in the light of the sun, a hole through the heart of a family, and that

of a mother most of all. He knew that as well as anyone. But Mylo and Aeda simply carried on with their meal, as if their sorrow had long-since clotted and scabbed over, leaving a deadened callus to greet any mention of her absence.

The marten's eyes wandered to the shrine in the corner, a regular feature of any household—only upon this one, beside the icons of other gods and clusters of candles and prayer-beads, stood a little figurine of a raven, messenger of Mirod, the god of death. When his gaze focused on the little clay corvid, he noticed the flower resting in its shadow, a blue chrysanthemum, like a piece of the night sky carved out by their loss. *I'm sorry to hear about her*, he wanted to say, *I know what it's like*, and *She knows how much you loved her* floating behind the words. But Tamyris had fallen quiet, a pensive expression on the weasel's face, and Sikarios could not bring himself to pry open old wounds, of another or himself. The meal concluded in silence.

From there it was on to the daily tasks of farm life: Mylo distributed chicken feed and collected eggs as the others, Sikarios included, led the sheep out to pasture, while Pyrra and Kokkin ran yapping and yikkering around their hooves. The hours passed languidly as the sheep milled about beneath a clear sky, rich with clouds as white and fluffed as their overgrown coats.

Aeda returned to the cottage to prepare lunch, and Sikarios helped her bring the food to the others. They ate atop a cloth spread over grass still speckled with dew. A yellowhammer swooped by like a flash of sunlight, vanishing into the trees; the bark of a distant fox roused the ears of Pyrra and Kokkin, then was quickly forgotten. The pair loped across the meadow, ushering two bolder rams back to the safety of the flock.

"Would you care to see our humble town?" Tamyris asked, turning to his guest. He had donned a wide-brimmed straw hat much like the one his son wore, while Aeda had her own head wrapped in loose white cloth. "Mylo is going to be heading into the market later."

The marten found himself strangely curious. He nodded. "I'd be happy to." Their meal concluded, he helped the young kine bring their wooden bowls and plates back to the cottage, where his kopis

rested by the doorway beneath his cloak, secure in its sheath. Sikarios reached for the weapon, then hesitated, fearful of being caught unarmed, yet knowing it was bound to draw attention. His paw hovered before the hilt, then reached up to swipe the cloak off its hook, leaving the iron in the cool darkness of his host's home.

Dalma, as the marten discovered that afternoon, was a rather unremarkable settlement, barely more than a village clustered around a central square, in turn surrounded by farmsteads, all nestled within hill country well suited to raising sheep and goats. The sea lay slightly under a league from the town; on calm nights, a keen-eared kounavi could hear the heave of the Adriatik as it hurled wave after wave against the rocky shoreline. Rather than a river, the inhabitants of Dalma had access to a shallow brook that snaked its way down from the rugged eastern wilderness, bearing pure, life-giving water as it raced northwest in search of the sea. The town itself wasn't significant enough to warrant a proper lord, Mylo explained, but one wealthy farmer, a mink by the name of Berychis, loomed large in civic functions. It was one of his many daughters who had assumed the role of sofianthe, tending to the local shrine and overseeing public rituals on holidays.

"Her name's Mira," the young kine said, letting the syllables drip from his tongue like honey, "and she's the most beautiful doe I ever seen." He swayed on his feet, staring up into the pale blue sky as the two trotted down the main road. " 'Course she can't marry, being a sofianthe and all," he added with a sigh, "but still..."

Sikarios smiled at the thought of young love, or what a young mind might think passed for it. The gods only knew how hard they could be to distinguish. He thought again of those long nights with Elias: their clumsy, fumbling forays into romance, after the initial hesitancy and uncertainty had been washed away in blessed reciprocation, but before his brother's discovery threatened to sever the ties that bound them.

"Come on," he said, nudging the young kine affably, "there's got to be a doe you fancy around your age."

Mylo shrugged, pausing to kick at a rock, scuffing his sandals in the dirt. "Well, there's Lylla—she lives in the farm beyond our neighbors'." His shoulders sagged. "But I heard from the other kines in town that Andris and Egnat have both been visiting her."

"Is she fond of you, do you think?"

Mylo's face brightened, and he nodded eagerly, tail swinging through the dust his feet kicked up. "Last time I saw her, she told me—" An embarrassed grin crept over his face. "Well, I think she likes me enough."

The marten tried his best to echo his own mother's memory, the advice he recalled her giving his lovesick brother when Kyrios had been pining after the daughter of an officer. "Then go and speak to her, and tell her how you feel. Let her know where your heart lies, without seeming overeager."

Mylo's face grew thoughtful, and the young weasel looked up at him. "You must know a lot about the world, mister, being so old and all." Sikarios furrowed his brow, but the kine's eyes were clear and innocent, and the sting of offense melted into amusement.

The marten forced himself to chuckle. "How old do you think I am?"

"I dunno, maybe..." Mylo squinted, cocking his head. He turned to walk backwards, paws clasped behind him. "Maybe 35?"

This brought genuine laughter. "How old are you?"

"I'll be thirteen this spring."

"Then I am not even twice your age." The kine gaped, and Sikarios nodded. "I am just shy of twenty-three." *Though the gods know I look older*, he thought, gently fingering the contours of his scars, feeling the weight of his past bearing down upon his haggard frame, once bursting with youthful vigor.

Mylo seemed to sense his unease. "Don't worry mister, Aeda says you're still handsome in a way, like the soldiers who come through last summer." He halted, grimacing. "Please, don't tell her I told you." Sikarios chuckled softly. "Besides, she's got eyes for Gallas, not that she'd admit it," the weasel added, sticking his tongue out. "His

father's a leatherworker in town. She's 14, so she'll be pairing off soon enough."

