

REBORN GODS THESIS STORIES

By

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TALES OF THE REBORN GODS

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## Introduction

Writing about the Reborn Gods as a story is paradoxically hard for how much I have to say about it. I think that's the problem: I could talk at length about this world and the characters in it, how it works, the customs of its people, the little regional divides and quirks that make some feel at home and make others feel like they've never been further from home. This is a story that, while it was conceived the summer before I started college, really only started to develop in its own way when I started attending OSU. As I walked around campus I thought about what the characters in the novel would do, and how the day in and day out of their lives would tie in to the world-changing courses of their destinies. This story was originally conceived as a novel, and I still have ideas for that storyline, but given how hard-pressed I am to actually write with brevity I, instead, decided to write short stories taking place before the start of the novel proper. All of these stories work to inform the setting, the world, and the characters in some way. The most direct stories are probably *A Dream of Life and Death*, which features two of the side characters several years before they meet the protagonist of the planned novel, and *The Pacifist and the Lion*, which is about the protagonist's dad and why he's disappeared from her life. Some of the

stories are more indirect in their effects on the novel plot I have planned, but they're all important in some way in fleshing out the world more, and giving it a sense of verisimilitude that it otherwise wouldn't have.

The basic premise of Reborn Gods, is that magic is as real in this world as any other scientific setting and after a certain period of time the gods of the planet, Ouraneia, die and are reincarnated. This reincarnation takes three generations before the reborn gods reassume their roles. This is a known factor of life in this world, but it generally marks massive changes in global society over the course of the gods reincarnation, up to and after the new gods assume their roles, as the reincarnation allows the gods to come of age alongside mortals and to gain an understanding of human life which can then influence the ways they use their power, both magical and social.

I originally thought that I might write an introduction to this collection from an in-universe, or Watsonian, perspective, but unfortunately that's much easier said than done. Part of the issue is that a lot of the more pertinent explanations that I could, and should, write would be more or less impossible to explain from an in-universe perspective. Ouraneia doesn't have conceptions of religion in the same way I, as a native English speaker born and raised in America, do. The language and thoughts that I use to refer to religion are shaped by Christianity, both because I was raised in the religion and because the history of English as a language is impossible to divorce from its roots, and while a few of those roots are Christian, the stems and leaves are very much so. Christianity comes from a certain place and has a certain view of the world that would sound insane to an Ouraneian who had never heard of the term. Mapping out influences can be difficult, especially when they're influences from your own work, and some of those influences sound strange out of context. One of the biggest reasons why this thesis is able

to be constructed in the way it is, is because of my learning Japanese and studying abroad in Japan.

In Japan, very few people are Christian, and the language is extremely different from English, in grammar, vocabulary, and especially in the writing system. Spending time in a different culture and learning its language proved to be incredibly helpful for when I was writing this thesis and trying to create a world that, while realistic, wasn't just American society with magic. One of the more tangible ways that this worked was the concept of eras and how time is measured in the story. The thesis stories take place in a "Godless Era", signifying that this is an era in between the death of the old ones and the birth of the new gods. The only exception to this is *God of Crows*, where the framing device takes place in the Godless Era but the story itself predates most of the gods. The concept of eras in this way is taken from the Japanese calendar system, which denotes years according to 'eras' which then correspond to the reign of Emperors. This was especially useful in distancing the story away from the Gregorian calendar and its year counting system, which is based off of Christianity and thus would make no sense if used in Ouraneia.

Hypothetically, I could write a Watsonian introduction from the perspective of someone from the future, who has come into contact with a monotheistic religion with no reincarnation, but there are other aspects of the story which need to be talked about in their context, and that context is inextricable from my own context: that of a woman living in Oklahoma who was raised to be compassionate, kind, open-minded, and Methodist. The story was originally planned to be a series of novels that I came up with when I was riding the city bus based on a writing prompt about a pantheon of new gods having to be selected after the previous gods died, except for the gods of Life and Death, respectively. The stories in this collection were based around

concepts I had in place for a while, but they, and the world and characters themselves, are all very different from when I first came up with them. While I had the basic concept in mind during high school, the actual story didn't solidify until I attended OSU and started taking classes. I was able to actually choose my own classes, for one, and even the required classes for my major were interesting. I had always heard a lot about evolution and Darwinism, but had never actually read *Origin of the Species* until I took a Literature Survey course. I'd never cared that much for literature before, but actually being able to engage with my professors and learn historical context was eye-opening. I was also able to read literature that I found to be distasteful, and to articulate why I found it distasteful, and interrogate it in a way I was able to apply to my own writing and realize what some of my own pitfalls were.

The idea that a story is capable of not being political is, in of itself, a political concept. The first election I actually followed was the 2016 Presidential Election, when I was too young to vote and felt extraordinarily helpless. I'd already started to interrogate my own beliefs and values as my own person and not just an extension of my parents, and the shock of seeing some of the adults I trusted in my life buy into the concept of "Making America Great Again" was pretty pivotal, especially as I was reading about history and discovering that America needs to be made great, and never really was: that it's founded on a backbone of slavery and oppression and mistakes and horrors that nobody in office ever seems to own up to, and it made me angry, especially because I couldn't actually do anything about it. There's a helplessness that comes with thinking critically about the world and seeing all the cracks in the facade, only to realize that you're not qualified to start trying to assess and repair the actual damage. I saw this a lot in Christianity, both in other institutions and my own, and as I keep paying attention to what's going on in the world around me, more cracks begin to show. Sometimes I wonder how long it's

going to be before the whole thing collapses and crushes me under its rotten weight.

This feeling of anger at rotten social institutions is a key part of Reborn Gods as a story concept. One of the central conceits is that, while the gods reincarnate and follow the same patterns and those patterns are recorded, translations, politics, and conservative social mores end up changing the story. This is one of the reasons I brought up Christianity: in order to try and understand the Bible beyond a surface level reading, one has to understand that it was written two thousand, or more, years ago in an entirely different country and culture, and one has to learn about that country and culture in order to better understand what's being said. Some parts of the Bible are written in code, some parts are written in languages that we don't fully understand anymore, and some parts were changed by Christian Councils. Any verse that sounds like it has the right meaning can be ripped out of context and used to beat the proverbial snot out of anyone who doesn't fit in the narrow box of societal expectations. Women wear braided hair, but call homosexuality a sin. Pastors decry abortion and feminism while living in luxury and committing adultery. The people who are most invested in the higher echelons of these institutions got there by playing by the rules already in place, they refuse to change those rules no matter how unfair those rules are, and when other people start to discuss how unfair the rules are in a credible environment they're reprimanded for it. The government lies to you about how much it's lying to you, and it gets away with it.

It hurts when you build your worldview off of the information given to you, only to have it fall on the ground and shatter like cheap ceramic when it turns out you spent your whole life being lied to, intentionally or not. This concept helps to inform the character conflict of *The Pacifist and The Lion*, which is a story centered around a man trying to find redemption after he finds out that the cause he dedicated his life toward was built on lies and bloodshed in the pursuit



of imperialism. The idea of information being taken away from the public to better benefit those in power is key to *A Dream of Life and Death*. *The Daughter of the Forge* is about losing someone you love and anger at being hurt by people you want to trust. *God of Crows* focuses on a member of a community marked as evil and hunted down for their very birth. The struggles may involve magic and fantasy elements, but at their heart they're real struggles that This is a broken world, sure, but that doesn't mean it's impossible to fix. Maybe it won't ever be perfect, but it can be better, and even if it seems like an impossible task, it's still a task that can be taken one step at a time. All these stories deal with real world problems, but they also feature a community, even if that community is a small group of people. Connections between people are what make the world, and it's how we can fix the world, even if you're a normal person.

One of the struggles I had with creating the world and writing some of the stories is fleshing out the international relationships and conflicts. The history and political science classes I took at OSU were really helpful. I was too late to sign up for an honors class I really wanted to take, so I took an honors add-on for American Government called "Weird Democracies" that was all about the development and characteristics of democracies around the world. That was one of my favorite classes all year, and it's been incredibly helpful in creating secondary worlds with believable political structures. We spent time in class discussing the way that Germany's Weimar Republic was structured, and how that ultimately led to Hitler becoming Chancellor via being in the right place to use emergency powers to give himself full control over the government. In the class, I also had to learn how to do proper research, and had to write an essay about amendments I'd make to the Constitution and why.

I also took an upper-level political science class, and one of the class readings was a book called *All the Shah's Men*, which detailed the rise of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeigh

and how the US sponsored a coup to overthrow him in favor of the Shah and his authoritarian monarchy. That book, with its background on Iran as a country in addition to the information about the coup itself, was incredibly helpful when it came to writing *The Pacifist and the Lion* and creating the historical background for the Lancian-Sumestian War. I'd always had the basic concept of the war as part of the story, but I was never certain what to do with it until I gained a better understanding of the historical context to the wars fought within my lifetime. Readers of *Pacifist and the Lion* who are familiar with Iran's 1953 coup might spot some similarities between it and the causes of the war in Sumestia.

One of the more obvious classes that helped me with the writing of this thesis is Fiction Writing, with the first time I took the class being particularly helpful. In that class, we had to write short stories with a character arc. The professor allowed us to write science fiction and fantasy if we wanted to, but most importantly she insisted on us writing a strong, literary character arc whether or not the stories involved dragons and spaceships. I enjoyed that class because, even though that professor had high standards, they were clearly made, and the criticism I received during workshops helped me to learn the importance of asking other people for their perspectives on my writing. Not just for help with grammar and spelling, either: having someone to ask questions you never would have thought of yourself proved invaluable to me both in that class and out of it.

A class that I feel was useful for helping to create the background of the world is the Honors Mythology class I took last spring. In that class, we read predominantly Greek and Roman myths, but we also talked a lot about life in the Mediterranean at the time in order to obtain context for the stories themselves. One of the things we learned a lot about was weaving, especially due to how important it is toward Penelope and her actions in the *Odyssey*, and how

important weaving was in general in Greece. This helped inform the deity Vestus, the third oldest god who is characterized by a golden weaving shuttle, which in turn is based off of the golden spindle Helen of Troy uses in the *Odyssey*. Another important thing toward the story which I learned in this class wasn't directly about the myths themselves, but about the way that the myths were translated. The version of the *Odyssey* that we read in class was the Emily Wilson translation, which is notable for being the first translation created by a woman scholar. The foreword to her translation of the *Odyssey* discusses some of the ways that she decided to alter the translation to be closer to the original Greek as opposed to previous scholars, especially in the context of the slave girls who were hanged at the end of the *Odyssey* and the status of the other household slaves, who are usually rendered as "servants", especially since the end of the Civil War. This discussion of the politics of translation is important to the overall themes of the story, especially the themes of *A Dream of Life and Death*, where the copying and dissemination of written language is a main pillar of the plot.

One of the things I often find helps me to make a story concept I can actually work with is taking multiple concepts and forcing them to work together. This includes character ideas as well as story concept ideas. As an example, *Reborn Gods* may have started out as a story prompt response, but several characters, such as the character of Duanzidi, are holdovers from unused concepts I had when I was younger. I find the process of making two different concepts or conceits work together usually generates more ideas than just a basic, one sentence concept does on its own. I also find that, if I'm having a hard time thinking of inspiration, one of the best things I can do is watch something else. Sometimes this is because I'm having some issue which another work resolves and I want to figure out how that work approached the subject, but often it's important to let my writing problems simmer in the back of my mind. I especially like

consuming analysis of bad media for this. Not only am I the sort of person who will watch an hour long video about the history of 2012 apocalypse predictions for fun, it's also useful to see other people's takes on the flaws of media, so that I can then think about how I would overcome those flaws and come up with plot points for future stories.

The thesis stories started out like this, generally speaking. I took the original novel concept and, through my thesis prep classes, started asking questions. There were some concepts I had, for example I had the broad strokes of Maximillian and Nasreen in my head back in 2018, but other ideas only started to arise during the last semester, such as the interplay between the human hunter and the crow god Lukkaw in *God of Crows* alongside the Apollonians, a sect of people whose concepts about thought and morality are based off of the worst aspects of fundamentalist Christianity. One of the things that made me able to write these stories, though, is the fact that they tie into the same world, so while I wrote a scene from *Daughter of the Forge* I was able to think about the way this story would feed into *Pacifist and the Lion* with Jian's appearance there, alongside how mentions of the Lancian quest to find the First and Last Battlefield feeds into the discussions of the government in *A Dream of Life and Death*. When I was writing each individual story, one of the questions running in the back of my mind was how each story related to each other, and how to add in various easter eggs that would make sense as both part of the collection and as a stand-alone story. I didn't want the stories to only be comprehensible if read together, but I also wanted to make sure they were more connected than just being stories that were set in the same world.

Part of the issue I had with writing this introduction is the problem of explaining the influences on this thesis, but a special issue I had is the fact that this world is an open world, which I'm still in the process of writing and creating. Part of my worldbuilding process comes

from answering questions which arise during the writing process. I do outline, sometimes, but I'm the sort of writer who works best with a basic idea of how things are going to go: a goal I can write toward. This isn't a good thing or a bad thing, it's just a facet of my writing process. It is, however, hard to plot out the whole story world without having a story written for it. There are some aspects which I had in mind already as plans for future stories, but it's hard to answer questions I don't know how to ask. The stories in this collection are all prequels of some kind to the original story conflict, so there are worldbuilding aspects that didn't make it into any of the stories just because they weren't relevant. As an example, the holy city of Sacra Solla is mentioned several times, but the city itself is more fleshed out in drafts of a novel set in Ouraneia about the new gods learning about themselves as gods. I have an idea not just for that story, but for stories set in the future of the setting when humans and crows become spacefaring and encounter alien species with their own sets of gods, lore built up about the demons, and cut scenes from a story about a supernatural murder mystery that deal with the nature of how burial practices work on Ouraneia and what happens when they're not properly carried out.

Some of this information made it into the stories, some of it sits in my notes on my laptop, and some of it made it into the appendix at the end of the thesis. This includes background information I wrote to inform the stories, such as information about the magic system, a rough timeline of the events that have taken place during the Godless Era, and some brief profiles on major nations, alongside maps and illustrations. The country profiles were the harder part of the appendix to write because I wanted to make sure I did enough research to give them a sense of verisimilitude. I used a template I constructed for a dungeons and dragons group that fell apart before anything was implemented, and tweaked the template for use in the appendix. I didn't draw out any of the boundaries on the world map because if I drew out one

country's borders I would have had to draw everything else out to make things clear, and I haven't developed the continents and countries on Ouraneia nearly enough for that. It is important, especially the material that comes into the background for the *Pacifist and the Lion* as well as the supplementary material on runes, which are only briefly mentioned in *Dream of Life and Death*. The information in the stories regarding both the magical aspects of the world and the trade and technological aspects are important for me to have, even if I'm the only one who really knows about them.

Science fiction as a genre tends to look forward, while fantasy tends to look back, and this is the case with Reborn Gods as a concept. However, Reborn Gods is neither strictly a science fiction concept, nor is it a strictly fantastical setting. You can go to school to learn . Reborn Gods looks back at the origins of political movements which started out as being counter-culture and progressive in some way, but as they became more mainstream and accepted by those in power, they became more and more integrated with the very social structures it once spoke out against. The concept is a kind of soft reset to the world, a global spring cleaning that is carried out by the people who grew up in the places where the dirt tends to accumulate, and not the people who hid the worst of the mess and called the room clean. As of this iteration of the story, nobody is ever quite sure what the new gods will be like. In fact, those who try the hardest to find and manipulate divinity often want that power for themselves, just as the Lancian government tried to take control of the First and Last Battlefield. They didn't care about who and what was already there: they were willing to justify anything to increase their own power. Ouraneia's gods are dead, and even though they're being reborn, they're being reborn as people who are intimately aware of the issues their societies have, and the way those issues hurt people. To quote Thomas Jefferson, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the

blood of patriots and tyrants. It is it's natural manure.”

An idea bandied around in writing circles and reviews of fantasy literature is that of escapism. The problem with escapism ties into the problem with politics in fantasy, namely that escapism and politics are in the eye of the beholder. As an example, the crows in *God of Crows* are all nonbinary, and refer to themselves and others by singular they/them pronouns, as does the character of Khion in *Daughter of the Forge*. I personally don't see that as particularly politic, even though I know that many others will. I have many nonbinary friends, if you'll pardon the cliché, and adding nonbinary characters in a story is more a representation of the people I know than part of any political agenda. Meanwhile, the problem of escapism is that the idea of a place one would like to escape to is going to reflect the values and preferences of the person creating the escapist media. The isekai genre, popular in Japanese pop media, is about a main character (almost always male) who is good at video games being transported to a fantasy setting that operates on video game logic. Theoretically harmless, most isekai media is inundated with the male gaze, with most supporting characters being attractive women in scanty outfits who are often referred to as a 'harem'. Even though I like the idea of being surrounded by pretty women, this escapist media doesn't really appeal to me. It's not targeted at me, as an American or a woman, or a feminist, really. But then, that's the point: what escapism means for someone will be defined by what they want to escape from, and what they want to escape to. In that case, maybe I want to escape to a world where people use they/them pronouns and it's not considered to be political.

The world of Ouraneia in *Reborn Gods* is one that suffers from many of the same problems our own world faces. War, corruption, divisions in politics and religion, gender issues, colonialism are all familiar foes. In that sense, this is not an escapist story. On the other hand,

this is the story that I wanted to write, and even though this story is political and has political issues, who says that it can't still be escapist in some sense? This may be a world where the powerful try to kill the weak, but the weak have the gods among them. The meek shall inherit the earth, the first will become last, and the gods and heroes of Ouraneia will come from the last place the rich and powerful expect.



### The God of Crows

“They say that we’re going to be stuck in here for the next hour, at least,” said a short woman in a cartoonish, pink shirt. She was looking at her phone, which was covered in a case that resembled a fancy cake with icing flowers. “And I forgot my charger, so I should probably restart this thing so I have enough power to check the forecast.”

“Well, there are certainly worse circumstances to be stuck in a bathroom,” said a tall, gangly man. He was wearing an old jacket that desperately needed to be washed. “An hour, huh?”

“At least,” said the woman. She toyed nervously with her long afro.

There were four people in the bathroom, which sat low enough in the building and was made of strong enough materials that it qualified as a storm shelter. Thankfully, it was large enough that it wasn’t too cramped, and it had recently been cleaned. There was even blue water left in the toilets from where the janitor had left the cleaning solution. Outside, even though they couldn’t hear it, a tempest of raging, but it would pass soon. Sometimes the storms lasted for an entire day.

“I wish they had a vending machine in here,” grumbled the man sitting in the corner, who had a shaved head and large muscles. “I was going to get lunch.”

“Little late for lunch, isn’t it?” asked the fourth person in the room. Unlike everyone else, who was wearing more or less modern clothes, they were wearing a black cloak made out of cotton, with a feather-lined hood and a small, outer layer of fabric to cover the armholes. Their hair was long, black, and wild, and they had a thin look to their face that gave the impression that they’d been living in the woods for years.

“If I take my lunch hour later,” said the man in the suit, “I don’t have to wait in line, and my bosses won’t care if I take an extra couple minutes.”

“Oh, how clever!” said the person in the cloak.

“We could all introduce ourselves,” said the woman.

“We could,” said the man in the retro jacket in a tone of voice that was distinctly mocking.

“We’re going to be here for an hour,” snapped the muscular man. “Don’t be a jackass.”

“If we all tell our names, I’ll tell you all a story,” supplied the person in the cloak.

“There’s no better way to pass a storm than with a story.”

“What kind of story?” asked the woman.

“The Tale of Lukkaw.”

“Everyone knows that story,” said the man in the retro jacket. “Are you going to tell us the story of Solla Lunis’s coming of age while you’re at it, or sing us the Ballad of the Roses?”

“You know the *human* story of Lukkaw,” said the person in the cloak. “But do you know the story the crows tell of them?”

“You’re a crow?” asked the muscular man. He leaned over and peered at the very-human

looking figure before him. Still, there was a certain aspect to the cloaked figure, something about their facial structure, that did seem rather avian.

“In the magically transformed flesh!” laughed the person in the cloak. “You act so shocked.”

“The crows stay in the sky-lands, or they have since the gods died.”

“Until the gods come back, you mean.”

“It’s been so long since they died,” said the woman, “and the crows haven’t left their countries in all this time—!”

“Well, it’s a sign that the gods are back, then,” said the man in the retro jacket. “Like they should have been.”

“They’re reborn in the third generation after they die,” said the person in the cloak. “But thankfully, both crows and humans live longer before they have offspring than they used to, so the amount of time in between generations is longer.”

“Oh,” said the woman, “that makes sense.”

“Humans like to put numbers on things in definite ways, but there’s no predicting the future,” said the person in the cloak. “Now, let’s all tell our names. This isn’t a story to tell to strangers.”

“I’m Felicity,” said the woman.

“Hamza,” said the muscular man.

“Tomas,” said the man in the retro jacket.

“And I’m Karil,” said the person in the cloak, stressing the last syllable of the name instead of the first, as was normal for the Lancian language. “Good. We’re no longer strangers. Now, I’ll begin.”

#

Perhaps someone might claim that owls were the wisest birds due to their constant asking of “who, who, who?” Anyone who knew better, of course, would tell you that the true wisest bird was the crow. Crows cawed constantly and made a great racket, true, but they were also capable of laughing, of outsmarting human farmers, and of creating tools for their own ends. Just like how humanity had, over time, built up the delicate candy shell of mythology in order to learn how to make their own towns and nests, crows also developed their own understanding of the world beyond what simply was. While any animal capable of living could understand the fear of death, humans were the first ones capable of making a God of Death, and putting the face of their own species to it, with eyes like void, skin like bone, and white hair like the eldest amongst their kind had. Humans put a face to death to understand it, because they had grown smart enough to cheat starvation long enough to invent philosophy. The crows followed in their own time.

The first crow who had a mind of their own didn’t have a name in the sense that humans gave themselves names, but nonetheless this crow understood that they had their own understanding of the world. They were hatched in a nest near a farm, one of the first of its kind where crops were not grown to feed those who had planted them, but instead were grown by a smaller group to feed a larger group. This is not to say that this farm was the kind of place one might think of now, complete with fields and a barn and such. Instead, this farm took the form of a forest, which had plots of land where the best of each edible food had been taken and reseeded, in hopes of producing more food for those who lived in the area. Crow, because they referred to themselves by proper nouns, was able to watch the humans plant, and to see the delicious pieces of fruit, potato, and squash that were buried in the ground. Crow was then able to see, as well, how the humans poured water and dung over the ground where the food was buried, and more plants

grew full of foodstuffs even better than the previous years' yield to reward the humans for their seeming foolishness.

Crow then flew down underneath the tree where they liked to perch after a good meal and saw small trees sprouting up, of the same type that bore the berries that they liked to eat. Crow not only saw this, but made the connection between the human practice of burying water and dung next to bits of things which were good to eat in order to make more of them, which is something only being able to refer to themselves by proper nouns are able to do. In order to be a person, one must have the ability to understand instead of just do. Crow was a person, though they did not know it at the time, but they did know enough to go over in the dead of night, while owls asked the universe inane questions, and to take an apple core, a potato tuber, and a small gourd. Then, Crow buried these things under their favorite perch and waited, patiently.

Crow told no-one about what they had done, but waited. Crow sang the rattling songs and danced the rattling dances of spring, when those who laid eggs waited to see who would be a best fit to help raise their chicks, and then wooed a mate. Together, they made a nest on Crow's favorite perch, raised a clutch of eggs, and then in the fall, after those eggs had hatched and the baby crows had left and come back to visit, Crow's fruit, potato, and squash had grown, nourished by their own spoor and the spoor of their family.

This went on for two more years, at which point Crow began to age. On average, crows lived through seven winters before dying. However, as Crow's seventh winter began to chill the air, a human stopped in the clearing where Crow had planted the human crops.

"Hello?" asked the human, speaking in a manner which Crow could understand.

"My!" said Crow. "How smart you are. I've never met a human who could do anything but grunt and shout at other humans."

“And I’ve never met a crow which could understand the concepts of farming.”

“The idea is simple,” said one of Crow’s hatchlings, who had laid several clutches of eggs by this point, even only having seen four winters.

“Not so simple,” admonished Crow. “It only seems simple because it was done before you were born.”

“Many big words,” communicated Crow’s mate, who was unable to understand the strange way that Crow and Crow’s descendants conducted themselves, nor was crow’s mate able to understand the idea of a self. Crow’s mate could communicate, like all crows, but only in limited ways.

“Human!” said an unrelated crow. “Human human, danger danger!” They took to the sky out of fear. The others began to clamor, similarly scared.

“Quiet,” said Crow, speaking simply. “Not danger.” They looked at the human.

“Correct?”

“I want to make a bargain,” said the human. “I want to make a deal. What’s your name?”

“Name?” asked Crow.

“Name?” asked Crow’s descendants.

The other crows were silent.

“What do you call yourself?”

“I am Crow,” said Crow.

“I am Animari the wandering healer,” said the human.

“You are Human!” cawed Crow, finding this funny. “And confused!”

“I am mostly human, but I am Animari,” said the human. “In the same way you are a crow, but you are also Crow. You understand that you are yourself, as do your children, but

when there are enough of you who understand the self that you cannot simply say ‘I am Crow’, you will have to specify *which* Crow you are, and then having a special word for your own, individual self will be helpful.”

“And then I will cover myself with false feathers and cover my feet with skins!” teased Crow.

“If you wish.”

The crows who were capable of having a sense of humor found this idea hilarious.

“What do you want here?” asked Crow.

“I thought I’d see if you’d like to learn more about farming,” said the human called Animari.

“I know how to cover seeds with dirt, water, and droppings to make them come back!” said Crow.

“But do you know how to get the cow to give you her extra milk, or how to roast corn so that it is warm and even more filling?” asked Animari. “Do you know what season to plant melons in, or how best to tend to an orchard of pink peaches? Do you know what type of corn is best to feed to a hen so it will give you her eggs?”

“Do you know all these things?” asked Crow.

“I know some,” said Animari, “but I’m mostly someone who heals. You, however, seem like you’d like to know, and more importantly, you seem like someone who would also like to teach.”

Crow, who prided themselves on their wealth of knowledge, agreed.

#

Crow did as they were told by Animari. Crow waited until their next molt, and then gently took

their own feathers out where they were loose. When it was dark and the farmer's hands were drunk, Crow stole down and stole long, dark hairs from the comb of the farmer's wife. Then, on the ground, Crow wove these things together into a crude cloak. When Crow slipped their head through the opening, their bones stretched, their feathers turned soft and thin, and their beak softened and flattened, until Crow was no longer a crow in their form, but was instead a human.

“My!” Crow said, testing out lips for the first time. “Isn't this novel?”

Their magic cloak had not provided them with clothes, but Animari had. Crow put on the smock of skins that people wore, back before the invention of woven cloth, and walked through the woods to the farm, inquiring after a job as a farm hand.

“You want to work for me?” asked the farmer, a man who had more callouses on his hands than soft skin.

“I wish to learn from you,” said Crow. “That would require working for you? So be it.”

Crow was clever enough to make up a story about growing up in the woods and accidentally discovering how to plant good, growing things by himself. Since farming was a relatively new concept, this was easily believable. The farmer, who had recently lost a number of hands to contaminated beer, took Crow on.

Crow, when asked for their name, gave it as “Crow”, which was not that odd, since naming had not been refined into an art amongst humans. Back in those days, humans who had odd characteristics were named after those characteristics. A human who had a pretty voice would be called “Song”, a child who laughed a lot would be named “Joy”, and a birthmark shaped like a leaf would cause people to call its bearer “Ivy”, at least according to the words for Song, Joy, and Ivy which existed back then. “Animari” comes from an ancient word for “life-giver”, and he is called that even when the language of his name is dead. In the modern day,



most names mean something, even if the origins of the names come from other languages and other times. Crow's human form had hair the color of a crow's feathers, thus Crow seemed to be a fitting name.

Crow's human form was beautiful, and even as Crow worked, they caught the attention of the farmer's eldest children: one boy and one girl. When Crow was thirsty, the girl brought them water. When Crow was carrying lumber, the boy helped them carry it. The two siblings vied over Crow as a human, even as Crow, who was happily mated, tolerated them but did not pursue either of them.

However, one of the farmhands was in love with the daughter. More than that, he was jealous of Crow's diligence, and the way that the farmer praised Crow. The farmhand was, perhaps, afraid that the farmer would offer Crow her hand in marriage, or perhaps the farmhand was afraid that Crow would be given the farm when the farmer got too old. The reason has been lost to time, distorted by retellings, and perhaps the farmhand himself never told anyone. The important thing is, when Crow walked back into the woods to return home one fateful evening, they were followed.

The farmhand watched as Crow turned back into their true form, and then flew towards a clearing full of foodstuffs grown from seed, where crows congregated and chattered in what looked more like a village common-ground than any sort of meeting place.

This was a time before demons were commonly understood. In days where there were so few gods as we know them today, magic was barely understood. While we now know more about how souls work, and how spells are patterned, and how demons are born and feed, back then it was all a patchwork of superstition and anecdote. Maybe the farmhand genuinely believed that there was something demonic at work. Maybe he saw a chance to eliminate a rival. Maybe

he simply saw something strange, and called it evil, as the scared like to do.

The farmhand returned to the village, and told everyone that Crow was a demon, borne out of a flock of demonic birds, who would surely kill them all if they weren't killed first. This isn't a new story, so it should come as no surprise that the villagers gathered fire and sharp tools and heavy things, and went into the forest that night.

One of Crow's grandchildren, known as Owl because of their insomnia, spotted the humans with torch and hoe and heavy stick, and cried out an alarm, flying toward their flock. They did not make it. A human with a sling flung stones, and the fifth hit its mark, killing Owl. But while Owl themselves had died, they had managed to warn the flock. The flock arose at once. There were no eggs at that time, but there were those too young to fly. So, while an effort was made to save the young, Crow went out into the night, followed by a group of the bravest and determined of the flock, who hoped to buy time. They all had family, and they were all determined to save their family.

The humans had fire and weapons, but the crows had flight and sharp beaks. In fire, a murder of attacking crows flickers and dances. Crows are small, but being small means one is a harder target. Half the humans ran home, terrified that an easy prey had turned to face them. The rest stood and fought back.

While it is tempting to condemn these humans, some were likely there because they genuinely believed that they were to be wiped out. Some always do. But while they thought they were fighting to protect their own homes, the crows that flew with their forebear were all certain of the fact that, if they failed, then not just their home, but their entire people would be wiped out. They fought at their hardest and most desperate and cunning. Despite being people, they fought as fiercely as any demon borne of wrath. But, one by one, a blow took them down. A

torch burned, a hoe cut, a hand grabbed and threw to the ground for a boot to stomp. Finally, Crow himself flew alone.

Crow had lived a very long life, by the standards of crows back then. Crow had many children, whom they greatly cherished. But no long life would have been worth it to Crow if, in their old age, they had to watch their beloved family die at the hands of the scared, hating, and ignorant. So, Crow flew forward, but away from the clearing, leading the villagers through thicket and bramble, away enough from the clearing so that they would be lost. Then, Crow turned, and in a final act of spite, went right for the face of the farmhand that had uncovered their secret, and plucked out his eyes. Crow died alone, but did not die empty-clawed.

#

The humans sat there, seemingly confused.

“I’ve never heard *this* story before,” said Hamza.

“Nobody likes hearing the wrongs their ancestors have committed,” said Karil.

“I don’t understand,” said Felicity. “You said that the first Crow was named Crow, but I thought this was the Tale of Lukkaw.”

“Lukkaw is Crow, but Crow isn’t Lukkaw,” said Karil. “Lukkaw is the direct reincarnation of Crow, but it’s important to explain why Crows and Humans don’t trust each other later, and why agriculture worked the way it did back then, and how the feather-cloaks were made! Also, Animari showed up. Humans like Animari.”

“I think that you should have just gotten to the point,” said Tomas, bitterly.

“The context is important!”

“This is an *indulgence*.”

The way he spat indulgence like the name of a Demonic King seemed to confuse Karil,

but Felicity rolled her eyes.

“You’re one of those Apollonians, aren’t you?”

“What’s an Apollonian?” Karil leaned forward, curious.

“We believe, that without the guiding influence of the Gods, it’s important for all humans to self-regulate our emotions.” Tomas puffed his chest out.

“All *humans*?”

“Our philosophy is unpopular amongst crows.”

“No wonder,” mumbled Hamza.

“An important part of our doctrine is the removal of all vice,” continued Tomas. “Drink, gambling, unnecessary sex, licentious behavior—!”

“Oh,” said Karil. “That explains why it’s not popular among crows. Sounds boring as hell.”

“It’s also necessary to not think any ill thoughts, or experience too much pain, and risk feeding demons without Gods to provide a counter balance. And, since the gods rely on human thought to properly function, we must only think in acceptable ways.”

Karil blinked. “You mean your doctrine holds that it’s a sin to have bad thoughts and feel pain?”

“Yes.”

“And that doing so is feeding demons who in turn will try to murder and destroy without conscience, and weakens the gods?”

“Yes.”

“But wouldn’t that, in turn, cause negative thoughts which could feed a demon? If you’re worried that you’re doing everything wrong and stress over it?”

“Not if you’re doing it right.” Tomas sniffed.

Karil looked over at Felicity and Hamza. They both looked unimpressed with Tomas’s explanation.

“That sounds stupid,” said Karil, finally.

“Excuse me—!”

“The next part of the story is the bit where Lukkaw was properly born, and things might sound a little more familiar to you.”

#

Lukkaw was born into a world different from what Crow had known. In this time, there were many crows who had the gift of sapience and souls. It is not known how many at that time, because Crow’s legacy included the legacy of fear which humans had inherited. The animal instinct in us all to fear the strange has to be tamed, and humans did not do well at taming it.

Lukkaw’s flock was hidden in the deep forests for fear that a human would find them, hunt them, and kill them. This was no unreasonable fear. So, Lukkaw grew up in the care of loving parents, but parents who were often made to reel their most tricky hatchling in for fear that one day, there would be no hatchling left to shelter.

Lukkaw was not only a hatchling who regularly pushed the boundaries of what the family and flock would allow them to do, but was incredibly intelligent, which suited them, for their name meant “thinker”. This was one of the names which were used to describe the first Crow, in the stories often told to answer the questions of why crows came to be, why crows were hated by humans, and what the plants were that humanity guarded so ardently. Lukkaw drank in the stories of Crow and their miraculous feather cloak, which allowed them to turn into a human and walk among the most dangerous of animals. Among the other hatchlings, Lukkaw often drew

molted feathers around their own neck and pretended as if they were able to turn into a human and learn the human's secrets.

“Look at me,” cried Lukkaw as a hatchling, “for I am Crow, the smartest of all birds, smarter than even humankind!”

As this reincarnation of Crow grew, Lukkaw was more than able to amaze the other members of the flock. They were possessed of a thirst for knowledge that could not be quenched by the solitude and fear that protected the flock. So, after fledging, but before taking a mate, Lukkaw slipped out under cover of darkness to explore the outside world.

Lukkaw quickly came to realize how cloistered their people were, but also understood why. The bodies of dead crows were burned, to ensure that no magic could heal them and no crow could fake their death and escape. Additionally, many of the humans who regularly hunted would come back missing an eye or two, which the humans seemed to regard with a mixture of fear and respect. Lukkaw was aware of why they did this: a final blow against human marauders, begun in times long forgotten. If they could only see Crows as enemies, they would not see at all.

