The Adellia Hawk Chronicles
by Oviposity

Summary

Adellia Hawk is an aspiring monster hunter at the Hoxleigh Academy for Hunters. She's strong, fast, and brave, but she doesn't always pay close enough attention... and when hunting monsters, you don't get away with lapses.
Chapter 1

There are certain sounds that evoke an immediate emotional response. The racking of a gun’s slide quickens the pulse and heightens adrenaline. The jingle of Christmas bells can take the listener back to their childhood and fill them with warmth and comfort.

For Adellia Hawk, junior at the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters, the sound of chalk squeaking against a chalkboard was as potent a soporific as had ever been devised by man.

She couldn’t help it. She did care about the subject matter-- she really did. She wanted to graduate. She had wanted to hunt monsters since she was six years old. But her grades were never more than indifferent, and she had nobody to blame but herself. Sit her down at a desk, open a brick-thick anatomy textbook in front of her, and put a lecturer at the head of the class, and her mind would wander within thirty seconds. Her notes were a scattered mess, the result of a pair of ears drifting erratically in and out of orbit. Her papers started out promising, but soon lost focus into meandering tangents and unrelated anecdotes that attracted an ocean of angry red ink. Her practical assignments were good, great even, and that was why she had not yet failed out-- but, as numerous teacher conferences had made clear, this state of affairs could not be maintained indefinitely.

It wasn’t fair! She knew she was talented, and she wanted to learn. But the dusty old fossils at Hoxleigh didn’t seem to want to teach her way. Mr. Bentham walked with a cane, one polished ivory foot the relic of his triumph over the Hovenwood Wolf. But he seemed content to clump across the linoleum and drone on and on about spoor freshness and bite patterns in bones. Mrs. Krupp’s face was a network of twisted scars around her one remaining eye, but the woman talked as though the most exciting thing she had ever done was set out raspberry scones for tea instead of plain ones. Adellia couldn’t imagine surviving the Dunwich Atrocity and then spending thirty years writing dry-as-dust papers on metallurgy and ballistics, but the one time she had dredged up her courage to ask Krupp to describe her experiences, the instructor had fixed her with a cyclopean glare so fierce she shrank back in her seat.

“And what, young lady,” Krupp had replied, “does that have to do with the properties of electrum?”

Adellia had no answer to that, and her mumbled apology only served to further provoke the laughter of her classmates. Well. So much for them. They were dilettantes, anyways, the sons and daughters of nobility for whom Hoxleigh’s more exotic courses were just a bonus. They’d retire to their estates in the country, with Morlock-fur rugs and basilisk-feather capes, and the closest they’d ever get to a monster would be a tall tale told over roast pheasant. Poo to them. The Hawks had always been hunters, good ones, and Adellia was going to fulfill the family legacy.

Of course, that was assuming she actually graduated. In truth, she was indifferent about the prospect of an actual degree (aside from the relief it would bring her increasingly nervous parents) but she was absolutely, positively sure that if she lost access to the school’s armory she would literally die. Crossbows, stakes, longaxes, grapnels, holy water spritzers, the obstacle course, the shooting range, the sparring circle… as a child, Adellia had been indifferent at sports (though she had always had a fair turn of speed, the idea of running in a circle over and over did not appeal), but one look at the polished teak shelves of bite-armor and spiked gauntlets and she had fallen in love. She spent every second she could in the armory, pestering the instructors to sign her out more and more advanced and complex devices, asking a million questions about everything she could, and generally making a nuisance of herself. The senior students had seen her at first as an annoyance, then a curiosity, then a sort of mascot, and most recently as a prodigy. She could run, jump, fence,
shoot, and climb with the best of them, her adolescent scrawniness for once an asset instead of a liability. She had spent most of her teen years waiting for her growth spurt to come, and now that they were almost over it seemed like it never would. Well, who cared? The gangly, gawky girl who had first arrived at Hoxleigh had given way to a... well, a gangly woman, but one who moved with catlike grace and speed.

Of course, the armory was a privilege, not a right. It was one she had often held on to narrowly, but a vestige of stubbornness had kept her grades just on the right side of a D average to maintain her access. She was sure that without the carrot of the armory dangled above her head, she’d have failed out ages ago. Of course, she might anyways… which brought her to today.

“Adellia! Adellia! Are you listening to me?” Mr. Lachan’s voice cut through her ruminating and brought her back to reality. She was sitting in a red armchair so plush that if she let go of the wings she might drown in it. A fire crackled merrily behind the Headmaster’s mahogany desk, and the man himself, a gaunt spectre in a brown tweed jacket and steel-rimmed spectacles, was frowning across at her. She shook her head to clear it, realized what she was doing, and turned it into a nod. “Yes, sir. Yes, Headmaster. I am. I’m sorry.”

Lachan blinked, mollified, and sat back down. “Every single one of your professors has independently approached me, Ms. Hawk. Their stories are depressingly similar. You don’t pay attention in class. You fall asleep. Are you bored, Ms. Hawk?”

“No, sir!” Adellia said brightly. “No, sir. I love hunting. I can’t wait to be a monster hunter!”

“That,” said Lachan, with a grim smile, “appears to be the problem. You can’t wait. But you have to. You are a student for a reason, Ms. Hawk. It doesn’t matter who your family is. You must learn to walk before you can run... or hunt, as it happens. You would not last two seconds in the wild without a solid, practical base of theory on which to build. You know your father was on the dean’s list seven times while he was here? And he stayed on for post-graduate coursework.”

Despite herself, a spark of defiance rose up in Adellia. “Yeah, but I beat his record in the hundred-meter dash and the fifty-second free climb! And marksmanship! I’ve got him by twenty points!”

Lachan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, Adellia. And as I just finished explaining, that’s not enough. Do you recognize the name Struth Yarmeyer?”

Adellia brightened. “Yeah! He’s got the record in, like, everything! He was amazing! His name’s on all the plaques in the armory! I can’t wait to meet him!”

“That will not, unfortunately, be possible.” Lachan sighed. “He was eaten by a Spotted Grue two years after graduating. It’s not enough to be fast, Adellia, or accurate, or graceful. Those things are important, but they are not our only tools. No matter how fast you are, a Zephyr will be faster. No matter how strong, a werewolf will be stronger. Your weapon is your mind, and you have been neglecting yours!” He got up, strode away from the desk, and stared into the fire for a while. Adellia decided to remain prudently silent. She fidgeted in her seat, her eyes running over the trophies that lined the walls of Lachan’s study. Hanging over the bookshelf on one wall was a pair of curved minotaur horns. A pattern of scales formed a mosaic set into the stone wall next to the fireplace. There were horns, claws, teeth, even eyes pickled in brine. Lachan had had a long and illustrious career before retiring to manage the school.

When he spoke next, his words were melancholy and distant. “Despite what you may think, Adellia, your professors and I care a great deal for you. Too much, in fact, to send you into the world unprepared. You have a keen mind, we can all see that, but you lack focus. Perhaps it is our fault. We have not provided you the proper incentives.” He turned around. “As of today, you are
placed on academic probation. Until further notice, your access to the armory is revoked. We will arrange private tutoring, and--"

Adellia’s vision blurred as her eyes filled with tears. “You can’t do this!” she shouted, and jumped up from the chair. Her voice sounded like an awkward squawk even to her own ears. “This isn’t fair!”

“Now, now, Adellia,” Lachan began, adopting a conciliatory tone, “this is only temporary. In fact, I am quite sure that within a few months, you will--”

Adellia had heard enough. She hated, hated, hated being seen to cry. Mrs. Krupp never cried. She probably didn’t cry even when the Dunwich Monster ate her eye. She probably spat in its face. Adellia wished she could spit in Lachan’s stupid face, but he would just punish her worse. He would probably take away her armory privileges forever. So she whirled around and ran, tears streaming between her fingers, Lachan’s cries fading behind her. She couldn’t run to her dorm. Her stupid bubbleheaded roommates would make a huge fuss over her. They wouldn’t understand. She had never seen any of them in the armory. It would likely have posed an unbearable risk to their makeup, and besides, you couldn’t do wind sprints in corsets. They would blame her, really, and think to themselves (and maybe out loud, if they thought she couldn’t hear) that it was just what she deserved for being such a strange girl.