By then the conversation had brought them into town, a collection of wooden-framed mud-brick houses, the fraying straw of their thatch rooves bristling like pelts in the sea breeze. As they neared the central square, heading for the market, he spotted a trio of polecats haggling with a local over some bauble; the strange kounavi, with their spiked, sable fur showing patches of sickly ochre, chittered amongst themselves in their alien tongue, distinctive crimson coifs clinging to their heads. The wary mink they bartered with waited in silence. Mylo stiffened as they passed the group, putting the marten between himself and the members of the wandering clans. Despite his own misgivings about polecats, bred from generations of mutual mistrust and hardened through his princely upbringing, Sikarios could not help but feel a stab of guilt at how the townsfolk shot them glances laden with disdain and suspicion while he could stroll freely, even marked as he was.

Farther in, where kounavi of all types bartered and haggled amidst the bustle of the market, his ears caught the familiar ring of a blacksmith's hammer. Trusting Mylo to seek out what was needed and find him later, Sikarios followed the sound. In the shade of a wooden overhang, surrounded by scraps of metal and half-assembled tools, stood a peculiar creature: short and grey-furred, with a vulpine face and a bushy tail ringed in black. *A prokyon.*

Of all the kisenos, his people's term for members of the non-kouvani races, prokyons were the most common in Epirus—behind otters, of course. But where the latter were tall and sleek, traveling the continent's waterways and plying the currents of the Great Sea, and otherwise sticking to their own riverine fishing settlements, the former were stocky, ring-tailed forest-dwellers, known for their dexterous fingers. Among their people, it was customary for skilled families to seek employment in the cities of the Elladene, passing on the secrets of their trade from generation to generation. Sikarios' father had retained one in Nalanthis—Brennix, his name was, a taciturn creature, his thoughts always concealed behind those

small, black, ever-watchful eyes. Growing up in Nalanthis, he had encountered far more than just kouvani: sandy-haired mankous from the jungles of Afrika, speckle-coated mardun of the northern taiga, even black-furred, thick-limbed viverrid traders from far east of the Indus. But while the sight of kisenos in larger towns and cities throughout the Elladene was common, to find one here was surprising.

The smith hammered delicately at something laid atop his forge, then wiped a dark paw across his ashen fur before glancing up and flashing a smile. Sikarios stepped nearer, watching as the prokyon set down the iron blade and fetched a bronze hilt. He held them up to his beady eyes, testing the fit before setting the blade aside.

"Do you require something?" he asked, his Elladian gently flavored with the earthy tones of the northern forests.

"I just... I am surprised to find one of your people here," Sikarios replied, "in such a small town." The marten raised a paw. "I do not mean to cause offense—"

The prokyon chuckled softly, retrieving a chisel-like tool and shaping the hilt. "We can't all find employ in great cities, or the estates of mighty lords. And after all, even small towns need blacksmiths." He met the marten's gaze with a wink.

"Catharix," a voice called from across the street. Sikarios craned his neck to see a marten and two weasels approaching. The prokyon waved to them, brushing shavings from the bronze hilt.

"Still working on Berychis' sword?" the other marten asked. His companions smirked, and Catharix nodded.

"He figures one of his sons may soon enlist."

"The gods know the old bastard has enough to spare," one of the weasels snickered. His laughter spread through the crowd, and Sikarios felt a stranger among them. The other weasel's eyes flitted to him, his slender face hardening when they met the greyed fur and naked flesh of his scars.

Sikarios forced himself not to shy from the other's gaze. The weasel balked first, turning to Catharix. "Did you hear ol' Thestor is looking to our own lands for recruits now, for the campaign in

the Morrea? They're saying he'll try for Haikoth again this coming spring."

Sikarios blanched at the familiar names: Thestor, King of Makketon, the mightiest kounavi in the Elladene, to whom his own father owed fealty. The Morrea, the land he had spent the last four years ravaging and bleeding over. Haikoth, the city that had broken him as it had broken so many armies against its walls. The city that had torn Elias from his breast. The city he had fled from, leaving the brother who had tried to stop him cold upon the blackened soil.

The others had continued without noticing, and he drifted back to the present to find them debating the foreign king's plans. Thestor's Makketonian League had warred with a coalition of rival cities for four long years, rending the Elladene and drenching its soil with the blood of countless fathers and sons, brothers and husbands. Tyrene, the coastal Anatolian republic, had led the resistance; with the fall of Haikoth they would stand nearly alone.

Of course, much of this was lost on a group of Illyrian farmers dwelling dozens of leagues from the nearest battlefield. Some of the rulers of the region's petty kingdoms might swear fealty to one side or another, but the war had, so far, left the hilly country untouched. As the three kounavi argued good-naturedly, and the prokyon's nimble fingers worked over the bronze hilt and a pair of gems meant for inlaying, Mylo skipped over to Sikarios' side.

"Hullo Gento," the young kine said cheerfully.

"Hullo Mylo," the other marten replied, then lowered his voice. "So you're responsible for bringing this vagabond into town?" He flashed a toothy smirk.

"This is Meletos, he's visiting with us. He saved an ewe from a pack of razor-hawks yesterday! And he has a sword!"

Four pairs of eyes centered on Sikarios, narrowing slightly.

"A sword, eh?" One of the weasels said.

"I, um—I'm travelling..." the marten muttered, "to see family in Istria. And with the war, the roads have been dangerous." As an uneasy silence settled over the crowd, Sikarios noticed the trio of polecats trotting past, and like foxes abandoning a scrap of bread for a

slab of veal, the locals' shared suspicion leapt at the new target. Suddenly the marten was one of them.

One of the weasels spat and jutted his chin. "Best you keep an eye on that lot."