At one such event, where the bodies of crows were burned and their bones taken up in boxes, a corpse was tossed into the fire, but suddenly burst free and flew skyward with flame trailing on its wings like orange feathers. Lukkaw quickly realized that this strange crow had managed to fool the humans and was now trying to escape. Lukkaw considered remaining hidden, but something internal tugged at them. It was one thing to look after the health and safety of one's own flock, but Lukkaw still felt the urge to go out and help a stranger. It was not just because this other crow was, in fact, of the same species as Lukkaw, but because of some deeper drive. In time, this might be known as a conscience, but it was an urge that Lukkaw could not help but to obey. Despite their better judgement, Lukkaw flew out, skirting through trees, and

met the singed crow in the forest while the humans tried to find them.

“This way,” said Lukkaw, leading the stranger to a small pond to quench their smoking feathers, and then on a winding, weaving route through the forest, to lose the trail of the humans. When they had finally lost their pursuers and were sure that they had done so, the pair alighted on a branch to rest.

“I have to say,” said Lukkaw, “that I have never seen one as bold as you! In fact, you’re the first person I’ve seen to survive the burning of the humans. You must be especially favored by whatever gods are not firmly on the side of humans.”

“Do you often watch executions?” snapped the singed crow.

“Calm yourself, my friend!” said Lukkaw, hopping back. “I understand you’ve been through an ordeal, but I have no reason to wish you harm, especially when I could have done even more harm by not involving myself at all.”

The singed crow seemed to concede the point.

“Why did you help me?” asked the singed crow.

Lukkaw responded. “It seemed to be the right thing to do.”

The singed crow gave Lukkaw an odd look. “That is a bad reason to risk one’s life. In fact, it is no reason.”

“Are you complaining that I saved yours?” snapped Lukkaw, for they really could not explain themselves, and not knowing irked them more than anything else.

“Why do you watch the humans in the first place?” asked the singed crow.

“I want to understand them.”

“If anyone could understand humans, it would have been done by now.”

“Perhaps none have ever tried to understand them in the way that I have!” decreed

Lukkaw. “For my name means Thinker, and I am intelligent enough to think my way through anything!”

“I had a name which my parents gave to me,” said the singed crow. “But now they are ash upon the wind, and so that is the old me. Yes, I am ash and ember, and so, Thinker, call me Pyrta: the smoke on the wind.” They coughed. “Humans are the most vile creature that is made of flesh. Do you know what the humans in that village do?”

“Kill our fellows, so I’ve seen.”

“They hunt us, with a single mindedness that not even the hawk can perform, for the hawk is less intelligent and more wise. Humans rarely kill birds for food: they kill us because of sport.”

Lukkaw, having watched the humans for a long time, could not dispute this claim.

“At any rate,” said Lukkaw, “I’ll take you with me back to my flock. Unless you’d rather not?”

“You saw what happened to the rest of my kin,” said Pyrta.

Silently, they flew back to Lukkaw’s own flock. While Lukkaw was initially scolded for going so near human territory, when the topic of Pyrta was brought up it was agreed that as a matter of solidarity, Pyrta would stay with them.

“What you did was reckless,” said an elder, voicing the general consensus of the group, “but it was also brave.”

“And what is the difference between reckless and brave?” asked Lukkaw, pausing in their preening.

“The difference is the odds,” said the elder, not quite sounding sure of himself. “Pyrta is a fine crow. Strong, as well. One would have to be, to escape from the fires the humans make.”



“They will have to be strong, to keep on living,” said Lukkaw.

“How profound!” The Elder looked at Lukkaw in surprise. “You surprise us all with your wisdom sometimes, little one. Still, so many surprises are not good for our hearts. Why not settle down, and set to work beginning a family instead of worrying us all?”

“Maybe I will start a family soon,” exclaimed Lukkaw, “but I doubt I’ll stop running you ragged for a very long time!” Their laughter reverberated through the clearing.

#

Despite Lukkaw’s good humor, the flock was on edge. Humans were known to be vicious creatures, whose capacity for fear was rivaled only by their ability to fly into a jealous rage. Pyrta agreed with this sentiment, to Lukkaw’s annoyance. But then, given Pyrta’s own experience with humanity, one could hardly blame them, which kept Lukkaw from saying anything especially out of line. In reality though, Lukkaw could not resist feeling hurt by the way that everyone kept a close eye on them, to prevent them from sneaking off. After all, hadn’t they done a good thing, in saving Pyrta from the humans? This resentment burrowed into their breast like a little worm, which the woodpecker likes to hunt. Lukkaw spent all their time brooding while tending to the wild grains and berries near the flock. Lukkaw enjoyed being alone, without having to deal with the judgement of the flock, and the plants seemed to enjoy their company as well. Whenever Lukkaw spent a day tending to a specific bush, the bush always came to fruit faster. Lukkaw assumed it was because they were simply so charming that even plants couldn’t help but flower around them.

It was nearly two months before Lukkaw was able to sneak out and to spy in the human village again. When they perched on the branch of a tree, a presumably safe distance away from the village, they watched for only half an hour before they suddenly had the feeling that they

were not safe. Looking to the side, Lukkaw saw the glint of something metal in the bushes. At once, they dove from the tree, narrowly dodging an arrow which had been shot at them.

“How rude,” said Lukkaw, flying up to a higher branch. “I suspected that humans had no sense of hospitality, and this is certainly proof! What a villain you are!”

“Silence, demon!” shouted the archer. The archer let another arrow fly. Lukkaw dodged this one as well, alighting to another branch of a tree.

“Why not show yourself?” asked Lukkaw. “Or are you a coward, as well as a violent hunter?”

The archer loosed another arrow, but as Lukkaw dodged they were able to see the archer’s face. The archer had a trimmed beard, as was the custom for male humans of the time, with broad shoulders and a horse bow. What gave Lukkaw pause, however, was the number of scars around the archer’s eyes. Lukkaw had seen scars of the sort before, on the humans who had formerly hunted crows, but had been blinded by one of their victims. This hunter, however, had several sets of scars, indicating that many crows had tried to take the human’s eyes, and had failed. The archer’s arrows, too, were deeply disturbing to Lukkaw, because they were fletched with black crow feathers. While it was possible, hypothetically, that they had been gathered from molted crows, Lukkaw doubted that it was the case.

“I have hunted many a demon in my time,” said the hunter, “and I have many a trophy from your kind. I fear you like any rational man would, but I do not fear inordinately things which can easily be killed.”

“Then fear me, for I am not so easily struck!” cried Lukkaw. At that moment, the hunter loosed a fourth arrow, which struck Lukkaw in the wing and clipped half of two of their primary feathers off. Lukkaw screamed in pain and immediately flew off through the woods, making a

hasty retreat. The hunter followed, crashing loudly through the underbrush. With the hunter so close on their tail, Lukkaw dared not retreat to safety, and so tried to fly the most confusing and labyrinthian path they possibly could. Over and under and sideways, right, right, left, and up again, Lukkaw flew, but the human hunter was persistent. Lukkaw thought to themselves, in the frenzy of terror, that humans had no right to call crows demons, when humans themselves were as terrifying as any infernal monster. Lukkaw constantly banked to the side, as a result of their injured wing.

The hunter chased Lukkaw until finally, Lukkaw cut through the air over a set of streams with steep banks that the hunter could not cross quickly. Once they were sure that they were safe, they alit on a branch in a shrub in a small grove. Their wing hurt terribly, and their primaries were bleeding. They were tired and panting, and what was worse, they were totally lost. Lukkaw had flown so hard and so fast that they had completely left any of the territory they knew, and were surrounded by strange trees. Tired and scared, Lukkaw went to sleep, deciding to make a plan in the morning.

When Lukkaw awoke in the morning, the first thing they did was explore the clearing. They hopped around, looking for something good to eat, when they found a strange plant growing in the ground. It was a thin, leafy plant, with its shoots yellow and dying. However, its roots were fat and looked juicy. Lukkaw scratched through the dirt, and found more roots: tubers that were elongated and round. Lukkaw pecked at one for a while, marveling at this strange sort of unsweet fruit which grew underground, when an idea came to them.

“How lucky I am after all!” Lukkaw threw back their head and laughed. “I’ve found potatoes in the middle of this forest!” At that time, potatoes were considered to be a sort of legendary food by crows, akin to ambrosia. It was said that a small potato could sustain a crow

for a day spent in flight. Lukkaw hoped they could find more, perhaps even one to bring home to their flock for the purposes of propagation. As they began to dig, the rising sun made something glint, out of the corner of their eye. Lukkaw looked over, and saw a small chest, weathered by time. Lukkaw went over and opened it.

Inside was a collection of crow feathers. But, as Lukkaw pulled it out with their beak, it became clear that the feathers were tied together with bits of human hair, so that it resembled one of the cloth garments that humans wore when it was cold or rainy.

“Perhaps this is the cloak of feathers that the first crow wore, to transform into a human,” said Lukkaw, jokingly. “And maybe if I put this on, I too can turn into a human!” The same way a modern child would put on a cape to resemble a hero from a comic book, Lukkaw put on the cloak, laughing at the idea. Their laughter stopped when they found, to their shock, that they had in fact turned into a human!

Lukkaw ran around, trying to find a reflective, and in the process tripped over their new long legs, with strange feet. At last, they found a creek and knelt down, examining their new face. They had hair, long and black, like their feathers in shape if not texture, and their eyes were black as well. But their skin was a brown color, and their lips were so odd that Lukkaw could have spent the entire day contorting them into funny and terrifying shapes. At noon, Lukkaw finally decided to finish gathering the potatoes, and found that it was much easier to dig through the dirt with human hands. Lukkaw gathered the potatoes and set out, content to wander.

#

Although navigation was hard as a human, Lukkaw eventually managed to find their way to a river which they vaguely recognized, and decided to try to follow it back to its source. As they walked and stumbled along, they tried to sing a tune, but the sounds which came from the human

mouth were not what they wanted to make.

The river gurgled along, and Lukkaw pretended that it was lending its voice to make up for the deficiencies of the human tongue. Lukkaw sang thusly, until a crow alighted on a branch in front of them. Lukkaw was about to greet their fellow, only to remember that they were in the form of a human, and would thusly be treated with alarm and suspicion. However, this strange crow leveled their head at Lukkaw.

“Hail and well met, traveler,” said the strange crow. “What brings you here? And what a magnificent cloak you wear, though you wear little underneath it.”

“Well, hello, friend!” said Lukkaw. “I admit, I’m surprised at you! I wouldn’t think a strange crow would wish to greet a human!”

“As you have said, I am a strange crow.”

“Strange indeed, strange indeed.” Lukkaw peered up at the crow. They were sure that there was something odd about them, like Lukkaw had met them once, but Lukkaw knew that they had never met, and this troubled crow-turned-human. “Have you any news to tell me? Do you have any stories that you wish to share?”

“I have many stories,” said the strange crow. “I can tell you about magic in the far corners of the world. I can tell you of places where rain only falls once a year, where the sun rules the sky. I can tell you of waters so large that they weep and become salty from their own loneliness, where no crow can cross them for their sheer girth.”

“That sounds wondrous indeed,” said Lukkaw. “What about wisdom? Do you have any wisdom that you would share with me?”

“I could share all the wisdom I wish, with you,” said the strange crow, “but I do not know what you would wish to hear! Ah, but perhaps I should tell you of the ways of farming. For

didn't the first crow sneak amongst humans to learn it?"

"Aye, but look at the crows now!" said Lukkaw, cheerful in voice, but bitter at heart.

"Scattered and in fear, murdered by humans who curse them as demons. I'm sure that if humans think crows are demons, they may as well be demons to crows!"

"Watch your tongue," said the old crow. "It is best not to invoke evil where it is not present. If you'd like, I could teach you about humans in the treeless plains to the south, who worship the sun as the mother of all life."

"Mother?" Lukkaw laughed. "Imagine the eggs the sun would lay. Humans truly are foolish!"

"They have observed that plants all respond to the light of the sun," explained the strange crow, "and those plants in turn feed everything. Both themselves, and all animals who eat them. So, some in the south say that the sun is the ultimate mother, while others insist that the sun is a maiden who walks alongside a deer, with the deer's antlers representing the rays of the sun, while the human who leads it along with tender word is the sun's form, the same way that there is a woman who paints her face like bone and wears her hair long who is the same as death. There are islands at the edge of the world who worship the ocean, who wears a red cloth on her head and once held back waves like mountains with her bare hands. There is a god of the hammer that builds human nests who also dwells in the weaver's loom and the potter's kiln, and who teaches anyone who asks them for aid."

"What a wondrous world," said Lukkaw. "And who are you, then? A crow who knows as much human knowledge as a human might?"

"Oh, don't tease me!" the strange crow laughed. "I'm as much a crow as you are a human!"

“That is impossible,” declared Lukkaw. “This is the magic feather-cloak of Crow, first of my kind. How can you transform, much less from a human to a crow? Have you torn pinions from some kin of mine, so you may act as a saboteur?”

“Certainly not!” said the strange crow. “I am not some fool who thinks that, because someone speaks but is not human, that they are as vile as a demon! Such a device would have blood imbedded in its very core, and would tear any user apart.”

Lukkaw was forced to acquiesce. “Your words ring false to me, but I suppose I have no knowledge of the construction of a feather-cloak.”

“I only have a little knowledge,” admitted the strange crow. “My abilities are limited. While I am, of course, knowledgeable in the magical arts, I have found that the magic of changing from one form to another no longer comes as easily to me as it seemed to have come from the old wanderer before me.”

“Pray tell, what wanderer do you speak of?” Lukkaw inquired.

“The wanderer known as Animari,” said the stranger. “He is one of several human gods, but is one of the most important, for it is through the blessings he bestows that humans are able to perform magic to bring those back from the brink of death, to cure the ill of their diseases, and to alleviate the suffering of the old as their souls move on from this world. He is also responsible for the plants which bring life, and if one asks for his power, they can make plants grow.”

“You mention this thing known as a god,” said Lukkaw. “What is it? I hear humans acknowledge their gods, but we crows have no such thing. If you really are a transformed human, then you shall be able to explain this concept to me.”

“Think on this, then!” declared the stranger. “Gods are the things which humans create for themselves. To be a person is to be in possession of the greatest power of all: the ability to

create understanding. Only some can heal the sick and conjure fire from their fingers, but all are able to understand a thing in some way or another. If one can understand the world, then the magic in that will create a person of its own: a god. And once you understand a god, you can understand more gods. Humanity needs to understand the world, or else go mad from the force of the unknown pressing against their souls. Humans want to know, not what things are, but why they are that way. Thus, they tell themselves stories and believe in them so deeply and profoundly that they, in turn, become real.”

“Humans are a race of liars, then.”

The stranger clacked their beak threateningly. “Can you hold love in your beak, or is it something which you understand as real without having seen it?”

“Love is not a god.”

“It can be.”

Lukkaw did not know a way to dispute the strange crow’s statement.

“Tell me,” said Lukkaw. “Do humans have a god of strange kindness?”

“Perhaps they do,” said the stranger. “Describe this strange kindness, as you call it, to me.”

Lukkaw told the stranger about how they had saved Pyrta and brought them into the flock, and how, despite the benefits of a new crow, Lukkaw had not done the action because it would be beneficial to the murder, but because it simply seemed appropriate.

“I understand that it caused me great danger, which is why I was scolded greatly for it, but I still do not regret the action.” Lukkaw scratched at the ground with their foot. “I do not understand it, and yet I seem to be the only one who does understand it. Was I compelled by some strange, human god?”



“You were compelled by no human god,” said the stranger. “I know that much. But perhaps what you are describing can be a god, in of itself.”

“If it is a god, and it has no human touch to it, then is it a god of snakes or fish?”

“What you have felt,” explained the stranger, “sounds to me like a magic of the same sort as the magic which gives humans their own healers and homes.”

“That is impossible,” said Lukkaw, “for, except for Crow, my oldest ancestor, I know of no crow who has practiced magic.”

“You are a person,” said the stranger. “Is that not magic enough?”

“If I had magic like a human,” declared Lukkaw, “I would use it to save every crow from the arrow and snare of the human hunter.”

“You would have to have a strong soul, to do so much.”

“What is this thing called a soul?”

“It is the thing that gives all thinking beings their own selfhood, which in itself is magic. Indeed, the soul is magic in of itself.”

“Then,” said Lukkaw, thinking quickly, “if I could master this magic, could I do anything?”

“You could do most things,” said the stranger. “Why do you ask?”

“If I could master magic, could I protect my people?”

The stranger cocked their head to the side, considering Lukkaw’s words. “Who are your people, Thinker?”

Lukkaw was suddenly afraid, for they had not given this stranger their name, but the stranger knew it. Lukkaw was also afraid, for even though they thought first of their flock, and of Pyrta, they also thought of the many bodies and pinions burned by the humans, and felt grief at

their losses, and grief at the thought of more strangers murdered and burned in the same way.

“My people are more than I know.”

This answer seemed to satisfy the stranger, though it did not satisfy Lukkaw.

“My advice to you, Thinker, is to think upon your strange sense of kindness.” The stranger looked down at Lukkaw like an elder crow might. “Think about what you would have to do to satisfy it, and how you would accomplish the safety of your fellows. If you do so, I suspect that you will be able to achieve greatness. I know the cloak wrapped around your shoulders. Crows may not have gods, yet, but neither did humans at first. Gods are made from a sense of justice and compassion, to right the wrongs of the world. If they are not there to do it, they must then be made.”

Before Lukkaw could ask further questions, the stranger flew off, leaving behind a molted feather. Lukkaw picked it up, and tucked it within the folds of their own cloak of feathers.

#

“I understand why humans don’t tell this version of the story,” said Felicity.

“It’s barbaric!” sniffed Tomas, wrapping himself further in his jacket. Outside, even through the stone and brick of the walls, they could hear the wind howl.

“I’ve heard this version before,” admitted Hamza, “but it was always a contextual story for Princess Azurshi.”

“Princess Azurshi?” asked Felicity.

“She’s the human princess who married a crow and ended up mending the rift between the two species,” said Hamza. “Where are you from? I thought it was a more or less universal story.”

“I know the plot,” said Felicity, “but the story my parents told *me* has *Lady Tempesta* marrying a crow to mend the rift. Since she’s a goddess of sky, but also a human goddess.”

“She’s a *weather* goddess, not *sky*.” Tomas rolled his eyes. “Sky is Lady Solla’s domain.”

“Solla Lunis’s domain is the *heavens*, not the sky. Weather is under the sky. Heavens are above the sky.” Felicity sniffed. “There’s a difference.”

“You’re more than welcome to continue this conversation when we’re not stuck in the same room,” said Hamza, rubbing his temples. “I don’t have any headache medicine, or patience for it.”

“Don’t you have an opinion?” asked Tomas.

“My opinion is that the sun warms the planet, and that heat helps cause the weather which is Lady Tempesta’s domain, but also clouds can block out sunlight and therefore impede the sun, which is Lady Solla’s domain, and so I imagine it’s philosophically complicated and philosophy drives me *nuts*.” Hamza looked incredibly unimpressed with the course of the entire conversation.

Karil, for their part, looked incredibly happy just watching Felicity and Tomas argue.

“Well, what do the crows think about sky and weather?” asked Felicity, turning to Karil.

“Our sky god more closely resembles your hearth god than either Solla or Tempesta,” said Karil. “Cloud, bower, and nest are all considered to be the same domain.”

“Use the long name or honorific,” said Tomas.

“I only know the short names,” said Karil. “Besides, they’re gods, not queens. One’s worth my respect, the other is not.”

The blasé tone Karil used in talking about queens made the three humans shift, uneasy.

“Does Pyrta end up playing a larger role in crow religion?” asked Hamza.

“They’re a god of fire, and of death,” said Karil. “Known as the Phoenix, in Lancian. Yes, that’s a good translation. They form half of the Mighty Quartet.”

“Mighty Quartet?”

“It doesn’t have a direct analogue to humans.” Karil patted themselves down. “Can I have a pen, and some paper?”

It took some scrounging, but Felicity pulled a beat-up pad of sticky notes, patterned with a pastel sunset, and Hamza found a mechanical pencil that looked like it had been stepped on at some point.

“The quartet is like this,” said Karil. They drew out a diamond on the paper. “Like humans generally have two arms and two legs, crows generally have two wings and two feet. Two limbs for manipulation of the tangible, with one ‘foot’ as earth and the other as ‘water’.” Karil drew two symbols on the left and top of the diamond. “Then, the two wings represent the intangible, air and fire.” Karil filled the other two corners with another pair of symbols. “A stable quartet. Water quenches fire, fire consumes air, air rises above earth, and earth sullies water. It flows around itself, neither truly dominant. In the middle, it generates change, which is sometimes said to be energy.” Karil drew a circle in the middle of the diamond. “It’s also the basis of a card game, but you can’t play it with Lancian cards. Anyway. Lukkaw is of earth and Pyrta is of fire, so they’re supposed to be a matched set, with neither side dominating the other, but kept equal.”

“But are they *really* equal?” asked Felicity.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I know crows don’t do the whole gender thing, but—.”

“You’re asking who takes charge in the relationship?”

Felicity nodded.

“It’s a partnership, not a master-servant relationship.” Karil rolled their eyes.

“Was the stranger supposed to be Animari?” asked Hamza.

“Oh, yes, of course. Wasn’t it obvious?”

“Yes,” said Hamza.

“Kind of,” said Felicity.

“Not at all,” said Tomas.

“Oh.” Karil sighed. “Well. It is. In some interpretations. Others think it was supposed to be Mortia, but given Animari’s character it makes the most sense for it to be him.”

“If he is the crow, why not use masculine pronouns?” asked Tomas.

“Because he was a crow at the time, and it’s not—.” Karil paused, thinking. “We don’t describe ourselves with gendered terms, if we can help it. There are languages where they gender everything from tables to toilets, much less people, but the specificity isn’t done. Too much of humans trying to divide us along gender lines in the past, like we’re just like them, but don’t know it yet.”

“So it’s half a sense of irrelevance, and half a sense of spite?” asked Felicity.

“Mostly irrelevance, but spite is an excellent garnish.” Karil grinned.

#

Lukkaw was sure to turn back into the form of a crow before entering their flock’s territory, for they were positive that if they entered as a human, the flock would splinter and flee. They returned, with the feather cloak still tied on in a form small enough for a crow to wear, but they were forced to bury all but one of the potatoes under an auspicious tree, since they could not

carry so many.

When they arrived back in the glade of their home, a great cry rang out, for they had assumed Lukkaw was dead or lost. Lukkaw's family, as well as Pyrta, were happy to see them back, even before Lukkaw spat out the potato in their beak and began to tell them their tale.

Lukkaw embellished their story a little, mostly to keep the fledglings in the assembly from becoming too frightened. Most of what they recounted has already been mentioned here, so it is not worth repeating. Lukkaw kept the stranger's words a secret, and only mentioned seeing other crows in passing as a detail of their travel back.

When their story was finished, however, it was assumed to be largely fictional by the gathered crows.

"The First Crow's magic feather cloak!" laughed Lukkaw's sibling, who was named Kawsit. "How ludicrous! You have always been one to tell a good story. I am quite sure that you must have had a long, boring flight back, if you were able to imagine such a tale!"

Lukkaw's pride was wounded by this, and they told the others to stand back. Lukkaw hopped back, and after warning the crowd to keep their wits about them, transformed into a human again. No-one truly had believed that Lukkaw could turn into a human with the feather cloak, so there was a great panic when they did transform, but Lukkaw was still able to speak to their brethren and convince them that this was, in fact, their familiar Lukkaw. Once everyone had calmed down, Lukkaw transformed back into a crow, and told them about the place where they had hidden the potatoes. Since Lukkaw had demonstrated their shapeshifting ability, nobody seemed to think that finding a cache of potatoes was too unbelievable, and a contingent of crows left to retrieve the mythic tuber.

However, the conversation quickly turned to what to do with the cloak, and Lukkaw was

horrified to find that several of the elders wished to see it destroyed.

“I will not let you!” decreed Lukkaw.

“Calm now, calm now,” said an elder. “Think of this in a rational manner. It was the first crow’s own transformation which allowed them to interact with humans, which had brought this woe upon us in the first place. Do not be childish, allow us to take it and bury it.”

“By that logic, one could maintain that Crow founding our kind was the cause of humanity hating us so,” said Lukkaw. “Will we then give up our rational minds? You are welcome to, but I am Thinker, and so I will think!”

This conversation went back and forth for a long time, until Pyrta stepped in.

“No crow since the first crow has been able to shape-shift, and yet they hunt and kill us just the same,” Pyrta reminded them. “I do not think that destroying the cloak will do much to help us now, and it would be easier for a human in a black cloak to save lives than it would be for a singular crow.”

Lukkaw felt overjoyed at this wise defense.

“However,” continued Pyrta, “I also believe that it should not be allowed to use this cloak on a whim. It should be saved for dire need, and not for simple amusement. For if the humans take it, they will certainly burn it, and then we will truly be lost.”

Though Pyrta was still considered an outsider, their reasoning was sound and arguments measured, for they were more temperate in nature than Lukkaw, who had a reputation for ego.

While Lukkaw was happy that the cloak was not to be destroyed, they were annoyed that they did not get to keep it, for they had found it and so felt that they should have the right to lay it in their own nest.

Lukkaw proceeded to sulk about this matter through the last of the spring, even as the

summer, mild at that time, began. Soon, even though several of the potatoes had been taken for the purposes of eating, the hunt was on for delicious nuts, seeds, berries, and the delicacy of meat. Lukkaw, however, was determined to be too much of an unpredictable factor to be sent out to gather food, and was instead made to stay within the glade and to watch over the potato's growth: busywork, in essence.

While every other crow who could fly was out gathering provisions, flying in and out of the glade in shifts, Lukkaw was stuck watching dirt. They were not happy about this, and made a nuisance of themselves by complaining loudly about it, until a crow with a broken wing told them to shut up. Bereft, Lukkaw flew a ways away, and stalked a circle around the potatoes, as though they could make them grow by mental willpower alone.

They could not, but staring at the buried plants made Lukkaw remember the words of the stranger, and how the humans had a god who made plants grow. Unsure about the whole concept of a deity, Lukkaw was also ready to start clawing at their own feathers if they didn't find something to alleviate their own boredom, and so set about trying to formulate a magical solution. Even if this was a human god, Lukkaw imagined themselves to be smart enough to get a favor or two out of this strange figure. Lukkaw looked inward, meditating in order to find some connection to the plants. The crows above paid them no notice, happy to have some peace and quiet for once.

Lukkaw meditated on the ground for days, only stopping to eat and to drink. Soon, even the latest fliers had learned to fly, and Lukkaw was still unable to unlock this magical power that the stranger had told them about. Finally Lukkaw let out a cry of frustration, and at that cry, a shoot from a potato burst from the ground. Lukkaw started, and inspected the new shoot. It looked like any other plant, being green with small leaves. If Lukkaw had not seen it with their



own eyes, they would not have believed that it was magical in any way.

Lukkaw returned to meditation, and found a well of energy inside of themselves: a hot coal surrounded by green fire. Lukkaw tried to siphon off some of the green fire, but each time they tried, it slipped from their grip. Lukkaw continued to meditate and grab the green fire, and spent the entire night doing so.

After the sun had risen, Pyrta flew down to make sure that Lukkaw was still in good health.

“What is this?” Pyrta asked. “Are you going to sit out in protest over not being able to leave with the others? You should be grateful for the leisure. You look as though you have not slept at all, and the other will worry. Why not rest?”

“I am trying to do something wonderful,” said Lukkaw.

“You can do wonderful things in your dreams.”

Lukkaw paused to try and think of a witty retort, and at that moment they were able to grasp some of the green fire. Lukkaw gasped, and flung it out, where it settled into the dirt like water, and more potato spouts came up. Pyrta was shocked, but was quickly overcome by curiosity.

“How did you do this?” they asked.

“I tried to focus,” said Lukkaw, “but I appear to have focused too hard. Oh, thank you, thank you, bless you my dearest Pyrta! If you had not interrupted me, I know not what I would have done! I cannot grab this energy more than I can grab down in water: I must act slow, and not rashly!”

When the rest of the crows came home to roost, Lukkaw had grown enough potatoes to feed the entire flock for several days. While they wondered at this miracle, Pyrta did not: for they

had exacted a promise out of Lukkaw to train them in the strange art to make plants grow, and feed a murder in a day.

The rest of the murder watched, and murmured amongst themselves.

“How are they able to do such things?”

“Is this the gift of the cloak, or did something happen which Lukkaw has not told us about?”

“Lukkaw is incapable of keeping secrets. No, this much be a result of some strange gift.”

“Perhaps, Crow has returned? Humans speak of souls returning from death in new bodies. Is this a sign that our species is to be reborn?”

“Reborn, or destroyed again? Crow brought both blessings and curses.”

Lukkaw pretended not to hear these things even as they learned how to grow trees from saplings to grown trees laden with fruit, and to make even that fruit more nutritious. Over the course of the seasons, Lukkaw grew more and more skilled with growing plants, but in ways that changed them. For though Lukkaw knew that they could grow things to match their mundane counterparts if they so desired, they always made changes so the plant would be more useful, whether increasing the number of sturdy branches or the amount of fruit a plant bore.

Soon, Lukkaw flew around the forest, practicing their magic on different types of plants. Lukkaw used their magic, but they could also feel how the plants themselves desired to grow, sucking up energy of their own from the dirt and living rock below them. Pyrta studied this magic as well, but was always more cautious than Lukkaw: for they had good reason to fear humans, and wished to keep the things they grew nearer to their flock, while Lukkaw grew new plants far and wide, even in places where other flocks often foraged.

After several seasons, for that was how crows measured time in that era, a summer came which was so hot that the sun itself burned the rainclouds out of the sky, and no water fell. Lukkaw was still able to grow fruits with juice, which helped to quench thirst, but the heat was deadly in of itself, and the wise kept the foolish in the shade.

That year, a foolish hunter from among the humans left a cooking fire unattended a day's flight to the direction in which the sun sets. Sparks from the fire had caught dry leaves on a dying tree on fire, and that fire had spread to the dry leaf layer of the forest floor: from there, the fire spread significantly and burned for a week. The lands to the west which the humans used to hunt were burned down and untenable.

The humans suddenly pushed forward into the eastern forest, even into the deep, thick parts where the crows lived in secrecy. The humans saw thicker brambles than they had ever seen before, fruit trees who bore heavier fruits than were possible for the season, and the evidence of crows and magic. Like any human, faced with the unknown and the aftermath of a tragedy, they were afraid. Like any human, they looked for something to blame. As was the lot of the crows, the humans blamed them.

Pyrta, noble and true, sent out the first alarm. Like the first day when they had met Lukkaw, they arrived, with their feathers trailing red. Unlike that first day, however, their own feathers were bloody, as were their feet and talons, and in their beak they held the remains of a human eye. They let it fall to the ground, and for all that it was a small piece of flesh, the weight it carried was like that of the largest stone.

“The humans are in the forest,” announced Pyrta, “and they are coming toward us. I know not why they come this way, but they do, and so we must hurry and flee: bring with you only what you can carry and which will be necessary, the seeds and the cloak, because otherwise

they will surely find and kill us all.

A great panic arose, which was only calmed when the elders reminded the flock that they had little time, and must leave immediately. Everyone went to their own nest and perch, and several went to the plants which Lukkaw had grown with their magic, to take the seeds so Lukkaw could replant them. Lukkaw himself was directing the others in what to take, and was extracting berries from the brambles they had created, when an idea struck them.

“Go on ahead!” they cried, gathering as many bramble seeds as they could. “I shall entrap them in a snare made of nature itself!”

“You fool!” said the elder crow. “You’ll die, and where will we be without you?”

“If I do not, then they will be close enough to kill some of this flock,” said Lukkaw, “and furthermore, there are other flocks in the area who would benefit by the human’s entanglement.”

“Why care about the other flocks?” asked the elder. “Is your duty not to us?”

“It is,” said Lukkaw, “but ‘us’ is a word with a broad meaning.” Lukkaw, beak full of bramble seeds, took flight, toward the west where smoke still lingered in the air.

They found the human war party and dropped seeds, carefully flying ahead so as to make sure that they could hide. When the human war party walked over the seeds, Lukkaw had them grow, and their wooden, thorn-ed vines trapped the humans like they trapped rabbits in their bits of deadly string.

Lukkaw laughed happily and turned to flee, only to be forced to dodge an arrow. When they looked down, who should appear by the hunter with the scars around their eyes, who had previously clipped off Lukkaw’s wing feathers with an arrow.

“You’re still alive!” said Lukkaw, by way of greeting. “What a pity. Were you slow? Is that why you are not trapped with your fellow murderers?”

“I am not with them because I knew you were not dead, wiliest of all demons!” declared the hunter. “You were behind the fire to the west, were you not?”

“You give me more credit than I am due in every respect but morality,” said Lukkaw.

“What would a crow know about morality?” asked the hunter.

“What would a human?” asked Lukkaw. They tried to make the brambles ensnare the hunter moved too fast, and fired several arrows at Lukkaw in the process. Lukkaw ducked down in the branches of a tree, where the wood was thick enough that no hunter would dare to fire into it.

The hunter loudly cursed Lukkaw and all their kind, even as Lukkaw looked down at the face of the hunter. Each scar across the human’s face was a warning and an omen, but it was also an act of kindness: an attempt to save their own loved ones from death and danger. That they had failed in this one final act make Lukkaw angry.

“Hunter,” spoke Lukkaw. “Even now you pursue me and my loved ones. Won’t you stop, and return to your own hearth and home, where you have your own gods who protect you from the demons and monsters which hunt your kind? We crows aren’t as lucky as you: why not leave us in peace?”

“I shall not leave you in peace!” the hunter spat. “You troubler of man! My bowstring may be snapped, and my flesh may be weak, but even crows have to alight on the tree and the ground to recover their energy. When you do, when you find yourself in a nest, I will find you, and will only abstain from wringing your neck long enough to smash the eggs of your nest while you watch!”

Lukkaw was now quite positive that the hunter would not listen to reason. Moreover, Lukkaw now realized that, although the hunter was one human, there were many other humans

who likely thought the same as this hunter. Even though the crows were wily, the humans only had to win once. The only solution would then be for the crows to forever keep out of reach of human hands, but no crow could fly forever. If only there was a way to make a land which flew, so that crows could live on it forever, and not have to fear the humans below.

“You will not change your mind?” asked Lukkaw.

“I shall not!” declared the hunter. “I shall not rest until either you or I am dead, demon!”

“By all means!” said Lukkaw. “Then, if you will call me demon, I will give you a name as well! I dub you Cafa, which means Scar, so that, as long as me and my kind exist, we will remember those who have died trying to stop you, and venerate them until the end of days while your true name will die with you! For we have our tongue, human, and we will not forget your face.”

This, at last, seemed to frighten the hunter. As if a change came over him at this new name, he staggered back. Other humans were audible through the trees, and so Lukkaw took to the sky.

Morality is not a thing which is done easily when it is first done. It is a tough road, which only becomes easy with diligent practice. It was not easy for Lukkaw, but at the same time, Lukkaw knew that there are things that are not easily explained, but are easily understood. Although there were no means to properly explain this to anyone whom Lukkaw knew, Lukkaw still understood that it would be easy to make it so that their flock could escape the ruin that humanity sought to inflict upon it. However, the humans were filled with wrath, and they would not stop with Lukkaw’s own flock: they would go after other murders, and would likely succeed in destroying many of them. The deaths of those who were not real to Lukkaw, and who were little more than flickers of Lukkaw’s own mind, troubled Lukkaw. Lukkaw also remembered the

words of the stranger, the human in crow form.

If the crows had no gods to protect them, then Lukkaw would have to borrow some magic. But how? The human god who made plants grow and gave things life was not an avenger, nor was he a savior. While Lukkaw could reach out for his magical power in order to grow plants, they could not do as much to protect their whole species. Lukkaw's new-found feather cloak was with Pyrta now, as well. Would this human god answer the prayer of one who was not human, not even outwardly?

