

Under the Cover of Fog

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From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

A silver-winged surveillance fly buzzes near my ear, and I resist the urge to shoo it away. Whoever had worked the magic on it had done a shoddy job, first-year mind-mage probably. Seems like the bug spends more time staring at me than helping track down weapons shipments. My first few weeks of working the docks I hadn't found much, but now not a day goes by without me uncovering a crate full of jewel-encrusted battle mallets, or bone-carved armor, or poison-infused knives. Tension is brewing in Ravnica, I'm sure of it, but House Dimir doesn't expect me to think. They expect me to work these covert jobs without getting caught. With crates stacked a dozen high and crammed into a maze of thin passageways, my job is simple—quick crowbar to the lid, crack the crate's seal, just enough to let the bug fly inside, then it zips back out, and we move onto the next only this time, a gleam inside the crate catches my attention.

"Buttress South Whiskey," the label reads, and without another thought, the whiskey bottle is in my hands. Expensive, enchanted, and aged in casks made from thousand-year-old trees poached from Selsnyan forests. Immoral? Maybe. Lucrative? Definitely. Serves them right for not sealing the crate with a stronger spell. The bug chirps at me, urging me on, but it's too late. My mind's already imagining the pile of gold zinos I could get for it. The long, slim bottle would fit nicely into the pocket of my trench coat. No one would notice. Suddenly, the bug whistles, then I look up, now all too aware of the approaching footsteps I should have been listening for. Sloppy, Merret, sloppy. Fog swirls, obscuring me from view, and in those last few moments of bought time, I shove the bottle snugly into the divot of packing straw, gently tap the lid closed, and then try to look inconspicuous.

"Ah! Merret!" says Grimbly Wothis, my boss, arms crossed over his wide chest, horns scraping against the stacked crates on either side of him. He's half-man, half-bull, total grind-hard. "Just the guy I was looking for."

"Sir?" I say, averting my eyes, trying to blend into my surroundings. Wishing I could become invisible.

"Fog's too thick, and I've got a potential investor wanting to see the harbor. Clear it for me."

"Can't Warwick do it?" I ask. A little fog I can handle, but despite a year of training, I don't have enough focus to clear the harbor. Can't concentrate hard enough to inflict nightmares or purge memories. As a covert agent of House Dimir, I don't have much to offer except the ability to work a crowbar of malintent.



Wall of Mist | Art by: Tianhua X

“Warwick’s out. And Bender, too. You’re all I’ve got.” He looks me up and down, nostrils flaring. “Unfortunately.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“How’s this for confidence you don’t clear it and you don’t get your pay for today?”

“I’m on it, boss,” I grumble. Should have taken the damn bottle. There’s no way I’m going to get this fog cleared. Bills are overdue, wife and kids are hungry. Another day with docked pay and deeper in debt. I amble up to the very edge of the deepest pier and focus on the magic all around me. I pull, drawing the power in like an inhale of glass shards, and then release, a force from within me beating like thunder against the inside of my eardrums. Fog swirls, barely, clearing about halfway to the other side of the river, just enough to reveal a sleek, Simic schooner with spiral-embellished sails cutting through the water. Two merfolk keep pace beside the boat. The one in the lead turns toward me, scowls, then presses a webbed palm against the hull of the ship. Within seconds, the schooner fades into shimmering blue-green ripples, indistinguishable from the choppy river water unless you knew right where to look.

Grimbly Wothis stomps his hooves, his deep, roaring laugh a near-perfect match to the blare of a fog horn. “Didn’t see that, did we?” he says, turning to his investor, his mischievous smile stretched wide. “The cover of fog is a key selling point for the kinds of ships that sail through these parts, and as you’ll come to find, it is a very profitable one. Tomorrow, I will show you the harbor. Tonight, we will drink to the beginnings of a new partnership!” Grimbly Wothis slaps his massive, furred hand against the investor’s back, moving him along, but not before aiming a soul crushing glare down at me.

My feet pad softly against the wet steps to my apartment building, avoiding the crunch of leaf litter piled in the corners. Tenement buildings crowd together, their spires jutting up like an enormous mouth full of pitted fangs. Sun doesn’t shine here. Ever. Keyhole Village isn’t the worst neighborhood we could have ended up in by far, but sometimes the gloom gets to me.