"There's too many strange folk passing through here of late," Gento said, as if he had forgotten Sikarios were standing right next to him. "Remember those Saarenians, come through last week, or the week before? Heading for the Morrea, I figure, same as all the other vultures." Through all of the talk of outsiders, Catharix had kept silent. Sikarios could see the faintest flicker of fear in his small black eyes, knowing that the flame of mistrust could just as easily catch on him.

It was Mylo's innocence that broke the unease. "Is there any news about the war?"

"Why," Gento asked back, "thinking about joining up?" He let out a deep, paternal laugh. "I don't think they take 'em so young, lad. Give it a few years, you'll get your chance at glory."

Sikarios did not share their laughter. He knew that the army would take kines as young as Mylo as runners and aides; he also knew how easy it was for those very same kits to find themselves with a sling in hand, or pressed shoulder to shoulder in a phalanx when a desperate commander had need of all the bodies he could muster. The marten studied Mylo's face, watching as the young weasel followed news of the war with innocent eyes, dreaming of bloodless prestige. The thought of his body lying cold and broken in some far-off field made Sikarios want to dig his claws into his own flesh.

But they could not know who he was, who he *truly* was. No one could. And so he held his tongue and bore his anguish in silence.

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That evening, as the sheep grazed contentedly in the meadow under a sky stained with the fires of sunset, Sikarios once more returned to the carving. It was easy to lose himself in the pattern of the grain, the steady strokes of the knife keeping time with the beating of his heart. The lion had taken firm shape; all that remained was to free its legs from the remnants of the block the silver birch had

once been. He drifted off, letting his fingers continue their work as his mind wandered back, to the summer of his sixteenth year. The storm clouds of war rumbling in every audience chamber, rumors abounding of the coming conflict. And he and Elias, both on the cusp of adulthood, eager to prove their worth, to win renown before gods and mortals, to carve for themselves a place in the storied halls of Elladian legend. Kypros, the stalwart firstborn, had already been fitted for a suit of gleaming bronze armor, crested with a tuft of white bristle-boar hairs, and young Alexi, still wary around Sikarios, bounded through the halls of their home lancing invisible foes from atop an equally invisible mount.

They had lost their mother the year prior, and in his grief their father had taken closer counsel with King Thestor, whose firstborn had fallen to the Plague out of Parthus. Their plans of grand conquest had been birthed amidst tragedy; together they would make the world weep with them. As he sat on the hillside, his mind barely registering the grazing sheep, Sikarios remembered Elias racing across the field, eyes bright as the sun.

"You'll never believe it! I saw a *lion*!" The beasts were nigh-unheard of west of the Bospor, and yet the conviction in his friend's gaze was unshakeable. He had begun carving its likeness at once. "For strength," he had said, clasping a paw in Sikarios'. "If it does come to war. A charm to see us safely through." The marten's eyes watered at the memory.

"Meleos," a voice called, dragging him back to the sun-drenched knoll. Tamyris strode over, stabbing a crook into the soil. "You are skilled with that," the weasel added when he did not answer, lifting a clawed finger at carving knife.

"Thank you. I... learned it from a close friend." Sikarios glanced up at the shepherd watching him with an arched brow.

"You know, it might be best to settle on one name." A smirk crept across the weasel's face. "Meleos, Meletos—you've answered to both." He raised a paw. "No, no, it's all right. Like I promised, I won't pry. There are plenty of reasons these days to guard something as precious as a name." He sat down, resting his back against

the boulder. "I'm just a shepherd, so I don't expect to have seen as much of the world as you, despite my age. But I am also a father," he said, laying a steady hand on the marten's shoulder, "and my heart knows the sight of a young kine struggling."

Sikarios couldn't bring himself to meet the weasel's eyes.

"The gods and fates weave tangled webs of our lives, but you don't have to face it alone. We have a sofianthe here, a rather beautiful mink, if the gods will pardon my saying it." He chuckled, but the laugh felt hollow, trickling away as he waited in vain for his companion to join in. "Her name is Mira, and she lives in the hills to the northeast of town, in a little hovel by the shrine of Ilovek." His voice trembled, the faintest rumble of distant thunder. "When we lost Bero to sickness, several years back, she helped me through my grief. She... may be able to help you, too."

Tamyris stood, groaning as his bony limbs stretched. He cleared his throat. "It's almost time to bring the sheep in." The weasel started for the flock, but the marten's voice stopped him, turned him back.

"Sikarios." He let out a deep breath. "My name is Sikarios." He tensed, waiting for the flash of recognition, the shock that would quickly sour into fear or revulsion. Instead, the weasel just smiled, mouthing the name silently with a nod.

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A day passed, and then another, and Sikarios allowed himself to ease into the lull of the rugged hill country, so welcome after months of flight and years of blood and fire. Deep within his mind, a voice whispered warnings of his brother; he pictured Kyrios striding into town clad in bronze, burning like the sun. *They would hate you if they knew*, the voice snarled. *You do not deserve to share their peace. Leave, while you still can.*

And yet a part of him pined for the comfort of a home filled with laughter, wishing dearly that he could shed his past like an old skin, could bleed his lifeblood into the brook night by night until nothing remained of Sikarios the kinslayer, Sikarios the oathbreaker, until a new creature had taken his place: someone worthy of the shepherd

family who had taken him in. There was an honor to this life, he reflected, equal to that of any warrior. His father would have laughed at the sight of him casting feed to chickens, or mending the gate to the flock's pen alongside Tamyris, but soldiers needed food and clothing as much as anyone else. And the paws of a farmer, of a shepherd or carpenter provided, where for years his own had done nothing but take. Perhaps a life of humble labor would be enough to earn forgiveness from the gods.