The price of not trying seemed more dire to Lukkaw than the price of failure. For, if they were to succeed, they would have achieved the impossible. So, Lukkaw reached into the core of magic that made up their own soul, and drew upon it, spinning it into something which had never been made before. Cafa shrieked, for the human had never seen magic cast before in such a way, and was greatly frightened.

The conviction within Lukkaw's soul stirred something in their magic. It morphed around them, becoming more than simple conviction. It was not their fear which prompted this, but their determination to do what was right. Lukkaw wished to create land which could never be reached by humans, but humanity could do a great many things. However, they could not fly. So, Lukkaw poured wings into the ground, focusing hard on the things that they held most dear, and the ground began to tremble.

Earth split from earth, and trees found themselves uprooted. Streams spluttered and lakes shook as chunk of land after chunk of land began to shake itself free of the planet below, as if rising to meet Lukkaw's demand. Cafa fell down to the ground, in awe: for even through Lukkaw was no human, Cafa could recognize great magic when it presented itself so obviously.

As the masses of land rose, shaping themselves into islands in the air, Lukkaw felt their

strength begin to wane, and dark spots like clouds cross their vision. No-one had ever tried to make land fly, and so no-one had known how much it would cost.

The flock found Lukkaw holding on to the branches of a fruit tree, and panicked at the sight of them: straining as if bearing some heavy load, and yet not holding anything but their own magic.

“Lukkaw, Lukkaw!” cried an elder crow. “What are you doing?”

“I am doing what I must,” replied Lukkaw, though strained, “but I appear not to have the ability to do what I wish. Could you help me? I wish to create a safe haven for all of our kind.”

The flock was taken aback, and murmured amongst themselves as to what this could mean. Then, Pyrta flew forward, alighting on the same branch as Lukkaw.

“Why do you do this?” they asked. “Why all crows? Why not just your own flock?”

“Because we can only be great if we care about each other,” replied Lukkaw. “Because when I saved you, I did not do so for my own gain, but because I hate to see another suffer and die.”

Pyrta remembered Lukkaw’s earlier words, and repeated them in their own manner.

“Then I will help you, for it is the right thing to do.”

Pyrta lent Lukkaw their own magical energy, and upon seeing this, one by one, two by two, the other crows joined in, lending Lukkaw their own energy to lift the new land up to the sky, where no human could shoot an arrow and no climber could reach.

Lukkaw was rendered senseless for the next eight days, but when they awoke, it was to a new land, one where their kinsmen could live safely without fear of molestation or harm.

As the years passed by, Lukkaw taught all crows the tricks that they had learnt: how to make fruit grow out of season, how to disguise oneself, and above all else, how to love a



stranger. Lukkaw's magical power would remain unmatched, but their name would never be forgotten. As long as crows have beaks, the name of Lukkaw will pass them, and with the name of the god of crows lies the power to change the world for the sake of life.

#

"Is that the end of the story, then?" asked Hamza, when Karil finished speaking.

"It's the end of the story's chapter," said Karil. "But the storm's almost passed by now, I'm sure."

"Well, that was a waste of time," said Tomas, standing up and stretching.

"It's never a waste of time if you've learned something new," said Felicity.

The intercoms crackled to life in the building, mumbling through static in a way that was only barely comprehensible. Hamza squinted at it, despite the fact that it was audio-only.

"Was that the stay in place order being lifted?" he asked.

"I think so," said Felicity. "You'd think the emergency system would be intelligible, at least."

"Well, I try not to indulge in time-wasting in general." Tomas stood up.

"You learned something," repeating Felicity.

"I was told a version of a story I already know with no purpose to it whatsoever." Tomas left the bathroom without another word.

"Well." Felicity looked between the doorway and Karil. "I'm sorry. He was—."

"An asshole?" Karil shrugged.

"I think he just insulted your entire species," said Hamza. "Aren't you mad?"

"He's an asshole," Karil repeated. "I'm going to think happy thoughts of vehicular manslaughter and continue on my way like I never met him. I assume neither of *you* thought this

story was useless?”

“It’s interesting to see what other people think of you,” said Felicity. “I watch movies made in different countries sometimes, for work, and the ones that deal with Lancian history are always fascinating. Like the movies KARASU makes. There’s never a token Lancian who’s a good person despite whatever event was going on to make us feel better about ourselves. It just is what it is.”

“You watch movies for work?” asked Hamza.

“I film movies, but I want to be a director someday.”

“I wish you luck with that,” said Karil, genuinely. “Hamza?”

“Well, I don’t think it was stupid, but other than listening to a new story, I don’t know what I *learned*.”

“Why is it a new story? Why not a new version of a story?”

“Isn’t this a new story?” asked Hamza. “It’s an origin story for the crows themselves, not just an origin story for Lukkaw. It’s not just a different version, it means something different. It wasn’t *pointless*, but this isn’t like history class or religion class. This is something different. But I don’t know if it’s the true story.”

“Why would it be more true?” Karil leaned forward.

“Because the crows were there for this,” answered Hamza, “and would have closer contact with Lukkaw.”

“Because the gods are infallible?” tried Felicity.

“If the gods are infallible,” said Karil, “why did Crow die? Why do any of our gods die?”

Felicity and Hamza exchanged a nervous glance, but couldn’t answer the question.

“The answer is that gods are less infallible as anyone else,” said Karil, “but they’re not

more infallible. Stories can be true if they're told different ways. You'll tell people about today, and none of your stories will be less true because they're different, but they *will* be different."

"So two stories can be just as true, without being infallible?" asked Felicity, slowly.

Karil nodded.

"But then how do we know they're both true?" she asked.

"You have to *think*," said Karil, "and not just see demons in the things you don't understand."

### The Daughter of the Forge

There were visitors to the island. Not the various seabirds which treated the island as a home or a stopping-point on their long journey across the vast Maiyaking Ocean, but human visitors. This should have been impossible.

The Sentinel could see their gleaming ship, metal and wire and vast, from where she stood. This mountain stronghold, the extinct volcano which watched over the First and Last Battlefield, had an excellent view of the small harbor at which the ship had made landfall. Not once in her forty years of life, since she had awoken in a small workshop carved into the rock, had she seen any human visitors.

She knew of humans on the island, along with some crows who had slowly married into the population by use of various shapeshifting methods as a way to avoid inbreeding. They were all the result of various people who, for one reason or another, had been left on the otherwise uninhabited island that was only accessible by beast and god. Until now.

It troubled Sentinel. She leaned on the rock balcony, with an artfully shaped rail that some past incarnation of Vestus, with their domain of craftwork, must have put down. The ship

was only viewable in the morning. In the afternoon, when the sun began to set, it shone down on the ship and made her eyes hurt, even as powerful as they were. Sentinel imagined that the seabirds must find it blinding, but at least the shadow that was cast by the mountain at sunset kept the shining from continuing past the late afternoon, for fear that it would lure the young turtles to the ship.

None of the turtles had come to lay their eggs yet, and would not until the next full moon. There was a period of months that they came, and Sentinel forgot their names. After her first ten years of life, she'd given up on using calendars. She could track time without them, and never had to remember social events. Sentinel never spoke to the mortals, and avoided them when she could. She had only ever spoken to the gods, and then only to her mother. The gods were all dead, and would continue to be dead for at least twenty more years. Sentinel had gotten *very* good at solitaire over the past several decades.

The ship was a potential problem. Mortals weren't supposed to be able to come to the island without the assistance of gods. It could not be found with mortal magic, and was placed so far out of any shipping route that it should be impossible to find on accident. The island wasn't created by any tectonic process: it was created to be a lonely landmass to contain death and violence. It was simultaneously a place of great sorrow and a place of delayed joy.

Sentinel had read a text which explained it, written by a human who had died long, long ago. Gods were reflections of beliefs and of people, created out of magic and prayer. One of the duties of the gods was to set the world to rights, and to overturn calcified political structures and beliefs, so that the world could grow properly. Even the richest field had to lie fallow, however. Mortal institutions changed inevitably due to mortality. But, if gods were immortal, then they would be unable to change, and would lose touch with the mortal peoples of Ouraneia. So, the

gods were mortal, and at the end of each era of history, the gods, as embodiments of the life and hope of the mortal races, would have to do battle against demons, who embody the fears and worst impulses of humanity: avarice, cruelty, contempt, envy. Crow sources tended to phrase this in terms of the life and hope of crowkind, but the basic message of virtue versus base impulse was constant in these works.

The Gods would win, and had always won, at the cost of their own lives. There was a mortal or two who was willing to fight alongside the gods, but there were always other battles, and the mortals the gods trusted were usually needed elsewhere, even if only to try and help people carry on in the absence of gods. Even then, while some minor gods remained behind to oversee the transition to a new era, there were plenty of minor gods who were willing to give their lives alongside the major gods. Then, their souls entered the cycle of reincarnation. They would come back and be reborn, and with it, so would the world. The first book Sentinel had read on the subject was an academic text written by someone who had never seen the period of death and rebirth. According to a calendar which tracked eras of death and rebirth, planted squarely in the middle of a rebirth era. Sentinel had read the book over the period of a year, stopping when she felt the tight, stabbing feeling in her chest. She didn't know what it meant, but decided not to risk injury to herself. The only person who could repair her was dead, after all.

She felt the pain again and turned her attentions back to the metal ship. She was still considering what to do about it. She had no idea what harm it could cause, much less what harm it *would* cause. She would have to investigate. But then, the humans who lived on the island might be able to determine what the strangers were trying to do for themselves. Perhaps she wouldn't have to worry at all.

Sentinel decided to go out into the forest which surrounded the volcano. She made her

way through the winding halls of the fortress, only stopping to change into something less likely to become snagged on the plant life outside and pick up her spear, and then once she passed the room that she'd been created in. She hadn't gone in it since she'd left it the first time. Her fingers brushed the door's handle, and she hesitated. Then, like she always did, she removed her hand and left the fortress.

The outside was lush and beautiful. The island's inherent magic meant that the soil was always fertile, except for the ground of the Battlefield itself. That place was a barren crater of stone, a bowl of death surrounded by barren land, with what plants survived mutated and hostile. She tried to avoid it as best she could. Sentinel made her way across the game trails, which all living beings used at some point or another. She supposed that she was one of them, if only by technicality.

The mortals inhabiting the island tended to not be in this part of the forest at this time of day, which is why Sentinel had selected this particular path. As always, there were outliers.

Sentinel stopped as she heard voices. She stepped to the side, into the trees as a trio of youths walked past. The people inhabiting the island generally had dark hair and a range of skin tones ranging from tan to dark, but there were always a few with different colors to their hair and skin, especially the direct descendants of the more recent transplants, as well as those who practiced magic long enough for it to seep into their appearances.

The youths ran by, but one stopped and pointed at Sentinel's footprints, and where they disappeared. The three talked among themselves for a minute or so, and then continued on their way. Sentinel knew the mortals were aware of her, but didn't know what they thought of her. Perhaps it was for the best, that way.

Sentinel continued toward the harbor, walking in a radius around the ship to try and

discern the best vantage point. She gathered that her eyesight was keener than a human's, and perhaps even a crow's. So, she sat in a tree, and watched. She didn't hunger, or tire, so she spent the whole day in her roost. There were 33 sailors, and they all had more or less identical clothing: a uniform, most likely. Variations in clothing accounted for differences in rank and job. She didn't know what uniforms they *were*, though. She knew of uniforms from books, but all of those books were older than she was, and new information from the outside world was nonexistent.

The sailors were working to create shelters on the beach. They had brought metal poles and canvas tents with them, but they were in the process of making more permanent structures out of wood. They didn't use thatch, which Sentinel considered to be a grave oversight. Instead, they used some kind of tarred canvas that seemed like it wouldn't be very durable if a storm hit, and would be hard to repair. Sentinel gathered they didn't know much about islands like this. A series of blankets had been packed up and were laying in the shade. There were no women in the group.

As she watched, their commander came out and yelled at some of them. After a few minutes, a small party was given some kind of firearm and sent into the forest, presumably for hunting. Sentinel watched them, even as the sunlight began to shine on the ship, until finally the glare was too bright for her to make out much detail.

Sentinel decided to go after the hunting party, which had yet to return. She hopped down to the forest floor, frightening a roosting bird, and made her way down to the part of the forest that the strangers had entered. She didn't feel like she'd walked for very long when she heard a noise like a thunderclap, but smaller. Birds flew from trees, startled by the noise. Sentinel followed the sound, stepping carefully even as she ran to avoid the snares which the mortals



living on the island laid for small game, until she heard another one of the noises. Sentinel stopped, even as the sound echoed throughout the island. It sounded like embers popping in a fire, but much louder. This was not what made her stop. It was the scream, a human scream, which chilled her to her core. Someone had been shot.

Sentinel raced through the woods, suddenly reliving the smell of acrid ash and the blasted heath surrounding the Battlefield. She entered a clearing and saw no corpses, but a pair of people. Sentinel brandished her spear, but then stopped. These were neither islanders, nor the strangers from the ship. A third party was on the island.

#

Sentinel could tell immediately that these two strangers were not human, but she couldn't place exactly *what* they were. While they occupied the same space as a human might, and had all the right limbs in all the right places, she could tell that the substance they were made of was more profound than the collections of meat, bone, and magic that made up a mortal being. They were also troubling to look at: the first smelled of blood, dirt, and rot and the second figure smelled like stale air, bile, and human filth.

"Oh!" said the second stranger, brushing her long hair back. "Oh, you're the Sentinel."

"That is, in fact, who I am," said Sentinel. Her voice felt hoarse, even though she used to make prayers toward her mother's, and the rest of the gods', safe journey back into the mortal world. "Who are you? And, though I understand this is a rude question to ask, and though I was raised to be polite, I must also ask: *what* are you?"

"Not even an immortal has *that* much time to waste talking," said the first stranger. He chuckled, rubbing his shaved head. "We're death gods."

"No, you are not." Sentinel pointed her spear at the first stranger. "You cannot be, since

the Goddess of Death is a Goddess, and thus cannot be a man.” She pointed her spear at the second stranger. “You cannot be the Goddess of Death because she is currently in the cycle of reincarnation with the other Gods. Furthermore, you look nothing like her.”

“We’re Death Gods, not Gods of Death,” said the first stranger. “We work both with and for Mortia, but we aren’t *her*.”

“Like how you’re with and for Duanzidi,” explained the second stranger. Sentinel didn’t flinch at the casual mention of her mother. “Here, let us introduce ourselves. I’m Panolis, I’m Death God of Mass Disease and Natural Death.”

“And I’m Polemus, Death God of Mass Violent Death, which usually means War Death,” said the first stranger.

“It’s nice to meet you,” they said in perfect unison, which Sentinel found off-putting.

“Why are you here?” asked Sentinel. “There is no war, and I know of no plague.” She remembered the deaths of Mother Duanzidi, and of the rest of the Gods in the fight against the Prince of Sin as much as she could, having been sealed away in the mountain, but that was a war and no such thing had happened recently. Plagues had occurred before on the island, of course, but Sentinel had seen the aftermath: mass graves and small families. She hadn’t seen that happen within the past four decades.

“I’m not just war,” said Polemus. “I’m a death with no face. The sailors on the island don’t know any of the islanders, and as a result they don’t feel anything personal when they kill them. Therefore, I’m here, and not dear sibling Dolophon.”

“And the plague is only beginning,” said Panolis. “The sailors have their own diseases back home which are foreign to the island, and the islanders are already getting sick.”

“Are you here to render assistance to them?” asked Sentinel.

The two exchanged a glance, and then looked at Sentinel.

“Did Duanzidi tell you what your job was?” asked Panolis, not unkindly.

“I’m to protect the graves of the Gods,” said Sentinel. “That is what I am made for.”

“If you’re made for only one purpose, why did she give you those clothes?” asked Polemus. “I recognize the stitch-work from her home: it’s written in the common language of her continent.”

“Did she name you?” asked Panolis. “What’s your name?”

“I am the Sentinel, and that is what I do.” Sentinel gripped her spear tightly.

“She didn’t even name you?” Panolis sounded strange, gripping the sash around her middle.

“There was no reason to waste the time,” said Sentinel. “When I awoke and she gave me my purpose, Lady Solla Lunis was donning her Armor of Two Shades, and Lord Ancora was bleeding to death, despite Lord Animari’s administrations. There was no time to name me beyond gifting me with my purpose.”

“Even so, to not have a name....” Panolis sighed.

“I don’t understand why that troubles you.”

“Even though we’re under Mortia’s domain, we’re named and separate,” said Polemus. “When she’s reborn we’ll continue to work under her, and even in the meantime we have our own council, but to have no name outside of our purpose....”

“I am my purpose.”

“No you’re not.” Polemus and Panolis spoke in unison.

“If you’re nothing more than a purpose, how can you recognize that?” asked Panolis.

“I don’t understand,” said Sentinel.

“See?” Panolis pointed at Sentinel. “You refer to yourself as ‘I’. You *do* have a self, and therefore you must have a name to describe your self.”

“I don’t understand what that self *is*,” said Sentinel. “I am the Sentinel of the Graves of the Gods, she who was formed by the Goddess Duanzidi of the Forge, who is currently cradled in the hands of Fate as she is reincarnated in a human body until She May Ascend. I was created of precious metals and given my spear so I may watch until my Honorable Mother returns and gives me my next assignment.” It felt calming to slip back into ritualistic language, even though she felt the tightening in her chest which came with thinking of her later mother for too long.

“But your self *is* that,” said Panolis.

“And more,” said Polemus.

“How can it be more?” asked Sentinel.

“You have to decide that,” said Polemus. “In our centuries, guiding the dead to the floor where they can shed the last vestiges of the material and go on to the next world, we’ve learned a lot about people. If you decide that you’re nothing more than your purpose, then you decide that for yourself, and that act of decision is a part of yourself. If you are more than that, you enact that addition to your self *on* yourself. You are what you make yourself be, as a new soul created by Duanzidi herself.”

“That sounds confusing,” said Sentinel, slowly. “Both confusing, and terrifying.”

“That’s what it’s like to be someone wholly unique,” said Polemus.

“Ah,” said Panolis.

Sentinel was about to ask her what exactly she meant when she heard two more of the sound. It was closer, and sounded even more like echoing claps of thunder. Then, she heard the wailing.

“The mother,” said Polemus. “Come on.”

Polemus and Panolis ran through the trees with as much grace as Sentinel herself, and Sentinel, at a loss for what else to do, followed them in.

They came to a stop at a clearing close to one of the villages on the island, where an islander was dying. Sentinel instinctively raised her spear and flinched, as though she could somehow ward off the sight before her. The dying woman had strange holes in her chest, red and weeping blood, and it was coming out through her mouth as well. Sentinel had seen humans die from being gored by wildlife before, but this was different: less messy, and more disturbing in the relative cleanliness of this wound. The woman was not the one wailing. She was past the point of being able wail, fluid and blood in her lungs choking her as she bled out into the dirt. Instead, a small child, at the age where it would be able to walk and follow the older children around the village circle, but not quite old enough to talk, was screaming as its mother bled out in front of it. The little girl didn't notice Sentinel, or the two Death Gods.

Polemus stepped forward and placed a hand on the woman's forehead, whispering something to her in the language the islanders spoke to each other. He pulled back, and the woman wheezed out a last breath. Sentinel watched as that breath took form, and her soul, a ghostly, half-human image, came out through her bloody nostrils.

“What happened?” asked the ghost.

“You were shot,” said Polemus, sadly. “I'm sorry. It's a bad way to go.”

“It was not as bad as it could have been,” said the ghost. “But, why?”

“They were hunting game and were careless,” said Polemus. “They didn't know you were there.”

“Nor did they care,” grumbled Panolis.

“An accident,” said the ghost. “An accident, and I’m dead.”

“It’s a bad way to go,” repeated Polemus.

“What about my child?” asked the ghost. Below them, the child was still wailing.

“We can’t do anything,” said Panolis. “We’re Death Gods: if we take your daughter with us...”

The ghost turned to Sentinel, who took a step back, surprised that the ghost had noticed her at the edge of the clearing.

“Please, Jian,” the ghost said. “Please take care of my daughter. Please, protect my daughter.” The familiar word made Sentinel’s hand tighten on her sword. If this scene didn’t remind her of her own mother’s death already, that word would have clinched the similarities.

Sentinel looked down at the young girl at the side of her mother’s bloody corpse. She remembered, after the mountain had opened and she had left, how there had been a clearing of ash, where liquid metal had burned the trees in a perfect circle. Demons left behind no corpses: they didn’t have physical forms, but they left behind marks that they had died there: ash, or trees with poisoned sap, or spots of rank tar.

Mother Duanzidi had a physical form. Her corpse was barely recognizable. It was still shaped like her, but her black hair, cut short unlike Sentinel’s own hair, was burned and soaked with dried blood. Her face was caked with blood and demonic bile from the fight. Her left eye, which had blazed with the fires from which the first human forge was kindled, from which the first rake, plow, sword, and scythe were made, from which sprang the nails which the first of her temples had been built with, and from which Sentinel herself had been made with, was extinguished, like ashes in place of a great tree. Her mother was dead, and all that was left for Sentinel to bury was a shattered shell.

The sun was out that day, even though Solla Lunis had been cut in two even as she killed the Prince of Sin until he could revive again from the failings of mankind, and it was pleasantly warm. It would have been beautiful, except Sentinel's mother was dead. Even if she would come back again, who would know when exactly that would happen? It would be years and years, and Sentinel had barely had two hours to know her mother. She hadn't been given a name, even. Instead, she'd been given the duty of burying her mother in the tomb set out for her, and the other gods' corpses on the day she'd been made.

The mother's corpse looked nothing like her own mother's corpse. At the same time, it was identical, down to the daughter clinging to her side and weeping like she could bring the sky down with the force of her grief. Sentinel felt like she was watching herself, and she had to force herself to look away from the reminder of her greatest terrifying moment.

"I am the Sentinel," said Sentinel, instead of telling any of this to the ghost. "I am She Who Watches over the Graves of the Gods, she who was formed by the Goddess Duanzidi of the Forge. I will do what I can."

"That will be enough," said the ghost. "Thank you. Thank you."

Polemus took the ghost by her remnant of an arm and guided her into the next world. The body remained. The child remained. Nothing was left but death gods, the dead, and the mourners.

#

Sentinel knew the path to the village, which was good because the child was unable to do more than weep and scream. Sentinel carried her down the path, but didn't make it into the village before the noise summoned more mortals. They stopped in their tracks, and looked at Sentinel, and the child, and the blood on the child. Sentinel half-expected them to attack her, but instead

they walked over to her without the fear she expected them to display. One of them, the smallest and least imposing of the group, tried to take the child from her, but the child screamed even louder. The mortals apparently decided that it wasn't worth it, because they led both Sentinel and the child back to the village.

The first to greet them was a man with relatively pale skin. He ran forward and hugged the child, and she burst into fresh tears and hugged him back. Sentinel gently extracted the child from her arms and the man took the child, hugging her tightly and rubbing his hand against her head like he was afraid the child would evaporate into mist if he stopped hugging her.

Sentinel stepped back, fully ready to return to the first, but when she turned she was greeted by a man with flaky, purple powder painted over his eyes.

“Is it really so bad?” he asked, breathlessly.

“What?” asked Sentinel.

“Where's Tiana?”

Sentinel cocked her head to the side. “I don't know who that is.”

“The mother of—.” Sentinel's expression must have changed and given herself away, because the man didn't even finish his sentence before his face crumpled with sorrow. “Oh, no.”

“She was shot by the crew of the ship,” said Sentinel. “I don't know if it was intentional, or not.”

“We haven't said a word to them, why would it be intentional?” The man raked his hands through his hair. “I don't even understand why they're here in the first place! Was it an accidental landfall? How could they come so far out to sea?”

“They have supplies on the beach,” said Sentinel. “They don't seem to understand the weather, here.”



“You haven’t spoken to them? Asked them why they’re here?”

“Give her space, Elre!” snapped a new voice.

Sentinel turned to see a large woman, nearly a head above everyone else, walk over. She wore a veil and a grass coat, and her wrists were tattooed with the bands of a weather seer.

Sentinel inclined her head. The woman looked at her, and sighed.

“You don’t need to be nervous, Honored Lady Sentinel,” said the woman. “We mean you no harm nor ill will. You are a guest among friends, and we shall treat you as such.”

The formal greeting really did make Sentinel feel more at ease, despite literally everything else about the situation.

“Apologies, honored Lady Sentinel,” said the man, whose name was, apparently, Elre. He bowed, folding his hands inward as he did so, and then quickly left.

“May I offer you food and drink?” asked the woman.

“I don’t know if I can eat,” said Sentinel. “I know I don’t need to, and I’ve never tried.”

“It would be my sincere honor to help you find out.” The woman smiled and bowed. Sentinel, nervously, bowed back, but a little deeper. The woman saw this, and bowed back, even deeper. Sentinel started to bow back deeper, but then realized that she didn’t understand the customs of the mortals and should probably stop bowing.

The veiled woman turned, and lead Sentinel into one of the larger homes on the island. It was built with a palm thatch roof with an opening in the roof to let smoke out and brick sides, and when Sentinel entered it had stone and clay pads embedded in the floor that could be heated on cool nights. The veiled woman offered Sentinel some beer, thick and earthy, and some pieces of sliced fruit that a girl had run in with on a wooden plate.

Sentinel could eat, but was unsure about whether or not she was supposed to drink too

much of the beer. She was pretty sure that she couldn't get drunk, at least, but from the stiff way the veiled woman held herself Sentinel had the feeling that she would have been thrown a feast if the situation was better.

When Sentinel finished eating and passed the plate and cup back to her hostess, the veiled woman set them aside for later cleaning.

"My name is Cellica," she said. "And I feel as though I have you at a disadvantage, for every one of us who lives on this island knows who you are."

Sentinel felt startled. "You do?"

"Lady Duanzidi spoke of her plans to create a lady of steel instead of flesh. She spent every moment she could spare ensuring every part of you would be fit to serve a daughter of one of the Great Gods of the World."

Sentinel leaned back and studied Cellica's face carefully. She had seemed relatively young, but now Sentinel suspected that she'd simply aged very well. "Did you meet my mother?"

Cellica laughed. "Not directly. But when I was still a little thing, I climbed a tree and hung down from a branch so I could eavesdrop on a previous village council, who *did* meet your mother. We helped make some dresses for you, and each member of the village contributed a lock of hair for you, and magic was used to make it into your hair."

"My hair?" Sentinel reached up and wrapped one of her fingers around a lock of her long, black, straight hair.

"It was the least we could offer."

"I assumed that Vestus made my dresses."

There was a pause. Cellica studied Sentinel's face. "Did you ever meet them?"

Sentinel slowly shook her head no.

“May I ask what your first memory was?”

Sentinel’s first memory was slowly waking up, as if from a dreamless sleep, while her mother kissed her face. Sentinel had red markings on her face: red lips, red eyeliner, and red cheeks, but the red on the bridge of her nose was the result of Duanzidi declaring her finished with action, and not words. At least, Sentinel didn’t remember any words. She did remember something warm, and when she opened her eyes her mother was straightening. She looked tired, with bruise-like circles under her eyes. Her fingers were wrapped with little bandages, but she’d looked happy when Sentinel looked up at her. Sentinel herself was immaculate, shining metal and paint, clad in bright silks.

“Happy birthday, my little sword,” Duanzidi had said, in the language of her mortal homeland. “Welcome to the world.” Sentinel was fully formed, in the only body she would need. Steel and paint and soft things, all in the form of a guardian with a likeness to Duanzidi herself.

Duanzidi had only been able to spend an hour, probably less, with Sentinel, before Mortia had run in and called her out. Mortia was covered in blood and ash, and her Bone Daggers of Death were stained black with demonic ichor. Duanzidi had told Sentinel to stay where she was until the door opened for her, and so Sentinel had. The door had opened hours and hours later. Sentinel left the room, and went to find her mother. She’d found her mother’s corpse, instead.

Sentinel remembered all of this, and the tightening in her chest felt like it was about to snap.

“I remember spending time with my mother,” said Sentinel. She didn’t elaborate.

Cellica looked at her with a profound sadness written on her face.

“You’re very easy to read.”

Sentinel looked at her, confused.

“Your face,” explained Cellica. “It’s very expressive.”

“It’s metal, painted to look like skin.” The joints were left silver for practicality’s sake.

Everything else, including her markings which gave her the appearance of makeup, were painted on.

“It’s a very good likeness.”

Sentinel sat silently. The silence unnerved her. She felt off-balance, and had been since the ship had arrived. Was arrived the right word? The more she learned about it, the more it seemed that it was no innocent accident, but part of some greater plan. A plan which had no space in it for the people who actually called this island home.

“You mentioned a council,” said Sentinel. “May I meet with them?”

Cellica winced and looked to the side.

“I suppose you probably could,” said Cellica. “But, perhaps later would be better.

They’re very ill. One of the other villages, closer to the coast, is decimated by illness. I was left behind to manage things while the council renegotiated trading for their salted fish. They’re too ill to risk the trip back, and the runner is ill in a quarantine hut with boils and a rash. We have healers, but they’re having a hard time since she doesn’t know what the disease is.”

Sentinel remembered the presence of Panolis, who was infamous for administering to the deaths of plague victims in literature and historical writings.

“The sailors?” asked Sentinel.

“Maybe,” said Cellica. “We’re hoping the coastal villages’ own healers can find out.

We’ve sent some of our own, but we need to keep some in case the worst happens.”

Sentinel felt like she was forgetting something important, but was unsure what.

“Do you know the name Jian?” asked Sentinel.

Cellica looked up at her, gaze sharp. “Do *you* know it?”

“It’s a name from one of the kingdoms of Taije,” said Sentinel. “A name of indeterminate gender. It has many meanings, depending on the symbol used to write it. I know the name, but I don’t understand why the woman, Tiana, would use it to refer to me.”

Cellica looked profoundly shocked.

“What is it?”

“That’s your name.”

Sentinel stayed silent for several seconds. “What?”

“Your name. Jian, the Sentinel. Daughter of Duanzidi.” Cellica glanced around, and her surprise took on an edge of nervousness.

Sentinel stared straight ahead. Her mind felt as though it had come to a screeching halt.

“My name isn’t Sentinel?”

Cellica’s nervous shock faded to concern. “Did she not tell you?”

“I.” Sentinel was about to say no, but then she thought back to that memory of hers. One of the meanings of the word *jian* was sword. Duanzidi had called her “my little sword” in her native tongue. The word *jian* had been used, but Sentinel had thought that it was a reference to what she was supposed to do, not a *name!*

“Honored Sentinel?” asked Cellica. “Are you alright?”

No, thought Sentinel, as that tight feeling came back again, that feeling she didn’t dare put a name to. Gods damn it all. What a profound fool she was.

“I’m fine,” said Sentinel. “I simply. Well.”

“It’s been a long day, hasn’t it?” said Cellica, diplomatically. “If you’d like, we may

continue this discussion tomorrow.”

“I think that sounds agreeable,” said Sentinel. “When?”

“At noon?”

Sentinel nodded.

“At noon, then.” Cellica smiled. “I’ll see you then, Lady Jian.”

#

They didn’t meet at noon. Instead, Sentinel’s meditation in front of her mother’s shrine was interrupted by a chiming which rang through the fortress. Sentinel grabbed her spear and ran to the front door, only to open it to a startled-looking younger mortal.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know it would do that,” they said.

“What?”

“The button. I pressed it, and it made that noise.” The mortal pointed at a button that had been embedded into the side of the door in the fortress.

Sentinel had to think, but then she realized what it was.

“A doorbell,” she said. “It’s supposed to do that.”

“Why have a button that makes noise?”

“It’s easier to hear than a knock. I didn’t know the fortress had one.” Sentinel turned to face the messenger. “Did Cellica send you?”

“Y-yes, Honored Lady Sentinel Jian,” said the mortal. They bowed. Sentinel bowed back.

“Would you like to come in?” asked Sentinel. “I don’t have food, but I should have some water, or maybe some ceremonial wines that haven’t turned to vinegar yet.”

“I am humbled by your request, but there is not much time. Honored Sentinel, I humbly request your presence—.”

“Please.” Sentinel held up a hand. “Who are you, and *what* is this all about?”

The mortal studied Sentinel’s face, and then took a deep breath.

“Apologies,” they said. “My name is Khion, and I help administrate now that the rest of the council is...” They hesitated. “Ill. The people in the metal ship sent a messenger to our village. They want to meet with us. Councilwoman Cellica thought it would be appropriate to request your council.”

“I’ll come,” said Sentinel. “Let’s go.”

They walked together, and Sentinel said nothing about her sudden dozing, or about what Panolis had said about her godhood. Khion kept glancing at her, but when Sentinel didn’t initiate any conversation, Khion didn’t either. Sentinel wasn’t sure if this was due to politeness, or if it was due to the status the islanders afforded her. She also wasn’t sure what to think of this status.

Cellica met them at the village boundaries.

“The messenger is in a guest hut,” she explained. “We thought you may want to meet with him, yourself, Honored Lady.”

“What’s he like?” asked Sentinel.

“Formal,” said Cellica. “A few of our number speak his language, so we’ll translate for you, but it’s a bit rough.”

“How so?”

“None of us have had much reason to practice the Lancian tongue all this time. Elre speaks some, but he hasn’t practiced much since he was a boy.”

“Lancian, being which language on the continent?”

“The Kingdom of Lancia.”

Sentinel felt confused. “I thought that there were several languages spoken even within

the kingdom.”

“Well, this one is the official one, according to the sailors.” Cellica sighed.

“How do you know all this?” asked Khion.

“I was performing research,” said Sentinel, “so I could try to understand what’s going on better, and understand who the sailors were.”

“*How?*” Khion paused. “I mean. How do you know this, Honored L—?”

“There’s a library in the fortress,” said Sentinel. “I know a little about the Kingdom of Lancia, but I wasn’t able to read as much about them as I like.”

“Well, come and learn more then, Honored Lady,” said Khion. They looked discomfited, for some reason that Sentinel didn’t quite understand. Cellica lead them over to the hut, which had Elre standing by the door. He nodded, bowed to Sentinel, and lead the group in.

The sailor was sitting in smaller hut, with a small window to the side and decent ventilation. There was no fire in the hut, but the sailor had a small flashlight he was using it look around. He wore the same uniform as the sailors from the boat, as if there was any doubt that he was who he said he was, and he had a tan alongside black hair. That said nothing about him, really. The Kingdom of Lancia, from what Sentinel knew, occupied most of the Lancian continent along with a large island off the continent’s southern coast, though there was a second island which was its own political entity and was trying very hard to stay that way. This man could have been from almost anywhere in the continent and the kingdom.

The sailor looked up at Sentinel, and his features morphed from shock to fear to a carefully school neutrality. Sentinel found it interesting to watch in motion.

“I—.” He started. “What are you?”

“My name is....” Sentinel hesitated. “I am Jian, the Sword, Sentinel of this Island and its



Sacred Battlefield. Who are you?”

“You understand Lancian?” asked Elre.

“He sounds just the same to me as you do,” said Sentinel.

“My name is Ensign Titus Aper.” The soldier clicked his heels together, transitioning into more formal language. “As a gesture of goodwill, my commanding officer, one Captain Quintus Lucius, would like to meet the leaders of your village. We were unaware of any non-mortal presence on this island, however, Lady Jian.” He was nervously glancing at her spear the entire time he spoke, in quick little flashes that a normal mortal may not have noticed. Sentinel, of course, was neither normal nor mortal.

“Well, you are aware of it now,” said Sentinel. “I, for one, have been aware of your presence for many days, though I am unsure how you arrived. Were you lost in a storm?”

“No,” said Aper. “The Captain will explain it all to you, if you would see him.”

“You can’t tell us now?” asked Elre.

“It’s part of what he wants to discuss with the leaders of this village,” said Aper.

“Though, I’m sorry to hear that your Council is absent.”

“We’ll tell them what we are told,” said Elre, primly.

