

His Eyes, All of Them

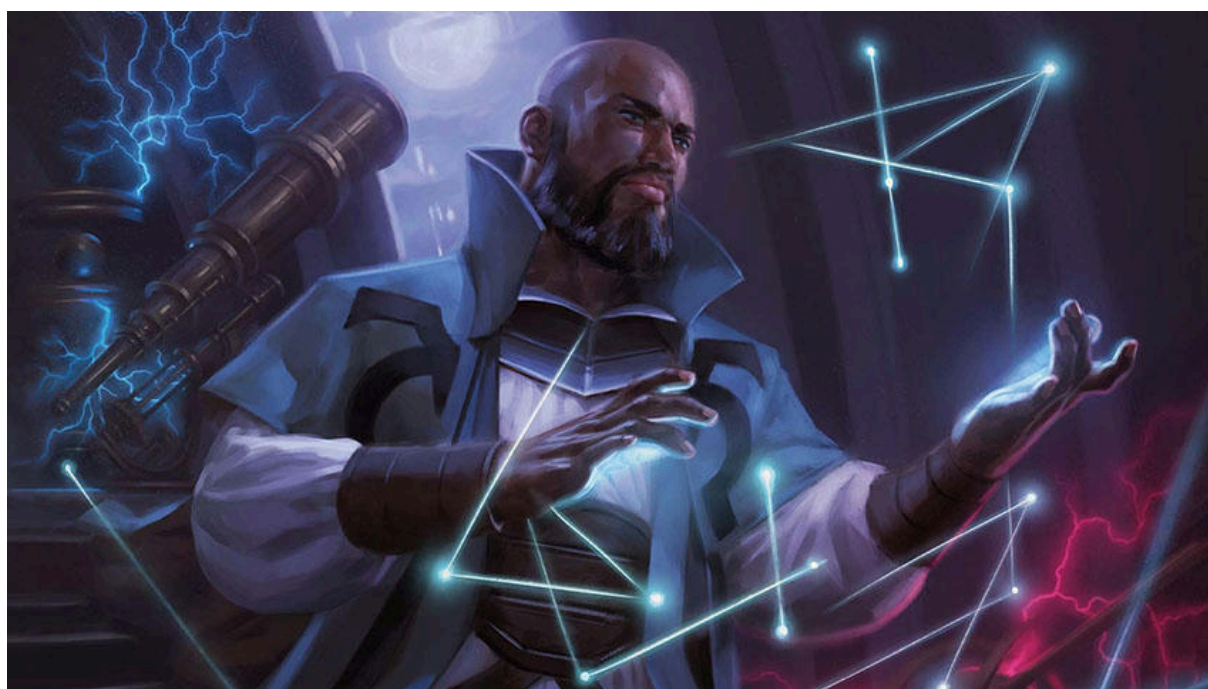
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From set *Innistrad: Midnight Hunt*

17. 09. 2021

The Plane was peaceful in the dark. The moon was a waning crescent, overcome by clouds, and there was just enough light to catch the hoarfrost that lined the road. While Vadrik kept both eyes on the cobbles and the fields of grain for trouble, he was comfortable enough. Happy enough. Do a simple job, get home to his husband Hailin.

He didn't love to be so far from his lighthouse tower in Nephalia—nor his charts and his studies, nor his easel, nor his spouse—but he had responsibilities as one of the most preeminent astronomancers in Innistrad that simply couldn't be avoided. With Jenrik gone, there was far more work to do. He missed his old friend.



Vadrik, Astral Archmage | Art by: Kieran Yanner

The call for help had come from Lambholt, where his husband had been born. You simply do not pass up an opportunity to be a hero to your loved ones, even when it drags you away from your work.

More importantly, a little bit of adventure was bound to clear his head, help him focus on his studies, at least according to Hailin. He rode his hack down through the brambles and berries, over the briar-bridge, through the farmlands that brave souls had carved out from the Ulvenwald.

He rounded the last bend and saw the farming village of Lambholt silhouetted against the sky in all its modest glory.