One crisp, clear morning, when the hearts of the townsfolk lightened with the first hints of spring, Sikarios joined the two young weasels on a venture into Dalma. The marten's kopis jostled against his leg from within its sheath; he had taken to wearing the blade on his forays into town, as if imitating the kine he was before might wash the guilt and dread of the prior months from his soul. A flock of starlings speckled the sky with their northward flight, and he glanced at the two kits trotting happily beside him: Aeda cradled a basket of eggs, while Mylo shaded his eyes and looked south.

"Kyto said he and his brother might join up, when the recruiters come." The kine's voice sizzled with excitement. "A southerner passed through yesterday, said they were offering thirty drachma to anyone who fought, plus ten per month." Sikarios saw the weasel's eyes hungering at the thought of such a sum: a single drachma might feed a peasant for a week; a full thirty could purchase a plot of land and a few head of sheep or goats, perhaps even a pair of roe deer.

Your life is worth more than that, the marten wanted to say. Instead, he asked, "Do you know anyone who's fought before?"

Mylo nodded. "Kyto's father fought before I was born, when the Kimmerians came down from the north. They say he slew five of them at the gates of Istria, before their chief turned tail." He lunged forward, thrusting an imaginary spear, growling and grunting. "I'd love a chance to fight like him."

"And I'd like to marry a soldier," Aeda said. "That way I know he'd be brave and strong."

"The only thing Gallas fights is deer hides," her brother said with a snicker. She swatted at him, then raised her muzzle.

"He may join up as well," she sniffed. "The army has need of tanners, and he knows how to use a sling."

"So do I," Mylo added with a huff. He plucked a rock from the road and launched it into the grass. Sikarios' heart sunk to hear them speaking like this, echoing the words he and his brothers had shared, happily dousing themselves in oil as the fires of war crept ever nearer. He had seen that same eager gleam in Elias' eyes, and had lived long enough to watch them darken.

"There's more to warfare than glory and victory," he said softly, trying not to growl the words. The weasels' eyes darted to his face; Mylo nearly tripped over his own feet. Sikarios' claws found their way to the marks scoring his face. He halted to let the two stare, their innocent eyes taking in the jagged ridge of bare skin and patchy, grey fur.

He let the silence stretch. "Trust me, I saw much worse. I *dealt* much worse." Stifling a shudder, he breathed out deeply. The day suddenly seemed much colder. "When I was young, we spoke of war the same way you did, in my home. It was only later that I learned the truth." He set one paw on Mylo's shoulder, the other on Aeda's. "I will not deny that fighting may be necessary at times, but it is not something to rush into eagerly." He longed to explain further, to stomp out whatever embers might be lingering within their hearts, but feared to reveal too much. "I... I wish someone had told me that, before I marched off to war."

Without waiting for an answer, Sikarios started walking, hearing the slap of their sandals on the road a moment later. The trio remained silent the rest of the way into town. Dalma itself, however, bustled with activity. As soon as they neared the market, the marten noticed a number of strangers milling about, clad in tunics lined with dull bronze scales and draped in thick furs; smooth white or tawny coats showed beneath their armor, behind which dragged lithe, black-tipped tails. All were armed: some rested spears on their shoulders as they haggled with uneasy townsfolk, while others wore long knives or curved shortswords, or carried unstrung bows of yew

that curled like the wicked horns of a steppe-beast. Sikarios found himself suddenly conscious of his own blade.

A local he didn't recognize waved the three over. "Stoats," the weasel muttered, "mercenaries from Kirkassios." Sikarios thought back to his father's maps: the Kirkassians were a long way from their rugged, mountainous homeland. But for the moment they seemed to be causing no trouble, and so the kits went about their business as he watched from a distance, the sight of so many warriors stirring up unwanted memories like silt in a shallow stream.

A raised voice drew his gaze to one of the townsfolk, standing in front of a stall, waving his hands at one of the stoats as another watched from nearby. Sikarios took a few steps closer. The mink held up three fingers, then pointed to the bowls of dried figs sitting on his stall. "*Three obols*," he explained, dragging out each syllable, "for *one* cluster." Beside the fruits sat wedges of goat's cheese wrapped in arum leaves. The mink swept his arm. "*Two* for *one* wedge." The stoat said something in his guttural, singsong tongue, then turned to confer with his comrade before handing the mink a pawful of coins. Without waiting, he snatched up two wedges of cheese and a few clusters of figs, and began stuffing them into a sack.

"No," the mink said, "*three* for *each* of those!" When the stoat ignored him, his voice sharpened to a snarl. "Stop!" His claws swiped for the sack. The mercenary caught his wrist and shoved him back against the wooden stall, and the cloth went with him, spilling figs and cheese to the dirt. As the mink scrabbled to collect his goods, a knife appeared in the stoat's paw.

Sikarios stepped in between the pair before he could think, his left paw finding the worn bronze hilt of his kopis. The mink looked up before scrambling back behind the stall with a whimper. The stoat glared, but as his attention fixed on Sikarios' face, as his gaze traced the grooves in his flesh, something between respect and challenge flickered behind his deep-brown eyes. He muttered something, waving his left paw languidly at the mink, his right still clutching the dagger. The bone hilt of the blade was white as its

owner's fur. Behind him, his comrade stood straighter, resting his slender spear on an armored shoulder.

Sikarios cleared his throat. "Give him what is owed." The stoat grinned, exposing a row of needle-like teeth. A pink tongue flicked over them. The mink cowered behind his stall, as if his fruits and cheese were battlements. Around them, the other locals had forgotten their mundane tasks.