Instead, her legs carried her across the acres of Persian carpeting and past gilt-framed portraits of hunters past, towards the sound of clashing swords. The armory was attached to the main building by a narrow corridor, which opened into a large stone archway over which the school motto was emblazoned: Omne Ignatum Pro Magnifico. Beyond was a wide gymnasium with a smooth marble floor and fitted stone walls. Gas lamps blazed along the wall and two huge fireplaces roared day and night, banishing the darkness and heating the room even in the dead of winter. One wall was devoted entirely to examples of the school’s martial arts. Epees, sabres and foils of all shapes and sizes lay in the racks, next to a display of crossbows, shortbows, horsebows and longbows. Glaives, guisarmes and voulges sat nestled in their pegs next to rapiers, dirks and daggers. The school had amassed all kinds of esoteric weaponry during its long life; a manriki-gusari was coiled neatly around one peg, in between a meteor hammer and a stack of atlatls. The opposite wall was given over to an obstacle course, designed by the senior weapons masters and frequently changed up. Their fiendish cleverness presented itself in a variety of challenges ranging from wire mazes to muddy tunnels, but the capstone of the course was always the school’s impressive climbing wall.

In between the walls, a series of round pits for fencing, wrestling, and other combat sports ran down the length of the room. Raised platforms for instructors and spectators allowed passage from one side to the other. The room was never more than half full, and today, it seemed especially sparse. A few knots of students were standing around in quiet conversation; the armory was a favored meeting place for those who, like Adellia, eschewed the quiet of the library or the reading rooms. She strolled over to the weapon racks with forced nonchalance, nodding at another junior who was agonizing over a selection of foils. The boy already had his fencing suit on, and carried his white wicker helmet under one arm. Adellia tried to put a smile on and waved hello. “So,” she began, “Anything good going on today? Place seems dead.”

The fencer gave her a blank look. “Classes are cancelled. The martial instructors are out. Nobody told me why.”

“It’s cause of the forest!” a voice called from behind them. Adellia turned around to see a short, pudgy boy standing near a cluster of younger-looking students. “I heard that they discovered an araqny nest in the woods! They’re all out on a hunt!”
Adellia’s heart leapt into her chest, but she tried to force herself to remain calm. The Hoxleigh Academy was located on hundreds of acres of land deeded by the Hoxleigh family, which included the Hoxwald. Adellia had heard rumors of “canned hunts” in the sprawling forest, though she had never spoken to anyone who claimed to have been on one. The school’s infirmary was suspiciously well stockeled with antivenin and surgical tools, but many professors were hot on practical demonstrations.

The idea of actual, breathing monsters not an hour’s travel from the academy was, well… it was scarier than Adellia would admit, even to herself, but it was exciting, too. She tried to remember what she knew about araqny from classes, which wasn’t much. Spider-like creatures, the size of wolves, weren’t they? Pack hunters. Individually not very dangerous.

That was when she got an idea.

Lachan and the rest of them, they thought she wouldn’t make a very good hunter if she didn’t pay attention in lessons. They thought she wasn’t learning everything she had to learn. Well, what if she went out on a hunt of her own, and brought back a trophy? She’d show them! They’d have to let her back in the armory after that! She’d prove that her way was just as good as their way. In fact, it was better. Much better!

“Hey! Adellia! You’re not supposed to be in here!” The voice snapped her out of her daydream. One of the prefects, Tolliver, was calling out to her. He had always been friendly, and his voice was not unkind now, but his face was set in a grim frown. “Come on, Adellia, you’re going to get me in trouble. Off you go.”

Adellia felt another twist of anger and frustration, but she was too wrapped up in the brilliance of her new plan to care. She waved goodbye and ran off towards her dorm.

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The moon hung low in the sky, its silver beam shattered by the iron bars in the dorm window. A splinter of light shone across Adellia’s bed, revealing her carefully chosen tools. Not that she was afraid of anyone else seeing them: it was two past midnight, and even the dorm proctors had long ago retired to their beds. They placed their trust in the high walls and barred windows and, not least, the isolation of Hoxleigh Academy. Even if a student wanted to get out, where would they go?

Adellia reviewed her preparations. Her sleeping gown had been discarded in favor of hard-worn leather, a true monster hunter’s outfit. Her cuirass and breeches were carefully blackened so as to blend in with the shadows. Each of her tools was in a separate silk bag to prevent inconvenient clinking. She had a pistol crossbow, a boar spear, a weighted net, caltrops, climbing spikes, a compass, fifty feet of rope, and the more esoteric tools of the hunter’s art: a silver mirror, a pair of stone cubes three inches on a side, a bronze circlet, a collection of tiny wooden pegs. Each had been painstakingly crafted to deal with a specific threat, and without knowing what exactly awaited her in the forest, she was bringing them all.

She paused a moment to look at herself in the moonlight. She had always been a wiry, scrawny girl, and though she had some hips, she was far from what the romance novels her dormmates preferred called “curvaceous.” She had small, perky breasts, but they were more of a hindrance than anything else, and she preferred the tightest athletic supports she could find to bind them under her leathers. There was not much she could do about her round bottom, but at least it didn’t stick out too much. Her features were sharp, not delicate like her mother’s, but she didn’t mind. Her legs were long and supple, and her copper-colored hair was cropped short and swept back from her face. Bangs could
impede your vision and get you killed, so she didn’t hold with them. Her limbs were slender, but months of calisthenics and fencing had given her muscles like steel bars, and she barely grunted as she slung the pack over her back. Now for the window.

The bars were thick and solid. They wouldn’t break or bend, no matter what she tried. The ancient mortar around them, though, was roughly the consistency of hard cheese. It was a secret generations of students had kept; you could scrape the stuff away like wet clay, and when you were done, pack it back in before a teacher could see it. Adellia levered away with a knife from the dining hall and was relieved to see clods of mortar peel away. She pulled enough free that she could wiggle the bar, then worked it gently loose like a tooth from its socket. Laying it on the carpet, she scrambled up through the window and swung her legs out.

The drop was intimidating-- at least forty feet. But Adellia loved free climbing in the Armory. She scrambled up the wall like a monkey, the instructors said, laughing and leaping from stone to stone, outpacing any classmates who dared to challenge her. This wall was hardly more difficult than that one. It was made of rough-hewn granite blocks, only barely worn by time and weather; there were plenty of places for her nimble fingers to find purchase. The climbing spikes from her bag proved almost unnecessary, though she was careful to collect them, as she’d need them to get back in-- especially if she was towing a heavy trophy. It was a warm night, and she was barely winded when her feet touched the loamy earth outside the Academy. Pausing only to kiss the stones for luck, she dashed off towards the menacing dark cloud of the Hoxwald.

The forest was located about a mile from the school, and Adellia slowed first to a brisk jog, and then a steady walk. Despite the butterflies fluttering in her chest, she found herself quite enjoying the nighttime air. It was a wonderful change from the stuffy dorm, which always smelled of sweat and undone laundry, and the full moon gave plenty of light to see by. She recalled hours of dull lessons about the properties of the moon: its effect on shapeshifters, on other types of monsters, moon myths, the place of the moon in human history, how to utilize it to weaken foes… it was all very dry stuff, and none of it had mentioned just how beautiful the moon could be when you were walking alone under its warm glow.

Up ahead, the boundary posts that marked the edge of the Hoxwald loomed out of the night. They were more foreboding than she remembered. As she passed them, she reached out and trailed her fingers along the closest. The wood was old and so hard it was like stone… it scraped her fingers uncomfortably, and she snatched her hand back as though stung. These posts were clearly meant to warn people away. She looked up for the reassuring light of the moon, but the tangled branches of the Hoxwald trees had caught it like a fish in a net, and only glimpses of silver were visible between their gnarled mass. For the first time, Adellia began to doubt her plan.