Nine stories up, I sneak a peek into an open window. Our small kitchen looks like it's been hit by a rage spell, overturned bowls and measuring spoons spread across the counter. Tashi's balancing the baby on her hip as she conjures minor healing salves from a blend of arrowroot and boar spice to sell at market. She's working under the dim light of a single candle floating uncomfortably close to the loose fabric of her cloak—it's the green cloak with the golden leaves printed on the trim. I seem to remember it fit fine, once.

I turn the knob and step inside. House Dimir has nothing on the traps that litter our floor. Wooden blocks sit in wait, ready to impale a bare foot with their sharp corners. A wheeled xylophone made of rib bones offers a fast track to a broken neck. I step around them, nearly second nature now, and get ready to break the news to my wife.

"Merret! Finally," Tashi says, exasperated. She shoves the baby into my arms, who is almost a year old now, but he's still as fussy and listless as a newborn. He barely weighs anything at all, his nose a constant dribble of snot. Two seconds of holding him, and it's all over my lapels.

"Daddy!" Soche, my oldest, comes barreling up to me, head hitting right in my gut. I bite back the pain as I force a smile onto my face.

"Soche, shouldn't you be in bed?" I ask.

"I wanted to see you, Daddy."

"You've been good for your mother today?"

"An absolute terror," my wife grates at me. "Broke a bottle of mat'ti root essence. Whole thing ruined! Where are we going to get money to replace that? Money to run the gas lamps so I'm not hunched over this candle all day? Money to feed the baby?"

"I brought home a dozen apples yesterday," I remind her, hoping it will stall the next question. *Where's the pay from today?* The job at the docks may be a covert assignment, but the money's real, and it's the only thing keeping us afloat.

"They're mush, Merret. Market mush. Baby eats and eats and isn't getting any bigger. He needs real food. The kind you get from a proper grocer. Something that will fill him!"

"I need filling, too!" Soche yells, patting her belly. "And mum!"

"To bed!" my wife scolds her, and little feet pad against the stone floor. Soche ducks into her sleeping nook next to the unlit hearth, then buries herself in a mound of threadbare covers, tattered warming spells drifting off them like tufts of shed fur.

"I " I open my mouth, but for the first time, I notice how sunken my wife's face has become. A lump catches in my throat, and the words just won't come out. "I didn't—"

"Get the food, Merret. I don't care how." She pries the baby from my arms, then starts enchanting her herbal mix again.

I stand there for a moment, trying to figure out how *this* has become my life. Fog seeps in from under the gap in the front door, twirls around me, like the dreariness of the streets has come to claim its stake inside my home. Inside me.

Stealing from the grocer isn't nearly as easy as stealing from the market at Keyhole Downs. Oh, they're nice enough here. Seems I've got a personal escort, following five steps behind me, big smile on his face. I try to lose him, snaking up and down the aisles past a display of steaming minced elk pies, a floating pile of blemish-free fruits, and bins containing twelve different types of live maggots for the

discerning Viashino. But no matter what I do, the market clerk is still there. I guess the same scarred face that says “don’t mess with me” to the vendors of Keyhole Downs, screams “thief” here in this posh neighborhood.



Art by: Wesley Burt

I leave empty handed, but for all my luck, I hear that roar of laughter that has left me cringing on so many occasions. I look up and spot Grimbly Wothis and his investor friend coming out of an apartment four floors up—the building massive, top heavy, and drenched in cleansing spells so it’s impervious to graffiti. I knew he lived around here, but I hadn’t imagined his place being *this* nice. Huge gas lamps cut through the murk, their light glinting off the silver sigils juttied out from the building’s polished red stone.

I watch as pedestrians scramble between the archways of one market to the next. An enormous indrik stomphowler trudges through the streets, muzzled with so much magic I can feel it sizzle where I’m standing. Throngs of workers cling to the web of harnesses strung across its back, returning home from far-flung districts. Typical evening rush hour. Armor-clad centurions in chainmail and sunburst helmets are stationed here, also, ensuring the night traffic remains the legitimate sort. I press closer

into the shadows, and once I'm sure my boss is well on his way to the pub, I sneak up to his home. The spell on the door lock is tight. Much too difficult for me to break, but minotaurs, they're too beef-headed to ever think of themselves as potential targets. I round the building, make a quick hop to the balcony, and sure enough, find an unlocked window.

I slip inside, like a sheet of fog, feet barely touching the expensive ceramic tiles beneath me. Doubt bites at me. Sure, I've pinched things from the market on occasion, from a few pockets, too, but I've never done anything like this. I nearly turn back, remembering the look of disappointment on my mentor's face as I'd failed to pull a single memory thread after six months of close instruction. "Maybe you aren't meant for House Dimir," she'd said to me. Well, not said. She'd jammed the thought into my mind, easy as breathing. And there it still sits, front and center. I shake it off. My father was a spy. And three of my aunts and an uncle. Sneaking runs in my family. I can do this.