He was less than two hundred feet away when a crossbow bolt flew past his head and sunk halfway to its fletching into a nearby alder. That wasn't the welcome Vadrik had been hoping for.

"Apologies," a cloaked figure shouted from the wooden guard post set into the town's meager palisade. "Could have sworn just there behind you in the dark."

Always these peasants with their fear of the dark. It was Innistrad—there *were* things to fear in the dark. But not every bit of shadow held werewolves or ghosts. Even those creatures, even those worse still, could be understood, could be combated. There was no need to fear, to cower. The vilest monsters could be defeated with magic and the application of intelligence, not with superstition or, worse, half-cocked ideas and full-cocked crossbows aimed at the darkness.

"I am Vadrik, of Nephalia," Vadrik called out, some arrogance having slipped into his voice unbidden. "I have been called here by the crones and mothers of your village, come to see about the slain."

"You're most welcome here. I just could have sworn I saw " the voice trailed off into a mumble.

Vadrik turned, but of course there was nothing behind him. Just a few thin trees standing sentinel over a fallow field. Elaborate wards protected himself and his horse from mundane threats, and his senses had been so honed by four decades of magic work that no dead beast could approach him unheard.

He flicked the reins and his horse walked onward into the village.

Old Stickfingers Terror-bringer Knows when children disobey

If you're slacking He's attacking Did you do your chores today?

Despite the late hour, despite the cold fog, despite the bright dusting of ice already forming on every surface with the coming of the night's cold, a gaggle of children ran through the streets singing and laughing. They seemed, in their playful way, to be following him, occasionally running across his path or dogging his heels but always out of reach. The nursery rhyme was a call and response: one child sang the first line, another the second, then the whole chorus of them the third.

Old Stickfingers's Presence lingers Inside every hollow tree

Don't sneak out Or you'll shout And no one will remember thee

Hailin was full of strange rhymes like that, which he'd sing sometimes washing up after dinner. Vadrik had never heard his husband sing this particular one.

After settling his horse at the inn, it was easy to find the town hall, half again as large as the inn, which was half again as large as the largest homes and workshops. Lambholt had no more than thirty houses and halls within the palisades, presumably where the tradesmen and merchants lived. The rest of the population was likely scattered in simple stone homes on the fields and pastures.

The hall was simple and sturdy, with ten feet of stone then timber framing up to a steeply gabled roof designed to shed snow and rain alike. A simple wooden belfry sat atop it all. The hall's windows were stained glass and ancient, depicting what Vadrik assumed was the history of the town: the felling of ancient trees, the battling of ancient beasts. In front of the hall was a public space with tables and chairs, where in fair weather villagers might gather for meals.

Vadrik went inside. Lit by tallow lanterns in every corner, warmed by a massive stone hearth, guarded by two farmers with crossbow and spear, he understood at once what this place meant to the people of Lambholt: safety. How many times, over how many generations, had the denizens of Lambholt retreated to the security of these thick stone walls and waited for dawn or rescue?

A group of ten women sat in a semicircle of chairs at the entrance to the hall. The council of crones and mothers. The crones wore cloaks that showed their age, from the youngest in pale, bright colors to the eldest, in full black, and all the gradients between. Someone else was with them, a man. Red cape, brown leather clothes, rapier at his side, large bastard sword across his back. Not just a man, an inquisitor, facing away from the door.

“Oh, good,” the man said, as Vadrik approached. “I’m dying for some ale.” He turned, saw Vadrik, then scowled. “You’re no servant. An archmage? What’re you doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you,” Vadrik said. Even beyond his instinctive distaste for the inquisitors—all bravado, no brains—he didn’t like the man’s tone. Villages weren’t places with servants and were all the better off for it.

“Now don’t be cross,” the second-eldest crone said. “Either of you.” Her voice boomed low and clear from beneath the dark gray hood that cast her in shadow.

“I will cease being cross the moment someone explains what in hellfire an archmage is doing here.”

“We called for him,” the crone in dark gray said. “Vadrik of Nephalia, meet Rem Karolus.”