“When will your Captain meet us?” asked Cellica. Elre translated for her, haltingly.

“Today, if you are able,” said Aper.

“Are we able?” Cellica looked at Sentinel as she asked. Sentinel nodded slowly, still not sure what she thought of Cellica’s deference to her. “Then it’s settled.”

“Before you make a decision,” said Aper, before Elre could piece together the phrasing, “our Captain has some gifts that he would like to give you, as an apology for trespassing.”

Elre tried to translate, but finally gave up and looked at Sentinel, pleadingly. Sentinel

translated, repeating what Aper had said, and both parties understood her.

“That is very generous of you,” said Cellica. “In that case, allow us time to find something appropriate to give you, in return. It seems untoward to make it so that new neighbors are on unequal footing.”

#

At noon, the group departed, and Ensign Aper lead them down to the shore. Cellica had wrapped herself in an ornate shawl, woven with images of ocean storms and monsoons, and had taken the time to draw black bands over her wrists and to pencil in the black tear tracks that marked her rank as a Priestess of Tempesta. Khion walked next to her, carrying a bag.

Sentinel, for her part, had run back to the fortress while everyone had been preparing and had picked out one of her favorite dresses, alongside one of the more ornate jewelry that had been gifted her. This included a pair of little amethyst and gold pins, with the gold fashioned into the shape of her spear, that Duanzidi had given her directly. She used them to secure some of the fabric of her dress together so it would be less likely to snag on branches.

The beach was less active than usual, partially due to the fact that there was a storm on the horizon, and the winds were already blowing hard to herald in a cold front.

There were guards on the door, and guards in the ship, and Sentinel found herself counting them as she passed them: two with large rifles and sidearms, another with a large rifle, but in ceremonial dress. They appeared to be receiving a very formal welcome. Sentinel had to give her spear up at a checkpoint, and watched them carefully put it in a locker before she continued onwards with the others.

Captain Lucius was sitting at his desk, wearing a dress uniform, complete with white gloves. He reached out to shake Cellica’s hand, but she bowed, instead. Not the full bow she’d

given Sentinel, but a respectful one nonetheless.

“Madam Priestess,” said Captain Lucius. “An honor and a privilege to meet you.”

Sentinel translated.

“And I you,” said Cellica.

Captain Lucius looked between Sentinel and Cellica, seemingly confused, before Aper stepped forward.

“Sir, the, er, Lady is the Goddess of Protection on this island.” He nodded at Sentinel.

“She wished to meet you as well.”

“Is that so?” Captain Lucius saluted Sentinel. “Ma’am.”

“Sir?” Sentinel tilted her head to the side, slightly.

“She had a spear with her of Taijean make, sir.”

Captain Lucius seemed surprised by this, though Sentinel wasn’t sure why.

“My mother made it for me,” said Sentinel, “as she made me. She was originally from a kingdom in Taije, though it has since fallen.”

“A forge goddess under Lady Duanzidi?” asked Captain Lucius.

“No,” said Sentinel. “Duanzidi herself is my most Honorable Mother.”

The sailors in the room went silent.

Cellica clapped her hands together. “Well, then. I believe we have things to discuss?” She glanced at Sentinel. “This *is* Captain Lucius, right?”

Sentinel nodded. “This is Councilwoman Cellica. She believes that it’s time to discuss important matters.”

The first several minutes of the conversation were mostly pleasantries that Sentinel was mostly uninterested in. Khion, who was still holding the bag with the gift, shifted on both feet.

They were barefoot, and still standing on the metal surface, which Sentinel assumed was uncomfortable. The two guards standing with Khion, didn't show any outward discomfort, but were also barefoot. The sailors in the room, Aper and a pair of guards, were wearing boots with supports for their feet.

“Pardon me,” said Sentinel, finally, “but if this will take a long time, we should all sit down, shouldn't we?”

Captain Lucius seemed surprised at the addendum, especially since Cellica had been mostly quiet and hadn't said anything that would translate to Sentinel's words. Cellica, for her part, looked embarrassed as she noticed Khion's discomfort, and Khion looked embarrassed that Sentinel had noticed.

“Of course,” said Captain Lucius.

“And, Councilwoman Cellica, will we bring up the matter of Tiana?” asked Sentinel.

“I was hoping to make more pleasantries, first,” said Cellica, “but you're right, Honored Sentinel.”

“Who's Tiana?” asked Captain Lucius, after everyone was seated in a chair.

“A woman of my village who was killed by your men,” said Cellica. Sentinel translated and the room fell silent.

“That's unfortunate,” said Captain Lucius. “I was unaware of this.”

“It appears to have been a hunting accident of some sort,” said Cellica. “Still. She was killed, and her daughter was present when her mother was shot.”

“You know what guns are?” asked Captain Lucius.

“Why wouldn't we?” asked Cellica. “Some of the people in my village lived outside of the island as recently as forty years ago. Guns are hardly new, after all. We've only been cut off

from the world for only a pair of generations.”

“Back to the matter at hand, please?” asked Khion. “Councilwoman, guns or not, one of our own is still dead.”

“That’s true,” said Cellica. “Captain, while we understand that this must be a strange situation for you, the fact remains that a woman is dead, her child was traumatized, and her husband is now a widower. Some amends must be made, if we hope to have any peace between our peoples.”

“I can issue an apology,” said Captain Lucius, “and I’ll confer with my officers to find a way to offer restitution. It may take some time, however.”

“Understandable,” said Cellica. Behind her, Khion was chewing on their lip.

Sentinel stood and translated, and even she felt slightly fatigued at the end of the meeting. Cellica didn’t seem to be too tired, even as she stood and turned to Khion.

“As hosts of unexpected guests, we graciously offer you a gift, for you and for yours,” said Cellica. Khion came forward, and Cellica pulled a number of carved, wooden figurines out of the bag and gave them to Captain Lucius.

“They’re protection figures,” said Cellica. “With enough time, they may even become household gods.”

“You know of Lancian household gods?”

“I do.”

Captain Lucius used a button on his desk, and a pair of sailors came in, each holding a stack colorful and ornate blankets cotton sheets and blankets, with printed designs on them.

“We offer these gifts to you,” said Captain Lucius. “Do with them what you will.”

“How generous of you,” said Cellica.

“Not at all,” said Captain Lucius. “To tell you the truth, the production of cloth and the dying of cloth are all easily done in Lancia. Not that we have woodcarvers as kind or as skilled as you, of course.”

The gifts were exchanged alongside pleasantries, and both parties left the office. Captain Lucius and his men escorted them out, even stopping and waiting as Sentinel’s spear was returned to her. She watched, with her sharp eyes, and thanks to those eyes she saw something else in the locker, as the quartermaster retrieved it. Small, carved shells, in an upper shelf, out of sight unless one knew where to look, or had extremely keen vision. Sentinel was handed back her spear, but aside from translations, she said nothing as the islanders and the sailors parted ways. She had too much to think about.

#

Everyone in the party went back to bed, and Cellica sent Sentinel back to her home, the fortress. It felt strange to return. The fortress had always been quiet, but after spending time in the village and spending the day acting as a mouthpiece, it felt stifflingly still. The fortress was lived in, sometimes, when the gods weren’t preparing for war. The island could only be accessed by a select few, which meant that it was a place where the gods could retreat and rest, albeit with the reminder of their own mortality nearby.

Sentinel couldn’t help but wonder if it bothered them, being so close to the spot where they’d died before, and would die again. Did they remember their deaths? They seemed to remember most everything else, why not that? Did Ancora remember being the first to die? Did Mortia and Animari remember dying in each other’s arms, holding each other for the last time until they met again in a new age? Sentinel wondered, secretly and shamefully, if Duanzidi would remember her, or if they forgot what it felt like to die, and never remembered the day in

question. Was it better one way, or the other?

Sentinel went to the library, with its vast and varied collection of books. The shelves were organized, but Sentinel had no idea whatsoever what the system was. She knew that some shelves were divided between fiction and nonfiction, that some were arranged by topic without regard for the realism of the books, and that one of the shelves was organized by color. She suspected that each god had some shelves they used for their own books, or that there had been multiple librarians who hated each other. Sentinel had also, about ten years in, found a secret side room hidden behind a false wall, but those shelves were full of pornography and erotic, trashy novels, and as such she barely touched them. If that was how mortals procreated, Sentinel was surprised they didn't just quit it all and devote themselves to figuring out a way to make children in a way that involved less slime and risk of disease.

Sentinel selected a textbook about the history and political structure of the world at large, which had been brand new when it was brought to the island by the gods, but was now forty years old. Craft magic imbued the library to keep the books from aging too terribly, but the book's spine was still relatively stiff due to disuse. Sentinel put the book down in her favorite chair, positioned for ideal lighting, and began to read about the various countries that had made up the world's powers, and hopefully still did.

Sentinel didn't need to sleep, but she was capable of dozing after a particularly strenuous day. She was never tired when she was in the fortress, so she was surprised when, halfway through a chapter about the various desert people of the great Lancian desert, she slipped into sleep only to wake up when her head dropped down and smacked the book with enough force to startle her back to alertness.

Sentinel shook her head and stood up, nearly dropping the book when it started to slip out

of its dust jacket. She never fell asleep in the fortress. What had changed? Sentinel began to pace the library, walking in circles.

There had been enough strange happenings lately that it was impossible to pin down exactly what the issue was. Did the visitors, the sailors, change something? Was it a result of speaking with the islanders? Could it have been the result of speaking to Panolis and Polemus? From speaking, using a magic power that she-herself only barely understood. She had so many questions that it made her head hurt to map out the logistics of each possible answer and factor, not to mention the possibility of unknown factors. Was she dying? She didn't think so, but she hadn't even known her own *name*, much less her own lifespan, or whatever she had if she wasn't a mortal. There had to be something she wasn't considering. But what?

A chiming, like bells, filled the air. Sentinel turned around to see Panolis sitting in her chair.

"This is comfy," said the Death God. She kicked her feet back and forth.

"Why are you here?" asked Sentinel, suddenly nervous.

"I wanted a break, and thought I'd come back here to rest," said Panolis, "congratulations on finding the most comfortable chair in the room, by the way."

"Oh. Thank you."

Panolis nodded, but didn't move from the chair. Sentinel watched her, stared at her, considered her, and finally, she spoke.

"Am I ill?" Sentinel asked.

"No," said Panolis. "Ha! No, no, no." She smiled. "I don't think you can get ill, actually. Not in a normal way."

"What about an abnormal way?" asked Sentinel. "I... I passed out. I fell asleep, but I



never do that in here.”

“Oh?” Panolis looked at Sentinel, tilting her head in a considering way. “Hm. Do you go down, often?”

“To the village? No.”

“But they still know about you, and about what you are.”

Sentinel nodded.

“Then that might explain a few things,” said Panolis, tapping a finger to her cheek. “The village on the coast is full of the dead and the dying. The runner in the village you were at passed a few hours ago, and I collected his soul, as is my duty. I doubt the mortals know he’s dead, yet. Poxes are ugly things. Even if he’d survived, he would have been blinded, you know.”

“Why does that matter?” asked Sentinel. “How does his death affect *me*?” The words settled into the air, and Sentinel realized how horrible she must sound. “I don’t mean that his death, that any death, is unimportant,” said Sentinel. “But it’s so frustrating! I can understand a mortal’s death better than anything else about myself! I didn’t know I could eat, or fall asleep while reading, or where my hair came from! I barely know my own name, much less *what I am!*”

“I know what you are,” said Panolis.

“What am I?”

“You’re a god,” said Panolis. “Not just that. You’re *their* god.”

Sentinel shook her head. “I know what a god is like. I’m not that.”

“That’s because you only met Duanzidi and the others,” said Panolis. “That’s like a lake comparing itself to the ocean, when you’re surrounded in turn by puddles and waterskins. *You’re* the Sentinel of the island, *you’re* the begotten daughter of Duanzidi, and *you’re* a goddess. More importantly, the people of this island don’t care about the distinction. To them, you’re Jian the

Sentinel, and you're the person who's here to protect them against danger." She raised a finger, pointing at nothing in particular as she talked. "They believe in you, and belief is magic, and from magic is your power. Your strength comes from your people, and if you don't have people, you don't have strength."

"Is it really that simple?" asked Sentinel.

"This is metaphysics, so no," said Panolis. She reached down and found the lever in Sentinel's chair, and flopped back into a reclining position. "This fortress is full of magic. This is a place where gods and demons come and die, and every leaf is imbued with energy. You feed on that too, but it's less powerful. If everyone but you dies, you'll still persist, but you'll be different."

"I don't want everyone to die," said Sentinel. She wished she had her spear in hand, if only to grip it tight and feel its comforting weight against her.

"You're the Sentinel, *of course* you don't want everyone to die," said Panolis. "So. What are you going to do about it?"

"What should I do about it?"

Panolis cackled. "Why would I know? My job is to clean up whatever happens. Your job is to protect your people. If you want to fulfill the role of Sentinel, you have to decide what being a sentinel means to you! It's time for you to step out of your mother's shadow, little sword."

Sentinel felt like she'd been struck. She stepped forward, not sure what she was going to do or say, but Panolis disappeared, and the chair snapped back into its upright position.

Sentinel stared at the chair for what felt like eternity, and then sighed. She went to grab her spear, and then looked back at the Room. The door loomed, like it always did. Sentinel considered going to it, and opening it, but didn't. She never did, so why did she even bother

considering it? Was Panolis right? Was she in her mother's shadow? Was she a weak guardian?

#

Sentinel returned to a village two days later, after the storm. A man was sitting outside on a mat of palm leaves, with the daughter that Sentinel recognized from when the woman, Tiana, had been killed. He was sitting and trying to encourage his daughter to play with some small balls in a circle, but she didn't seem to be interested in doing anything aside from clinging to him.

"Lady Sentinel," said Cellica. She stood at the door to the hut, and she was wearing one of the bright cotton cloths as an overskirt. "Welcome."

"Hello," said Sentinel. She glanced around, and saw that there were other people who had the bright cloths with them.

"We saved cloths for you, if you'd like them," said Cellica.

Sentinel blinked, surprised, but nodded, anyway. Cellica lead her into the council hut, where a trio of cloths sat: red and gold, purple and white, and gold and black.

"We didn't know which ones you'd like the most," said Cellica. "You are, of course, welcome to all the ones that you'd like."

Sentinel nodded and went to inspect them. "Thank you."

"Oh, not at all!" Cellica laughed.

"Have the sailors decided what to do, about making amends, yet?" asked Sentinel.

"No, sadly." Cellica glanced to the side. "I'll give them a week before I ask again."

Sentinel nodded, looking over the cloth before her. She wasn't sure what to do with it. Maybe she could take a strip or two, and make them into a decorating for her spear, like she'd seen in paintings of old heroes and cultivators from legend. Should she take it all, or just two, or just one? They really were pretty, though when she inspected the weave, she found that it was of

a considerably lower quality than anything her own clothes were made of. It had color going for it, with synthetic dyes that were more vibrant than most natural colors, but not much else was in this cloths' favor.

“Councilwoman Cellica!”

Khion entered, carrying a wooden bowl, but stopped then they saw Sentinel. “Oh. Apologies.”

“You’re not interrupting anything,” said Sentinel. She glanced to the side. “I think this cloth is machine-made.”

“That would make sense,” said Cellica. “If they make boats out of metal, they can probably do all kinds of things with it.”

“I suppose so,” said Sentinel.

“It’s about Hanri,” said Khion. “Since he died of pox, there’s concerns over how many of his belongings will need to be quarantined or destroyed.”

“Well, it’s always safe to assume that it’s everything in the hut,” sighed Cellica. “I don’t want to have to burn the entire thing, especially given how hard it’ll be to make sure the thatch actually catches, with the storm.”

“Hanri was the messenger from the coastal village?” asked Sentinel.

“Yes,” said Cellica. “A good man. Pox is a miserable way to go.”

“It’s a virulent strain,” said Khion, “the healers say that many people here don’t have a resistance to it, which means it’s easily twice as lethal as it would be otherwise.”

“How terrible,” said Sentinel.

At that moment, a strong wind blew in, arcing from one window of the room through to the door. Something in the rafters chimed, and Sentinel looked up to see strings of carved shells

hanging from a piece of wood high in the rafters, where they would be illuminated by the setting sun.

Sentinel froze.

“What is it?” asked Cellica.

“What’s that?” asked Sentinel. Her eyes mapped out the details in the carvings. Not the same craftsman she’d seen before, but the same style of craft.

“The shells?” asked Cellica. “They’re from the coastal village. They make beautiful art down there.”

“The sailors had carved shells like those,” said Sentinel.

“What?”

“In the locker, where they stored my spear, when we visited,” said Sentinel. “I saw them for an instant.”

“If they’d made contact with the coastal village, then why didn’t they mention it?” asked Khion, glancing to Cellica.

“I’m afraid I’m not sure,” said Cellica. She put her hands to her face, deep in thought. “I wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt, but now I wonder.”

Sentinel looked at the shells, and then at Cellica and her new, colorful overskirt. It had little frogs on it in green and yellow, bright and pretty. Sentinel had once read about a golden frog, poisonous enough to kill ten human men with its tiny body.

“Cellica,” said Sentinel, slowly. “You said that if someone had a pox, their belongings might have to be destroyed. To prevent contagion?”

“Yes,” said Cellica. “Pox is transmitted through the pus from the sores and boils it produces. Clothes, bedding, wood tools all have to be burned if an infected person used them.

But why—?”

Khion dropped their bowl.

Cellica and Sentinel both turned to look at them. Their face was warped into an expression of pure horror. They had realized the same thing Sentinel suspected.

“They’re all murderers,” whispered Khion, hoarsely.

“Cellica,” said Sentinel. “How many have taken a cloth, or a blanket, that the sailors gave them?”

“One per family, more or less,” said Cellica. “And then....” Her voice slowed as she realized what had happened. “Oh, Gods preserve us.”

“Everyone’s come to look,” said Khion. “Everyone... the old, the children, the pregnant.... They’ve all touched it, or rubbed it on their faces...!”

“The coastal village, everyone was falling ill, but they didn’t know....” Cellica collapsed to her knees. She tore her overskirt, with its mocking, smiling frogs, and threw it into the old fire pit. “Damn us all, and damn those sailors too!”

“You were tricked,” said Sentinel. “They used hospitality and called us friend, but they were planning this all along.”

She thought of the blankets she’d seen before.

“They were sent by their country,” said Sentinel. “The sailors had their own blankets, and they look nothing like what they gave us. They had these blankets especially for the purpose of gifting to us, so they could. They could....”

“So they could kill us all,” said Khion, hollowly. “Like they killed Tiana. Like they’ve killed Hanri. Like they want to kill us all. Every adult, and child, and baby.”

And Sentinel, protector of the island, didn’t see it coming.

“Cellica,” said Sentinel. “Cellica, listen to me. Tell the villagers. Tell the healers, and send a messenger to see if anyone’s left at the coastal village. We know what this is, now. As for the sailors, the captain had gloves, but the others didn’t. They must have a cure, or must be immune.”

“They won’t give it to us,” said Cellica. “Even if they have medicine—!”

“I’m going to get it, Cellica.” Sentinel repeated her words. She gripped her spear tightly. “I swear, as the Sentinel of this Island, and on the Honor of my Mother, and her Domain, I will not return without exacting what’s due from the sailors. Are there other villages?”

“Y-yes,” said Cellica. “On the other side of the mountain, there’s two more.”

“Well then.” Sentinel raised her head and pushed her shoulders back. “Gather your people, do what you can, and I will make sure that this will not happen at another village.”

#

Sentinel walked down to the beach where the ship was. The sailors were out, enjoying fresh air after the long storm. There were guards on the beach, but Sentinel stormed back them. Captain Lucius was sitting in a chair, but he stood up as he saw her.

“Miss Sentinel,” he said, placidly. “Is everything—?”

“*You knew.*” Sentinel snarled, fully enraged now that the information had time to sink in. “*You knew* what you were doing. You invited us in, gave them gifts, gifts of blankets covered in *pox virus.*”

Captain Lucius seemed surprised, but there wasn’t a single grain of shame in any part of his body. “What if we did?”

“We’re not idiots,” said Sentinel. “And I’m not stupid. You gave them infected blankets because you knew they wouldn’t have immunity. You have vaccines, I’m sure, which make you

naturally resistant and immune, while they all die. Then what? You take their homes for yourselves, and your Queen and Country?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” said Captain Lucius.

“I understand that you violated hospitality and good will, and that you’re so rotten to your core that not even a jackal would gnaw your bones, if they were bleached by the sun for a hundred years.”

“You know the Ballad of Alkaius?” Captain Lucius chuckled, like he was speaking to a little girl. “How clever. They do have books on this island, then, don’t they?”

The sailors laughed. Sentinel realized now that they were all surrounding her, like they hoped to cage her in. They stood back a ways, and closer to her were guards, all with their rifles.

“This is the First and Last battlefield of the gods,” said Sentinel, “and it’s home to hundreds of mortals. What you’re doing is a crime against humanity, crowkind, mortals of all stripes, the gods, and justice itself. You have the gall to sit here and patronize me?” She jerked her shin up, as a challenge.

“Don’t be silly,” said Captain Lucius. “The islanders may believe that you’re the daughter of a Great Goddess, but it takes more than steel and silk to convince us. The Kingdom of Lancia is home to the three Great Gods of Life, of Death, and of the Heavens. You have a spear. We have a destiny, to take the world in hand and teach them our greatness, and no primitive guardian will stop us.” He twitched with his hand, where he thought Sentinel couldn’t see him.

“You don’t feel any shame,” said Sentinel. A new emotion rose in her chest. “Why not?”

“Our queen sent us in her service,” said Captain Lucius. “And she serves the Golden Lady of Lancia. Our goddess is a real Sentinel, clad in gold and silver cloth lined with pearl. She



could wave a finger and break your spear like a twig.” He smiled, with not a gain of kindness in his entire body. “You’re no daughter of Duanzidi. You’re an obstacle.”

Sentinel was about to respond, when the air was filled with noise. It sounded like thunder, and Sentinel thought for a second that it was thunder, because she felt little taps, like rain, all over her side and back. She looked up. The sky was clear.

Sentinel looked behind herself, and the guards were shooting her, but all their magazines clicked empty. Sentinel looked back to Captain Lucius, who was holding his hands up in a warding sign, and his eyes were glowing red as he used magic to keep the bullets from hitting him. The guards went to reload, but they were eying her warily now. The sailors had looked amused before, but now they looked scared.

“Were those supposed to be magical, somehow?” asked Sentinel. “Capable of killing a lesser god or a spirit? Something weak, that your precious goddess of gold could snap in two?” Her voice took on a bitter edge toward the end. “Gold may be pretty, but it dents easily.” Captain Lucius paled, and said nothing. Sentinel took it as confirmation.

“Don’t think this is the end,” snarled Captain Lucius. He made a sign, and the air splintered with war magic. “This is our island now, and—!”

Sentinel cut him off by cutting him in two. A slice of her spear, and like a whisper of a breeze, the sharp metal flowed through him. It cut through lungs and heart, and he was dead before both halves of his body thudded to the ground. Sentinel turned as the guards started shooting, and all the sailors drew their sidearms. Sentinel took her spear, red like her dress, red like her mother’s first and last kiss to her forehead, and dove forward.

It didn’t take much time at all to kill every last man, all thirty-three of them. Sentinel cut down Aper last, because he tried to run, but she severed his head from his body before he could

do a thing.

It was silent, except for the wind and waves.

Sentinel looked down at Aper's corpse, and then at the rest of the bodies on the ground. Mortals, like gods, left behind corpses.

It was obvious, but still, Sentinel couldn't help but remember what it had felt like to hold onto bloody, cold flesh. The tight feeling in her chest came back, and she choked it back down, a thing she couldn't slice in half and leave to rot. She had still failed, despite it all. The sailors were still dead, but she hadn't done it in time. The pox was still there, incubating in the skin of the villagers, and just like her mother, she couldn't do a thing to stop it. Once again, she would be surrounded by corpses.

She walked up into the ship, blood and sand falling off her feet in footsteps on the metal floor. She found the sick bay and went through every cupboard and cabinet until she found a list of medicines and their properties and side effects on the ship. She grabbed every one that looked useful: painkillers and aloe and rubbing alcohol and vials with needles that might help if administered quickly.

Sentinel walked out of the ship, onto the beach, and saw the sailors, still lying in pieces, sliced up and left to rot on a field of black and white, where nothing grew, and she nearly fell to her knees by the force of the memory.

"Lady Sentinel?"

Sentinel started.

"Lady Jian?"

Sentinel whirled around. Khion stood by the tree line, in the dune-grass, staring. The sand of the beach was salt and pepper, white and black. Quartz and obsidian, which all crackled

underfoot. Now, it was all covered by the red of life-blood and the pink of organ-flesh. Sentinel was no exception to this.

Sentinel stared blankly at them. “Why are you here?”

Khion looked down at the blood and gore, and then at Sentinel, who was dripping red. Her hands and hair, and her spear, all saturated in death.

“I wanted to.” Khion swallowed. “I want to help you.”

“Help me?” asked Sentinel. “*Help me?*” Her voice wavered as it never had before. It seemed ridiculous. “Help me with *what?*”

“To find some medicine,” said Khion, nervously. They took a step back. “To. To sneak in. I didn’t realize that it would be so... easy for you.”

Sentinel looked back at the corpses. “What about death is easy, Khion?”

“I’m sorry, I—?”

“They’re all dead,” said Sentinel. “They’re murderers, and they needed to be stopped because they would have killed every last mortal on the island, but that doesn’t make it easy. They had families. They had mothers and fathers and siblings, and children and cousins and friends. They had people who loved them, but they threw that all away to come here and slaughter everyone. They tried to kill me, too. They told me they wanted us all dead, so they can hold the world in their hand and crush it a gentle fist, and I had to stop them, but! But!” The tight feeling was back. “It was so easy to take their lives. One swipe, and they’re gone. One action, and a person dies. Why is it so easy to do such a horrible thing?”

Khion stared at her, quiet and blank.

“Because that’s what it means to be a god,” said Khion. “Because people are fragile, but you’re not. You don’t age. You don’t starve. You don’t....” They hesitated. “You don’t get sick.

It's easy because people break easily, but hard because it's a burden. It should be too heavy to take on, and it's what stops people. What should stop people." They looked at the corpses. "If you don't train yourself to stop seeing people as people, it does stop you. But if you cross that threshold, if you become a monster? It becomes very easy indeed."

Sentinel looked down at her hands. The red, the iron-filled cells, pooled in the creases of her finger joints. Her hands were all the same color, metal and paint hidden. She hadn't washed it off. It was all over the bottles and the bag. It disgusted her.

"They had a sick bay in the ship," Sentinel finally said. "They had things that could help. Needles. They had things to clean skin, to make it hurt less, but nothing...." She swallowed. "It was all preventative. Nothing that can cure. A few things, maybe if we do it in time, but.... I failed." The tightness came up again, looking at the blood congealing over black ground, cold flesh, the smell of broken bowels in the hot sun, and Sentinel couldn't hold it back anymore.

She dropped to her knees, feeling that tight pain in her chest, the emotion she knew but refused to acknowledge. She let it out, let it hurt, and screamed. "I should have stopped them sooner!" she wept. "I failed! What kind of Sentinel am I, if the people who rely on me die, if the people I love die and I can't stop it? It's not fair! They're dying just like she died, while I was in the fortress, safe, and I couldn't be there! I couldn't help, I couldn't stop it, and I couldn't protect *her!*"

Sentinel couldn't look up. All she could see was what she'd seen before. Her mother, dead, and realizing that the last time she'd seen her would be the last time she'd see her. Not knowing it would be the last time, and wishing that there was some price she could pay, some force of fate she could bribe, that would give her more time.

Then, Khion knelt next to her.

“You didn’t fail,” said Khion. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes it is,” sobbed Sentinel.

Khion stayed silent for a while, and then they spoke. “People can’t rely on gods. People can’t rely on fate. All we can do is trust each other, and hope that we can help each other. When that fails, so do we.”

“Her death wasn’t your fault.”

Sentinel started and looked up at Polemus. His face was painted red, the same way that Sentinel’s hands were painted red. He stood there, looking down at her.

“The last thing your mother would have wanted was for you to blame yourself,” he said. “She loved you, Jian. She spent all her time trying to make sure that you were ready, because she knew she was running out of time. The time she spent with you was the last few precious hours she had, and she wanted it to be that way. She told you to stay in the fortress because she knew that people could come to the island without divine help, and she needed someone she trusted to stay behind and protect the people here.”

“Why?” asked Sentinel, her throat heavy.

“Because the gods are things created to protect their people,” said Polemus, “but people can’t be protected forever. And despite this, we keep on loving mortals, and we love each other, because without love, there’s nothing to be gained by life. Pain hurts, but nothing hurts more than never feeling at all.”

Beside Sentinel, Khion was stiff with terror as they looked up at Polemus.

“I’ll take care of my dead,” said Polemus. “You take care of your living.” He turned to go and minister to the casualties of a short war. “And while you’re at it, take care of yourself.”

Sentinel took the medicine to Cellica and the rest of the village. They'd burned all the colorful cloth, and had made signs to indicate sickness around their village. The village healers took the medicine and its instructions and immediately began to clean arms and inject serum, working to protect and save their friends and neighbors. Sentinel returned to her fortress, alone.

Sentinel stood at the door to the room she'd been created in, and this time, she opened the door. Inside there was a thin bit of dust, but the magic which kept the fortress intact worked in this room, as much as any other room. There was a tub in there, and a bed, and tools for Sentinel to use in the upkeep of everything from her paint to her body to her hair. She swallowed and stepped inside. She used the tub and cleaned herself, watching as the boiling-hot water turned red from all the dried blood. Her dress went into a laundry chute, which hopefully would still work. She would have to ensure that she could get the pox virus off of herself, soon.

Sentinel was about to start searching for some kind of sterilizer when the doorbell rang. She went out, wrapping herself in a robe, and answered the door.

Khion stood outside, still clammy with sweat from their run.

"Is everything alright?" asked Sentinel.

"Yes," said Khion, "but I! I. I wanted to apologize."

"Apologize?" asked Sentinel.

"I'm deeply sorry for my behavior, earlier." Khion bowed so low it seemed like they might fall over. "I was rude, and I spoke out of turn. Councilwoman Cellica encourages me to question her, but you're the Honored Sentinel, and I shouldn't be so blunt."

Sentinel stood there silently, and then she reached down and had Khion straighten.

"You don't have to apologize," said Sentinel. "I'm not. I feel as though I've shown you too much of myself for you to be so formal." She took a deep breath. "Please. Call me Jian."

### A Dream of Life and Death

At Sage Caduceus's Life School, the only students were boys. Some of the teachers were women, but most were not, and those who were tended to be regarded by all the adolescent students with a sort of awe. The school was located near the lakes known as the "Footsteps of the Sun", which was relatively close to Sacra Solla, or "Sacred Sun." This allowed for some greenery and plant life in the otherwise arid desert that made up most of the Lancian Continent's southern half. The idea was that, out in an oasis in the desert, there would be less distractions to get in the way of learning the nuances of living and life magic. Distractions included junk food, girls, more than an hour of TV a day, and most other things that its students would consider fun.

Vitas Carpascinus, however, was considered especially boring by his peers because he seemed to find genuine enjoyment in memorizing the most excruciating details about the human body and its makeup and regurgitating them in the form of essays and exams. For this reason, and several other reasons which included his introverted nature and stoic personality, he did not have many friends. For those same reasons, alongside his ability to correctly and engagingly write said essays, he was one of the teachers' favorite students.

It would be unfair to call Vitas a teacher's pet. He wasn't as much of a stickler for the rules so much as he enjoyed learning and generally found the rules at Sage Caduceus to not be worth breaking. It would be easy to mistake him for someone who would do what was asked of him by those in authority no matter what: a perfect soldier to fit in with the increasingly militaristic culture of the Kingdom of Lancia. It would, however, be a terrible mistake to make if you sought to take advantage of his sense of right and wrong. Vitas also had a sense of justice that ran through his body like the iron in his blood cells. Vitas was a healer, not a soldier.

Several people found this fact about Vitas during his final year studying at Sage Caduceus, when Professor Ghostlight was granted permission for his daughter to attend the school. The reasons for this were secret, but everyone knew that there couldn't be any other options if the school board was letting her attend. The teachers were nervous. The students were excited. Vitas hoped that he wouldn't be stuck with a group project. When Professor Hyacinthus handed out the syllabus for class on the first day that classes were back in session, Vitas saw that he was going to have to do a group project. He sighed.

"Hey." A student behind Vitas poked him with the eraser end of his pencil. Vitas ignored him. "Vitas, don't ignore me." Vitas glanced behind him to see a pasty-looking boy with black hair. "Hey. Is that the girl?"

"I think she has a name," said Vitas, feeling exhausted despite the fact that it was the middle of the morning.

"Is it *her*?"

"Leave me alone."

"Gods, killjoy." The pasty boy turned to bother Vitas's neighbor to his left, who was more than happy to stand up to try and look at the student toward the front of the class, and



knocked over his desk in the process. This would have been a source of secondhand embarrassment by itself, but said student had a bottle of ice-cold tea on his desk, which was flung into the air by the desk's launch, and in turn was spilled right on Vitas's head.

"Alban!" snapped Professor Hyacinthus. "Look what you did!"

"S-sorry!" said Alban the desk-flipper. "I just wanted to get a look at, at her!" He pointed at a head of red hair sitting near the front, spine ramrod straight.

"If Miss Ghostlight is going to be this distracting—," started Professor Hyacinthus.

"It's not her fault that I'm stuck next to a *buffoon*," said Vitas, using a bandana to try and salvage his notebook. It had been a gift, too, and the pages had been crisp and absorbent. They were still absorbent, at least. "Does anyone have towels?"

Despite all that, the day did go rather smoothly. The head of white hair, colored by either dye or long-standing use of Death Magic, at the front of the class was, in fact, Professor Ghostlight's daughter. It was impossible to get a good look at her face due to the way everyone at school who was remotely interested in girls kept crowding to look at her, and she was placed in the exact same front row seat in every class that Vitas had with her (three out of six classes for the year). Her hair was so blindingly crimson that it was impossible to mistake her for anyone else. He saw her from a distance sometime, usually smiling at some other student who was talking to her, but was never close enough to talk to her even if he'd really wanted to. Vitas suspected there would be badly written poems about silver locks of hair shared around the dorms inside of a week. He winced at the thought. He tried his best to tune out the different conversations that his dorm-mates had about the new student. His headphones helped, but there was only so much he could do at lunch time.

"Vitas, are you gay or something?" asked Vitas's roommate, whose name he didn't care

about enough to remember.

“I know what you’re going to say,” sighed Vitas. “I like women—,”

“Ooh, *women!*”

“But I also don’t care enough to act like an idiot all the time. I’m busy. I have a capstone project, and I want to get into the honors program at Tiberia Royal University.” He punctuated this statement by taking another bite of his salad.

“TRU already accepted you, why are you still stressed?” asked one of Vitas’s roommate’s friends, pronouncing the acronym as *true*.

“I’m not stressed,” said Vitas, “it’s bad for your blood pressure.”

The boys around him laughed. Vitas resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“I want to be in the honors program because I want to *learn*, not just earn a diploma.”

“Maybe you can learn what the deal is with your weird dreams,” said Vitas’s roommate.

“What was your hair in the latest one? Daisies?”

“Hydrangeas,” said Vitas. “At least I don’t have to find clean underwear after *my* dreams.”

The roommate’s friends cackled at that, even as the roommate’s face darkened in splotches of angry blush.