Panic threatened to clot in Sikarios' throat like rancid blood. He seized the hilt in his right paw and bared a finger's length of the blade. His brother's words echoed in his mind: *Stand your ground. Make them come to you. Make them pay for it.* The stoat tensed, head lowering, white fur bristling. The marten's heart pounded in his chest like a war drum.

Then a shout ripped their focus from each other, and Sikarios turned to see another Kirkassian stalking over, taller than either of the pair, a plume of crimson feathers fluttering from atop his helmet. He clouted his dagger-bearing subordinate over the head, barked something in his own tongue, and then turned to the mink, exchanging a few sentences in Elladian. The first stoat hefted over another pawful of obols.

As the captain of the mercenaries made to leave, his eyes settled on Sikarios, and he nodded sharply. "Apologies. You will have no more trouble from us." His accent was crisp, words rustling like pines in a winter breeze. He strode away without waiting for a response, and just as soon, the marten felt claws clutching at his arm.

"Thank you," the mink started to say, but the rest of his words were lost in a rush of blood and fear as the world reeled. Sikarios staggered away from the market, away from the crowd of strangers to find himself plunging into the past, drowning in the wake of blood and fire that had eventually washed him onto these distant shores alone. He stumbled behind a mud-brick wall to cradle Elias' body, the lithe limbs that had once held him now broken and rent, the beautiful silken fur he had stroked in the moonlight now stained and clotted with crimson. He cringed as his brother's claws grappled for

his own flesh, choking out a breath to find himself back in Dalma, huddled in the overlapping shadows of Aeda and Mylo.

Sikarios hated the way their eyes studied his wretched form, as if he were a crippled lamb, or a rabid jackal-dog. He gasped for air, wiping the tears from his bleary vision, wincing at the rapid stutter of his heart against his ribcage. The world slowly came back into focus, and the two kits gathered close once more, kneeling to help him stand.

"We saw what you did," Mylo said, the whisper laced with awe. "You really are a soldier, then—not that I doubted you, of course, but—"

"I'm not." The marten waved a still-trembling paw. "Not anymore." He sighed. "I left that behind."

"What happened?" Aeda asked quietly, eyes softened with pity. Closing his own, Sikarios swallowed the knot of bitter longing welling up within his throat.

"I... lost someone. And I hurt someone." He turned away, hating the way his voice broke, hating the ache in his chest, the flashes of terror and rage and bitter, biting pain. *I won't let you.*

"Please," he muttered, "don't make the same mistakes I did." His gaze flitted to the skies above, where the gods lurked, watching in silence. "There is hardship enough in the world without rushing off to find it." Without waiting for an answer, Sikarios rose. The kits followed him back in silence.

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By the time dusk had drained most of the sun's light, the marten's nerves had calmed enough to allow him to enjoy their supper, and the modest dessert of chestnuts served alongside a glass of watery wine. But a part of Sikarios still craved fresh air and solitude, and so he offered to clean the dishes and utensils, lugging the basket out to the nearby stream as the moon rippled over its trickling surface. The marten worked his claws slowly over the crude wooden cutlery and flatware, letting the cold, pure water rinse the day's tension from his mind, settling his own heartbeat into the tranquil

rhythm of the quiet countryside. Once he had finished, he sat beneath the endless depths of the starscape, bathed in its pale fire.

Again, the thought of remaining here flitted into his mind; he let himself wander back through the years, to the day he and his brothers had made the decision to leave home. Kyrios, ever ready to honor their family name, was to be given his own command, while Alexi, barely thirteen, would serve as an officer's aide, away from the frontlines and yet still near enough to share in the glory of battle. Sikarios had been nervous, but with both of his brothers so eager to win honor and renown he had knelt and pledged himself as well. Elias, naturally, had been quick to follow.

He recalled the pride gleaming in his father's eyes, still tinged with sorrow even as they dreamt of greater conquest. And when he had confessed his fears to his older brother, Kyrios had devoted many of their dwindling hours to sparring with him, always besting the younger kine with a grace and dignity befitting a firstborn son. His words still rang clearly, even all these years later: *Most individual fights last less than three heartbeats—in that time you will either have won, or be dead. But most people are not ready to face their death, and so by hesitating, or rushing in headlong, they meet it. You must stand your ground, make them come to you. Make them pay for it.*

And to assuage the last vein of his fear, Elias had shown him the wooden lion, barely larger than his paw. "For strength," he had said, lacing Sikarios' fingers through his own. They had each marked it with a drop of their own blood, drawn from the dagger his father had bestowed upon him.

An owl crooned into the night, dragging him back to the Illyrian hillside. The darkness quickly settled into silence. And in that silence, Sikarios remembered the shepherd's words: That there was someone here who could help him.

The following morning he rose well before the sun, leaving his kopis resting beside the door as a promise that he would return. All he knew of the town's sofianthe was that she dwelt in the hills, away from the coast, and so he trusted to the road and the first hints of daybreak smoldering in the east to guide him. One of the priestesses

had served his father's court, though he could not remember her name; the short, ash-furred weasel had tended to a small shrine in the courtyard of the acropolis, but as a kine Sikarios had paid little mind to the workings of gods. It was not until the night of his enlistment that he had chosen Mashena as his patron, her warrior's wisdom a stark contrast to the passionate bloodshed of Voyokan, whom most of the other recruits had favored. And as far as the marten could tell, she had answered few of his prayers.

The path took Sikarios through brush greyed and withered by the wet chill of the Illyrian winter. About halfway up the hillside, it passed beside a clearing containing a lump of stone, small wooden structure nestled quietly in the shadows of the undergrowth nearby. As he drew closer, the marten recognized the worn, moss-covered figure of Iluvex adorning the shrine, various woodland creatures frozen midstride about her feet. The stone beneath her was charred and cracked.