“I know of him by reputation,” Vadrik said. “And I share his confusion. If you called for me, why call for a monster slayer?”

“We called for you, Vadrik of Nephalia. Dein Salvasi, may his body rest, forever interred, called for Rem.”

“Rem Karolus,” Rem said. “Or Inquisitor Karolus.”

Arrogance upon arrogance.



Rem Karolus, Stalwart Slayer | Art by: Francisco Miyara

“If his employer is deceased, then surely the mercenary may go,” Vadrik said.

“Mercenary?” Rem asked. “I am cathar, the blade of the inquisitors. I am no mercenary.”

Vadrik sighed. “Then I suppose we’ll be working together.”

Rem looked him up and down, clearly not excited about what he saw. "I suppose we will."

The crone in gray cut them off. "A farmer, Arinos, went missing three weeks back. He'd been arguing with his neighbor, Dein Salvasi, the wealthiest man in Lambholt."

"A pious man," Rem said.

"Also the primary suspect," another woman in a lavender cloak said. "Or he used to be. Then travelers went missing in the fields of rye. Then Lakil, a shepherdess, was found dead in the pasture. Parts of her were found, anyway. Her sheep untouched. Could be we have werewolves, could be something worse. Either way, we needed help. The council called for you, Vadrik."

"And Salvasi called for me," Rem said. "To deal with werewolves for the good of the town."

"Oh, he only hired you to clear his name," one younger crone said.

"Werewolves do seem more and more likely," another chimed in.

"Oh fiddles and famine, we know who it was," the crone in dark gray said. She stood up to her inconsiderable full height, holding herself up with the help of two simple wooden canes.

"We don't know that, Malynn" the eldest crone in black said, speaking for the first time.

Vadrik's husband had mentioned Malynn more than once, already elderly when Hailin had been only a boy. Stern and wise, even frightful, she taught children numbers, song, and to stay afraid of the forest. She'd been raised a boy, Hailin had said, but had chosen the life of a woman as soon as she'd been old enough, and the village had accepted her quickly.

"It was Old Stickfingers, it was," Malynn said. "You know it and the stars above know it. Old Stickfingers come out of rhyme and story, come out to see the living become the dead. Only question is why, only question is how."

"Is that him right behind you?" the woman in lavender asked.

"What?" Malynn shouted, spinning on her heels, raising one cane to defend herself.

There was nothing behind her, of course.

"Oh, so funny," Malynn said. "Let's have a laugh at the old crone, scared of sticks and shadows."

"You can laugh at the scary stories of children and crones," the eldest woman said, "but Old Stickfingers is real. He's had a thousand names for ten thousand years. Aval, the Vine Lord of the Hearth. Macath. The Destroyer. A guardian spirit, vicious and frightful. These days, as his memory fades, he's just Old Stickfingers, just a boogiemer. Or so he was."

"Whatever it is," Rem said, "if it's got claws enough to rend apart a poor shepherdess, it's got flesh enough to cut with steel. Just take me take us to where it lives and I we will set your town free from fear."

The door of the hall slammed open, and a breathless man charged through.

"My ladies," he said, pausing to catch his breath, "it's the it's "

"What is it?"

"Murder," he finally got out. "Murder."

“I told you it was Stickfingers, and I won’t see none of you lot doubt me again,” Malynn said. The half-moon cast her long shadow across the pasture. Half a dozen peasants stood with pikes and crossbows, nervously scanning the distant brambles. Rem had his rapier drawn and paced the perimeter of the group like a sheep dog guarding a flock. Vadrik, for his part, ignored the living and kept his attention on the three dead people in the grass.

Well, two dead people and one dead werewolf, the latter reverted to human form on death but recognizable by the clothing torn by transformation. All dead by the same means—pierced through as if punctured with arrows, yet there were no arrows to be found.

All three of the victims were male, all three of them young, all three of them unarmed and unarmored. Two were wounded from the front, one was wounded from the back and was a few paces away. Likely, the youngest of the group had been run through after turning to flee. There was no reason for anyone to know that, ever. No reason for the man’s family to know he’d run.