There were no paths through the Hoxwald. She found herself picking carefully between the trees. The light from above had dimmed almost to nothing, and Adellia pulled out the tiny gaslamp she had stolen from the Armory. She would have it back before anyone even knew it was missing, she figured, so what was the big deal? Shutters on the side of the lamp allowed it to project a tight, narrow beam of light, and Adellia was grateful for that: she didn’t want to broadcast her location any more than she was currently doing. Of course, it didn’t help that each step seemed to find a dry twig. Each brittle snap made her wince. How did the senior hunters manage such stealth? Many types of monsters could only be taken down with the advantage of surprise; Adellia resolved to pay more attention in her stealth classes when she returned.

She wasn’t entirely sure what she was looking for, but she knew it when she found it. The beam of her lamp found something white and curved, and Adellia shuddered. It was a bone, a deer’s rib by the look of it, smeared with a glaze of red paste. Next to it was a hoof still bearing a couple of scraps of fur. Adellia bent down to examine them closely, and stiffened when a shrill scream
When she was sure that she wasn’t going to have a heart attack, she straightened up. The scream came again, and she winced. It wasn’t human, of that she was sure. It was an animal sound of pain and fear and distress. And it was close. She doused her lantern and blinked a few times as her eyes adjusted. The branches overhead were slightly thinner here, allowing a watery grey moonlight to filter down to the forest floor. Up ahead, she saw movement, and slid in one smooth motion behind a tree. Peering out, she got her first good look at the source of the scream.

A deer was standing in a gap between two trees ahead. As Adellia watched, it shivered and threw its head back and forth, but did not leave. Its legs twitched. Its eyes rolled in their sockets. Terror was rising from it like steam, but it didn’t run. Why? Then a cloud rolled away from the moon, and Adellia had her answer.

The deer was caught in a tremendous spiderweb stretched between the trees. It must have run directly into it, and by the looks of it, it was stuck fast. As it tugged and pulled, Adellia saw the strands sticking to its flank. Its screaming was growing distressing; Adellia hefted her spear and prepared to move in to put it out of its misery, when the web shook. She drew back behind the tree.

Something bulbous and grey descended out of the darkness. It scuttled along the web on eight bristly legs. The deer saw it and redoubled its thrashing, but the creature pounced onto its back. There was a brittle snapping sound, a horrible thin wail, and then silence. Adellia risked a glimpse from behind her tree.

The thing-- the araqny, she supposed-- was about the size of a large dog. It had the hairy body of a tarantula, and its fur was coarse and grey. It looked like nothing more than a scaled-up spider, except that the top of its abdomen was shaped into a disturbingly lifelike human face. The face was androgynous and alien-looking, with almond-shaped eyes and a thin blade of a nose, but its features were moving; the eyes rolled and the mouth worked soundlessly, like a person trying to expel a watermelon seed caught in their teeth. The spider also had a normal head, bearing a pair of gleaming fangs, and when it sank these into the deer’s neck the human face twisted in a grotesque expression of satisfaction. Adellia’s stomach roiled and she fought to hold in her gorge. This was her first glimpse of a live monster in the wild, and it was alone. She tried to remember what her teachers had said about araqny, but all she could think of was that horrible snap, and the dead gaze of the human face. She shivered. More would be along soon. If she was going to take a trophy, now was the time. Another quick look confirmed that it was still feeding.

She took a deep breath and sprang out from behind her tree. The distance between her and her prey closed quickly. One hand was raising her boar spear as the thing turned, its human face gaping in surprise. Her other hand had found her weighted net and flung it as the araqny tensed to leap. The net caught it squarely in the middle, and it collapsed to the ground in a tangled heap. Its limbs flailed as it tried to free itself, but the weights had it pinned neatly. Adellia grinned and stabbed downward with her spear. This had been easier than she expected!

There was a short, plosive whump as her spearpoint pierced the araqny. Adellia was thrown off her feet by a tremendous force. At first she wasn’t sure what had happened; her ears were ringing, and her limbs felt sluggish. Had the thing exploded? It seemed to have; her spear had been flung free, and she was lying on the ground. She tried to stand up, and found herself hopelessly entrapped.

Heavy, sticky strands of web covered her, trapping her limbs and pinning her to the ground. Here and there around the clearing she saw bits of hairy grey flesh. It had exploded, and when it had, webbing had burst forth-- webbing that had caught her as neatly as the deer. She tried to reach for her boar spear to cut the strands, but it was tantalizingly out of reach. She could barely wiggle her arms and legs, and when she tried to push herself to her knees, she found that some of the strands echoed in her ears.
anchored her to the ground. They were very sticky, and the adhesive seemed to set quickly. There was nothing she could do.

She had time to curse herself for her lack of preparation when she heard a rustling, chittering sound. It seemed to come from all directions at once. She froze in terror. More of them! For the first time the danger she was in penetrated her thoughts. She had bitten off more than she could chew. Did she dare scream for help? If there were other hunters here, they might hear… the prospect of the terrible trouble she would get in seemed less scary when she imagined the horde of furry grey legs even now scuttering across the forest floor. Then again, calling out might summon the pack down onto her. Could she take the risk?

“Help! It’s me! It’s Adellia Hawk! I’m stuck! Someone! Please help!” She screamed herself hoarse. There were no answering calls, no sound of cavalry. She swallowed glumly. Maybe she could work herself loose if she went slowly…

The first araqny burst into the clearing across from her. It stopped, then slowly rotated around, so that the face on its back could get a look at her. It was followed by another, then another. Adellia couldn’t turn her head completely, but she could hear rustling behind her as well. It was too late. They had found her.

Araqny swarmed at her from all directions. She closed her eyes and tensed, expecting to feel their teeth ripping through her flesh at any moment, but the expected bite never came. She felt a heavy weight above her, pressing down, and then a strange sensation of pressure all around. Opening her eyes, she saw that they were all around her, biting and clawing. There was no pain. She had a moment to wonder if they had injected her with some soporific before realizing that they weren’t biting and clawing her. In fact, they were removing the strands that bound her. A pair of mandibles sliced through her leather breeches, while another parted her vest like cheesecloth. Two of them had found her pack and were tugging it back and forth-- the material parted, spilling her little velvet bags all over the forest floor, and both spiders pounced on it.

She found that she could move a little bit, but as she tried to push herself up, an araqny leapt on her chest and knocked her flat. It turned, exposing its human face, and the silent mouth twisted in an angry grimace. Adellia whimpered and closed her eyes. The faces were horrible, their almost-human appearance so dreadfully out of place that they offended the eyes. She was glad they didn’t speak. If it tries to speak to me, she thought, I shall go mad.

The clearing remained silent aside from the rustling of the araqnys and her labored, fearful breaths. She felt a pressure on one ankle, then she was being dragged. Too frightened to move, she lay there, listening to her heart race. It felt like several araqny were dragging her at once; there was a slight pinch on each ankle and her right wrist. They carried her a few feet, then paused, and she felt herself rising into the air.

Adellia opened her eyes again in astonishment. Loops of webbing had been fastened around her ankles and thrown over a branch, and the araqny were working in concert to hoist her up. This was far more coordination and intelligence than she had expected to see from such bestial things. Other araqny were spinning a web into existence in the gap between two trees, with an oval gap in the center about her size. She rose until she was about seven feet off the ground, then a lasso of silk settled around one wrist and tugged at her until she was pulled into the void in the web. Further strands anchored around her wrists, ankles, waist, elbows, armpits, knees, and neck, suspending her in midair in the web. It made no sense to Adellia. If they were going to eat her, why go to all of this trouble to wrap her in webbing? Her leather clothes hung off her in tatters where sharp mandibles had sliced through them, as as she hung motionless, araqny climbed over her biting and chewing off the last of her clothing. It dropped away to the forest floor below.
With her arms and legs splayed out like a child making a snow angel, she lay in the middle of the web. The strands holding her in place were tight: she could barely move an inch, and when she did, the whole web shook in a way that made her very nauseous. She was laying parallel to the ground, facing down. A cool breeze blew between the trees and raised goosebumps on her pale, exposed flesh. She felt very vulnerable like this; she was terribly conscious of her spread legs, and of the way her small, shapely breasts hung down. She supposed that if the hunters arrived now the humiliation would be an adequate price to pay for her escape.