"Hello?" Sikarios called. "I was hoping to speak with the sofianthe." At first the only answer was the high trill of a distant waxwing, but then a voice echoed from the hovel, smooth and gentle, younger than he had expected.

"Ah, you've come at last." A moment later a slender form strode out into the clearing, wrapped in a light grey cloak. She lowered her hood and bowed slightly before the shrine. "I am Mira, and I have the pleasure to serve the gods and Dalma as sofianthe."

The mink's eyes sparkled with calming warmth, and her coat of rich sable fur was dappled in glistening patches of bronze where shafts of sunlight pierced the canopy. Sikarios stared, and stared; it had been so long since he had known the warmth of another body against his own, and now before him stood one of the fairest does he had ever seen. A part of him knew how his longing smoldered in his eyes, fearing that the priestess would recoil at the sight, would see the beast lurking within his haggard face. *Murderer. Oathbreaker. Kinslayer.* But she did not so much as flinch, meeting his gaze as if he were but an injured kit, and she was a mother who could mend any wound.

"You... you've been expecting me?" he finally stammered.

Her smile took on a hint of playful amusement. "Well, word gets around, and I am not chained to this shrine. A scarred southern wanderer with a kopis as his side, here in humble Dalma?" She led him to the altar, staring up at the goddess of the wilderness. "And so, what is it that brings you here today?"

"I... I was hoping for advice, after a fashion." He drew his paw back, curled it into a fist, fighting the urge to dredge every last detail of his past, knowing it would only make things worse. "I... am sorry," he sighed. "It is difficult to speak about. But I feel as if the gods have forsaken me, and that every path forward has closed."

A shadow passed over Mira's face. "We are like children before the splendor of the divine, and discerning the proper path can often prove painful. I understand you are... hesitant to speak freely, and I will not presume to know what a soldier such as yourself has endured—" she paused as his mouth fell, giving him a look of somber understanding—"but we could try a divination."

Sikarios grimaced, remembering the few he had been present for in his youth: a hare dragged screaming to the altar, or a crow bound and squawking, where a silver knife would reveal the secrets of the world in their steaming entrails, leaving a crimson stain upon the cold stone. But Mira simply kindled a tiny flame upon the altar before producing a clump of white flower petals from a pocket. She smiled, her eyes filled with sly understanding.

"None of that mess, I assure you. The gods eat well enough without me sending them a squealing rabbit. Now let us see what your own fate holds." She sprinkled the petals atop the altar, letting them dance down on the currents birthed by the fire, already dying. One landed directly upon the flames and sizzled, its edges glowing red, the white flesh curling into char. The marten though that did not bode well, but the mink's face remained dispassionate.

Her voice, when it came, seemed to echo in the glade. "I see a fire spreading northward, and withered trees embracing its flames. I see a kine bearing a torch in bleeding claws, coming to claim something that was stolen, and to take something more." The mink's paws hov-

ered just above the scattered petals, as if afraid they might singe her rich brown fur. The last of the embers' light sizzled in the sheen of her coat. "And... I see a shadow racing ahead of the flames."

Sikarios tried to swallow the unease that welled up within his throat. Mira clasped her paws and peered up at him, as if the answers might lay behind his own eyes.

"Thank you," Sikarios said, failing to keep the quaver from his voice. He dug out a pawful of obols from the pocket of his cloak and set them on the altar.

"Go with the peace of the gods," the mink replied. He nodded, and left without another word.

The forest lay silent around Sikarios as he followed the same narrow, muddy path back. *A shadow, racing ahead of the flames.* A layer of thick, grey clouds settled in beyond the canopy, muffling the daylight and threatening rain. The pines rustled and creaked in the wintry breeze. For what must have been the thousandth time, the marten thought of home, only for the image of Dalma to seep into the memory.

When he neared the familiar cottage, Tamyris was waiting for him outside, with his crook gripped tightly and one of the foxes standing rigid in his shadow. Kokkin started towards Sikarios, but a hiss from his master stayed the fox. As the marten neared, fear bubbled up beneath his confusion.

"A messenger came through," the weasel said. "King Thestor has dispatched emissaries to our lands in search of recruits for the spring campaign. One will be here tomorrow: Kyrios, Prince of Nalanthis."

The mention of his brother's name tightened a claw around Sikarios' throat. The weasel went on, as if he were choosing every word with care. "The kine said... he said that this prince is seeking a deserter, an oathbreaker and kinslayer. His brother. A brown-furred marten, with a mark over his left eye." Tamyris' own eyes smoldered with betrayal, and the marten's words turned to ash on his tongue.

The shepherd lowered his voice. "I know that I did not press you for the details of your past, Sikarios..." His claws tightened, scor-

ing marks into the yew. "But *this*?" He grimaced, shying from the marten's gaze, then waved a paw. "May the gods themselves bear witness to the hospitality we provided a stranger. But there is no place for you here anymore."

Sikarios let the silence stretch. "I understand," he finally said, desperate to keep his voice from breaking. "May I fetch my things?"

The shepherd nodded, stepping aside, giving him a wide berth. Kokkin shot a perplexed glance between the two. The marten retrieved his few belongings, buckling on his sheath before digging through his sack. Drawing out a drachma, he set it gently on the table.

"Thank you. You've shown me more kindness than I deserve."

Tamyris simply stared from beyond the doorway. As Sikarios stepped out into the first gentle patter of rainfall, he turned one final time to his former host. "Do the kits know?"

The shepherd's eyes softened ever so slightly. He looked away. "Not yet."

"Please, don't tell them."

Tamyris' gaze rose to meet his. "They're bound to hear it sooner or later."