Abandon the Post | Art by: Zoltan Boros

“Did you know this man was a werewolf?” Vadrik asked.

“We did not,” Malynn answered.

“Though it may not be werewolves, we need know nothing more,” Rem said, still keeping eye on the field around them. “Take me to the beast, Vadrik of Nephalia, so that we might be done with the deed this night and these innocent villagers may sleep sound.”

“Like I’m a dog, fit only to follow tracks?” Vadrik asked, too quiet for Rem to hear. He then focused his energy upward, drawing power from the sky, from the stars. He wove that power through his hands.

He threw open his hands, releasing the energy, and a dust fell from the heavens, twinkling in the moonlight, landing on tracks all across the field. Most were bright and solid, leading back into town. The tracks they’d made on their investigation. There were other tracks, too, of the three dead and the guard who’d found them. Fainter and stranger, scattered, uneven and zigzagging, was another set of tracks, off to some distant field.

The tracking spell was simple enough. More than enough power remained to express his will even further, to teach Rem not to mistreat an archmage.

"I suspect you know this," Vadrik said, turning to the villagers, "but it isn't safe to follow us." He then turned to Rem. "You coming?"

The cathar's eyes were full of rage. His mouth, more importantly, was gone, disappeared by Vadrik's magic. No lips, just skin from his chin to his nose.

"What's the matter?" Vadrik asked. "Did you mistake an archmage for a hound?" Vadrik snapped his fingers, Rem's mouth reappeared, and Vadrik took off following the tracks without looking to see if the cathar was behind him.

"Be careful," Malynn called after Vadrik. "Don't make Stickfingers angry."

The tracks led through brambles and hedges like they weren't there, and Vadrik was grateful for his woolen cloak to repel the barbs. He was also grateful that his companion, now on the job, was quiet and attentive. Even the swagger left his step as he kept himself ready for action.

The moon shone bright on the fields, and the grass moved so much like waves in the wind that Vadrik found himself homesick. But also, the moonshadows danced and moved, including behind Vadrik, and the motion kept catching his eye, and he kept glancing over his shoulder.

No one could sneak up on him. He was Vadrik of Nephalia.

Rem was looking over his shoulder too.

They passed a stone house, perhaps derelict. For a moment, Vadrik thought he saw green light from within, but it was gone when he tried to look further. A few hundred yards afterward, the trail stopped at a small grove.

"Your magic ran out," Rem said, once they entered the grove and the magical light disappeared.

"It did not," Vadrik replied. "We've reached the end of the path."

"There's nothing here."

The aspens had lost their leaves months back, and as clouds rolled in, the thin trees were silhouettes against the darkening sky. Vadrik whispered a few words, letting power flow from the ground around him and into his eyes, allowing him to see a bit better in the gloom.

Distant windchimes tolled, high and tinkling. Then closer ones, wooden ones, from the trees around him.

"Can you make a light?" Rem asked, much more polite this time. "I seem to have forgotten my lantern."

Vadrik kept walking, into the woods. The creature must be in here, somewhere. Maybe it had climbed into the trees.

"Thanks," Rem said.

"For what?"

"The light," Rem answered.

Vadrik hadn't cast any light.

The archmage turned on his heels, raising a protective barrier as he did, only just in time as a spray of twigs and sparks crashed against the magical wall.

The creature had been right behind him.

It had to be him.

Old Stickfingers lived up to his name. Thin as an alder, taller than a man, skin stretched tight against small bones, fingers like twigs. A creature of nightmare, of every child's imagination. At his feet, everywhere he stepped, hoarfrost bloomed and mushrooms grew. His face was more deer skull than human flesh, embers dripped from his jaws like blood, and he had more antlers than any natural beast of any natural forest. His eyes, though, were the problem. He had too many of them. Four? Seven? Every moment, the number seemed to change, and each glowed with pale green fire, and each one was watching you. He was there and he wasn't there, you could look right at him and be sure he was creeping up on you.