After a short trip up a narrow hallway, I find myself in the kitchen. A gas light burns on its lowest setting, just enough to cast a warm, yellow glow upon the cabinetry. There, on the counter, a basket of bread. I take a loaf, feeling how hearty it is, nearly a brick in my hand. It's perfect. But next to the basket, tucked in a wire rack, something else catches my attention. Elixirs, a dozen of them. I pull out one of the bottles, long and rectangular, and made of thick, artisan glass. "Elixir of Focus" the metallic label reads. Inside, blue liquid glistens like it's bathed in the purest moonlight. The bread, it's nice. It'll feed my family tonight, but this just a few drops of this elixir could change our lives. I could strengthen my magic, prove myself on the docks. Work my way back into the favor of the guild. Just a few drops. My boss would never notice what I've taken.

I pop the cork, and the smell wafts right up my nose a soft, cottony scent like that of freshly washed blankets. I open my mouth, tilt the bottle.

One drop.

Two.

Just one more, for good measure. But before the last drop hits my tongue, the lights flicker on full. My eyes go wide, and the elixir spills all over me, down my chin, seeping into my trench coat. I stand there, frozen like a statue as a minotaur enters the kitchen, her eyes half-closed, rollers in her hair, long robe draping nearly to her hooves. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined there was a person in all of Ravnica willing to wake up next to Grimbly Wothis every day. A real spy would have taken time to learn these things. How could I kid myself? I'm nothing close to a spy. I'm barely a thief.

She yawns, and I see every single tooth in her gummy mouth. Nothing threatening in there, but I'm pretty sure she'd be able to snap me clear in half, if she put her mind to it. I stand there, completely exposed, not even daring to swirl up fog around me. She's half-asleep, half-aware, but I can guarantee she won't stay that way for long. She moves over to the counter across from me, pulls out a large metal bowl, and fills it to the brim with grass and barely. Then she scoops the bowl up into her hands and shuffles back toward me.

But the elixir, I'm feeling it now. Scattered thoughts come into focus, and I start flexing muscles I never knew I had. My fingertips glow, and nearly forgotten spells suddenly sit upon my lips. I draw on magic, and her mind opens up to me like a map. I tug here, push there, and suddenly I'm invisible to her. She's inches from touching me, chewing, chewing, chewing mouth open, eyes distant.



Unexplained Disappearance | Art by: Izzy

Guilt overwhelms me. I'd wasted so much of the elixir. I should apologize. Offer to pay it back. But we can't afford that kind of debt, especially with what her husband pays me. *When* he pays me. Besides, if House Dimir finds out I'm this awful at espionage, I'd be disappeared for good. I'm doing the right thing, staying quiet. Even if I have to stand here all night. I suck in my breath and clench the bread loaf to my chest like it's my lifeline, taking comfort that it will soon feed my hungry child.

A blast of magic erupts from my fingertips, fog leaps out of my way, and for the first time since I've worked the docks, the river is clear as far as the eye can see. It's not much of a sight—muddy waters, riddled with trash and clumps of invasive river plants. I can't help but wonder if the mystery would have been better for Grimbly Wothis than his investor now seeing the naked truth. It just isn't that great of a harbor, but that's no problem of mine.

I grow antsy, all this power at my fingertips, wanting to show off a little in front of the other dockworkers. Yantis is operating the crane, a Viashino with sticky fingers, the kind great for pulling levers and coaxing gears. But his forked tongue has aimed more than a few reptilian curses my way, and a little payback sounds right on time. I recount the nightmare spell I'd been taught. It never materialized into more than haze before, but now, Yantis has ribbons steaming off his brain, just waiting for me to give them a yank. Power wells within me, so fast, so hard, I can't control it. Yantis screams, fighting all the terrifying nothings in front of him. The boom swivels left, the crate drops loose and goes tumbling, tumbling toward Grimbly Wothis and the investor standing at the edge of the dock. My boss sees the rogue crate, sees Yantis flailing, sees the last few shreds of nightmare spells drifting from my fingertips. He scowls at me, then pushes the investor into the river at the last second. He barely has time to jump in himself before the crate smashes right where they'd been standing.