One of the araqnys was climbing over the underside of the web towards her. It maneuvered upside down without a hint of discomfort. Something long and pink bobbed between its legs as it scurried out of sight behind her. Adellia had a moment to wonder what she had seen before she felt the sharp points of its legs on her thighs. It had climbed between her legs, and she realized its target only moments before something cool and slick nudged at her pussy lips.

“No! NO!” she screamed, and thrashed back and forth in the grip of the web. It was to no avail. The spider’s fleshy pink cock poked a couple more times at her tight, virginal pussy before sliding in between her nether lips. She howled like a wounded animal as she felt it penetrate her. This was a horror beyond imagining, beyond endurance. The spider’s rod was knobbly and tufted with short, wiry hairs, which scraped uncomfortably against her delicate lips. It shifted its legs around to find a better angle, then the tube pulled mostly out and thrust itself back in. Adellia screamed again and tried to clench her inner walls to keep it out, but its muscular thrusts easily overpowered her defenses. Tears streaked her cheeks and dripped off her nose onto the forest floor as she was violated by the monstrous organ. The spider built up a regular rhythm of thrusts, planting its fuckrod deep in her moist quim before pulling most of the way out again. Despite herself, Adellia could feel a warmth growing between her legs. She had experimented a little in the shower, though the lack of privacy at school had prevented her from getting much practice. Still, she was aware of “the facts of life” as her Biology teacher had called them. Too late, she remembered warnings that some monsters choose to partner with humans. Often, she recalled, this was fatal for the human involved.

The spider’s thrusts increased in speed and potency. It seemed like it was coring her out; its meaty pole slammed home, instantly stuffing her honeypot to bursting, then pulled out just as fast and left a hollow void behind. Adellia grunted with each thrust and tried to wriggle her hips into a marginally more comfortable position. If the spider was going to have its way with her, she might as well protect herself as best she can. She shifted slightly, and shivered as she felt one of the knobs rubbing against her sensitive clit. An electric sensation seemed to shoot up her spine. There it was again-- each thrust was sending little slivers of pleasure shooting outward from the pink pearl of her clit. She bit her lip as her hips humped backward against the spider, meeting each of its thrusts with one of her own.

The creature abruptly adjusted its grip on her, and gave one last powerful thrust. Adellia could feel its stiff prick inside her, deeper than it had ever gone before. It had penetrated to the very core of her being, it seemed. This time, instead of withdrawing, the organ twitched inside her. What was happening? Another muscular twitch shook the entire spider. Unable to look back and see what was going on, Adellia’s eyes widened as she felt something bulbous and round pressing at her battered cunt lips. Already stuffed to the brim, her once-tight pussy at first refused the intrusion, but the pressure built until it was almost painful. With a gasp of relieved tension, Adellia felt the thing pass into her. It was so big and so round; she pictured it traveling up her inner channel, pushing it open all around itself. It emerged deep inside her, and she felt it, a cool, round object like a handball. Or an egg. Realization hit her like a thunderbolt. That was what it was! The thing inside her wasn’t a cock-- it was an ovipositor!

A second egg was already pressing at her quim. She tried to constrict her muscles to bar its
passage, but to no avail. As the egg passed through her slick tunnel, she felt it pushing on her walls, and let out a low, animal growl. The sensation was alien but incredibly pleasurable. Looking down, she could see a bulge moving beneath her skin, and as the egg joined the first one her stomach tented slightly to accommodate it.

Egg after egg passed into her. Each one stretched her out more and more, and each one’s passage produced a greater reaction as her tender insides were mercilessly stretched and kneaded. By the fifth egg, her eyes rolled back into her head as an orgasm overtook her; her fingers fluttered, her toes curled, and she bellowed like a wounded steer. “FUCK! OH, GOD, FUCK, THAT FEELS--” She was beyond caring if the hunters heard her, or if they even existed. Her world had shrunk to her stretched-out cunt, the aching, throbbing bud of her clit, and the spider eggs now bulging her stomach out like a pregnant woman’s.

Finally the araqny withdrew. The eggs remained, possibly adhering to her inner walls and each other. Adellia didn’t care. Her mind was on fire with the aftershocks of her first orgasm ever, and the fact that it had been at the hands (or claws) of a monstrous spider-creature didn’t even cross her mind. She was barely aware of the scuttling as more of the creatures mounted the web, but when she felt the familiar pinprick of sharp legs on her thighs, her face spread into a crooked grin.

“Well,” she began, “I guess if you--”

Whatever she was going to say was drowned out by her yelp of surprise as this araqny, rather than probing her distended womb, lined up its ovipositor with the tight pucker of her ass. She had a moment to catch her breath before it rammed itself six inches deep into her. This was a different sensation altogether: while her teenage pussy had stretched to allow the ovipositor’s passage, her asshole felt as though it were being forced open. She wailed in pain and terror as inch after inch of spider meat slid into her tender backdoor. This araqny was more aggressive than the first and immediately began sawing in and out of her, ignoring her cries. It pulled itself completely out, allowing her bruised anus a moment to clench closed before slamming her O-ring open again. Adellia screamed as she felt her asshole brutalized by the monstrous organ. It seemed like it was going to burrow all the way through her intestines. She was so absorbed in the overwhelming sensation of spider sodomy that she didn’t even notice the araqny on the web in front of her until its ovipositor thrust past her lips and down her throat.

“GLLK! SPLRT! KLLRRF!” Drool instantly lubricated the spider’s thick rod, which forced her mouth open tendon-twangingly wide and threatened to close off her airway every time it burrowed down into her throat. She was helpless to shake it off, and soon spit was smeared all around her mouth and dripping off her chin as it thrust messily in and out. She tried to bite down, but her jaw was stretched to capacity by the thick shaft, and she could barely move it. It was all she could do to relax her throat to keep from gagging; if she threw up around this thing, she knew, the spider wouldn’t stop for a moment. All of her will was focused on keeping her gorge down as the two spiders thrust into her holes with such ferocity, it seemed like they intended to meet in her stomach.

They synced up their thrusts, one burying itself in her bowels just as the other was withdrawing from her throat, then reversing so the araqny in front of her punished her tonsils as the one behind pulled itself free from her sphincter. Over and over they went, like lumberjacks working the same two-man saw to fell a mighty sequoia. Finally, when she felt she could take no more, both of them hilted themselves as deeply as they could. Bristly, foul-smelling hairs filled Adellia’s nose as the ovipositor seemed to pass through her esophagus to her stomach. On the other side, she could feel the thick rod plant itself deep in her colon. The first egg stretched her already-dilated asshole to truly heroic proportions. She tried to scream, but the meaty rod in her throat muffled her exclamation. Egg after egg packed tightly into her violated bowels, sticking to the walls like limpets. Simultaneously, she felt her jaw stretch even further as the first egg rolled down her throat. She felt like a snake trying to swallow a piglet; the massive orb rolled down her throat and plopped
free into her stomach. Mercifully, the creature at her mouth seemed to have fewer eggs; after four of them, it withdrew, leaving her cross-eyed and panting for breath. Her jaw creaked painfully as the ovipositor slid out of her mouth.

Its companion had eggs to spare. She lost count as the orbs burrowed into her guts, packing her colon tightly. Just when she was sure that she would burst, that there was no more room in her, it too withdrew, leaving her asshole bruised and gaping. Looking down, Adellia groaned in dismay. Her body had swollen obscenely to accommodate the eggs; her once-flat stomach was bloated like that of a woman in the ninth month of pregnancy. She looked bizarre to her own eyes, a massive orb of flesh only barely recognizable as human. Her eyes were glazed and her tongue hung limply out of her mouth as her fuck-addled brain tried to process what had just happened. Dimly she was aware of her vision darkening as the spiders spun a web all around her, leaving only a gap to breathe out of. Adellia panted with exhaustion. She had come out here for a reason, she knew that, but now all she wanted to do was sleep.
Adellia Hawk tries to pick up some extra credit work in the greenhouse.

Her locker was full of spiders again.