He was made of fear, like nothing Vadrik had ever seen. No wonder the villager had run. The other two must have simply been killed before they'd had the chance themselves.



Old Stickfingers | Art by: Jehan Choo

Vadrik, safe within his wall of force, pondered the strange beast. Like nothing he'd seen before, like nothing he'd read about before. The thing was corporeal, and it was not.

The creature barked like a deer, and Vadrik's wall crumbled. Simple as that.

The creature cocked his head to the side, and a constellation of twigs hanging from his antlers crackled with light and echoed with the sound of wind chimes.

While Vadrik studied Old Stickfingers, Old Stickfingers was studying Vadrik.

"Cursed beast!" Rem roared, driving his rapier through Stickfingers's abdomen. White blood, like moonlight, flowed out around the blade.

Stickfingers roared, this time with the sound of a hundred dogs, a sound that filled Vadrik's head and drove sense from his mind.

Vadrik twisted his hands, twisted his mind, then pulled the power out of the sound itself and used it to force his mind right. He'd only done that trick once before, while fighting a beast from beyond the stars.

Stickfingers twisted his torso and sent Rem flying into a tree. The cathar landed on his feet, sword still in hand. He was made of strong stuff. He charged once more, mostly dodging a spray of sparks from the beast's hands.

Vadrik cast a spell of paralysis, but Stickfingers shrugged it off. One hand wrapped tight around Vadrik's waist, lifting him easily. The other reached out for Rem, who slashed out at its wrist, sending that moonlight blood flying, but it managed to grab Rem as well.

There was no subtlety left to consider. Vadrik screamed, drawing his own strength and mixing it with every source around him, channeling it all into a single blast of ice that struck Stickfingers, knocking him off balance.

Both men twisted free and hit the ground. While Vadrik caught his breath, Rem stood up and drove his blade through the beast's chin, up through his face.

No screaming, this time.

Stickfingers had vanished.

The creature's white blood pooled on the ground like mercury. Vadrik sat up, opened a kit from his belt, removed a syringe and a vial, and took some of it.

"I don't think we killed it," Rem said, panting for breath.

"We surely did not." Vadrik paused for a long moment. "And, thanks."

By the time they had returned to the village, the sun was up. Rem left for the inn, but Vadrik went straight to the town hall.

Despite the morning frost, Malynn sat on the patio in front of the hall, drinking water and eating porridge with a stranger in layered, threadbare dresses. This second woman was scarcely out of her teens, if at all.

"Good morning," Vadrik said, as he approached and sat at the table with the women.

"It is not," Malynn said.

"Every time you break my skin," the new woman sang, her voice perfect, nearly angelic, *"I will break another man."*

"This seems like information you could have given us last night," Vadrik countered.

Left to his own devices, Vadrik would have done it without drawing blood. It was that fool of a knight who'd insisted on making it a fight. It's better to control things than destroy them. Still, he couldn't very well put the blame on someone else.

"We'll do better," Vadrik said. "I just need more information to do it my way. A creature like that, he was summoned, was he not? Who did the summoning? My guess is someone who is among the dead."

Malynn stared at the newcomer, who stared at her tea.

"My father was a superstitious man," she said. "Always kept sheep teeth on the mantle, werewolf teeth under the mattress."

“Arinos, I’m guessing? The farmer who first went missing?” Vadrik asked.

The woman nodded.

Malynn cut in. “Vadrik, meet Ariosa. Daughter of Arinos.”

Vadrik took that new piece of information in. “You live in the run-down stone house, small farm, near a copse of alder?”

Ariosa nodded.

“You hear us last night?” Vadrik asked.

“I I wasn’t sure what it was I heard.”

Vadrik mulled everything over. “Your father was arguing with a rich neighbor. Over what, debt?”

Ariosa nodded.

“Was he threatening to take the land?”

She sighed. “Yes.”

“Rich neighbor threatening to make a man homeless, when he’s got a daughter at home just old enough to take over the property. Would drive a man to do a lot of things.”