Glass cracks, and the sharp scent of good whisky fills the air. The surveillance bug hums in my ear again, tiny wings flapping, eyes pointed right at me. Nope, there's nothing covert about ruining a thousand zinos worth of cargo. I wince. Losing my job, I could handle. But once House Dimir comes knocking at my door, it'll be like I never existed. Heh. Like they'd knock.

Fast as I can, I run home. We'll have to pack up whatever we can and leave Keyhole, maybe go into hiding in the old Ghost Quarter or seek refuge at the ruins of Mahovana, claiming the treetops as our new home. I turn the knob on our front door so hard that the lock shatters, remnants of weak magic slipping away like wisps into the air. Tashi stands there, holding the baby, giant smile plastered on her face.

"Merret! Merret, you've got to see this!" She holds the baby up. He's flourishing. Cheeks plump, his gummy smile glistening, and an undeniable spark in his eyes. "He's so strong, now. Feel his muscles. I think he's going to walk any day." And then she's pulling me close, kissing my cheek, telling me how she loves me and I can't even get a word in about how our lives are about to change, and not for the better. "Everything's going to be okay," she's saying, but me, I'm just staring at that bright blue elixir stain on the chunk of bread baby's been gnawing on. Watching how it shimmers, ever so slightly, like moonlight.

Then baby sneezes, and every single candle in our apartment bursts into flame.

Something's happened. Good or bad, I don't know. No time to think with the beating on our front door. I wedge my weight against it. Grimbly Wothis is hollering from the other side about how he knew it was me who caused the incident, and that I'd ruined his cargo as well as scared of his investor. They say merfolk cuss like you've never heard, but dock bosses have them beat, hooves down. With a broken lock, this door won't hold him back for long. I whisper for Tashi to hide in the cupboard with the baby, and for Soche to duck into her sleeping nook and cover herself with blankets. Me there's no room left in our little hovel to hide. Doesn't matter anyway, because when that big hoof hits the flimsy door, splinters fly, and I take to the air, landing hard on my chin.

It takes a moment for the fog *inside* my head to clear, but soon as I'm able, I reach out between me and Grimbly Wothis, trying to pull those magic threads, trying to shield myself from sight, but it's useless. Now, Grimbly Wothis is standing over me, brow bent, his stare as sharp as the tips of his horns. Bits of flotsam cling to his body, and he smells like a striking combination of dank river and wet fur.

"You owe me, Merret." He takes one look around my home and laughs his roaring laugh, as if the idea of me possessing anything of value were a huge joke. "I'd take it out of your pay, but you'd spend three lifetimes earning back the cost of that whiskey. Then I thought I'd just take it out on your hide, but it seems you *do* have something of considerable value after all."

My heart constricts in my chest and doesn't let go. I watch his eyes track to our kitchen.

"I'll do anything," I tell him, scrambling between him and the cupboard. "Clear the harbor every waking hour. Double shifts. My wife! My wife will work, too. We'll pay off whatever we owe you, I promise."

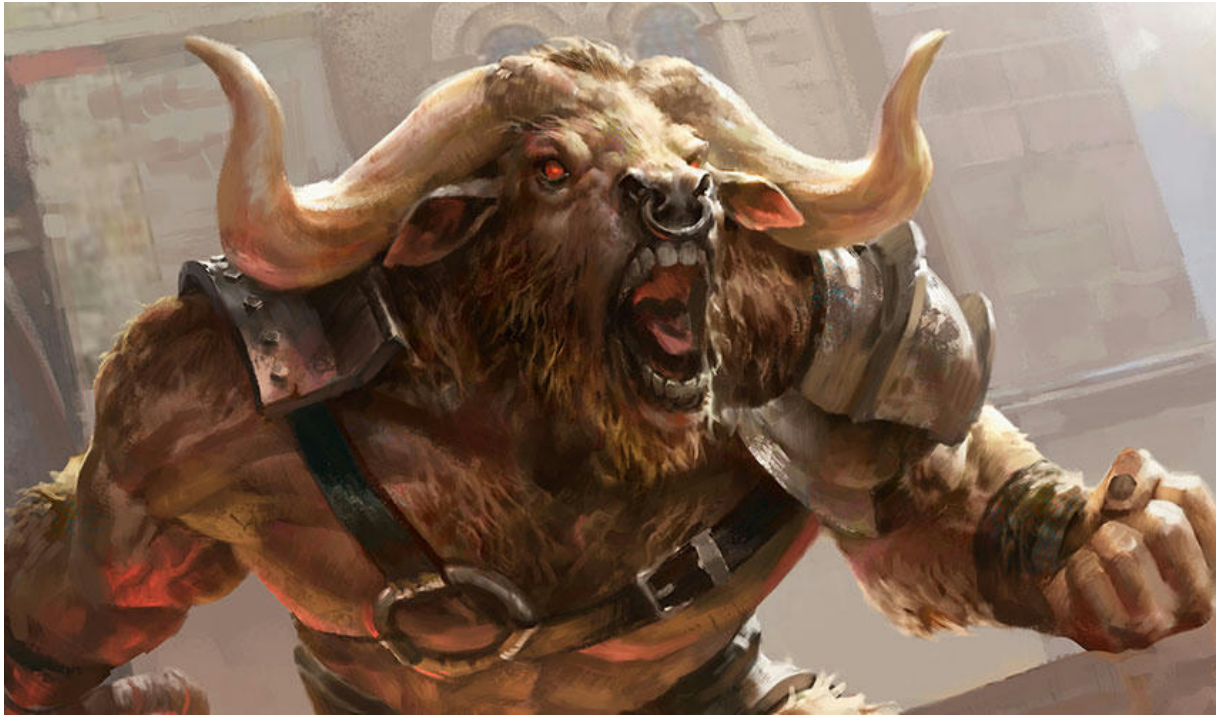
"I saw what that child did through the window, the trick with the candles." His hoof knocks across my shin and I bite back the pain. Another kick, right in the ribs, and I crumple into a ball.