Adellia Hawk sighed and rolled her eyes as they poured over her, their rubber legs jiggling, glass eyes rolling madly in their sockets. She made sure to make her reaction as theatrically bored as she could. Truthfully, in the split-second she had opened her locker to see the teetering tower of arachnid bodies, icy fingers of panic had clamped her heart. Even now, on what must have been the fifth or sixth iteration of this particular prank, it still got to her. But it wouldn’t do to let her classmates know that. The first time it had happened, her strangled yelp had been answered by giggles from all corners. Now, her neighbors didn’t even bat an eye. Adellia Hawk’s locker was full of spiders. Again.

She wasn’t sure how the student body had found out about her ordeal in the Hoxwald, or how much they knew. She still wasn’t sure how much she knew; her memories of that night were patchy, fading out around the time she scaled the school wall and remaining threadbare until she had awoken hours later in the school infirmary with an aching jaw, terrible nausea, and what felt like a bruise that stretched from mid-thigh to her navel. She had no memory of being found by hunters on the prowl for an araqny nest and cut down; no memory of her trip to the infirmary, nor of the bitter cocktail they had given her to induce her to expel the eggs. She certainly didn’t remember the three-hour operation with speculum and forceps to remove the last of the stubborn things, but the soreness radiating from her puffy, bruised pussy had been real enough.

In a lucid moment, she had begged the duty doctor not to share the details of her injury with the school, and she had no reason to believe that the woman had. It was a small school, though, and news traveled fast. Some of the hunters had been seniors or graduates on a practicum. Had one of them told? It didn’t matter. She was Spider Girl now. At first her cheeks had burned every time she heard the taunt, but it was remarkable what you could get used to. Two years ago Ferdinand Jocelyn had lost a hand while tending the Hounds, and after a short interlude where he had been known as Five Finger Ferd, life had gone on. She would graduate, and in a couple of years, all this would be forgotten. It helped that she didn’t remember. Some nights-- fewer and fewer lately-- she’d wake up in a cold sweat, certain that she was trussed up tightly, imagining the clicking of caliper legs on the flagstones of the dorm. That wasn’t the worst part, though. The worst part was waking up damp between the thighs, with a lump in her throat and an urgent need fading in the back of her mind. What was that about? She didn’t like to think about it.

In any case, she had no intention of letting one misadventure derail her education. When her bruises had faded and the infirmary had lost its appeal, she had petitioned to return to class right away. Surprisingly, she faced no further consequences for her nocturnal escape; the administration seemed to think that she had already suffered enough, though Mr. Lachan had grilled her for an uncomfortable fifteen minutes on whether she planned to repeat her escapade. She had truthfully assured him that she did not. He hadn’t revoked her academic probation, though she had been allowed a few short, supervised sessions in the armory, always with a chaperone.
Disquieting dreams aside, Adellia really did think that the best way forward was not to look back. She had made a mistake, and she had paid for it. All that meant was that she would not make that mistake again. “Failure is the best teacher” was one of Mrs. Krupp’s favorite phrases, and while Adellia had always thought that it sounded a bit like an excuse, she had to admit that she was starting to come around.

While none of her professors would ever suggest that Adellia’s ill-fated hunt had been a good thing, they were in accord on one point: the girl who had returned to their classrooms was a much better student than the one who had left them a week before. To call her quiet and studious would be stretching the truth to the breaking point. She was still the same Adellia, still full of irreverent questions, still prone to distractions and tangents. But she was… focused, present, in a way that she hadn’t been before. Her papers earned Cs and Bs instead of Ds, and mixed in among the corrections in red ink was the occasional “good insight” and “well put.” She still threw herself exuberantly at every challenge the armory could provide, but the reckless abandon of the old Adellia had given way to a calculating pragmatism.

At the same time as her grades had improved, her social life had suffered. Adellia had never been the most gregarious student, and she had few friends among her classmates. Mostly, she had rivals, bonded by their competition at the armory. Lately, however, she had been eating her lunches alone. She rarely spoke in class except to answer a question, and she was always one of the last to arrive and first to leave, hefting her bag across her shoulders and crossing the room silently with downcast eyes. Even after “Spider Girl” had been forgotten for some new flavor of the month, she had avoided speaking to her classmates. Her professors fretted privately, but running a school for several hundred hormonal teenagers was hard work at the best of times, and as long as Adellia’s grades were trending upward, it was hard to find time to worry about her.

It would be wrong to say that Adellia was privately miserable. Her ordeal had not broken her spirit, but it had certainly knocked the wind out of her. She knew how lucky she was to be alive and not permanently damaged. Hunting monsters had seemed like a fun game before; she hadn’t really understood how dangerous danger could be. Her gleeful vitality had not been dulled, but layered over it now was a soupçon of caution. She still knew that someday she would be the best monster hunter ever to live. Now, though, she had an idea of how much book-reading that would require. Adellia Hawk was brave enough to climb the armory’s wall without belays, brave enough to stand up to Mr. Lachan, brave enough to venture into the Hoxwald at night alone. She wasn’t sure if she was brave enough to set foot in the library and crack those old books.

Once the rubber spiders had tumbled across the floor, Adellia fetched the book she had gone to retrieve in the first place and slammed her locker closed. As she turned, she nearly tripped over one of the fat rubbery bodies. She lashed out viciously with her toe and sent it bouncing and sliding down the hall. So there. She hurried back to her Intermediate Anatomy class before Mr. Bentham could take issue with her tardiness and sliding down the hall. So there. She hurried back to her Intermediate Anatomy class before Mr. Bentham could take issue with her tardiness and sitting down.

Two rows in front of her, Toby Cotton turned and gave her a hopeful little smile. Adellia scoffed and looked away. She felt a little mean, but seriously, Cotton Ball? He had gotten the nickname by being soft, white, and round, and he was perhaps the only student at Hoxleigh with dimmer social prospects than Adellia. She supposed that probably wasn’t true anymore; in the last year, he seemed to have grown into his body, and two years of running track had melted some of the fat off of him. Still, he had proven unable to shake the nickname, and his long hours spent in the library or off on some brown-nosing extra credit assignment did not exactly endear him to his peers. He had been giving her these smiley looks for a few months now, though only since returning to class had she been paying enough attention to notice. She wasn’t stupid. She knew what that meant. But, again, Cotton Ball. Even if his teeth were white and straight and his acne had cleared up nicely, he was still Cotton Ball, and she was Adellia Hawk. It just wasn’t going to happen.
Cotton Ball was banished from her mind as Mr. Bentham’s lecture began. The topic of the day was exoskeletons, and as his chalk squeaked across the chalkboard, he droned on about segments, layering, joints, the properties of chitin… Adellia’s attention was starting to wander when something in her textbook screamed for her attention. It was a color drawing in one corner, an almost cartoonish depiction of a fat abdomen topped with an eerie likeness of a human face. Her breath caught in her throat. All of a sudden she was back in the forest, dark, cold, goosebumps raising on her bare skin, and there was something inside her, deep inside her, twisting, plunging, filling, stuffing…

“Adellia? Adellia!” Mr. Bentham’s voice broke her out of her reverie. She shook her head and stared bemusedly at him. “I said, Adellia, do you know the name for the fluid analogous to blood shared by most arthropods?”

Adellia didn’t. She stammered for a moment. “Uh, it’s, that is to say…” her finger frantically scanned the page and came up empty. The class was looking at her, not staring or glaring, but with a look of polite anticipation that was somehow worse. Two rows down, Cotton Ball raised his hand. Wearily, Mr. Bentham pointed at him. “Yes, Toby?”

“Haemolymph, sir.” Cotton Ball’s voice had grown with the rest of him into a rich tenor, though the way it cracked on the “sir” rather spoiled the effect. Embarrassed, he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looked down at his desk. Bentham smiled. “Very good, Toby. As for the rest of you… test this Friday on the arthropod material we’ve covered. Study hard. Class dismissed.”