“It would not have driven him to murder,” the woman said.

“There you are,” Rem said, walking up. There was no room for him at the small round table, but he was clearly happy to just hover over them all and talk. “While you’ve been gossiping, I’ve discussed it with some of the men who do guard duty. Says last night was peaceful enough. We must have kept the monster busy. Should we begin our investigations?”

He looked down at the plain meal the women were eating. “Perhaps we start with the Salvasis? Ask what they know of their dead patriarch? I suspect if nothing else they’ll have decent breakfast. Maybe tea.”

“We’ve tried it your way,” Vadrik said. “Nearly got us killed. Today, we do it my way.”

“Alright, I’ll be a sport. What’s your way?”

“Well,” Vadrik said dryly, “probably, we start at the Salvasi manor.”

The richest man in Lambholt had not been particularly rich by the standards Vadrik was used to. Their manor was a two-story stone house with four bedrooms, two of which even had wallpaper instead of plain stone walls.

Their wealth hadn’t saved them.

Instead of a warm welcome and food, the pair found a door broken open, hanging from one hinge. They found an empty house. They spent half of the short day combing over the house, looking for clues. No people, no bodies. No blood. Signs of violence, however, were everywhere—overturned tables and chairs, a broken window from where one person had tried to escape. The family crossbow lay on the floor near the entrance, a bolt protruding from the door.

Hoarfrost and mushrooms lingered in corners of the hallway.

A hand—perhaps a child’s—had painted “he’s right behind you” in ash on the mantle above the hearth.

It worked, and Vadrik and Rem both turned to look at the same time. Nothing was there, of course.

“Who writes a message like that when they should be fighting for their lives?” Rem asked.

“Someone forced to, by fear or by spell,” Vadrik answered.

Rem shuddered. “Beasts and demons should be honest things, violent things. As big or as strong or as full of teeth as they like, I’ll fight them. None of this witchery.”

“Good thing we gave up on raw violence as the solution,” Vadrik said. He saw something on the ground and knelt to examine it. Black goat fur, in the house. This didn’t seem the sort of house to keep goats inside. He put it into the pouch at his waist.

“Come on,” Vadrik said. “I want to get to Arinos’s house before his daughter gets home. I have a suspicion.”

The house was empty, and Vadrik didn’t feel great about trespassing but determined it necessary in that moment. It was a hovel. The house itself might have been five hundred years old, sturdy as they come. The door was as much cracks as it was planks. The floor was dirt. But for the two made beds in the one room, it could have been abandoned. A single white goat grazed outside the uneven and cloudy window.

Vadrik didn’t linger long inside. What he needed was on the porch.

Hanging from the rafter over the door, among a dizzying array of wooden and steel wind chimes, a wooden mobile hung. Shapes built from twigs, tied together with strips of bark.

“That looks like “ Rem said. “That means that “

“Arinos summoned Stickfingers to dispose of Salvasi and save his farm,” Vadrik said.

“But it went wrong,” Rem agreed. “Stickfingers was not contained. Killed Arinos, Salvasi, and more besides.”

Vadrik reached up and untied the mobile from where it hung. “We’ll unsummon him, today, before he returns tonight.”

“You know how? We have to, what, find a place the moon has never shone? Bring flowers that have never touched soil?”

“No,” Vadrik said. “I suspect it will be much simpler than that.”

Vadrik put the mobile on the ground and poured the vial of Stickfingers’s blood onto it. He then raised one boot and slammed it down, crushing the thing underfoot.

A keening cut out across the fields, coming from the grove of alders.

“That’s all?” Rem asked. “He’s been cast out from the Plane? What now?”

“Yes, that should be all. As for what now, I suggest we head to the inn. I suspect we could both use a good meal.”

“Maybe there will be ale.”

The short day was nearing its end by the time they reached the village walls, and the sun slowly set as they started into their food—mutton for Rem, beets and potatoes for Vadrik.

“To Vadrik,” Rem said, raising a glass of water. Even the lack of better drink didn’t seem to dull his spirits. “We make a fine team.”