Then he's past me, throwing open the door to the cupboard. Tashi is inside, whimpering, the baby asleep against her chest. The sight of my wife suffering, of my child in danger, ignites my fury, and I'm up to my feet again. I conjure the magic before it had been a chore, like sucking hard through a cracked straw, but now it enters me with a flow as unrestrained as the river.

"A child like this is worth something," Grimbly Wothis says, attempting to pry the baby from my wife's arms. She bucks and bites and screams, and now the baby is awake and howling.

The tips of my fingers dance with light, and the threads of my boss's mind open up to me. I pull and tug, weaving a nightmare, especially for him, constructed of his deepest fears. Now Grimbly Wothis is screaming, too, a piercing and perfectly pitched note that rattles the glass of our gas lamps. He fights the invisible foes before him, throwing pots and pans, tipping over chairs. He's stomping all over the

place, not watching where he's going. My nerves go tight as he stomps closer to the pile of blankets Soche is hiding under. *Those hooves* my focus wanes, just for a moment, but it's enough for Grimbly Wothis to throw off the nightmares and make a run for my son.



Smelt-Ward Minotaur | Art by: Wisnu Tan

And like that, my baby is in Grimbly Wothis's arms, back arched, letting loose a heart-wrenching scream that tears me up inside.

"As always, you've got no focus, Merret," Grimbly Wothis scolds me. "But we're even now."

"Give me back my—"

Grimbly Wothis raises his leg high, and for a moment, I'm mesmerized by the draw of all that firm muscle, then his hoof lands square in my mouth and my world explodes with pain. I catch blood in my cupped hands, but they can't hold all of it. I must have blacked out for a moment, because Wothis is already at the door, trying to maneuver his horns through the opening while the baby writhes and my wife grips at the fur on his thigh. With a hard shake, he flings her off. She goes flying and hits the side of a cabinet. Something cracks. Something that's not old wooden cabinetry.

I focus as hard as I can, ignoring my child's screams and the awful whimpers coming from my wife. I pull at magic, trying to wrap a noose around my boss' thick neck, but the flow is back to a trickle now. Whatever he feels, it's no more than a scratch in his throat. He coughs once, then looks back at me. Laughs.

"See you at the docks tomorrow, bright and—" His eyes go wide, his breathing chokes off. I look down at my fingers, dull as dirt. Not even a breath of magic stirs around me, but Grimbly Wothis has been gripped by the mind, I'm sure of it. I catch a glimpse of the intensity in my child's eyes. My son arches his back again, throws his arms up, and suddenly, he's gone. Disappeared. Vanished.

"What did you do with my baby?" my wife screams out, gripping her broken ribs.

My brave Soche has come out of her hiding spot, and now she's pitching wooden blocks at Wothis. One hits him square in the forehead.

“Stop! You’ll hit the baby!” I say, scrambling over, trying to see through the baby’s cloak. I feel for him in my boss’s arm, but there’s nothing. Panic overwhelms me. Had he dropped him?