Adellia had taken a seat near the top of the lecture hall so that she could slip out early. She had no class next period, so she meandered over to the study hall. She told herself it was just to take a moment to sort her books before she headed to the armory for a run, but once she was sitting down, it seemed prudent to review her notes on arthropods. She opened her notebook and flipped to the end… and then, in mounting horror, turned back through the last few pages. Her notes, never extraordinary, had been improving lately, but what she had in her notebook were barely notes at all. A few scattered sentences lay in between a forest of doodles, the kind she unconsciously scribbled while her mind was elsewhere. Normally, they appeared in dizzying variety: boats, stars, horses, people, weapons and buildings and fantastic landscapes. These, however, were all the same unsettling image: crude human faces, almost cartoonish. The same as she had seen in her textbook. When had she drawn these? Hadn’t she been paying attention in class? The sight of them was unpleasant; it churned up her guts with fear and a second emotion she couldn’t identify, a kind of warm tension that settled in her stomach and spread its fingers into the crack and crevices of her body. She shifted her hips to and fro unconsciously.

What would she do? Her grades had improved a bit, but bombing this test would undo all of the progress she had made. Would they ban her from the armory again? Or would they just ship her home to her parents in disgrace? Neither thought appealed. Heart racing, she looked around frantically, only to find salvation coming from the unlikeliest quarter of all. There, at the next table, surrounded by a stack of books, was Cotton Ball.

Adellia tried to play it cool as she sauntered over and slid into the chair next to him. She laid her elbows on the table and held her chin in both hands. He was so absorbed in his book that he didn’t notice her coming over; she was close enough to see that it was some old picture guide to seeds. She coughed once, politely, and he startled and looked up.

“Oh! Adellia! You snuck up on me!” he exclaimed, pushing his glasses up his nose. “What, uh, what brings you to, uh, this place, here? Where we are. You and me.” His hands waved as if to dispel the awkwardness of the sentence.
“Just studying.” Adellia tried to force herself to remain calm. This was Cotton Ball, she reminded herself. He wasn’t going to say no to her. Oddly, her stomach was full of butterflies. She kept thinking about the faces; that strange tightness had come over her again. It was incredibly distracting, like having to pee but worse. She found her head full of strange images, strange impulses that she had not previously considered. “Say, can I borrow your notes on arthropods? I just wanna make sure I didn’t miss covering anything.”

Cotton’s face twisted in an agony of indecision. “Oh, uh, Adellia, I was going to study those… I mean, we have that big test coming up…” he gave her a hopeful smile. “We could study together?”

Something inside Adellia snapped. She wanted those notes, and if she had to use cleverness to get them, well, that was a monster hunter’s prerogative. “Look, I really need those notes, Cot- Toby. I’ll make it well worth your while.” She tried to smile coquettishly and flutter her eyelids like her roommates were always doing. She didn’t think she did a good job, but it must have worked on Toby, because he immediately blushed beet red and looked away. “Oh, Adellia, no, I mean, that’s not necessary, you don’t have to, of course you can-”

She grabbed him by the wrist and practically dragged him out of the chair. He may have sprouted up from the little Cotton Ball that had landed on the doorstep of Hoxleigh three years ago, but she still had him on strength and speed, and he wasn’t even trying to defend himself. Three minutes, tops, with my hand, Adellia told herself. What had come over her? She would never have thought of this in a million years. And yet here she was, looking both ways to make sure that nobody saw her dragging him into the boys’ room. Inside all was brushed chrome and white tile. She threw the deadbolt with one hand while maintaining her grip with the other. Toby, bemused, stumbled and managed to keep his footing. Adellia spun him around and shoved him against the wall with one hand. The impact knocked his glasses down his nose, and this time she reached up with her free hand to push them back into place, a strangely intimate gesture.

“Adellia, what are you, what is…” Toby was stammering. Toby? She supposed that Cotton Ball wouldn’t do anymore. He hadn’t gotten any darker, but he certainly wasn’t round anymore, and her questing hand confirmed that “soft” was also off the menu. Her fingers popped open the button of his fly and drew down his zipper with deliberate slowness. She could feel the fabric of his drawers tented out; her fingertips slithered into his pants, caressing the hardness of him and feeling the wet spot on the front of his smallclothes. With a sinuous bend of her wrist she slipped her hand inside those smallclothes and wrapped her fingers around his warm, stiff cock.

It wasn’t her first time-- Adellia had had her share of awkward fumblings after hours. It was an inevitability in a mixed-sex school like this, no matter how hard the proctors tried to keep the boys and girls separated. She had never had time (she told herself) for a serious boyfriend, and anyways her reputation as the girl who lived at the armory had scared away more than one potential suitor. That was fine. The boys in her class were immature anyways. Toby, though… he may have been sweating and stammering, trying to squirm away into a solid stone wall, but his prick knew what was expected of it and rose to the occasion. Adellia gripped it lightly but firmly and began to stroke back and forth. She could feel Toby’s breath on her forehead, fast and shallow. She imagined his expression of goggle-eyed astonishment. Rather than look at it and spoil the mood, she leaned forward and down, pressing her cheek against his chest. When she felt one of his arms awkwardly wrap around her shoulders, she grabbed his wrist with her free hand and pinned it against the wall. Her strokes grew faster and more insistent. More wetness coated her fingers, leaving them slick. She rubbed her thumb over the firm pink head of his cock while her fingers caressed his shaft. Her touch was light but firm. She could feel his hips twitching-- not long now. She pulled down the waistband of his drawers and tugged his cock free from his pants. Bobbing in the light of the gas lamps, it seemed almost menacing… which was ridiculous. Cotton Ball or not, Toby was one of
the least threatening students at Hoxleigh, and right now he seemed positively helpless. His eyes were half-closed and he was panting like a dog. His hips still occasionally bucked against her hand. Adellia stepped to the side—no sense in getting messy—and increased her speed. Her hand blurred around his prick, her thumb brushing the underside of its head on each stroke. Toby moaned and jerked, once, and then a spray of white goo flew from the tip of his penis. Two more thick ropes of semen burst out of him and splattered on the floor before he let out all of his air in one long exhalation and leaned back against the wall.

“Adellia… I…” he began.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, and surprised herself by giving him a peck on the cheek. “Your notes, please? I’ll bring them back when I’m done.” Inside, her stomach was fluttering. Had she really just done… that? With Toby Cotton? Just to borrow his notes? It was… unusually daring, to say the least. She found that she wasn’t embarrassed. In fact, she felt a perverse sort of pride. Where brute force wouldn’t do, she’d used her brain, and come up with a creative solution. Take that, Mrs. Krupp! Toby was awkwardly fumbling with his softening prick, so Adellia brushed past him and washed her hands. She gave him an expectant look, and he nodded, red-faced, without making eye contact. “S-sure Adellia. Look, you didn’t—I m-mean, I never meant t-to—”

Adellia left him stammering and returned to the table. Toby’s notes were as orderly as she expected. He had even separated them into folders, organized by subject. The section on arthropods was near the top; she grabbed it and her bag and nearly skipped back to her dorm.

Studying made her brain creak, but Adellia forced herself, that night and for the next two days. Walking past the armory as the sounds of energetic running and sparring boomed and echoed was a special kind of torture, but she forced herself. When her chaperone showed up to take her for a half-hour session, she surprised even herself by declining. The chaperone, a senior boy wearing a wrestler’s jersey, stared at her in such frank amazement that his mouth guard almost fell out, but she remained resolute. “Are you sure?” he pressed. “Lachan says this is your one slot for the week. You’re really not going?”

“I’m sorry,” said Adellia primly, “but I have a big test tomorrow.” She gestured towards Toby’s notes, which were already hopelessly out of order. The senior shrugged and walked away, muttering under his breath about the crazy Hawk girl. She felt a little crazy, to be honest, but she could tell that she was close. The subject was clicking for her in a way that it hadn’t before. The next day, she strode confidently to the front of the class, pausing only to drop a loosely stacked sheaf of papers on Toby’s desk. He looked up at her wide-eyed and crimson-cheeked, but she ignored him; since the episode in the bathroom, he’d hardly been able to tear his eyes away from her in class. Well, his swooning wasn’t her problem. The test was.