#

A month passed, and Vitas hadn’t spoken to Professor Ghostlight’s daughter once. Even though he liked the man himself, who was smart and witty and would let Vitas talk his ear off about cellular decay, Vitas had no intention of getting involved with his daughter. He was slightly annoyed at the girl by proxy for how insufferable everyone else was acting now that she was present. It wasn’t her fault, but she was still the cause of it, and Vitas still remembered being

doused on his first day of class.

Professor Ghostlight taught religious history, with a focus on the various interactions between humans, crows, and gods, and how they shaped the course of history and life on Ouraneia. His more advanced classes required students to go through the school library to find antique texts with contemporary accounts of historical events and figures, and cite at least three sources which had contradictory details and use them to discuss the viewpoints of the historians involved and what that said about the historical narrative in the present day.

It was Vitas's preferred type of assignment, as it meant he could immerse himself in books and notes without having to interact with anyone else, and it also led to him making plenty of notes related to research projects that he wanted to pursue in his own time once the God of Life, Animari, ascended back to his divine station and the royal family would finally repeal their ban on medical research once they could be sure that Animari's blessing would make sure any new medicines actually worked. Even though he wasn't a life magic user, Vitas also liked to talk about some of his ideas for future research with Professor Ghostlight because the man would willingly ask questions about his ideas instead of tutting at him and reminding Vitas of the laws.

Professor Ghostlight had seemed more and more tired as the year continued, and Vitas wondered if it was because of whatever had happened that meant Morticia had been able to attend Sage Caduceus in the first place, or if he was dealing with the collective downstairs brain of most of the school. Vitas wanted to talk to him, but also felt unsure as to how to broach the subject. So, he kept his questions to academic matters and academic matters only.

Vitas decided that the best course of action would be to try and avoid contact with and mention of Professor Ghostlight's daughter as best as he could, especially given the upcoming group project in Professor Hyacinthus's class. Because the forces of Fate had an especially cruel

sense of humor, when Vitas received the group assignments for said project, his assigned partner was Professor Ghostlight's daughter. To make matters worse, the assignments were written out on the board.

"Carpascinus, you lucky bastard!" cackled a student sitting in the front row. Vitas issued a silent prayer for his soul to be knocked out of his body for the rest of the semester. It wasn't answered. Professor Hyacinthus told everyone to stay quiet and continued explaining the terms of the group project: a presentation on various plant extracts and how they were turned into medicine. Easy enough for Vitas, and par for the course at Sage Caduceus. Vitas only hoped that Professor Ghostlight's daughter would be good enough to not get in his way, and maybe he could make it out of this with an A.

That night, Vitas received an email from an "M. Ghostlight" asking to meet him at study room H in the library after classes ended tomorrow. Prompt. Vitas responded with an affirmative, and did his best to ignore his roommate when he started to complain about how lucky Vitas was to get to be "up close and personal" with Professor Ghostlight's daughter.

#

The library had a number of study rooms with tinted glass, large tables, and comfortable chairs. Vitas often used the rooms later in the semester, when he wanted privacy to work on his assignments, and was familiar with them. Still, he had to double-check the small map of the library to make sure that he was going to the correct room, which was hidden behind a forest of bookcases. The signs in this areas needed to be replaced.

"Oh, hello there!" said a chipper, feminine voice.

Vitas looked up at Professor Ghostlight's daughter. She grinned at him. Her hair was as stark white as ever, a shade that indicated either death magic use or hair dye, and her eyes were

black like the night sky. Her skin was pale, and she was wearing the uniform a size too large, but with a few spots where it looked like she'd pinned it together so that it looked tastefully large and not overly baggy. She was small, and Vitas privately wondered if she was wearing the smallest uniform they had on hand, or if the school board had made her wear one too big for her so that she'd look less appealing to the other students.

“And who are you?” she asked, batting her lashes at him. They were long, but clumped with mascara.

“My name is Vitas Carpascinus,” Vitas said, sitting down at the table. He pulled out his books. “And you're Professor Ghostlight's daughter. M-something.”

“Morticia Ghostlight, at your service.” A morbid name, Vitas noticed. Morticia mock curtsayed, holding up the fabric of her pants when she introduced herself. They were large enough that it almost worked.

“Please just sit down.” Vitas sighed. “I have perfect grades in every other class. I don't even mind if you let me do all the work, just don't screw this up.”

“Do you say that to all your classmates?” Morticia asked as she sat.

“Yes,” said Vitas. He opened his textbook. “If we start with the exercises on page 43 and make sure to have at least three sentence answers to all of them, then--.”

He was interrupted by a peal of laughter. Vitas looked up to see Morticia giggling uncontrollably.

“43's not one of those 'funny' numbers, is it?” he asked, dryly.

“No, it's not that,” said Morticia. “I just like the way you answered.”

“I just answered.” Vitas looked at her, confused.

“I know,” said Morticia. “Thank you.” She smiled at him, and it struck him as odd. He

shook his head and went back to explaining the assignment.

Later that night, Vitas realized the reason the smile looked odd to him was because it looked genuine. Morticia Ghostlight smiles often, in class, and in the halls, and when chatting with the many boys at the school who were eager to talk to her. Vitas realized, as he finished his evening prayers to a god who was probably his age and yet so many eons older, that he'd only seen Morticia actually smile in that library.

#

That night, Vitas had another of his strange dreams, which was made only stranger by the fact that it had changed. He walked through a forest he had never been in all his life, and yet he knew it as well as his home. His hair brushed softly against his neck as it turned into flower petals. He reached a hand behind him to collect some petals, expecting hydrangea petals. What he collected this time, however, were rose petals as red as blood.

“They look like your hair,” he said in the dream.

“Really?” A woman came up from behind him, hugging him. “How sweet of you.”

“I’m not sweet.”

“You’re as sweet as your gardens.” The woman said. “I wouldn’t go along comparing me too much to roses, though. Dear Wardamya might get jealous. You know how she treasures her flowers.” She pulled away and walked alongside Vitas, or whoever he was in these dreams. Her face was bone white, and it shimmered black where her nose and mouth would be, giving her the appearance of void around bones, with wisps of bone-white hair framing her face. She wore a black silk cloak that shielded her from the sun’s rays.

“Not as much as I treasure you.”

The woman laughed, and the sound that came from her lips was the same laugh that Vitas

had heard from Morticia earlier that day.

Vitas woke up with a start. He took a second to remember his dream, and when he did, he immediately hid his face in his hands and stifled a groan. Not only was he having dreams about the professor's daughter, he was having dreams about being in a romantic relationship with her, as some sort of specter of death. The things he'd said in the dream reverberated around the inside of his skull like a bell on a cat's toy. *No as much as I treasure you*, indeed. If Morticia ever found out about this, if *anyone* did, he was going to die of shame, he just knew it.

"I can't believe it took one conversation to make me act like a fool," he muttered.

"What?" mumbled his roommate.

Vitas ignored him and went to the bathroom to pour cold water on his head.

#

Morticia had insisted that their project be on different extracts of poisonous plants and how they were used in medicines. Vitas had been leery of the concept, until Morticia had turned up with five pages of notes on the uses of digitalis derivatives in cardiac medicine. Vitas had been unable to find any major flaws in her research methodology.

Vitas quickly found out that Morticia was smart. More than that, she applied herself. That alone put her above most of Vitas's fellow students, who mostly seemed to coast on their own intellect and, frustratingly enough, were allowed to. Vitas quickly took the information that Morticia supplied him with and, by the next week, he was helping her read through medical journals on cardiac conditions and their various treatments, especially ones which involved digitalis and its derivatives. He tried to push the previous night out of his mind, when his roommate and said roommate's friends had loudly discussed Morticia's chest size until the RA came in to tell them all to shut up and go to sleep.

“They say that foxglove was created by Animari and Mortia together,” said Morticia, seemingly out of nowhere.

“What?” asked Vitas.

“They say that fox—.”

“No, I heard you, I don’t understand why you *said* it.”

“This is a school for Life Magic, I thought you’d be interested in the historical aspect of digitalis treatments.”

“I am,” said Vitas. “That’s what we’re talking about right now. But I don’t understand why you’d bring that up in the middle of a conversation about sodium-potassium ATPase inhibition in 19<sup>th</sup> century clinical trials.”

“Well, the story goes that Mortia and Animari were trying to help Mortia’s mortal father,” said Morticia, “but they couldn’t find anything that would help with his heart issues. So, Animari began experimenting with different herbal extracts, but then the town’s warlord tried to talk him into becoming the physician for his soldiers. When Animari refused, the warlord threatened Mortia and her family, since they were close. Animari warned Mortia, and Mortia took flowers from her garden, and—.”

“That’s not how I know the story,” said Vitas, suddenly.

Morticia blinked and leaned over to look at him, waiting for him to speak. Vitas tried to maintain eye contact with her, but looking into her eyes made him think of his dreams and her role in them, so he averted his gaze.

“In the version I know, it was Animari’s idea to poison the warlord, because if he didn’t, then more people would die.” It felt almost wrong to admit it and to contradict Morticia on something like this, but it was true.



“That’s interesting,” said Morticia. She leaned forward and rested her chin on both of her hands. She was wearing white gloves made of either leather, or a convincing substitute. “Where are you from, again?”

“Augusia,” said Vitas. In any other context he would have felt insulted by the question, but he supposed it was inoffensive enough in this case. It was an island just to the south of the main Lancian continent that was considered to be part of the Kingdom of Lancia. As with most things, the reality was more complicated than that. Politically, Augusia was under the rule of the Lancian Crown and Queen Opalesca, and had been for most of the current era. Culturally, Augusia was as good as a separate country. Vitas’s parents had immigrated to the Lancian mainland when he was still very young, but even so Vitas considered himself to be more Augusian than Mainlander.

“So the Augusian version isn’t so tepid, huh?”

Vitas nearly choked on his own spit at that. He wasn’t used to being asked so point-blank about his own culture. Most people he met in Lancia seemed to dance around the subject or pretend it wasn’t anything to be discussed, treating him like one of them in hopes he’d buy into the idea.

“Well, sorry, but it seemed very....” Morticia tapped her fingers against the table. “Well. Very *off* to me that Animari would refuse to kill a human even when said human is going to kill even more humans, including Animari’s own loved ones. It’s not as if he’s a pacifist. He’s fought and killed in other accounts.”

“You think it’s strange that a healer would find the idea of an assassination off-putting?”

“If someone threatened to kill my friends and family because I refused to listen to their beck and call, I’d put the foxglove in their food myself.”

Vitas took a second to gather his thoughts, and finished his bottle of water.

“I don’t know what I would do,” said Vitas.

“It’s not like I really know either,” said Morticia, leaning back in her chair. “But I think that’s the *moral* choice. Besides, why do you care? You just said that in the Augusian version—!”

“I think it’s a discussion worth having,” said Vitas, “and I wanted to be sure that you weren’t starting anything.”

“Like a poisoning plot?” Morticia giggled.

Vitas didn’t see why anything he’d said was funny. This seemed to be a theme with Morticia: he said something completely normal, and she laughed at random. He knew on some level that his peers thought he was slow when it came to anything social, but even they didn’t really laugh at him like this. Of course, Morticia was so open with him that he found it hard to take it too personally.

“They say that Sage Caduceus heard an account of the poisoning once,” said Vitas, trying to stick to the subject while also providing new information. That generally worked to move a conversation along.

“Oh, really?” Morticia brightened with interest. “Do they have it here? They have all of Sage Caduceus’s original writings, right?”

“They do,” said Vitas. “Most of them, at least. We have all the translations, but I know the code and the language they’re written in, so I use the transcriptions, usually.”

They’d made more progress than he’d expected today. He supposed a break wouldn’t hurt, so he got up to find the librarian. She was an old woman who was perpetually hunched over after years of poor posture and sported wrinkles on her brow from years of scowling at students

who spoke too loudly in the library.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said Vitas. “Do we have the account of Animari and Morticia poisoning the warlord by Sage Caduceus?”

The old woman blinked at him and cleaned forward, cupping a hand to her ear. Vitas leaned forward and repeated the question.

“Hmm. Hm, oh let me check.” The old woman typed at the computer. Despite the fact that the school should have had the money for better ones, the library computer was cream and boxy, and was probably as old as Vitas was. “Which transcript?”

“I hoped I could see the original, actually.”

“Do you have a pass for the rare collection?”

Vitas pulled it out of his wallet and handed it to her. The old woman put on reading glasses and studied it.

“Vitas Carpascinus,” she muttered. She handed it back and peered at him over the rims of her half-moon glasses. “Are you with the Ghostlight girl?”

“We’re study partners,” snapped Vitas. He regretted it even before the old woman gave him a scowl. “I’m sorry. It’s just. Well. Nobody stops talking about her. And nobody’s taken the time to talk to her. I don’t know why she’s here. She must be miserable. It’s like she’s a sideshow. You don’t know the way people talk about her, when she’s not around. I’m sick of being asked about her and told how lucky I am. It’s horrible.” He rubbed his face, despite the risk of causing an outbreak. “People are horrible.”

“People are what they learn to be, and they learn that from those in charge.” The old librarian put her glasses away. “I know more than you think. She talks to me, sometimes. And, of course, us women have to stick together.”

“I don’t know much about women,” admitted Vitas, “but why wouldn’t the people here learn some *decency* from those in charge?”

“They’re not being taught that,” said the old woman. “Not really. Oh, but from what little Ghostlight has told me, you don’t see it. Do no evil, but see no evil. Ah, but I’m saying too much.”

From Vitas’s perspective, she hadn’t said much at all.

“The book you’re looking for is on some kind of indefinite loan,” said the old woman. “Something faculty approved. Do you need it for a class?”

“No,” sighed Vitas. “I wanted to see the account for myself. Simply curiosity.”

“You know what they say about curiosity, don’t you?”

“Er?” Vitas vaguely remembered something about dead cats. “No.”

“It’s the egg that hatches wisdom,” said the old woman. “And wisdom is that which scares a lord most.”

“I know that saying,” said Vitas, quietly happy with himself. “The difference between the authoritative king and the authoritarian ruler is that one holds wisdom, while the other is burned by it.”

“It’s not just true of kings.”

This was starting to take too long.

“I’m sorry, miss—.”

“Anna.”

“Miss Anna, but if you don’t have the book, I need to go back to my partner.”

“Would you like a transcript, at least?”

“I suppose.” Vitas sighed. “Whatever’s in that’s most recent.”

“If you don’t mind waiting until tomorrow, I can put the 2010 edition on hold for you.”

“That’s fine.”

“Remember what I told you, Vitas.” Anna had a knowing smile on her face, like she was aware of something that Vitas couldn’t dream of understanding. “I think that in a few years, you’ll understand what I mean.”

Vitas returned to the table, where Morticia was making notes on her paper in red pen.

“What did you need?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Vitas. “I wanted to ask Miss Anna a few questions.”

“Oh, Miss Anna? She’s great. She told me her son has a job at a famous newspaper. She’s really smart, but I don’t understand half the things she says. Still, I think you can learn a lot from her.”

Vitas thought for a few minutes. Morticia assumed he was done talking, and so she turned back to the journal article.

“Hypothetically,” he finally said, “I think I did.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

Vitas hesitated. “I think it is.”

#

Vitas’s dreams continued to involve Morticia, always either dressed in the garb of a high-ranking Death Priestess, or clad in period clothing. Sometimes her face changed, but it was always still her. While he knew intellectually that the faces of people he knew were used in his dreams by his subconscious mind, he was still embarrassed when a lot of his dreams took on a sort of period drama aspect, with him playing some kind of romantic interest towards Morticia. His dreams also started to feature the garden, again, but sometimes with visits to the room.

The room was small and dark, though it had a lantern and a window. It was an apothecary's office, full of various herbs, powders, and tinctures. A paper with an arcane diagram was pinned to the wall in front of the desk. What the diagram was, exactly, depended on the dream, as did exactly what was in the bottles. Some of them Vitas recognized: feverfew, chamomile, valerian, echinacea, and so on, but other Vitas didn't know at all. The bottles and jars changed often, like someone was constantly using them. Vitas had no doubt that was, in fact, the case.

Sometimes there were people in the room with him. Morticia, of course, dressed in period clothes, but sometimes Professor Ghostlight was there, and sometimes there were strangers. A woman with bright orange hair that was almost certainly magical in origin, a woman of Taijean descent with only one eye, and sometimes there was a man who looked like Headmaster Asinas wearing gaudy armor standing in the room. Those dreams were the worst ones. They always made Vitas feel like he was trapped. His dreams became more and more frequent, but while they were strange, they never caused Vitas problems until, during midterms, Vitas was called to Headmaster Asinas's office over a spell.

The exam had been a life magic exam, which was one of Vitas's best classes. Magic was difficult to use, and life magic had a reputation as being one of the most difficult magics to practice. Vitas had heard it described as trying to fill a bucket using a spoon. For Vitas, it was like trying to fill a bucket from a river: easy. Vitas knew he had talent, but he liked to think that he put a lot of work into learning how the human body worked. It wanted to repair itself, and Vitas studied hard so he'd know how to help it. What made this exam tricky was that the practical was on limb regeneration in animals. A number of dogs, cats, and similar animals had been brought out to the school for the exam. Humans and crows weren't allowed to be used for

exams, for obvious reasons.

Vitas was given a small dog missing its lower front leg. It appeared to have been amputated recently. Vitas stroked the dog's head and placed his dominant hand over where the flesh had been folded and sewn back. The stitches had only recently been removed. Vitas used his hand on the dog's head to feel for the nervous and circulatory systems and followed them to where they abruptly ended at the amputation point. From there, it was a matter of consulting several diagrams and coaxing the skeletal and muscular infrastructure to grow back out. There was an IV inserted into the dog with a feeding bag as well as a mild sedative: the former because of the calorie cost of regrowing a limb from scratch and the latter so the animal didn't panic. Vitas grew back the remains of the radius and ulna, continuing the musculature and other flesh from the amputation, and began to grow back the cartilage on the ankle joint. He was halfway through regrowing each fiddly carpus of the paw when the dog twitched.

Vitas immediately stilled, holding his breath. The dog whined, and tried to look down at its paw. If the dog started moving more, not only would it up mess up Vitas's preexisting work, it could cause even more damage to the limb. The professors proctoring the exam looked worried. That was never a good sign.

Thinking quickly, Vitas remembered a dream he'd had where his dream self had dealt with a small child who seemed to have been trampled by a horse. There was blood and bone everywhere, and the child was screaming and thrashing out of panic and pain. Vitas's dream-self had sung something while holding onto the child's head, and it had calmed. What was the song?

Vitas pressed a hand to the dog's head again and, stroking it gently, started to sing. The words were halting at first, because Vitas couldn't remember what language they were supposed to be from, but finally Vitas hit something that simply felt right. The dog quieted, tongue lolling

out of its mouth, breathing stinky air that made Vitas wrinkle his nose. Vitas continued to heal the dog's leg, until finally he'd even regenerated the nails and fur. He felt shaky and sweaty from hypoglycemia from an overuse of magic: he'd kept the sedation song up throughout the entirety of the exam. Vitas stepped back and held up his hands, signaling that he was finished with the exam.

The room was dead silent. Vitas looked up and saw the proctors staring at him with disbelief.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" asked Professor Hyacinthus.

Vitas didn't want to have to say "in a dream". Instead he nearly collapsed on a chair.

"Get him some electrolyte water!" ordered a professor. "And someone, tell the Headmaster!"

This was how Vitas found himself drinking a mug of vegetable soup while Headmaster Asinas studied him.

"How *did* you learn that spell?" asked Headmaster Asinas.

Vitas still didn't want to say it was from a dream.

"Did Morticia Ghostlight teach you?"

"No?" Vitas cocked his head. "Does she even know life magic at that level?" She wasn't in any of his magic classes.

"She could have showed you a book—."

"It wasn't her."

"Then *how*?"

"I doubt you would believe me," said Vitas.

"Try me, then."



Fine, then. “I saw it in a dream.”

Headmaster Asinas looked down the bridge of his nose at Vitas. “If you were anyone else I’d give you detention for lying to me.”

“This is why I didn’t say anything,” said Vitas, feeling grumpy due to a lack of food.

“What kind of dream?”

“It’s recurring,” said Vitas. “I often have dreams where I’m an apothecary treating various illnesses and injuries. I once had to treat a panicking patient in the dream.”

“Do you have any idea how advanced that spell is?”

“Judging from my current condition, it’s at least a collegiate level spell,” said Vitas, inventorying the shaking of his muscles and the weariness of a blood sugar crash that came from an excessive use of magical energy. “Probably a surgical spell.”

“If it were anyone less talented than you, you probably would have collapsed.”

“I didn’t plan to use it,” said Vitas. “The sedative failed.”

“So I heard,” said the Headmaster. “You should have stopped and retaken the exam later on.”

“I had a duty to finish what I started.”

The Headmaster chuckled in a way that Vitas thought was more than a little condescending. “Of course. You’re a very diligent young man.”

“Thank you,” said Vitas, choosing to take the compliment at face value, even though he suspected it wasn’t. He was proven right, as the Headmaster produced a sheaf of papers.

“I’d like you to take a look at these,” said the Headmaster.

Vitas took exactly “a look” at them, enough to see the crest for the magical branch of the Lancian Armed Forces, and then didn’t look further.

“In our quest to liberate the rest of the world, and spread our teachings to other continents, we’ll need talented people like you.” A recruitment ploy, then.

“No thank you.” Vitas immediately tried to hand the papers back.

“No, no, I insist.” The Headmaster pushed them back in Vitas’s hands. “It’s only natural, after all. You’re Lancian, you deserve the right to champion your country.”

Vitas suppressed a twitch at the comment. He wasn’t even really Lancian, but he still had the glorious obligation to die for his country. He decided not to argue the issue, and made a private plan to dispose of the papers as soon as he could.

“And, may I confess something to you?” The Headmaster leaned closer, conspiratorially.

“You may,” said Vitas, feeling mentally tired already.

“I believe that you may be predestined for life magic.”

“I’m sorry?” Vitas started a little bit. That wasn’t what he’d thought the Headmaster was going to say.

“Yes, yes!” chuckled the Headmaster. “Your own innate talent for life magic is one thing. But if you really are learning advanced magic in your dreams, well, obviously that must be from your past life. Only the truly magically talented are able to do that, especially without training. You haven’t been trained in past life recall, correct?”

“Correct,” said Vitas. While he knew people who cared immensely about their past lives, he hadn’t cared much. Who was he in his past life except for a version of the person he was now? And who would he become but the person he would become? It seemed pointless to him, but he could never fully explain it in a way that made sense to him in the way that it worked inside his own head, and it was endlessly frustrating.

“That means it’s certainly the case,” said the Headmaster. “Not to mention, now that the

Godless Era's ending, a lot of powerful magic is accumulating. There's the ongoing search for Lord Animari's reincarnation, of course. I'm not going to suggest you're him, naturally: I think we'd have noticed by now if you were a god. It's still entirely possible that you could be powerful enough to be his disciple!" The Headmaster spread out his hands. "Sage Vitas Carpascinus has a very nice ring to it."

"You're too kind." Vitas felt embarrassed, but he wasn't sure if it was at the flattery, or at the Headmaster's antics. He decided to change the subject before this went anywhere Vitas didn't want it to. "I was trying to find a book, the other day, in the library."

"A fine place to look for books!" chuckled the Headmaster, still in good spirits.

"Unfortunately, it wasn't available," said Vitas. "It's one of the older books, part of the rare collection, but apparently out on loan. I was wondering, do we have photocopies of the text within those books I could borrow? Or, do you know what the faculty—?"

"I'm afraid that I must stop you there." The Headmaster held up a hand. "The Journals are rare, true, but they're also valuable for study here. In fact, one of the largest draws for faculty to work here is access to the books, and as such their demands are prioritized above the students. I'm afraid that you'll have to wait, but I can, of course, ask around to see who, exactly, has it. As for copies, well, I'm sure there must be some around."

"Thank you, Headmaster. Will there be anything else?"

"No, no. You seem tired. I'll inform your professors that you'll be taking the rest of the day off. I'm sure you've passed your exam. You've certainly exceeded my expectations!" The Headmaster laughed. Vitas nodded, and slipped out. He finished his mug of soup in his dorm, after he put the recruitment papers on his roommate's bed, and then he laid down for a nap. He could already feel his mind chugging like a clogged pipe from sheer exhaustion. However, even

though he was comfortable and wearing a sleep mask to block out the light and a cap to keep his hair in good condition, he couldn't sleep. Something about the day that he'd had: the exam, the conversation with the Headmaster, the dreams themselves. Was he really seeing past lives? Was he seeing anyone else's past lives interacting with him? How much of this was his subconscious, and how much of this was him remembering something that had happened hundreds of years ago? He would have to read up on past lives.

Vitas began to relax and to slip into slumber, then, like a stray muscular twitch, a realization jerked him awake.

He hadn't told the Headmaster he was looking for a Journal. He'd only mentioned a rare book, and the Journals were far from the only books in the Rare Book collection. The desert air made books easy to maintain, and the isolation made the valuable ones harder to steal. *How had the Headmaster known?*

Vitas suspected he wasn't going to be able to get much sleep at all, tonight.

#

Vitas and Morticia completed their presentation successfully. More than successfully, really. Vitas rarely felt satisfied with the results of any group project, but he and Morticia worked well together. She was a better public speaker than he was, more confident in front of a crowd, and it was a relief to have that aspect of her personality mixed with the fact that she understood what she was talking about. Professor Hyacinthus seemed to be begrudgingly appreciative of them, which was a relief, on Vitas's part: even he had picked up on the fact that Professor Hyacinthus was one of a few professors at Sage Caduceus who resented Morticia's very presence.

"I don't understand him," confessed Vitas. He sat with Morticia underneath the shade of one of the large, old trees that was planted by the lake. Morticia had brought a picnic blanket

with a crinkly plastic underside and a soft top made of some kind of cotton buffalo check in black and white.

“Who?” asked Morticia.

“Professor Hyacinthus. The others like him.”

“Oh, *them*.” Morticia made a disgusted little noise at the back of her throat. “Of course you don’t.”

“But you do?”

“In a sense.” Morticia sighed and flopped back onto the blanket. Since the school was technically on break, she’d shed her usual uniform for a vintage, black, lacy dress that Vitas thought made her look a little like a fancy doll. “They don’t want me here because I’m a girl, and I’m a disruption for existing. They think that I’m a distraction, and they probably insist that Sage Caduceus wouldn’t want girls at his school anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Vitas.” Morticia sat up. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Vitas looked at her. “Why?”

“Because of his journals,” said Morticia. “I mean, you have to look hard, but one can find it if they *want* to.”

“*Why?*”

“It’s one of those things where the translation should be obvious, except nobody in charge wants it to be.”

Vitas squinted at her in confusion. “Please explain from the beginning.”

“Well, Sage Caduceus didn’t speak modern Lancian,” said Morticia. “This was before Lancian was even widespread far beyond the banks of the Koronus River, and on top of that, he

was technically a heretic before he came into contact with Lord Animari. So the diaries were all written in code, which is hard enough to crack, but then also a lot of the diaries were soaked when the Royal Library flooded.”

“They do actually teach us all of this in history class,” said Vitas. “The school is *named* after him.” After the flood, the diaries were all saved, but the problem was that they were old even then, and on top of that, Sage Caduceus had been largely poor when he wrote many of his diaries, and so the ink from the earlier diaries was mostly made from lamp and candle soot and water, with the occasional cheap alcohol mixture to try to weather-proof it. Proper ink at the time was made from soot mixed with animal fat or various plant-derived resins, which gave it a waterproof quality. Transcriptions were made immediately after the books were saved, but many pages were blurred or cracked enough that even the most skilled monk would have problems identifying the symbols and letter used. Many other books and ephemera weren’t able to be salvaged. It was such a blow to scholarship and literature in general that King Iaspis had ordered that all books in royal libraries were to be transcribed wholesale and saved in multiple libraries, and had paid for it out of the royal treasury. The Royal Family still had a fund in place for preserving books and unique pieces of art and writing.

“So,” said Morticia, looking relieved she didn’t have to explain everything, “when the monks transcribed everything, they made sure to indicate passages that were unclear even while they were translated. The codebreaking was all guesswork, too, and we didn’t discover an actual cipher until a hundred years ago, but by that point the books were at Sage Caduceus and Sage Caduceus is run by people who are thoroughly ‘anti-distraction’. Sage Caduceus writes about how to treat students, and one of the things he mentions in one of his journals is problems that come from boys reacting to girls around them and getting ‘distracted’.” She put air quotes around

“distracted”.

“So, the people running the school decided that the best way to deal with students being distracted is to ban half of all possible students from attending?” asked Vitas. “Why?”

“Because the passage, which is marked as an unsure transcription, claims that if students are distracting each other, it’s better to remove the distraction.”

Vitas waited for a further explanation. Morticia stared back at him, like she did when she was waiting for him to understand a joke. “Is that. It?”

“That’s it.”

Vitas stared at her, vacantly horrified. Morticia broke out into a fit of giggles.

“How did you not *know* all this?”

“No-one’s ever said anything to me about it,” said Vitas. “Why would I? Who *would*?”

“And of course you never picked up on any implications, because we know how you are with subtle social cues,” said Morticia. “Not even outside of school?”

“I don’t spend much time outside of school,” said Vitas.

“What about breaks?”

“I usually read, or I just don’t leave the house much,” said Vitas. “My few friends were mostly crows.” Crows were easier to talk to because they didn’t have the same kind of social expectations humans did, and they were more likely to explain things to him. He’d spent time as a child trying to interact with other children, but he’d usually felt just enough out of sync that it was simpler to retreat into his books. His parents, constantly busy with work, hadn’t had enough time to help him in a true, consistent way, and anything that they looked into regarding helping him to interact with other children had been problematic. There were certain “therapies” for children who had difficulties with social interaction, but Vitas had looked into them when he was

fifteen, and had decided that his parents had been right not to bother: they didn't focus on actually teaching anything, and more on disciplining children for not acting "normal."

"What about family? Or the internet?"

"Most of my relatives are still in Augustia," said Vitas, "so we don't visit them often. And I don't look at social media much." He looked up at the horizon. A few clouds had formed.

"Apparently it's going to rain, soon," said Morticia. "I thought it didn't rain here."

"It doesn't rain much," said Vitas. "But we do have an occasional storm." He fanned himself. Despite the shade, the day was starting to heat up. "It cools the air down, and the desert blooms afterwards. We usually have an expedition outside the grounds to study the plants."

"Sounds fun," said Morticia, wistfully. She tried to brush a stray lock of hair behind her ear, but when it wouldn't stay she undid her messy bun and started to gather her hair into a ponytail. Vitas watched, patiently, as she put her silver hair up. She was wearing gaudy-looking sunglasses, shaped like hearts and had rhinestones encrusted on the frame. They were different from the ones she wore with her uniform, which were shaped normally and had no rhinestones at all. The heart ones, of course, suited her more.

"Have you refreshed your sunscreen?" Vitas asked, looking for his own bottle.

"I have half an hour," said Morticia. "What's that book?"

"It's about past life visions," said Vitas. "I've been reading into it since the exam."

"You're having dreams about your past lives?" asked Morticia.

"Apparently so," said Vitas. "I don't put much stock in dreams, usually, but if I'm remembering powerful spells then apparently I do actually have some powerful connection with a previous life."

"And I'm sure that the Headmaster is hoping that you're the reincarnation of some



powerful battlemage so he has an excuse to get you to sign up to go overseas.”

“How did you know?” Vitas turned to look at her. Morticia had turned the ponytail into a braid. She hummed a little as she thought.

“Dad complains about him a lot. He joked that the man would marry the military if it was a woman.”

“Is Professor Ghostlight a pacifist?”

“No, he just doesn’t think we should be trying to spread our culture around the world like it’s the best and everyone else is a bunch of backwards primitives. You don’t have to be a pacifist to think the Royal Family’s annexation of Sumentia is wrong. Plus, if we’re being honest, they probably just want more bragging rights. Did you hear about the search for the First and Last Battlefield?”

“I know of it.”

“Back in the seventies, the Royal Family sent out naval vessels to try and claim the island. You can’t find it with radar or satellite, since it just looks like ocean thanks to the enchantments protecting it, but with the tech they had back then they could easily just comb the ocean looking for it.”

“I know that we know roughly where it is,” said Vitas. “But to try and claim it, surely that’s foolish? After all, that’s the graves of all the gods, and all the devil lords too.”

“Well, it turned out to be,” said Morticia. “Because a bunch of the ships who tried to land on the island were never seen again.”

“Some kind of guardian spell?” Vitas leaned back on his elbows, “Or could it be some kind of sentinel protecting the island?”

“If the Gods didn’t want anyone on the island, I’m sure they had ways to keep them off

of it.” Morticia finished her braid.

“I’m sure,” said Vitas. “There are some things that people should recognize as futile.”

“You’d be surprised what a lust for power can do to someone’s common sense,” said Morticia. “Especially if there’s money involved, too. ‘Wisdom is what scares a lord most.’ Do you know that saying?”

“I know it,” said Vitas. He thought about Anna, the old librarian, and what she’d said about how a doctor’s office that wasn’t cleaned bred disease. He also thought about how the Headmaster had known that Vitas was looking for one of Sage Caduceus’s journals. “Morticia. May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“If girls were allowed to attend the school, would you have wanted to come here?”

Morticia fell silent. Vitas wondered if he’d offended her somehow, but when he looked back over she had a look on her face that only indicated deep thought.

“Maybe,” she said. “I don’t know. It’s hard to say, really. I don’t know what kind of person I’d be. Maybe I’d be expected to be some successor to my father, and I’d buck against that. I’m not someone who likes to conform to expectations.”

“I know,” said Vitas. “It’s one of your admirable qualities.”

“Thank you.” Morticia smiled. “I don’t know. If I were born in that world, what else would be changed? What kind of person would I be, if the place I lived in was different? I can’t say. I don’t know if anyone could, because so much would be different, and the people around me would also be different. I’m still someone who practices death magic, but the education here’s just so good, you know?”

“Are you someone who believes that we’re made by the people around us?”

“Aren’t we, to an extent? Wouldn’t you be different if you were around different people, and not at this school?”

“If you have some kind of past life or destiny, then do the circumstances change that as well?”

“I don’t know, but probably. Even if the broad strokes are the same, the details probably have an impact in their own way.” Morticia shrugged. “Most of us would never know. Maybe the gods do?”

“Well,” said Vitas, “if the Headmaster’s right, and I am destined to become a Sage, maybe I’ll meet a god and ask.” His tone of voice was dry.

“I’m sure you’ll be one of the Sages who moved into a cave in a mountain so you wouldn’t be bothered while you study, only for your front door to be crowded with disciples.”

“Like Sage Caduceus.”

“Maybe you’re his reincarnation, and then you’ll become headmaster.”

Vitas grimaced. “I think I’d rather live in that cave.”

Morticia laughed.

That night, Vitas had a dream where he was back in his apothecary office. While on some level, he was sure that he was aware that he was dreaming, that part of him floated in the background like a spectator while the rest of him ground herbs and old medicinal remedies into powders. There was a knock on the door, and Vitas turned on his chair.

“Enter, please.”

Professor Ghostlight, except not, entered.

“Hello, Vitas,” said Professor Ghostlight. Vitas understood what he said as his name, but on some level Vitas knew that the name was different. He didn’t know how different, but it both

was, and wasn't, his name.

"Hello," said Vitas, feeling relieved but not sure why.

"Is everything alright?"

"I was concerned that you might be the warlord."

"Oh, of course." Professor Ghostlight looked troubled. "Is he bothering you?"

"No more than usual," said Vitas. "Morticia says that if the military was a woman, he'd marry it."

Professor Ghostlight laughed. "She's too smart, that one."

"I think she's just the right amount of smart."

"That's because you're a better man than most," said Professor Ghostlight. "You're seventeen summers old, and yet I think you're almost as wise as any Sage."

"You flatter me," said Vitas. He stood up and pulled down a bundle of dried herbs. "I have a new medicine for you."