“To Rem,” Vadrik said, raising his own glass. “What you lack in subtlety, you more than make up for in courage.”

As they went to drink, the village bell tolled.

“Probably just calling in the farmers for the night,” Rem said.

At the sound of the bell, the innkeeper grabbed a sword and ran out the front door into the night.

The bell kept tolling.

Vadrik put down the glass with a sigh, took a wistful look at what was left of his roast potatoes, and went out to see what the fuss was about.

“He’s inside the walls!” a man shouted, terrified, to the assembled crowd. The crones of the village stood and sat on the patio in front of the town hall while about thirty villagers stood holding weapons in their hands and fear in their eyes.

“He’s only killed in the fields and the forest,” Malynn said, standing with the help of her canes. “There is no reason to believe he is inside the walls.”

“I saw him!” The man said.

“Clearly?” Malynn asked, like a teacher chastising a student.

“No ma’am,” the man admitted.

“I saw him, too!” a woman shouted.

Vadrik pushed through the crowd, which parted before a man who walked with purpose. He made it to the patio and turned to the crowd. Rem was close behind him.

“Stickfingers has been dismissed back from whence he came.”

“You saw it?” the man asked. “Clearly?”

“Well, no,” Vadrik answered. The crowd was not pleased. “But I performed the ritual, as I have done a hundred times, and I heard the death knell of the beast.”

Ariosa came running up just then, breathing through her mouth but not struggling with her pace.

“Just came from home,” she said to Malynn, then she looked daggers at the pair of men. “They set him free.”

“We did what?” Rem asked.

“We did no such thing,” Vadrik replied, automatically, but his brain started racing. Stickfingers had not acted like any other demon he’d faced before. He must be something different. Breaking the binding must not have

“Okay,” he said. “Maybe we did.”

“Listen to me,” Malynn said to the crowd. “We will make it through the night. We have to work together. Each of you, eyes open. As many of you watch into the crowd as out of it, so he can never be behind you.”

The crowd did as they were bade. People in Innistrad were used to learning and adapting to new horrors it seemed.

"I saw him!" a straggler shouted, running toward the crowd. "Just behind the inn!"

Rem went to run toward the trouble, but Malynn blocked his path with a cane. "You will listen to us. No more running off toward danger before you've heard what the danger is."

Rem nodded, clearly uncomfortable with not running toward trouble, but surprisingly, willing to accede to the crone's command. "Stickfingers cannot be sent to some home, to some other place," Malynn said, "because he is from *here*. A hearth spirit."

"A hearth spirit?" Vadrik asked. "So he was summoned, not to kill, but to protect?"

"He was."

Screaming broke out a few streets over. "While you lot figure out what to do," Rem said, "I'm going to see about saving some people?"

Malynn waved permission, and Rem ran off toward the distant din.

"Step one, mark the hearth, the land to be protected," Vadrik said. "Step two, make an offering, mark those who may not enter, else you must mark each who can. He Arinos didn't get to step two, then?"

"I don't know the magic of summoning," Malynn said.

"I know the words, I think," Ariosa said. "From my grandmother's old stories."

"He must have been interrupted. He " Vadrik pulled the goat fur from his pocket, handed it to Ariosa. "This familiar?"

"One of our goats went missing the night before my father did," she confirmed. "I assumed Dein Salvasi stole it, took it as repayment without asking."

Out of the corner of his eye, Vadrik saw Rem return, escorting a few huddled figures to the throng before running back out into the night.

"Arinos summoned Stickfingers," Vadrik said. "Built the sigil and hung it from the farmhouse. Guard that house and all its lands. Step two, sacrifice. Took the goat out into the grove, maybe, left it for Stickfingers. Dein Salvasi saw the goat, stole it. A bit ashamed, kept it inside. Means Stickfingers came, knew where to guard, didn't know whom to guard against. Killed Arinos as an intruder on his own land. Killed your neighbor the same way. But why all the killings so far afield?"