Grimbly Wothis starts coughing, sucking in huge amounts of air as he regains his composure. Bloodshot eyes stare down at me. “Where’s the baby?” he says, like he’s accusing me of the baby’s disappearance.

I’m so angry, I can’t think straight and punch him square in the jaw. His nostrils flare, and his eyes soften like I’ve just given him permission for this to be a real fight. My fists are up, and then we’re scrapping, and I’m trying to push him towards the door, and he’s trying to fight his way back in, and then Tashi screams the baby’s name, and we all stop and stare.

The baby’s sitting there on the floor. He’s got scratches on his arms and is holding a strange purple fruit shaped like a star. I’ve never seen anything like it. He puts it in his mouth, the bitter skin making his lip pucker tight. He drops the fruit, and then pushes up on all fours, about to crawl. Grimbly Wothis is trying to force his way past me, but I hold him back with all my might. “Go to mama,” I tell the baby. “Go to mama!”

But the baby isn’t listening. His eyes are focused across the room. Then I see the near-shadow sitting in the armchair by the hearth. We all see it. Him. And I realize somewhere deep in the back of my brain that he’s been sitting there a long, long time. He’s draped in a flowing leather cloak, made from the hide of some beast that had gone extinct ages ago he’s regal, even upon the throne that is our rickety armchair. All of the magic in the room, in this apartment block, maybe in this whole neighborhood is flowing toward him, like a sinkhole that’s suddenly opened up in the middle of an unsuspecting lake. I shake my head, trying to rid myself of improbable thoughts. Could this be Lazav? Lazav the Mastermind, Guildmaster of House Dimir? Every aching bone in my body wants to bow in his presence, though doing so would be the worst indiscretion I could make.

The baby pushes up again, and suddenly he’s standing wobbling back and forth and back again, before taking his first timid step. He smiles for a moment, proud of himself, then takes another step, and another, until momentum gets the best of him, and he falls right into Lazav’s arms. Lazav hoists the baby up into his lap.



Lazav, the Multifarious | Art by: Yongjae Choi

“Any outstanding debts Merret owes you will be paid in full by the close of business tomorrow,” Lazav says to my boss. “And in return, you will refrain from further contact with any member of this family. Isn’t that right, Mr. Wothis?”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Grimby Wothis says, puffing up to his full breadth, head tilted forward, horns ready for a battle.

“No one,” Lazav says, his voice as hallow as a whisper, but there’s nothing soft about it. He waves a hand and the entire room starts spinning, spells blazing silvery light in circles around the edges of our home. I cling to the floor, feeling like the weight of the world is pressing upon my lungs. It spins faster, faster—furniture quaking, walls shaking, windows warping and on the verge of shattering out of their panes. Then everything comes to a screeching halt.

For a long moment, there is absolute silence, then Grimby Wothis mutters, “Okay. Sounds good. Whatever you say,” and stumbles dizzily out of the house, nearly toppling over the balcony railing.

“Good,” Lazav says, smiling at me now, my son happily gnawing on one of his knuckles. “This babe will astound us in every way you’ve disappointed us.”

“You won’t have my son,” I say, respectful, yet firm.

“We don’t want your son. At least not in that way. He will stay with you. You will raise him as you see fit. But in return for paying off your debts, we would like to ask that we send a tutor to your home to oversee his learning. Of course, we will also provide you a modest stipend so that you can adequately provide for his needs. And yours.”

My jaw has dropped. I go over to Tashi, pulling her gently into me. I try to push away some of her pain, then we just stare at each other, dumbfounded, each grasping for questions to ask and falling short.

“Is my brother special?” comes Soche’s voice, a terror-ridden peep.

Lazav laughs a raspy laugh, like stones scratching against rib bone. Something in my brain twists sideways, my mind fogs over, and then all of a sudden, we're all laughing, and Great Aunt Bea is sitting in our armchair, bouncing the baby on her knee. Soche's playing a tune on her xylophone, and Tashi's in the kitchen, chopping up some strange purple fruit she must have gotten at the market. I go stand next to her, and she smiles at me, then places a bit of the sweet pulp on my tongue. As I chew, my jaw aches some, like I'd been punched in the mouth.

"You're sure you're okay with my aunt staying with us for a while?" she asks. "Just until she gets back on her feet? She won't be much trouble, and she can help keep an eye on the baby while I get some work done."

"Of course, it's okay. I like her," I say. "There's just something about her, you know? That wisdom that comes with old age? I think she'll be good for our family."