"Isn't that foxglove?"

"It is," said Vitas, "but Morticia and I have been working together. She says that due to the way the poison works, if the dose is right, it could work to help your heart."

"If the dose is right, you say."

"I erred on the side of low dosage." Vitas wrapped the bundle in paper, set it aside, and handed Professor Ghostlight a small jar with paper tied around it. "This is it. Follow the instructions precisely."

"Oh, thank you, but I came with the medicine for Morticia's eyes."

"Oh." Vitas looked down at the mortar and pestle. "You'll have to wait."

"I'll make tea for us, then." Professor Ghostlight laughed.

“Tea would be nice. I bought some new flowers from that friend of mine. They called it ‘lavender’, and it smells nice.”

“The crow fellow?”

“I’ll tell them you called them a fellow. I think they’ll find that funny considering you’ve never met.”

“Do they have many crows in your homeland?”

“No. A few wanderers, a small community or two, but the Skylands don’t often drift toward Augustia.”

“I’d like to go there, sometime,” said Professor Ghostlight. “I think it would be nice to travel like you.”

“Why don’t you leave?” asked Vitas.

“I’m too old to gallivant around the globe,” said Professor Ghostlight, “and with Morticia’s health, I don’t know if I’d risk it normally. But with how the Warlord is pushing at us...”

“Something needs to be done about the Warlord,” said Vitas.

“Yes,” said Professor Ghostlight. He gave Vitas an odd look. “But what will you two do?”

Vitas woke up before he could answer the question. He wanted to know what the answer was. Everything was converging, becoming more complex.

*What will you two do?*

Someone knocked at his window. Vitas took a second to realize that the noise had been what woke him up. Vitas’s roommate was out, visiting family for a week, and so nobody was there to see Vitas crawl out of bed and open his curtains.

Morticia waved at him. Vitas took a few seconds to stare at her, because she wasn't sure how she knew where his room was, and also because his room was on the third floor. He opened his window, slowly, and stared at her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Asking for a favor,” said Morticia. “How would you liked to help me break into the Headmaster's office?”

Vitas stared at her, blankly.

“I need coffee, first,” he said, finally.

“That's fine,” said Morticia. “I'll meet you under the Immortal Tree in half an hour. I'll have coffee with me.” She slipped back down the wall, deft in a way that screamed magic, but not any magic Vitas knew. Vitas shut his window. He sighed, mourning the books he'd been planning to read today, and went to get dressed.

#

“My first question of the day is how you managed to find me,” said Vitas. He grumpily sipped at his coffee. It was spiced. He wasn't sure if he liked that or not.

“Death magic,” said Morticia. “Soul sensing.”

“You were able to find me by sensing my soul?”

“It's easier with people I spend a lot of time with,” said Morticia. “And your soul is big.” She paused. “Maybe it's because you're supposed to be a Sage incarnation.”

“That's interesting,” said Vitas. Morticia grinned at him. They sat under the large, gnarled tree that Sage Caduceus had grown from seed into a shade tree with fruit over the course of a day, so he could have a place to feed and teach his students. The tree still bore fruit, and the fruit was processed and preserved for its magical properties. Currently, it only had leaves and

flower buds.

“Is what you want me to help you with related to death magic, then?”

Morticia nodded. “We were talking about the journals, and then I talked to Anna about the originals, because I wanted to see if I could get Dad to look at them for me. But she told me that they’re out indefinitely and then she told *me* that the Headmaster came around and started asking some questions about them. So she told me that she thinks the Headmaster has them out, and probably intends to keep them out.”

“That makes sense.” Vitas nodded. “If he’s keeping them out for study, he probably has a room for it.”

“Well, that’s the thing!” said Morticia. “He does, in his home. I stayed up late last night and kept an eye on him, and he went into what felt like a second story room in his house and was there for *hours*.”

“I thought the Headmaster’s parsonage was one-story,” said Vitas.

“It’s *supposed* to be,” said Morticia, “but I know what I felt. And even though the students have the day off, he always spends his Tuesdays in the office, taking care of meetings. The best time to do it is when he leaves for his office.”

“Where is he now?”

“Eating breakfast in his house.” Morticia gave Vitas a food bar. Vitas looked at the ingredients list and decided that he wasn’t very hungry. He gave it back to her, and she ate it.

“That’s why I wanted you to be out here with me as soon as you could.”

“Why me?” asked Vitas.

“Because you told me you can read the journals without a translation!” Morticia looked at him like it was obvious. “If he has them in a secret room in his house, he’s probably hiding them

for some reason, and it's got to be because of something in the original, and not because of something that can be found in the transcripts. I bet it's a transcription error, something that would really mess him and the school board up if it got out."

"You want it to get out," concluded Vitas. Morticia grinned at him, all teeth, and Vitas knew that they were going to break more rules than he was comfortable with. Still. Plenty of things weren't comfortable and still necessary.

"How are we going to find it?" asked Vitas.

"Death magic," said Morticia. Death magic, as Vitas was aware, was about the hidden and scary things in the world. Death was death, but Mortia's domain wasn't just funerary matters. It was about the energies of the world that couldn't be explained, the hidden and the macabre. Where life magic's use was for healing and rejuvenation, whether it be animal, person, or plant, death magic cast a wider mark. Death magic users were called upon to watch over last rites and burials to ensure a clean break between the body and the soul, but they were also called in for forensics, exorcising phantoms, and search and rescue. The last one was due to both a death mage's ability to see and identify souls, and their power over hidden things, whether they be physically or magically concealed.

"Of course," said Vitas.

"Come on," said Morticia. She stood. "He's moving around more. Finish your coffee, I think he's ready to go." She took Vitas's hand, and Vitas felt something around them change, like an invisible blanket had been dropped over them. Vitas finished his coffee, and Morticia wolfed down an energy bar, shoving the wrapper in her pocket.

"A death spell?" asked Vitas.

"Nobody will see us come or go," said Morticia.



“I see.”

“Well, you might, but nobody else will.” Morticia laughed at her own joke, and Vitas found that he wasn’t as annoyed at the pun as he normally would be. Curious.

They walked across the grounds, avoiding the few people still on campus for the break.

“What’s it like?” asked Vitas.

“Hm?”

“Death magic.”

“Oh.” Morticia thought. “It’s like. Well. It’s soft. It flows, and it’s easy for me to shape it. Like adjusting a silk blanket. Everyone else says it’s hard, but it’s not for me.”

Vitas thought about his own experiences with life magic. “Like filling a bucket from a river, while everyone else is using spoons?”

“Basically!” Morticia laughed. “Even when I use other forms of magic, it’s not like spoons as much as it is a ladle.”

“I haven’t really tried anything outside of life magic,” admitted Vitas.

“I bet you’d be good at it. You’re smart like that, I’m sure you could figure it out easily.” The praise felt different when it came from Morticia.

“What’s it like, in the outside world?” asked Vitas. “Going to school outside of Sage Caduceus.”

“Oh.” Morticia hesitated. “It’s not as strict. Obviously. I went to a magnet school, so we don’t have dorms or anything. I used to live with my grandmother, and she was nice. Old ladies will gossip about anything. If you’re friends enough with an old lady, she’ll tell you about the time she killed a man and buried his bodies in the woods. Grandmother was great, really. Liked cop shows too much for my taste, but....” She hesitated.

“Grandmother’s not dead,” said Morticia. “But she’s not healthy anymore. Well. She’s in a retirement home now, and it’s a nice place. It was either live with dad, or go to a different boarding school. And, uh.”

“Why not a different boarding school? Wouldn’t it be better?” Vitas thought about everything he’d seen Morticia put up with. “Here, it seems like. You seem—.” He struggled to think of the right words as they dodged through a garden. “Wouldn’t you be happier someplace where there were other girls, and the professors didn’t resent you? And you should study death magic more intensely?”

“Maybe,” said Morticia. “But I’d be alone. At least here, I have Dad.” She stopped in front of the Headmaster’s house, and turned to Vitas. “I miss wearing black, though.”

The headmaster’s home was old. Like all the buildings on campus, it was made out of a clay that was vaguely orange, but redder than the signature sun-orange clay of Sacra Solla that everyone seemed to associate with the desert. The roof was more or less flat: just a slight dome for when it did rain, and to let warm air rise to the top to make cooling slightly easier. The door was locked. Vitas looked around for a key, but the Headmaster was smarter than that, apparently.

“Do you know a lock-picking spell?” asked Vitas.

“Nothing untraceable,” said Morticia. “Do you think they’d look?”

“How do they work?” asked Vitas.

“You have to kind of move the tumblers around,” said Morticia. “You need a bobby pin, or a wire, but I’m not good at it the old fashioned way.”

“Something small?” Vitas looked around. “Did your snack bar have fruit in it?”

“Raspberries.”

“Seeds in?”

Morticia pulled out the wrapper. Vitas took it, and looked on the inside of the wrapper. A small piece of berry was stuck on the inside. Vitas pulled the berry out and concentrated. There were a few small seeds, and with an infusion of life magic, they started to grow.

Vitas held them up to the lock and started coaxing them into the lock. Making plants grow in a specific manner was more agricultural magic than life magic, but Vitas fed the plant little pulses of magic, and it grew into the lock, filling spaces where it could. Finally, when the plant refused to grow inside the lock anymore, Vitas coaxed it from a delicate shoot into woody stem, and gently turned it. The door unlocked. Vitas gently extracted the plant and put it in his pocket for later.

Vitas put a pair of thin gloves on and opened the door. Morticia followed him, pulling out white cotton gloves and slipping them on.

The Headmaster's home was done in the popular new minimalistic style. It was all white, sleek surfaces and white paint. It reminded Vitas of an OR, and he wondered how someone could feel comfortable in such a sterile environment.

"This place matches his personality." Morticia did a little spin. "Look at the ceilings. The best place to hide something is up. It's probably an attic door."

Vitas poked through the house. There was a small kitchen, a dining room, and the bedroom. The Headmaster needed to do his laundry desperately. An air conditioning unit was turned off, and Vitas decided not to touch it, even though he could feel the itch of sweat on his scalp. It was tougher than he'd expected to pick the lock with the plant. Life magic didn't like to be cultivated like that.

"Are you okay?" asked Morticia.

"Fine," said Vitas. "Have you found it yet?"

“No.” There was a pause. “Yes.”

Vitas walked into the room to see Morticia’s eyes turn black like a bottle of pitch as she used death magic. He could feel it radiating off of her by virtue of how different it felt from the life magic that basically saturated the school grounds: cold, like ice, with a sort of filmy quality Vitas couldn’t place until magic started flaking off the ceiling and onto her, and then he recognized it: sooty and slick, and falling down on her were the ashy remains of whatever spell had been cast. Vitas craned his neck and looked up at the ceiling, where a small, unobtrusive, white door to the attic was. A series of runes were drawn onto the door in what looked like expensive spell-ink. Vitas recognized it, though the colors were different from what he was used to. It was rusty, like someone had added a lot of blood to it, which marked it as tied to death and the immaterial, as if the swirls and curves built into the rune weren’t clue enough: life magic was mostly straight lines, to symbolize the material world.

“I looked through here earlier,” said Vitas.

“There was a death spell on it,” said Morticia, “designed to make you forget it was there. It prevented you from looking up because you don’t think to, and then makes you forget you forgot. That’s what the spiral in the middle’s for.” Morticia reached up to try to unlatch the door, but she was too short. She looked at Vitas, who was several inches taller than her. She bit her lip. “Help me open it, please.”

The door was easy to operate: it didn’t even have a lock. Vitas crawled up the ladder first and saw it as a wash of cold air hit him in the face: a bookshelf, full of old books. He clambered up the rest of the way and looked through the books until he found them: old leather, of a simple design, but distinctive if only because Vitas was looking for them specifically. There were different colors on each page, and some of the pages were an unreadable mass of color from

where it had all blended together. Cheap, if a book from that era could be called cheap, and its pages were crinkled from water damage. Only craft magic, heavily applied, kept the book from falling apart. Someone had taken the set and engraved numbers into them long ago. Vitas had to angle his head so the light caught it right in order to identify the one he wanted. He pulled it out and set it on a special table, and slowly, gently paged through it until he found the entry he needed.

The pages were water damaged and ink stained, but Vitas squinted and looked down at the page until he found a passage.

“Huh.”

“Huh?” Morticia looked over from where she was feeling for anyone who came close.

“I think I found it,” said Vitas. “It’s in a part about the importance of consent.”

“Like. Sexual?”

“No.” Vitas gave her a look, and then turned back to the book. “I think that I understand what the issue is. Do you have a phone with a scanning app, or a camera?”

“Yes. Why?”

“We need to take pictures to prove this is real,” said Vitas. He tapped a symbol gently. “This symbol, the one that looks like a sun, it’s used to represent the concept of consent in moral terms. Think of the saying, ‘One shouldn’t infringe upon another’s self, and should protect a person’s ability to consent for their own self.’”

“Because the self is sacred, and so the self and the body shall not be degraded.”

Morticia nodded. She pulled out her phone and took pictures, with no flash.

“I think the issue is that the symbol is similar to the representative of ‘distraction’,” said Vitas. “It’s less of a cipher in some places than it is a shorthand. So, when it’s distorted like this,

it's hard to tell. There are other places where it's rendered correctly from what I remember of the transcripts, but it's hard to tell, this section was really badly water-damaged, and the same symbol seems to be used later in the same sentence, so I don't blame the transcriber for getting it wrong."

"But it's wrong?"

Vitas nodded. "Let me think." He mulled over the section, and then read aloud, translating on the spot. "'While I am not one known for my love of people, I have a great love of learning, and so I am inclined to welcome all who share my love of learning, whether human or not, Tiberian or not, male or not. I will say this. I do not abide distractions. The art of saving lives is one of the oldest and most honorable things one could learn, and I will not tolerate those who do not take it seriously. I won't tolerate heavy drink, poor eating, or a fascination with lewd things. And furthermore, one must be removed if they do not respect others, and prove themselves a danger to the consent of others, bodily, emotionally, or sexually. Women may be easily distracted, and men tend to be less obliging of consent.'" Vitas looked at Morticia. "If you translate the last word as distraction, it sounds like Sage Caduceus thought men were easier to teach than women."

"Are you *shitting* me?" Morticia stared at Vitas, open-mouthed. "That's it?"

"A distorted line is the only difference," said Vitas. "The journals weren't expected to be so important when he wrote them, or I'm sure he would have been clearer on that front."

There was complete silence in the attic, except for the hum of the environmental controls in the attic.

"Vitas?" said Morticia.

"What?"

“He knew this whole time.” She smiled up at him, looking sad, or maybe pitying if it was anyone else. Then again, could she be pitying herself, having gone through the past semester with everyone’s eyes on her, and them just now finding out that it was all a lie? Vitas regarded her silently, and then turned back to the book. “I know.”

“Of course you do.” That sad smile remained.

“There’s a dehumidifier in this room,” said Vitas. “Climate control. This is long term.”

“This had to have been known since at least the cipher was broken.”

“But they hid it,” said Vitas. “They’ve lied for years. But *why*? They’re supposed to be devout. They’re supposed to listen!”

“Because it’s not about being devout.” Morticia put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s about being in control. It’s about power. They have it, and more importantly, others don’t.”

“This can’t stand,” said Vitas.

“I know,” said Morticia. “But I don’t know what we can do.” She paused. Her eyes widened.

“Someone’s coming,” she said.

“*What.*”

“I was distracted and I didn’t notice them!” said Morticia. “Put the book back. Turn everything off.”

Vitas carefully placed the book back, and Morticia closed the door to the hidden attic and turned the lights off. They huddled together in the dark, sitting down behind a shelf.

“It’s the Headmaster, and a stranger,” Morticia whispered. “Someone from a meeting, I think. I’m putting a spell on over us.” Vitas felt the same sheet-like feeling, and Morticia went still as she concentrated on keeping it up.

They held their breath as the door to the attic was opened and someone turned the lights on.

“—books are all kept in the best possible conditions,” said the Headmaster’s voice. He climbed up and helped a skinny, elderly man up into the attic. Morticia and Vitas watched as they chatted, and went over the books together.

“That man’s wearing a military pin,” whispered Morticia. Vitas jumped, not expecting her to talk. “It’s fine, I hid our sound too.”

“How long can you keep this up?” asked Vitas.

“A while,” said Morticia. “Here.” She handed him her phone, with it set to record video. Vitas took it and held it up.

After about twenty minutes, marked by the phone recording in ten minute intervals, Morticia started to tremble. Vitas looked at her, and she was even paler than usual, looking strained and tired. A while indeed.

Vitas leaned over, pressing his shoulder against hers, and put his hand in hers. He coaxed her metabolism toward the reserves of fat found in every human who ate well, and started to channel his own magical reserves toward her cells, trying to use his own energy in place of hers so she could continue to work. He was going to have a massive headache.

The two men continued to talk, but Vitas didn’t focus on them so much as he focused on keeping both Morticia and the camera steady. After what felt like over an hour and was about fifty minutes in real life, they left. Vitas stopped the recording.

“Are they gone?” asked Vitas. Morticia nodded, and he could feel the synapses firing and muscles contracting. It made him feel queasy, and he stopped feeding energy into her.

“We need to get this out there,” said Vitas. “This isn’t just the school. If the military’s



involved....” He looked down. “Do you think that the librarian....” He spoke slowly as a plan formed in his mind. “Anna. Would help us?”

“Help us do what?” Morticia’s tone of voice was cautious.

Vitas thought about how he saw Headmaster Asinas in his dreams.

“Stop a warlord.”

Morticia was silent, but then she started to laugh.

“Well, why not?”

#

“Well,” said Professor Ghostlight, after the term had finally started back up. “This has been the most eventful vacation I’ve ever taken.”

“I can’t believe that so many professors left.” Vitas’s voice was bland.

“I nearly left,” said Professor Ghostlight. “Of all the outrageous, blasphemous, dishonest things I suspected that man of doing, this takes the cake. Not even the cake, the whole bloody birthday party!”

“So you weren’t surprised by the news?”

“Well, I was, and yet I’m not.” Professor Ghostlight sighed heavily. “Asinas was always a fool with more love for bureaucracy than knowledge, which is dangerous, but normal for the Headmasters of these places. I’m just surprised by the scale of this deception. To think, this whole time, we were being lied to about the institution. About the Sage himself.” He took a drink of his lemonade. “Whoever leaked the contents of the journal to that reporter deserves a medal, but will never get it. This is the sort of thing that can get the government involved, and anything that gets people questioning authority and what truths they’re being fed is never good for government officials. Especially not that man in the video.”

“I’m not really surprised,” said Vitas. “I don’t think the Headmaster was the one who thought it up. But I’m not surprised he went along with it.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” said Professor Ghostlight. “Too bad everything’s going to be pinned on him.”

“Mm.” Vitas drank his water.

“Sorry I’m late!” Morticia ran over to the picnic blanket. “I was saying goodbye to Miss Anna.”

“She’s leaving already?” asked Vitas.

“She was getting ready to retire even before the scandal broke,” said Professor Ghostlight. “It’s funny, you know. She told me she wasn’t going to retire until she fulfilled some destiny.”

“Destiny?” asked Vitas.

“Oh, yes,” said Morticia. “Apparently she was told at a young age that she’d meet the reincarnation of Animari if she worked long enough at Sage Caduceus.”

“*Really?*”

“I assume she did,” said Professor Ghostlight. “She didn’t tell me who it was, though.”

“You asked?” asked Morticia.

“Of *course* I asked!” Professor Ghostlight huffed. “She laughed so hard she had a coughing fit. I don’t understand that woman.”

“I’m sure you’ll look back on this someday and it will all seem obvious,” said Vitas.

Morticia sat down next to him and leaned her shoulder against his. Her uniform fit better, this semester. “And all this right before we graduate.”

“Let’s hope your college life is less stressful than this,” said Professor Ghostlight. “Both

of you, going to TRU. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"Thank you," said Vitas. He glanced over at Morticia. There was a barely visible smear of sunscreen on her nose. "Oh, Morticia—."

"Mm?"

"Here." Vitas carefully wiped it off with his thumb.

Professor Ghostlight raised an eyebrow at that. Morticia giggled a little at that.

"You two seem to have bonded, lately." Professor Ghostlight took another, very long, sip of his lemonade.

"Well," said Vitas. "We've spent a lot of time together. We get along well."

"I see," said Professor Ghostlight, nodding like he knew something Vitas didn't. "I need to go in and grab a bite to go with my medicine. I'll be right back." He left, and Morticia sighed.

Vitas couldn't help but think about the Professor Ghostlight from his dreams, and the Morticia from his dreams, and the way that it was only them and no-one else. And then, here, it was only him.

"You know," said Morticia. "Since we're relatively close to Sacra Solla out here, we're going to the Midsummer Festival after break. Who knows: maybe the new Solla incarnation will be out by then."

"Have you ever been to Sacra Solla?"

"No," said Morticia. "We used to live up toward the north, in Calvado." Vitas gave her a blank look. "It's near Penin City."

"By the sea?" asked Vitas.

"Yes," said Morticia. "But it's cold, up there. We were on the southern tip of the big peninsula, and the blizzards are enough to make you unplug your freezer and shove your ice-

cream carton in the garden.”

“I can’t imagine. I’ve never seen snow.”

“Really?”

“I spend my winters here.” Vitas gestured at the desert surrounding them.

“You should come home with us, sometime,” said Morticia.

“Are you sure about that?”

Morticia flashed him one of her genuine smiles. “I asked, didn’t I?”

They sat in silence, watching as one of the few nomadic groups from the desert came to the lake. They gathered water and chatted. A few looked over at Vitas and Morticia, studying them carefully.

“I wonder what they think of us,” said Morticia.

“Who knows,” said Vitas. “Though. What do you think of the story, and the ending Caduceus wrote down?”

“It was interesting,” said Morticia. “But I also wonder how much of the different stories are just moral stories.”

“About whether healers to kill?”

“About how best to save lives,” said Morticia.

“I wonder if the nomads have their own version of the story,” said Vitas.

“Come on.” Morticia stood up. “We can ask.” Vitas stood up and then, before he could overthink it, he offered Morticia his hand. She looked at him, smiled, and took it. As they walked over to talk to the nomads, Vitas glanced at her. He squeezed her hand, gently. She looked over at him, and smiling, she leaned close and squeezed back.

### The Pacifist and the Lion

Maximillian wished that he had a ball to bounce off the wall of his cell. It was made out of clay that was almost enough to remind him of home, but the orange clay of Sacra Solla made the ashy clay deposits surrounding the city of Eridian look even ashier by comparison. The bars looked the same as the bars to any military jail. He was bored out of his mind, but too jittery to take a nap. His court martial was tomorrow. He was sure it would go over swimmingly, by which he meant he'd be swimming with the proverbial fishes inside the week. He wished that time magic existed, so he could go back in time and slap the pen out of his own hands before he signed the recruitment papers at his college's office, before he agreed to enter Knight training. Some good things had come out of all that. Meeting his wife had been one of them. But it wasn't worth meeting her to leave her a widow with their daughter to raise.

Maximillian's former cellmate glared at him from across the hallway. Maximillian himself was sporting a fat lip and a soon to be black eye. The guards had taken their sweet time actually breaking up the extremely one-sided fight. Maximillian wondered if they were testing his resolve, or if they just hated him. Maybe it was both.

The moon, brilliant in the night sky, shown through his cell window. Maximillian thought about being back home in Sacra Solla, reading the story of the Moon Frog to Celeste over and over again, until she had it memorized and he could trick her into reciting the story to *him*. Yes, that was the thing to think about; the good times he'd had with his family. He hoped that they'd forgive him in their hearts, somehow. Someday.

Maximillian turned the story over and over in his mind, reciting the words back to himself silently. *One day, the Heavenly Goddess Solla Lunis was looking over the people of the world when she noticed that the light cast by the moon was dimmer than it had been the night previously—*.

The door to the cell block opened with a bang.

Maximillian shot to his feet. What was this? Were they not even going to bother with the trial? Were they going to actually go for it, and then in a month's time inform his family that, instead of facing justice, he'd somehow committed suicide by shooting himself in the back of the head three times?

Apparently not. Instead, a group of four Sumestians, wearing desert robes, strode into the cell block like they owned the place without even so much as a hint of a military escort. That was odd. Unheard of, even. Maximillian edged closer to the door to his cell, curious as to where this was going. He hadn't watched TV in three weeks, so he thought he'd take the live show while it was playing. Then, Maximillian saw soldiers behind them, lining up with blank looks on their faces, and that was when he started to get worried.

Three Sumestians wore masks: the same kind often worn by the insurrectionists who hid in the winding streets of Eridian. The fourth wore an ornate hat shaped like a lion mask, with a red veil obscuring her face. Maximillian assumed it was a her: she wore the same sort of clothing

that was favored by the Sumestian women in the markets and streets, though newer and of better materials. She was small, wearing red and gold-colored clothes, and she stopped in front of each occupied cell, muttering to herself in the local dialect. Maximillian struggled to understand what she was saying, but to no avail. Finally, the woman in the mask stopped and turned to look at Maximillian.

“At attention, soldier,” she said, speaking in carefully enunciated Lancian.

“I’m no soldier,” said Maximillian in his best Sumestian. He switched back to Lancian.

“Who are you?”

“No more questions,” said the woman. She cocked her head. “What’s your name?”

“Maximillian Eclipsa,” said Maximillian, resisting the urge to make a joke about the no questions comment.

“Rank and serial number?”

“I don’t think I really have either, technically,” said Maximillian.

One of Lion Hat’s companions said something in Sumestian that even Maximillian could tell was insulting as hell.

“Did he call me a smartass?”

“Yes,” said Lion Hat. “He’s right.”

“I never said he wasn’t,” said Maximillian, blasé.

“You’re a pacifist,” said Lion Hat, leaving no real room for denial.

Maximillian nodded once. Lion Hat relayed this to her companions. There was a shocked moment of silence, and then they burst out laughing. The word for “Lancian” was tossed around. Evidently the concept of a Lancian pacifist was the funniest damn thing these people had heard in the past year.

“You’re a very lucky man, then,” said Lion Hat. “They skin pacifists alive, so we hear.”

“That’s not true,” said Maximillian. “I think they beat us to death, first.”

Lion Hat turned around and issued orders to her companions, who produced keys to the cells (where in the name of the Dancing Dead had they *gotten* the keys) and set about opening all the cells. Lion Hat spun around in her heels, her robes making a rippling effect, like a sea of blood, and pointed at the cells.

“Five to a cell,” she ordered. “No harm comes to you, provided you cooperate. Wait here.”

Maximillian was confused. His confusion turned to shock as he watched the soldiers on base file into cells, five to a cell, with blank looks on their faces. Lion Hat turned and pointed to Maximillian’s cell door. She issued rapid fire orders to one of her companions, who protested. After thirty seconds of what was probably a blank stare under the veil, said companion sighed. Lion Hat pulled a pair of handcuffs out of her robe and tossed them to Maximillian.

“Put those on,” she said, “and we take you out of here and give you a decent bed and food for the night. Leave them off, and we put your former fellows in with you.”

Safety or death, safety or death. Maximillian, though willing to die for his beliefs, wasn’t a complete idiot. He put the cuffs on, and the companion unlocked Maximillian’s cell door. Maximillian considered trying to make a break for freedom, but all of the companions were unarmed. Considering what Lion Hat could do (mind control, maybe?), Maximillian was sure that each companion had the ability to set him on fire with their brains or something like that. Magic made it harder to tell who was simply a bystander, and who was capable of turning a dozen men to fine ash. The soldiers who’d followed the quartet in filed into cells, like they were just following orders. Maximillian was no egotists, and was ready to admit he had no clue what



was going on.

Maximillian shuffled out of his cell, keeping an eye on the nearest companion. The companion rolled their eyes and nudged him out of the way as Lion Hat gestured the company clerks into a cell and shut the door behind them.

“Well!” said Lion Hat. “That was fun, wasn’t it? Come on, Sir Pacifist. I think we should talk over a nice dinner. I’m sure they only fed you the worst Lancian food in your cell. It would have been merciful if they’d beaten you to death like you said: not enough oil, not enough salt. Like dieting models.”

“You know, you can’t hope to keep this place locked down,” said Maximillian. “The others bases will send troops.”

“No they won’t,” said Lion Hat.

“*What?*”

“Oh, dear Sir Pacifist.” Lion Hat clucked at him. “You really have been cut off. Tonight was the last night of Lancian control in North Eridian. We’ve taken all your bases in this city, and we control the lake. No-one’s going to take this base back anytime soon.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?” Maximillian swallowed.

“Because, if we were desperate, we’d have shot you and everyone else instead of taking hostages,” said Lion Hat. “This is our country: we do what we wish with insurrectionists and invaders. Even pacifist ones.” She gestured to her companions, ordering them in Sumestian. The companion of hers who had unlocked Maximillian’s cell nudged him forward with a hand. Maximillian looked down and saw henna lines artfully marking out runes designed to channel some kind of magic. He took the gesture as what it was: a promise and a threat.

“Don’t complain: you would have died otherwise. There’s no bigger snub to your queen

than refusing to kill.” Lion Hat turned. “And even if we all die in the morning from being bombed until the dust is dust, it would be a shame to do so on an empty stomach.”

#

The Sumestians’ takeover of the base was surprisingly peaceful. Everyone seemed to be, if not unharmed, alive. Maximillian mentally ran the numbers on the people in the base, and decided that either there were a lot of defectors already in place, or Lion Hat was just that powerful.

Still, he was a practical man, and practical men took advantage of having a real bed and a shower to themselves for the first time in several weeks. They had put him in some officer’s quarters, a room with no windows, but they took his cuffs off before they locked him in which was more kindness than his own countrymen had shown him. He passed out in the bed and woke up with no real idea how long it had been. While the countryside around Eridian was a desert not unlike the one Maximillian had grown up in, the lake provided enough water that Maximillian felt justified spending an extra few minutes enjoying the water on his freshly-scrubbed skin before he finally turned the tap off. He stepped out to see a masked Sumestian putting out fresh clothes on his bed: simple desert clothes, designed to keep the sun off of his skin. Maximillian noted that this Sumestian had some small flowers painted on their mask.

The Sumestian froze and looked him up and down. Maximillian took pride in his fitness, but he knew that wasn’t what the stranger was looking at.

“They’re mostly on my back.” He turned around, showing the Sumestian the intricate runes and symbols outlined on his back, proving that he wasn’t a pacifist by his word, only.

“That’s Sumestian handiwork,” breathed the figure in his room.

“Yeah. Cost a lot of money, but I think the artist was just glad to get rid of another knight.”

The Sumestian in his room nodded and hurried out, probably to tell whoever their superior was, who would tell Lion Hat. Maximillian sighed and sat down on the bed. It squeaked loudly, and felt a little too firm, but it was better than a damn cot and a blanket. Maximillian's skin prickled as he put the robes on, but it was probably a figment of his own mind. There were no windows in his room, but there was a fan to circulate air and keep him from stewing in his own sweat.

Maximillian laid down on his bed, and then the events of the past day hit him like a brick in a sock. On one hand, he was definitely not going to be disgraced and dishonored before a kangaroo court martial in the morning. He would probably survive longer than the week. That was good. Probably.

Several minutes passed, and then a different Sumestian in a mask came in. It was hard to keep all these people straight. This mask had a starburst painted over one eye, and little bats on the cheeks and forehead.

"Nasreen would like to talk to you," said a feminine voice in measured and unaccented Lancian. "And there will be breakfast, too."

"Oh, great, I'm starving," said Maximillian. Miss Bat put handcuffs on him, and pulled him out of the room. The two of them were joined by a trio of masked figures, and they all had painted masks as well.

Everyone had painted their own mask, it seemed. Instead of the previous night's anonymity, everyone had a personal mask instead of a personal face. If he couldn't recognize them, Maximillian suspected they could still identify each other. Each Sumestian they passed was wearing a mask, even if it was just a cloth mask over the lower half of their face or a veil. Maximillian remembered hearing a piece of propaganda about how the Sumestian insurgents

used masks, so they could shed the masks and go back to their daily business when they were done taking Lancian lives, which was why all Sumestians were dangerous. At least some of that seemed to have been true.

Lion Hat had taken up residence in the CO's office and quarters. She made the swivel chair behind the desk look like a throne through charisma alone. Next to her was a metal teapot and a platter of flat breads and various nuts, dried fruits, and also scrambled eggs. Evidently, the Sumestians had taken the kitchens alongside the rest of the base.

"Mister Eclipsa," greeted Lion Hat.

"Miss Nasreen, I presume," returned Maximillian. Lion Hat chuckled and waved him to a seat. When Maximillian sat down, Miss Bat tied him around the waist to the chair, but took his cuffs off so he could eat.

"In case you try to be clever and run, of course," said Nasreen. "Just because you're a pacifist, it doesn't mean that you can't still hurt us in ways beyond the physical."

"Are you someone who know a lot about how to hurt people?" asked Maximillian, wary.

"I've learned from the best." Nasreen started to serve herself from the platter, and she poured herself a hot drink. It looked almost like coffee, but the smell was wrong. "Have you ever had tea before?"

"Once," said Maximillian. "I thought tea was green."

"Archipelagan tea is green," said Nasreen. "The tea we grow in Irdan is treated differently. And, of course, it's grown for a continent of tea drinkers, and not people who drink that bitter mud you call coffee."

"I *like* coffee."

"Lancians do." Nasreen put the cup under her veil and sipped, daintily from the sound of

it. Smugly, from Maximillian's perspective.

"Is it caffeinated?"

"Of course," said Nasreen. "Would you like some?"

"Please."

"Oh, how *polite* of you."

Maximillian felt like he was being laughed at, but he accepted the mug of tea anyway.

The breakfast food was actually pretty good, though he swore that the higher officers ate fresh meat once a week. Apparently Nasreen and her people were saving the meat for something.

"Now," said Nasreen, pushing her empty plate away. "I assume you don't have a clue who we are."

"True, but it's easy to tell who you're not," said Maximillian, airily. "Not Ikhta, obviously: there's no female commanders with them. I know one of your factions used a lion as a symbol, but I don't know the name. I hadn't heard of anyone who could control people's minds, though. Nice trick, you have there."

"Trick?" Nasreen snorted. "It's no trick. It's the Commander's Voice."

Maximillian froze.

"Oh, yes, even Lancians are told of Wardamya and the Commander's Voice, I see!"

Nasreen laughed at him.

Maximillian really wanted to say that it was impossible, that she was lying to him, but despite everything, it horribly made sense. The Commander's Voice was a legendary power held by the War Goddess, Wardamya, and a handful of even her Sages, the cream of the cream of the crop. It was spoken of with equal parts awe and fear because, if you had the power of the Commander's Voice, you could order a soldier to do anything that they'd do for their own

commander. It had limits, of course: an insubordinate soldier who disobeyed orders from superiors often could disobey this order as well, and even a military doctor couldn't be ordered to stop treating a patient they wanted to save. However, the entire point of military training wasn't just to build up physical and magical power: it was to break down a subject's sense of individuality and turn a person into a cog in a well-oiled fighting machine who obeyed their commander no matter what, who could kill and kill again. A single person with the Commander's Voice could determine the course of a battle with a sentence, and turn the tide of a war with a speech. This was the source of both fear and awe: what you felt depended on whether or not the person with the Voice was on your side.

“Did they suspect anything?” asked Maximillian.

“They did,” said Nasreen. “Of course, I was careful, but taking a few soldiers at a time was bound to draw some kind of attention, and became clear what was going on when they started moving war trophies out of Eridian. I'm sure they kept it on a need-to-know basis, of course. They wouldn't want to scare their soldiers. They were idiots, of course. Can you tell me *why?*”

“Because the key to resisting the Voice is knowing what it is,” said Maximillian.

“They had no idea,” said Nasreen, smugly. “It was kind of funny, actually. It wasn't even that hard. I talked to the local commander, and he *helped* me take the city.”