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Dusk found him huddled beneath a lip of rock in the hills north of Dalma, paws stretched to draw the warmth of a paltry fire struggling for life. Sikarios still dwelt on the stares of the townsfolk as he had passed through; eyes that had welcomed him in days prior, or passed him over with no more than a moment's consideration, now burned with contempt or widened in fear. Fishers and fruitsellers who had greeted him eagerly now drew their wares back at his approach, muttering curses under their breaths. A part of him whispered that things were now as they always should have been.

Rain continued to thud down beyond the slim stone overhang. The fire hissed and sizzled like an angry serpent. With his tongue, Sikarios loosened bits of stale bread from his teeth, all that remained of his meager supper. Then, retrieving the carving, he began the final strokes that would leave the lion free of its wooden womb. His

mind wandered back, back to the night before he and his brothers had departed. Kyrios, clad in armor that fit him so naturally he might as well have been born in it. Himself, anxious and yet eager to serve, to fulfil the oath he had sworn to their father. And Alexios, who had finally approached him that night to confess his own fears.

"Kyrios says that I will be fine, away from the frontlines... but I am still frightened. And I do not want father to know."

Sikarios had knelt, lowering his voice and taking his brother's paw. "We will never be far from you, Alexi," he had said, tousling his fur, "but while Kyrios is busy winning the war, I will watch out for you. I swear it, as I have sworn to Father." He had made a similar promise to Elias.

Gently, he blew the wood shavings from the lion, examining it in the flickering firelight. As far as he could remember, it was near enough a match for the one his friend had given him the evening before their final day together. After four years of fighting, Sikarios had told him how the clang of iron on an anvil, the flash of the butcher's blade, even a sudden shout might cast him back to the carnage of some nameless battlefield. How he wasn't sure how much more he could endure. Elias had clasped the lion in his paws, had held until Sikarios' breathing steadied. And even full of concern and pity and fear, his golden eyes had still held the fire of the sun.

"For strength," his friend had said. Gazing into the flames, Sikarios could still see him. He went to sleep with the whisper of broken promises echoing in his ears, and awoke well beyond daybreak to find that the rain had ceased.

As the clouds thinned into wisps and the sun baked the stones of the highland, the marten caught a pair of slender, ghostly pale trout in the stream. As he ate, his eyes were drawn to the distant spread of Dalma; he wondered if his brother had already arrived. If he was a fool to have lingered so late, or to have fled for so long. The lion in his cloak pocket dragged like a stone. He was so tired of running, always running—and what solace was there to be found in Istria, or the northern wilds beyond it, if he never tried to make things right?

Sikarios ran his claws over the ridges of his scar, then rose from the rock and glanced south. From here the settlement lay quiet, and his heart ached to know the tranquility was a lie. Staggering down to where the rugged trail met the road, the marten glanced right—to the north, where the well-worn pathway would carry him ever farther from his past, into the fog of anonymity and exile—and then left, to the lives he had come to know these last few weeks. To a town full of fresh kindling, eager to welcome the coming fire. His sigh carried all the weight of the prior four years. Turning left, he began his descent.

By the time he reached the edge of Dalma, Sikarios could see that most of the townsfolk had gathered in the market square, where a few mounted figures loomed above the crowd. A voice addressed them, rich and confident, strong as stone. A voice he knew, that had offered him counsel and reprimand and reassurance. A speech he had heard many times before, in one form or another; he let the words wash over him like mist. Some of the locals shot him casual glances that shifted quickly into lingering stares. Faces melted into scowls or twisted in fear; eyes full of reverence narrowed in contempt. He walked on, feeling for the lion in his cloak pocket. *For strength.*

Sat atop roe deer, a few ministers in regal chitons turned to watch him, while their guards came more rigidly to attention. The crowd slowly parted, and the speaker's voice trailed off. And before him, across the dusty plaza, clad in a suit of gleaming bronze, stood his brother, Kyrios. Their eyes met for a moment, the warrior's mouth gaping, before Sikarios shied away. He turned to the townspeople.

"What you have here is more precious than you know. Do not be so eager to throw your lives away."

Ever agile, Kyrios overcame his shock quickly. "Death comes for all of us in time," he replied triumphantly, "so why not meet it with bravery, why not live a life of adventure? Win honor and renown, and know that if you die, it is for a cause worthy of remembrance!"

"He speaks to you of a warrior's honor," Sikarios shouted, letting his eyes sweep the crowd, before settling them back on Kyrios. "Well, brother, tell them of the honor to be found in an early grave, of the honor in a mother and father weeping over the memory of their son, buried in some far-off field. Tell them of the honor of striking down some other kine barely beyond adolescence, so that you might live in his place; of watching the earth drink the blood of your friends, one after another, while the kings who send you off to die grow richer and fatter. Tell them of the honor you will *truly* give them."

Kyrios strode forward, eyes blazing. "*Honor*? What do *you* know of *honor*?" He thrust a clawed finger at Sikarios, voice crackling with rage. "You, who broke your oath and deserted the service of the king you were sworn to serve. You, who slew your own brother when he tried to stop you." His roar trickled to a rumble. "And now, you come slinking back. Have you finally grown tired of living in the hills like a polecat? Are you ready to return and face justice?"

Sikarios glared. "I have not come to plead for mercy, Kyrios, from you or from Father." His kopis leapt from its sheath, the bronze cool against the pads of his trembling paws. He raised his free hand. "With gods and kounavi as witness, I challenge you to single combat."

His brother stepped nearer, until only a few paces remained to separate them, and lowered his voice. "I accept, though I take no pleasure in this," Kyrios growled. "But before I kill you, I want to know why. *Why*, Sikarios?"

"I never meant to," Sikarios muttered, blinking away tears, his scars burning at their sting. "But I... I just couldn't bear it—battle after battle, week after week, seeing comrade after comrade fall. And then, Elias..." He choked down a sob, tightening his grip.