When the test papers were distributed, Adellia felt the familiar pang of anxiety settle into the pit of her stomach. It all felt like a game, all the studying and preparing, but who had she been fooling? She was still the same old Adellia. Even with borrowed notes, she wouldn’t—

“Turn your papers over, please,” called out Mr. Bentham. Adellia closed her eyes and turned hers around. She’d try her best, that’s all, and—

She knew the answer to the first question.

Carefully, she read it over again. No, she had been right the first time. She knew the answer (it was “three meters”). And to the second question, “formica medusae.” And the next, and then next… her pen scratched over the paper, her fear quite forgotten. She wasn’t the first student to finish, nor the second, but by the time she laid down her pen and rolled her aching wrist to get some feeling
back into it, there were still five minutes left in the class period. She breathlessly double-checked her answers, made a few corrections, and dropped the paper in the basket on Mr. Bentham’s desk. Bentham, who had grown accustomed to having to pry the test paper out of Adellia’s hands as she frantically tried to fill in one more answer, raised his eyebrows appraisingly but said nothing. With a triumphant smirk Adellia returned to her desk and laid her chin in her hands.

Her test paper came back the following Monday marked with a B-. She had flubbed the section on tracking, but otherwise, there was barely any red ink at all. A B, even with a minus attached to it, was the highest grade Adellia had ever scored on a test in any academic class since arriving at Hoxleigh. She briefly considered mailing to home to her parents (who would no doubt be equal parts relieved and in awe), but decided against it. This was her triumph, not theirs. Anyway, soon there would be more.

In the weeks that followed, there were more, and she rarely had to borrow Toby Cotton’s notes. She never dragged him into the bathroom again, and he never asked— in fact, he barely seemed able to put two words together in her presence without lapsing into an embarrassed, sputtering silence. This silence, at least, made studying near him agreeable enough. Her grades were never exceptional, but they climbed up to “adequate” and stayed there. She was even allowed back into the armory whenever she wanted. She availed herself of the privilege, putting in hours on the climbing wall and honing her skills with epee and foil, but she still found time to study… just enough.

Two months after her test, Headmaster Lachan called her into his study. She strode in with her head held high. As before, there was a fire cracking in the hearth, and Lachan stood in front of it. She was forcibly reminded of her last meeting here, and a chill ran up her spine. Had she messed something up? Had he— had Toby been talking to him? She swallowed hard. Just when things seemed to be going so well… there was always something, wasn’t there?

“Please, Adellia, have a seat.” Lachan’s face was taciturn and unreadable. He didn’t seem angry at her, but he wasn’t grinning, either. She didn’t think she’d ever seen him grin. Senior monster hunters were usually a dour lot, the horrors they saw every day making them grim. Adellia had sworn to herself that she’d never lose her upbeat personality even when she was the best hunter ever. She renewed that vow now.

“Adellia, I have to say, when you returned to us from the Hoxwald I was very angry.” He paused and looked at her over his half-moon spectacles. “Not at you, but at myself. I had warned you about the dangers of recklessness, but what warning from a professor ever calmed a youthful heart? I should have done more. I was very pleased to hear of your recovery, but I was at the point of sending you home before something even more dreadful happened to you.” He sighed. “What stayed me was the thought of you running away from home to try that same sort of trick again. When I look at you, I see a girl born to hunt monsters. It seems that whatever we did or didn’t do, you were set on that path. Therefore, as I saw it, I had a duty to make sure you were prepared.”

Adellia held as still as she could. She wasn’t sure where this was going, but wherever it was, she just had to see it through.

“I am glad to see that I was correct. You are a born hunter, Adellia, and finally your grades reflect that. I am a bit miffed that this is what it took to get you to put your nose to the grindstone, but that’s in the past. I think you have a bright future here, but unfortunately, your improvement comes a bit late. Your early marks will always drag you down and keep you from the advanced classes where you could truly thrive.”

Adellia sank in her chair. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. It wasn’t fair! After everything,
after she had worked so hard, they were going to judge her as harshly as ever. She should have known. Nobody gets second chances. She fought to keep her lip from wobbling. She wasn’t going to cry in front of Lachan. Not again.

“And so,” he went on, oblivious to her inner struggle, “I have no choice. I have decided…"

Adellia tensed. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of throwing her out. She would leave herself, before they got a chance to--

“...to allow you to take on extra credit assignments to improve your grade.”

All the air rushed out of Adellia at once. She froze halfway through rising from the chair. Extra credit? Had she heard correctly? She blinked owlishly. A question formed itself on her lips, but she couldn’t get it out. “Wha?” she managed.

“You can report to Professor Stine in the greenhouse this evening for your first assignment. That is all.” Lachan favored her with a rare smile. “This is a rare opportunity, Adellia. You would do best to take advantage of it.”

In a daze, Adellia stumbled out of the office. Extra credit! Advanced classes! Her head was spinning. She couldn’t even remember where the greenhouse was -- but that didn’t matter. Plants were easy. She could handle plants. And after that, who knows?

The greenhouse proved to be a tiny annex on the far side of the building, jutting out next to the kitchens. Adellia let herself in and immediately started sweating. The temperature was at least ten degrees hotter than the drafty stone corridors of Hoxleigh. She was in a kind of anteroom; hoes, rakes, shears, and less identifiable tools hung from pegs, and bags of soil were stacked on the floor next to clay flowerpots. The far wall was made of frosted glass, through which she could see a blurry mass of green and brown. The whole room had a rich, earthy smell, and the air was moist. Professor Stine turned out to be a tiny man with a face as brown and grooved as a walnut. He shook her hand-- reaching up to do so-- and explained, in a surprisingly rich and deep voice, what he wanted her to do.

“You’ll be feeding the plants in the Omnivore wing. Make sure you don’t get too close-- and wear protective clothing!” He wagged a finger in her face. “Mr. Cotton speaks very highly of you. He says you’re very quick. Stay on your toes in there!”

“Mr… Cotton?” Adellia asked. “Toby? He talks about me? Wait, he comes here?”

Professor Stine nodded. “Oh yes. Mr. Cotton is pursuing advanced certification in Anthropophagic Botany. I told him that I needed a new assistant for feeding time, and he recommended you.”

“A new assistant?” Adellia’s brow furrowed. “What happened to the old one?”

“Never you mind,” said Stine. “Now, I’m going to be grading papers in here, so just give me a shout if you get in trouble. I’ll be right along.” He pointed at a bucket resting on one table, next to a wicker basket and an unrolled scroll. “Food’s in the bucket, clothing is in the basket. That scroll tells you who gets what. Step lively now!” His instructions delivered, he turned around and hunched over his desk, pulling a quill pen nearly half his height out of an inkwell and beginning to mark up a stack of papers. Adellia shrugged and walked over to the bucket.

It appeared to be full of chicken giblets. She wrinkled her nose at the slimy things, but picked up the bucket in one hand. It was surprisingly heavy. She set it down and peered into the wicker basket. Inside was a long leather apron, a face mask, a pair of thick leather gloves, and tall rubber
boots. She sat down on the floor to pull off her shoes and change. The leather was stiff and awkward to move in, the boots squeaked, and the mask smelled foul; she tried to breathe through her mouth only as she reached for the scroll. Her fumbling fingers managed to scoop it up on the second try and she squinted at the page. It had a list of species names, none of which were familiar to her, next to counts. “Venomous Pendragon- six cuts. Tigerberry- four cuts,” she read.

“The names are on plaques in the greenhouse,” called out Stine without turning around. “Straight ahead, take the door second from the left in the far wall.” Adellia hoisted the bucket, rolled up the scroll and stuck it in an apron pocket. Easy enough.

If she had thought the antechamber was hot and wet, that was nothing compared to the greenhouse itself. Opening the door felt like opening a furnace; a wave of heat rolled out like a dragon’s breath. Sweat immediately beaded on her forehead and began to run down her face. She labored under the weight of the bucket as she trudged across the room. Every couple of steps she let it sink to the floor, dragging it for a short distance before hefting it again. Step, step, thump, drag… it wasn’t as though it was that heavy, but just moving in the oppressive jungle atmosphere was difficult under all of this leather. All around her, strange creepers and vines twirled and climbed towards the ceiling. The room was silent, but the air was pregnant with anticipation. She imagined that the plants were watching her. And this was just the first room!