“You ordered every soldier in the city to surrender and lock themselves in their own jail cells,” breathed Maximillian, “and they *listened?*”

“Yes,” said Nasreen. “Eridian and its lake is the major source of water in the region. If we control it, we control basically the whole of the desert your people have managed to take, up to Sunna and its coasts. We will, of course, take it too, but I want the glorious Lancian Military

to sit, waiting in the dark, not sure when the next bomb will be dropped, not sure where the next sniper will come from, not sure when the next healer will disappear for the crime of healing their own people. I want them to realize that they have no control over their own life and death while we build ourselves back into a proper nation.” He voice took on a bitter edge that hurt like a knife. “Then, I will fire upon them and take Sunna back.”

“Lancia won’t stand for this.” Maximillian stared at her in horror, wondering if it would end at Sunna. “Queen Opalesca won’t stand for it. As soon as she finds out—.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll do something nasty.” Nasreen purred, switching from a more colloquial Lancian to formal Lancian, the sort of speech often heard in speeches and in poems written by Poet Laureates and Court officials. “However, until we take Sunna back, and we *will* take it back, we have national housekeeping to do. Your nation’s armies, and you, have ruined the livelihoods and lives of many a Sumestian citizen. The streets are populated with refugees and the homeless, and many families consider themselves lucky because they’re living two to a house.

“You may be a pacifist, Mister Eclipsa. Fine. I respect that. I respect the measures that you have taken to strip yourself of the ability to commit violence. What I don’t respect is that you decided to do this over *here*, after killing many of my countrymen. So. You can put your military-made muscles to work.” She cocked her head, and Maximillian thought of the grinning of a lion before it rips the throat out of its next meal. “We build our houses out of brick here.”

#

Maximillian wasn’t dead, at least. He was stacking bricks alongside a host of other workers, many of whom were men, but plenty of whom were women. On the sidelines, with drinks and fans, sat women, children, and men who were watching the construction with interest. These

people, civilians, didn't wear the decorated masks, so Nasreen's guards stood out all the more.

Maximillian was surprised by how little ill-treatment he had received from the other workers. The first week had been bad, but after the first time someone had tried to deny him his full water ration Miss Bat had stepped in and given them a thorough scolding. Maximillian couldn't understand her very well, but he was able to pick out the Sumestian words for water, work, and dumb-ass, and so it seemed reasonable to assume that Nasreen wanted him to work properly, and not collapse in the heat of the desert sun. After the end of week one, the workers had all heard about his pacifism and how he was here on punishment detail, and collectively decided that the extra pair of hands were needed enough that his labors overrode his sins.

It was burning hot outside, even for Sumestia. Maximillian was woken early so he could eat and be led to the work site while it was still cool out, where he stacked bricks and did the hardest and dullest of the building jobs. While most of the workers only worked one of the day's two shifts, Maximillian had to work both. By the end of the first few weeks, his hands had thick calluses and his skin had turned from a more medium tawny color to a full, dark bronze.

Approximately a month after Eridian was taken, Nasreen visited the construction site. By that point a long row of buildings had been constructed, and contractors were going in and out, installing stoves and proper floors, and sweeping up. Nasreen was clad in robes with rich patterns, and draped over her shoulders was a shawl. It was all much more ornate than anything else Maximillian had seen her in: she looked like a leader even more, now.

"Friends," Nasreen started in Sumestian, and continued to speak in Sumestian for a long time. Maximillian caught the overall gist of the speech: Nasreen was telling everyone about how she was going to make sure everyone had a home to stay in, even if said home was small, and she was also going to make sure that their children had schools. She talked a lot about pride,



honor, and then lions and roses as well, for some reason. Everyone was very moved: they were either desperate, or Nasreen was just that gifted at public speech. Maximillian thought it was probably both.

Nasreen stayed even though the speech was done, and talked with the laborers. Maximillian watched as the majority of the people greeted her with excitement and adoration: not the reaction of a conquered people, but the reaction of someone facing their liberator. Nasreen took it all with grace: of course, it was hard to tell for sure because of the veil she wore.

Maximillian was so caught up with the glee the crowd was radiating that he nearly missed the gleam on top of the roof, but he was still alive because he was observant. Maximillian started nudging people to the side to get a better look, moving laterally to make it less apparent what he was doing, and got a good look: a man of uncertain nationality with a big-ass knife, looming over Nasreen, ready to drop.

“NASREEN!” shouted Maximillian, shoving his way through the crowd. He wasn’t obscenely tall, but he had surprise on his side, so he made it far enough forward that he nearly got bowled over when the assassin jumped down and the crowd tried to get away. Nasreen turned to face him, and Maximilian was terrifyingly certain that there was no way she could move in time. He surged forward and, thinking desperately, grabbed a brick and threw it in front of the assassin. Since it wasn’t actually thrown *at* the assassin, and he didn’t intend to hit the assassin, he was able to do it, but even then the tattoo on his back started to itch, dangerously. The assassin jumped back, and Nasreen raised a hand.

The man crumpled with a wet *snap* like a hideous doll. His bones had snapped like dry pasta: war magic. Maximillian remembered through his adrenaline-addled brain that if Nasreen had the Commander’s Voice, she probably had a natural affinity for war magic.

Miss Bat appeared by his side, grabbing him by the arm.

“We’re leaving. Now.” She jerked him along, and Maximillian got the weird feeling that he wasn’t going to make it to the second building shift.

#

“Did you really think that you, a sweaty pacifist, could stop a man with a large knife a meter away from me?” Nasreen could have either found this concept entirely amusing, or she could have been furious. Her dry tone and veil made it extremely hard to tell.

“Adrenaline is a hell of a drug,” said Maximillian. “Besides, if he’d gotten the drop on you—.”

“He was trying to mask his presence until the end,” said Nasreen, “but I could sense murderous intent coming at me. Until you shouted right after he revealed himself, I was thinking I’d slap him out of midair like a fly: it would have been really dramatic.”

“Breaking his bones with a word *wasn’t*?”

Nasreen shrugged. “You nearly hit him with the brick.”

“I didn’t,” said Maximillian.

“What would have happened if you had?”

“It would have *really* hurt.” Neither Maximillian nor the man who had given him the tattoos had messed around.

“I’m sure you would have been in such blinding pain you would have pissed yourself then and there,” said Nasreen, “but everyone did see you save my life. Half the city seems convinced that it was a Lancian plot, but whether or not your actions are a ploy to gain my trust is a matter of debate.”

“Sorry to inconvenience you.”

“There are some who think you’re in love with me.”

“I’m happily married,” said Maximillian, blandly. “And on top of that, I have a teenage daughter.”

“That doesn’t stop everyone.”

“I’m a decent man,” said Maximillian. “At least, I try to be.”

“I believe you try,” said Nasreen. She reached under her veil to rub something; presumably the bridge of her nose. “I’m going to find you a better use than the double shifts. You’ll just do a single shift of building. In the morning, and then you won’t be your usual self and I won’t have to worry about as many complaints.”

“My usual self is a delight!”

“Your usual self is a pain in the ass.” Nasreen waved him off. “Any questions?”

“Actually, yes,” said Maximillian. “Lions and roses, in your speech?”

“Roses are a national symbol,” said Nasreen, “especially the wild rose, the *nasreen*.”

“Like your name.” Maximillian considered her. “Is it *really* your name?”

“Maybe.”

“Huh.” Maximillian gave her a look. “Lions?”

“Symbol of the democratic government, the Înanan.”

“Înanan?”

“Have you heard of it?” Nasreen’s voice took on an edge.

“Yes.” Maximillian decided to choose his next words carefully. “But I’m sure I know a different version, from Lancia, than you would. Since you are a smart and nice person.”

“The flattery’s a bit much.” Nasreen pulled out a folder. “After the deposition of King Shikîr following the Death of the Gods, the Înanan was formed to rule Sumestia. It comes from

an old name for the lower kingdom, whose name represented ‘the Collective People’. The idea was that our country’s destiny would be in the hands of the people who actually had stakes in its proper ruling, improved women’s rights without the intervention of gods, instead of a handful of people who were rich enough to do whatever they wanted. So, my group’s name is the Înananus Naanaas: the Roses of Înanan. I’m sure you Lancians are told differently.”

“That it was unpopular, incompetent, and mob rule,” said Maximillian. “We have our own Senate, but the Queen still holds a lot of power.”

“We picked our executives for almost fifty years.” Nasreen sounded proud. “None of this lifetime-appointment business: a maximum of ten years. It worked well. The people loved the ability to hold their ministers accountable for what they did. The Înanan abolished those stupid laws forbidding criticism of the government, established a public school system, and there was almost a formal healthcare system.”

“And the government fell, still?” Maximillian leaned forward. “Even though it was so popular?”

“Well, even the forces of democracy have trouble facing a foreign invasion,” said Nasreen. “The Ikhta are supporters of a return to monarchy, but didn’t have half the popular support they claimed. So, they talked your Queen into invading and putting a King back on the throne.”

“And we didn’t put the King they wanted on?”

“Nîqi kre Kirnaaua was a rat bastard, but he was an opinionated, stubborn rat bastard and would make a poor puppet ruler, which is what your Queen wanted.” Nasreen shrugged. “So he was killed.”

Maximillian’s throat went dry. “I was told it was an accident.”

“Yes, he was accidentally shot three times in the back of the head at point blank range. Terrible, really.” Nasreen would have made a terrific comedian with her sarcasm.

“Gods damn it all to shit!” Maximillian laughed and slapped the table. One of Nasreen’s guards jumped. The other made a noise like he was laughing under his mask. “So that was a lie too?”

“I really must applaud your government,” said Nasreen. “They have excellent propaganda ministers: your own people think that they aren’t being lied to. Ingenious, really. Do you know how they do it?”

“TV and movies?”

“Yes, that too. But through their schools, mainly.” Nasreen handed Maximillian a folder. “Education is a powerful thing, and a dangerous weapon when those who are educated don’t like you.”

Maximillian opened the folder. What he saw made him want to shut it, immediately. But he felt that he had to look through it all, and to see for himself the horrors his own countrymen had committed, and which he had been trained to perform. The merciful ones were the ones with just blood, perversely. The worst one was a line of bodies of men and women in button-ups and slacks, paired with more traditional desert clothes, on pavement that had been painted with bright colors to resemble a sky. There was a sun with a smiley face visible behind a dead woman, her brain visible through the crushed remains of her skull.

“This is what happens to Sumestian teachers,” said Nasreen, pointing to a picture of a pile of charred corpses. “I was there for that one. My village didn’t have a school: there was a man who drove us in a bus to the nearest one. We arrived when they were piling the bodies. The man who drove the bus bought us time to escape with his own life. He was a nobody who had

never held a weapon in his life, and he had twenty times the heroism in his left foot than can be found in the entire Lancian army.”

Nasreen’s voice was tense, like she was trying not to cry. Maximillian could do nothing but hang his head while he talked, staring at the charred corpses.

“What can I do, then?” asked Maximillian.

There was silence.

“I’m sorry?”

“What do you want me to say?” asked Maximillian. “I can apologize, but I didn’t do this. If I had, you would have killed me already.” Nasreen didn’t deny it. “You seem like the sort of person who believes in justice: is there much else that this deserves?” Maximillian gestured at the pictures. “But there is some atonement that has to be done. Apologies won’t do that. So, what do I do to convince you that I actually care, that I want to make things right as much as I can?” Fully aware what he was offering, Maximillian took a deep breath. “How can I help the Inananus Naanaas?” He stumbled over the pronunciation, but held his ground.

There was dead silence in the room.

“There are three things,” said Nasreen, finally.

“Three?”

“You’re going to keep working with the building team,” said Nasreen. “And you can help repair our temples and schools: they were badly damaged by the occupation. I’m also going to have you work with a professor I know: she’s teaching people to read and write who haven’t learned because the schools were shut down. You’ll learn Sumentian, and if she wants you to you’ll teach every lick of Lancian you know.”

“Okay.”

“And when I ask you, you’ll don a mask and robes and look imposing.” Nasreen eyed Maximillian. “You have the tattoo, but there are places that need guards, and we’re stretched thin. I don’t expect you to do anything, unless you want to use yourself as a meat shield, but you just need to look scary.”

“That might be hard.” Maximillian swallowed.

“What will?”

“Looking scary.”

Nasreen groaned.

#

While his activities were physically less taxing, Maximillian felt even more exhausted at the end of each new day. He chalked that up to the teaching. While a lot of the students were adults, most of the students were children, and Maximillian had almost forgotten how stressful it was to deal with Celeste when she was that age, much less about fifteen Celestes who only barely understood a word he was saying. His only mercy was that Jadris, the woman teaching the class, spoke fluent Lancian.

“I studied abroad,” she explained, when he helped her clean. “I went to a small university up north, and it was so cold all the time, but I loved it. I saw snow for the first time in my life, and took pictures for my family and friends back home.”

Maximillian was afraid to ask if she still had those pictures, or if they’d been destroyed or lost in the nearly fifteen years since the start of the war. Jadris had a large, cord-like scar on her hand, and it made it difficult for her to write with chalk on the board, so she had Maximillian help her, pass out slates for writing, and just generally make things run smoothly. It was hard enough to keep things running during class, but during clean up-times she peppered him with a

combination of difficult philosophical and ethical questions, alongside riddles. Maximillian hated riddles, they never made any sense to him.

“A man in white wears an orange cap and has black hair,” said Jadris, as an example of one of the riddles she liked to quote. “When he wears the cap he shrinks, and yet he doesn’t care.”

“A man with a cursed hat?”

“No, try again.”

An hour later, the answer would turn out to be a candle. It was only marginally worse than a debate as to which came first: Lady Umami the Goddess of the Sea, or Lady Solla the Goddess of the Heavens.

“Obviously the major scholarly agreement is that Solla predates Tempesta, at least in concept, but the question of when Sea Worship began to occur relative to Sky Worship is a major question in the field of Theological History. We know that they didn’t branch off from a different kind of worship, like Agriculture branched off of Life or Night came out of Death, and arose on their own, similar to Death worship, but the order could tell us a lot about the metaphysical understanding that ancient humans had about the world.”

“And not crows?” Maximillian asked, mostly to divert her into a lecture.

“Well, we know from oral histories and archaeological data that crows didn’t gain sapience on a large scale until after several Gods had come into being, not to mention that they have their own concepts of these things. And that’s not as good of a distraction as you think it is!”

“It worked once!” Maximillian huffed a sigh. “It would have to be Lady Solla, first.”

“Why?”



“Is hometown pride not good enough?”

“No.”

Maximillian groaned. “Well, desert people, or people who live inland, they wouldn’t know enough about the sea to have a Goddess for it, would they?”

“Well, true, but Sea Magic doesn’t just work on salt water,” said Jadris. “It also works on freshwater, and it can be used to desalinate seawater, so one could argue that Lady Ummi is simply an amalgamation of concepts about water focused around Archipelagan concepts, since Ummi originates from there.”

“Both at the same time, then.”

“Why?”

“Because it would make a bunch of academics froth at the mouth and that sounds funny to me.”

Jadris cackled.

Sometimes, a messenger would pull Maximillian out of a class, or even out of building duty, and he’d swap masks and robes with a guard, who’d run off to do something important. Maximillian would then stand or sit by a door, silently, for a few hours. While everyone knew of the pacifist Lancian that Nasreen had made her pet project, the masks turned him into another person. The eyeholes were the only part of him that anyone saw, and brown eyes weren’t exactly rare enough to be identifying.

Maximillian didn’t mind standing around, but the silence and lack of anything to do made him think, and he kept thinking about his family, back home. One of the things that almost kept him from committing to pacifism was what it would do to his family, socially. Naomi had been proud, and he was sure that she could handle it, but Celeste was a different story. She was proud

like her mother, but she also had an activist, nonconformist bent that made her a social outcast, even before she'd come out and rejected that friend of hers, Sol-something-or-other, who was going to be the head of the Main Temple of Solla Lunis. Naomi had begged Celeste to take it back, to apologize and place herself back into the other girl's social circle. Not only had Celeste vehemently refused, but she'd never forgiven Naomi for not supporting her. Maximillian thought about that argument, and the idea of not being there for either of his favorite girls was almost enough to make him cry, even though every concept of masculinity ingrained in his body said not to.

Celeste had always taken after Maximillian's own stubborn nature, and now he looked at where he was and what he was doing and wondered if Celeste would be able to escape the black hole of her country's nationalism before it turned her into a murderer too. He'd killed and killed for Queen and Kingdom, and the guilt had eaten him inside out as the excuses of making a better life for the people he was murdering grew thinner and thinner. He didn't know how someone could sleep at night, after killing school teachers and laying the bodies out on the concrete in the burning sun. He'd only seen a picture, and some nights he couldn't close his eyes without seeing the contents of that folder.

"What do you do when they take you away?" asked one of his fellow builders, when Maximillian returned the next day.

"Nasreen asks me about Lancia," said Maximillian. His Sumestian was officially conversational. "Hey, could you please help me lift this beam up? It's not straight." He meant level, but couldn't remember the word. His companion, who was much shorter than Maximillian and had choppy, brown hair, ended up standing on a beam to provide a counterweight while Maximillian stacked a brick underneath it.

“Do you see her face?” asked the builder. Maximillian was terrible with names, but he thought the builder’s name was Labtha.

“No,” said Maximillian. “I don’t think anyone does.”

They stacked bricks together.

“Do you think she’s old?” asked Labtha. “I’m curious.”

“She’s younger than I am,” said Maximillian.

“I will admit,” said Labtha. “I never thought I’d meet a Lancian like you.”

“Like me how?”

“Not a hateful bastard.”

Maximillian sighed. “I’ll be glad when this war is over.”

“Well, it won’t end until we take back everything that’s ours,” said Labtha. “And that may take going to Lancia itself.”

Maximillian nearly dropped a brick on his foot. “*What?*”

“Well, it’s just—!” Labtha waved his hands at Maximillian. “It’s so we can retrieve the Five Cultural Treasures!”

“I thought they were in Eridian!”

“The Lancians took them before the city was captured,” said Labtha. “From here to Sunna, and then to Contiala, or so I heard.”

Any further discussions of the war effort were cut off by a commotion over by the edge of the construction area. Maximillian and Labtha exchanged glances and pushed closer. Several men wearing the yellow sashes of the Ikhta were harassing a group of people, predominantly women, at the edge of the construction zone.

“Hey now!” said Maximillian. “What seems to be the trouble, friends?”

“You’re no friend of ours!” The leader of the Ikhta men spat at Maximillian.

“If you insist,” said Maximillian. “I thought your people and the Inanan had a truce.”

“Be that as it may, that’s no excuse for whores to be constructing a holy place!”

The women eyed the Ikhta men angrily, and a pair of teenagers, a boy and a girl, angrily stepped forward. Maximillian barred their way with an arm.

“I don’t see you being constructive,” said Maximillian. “Whatever their job is, they’re more useful than you are right now. Or, would you like to take their places?”

“You shouldn’t be working on this either,” snapped one of the Ikhta. “Or are you busy staining these stones with blood too, like your bitch of a leader demands?”

“That’s not very nice,” said Maximillian as he suppressed a fantasy where he kicked the man in the balls.

“You should watch your language, friend!” Labtha stepped forward. “The good pacifist here may not strike back, but not all of us have taken vows like his!” He picked up a large trowel and waved it. “I, for one, don’t take kindly to you insulting the faction who kicked the invaders out, especially when you wear the colors of those who invited them *in!*”

“You’re not strong enough to fend off five men!” said the leader of the group.

“I’m strong enough to open five doors,” said Labtha, smugly. Maximillian was pretty sure that was an innuendo he didn’t get. The Ikhta leader’s face purpled, which only confirmed Maximillian’s suspicions.

“I’m strong enough to fend off ten men.” A man in robes and a mask stepped forward. He was a big and broad-shouldered fellow who wore a mask painted like a sun between deer antlers that he swapped with Maximillian often. “Leave, now, before we have to waste a wheelbarrow carting your corpses back to your coward search-dog master.”

Maximillian had no idea what the last bit meant, but the threat of a mage handing their asses to them convinced the Ikhta to leave. Sun-Mask turned to the assembled workers.

“Forgive me for not arriving faster,” said Sun-Mask.

“Thanks for arriving,” said Labtha, suddenly looking tired.

“They’re bold,” said the female twin.

“It’s a good time for them to try and grab for power,” said Sun-Mask. “I’ll talk to Miss Nasreen about increasing guards. Are you going to be okay, when you return home?”

“I don’t live near any Ikhta quarter,” said Labtha.

The women muttered to themselves, but didn’t seem too scared. In fact, they looked relieved that the Ikhta men were gone. They talked to Sun-Mask, and Maximillian and Labtha went back to the wall they were supposed to be building.

“Cheer up, friend,” said Labtha. “I’m sure Īnananus Naanaas will deal with them soon enough.”

Maximillian sighed. “After she gets done liberating the whole continent, I’m sure.”

#

Nasreen allowed Maximillian to go into the officer’s lounge on holidays when there wasn’t any work or teaching to be done, instead of solely being confined to his room alone. Since most things short of pain were preferable to being locked in his holding room all day, Maximillian relished the ability to sit on his ass and shoot the shit with the few people in the lounge who were fine with talking to him. It was also an interesting place to people-watch, since the lounge was also where the Īnananus Naanaas officers tended to remove their masks and outer robes.

Miss Bat had dark hair, the same color as the reddish black cup lilies grew in a lot in the living room back home. Miss Bat wore her hair short, with locks of it poking out under the cap

that nearly everyone, regardless of gender, wore in Sumestia. She had heterochromia, with one eye a pale blue and the other a warm brown. She dressed professionally, and Maximillian was pretty sure she held a high rank in the Īnananus Naanaas.

Miss Bat had two friends, men (or so Maximillian assumed) who she regularly ate and sat with, and who tolerated Maximillian's presence. One was Sun-Mask, who had ruddy skin and brown, curly hair, and the other was skinny and paler, with acne scars and a thick accent that made it impossible for Maximillian to understand him.

"You know, Miss Bat," said Maximillian, "I feel like we're forming a bond."

"Are we?" Miss Bat looked like she wished her tea was spiked with grain spirit.

"We're bonding," said Maximillian. "So, uh. I heard a phrase from a man at the build site today."

"Did he insult you?"

"No, he dropped a brick on his toe."

"I'm not translating swears."

"Well, I understood *most* of it, but I don't understand some of the nuance—."

"Is he making a pass at you?" asked Sun-Mask, in Sumestian.

Miss Bat responded in Sumestian. "No, he's just being annoying."

"Nasreen would teach me swear words," said Maximillian in Lancian.

Miss Bat looked like she was about to laugh at that comment, but then she got a sad look on her face.

"Nasreen is young at heart," she said, and then changed the subject.

That was basically what their conversations were like, but it was better than nothing: Nasreen hadn't sent a single word of message to Maximillian.

“Hoka,” said Skinny Man, which meant “star,” and then he rattled off a lot of words that Maximillian couldn’t pick out thanks to his accent. Miss Bat’s face did a funny contortion, and she told him that he was a three-fingered leatherworker, which felt like it was wrong but wasn’t. Judging from the way Skinny Man turned purple, and Big and Broad stifled laughter, Maximillian assumed it was an insult and filed it away to use later.

“What did he say?”

“He told me you have a nice ass,” said Miss Bat.

“Hot like a star?”

“I—! What?” She looked confused.

“Hoka?”

Miss Bat blinked. “No. That’s my. Er. Name.”

“Your name?”

“My name.”

“Your real name?”

“It’s complicated,” said Miss Bat. “I used it as a code name, but things have changed so much with me since I joined...” She glanced to the side, nervous.

Maximillian thought about the day Celeste had told him that her name was Celeste, and why she’d started to grow her hair out and experiment with more feminine clothes. He nodded.

“Do *I* get a codename?”

Miss Bat smiled, all tooth. “We will happily give you a code name.”

“You’re going to give me a code name that’s an insult, aren’t you?”

“We may hold a contest for the best one,” said Miss Bat, deadpan. “Since I’m sure the base needs something fun to pass the time.”

Skinny appeared to be half-following the conversation, or at least was dubbing the conversation to the amusement of Tall and Broad.

“After all,” continued Miss Bat, “we can’t all have Nasreen *personally* giving us as many jobs as she gives you.”

Maximillian didn’t think that it was such a great thing, but there was no accounting for taste. He was about to make a snarky remark to that effect when Miss Bat’s pager went off (yes, the mysterious freedom fighter group lead by a mysterious veiled woman used pagers). She checked it, and she stood up and started to quickly shrug her robes on. Sun-Mask started to stand up, but Miss Bat waved him off and turned to Maximillian.

“Nasreen has called us both,” she explained in Lancian. “There’s someone important coming.”

“Who?” asked Maximillian. “A Lancian?”

“She didn’t say. Come on.” Miss Bat gestured Maximillian forward. Maximillian sighed, wrapped himself in the light jacket he’d started to wear as the days turned chillier, and followed her out.

“Why would she have a visitor?” asked Maximillian. “The Ikhta?”

“Don’t gossip.”

“Well, they’re harassing people! It’s not gossip to ask if she’s going to do something about it!”

“If she had any plans, I’d tell you.”

Maximillian was pretty sure that Nasreen had a plan for everything, and that every plan she had Miss Bat at least kind of knew about. Therefore, this was probably a cue for him to shut up. Which he decided to do. For once.



When they were both let into Nasreen's office, the stranger turned to look at them, even though Nasreen appeared to be talking to her. Maximillian watched, curious.

The woman was almost certainly from the continent of Taije, though maybe she was from some of the southern or western islands in the Great Archipelago. She had large, monolid eyes with long lashes, red makeup on her eyes, cheeks, and the bridge of her nose, and long black hair. Her skin was pale, but it was too uniform-looking, too strange. Maximillian wondered if this was some crow who had a defective feather cloak, but then the stranger whipped off her cloak and set it on a chair, and the ball joints on her arms glittered in the low light.

Maximillian stared in awe as the woman, or maybe construct, stood and looked up into Nasreen's eyes. She spoke in a language that Maximillian didn't understand, but it definitely wasn't any Irdanian language Maximillian had heard, nor was it a language that sounded like it came from the continent Taije. It was beautiful, but even though he felt like he should have been able to, he wasn't able to understand a single word. Nasreen responded in kind, and they talked together for several minutes. Finally, Nasreen held up a hand.

"We're neglecting everyone else," she said, in Sumentian. "Sister Jian, if you please?"

"I'm no sister of yours," responded the woman, Jian, in Lancian. "I came here because you tell me you can help me, and because you proved you knew my mother. But I still don't trust you, especially not to the point where I am able to tolerate being referred to as 'sister' by you.

"Also, who is he?" Jian pointed at Maximillian. "He's not wearing one of your masks."

"He's a pacifist," said Nasreen. "Also, he's funny."

"He's dangerous. Even a pacifist could tell the enemy where—."

"He's a Lancian pacifist," said Nasreen. "The Lancians treat pacifists worse than they do

islanders. It's *personal* with them."

At the mention of islanders, Jian flinched. Archipelagan, then, it seemed. But Maximillian couldn't think of a reason why Lancia would pick a fight with one of the Archipelago countries, and it would have had to be a recent affair. He hadn't heard of even a whisper of a new war when he was still in contact with Lancia. Then again, he hadn't heard of Inananus Naanaas before they took over a whole city.

"You are a very cruel person," said Jian.

"Not very," said Nasreen. "I try not to be cruel, but you are someone who's easily bogged down in minor details when you really shouldn't be."

"Details are important," said Jian. "Anyone can see a big picture. It's the details which tell you the important things."

"I think you underestimate how hard it can be to tell the big picture for what it is." Nasreen shrugged. "Regardless, I'm glad you're here. I take it you're not here to pledge loyalty to me?"

"My loyalty only lies with the Gods," said Jian. "That being said, I will happily fight alongside you, given our mutual enemy, Queen Opalesca."

"Do you remember the project your country undertook?" asked Nasreen. She turned to Maximillian. "To find the First and Last Battlefield?"

"Yes, and it was stupid," said Maximillian.

"Very stupid," echoed Jian. "Those who succeeded did not survive."

Maximillian felt cold. He looked at her, and the metal she was made out of. She must be very strong, he thought to himself. "You killed them?"

"I didn't wish to kill them," said Jian. "But they refused to reason with me, and they

killed other inhabitants of the island. They gave us blankets with pox virus, and when I confronted them they tried to murder me. I am Jian, the Sentinel, and I had to protect them.”

“With your bare hands?” asked Miss Bat.

“I have a guandao which I used. It was made for me by Duanzidi herself. It is always as sharp as I need it to be.”

“Duanzidi?” Maximillian snapped his fingers. “Ah, yes, I see. Who are you, really, Miss Jian the Sentinel? You seem to know Lady Duanzidi of the Forge personally.”

Nasreen said something in the same language from before. Whatever she said, it made Jian wrinkle her nose.

“She made me,” said Jian. “By all rights, she is my mother. I was brought into being the evening before she went to the final battle. She predicted that, before she could be reborn and come into her own as Goddess of the Forge again, people would be able to come to the island by their own hands and works.”

“A Forge Goddess?” breathed Miss Bat. She looked like she was about to fall down on her knees. Maximillian thought he might join her. A goddess, even a minor goddess, was more than anyone in Maximillian’s generation had thought they’d meet until maybe the next generation came of age and the new, reborn gods proved themselves with their Divine Keys. Even then, to see one in person was almost surreal. Maximillian thought he needed to be pinched. How could Nasreen possibly have *gotten* her?

“Jian inclined her head, and then turned to Nasreen. She asked her a question in the strange language, and Nasreen responded. Jian shook her head.

“Lady Jian will, of course, be helping us retake Sunna and settle the current situation with the Ikhta,” said Nasreen. “But I asked her to arrive early so she could become familiar with our

forces.”

Miss Bat nodded like she understood what was going on.

“I’m more than happy to help in your fight against tyranny,” said Jian.

“Good,” said Nasreen. “Hoka?”

“Yes?” asked Miss Bat.

“Guide Lady Jian around and show her the new buildings and hospitals. I’ll be busy.

Maximillian can fill in for you on sentry duty.”

Miss Bat tensed.

“It’s only temporary,” said Nasreen.

“But considering everything?” Miss Bat hesitated.

Nasreen stepped out from behind her desk, walked over to Miss Bat, and gave her a hug.

“Allow everyone to know you as I do, sister.” She said it in Sumestian, using a word that implied sisterhood as a fraternal concept more than any specific familial connection, but it still resonated similarly.

They stood for a long moment, and then Miss Bat hugged Nasreen and took a step back. Maximillian, feeling bereft, stepped forward and patted her on the shoulder in a paternal way.

“Have fun,” he said.

Miss Bat snorted, but she seemed grateful all the same. She escorted Jian out of the office, and shut the door behind them. Once they were gone, Nasreen turned to Maximillian.

“Apologies for bringing you in on your day off,” she said.

“Well, I assume it’s going to be something important, if Miss Bat was supposed to be there and not poor, humble me.”

“There are some groups whom the Ikhta don’t take kindly to who are, to put it mildly,

concerned that their celebrations might be interrupted tonight,” said Nasreen. “Hoka was going to stand guard at one of them, with an apprentice partner.”

“Just her and some newbie?”

“She’s a good mage,” said Nasreen. “Not as good at war magic as I am, but still good.”

“High praise from you,” said Maximillian. “I assume I don’t look anything like her.”

“Your excuse is that you’re not her, but someone else.” Nasreen picked up a mask, painted with the blue moon, orange sun, and white star used to depict the general concept of the Solla Lunis and her heavens.

“I think I need fire-orange hair for this,” said Maximillian.

“It’ll do for a night,” said Nasreen.

“Okay, okay,” said Maximillian. “By the way. I have a question.”

“What?”

“Is it true you’re planning to invade Lancia?”

Nasreen froze, but quickly collected herself. “Don’t pay too much attention to rumors.”

“It’s not much of a rumor,” said Maximillian. “But it does make sense, from what I hear. The Five Divine Treasures?”

“*Cultural* Treasures. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Is it true?”

“What if it were?” asked Nasreen. “What would you do? What *could* you do? You can’t stop me, even if you hadn’t renounced violence itself. You’re here to atone. So atone, and leave the warcraft to those of us who know what it’s really about.”

“I know enough to know what it would look like if you *do* invade.”

“And you know that *how*?” Nasreen’s voice dripped with venom.

It hit like it was supposed to, but Maximillian didn't pull away.

"I'll help you find another way, but please—."

"I don't talk about war plans with traitors," snapped Nasreen. "Even if they're you. Get out and get ready, and go out and do something useful with your life."

Maximillian thought about pressing the issue, but decided to not. Better to live and fight, or plead, another day.

"Okay, then," said Maximillian. "As you wish." He took a long, deep breath and whirled around, storming out.

#

The party had food, which made it excellent. There were mostly little bits of bread and otherwise cheap little dishes, but it was good and everyone seemed happy. Maximillian walked in the door with the apprentice mage, some kid who'd painted a rose on his mask and was probably still old enough to be in school. Maximillian felt like he'd never been that young.

The party was being held in a block of tiny apartments that had only recently been repaired and deemed safe for occupancy. There were lots of families, but not too many couples, and some of the families were being led by teenagers who had looks in their eyes that would have looked haunting on a much older person, much less a kid his own daughter's age. The idea of his daughter having to lead her own family made Maximillian lean against the wall to keep steady.

At about sundown, Jadris walked in, accompanied by more people, and the party properly got started in the little walled courtyard in front of the apartments, with a door to keep strangers and animals out, propped open for circulation. Maximillian was careful not to speak. While he could understand Sumestian well enough, he still had an accent that told everyone that he was

Lancian, and therefore Nasreen's pet pacifist. So, he stood silent and watched.

The holiday's main focus was an offering to Wardamya, in spirit. Roses, the flower that represented blood and death due to their thorny stems and red blossoms, were burned to take the place of any actual blood being shed. Today, it seemed like it was more of a celebration of Eridian's recapture. A fire had been lit in the courtyard, and a mix of real roses and crepe-paper flowers were being thrown on the fire while the adults started to sing and have fun. Well, as much fun as one could have with children underfoot.

Maximillian had mostly cooled down after his argument with Nasreen by this point. He wished he had someone he could talk to, and he wished he wasn't in such a bad mood while there was a party supposed to be going on. He sat there, stewing in his own thoughts, deciding that he was going to calm down and have as much fuss as he could on duty. That made it the perfect time for a woman holding a small child to run in, ragged and breathing hard.

"Help me!" She was breathing hard. "My husband—! I tried to run from him, but he found me and he's chasing me with his friends!" She looked hopefully at Maximillian and Rose Mask, and Maximillian wished he had Miss Bat with him, or Sun-Mask. "He's Ikhta, they're right outside!"

Maximillian ran over to the door like an idiot and looked out. He saw men in desert robes. Though it was hard to make out, he was pretty sure they were all wearing yellow, and they had cloth masks over the lower halves of their faces to make it harder for anyone to identify them later. That was good: they hoped to leave people alive. They'd seen her come in, but they'd also seen Maximillian and were clearly trying to figure out if it would be worth it to storm the place and risk getting on the wrong side of a war mage.

"What's going on?" Jadris pushed forward, and Maximillian dropped down and pulled

her close.

“Ikhta,” he whispered. “A lot of them.”

Jadris started at the sound of his voice.

“It’ll take too long to explain. Is there an escape route?”

“Yes, of course. Why would there not be one?”

“Get everyone out, and go somewhere safe. To the nearest guard station, or to a mage’s home. I’ll buy us some time.”

“*How?*”

“I have a plan.” That was a lie. Maximillian didn’t have a plan at all.

Jadris stared at him, and then looked at Rose Mask, who looked terrified even with the mask. Maximillian gestured him over, and he came, scrambling.