His brother's face was hard as granite. "You think I haven't suffered these last four years? You think I haven't shed blood, haven't lost friends? But I let it strengthen me, shape me into something better!"

"Then I suppose you were forged from purer iron than I."

Kyrios' face softened, tenderness creeping into his voice. "Do you think I did not know what he meant to you?" A glimmer of pity diluted the hatred in his eyes.

Sikarios winced. Tears matted the fur of his cheeks, and he wiped them away with his free paw. "Alexi... Alexi knew as well. He confronted me that night, as I was leaving our tent." *I won't let you*. "I tried to explain, to make him see, but he—he drew a knife. And when I tried to take it from him, we fell." His voice grew panicked. "I don't even remember drawing my own knife..."

"There is still time," Kyrios replied, sounding so much like their father had, before. "Throw down your sword, come back with me willingly. Plead for mercy in Father's court. Even a dungeon, or a life of service in a temple would be better than this."

"No..." Sikarios breathed out with a shudder. Fear coiled around his heart like a snake. His pulse thundered in his ears, blood burning in his veins. He took a deep breath, then another, forcing everything else from his mind. *You are stronger than you know*. "No. I cannot go back. I *will* not."

His brother's eyes furrowed, fur bristling like a thousand dagger-points. "So be it." Snarling, he ripped his blade from its sheath and launched forward. *Three heartbeats*.

Sikarios brought his own kopis to bear, meeting his brother's slash. Iron screamed against iron. He buckled under the weight of the blow, and Kyrios swung again. Sikarios barely managed to meet it with a parry, then followed with a riposte that scored a crimson line across his brother's arm. As the older marten recoiled with a hiss, he brought his kopis down against the hilt of his foe's upraised sword, then gripped the flat of the other blade in his free paw and twisted. Kyrios stumbled back into a plume of dirt, his kopis sailing through the air to clatter to the ground with a clang.

Three heartbeats. When the dust settled, Sikarios' blade hovered only a hair's breadth from his brother's throat. Kyrios stared up at him with eyes that had faced death a thousand times. Neither dared to breathe: by the most sacred customs of their people, he held his brother's life in his paws. Slowly, Sikarios drew the blade back. "I

never meant to kill him, Kyrios. And I will not take our father's final son from him."

He looked at kopis. "If I could trade my life for his, I would do so in a heartbeat. But it is done. He is gone, and I remain. Now, if you truly believe that killing me will make things right," Sikarios went on, thrusting his sword into the soft earth, "this blade will work as well as any other." He unbuckled his scabbard and cast it to the dirt, waiting for the strike that would send him reeling into darkness.

But Kyrios merely stared. Finally, he bowed his head, eyes fixed on the kopis. "I will return this to Father, and tell him the truth: that both of my brothers are lost."

Sikarios turned away to find the people of Dalma watching in silence. When he advanced, they parted like water before him, muttering and whispering, clutching their kits close. But he paid them no mind until three familiar faces surfaced in the crowd. His throat tightened at seeing the shepherd's family watching him with the same revulsion shared by their neighbors. The marten stepped nearer, thankful at least that the trio did not flee from him.

While Tamyris glared and Aeda tensed with a shudder, Mylo simply stood there, gaze fixed on the dirt. Sikarios retrieved the carved lion from his pocket, and held it out. "You will hear many things about honor, and duty, and strength," the marten said, fighting to keep his voice level. He let out a slow breath. "But strength is not only measured by the force of a blade, or a spear thrust, or slingstone. May you have the strength to know what is right, and to choose it, no matter what may follow. No matter what the world may say." As if handling a fledgling bird, he pushed the lion into the kine's paws. "And may you not make the same mistakes I did."

He rose without another word and started walking. Behind him, Kyrios' soldiers had helped their captain up, while the ministers who had accompanied them brandished parchment and bags of silver. Several of the locals had lined up, kines as young as Mylo among them. At the edge of town, Sikarios paused, and turned a final time to see Tamyris and his kits still standing off to the side. While his father and sister watched the proceedings, Mylo was running his claws

delicately over the carving, tracing the wood's grain as if it held the answer to some powerful question.

Trusting that he had done all he could, and clinging to the hope that some worthwhile future waited for him beyond the horizon, Sikarios turned north and did not look back.

The Ritual (WT)

by Kayodé Lycaon

Madison Scott-Clary

Madison Scott-Clary is an author and technical writer living in the Pacific Northwest with her two dogs and her husband, who is also a dog. She's the author of the Post-Self cycle, a series of gender-weird, meta-furry sci-fi thrillers, and the Sawtooth books, collections of short stories from a small town in a flyover state. Her work can be found at makyo.ink

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Rob MacWolf lives somewhere in North America waiting for the world to end. In the meantime he practices neo-paganism, writes poetry, and co-hosts the audiofiction podcast The Voice of Dog, at thevoice.dog.

NightEyes DaySpring

Huldra

Pascal Farful

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SakaraFox would tell you he's from the mist-shrouded past some 12,000 years ago, but in truth he's a railway worker and prose-fiction writer who hails from the West Country of the United Kingdom. With a keen interest in history, enough railway photos to fill a hard

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Thomas "Faux" Steele is an author and attorney who has been creating short stories since 2015. He enjoys writing in many genres, including horror, science-fiction, fantasy, and adult contemporary. He specializes in descriptive stories with rich world-building whose written words render a painting in the reader's mind. His work has been printed in many anthologies, including FANG Vol. 7, Exploring New Places, and Beast Vol. 1 as well as many 'zines including #OhMurr. In his free time, he's an avid coin collector and fancier

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