Vadrik thought it over for only a second before answering his own question. "Your father's estate is old, then, is it not? One of the oldest houses I've seen. Used to have a lot more land?"

"It did."

Rem was returning, this time empty-handed and bloodied.

"Rem!" Vadrik called. Rem looked up.

"Can you guard these people? Can you hold back Stickfingers while we see to his binding?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" Rem called back. He was still bleeding, Vadrik realized, from cuts across his face and his chest.

Just at the edge of his vision, Vadrik saw green eyes and embers at the far end of a nearby alley.

Rem took several deep breaths, steeling himself. Vadrik summoned power from the stars, fed it to Rem. Sealed his wounds, renewed his breath. It would have bolstered the man's resolve, but it had not been flagging. There was fear, there was exhaustion, but there was no doubt. A cathar is a powerful thing.

"Where do we do it?" Ariosa asked. "Here? Town hall?"

Malynn shook her head. "He's not a creature of town or city. He's a creature who guards houses that stand like rocks in the river of the wild. Your place. He will be your guardian, for the length of the binding, a decade and a day."

"Let's get horses, then," Ariosa said.

The ritual itself was rather simple, almost crude, as folk magic tended to be. Ariosa repaired the crushed mobile and hung it from the porch. Through the front window, Vadrik saw the two made beds inside. Why two? Had she not accepted her father's death?

"Tall man, long man, will you guard this home?" she sang, as she spun it. *"Protect the one who calls, who dwells here all alone?"*



Novice Occultist | Art by: Zara Alfonso

Malynn brought over the remaining goat from behind the house. "Do we take it to the grove?"

The sound of sparks came from behind them, and Vadrik wheeled around. Old Stickfingers was there, eying them, curious.

"Don't suppose we have time for that," Vadrik said. "He came a lot faster this time."

"Old Stickfingers, of the alders, take this goat in lieu of me." Ariosa knew quite a bit more of the summoning than Vadrik had guessed.

"Aval vine lord, old destroyer, harm you none without my plea."

Stickfingers barked, and the white goat ambled over to him. Vadrik, never one to watch the suffering of animals, closed his eyes. When no rending, no bleating, broke the air, he opened them again.

Stickfingers had one long-fingered hand on the neck of the goat, stroking it.

Immortal and goat walked off toward the aspens. Another goat, this one black, came out of the trees to join them.

“Where to next, old man?” Rem asked.

“Nowhere next,” Vadrik answered. “You’ll go your way, and I’m heading home to my studies and my husband.”

“We’re such a good team, though!” Rem said. “I’ve got the brawn and the bravery, and you’ve got the brains and the power! And, you know, little twinkly magic lights? What songs they’ll sing of us together, unstoppable!”

Vadrik climbed onto his horse, taking one last look at his husband’s hometown, now the smallest bit safer. “One day we’ll give them more cause to sing songs of us, I don’t doubt, Rem Karolus. Just now, though, there’s a man waiting at home whose voice matters more to me than that of any bard. Be well, adventure well.”

He flicked at the reins and started off out of town.

“Hey Vadrik!” Rem called. “Even Jenrik wasn’t as good at the twinkly magic lights as you are. You’d make him proud.”

Vadrik stopped and turned.

“I was joking about the twinkly lights, but not that Jenrik would be proud.”

Vadrik tried and failed to conceal his smile at the compliment.

As his mount’s hooves struck the cobbles, Vadrik kept thinking about the second bed, made up in the old farmhouse. Thinking how odd it was that the bed was still made. Thinking about the green twinkling he’d seen in the house before they’d met Stickfingers in the grove. How odd it was that Ariosa had survived, unscathed.

Children ran through the street, singing and laughing.

Sticky StickHe killed VikDon’t go nearDon’t go near

Mister SticksHas lots of tricksHe can hearWhen you fear

Old dame HilginLost her childrenWhere’ve they beenWhere’ve they been

Old Stick BuddyIn the muddyDragged them inWears their skin

Soon, though, the town was receding into the distance. Behind him.