“What do we do?” she asked.

“I need you to hold the door,” said Maximillian.

Rose Mask jerked at his accent, and Jadris and Maximillian shushed her in unison.

“Hold the door, and make sure everyone gets out safely.” Maximillian looked back out the window. “I’ll stall.”

“They’ll kill you,” whispered Rose Mask.

“They’re not here for a massacre,” said Maximillian. “Your priority is getting everyone out. Okay?”

Rose Mask gulped, but nodded. Maximillian stood up, and with more confidence than he felt, he swaggered out the door, into the night, and he shut the door behind him. He heard it lock. He heard someone push furniture against it. He took a deep breath and walked forward.

“Hello there, friends!” He tried to deepen his voice and speak clearly, trying to channel



Nasreen's confidence. "Have you come for the food?"

"Stand aside," said the leader of the Ikhta men. "We're not here for you."

"Ah, but you are here for someone!" Maximillian held a hand up. "Come on, now, we're allies, remember? I'm sure it wouldn't be conducive to the combined war effort if you start taking people out of their homes in the dead of night."

"My wife has stolen our son and run," said a man. "They're in there, with the prostitutes and the radicals. I want them back."

"Why not ask nicely?" Maximillian said, as if the answer wasn't obvious. Did they think he was stupid, or a pig?

"She's not well in the head," said the man.

"Hysteria?" snarked Maximillian. "I hear that it's a very common disease in wives who run from their husbands."

"Do you think we're stupid?" snapped the leader.

"He does!" a second man spoke up. Maximillian looked over at the sound of a voice he'd heard before. "That's the Lancian dog! The pacifist! We're being tricked!"

"Your ears are playing tricks on you!" Maximillian laughed.

"Quick, get past him!" shouted the leader. "Into the house!"

Maximillian swore and charged forward, trying to grab at and stop the men without hurting them, but the lead man held out his hand. His eyes glowed red with magic, and Maximillian's legs seized and bloomed with pain, propelling him forward onto the ground.

The leader and several other men ran around Maximillian, but the man from the work site and a few of his fellows stopped. The man from before kicked Maximillian onto his side. Maximillian groaned and tried to curl into a fetal position, but his legs refused to cooperate, like

someone had run them over with a truck.

“Does it hurt?” asked the man from before, mockingly. “Does it hurt, little dog?”

Maximillian opened his mouth to say something mocking, but nearly bit his tongue in half when he was kicked again.

“Shut up!” The man from before kicked Maximillian again. “Asshole. The Inanan and you, you’re all bastards and radical scum, trying to take away the King’s rights!”

“Look at how brave you are,” Maximillian said, high off of the certainty that he was about to die. “Beating a man who can’t even fight back.”

This time, Maximillian was kicked in the head. He felt his nose broke, and he bit down on his tongue enough to draw blood.

“Can’t or won’t!” The man from before stomped down on Maximillian’s arm, snapping his radius and ulna like dried pasta. Maximillian screamed.

“Dammit!” shouted a voice from the apartment block. “They’ve all run, the woman and everyone else!”

“All of them?”

“*All of them!* They had a bolt hole!”

“You were buying them time,” breathed the man from before, looking down at Maximillian. Maximillian grinned up at him with blood-stained teeth.

What followed was the most merciless beating Maximillian had sustained in his life. It was one thing to be beaten by men who hated you. It was another to be beaten by men who hated you because you denied them something they thought they deserved. Maximillian curled up into a fetal position, sheltering his head with his one good arm, and let the blows come, enduring as best he could according to his training. The Ikhta men were so angry at him for depriving them

of their newest toy that they didn't bother with weapons or magic: they were going to kill him with their bare hands. It could have lasted minutes, could have been an hour. He'd been kicked in the head too many times to tell. It only ended when someone shouted something, right when Maximillian was making his peace with the Gods.

"New men?" said one of his torturers.

Maximillian looked up and saw someone wearing nondescript robes and a mask over the lower half of their face. Above the mask were a pair of eyes that didn't match. One was pale blue, and one was warm brown.

"Hoka?" asked Maximillian, indistinguishable past the blood.

Miss Bat's eyes glowed bright and fiery, and she charged forward. Before she could get to them, purple and silver flashed forward. Jian slashed in an arc around her with a giant polearm, her *guandao*. Bodies thudded to the ground, not even gurgling.

"How useless," Jian said. "Miss Hoka?"

"Dammit, Maximillian, you fool!" Miss Bat ran forward and dropped to her knees.

Maximillian gargled at her. Black spots sparkled across his vision.

"The other are safe," she said. "You saved them."

Good, thought Maximillian. Good. He saved them. He thought about everyone in there: rose Mask. Jadris. Those children that reminded him of his own daughter. Is this atonement enough, he wondered.

Miss Bat, no, Hoka, was shouting at him, but he was too far gone to understand her. He slipped out the back of his own mind and into a dreamless void. He didn't expect to come out of it. At least this way, he might have done something useful with his life. Right?

Maximillian woke up in a hospital room. He looked around to make sure he wasn't actually dead, and after confirming he wasn't, he sighed. His body barely hurt, but he had an IV sticking out of his arm that probably contributed to that. His limbs, despite being bruised and broken, looked fine and were in splints instead of casts. Life magic, perhaps? Maximillian raised his arm that had been broken via stomping and waved it around. It didn't hurt. Yeah, definitely magic, he decided.

The door opened, and someone stepped in.

"Hello, idiot," said Nasreen.

"Hi," said Maximillian. "I saved a bunch of lives and almost died. No need to thank me or anything."

Nasreen slammed the door shut. Maximillian had to take a second to remind himself that she'd had people spend magic and effort healing him and thus was probably not going to kill him. Probably.

"You threw yourself into a situation where you were certain to get killed," said Nasreen.

"Did not."

"Don't *lie!*" Nasreen stormed forward. "What did you think would happen? Did you think you'd be able to talk them out of it? Did you think that going alone, with no magic or weapons, and a vow of pacifism, wouldn't result in you being beaten to death and dumped in a gutter, or on my *doorstep?*"

Maximillian looked blankly at her. "It was a heroic thing to do."

"No!" Nasreen stomped her feet. "It was stupid! What, do you think it's heroic to throw your life away, like a gods-damned roadblock? You're a person, not a hunk of concrete!"

"I made the call," said Maximillian. "I'm one person, and everyone else needed my

protection!”

“You can’t protect anyone if you’re a corpse!” Nasreen huffed and turned around.

“You’re more use alive than dead.”

“Why?” asked Maximillian. “So you can invade Lancia?”

“No,” said Nasreen. “An invasion is the last thing we want.” She paused. “The only problem is that it seems like we might have to.”

“Why?” Maximillian sat up. “What could possibly be worth invading Lancia? How important are these Five Treasures?”

“All five are very important,” said Nasreen, “but we only need one: the War Set.”

“War Set?”

“One of the Five Cultural Treasures, despite being two objects, is the Sword and Shield of Wardamya.”

Maximillian’s face paled. “Her Divine Key?”

“You know the story about what happens when Wardamya awakens, I assume.”

“She...” Maximillian swallowed. “She comes to bring war to a foreign land, because they stole her sword and shield.”

“The identity of the sword and shield is kept a secret,” said Nasreen. “Only a few knew that it was kept in secret with the treasures. But those treasures, in turn, were guarded by the royal family, who may have told the Lancians.”

“You think Queen Opalesca knows, and took. No. *Stole* the Sword and Shield?”

Nasreen nodded.

Maximillian slumped back in his bed. “And you want it back. Why? If I remember my legends right, the only one who can successfully take it back is—.” He froze. “Wardamya.

Herself.” He looked up at Nasreen. He looked down at his hands and ran the math through his head. He looked back up at Nasreen. “How old *are* you, actually?”

Nasreen, slowly, reached up and took off her hat, and the veil came off with it. She was small, and even though she struck him as rather skinny, Maximillian could still see a roundness and softness to her that marked her as a teenager, still. She had eyes that had a reddish tinge to them, a sign of an extensive use of war magic that Maximillian usually only saw in career war mages who had children Nasreen’s age. She had a scar running down the side of her jaw to her chin, and curly, thick, black hair.

“You’re my daughter’s age.” Maximillian felt like someone had knocked him to the ground. “You’re a *child*. What are you doing leading freedom fighters?”

“Someone has to,” said Nasreen. “Do you know how only people who really understand their magical domain can be great mages? I understand what war is, Maximillian Eclipsa. War is suffering. It’s not glory. It’s the innocent people, the *children*, that you step on to get what you want. And my country’s been stepped on plenty.” She stared down at him, and Maximillian shivered. He didn’t like the look of her eyes, like someone infinitely powerful had just noticed him.

“You’ve figured it out, haven’t you?” she asked.

“I mean. I suspected.” Maximillian took a deep breath to steady himself. “Lady Jian the Sentinel. She’s a minor goddess. I wondered how you’d managed to get her over here, but you spoke to her in that strange language. Godspoke, right?”

Nasreen nodded.

“You can use the Commander’s Voice,” said Maximillian. “Why do you *need* the Sword and Shield? You don’t need a Divine Key if you have a minor goddess and a signature power

backing you up!”

“They won’t accept it,” said Nasreen. “I’m nobody. I’m Nasreen, a girl with a common name, the faceless leader of a group Lancia doesn’t see as legitimate. The Queen and everyone in power is invested in proving themselves the most powerful, and they won’t accept being told ‘no’. If I tried to claim I was Wardamya now, they’d call me a fake and accuse me of being a blasphemer, and then I’d have played my hand. No. I’m going to retake Sunna, and the rest of Eridian, and help set up a civilian government here. When the war ends, my people deserve stability, and to oust the few who think they deserve everything.” She smiled. “I’m going to be *very* busy.”

“So will I, it sounds like,” said Maximillian. “I’m going to miss my daughter’s high school graduation.”

“If I could, I’d smuggle your family here.” Nasreen sighed. “I looked into it, after you tried to save me that first time.”

“You’d like Celeste,” said Maximillian. “I think you’d get along really well.”

“I’ll have to meet her someday.” Nasreen turned her head away. “I’ll need to wait for Solla Lunis to awaken, and for Animari and Mortia as well. They’ll help me, and they know more about Lancia than I do. Then, I’ll take care of the Queen. I’ll end the war.”

“Easier said than done,” said Maximillian.

“It’s something only a goddess could do.”

“What’s it like?” asked Maximillian.

Nasreen thought about it. “It’s strange. I don’t remember everything, but I have dreams where I remember things. Sages I heard about in folktales. Events I read about in books. Sometimes I recognize the faces, and they’re people I know. Sometimes they show me what to

do, and sometimes I see things I want to avoid. I've seen Queen Opalesca in my dreams, or at least, I've seen one of her past lives." Nasreen looked at Maximillian. "She's not a very good person."

Maximillian laughed. "Hey, kiddo?"

"Yes?" Nasreen looked like she was torn between being affronted by the nickname, and wanting to laugh.

"Visions or not," said Maximillian, "you have people who care about you, and who want to help you."

Nasreen smiled at him.

"You have people who care about you too," she said. "That's why we stay alive."

She put her hat and veil back on and shut the door behind her.



## Appendix

### **Domains**

#

Domains are not just what the god themselves has control over, but what people who practice magic within that domain are capable of. Gods are not just beings to be worshipped, they provide a resource which makes practicing magic easier. If one imagines the process of doing magic to be like making a cake, then gods fill the role of a grocery store or mail service which makes it easy for anyone to make a cake so long as they have a recipe, aka the knowledge on what to do.

Even when the gods are dead and in the process of reincarnating, there are still ways to obtain “ingredients” and perform magic. If a blizzard comes to town, you can stock up on flour and sugar and such beforehand, and even if you’re caught unawares you probably still have enough flour to get yourself through a week of baking, even if you may have to stretch your supplies. You can also get help from a neighbor, and some ingredients can be grown at home if you’re really desperate, but generally you’ll count the days until someone salts the road enough for stores to open back up.

There are other ways to perform magic other than utilizing magical domains, but they're not recommended. You can channel arcane energy, which is essentially unadulterated natural energy, but it's unreliable. The more times one uses it for magical purposes, the more likely it is that the user will suffer negative effects to their magical ability and health. You can channel demonic energy, but that requires getting in touch with demons, who are motivated solely by the suffering of humanity, and so is very obviously an extremely bad idea. Arcane magic is generally discouraged, but using demonic magic is actively illegal.

Arcane and demonic magic aside, however, the "major" gods are not the only way to use magic. Outside of the major gods there are a number of subordinate minor gods and spirits who are powerful in their own right. Just as Ancient Greece had gods outside of just the Olympians, there are multiple specialist gods who are associated with the major gods in some way, such as the Death Gods Panolis, Polemus, Dolophon, Morai, and Akai, who work under Mortia, the Goddess of Death, and specialize in various types of death: disease, mass violence, murder, old age, and deaths associated with children, respectively. They all have various gods that they either report to or listen to, though some of these minor gods are more willing to listen to the major gods than others. Any god can be used as a focal point for magic, and domains are not exclusive, with some domains having overlaps in their abilities. An example of this is how both the Storm Domain (Tempesta) and the Heavens Domain (Solla) offer flight powers.

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### **Major Human Gods**

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- Animari: God of Life, eldest male god. Domain of healing and nature. Husband of Mortia. Originally held domain over more aspects of the world, but a rise in

understanding lead to the creation of more specialized gods. Key is Divine Tree.

- Mortia: Goddess of Death, eldest female god. Domain of death, darkness, and hidden things. Wife of Animari. Originally held domain over the spiritual/magical world, but a rise in understanding lead to the creation of more specialized gods. Key is the Eternal Catacomb.
- Vestus: Deity of Craft. Domain of the loom, the hearth, the home, and the creation of home goods, cloth, and food. Third oldest god in practice, though there are precursors to other gods who predate them. Key is the Golden Shuttle.
- Lukkaw: Deity of Crows. Domain of agriculture, trickery. God of Life for crows, created the floating islands which host the various crow nations. Key is the First Feathercloak.
- Solla: Goddess of the Heavens. Domain of the sun, the moon, the stars, and justice. Some early conceptions of the Sun Goddess had her as daughter of Animari and Mortia. While that is not actually the case in modern times, both gods act as her mentors. Key is the Great Skystone.
- Tempesta: Goddess of Weather. Domain of the sky below the heavens, winds, rains, and thunder. Known to wander the world and offer help to those who can pass her tests. Key is the Great Fan.
- Ummi: Goddess of the Sea. Domain of the ocean and all sea life, though has some influence over freshwater as well. One of the older goddesses, and most powerful when near saltwater. Key is the Umissong.
- Wardamya: Goddess of War. Domain of protection and defense, alongside war. Notable for her power to order any soldier. Tradition dictates that during yearly festivals, roses are burned as a substitute for blood otherwise shed. Key is the Sword and Shield.

- Ancora: God of Archery. Domain of vengeance, plague, archery. The god you go to if you've really been wronged and have no other recourse. Key is the Glass Bow.
- Duanzidi: Goddess of Forge. Domain of metalwork, the forge, technology. Created the first sword and shield, but also created the first plow and yoke. Key is the Immovable Hammer.

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### **Religion, Magic, Science**

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Crow religion and Human religion are extremely similar, since they operate on the same underlying metaphysics and have the same base abilities (e.g., life magic, death magic, agriculture magic, etc.) but the philosophies are different due to differences in species. Much how Baptists and Catholics are both Christian, but have different practices, humans and crows believe the same base things (e.g., the Christian story of Christ's resurrection) but have different ways of interacting with those beliefs (e.g., whatever is up with Mary Mother of Christ). Crow magic is mediated through the Gods in the same way human magic is, but who those gods are and what their deal is will vary between species.

A major example of this would be Lukkaw and Animari. While both species view these as gods of Agriculture and Medicine, respectively, there are variations. Animari is always seen as human and Lukkaw is always a crow. But while Animari is the principle God of Life for humans, Lukkaw is the Principal God of Life for Crows, and both are regarded as the "First God." (Humans have a debate over whether Mortia, Goddess of Death and "First Goddess" is first as one of the human gods instead of the first of her gender, and whether Animari came after

her and is just the first of *his* gender. Crows care a lot less about gender and refer to Lukkaw as the “First God” as the first Crow to be capable of sapient though). All of the human Major/Universal Gods have a crow counterpart, but many counterparts are “crow god of XYZ” as opposed to “This God but also a Crow.” Rather, the crows have their own pantheon which has a differing structure to that of humanity’s, and their own Major gods are representatives of their species’ priorities. While crows do have a forge deity, that forge deity does not have the same associations or level of status that Duanzidi does.

One of the main differences is the respective God of Life. Animari is characterized as a serious and level-headed person who focuses on the upkeep of the body and the enablement of natural energy. This is related to the use of natural energy to keep the body in a healthy state. In contrast, Lukkaw is a trickster who, instead of maintaining things-as-are, modifies and changes the world. Lukkaw creates floating islands and represents agriculture, which involves modifying the land and plants for the production of food. While human philosophy usually focuses on what is, crows philosophy focuses on change and improvement, including using magic to enhance the body more often than humans do.

Magic is used as a tool, but most do not use it regularly. A useful analogy to explain why that is would be scuba diving. Scuba diving is possible for most people to learn and do, barring those with certain health conditions, but many never learn. For most it may never come up, and there is the issue of special training required, as well as equipment which must be bought and maintained. While anyone can learn to use magic to fly in theory, it isn’t necessary for most people’s lives outside of certain professions. Additionally, airplanes exist to facilitate air travel in Ouraneia, and both crows and humans use them, just as both crows and humans use automobiles and trains. Magic is studied and well-documented, and the study of magic is known as

thaumaturgy. Science, religion, and magic are not rigidly separated fields, but are regarded as ways in which the world can be observed, documented, and accessed. There are some things, such as astronomy and information technology, which are unable to be done without magic, while other things, such as invisibility and shapeshifting, are only able to be done by manipulating magic.

Magic works because intelligence/sapience is a product of magical energy, and so people who are sapient can then manipulate magical energy. This doesn't erase a lot of debate over personhood, especially when it comes to things like children's rights and women's rights, though the presence of hyper-powerful beings like gods and spirits does. Sapience produces powerful souls, capable of sustaining magic. Souls are tied to bodies, but not irrevocably. When a body is damaged enough that it dies, the soul begins the process of breaking free. When it breaks free, that person is considered "dead", and it sheds a lot of magical energy off of it. People who are very good at magic have a lot more magical energy, and so the soul after death is bigger. This allows for the retention of memories. Souls have a magical core which absorbs and generates magical energy. While hypothetically a person can perform magic with only generated energy, it's not a situation commonly encountered outside of laboratory conditions, and most studies on what that does to people end with the scientists involved sentenced by war crimes tribunals. It's theorized that a soul only able to generate magical energy would eventually be destroyed, and that an infant born in a situation where there was no access to generated or naturally-occurring magic could be born without a soul, but due to the presence of the mother's soul and a lack of ability to create an artificial uterus by anyone morally bankrupt enough to try this, there's no definitive answer. Also, even trying that will probably result in you being killed, either executed or shivved in prison.

Reincarnation works when souls return to a body, which is usually when a baby is developing in the womb, but there's been isolated cases of a body which is legally dead having a soul bonded to it, but that's incredibly rare for a number of reasons. Because souls are inherently magical, all sapient people are capable of magic. Souls develop with bodies, so children are usually first able to practice magic at around age five to eight, though most children aren't able to start performing magic outside of the most basic exercises until about age eleven (approximately the age morality centers in the brain finish development, though studies are unclear as to whether this is correlation or causation.) Magical development is generally earlier in places with better child nutritional development due to the additional strains magic can place on the body, similar to the increased caloric needs during a growth spurt. There are other factors, of course, but the general rule is that better childhood nutrition will lead to higher magical power.

Souls tend to seek out bodies which suit them according to a definite, but hard to measure criteria. Studies are done according to survey and population data, especially in comparing population booms after wars and major disasters with large losses of life. Souls, especially more powerful ones, tend to reincarnate in bodies which resemble previous bodies. Reincarnations of sages will resemble past lives in both temperament and appearance, and will usually be raised in similar conditions to a past life. Souls will tend to reappear along genetic lines, but this is more due to nurture and less due to nature. An in-universe example is Solla Lunis/Celeste. Solla Lunis is always reborn in Sacra Solla to a family with low social standing, suffers at the hands of her peers, and ends up challenging the ruling class which leads to her being confirmed as an incarnation of the Sun Goddess by touching her Key. Circumstances will change in lives, such as whether Solla's family is poor and outcast, or becomes outcast over the course of her life, who

and what the ruling class is, and so on.

#

## **Metaphysics**

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If magic is the result of the soul and its excess energy, then there's still the question of how, exactly, that energy is channeled. Even if the gods function as a kind of magical grocery store, there's still the issue of the rhetorical equipment needed to make the metaphorical cakes. Studies of magic fall under the science of thaumaturgy, and magical practitioners are generically known as mages, with more specialized practitioners of magic having differing titles depending on organization. There isn't an official, international system of magical ranking beyond the recognition of sages and gods, but each countries have a system they use for categorization. The construction of an international categorization system has been an ongoing issue in the era of global communications, and becomes more and more pressing with the increased globalization of Ouraneia. By contrast, it is much easier to explain the makeup of a spell.

A spell usually involves an invocation, an offering, and intent. Invocations are what they sound like: a way to invoke magical power somehow. Usually this is done through language, whether verbal or otherwise. Offerings are something given up to perform a spell. This is usually just excess magical energy. Souls, as conglomerations of magic, don't like to give up pieces of themselves, and as such a lack of excess energy will result in a spell failing. Think of how, if one is trying to do some complex yoga pose, you're more likely to fail to do it than to succeed at the cost of a dislocation. Intent can be optional, but is usually helpful in directing a spell. Intent fills in gaps that may otherwise be left by the invocation part of a spell. Some spells, especially sensing spells, require less of a concrete invocation but more focus, aka intent.



There are passive forms of magic, but passive magic isn't something most people have to worry about, as it usually occurs in masters of their craft. Examples of this include eye and hair coloration changing to match associated colors of the domain. Death magic causes the hair to prematurely bleach and the eyes to darken, and war magic causes red eyes. These are cosmetic, and some philosophers theorize that it's an indication of repeated offerings, which in turn offer parts of the body's physical appearance to future spells. This isn't confirmed, by any means, but it's not an uncommon belief, and the exact mechanic of how magic causes these coloration changes is unknown. Outside of cosmetic changes, life sages (and Animari himself) are recorded as developing plant life in their hair, and especially powerful mages have been recorded performing accidental magic in situations involving heightened emotions, which has caused beliefs about the relationships between souls, magic, and emotion to strengthen, and many believe that emotions can form their own invocations, albeit weak ones, in the same way that skills mages can use thought.

Invocations come in many forms. The most widely known is verbal invocations, usually involving ritual phrases and prayers, grouped under the category of incantation. Incantations involve using spoken language to guide and shape magical energy to achieve a desired effect. Incantations are one of the most common ways in which magic is first taught, especially since it can be used to further impart knowledge to younger children. It's one of the older forms of magic, and was historically one of the most accessible due to the lower skill requirement and lack of need for physical materials.

Runes are another method, and they're relatively easy to use in the modern age. Runes are made up of a combination of lines and shapes, given meaning. There are general rules to the creation of runs, and preexisting ones which can be used in tandem with other runes. Geometric

shapes are commonly utilized, alongside inorganic lines, which represent the physical world, and organic lines, which represent the immaterial world. This ties back to the “prototypes” of Mortia and Animari, who represented the immaterial and material, originally, before more gods developed and they assumed their current roles in the pantheon. Different domains use different combinations of lines and shapes, with more complex runes incorporating arrangements of magic runes within their body.

#

### **A Note on Time**

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Ouraneia has the same orbital period, lunar cycle, and day length as Earth does, alongside the same polar tilt as Earth (23°) for the sake of convenience. This is something I determined for the sake of map-making, as well, since polar tilt is important for determining prevailing winds and climate. Technically, the month names would also be different, but since the year length and lunar orbit is identical to earth, there are twelve months in the calendar which are easier to “translate” to the Gregorian calendar. On Earth, weeks can also follow a seven day format based off of the seven visible “planets” (the sun, the moon, and the five visible planets of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn). If there’s a similar stellar situation on Ouraneia then a seven-day week would make sense.

This celestial arrangement doesn’t have to be the case, though: seven’s a very common number since it’s a prime number and a small, positive integer. One could also use a number like eight as a base for a week, which would give about 45 weeks that can be easily rendered as nine 5-week months, with an extra five days at the end of the year to be counted as a religious festival, like the biblical seventh rest year, but as the extra five days at the end of the year (called

an intercalary month). Ten day weeks are also a possibility, with three-week months, which would work with a lunar orbit around Ouraneia identical to that of Earth's moon.

Ouraneia does have an international standard calendar, which is necessary for political and business purposes. Most people know about it, in the same way that Americans learn about Celsius in school, but most people don't use it and don't have it memorized unless they have a degree in international business or political science, or something similar.

The popular system used to count years in Ouraneia originates from counting periods of incarnations and divine deaths, with the cycle going "Incarnate era, death era, Incarnate era" and so on, with death eras being shorter proportionally, but becoming longer due to the generational counting method. In a society with no Christianity the BC/AD system would likely not be used, but in reference material, such as the timeline, I still use it so readers understand what I'm talking about.

#

### **Godless Era Timeline**

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1: Gods die in the First and Last Battle. Sentinel is born.

2: King Shikâr of Sumestia is overthrown by popular revolt; democratic government is installed by revolutionaries.

3: UCKL closes borders, isolates. First Free Elections held in Sumestia.

5: Kikuhon closes borders, only keeping ports open for trade.

6: Augusia formally annexed by Kingdom of Lancia (KoL)

10: Opalesca, Princess of KoL, is born.

15: Proper Pause Act (PPA) suspends new medicine and medical production in KoL.

20:

23: Scandal erupts in KoL around PPA after Lancian Prince Rubius is caught importing contraband new medicine for personal use.

25:

30

35: Queen Opalesca takes KoL throne, institutes program to try and locate the First and Last Battlefield.

40: KoL Sailors find First and Last Battlefield. The Events of *Daughter of the Forge* take place.

45:

49: Lancian-Sumestian War begins.

50: Gods begin to be reborn at this time.

55: Godless Era is internationally recognized as the longest in known mortal history.

60: The internet causes a major boom in international communication. A online collective, KARASU, is organized through forums by both UCKL and Kikuhon filmmakers which

65:

70: The framing device of *The God of Crows* takes place.

71: The events of *A Dream of Life and Death* and *The Pacifist and the Lion* take place.

75: Celeste Eclipsa awakens as Solla Lunis using her Divine Key.

## Major Nations

### Augustia

#### Political Situation:

Under Lancian political control

#### Ruling Body:

Ruled by a Prince when it was sovereign, now ruled by governors who answer to Lancian's queen.

#### Continent:

Lancia (Island)

#### Climate:

Tropical island, with some small mountains and large hills.

#### Demographics:

Largely native Augusian, with some Lancians and those of northern Archipelagan descent. Since it has been annexed, there has been an increase in Lancians immigrating to the island.

Capitol:

Musa

Main Industries/Trades:

Tourism, Thaumaturgy, Medical

Exports:

Formerly food, lumber, raw materials, capital goods (specifically computer chips),  
textiles

Imports:

Formerly consumer goods, food, automobiles, fuel, energy.

Info:

Augusia is a nation with a long, rich history, and was historically known as the medicine cabinet of the world due to its natural biodiversity and long traditions of Life Magic. Before the current godless era, a natural disaster followed by a series of political and magical problems, followed by a demon attack, left the country in shambles. What at first seemed to be aid from Lancia turned into an annexation of the country during the first decade of the godless era. At first most Augusian simply wanted stability and security, but now a combination of Lancian cultural imperialism and Lancian law forbidding the production of new medicine in the godless era means that many Augusians are looking for a return to sovereignty.

International Relationships

Formerly on decent terms with Lancia and had a favorable relationship with Kikuhon, other Archipelagan neighbors, and Zhonghua.

#

Kikuhon

Political Situation

Stable, but closed borders

Ruling Body:

The Council of Kingdoms, headed by the “Child of the Sea”, the current Empress.

Continent:

Archipelago (islands)

Climate:

Warm, humid, ranging from tropical to subtropical.

Demographics:

Made up almost entirely of the denizens of the islands in its domain.

Capitol:

Kyoe

Main Industries/Trades:

Film, Technology, Energy (geothermal), Thaumaturgy, Automotive

Exports:

Film, Traditional Crafts, Fish

Imports:

Food, Capital Goods, Technology

Info:

A collection of three large and many small islands, Kikuhon projects a unified front to the outside world, but its own kingdoms have many of their own foods, customs, and manners of dress. Beef and pork are seen as luxury items due to a low amount of available land. Due to a lack of land for agriculture and industry, the nation works towards fishing, technology, and its own unique cultural exports to support its economy. The current Empress, Empress Chizuru, is searching for the next incarnation of Ummi.

International Relationships

Has a trade relationship with Trimak due to a treaty made before the godless era and its closed borders, otherwise has little contact with countries officially. However, the film industry in Kikuhon has many contacts with the UCKL film industry, and the advent of the internet means that private citizens may have more contact with the outside world.

#

Lancia

Political Situation:

Engaged in expansion, relatively stable.



Ruling Body:

Ruled by a monarch. Has a Senate, formerly the Patrician Council, but the Queen has ultimate executive power.

Continent:

Lancian Continent

Climate:

Varied. The main holdings are largely temperate with a variation between the western coast and the southern deserts, but island holdings are tropical.

Demographics:

Ethnic Lancians, People of Desert Descent,

Capitol:

Contiala

Main Industries/Trades:

Technology, Thaumaturgy, Agriculture

Exports:

Gold, food, consumer goods

Imports:

Capital goods, food, automobiles

Info:

Historically, Lancia was a kingdom of middling size, made rich by its position on the fertile grounds of the Saltatio River as well as natural gold and iron mines in the eastern-most hills. Over the centuries, its size has gradually grown, and now the Lancian people believe that their nation should have domain over all the human peoples of the continent, for their own good. Those who speak against the rising militaristic, nationalist fervor in the country feel as though they are in the minority.

### International Relationships

Tentative Allies with Zhonghua, controls Augusia, tense relationship with UCKL, at war with Sumestia, attempting to form stronger relationships with Trimak

#

Sumestia

### Political Situation:

At war with Sumestia, multiple factions are also vying for control of the country, mostly Royalist and Democratic factions.

### Ruling Body:

Currently ruled by Lancian Puppet Government in the East, with other cities controlled by various groups. Major player “Roses of Inanan” currently holds Eridian.

### Continent:

Irdan

### Climate:

Subtropical, largely arid but with a fertile area on the coast.

Demographics:

Ethnically there's a lot of diversity in different old kingdoms and isolated tribes in the mountains, but a national identity was formed under the Inanan and so most Sumestians refer to that before any ethnic identity.

Capitol:

Sunna

Main Industries/Trades:

Energy, Mining. Many are involved in the civil war.

Exports:

Roses, Tea, Raw Metals, Weapons

Imports:

Weapons (in recent years), food, capital goods, medicine (despite Lancian embargoes)

History:

The country now known as Sumestia was formerly three kingdoms, the most well-known of which being Inanan. Sumestia was ruled over by one dynasty after another, until a democratic government took over. Vying for control, the royalists remaining in the country invited Lancian forces in to help with their coup, and began a long and brutal war on multiple fronts. Some say that this prompts the perfect conditions for the resurrection of the War Goddess, Wardamya of the Roses, to champion the Sumestian people.

International Relationships

At war with Lancia, no relationship with Kikuhon or UCKL, strained relationship with Taris, seeking aid from Zhonghua.

#

Trimak

Political Situation:

Guarded against possible annexation

Ruling Body:

High Interpreter

Continent:

Ratia

Climate:

Mountainous, tropical to temperate, with mild seasons due to the prevailing winds coming off of the ocean and the country's position relative to the equator

Demographics:

Trimak is a melting pot due to its long history of trade, with even humans and crows living together. In recent years there has been an increasing Sumestian population thanks to refugees from the Lancian-Sumestian War.

Capitol:

Taris

Main Industries/Trades:

Business, tourism, hospitality, transport.

Exports:

Consumer goods, capital goods, automobiles, mechanical goods, trade goods

Imports:

Food, consumer goods, capital goods, trade goods, automobiles

Info:

Located on the eponymous island of Trimak, the country, and its capitol of Taris, have always been well positioned for intercontinental trade. The advent of advanced sailing ships capable of deep-sea voyages have only increased the strength of Taris's trade, since the large, warm sea in between Ratia and Irdan mean that Taris is perfectly positioned as a port. Many have tried to take Trimak and its island for themselves, but now the city appears to be at the peak of its power, even with the uncertainty that accompanies a godless era.

International Relationships:

Tense relationship with Lancia, trade allies with Kikuhon, however the country is generally politically neutral. For that reason, many trade, business, and hospitality schools are based in Trimak's main island.

#

United Crow Kingdoms of Lancia (UCKL)

Political Situation:

Currently isolated, stable

Ruling Body:

A variety of smaller kingdoms all govern themselves, and join together when major decisions must be made to debate and choose the best course of action.

Continent:

Lancia

Climate:

Predominantly cool, temperate, and wet, with lots of mist, but the northern areas tend to be more polar.

Demographics:

Largely Lancian Crow, with some non-Lancian crow. Few humans live on the islands permanently.

Capitol:

Syrvuk

Main Industries/Trades:

Tourism, Arboreal Agriculture, Music, Film

Exports:

Film, culture, food (nuts and dried berries)

Imports:

Consumer goods, capital goods, small aircraft and automobiles

Info:

One of the oldest known crow civilizations, the UCKL is a loose confederacy of kingdoms which unite for tax and trade purposes with human kingdoms. Viewed as being laxly regulated, human megacompanies trying to establish footholds in the kingdoms quickly lose money and are forced out either by coordinated boycotts or litigation against predatory pricing, poor worker treatment, and similar labor mistreatment. Crow kingdoms are fluid in form, but most individual kingdoms have very long and complex histories.

International Relationships

Tense relationship with the Kingdom of Lancia due to the Kingdom's expansion, attempting to open a trade and immigration treaty with Kikuhon in the event of the gods' returns for better cooperation among the film industry, otherwise neutral or distant relationships due to closed borders and concerns of human attacks in a godless era.

#

Zhonghua

Political Situation:

Polarized, but politically stable otherwise. In a soft war with its southern neighbor.

Ruling Body:

Emperor, who rules a bureaucracy

Continent:

Taije

Climate:

Warm, humid. Regularly affected by monsoons, except for the area rain shadowed by the Lung Mountains

Demographics:

Multiple ethnicities, human and crow both, previously ruled by empire, who are now fighting for their own places within the new country.

Capitol:

Daicheng

Main Industries/Trades:

Metalworking, Agriculture, Mining

Exports:

Capital goods, Pharmaceuticals, Automobiles, consumer goods, textiles, raw metal

Imports:

Raw metal, food, film, consumer goods

Info:

The northern half of a great, historical empire which ruled for nearly an entire divine era. While the largest half, and containing most of the agricultural holdings, most of the great cultural legacies of the country are held by its southern neighbor, the Kingdom of Shuguo. What cultural landmarks the country still has are being capitalized on in hopes of creating a new, strong



national identity. The government is currently putting a focus on the metalworking industry due to the empire's claim to being the birthplace of Duanzidi, hoping to unite the people culturally as well as to strengthen the economy.

### International Relationships

Tentative allies with Lancia, tense relations with Kikuhon, seeking a trade deal with Trimak, ambivalent towards Taijean crow populations, and not formally allied with Sumestia, however the country did increase an economic increase due to Sumestian trade under its Inanan Government.