Somehow, she made it across the the back wall, which was set with four doors. Sure enough, the second door from the left was marked “OMNIVOROUS.” Below it was a second sign, this one scrawled on paper in what she hoped was red ink: “KEEP OUT!” She tried to doorknob, found it unlocked, and stepped inside.

This chamber was a dim cave, lit by caged gaslamps on either side. Flickering shadows chased each other across the walls. The plant life here was more sparse and farther apart. Each plant was kept in its own pot, marked with a discreet brass plaque. The pots were quite large; Adellia could have easily climbed into one, though from what she could see of the plants, this was not something she was eager to do. They withered menacingly under her glare. She imagined that, when her back was turned, they were creeping towards her-- had that vine always laid across the table like that? What about that flower, the one with the jagged petals like teeth, had it been open quite so wide when she first stepped in? She looked at the plaque adorning the nearest pot, which said “Fireleaf Pitcher.” Finding it on the scroll, she found it was assigned five cuts. Her fumbling fingers pulled out five of the giblets and, unsure of what to do, she tossed them into the pitcher.

The reaction was immediate. A tendril whip-cracked through the air and snagged the chicken in midair. Each piece was spiked into the pitcher with a wet glunk. Adellia watched openmouthed as the plant shuddered and constricted, pulling its tendrils in towards itself. Delicate red tracerise began to bloom on the underside of the pitcher, and she shuddered. Who ever said botany was boring?

One by one, she circled the room, tossing meat scraps to her charges. Most of the plants scooped them up or snared them in some way, and not a few of them sent questing tendrils towards her. These she sidestepped with alacrity. Rubber boots or not, there wasn’t a plant grown that was faster than Adellia Hawk. Despite her fatigue at carrying the heavy bucket through this steaming jungle, she found herself energized. This was easy! Extra credit? She’d be graduating with honors at this rate!

The last plant on her list was labeled “Ichneumon Lily.” It squatted in a fat pot in the far back corner of the room, a vast off-white bulb surrounded by thin vines. These shivered at her approach as though in a high breeze. The Lily was supposed to receive ten giblets. Adellia checked her bucket: there were plenty of cuts left. She stood back and tossed them in one at a time. The plant
made no reaction; the meat simply plunked into the open top of its bulb while its tendrils quivered gently. She made a game of it, stepping back and tossing them in like bocce balls. Eight… nine…

*Clank!* Too late, she saw the bucket. Her foot knocked into it and chicken spilled everywhere. Instantly, creeper vines from all corners of the room converged on the bounty. “Shit!” she cried to the empty room. “Shit, shit, shit!” She dropped to her hands and knees and scrambled at the mess, trying to scoop up the meat with thick, clumsy fingers. It was slow going; she often dropped the same piece twice or more while trying to pick it up. Cursing, she pulled off one glove and groped with her bare hand. Much better! She scooped up the last couple of pieces and dropped them in the bucket. An Orange Snapdragon vine had curled towards her as she worked, and she danced backward out of its range. “Not quick enough, flower!” she taunted. “You’ll have to--”

There was a sudden, sharp pain in her fingertip. She looked down in disbelief. One of the Ichneumon Lily’s thin, quivering tendrils had somehow crept silently up her leg and was even now brandishing a thorn at her exposed right hand. A single drop of blood welled from the tip of her finger. She watched it gather in slow motion, bead up and begin to drop to the floor. Already, cold numbness was spreading from her fingertip and racing up her arm.

“Oh, bother,” said Adellia, and passed out.

She came to in a haze. Her eyes wouldn’t seem to focus; all she could see was a vague curtain of light, and faint, blurry shapes beyond. She could hear a rhythmic liquid sound, like a great wash-tub churning somewhere in the distance. She blinked once, twice, and yawned tremendously.

Her mouth felt… odd. It felt as though she was moving in slow motion. Was she chewing something? Alarm rose up inside her. Wait, where was…?

Memories tumbled back into place and her eyes widened. She tried to get up and found her limbs pinned in place. She tried to scream and a fountain of bubbles erupted from her mouth. All of a sudden she knew where she was. The curtain of light was the Ichneumon Lily’s vast bulb. Somehow, she was *inside* the flower, floating in a bath of sap.

Panic shot through her and she clawed desperately at the fluid all around her. She could barely move her hands. Looking down, she could just make out dark lines that looped and whirled along her arms; vines, it seemed, or some kind of internal filament. They were thin, but her disorientation and the thick sap which surrounded her robbed her of any strength. She could feel the sap filling her mouth, sliding down her throat, up her nose… and yet, she wasn’t drowning. Inch by inch, she calmed down. Somehow, the fluid was breathable. It was a highly disorienting sensation, and she had to keep fighting down her instinctive terror at drowning. She was captured, but alive. Why? Was she being digested?

Something slithered across her belly. Alarmed, she tried to focus her vision on it. Another vine, this one as thick as her finger, was sliding along her hip, towards the hem of her shirt. She could feel tiny thorns pricking at her skin. As she watched, more vines converged on her. They grew up from the base of the bulb and wiggled through the sap like burrowing worms. One crept under the hem of her skirt; another squirmed down her trousers. She felt them flex like muscular arms and their thorns tore through the wet cotton of her garments. They cut and sawed as pieces of fabric shredded off her and drifted away through the sea of sap. In short order only tattered rags clung to her calves and chest; everything in between had been ripped away. With her limbs trapped, she should have felt exposed, but right now her overwhelming sensation was that of a warm bath. The fluid kissed her skin and seemed to seep into her pores. She did not feel sticky or slimy. She felt clean and relaxed.

Something new was sprouting from the base of the bulb. It brushed against one butt cheek and she
craned her neck to see it. It looked like an acorn on the end of a thick root, a bulbous round shape with a soft and spongy texture. It caressed her thigh and rooted around blindly.

Some deep-down voice was shouting for her attention, but Adellia ignored it. This was pleasant. The sap tasted sweet-- how had she not noticed that before now? It sat on her tongue like lemon meringue. She gulped eagerly at it and swallowed huge mouthfuls. The stuff was barely filling at all! It seemed to melt away like candyfloss in her stomach. The creepers holding her limbs in place weren’t painful; they tickled! She let out a little burp and a giggle as they wriggled around her wrists.

Something was pressing against her pussy. She looked down and saw the round bulb had nestled between her thighs. She tried to pull her legs together, but the vines held them steady. Oh, well! She tried! No use getting mad about it! Inside, that voice was howling with alarm, but it seemed to be coming from a long way away. Adellia felt the knots unwinding from her muscles as she relaxed. The warm sap was all around her, hugging her, squishing between her toes and wrinkling her fingertips into little prunes. She barely felt it when the bulb slid inside her.

Oh, but it was large! It was much larger than she had thought. A slight twinge of pain broke through her relaxation and made her furrow her brow. Looking down, she saw the vine seeming to grow out of her quim and down into the bulb. It was thick, as thick around as her wrist, and as more of it pushed into her it was perceptibly widening. Her pussy lips bulged around it, unable to fully close again. She could still see the acorn-head inside her mound; her small thatch of chestnut pubic hair was practically standing on end, it seemed, pushed out by the intruder now colonizing her cunt. It was pushing on her from all directions, it seemed. Her inner walls flexed and contracted around the acorn, trying to push it out, but to no avail; there was a ripple that ran along the length of the root, and it corkscrewed deeper inside her. Adellia let out a little cry that vanished in a spray of bubbles. The plant needed to calm down! It was interrupting her relaxation. She swallowed another big mouthful of the sap, and her cares began to melt away. It would be ok. It would all be ok, if she just relaxed.

Inch by inch, little by little, the root wormed its way up Adellia’s tight channel. As it traveled, it pulled her down onto itself to ease its passage. Branching taproots sprouted from the sides, tiny anchors that clung to Adellia’s sensitive inner walls.

She squirmed and fidgeted at the sensation. It was something she had never experienced before, a strange and insistent tickle inside of her that drove her to the point of distraction. Her clit ached for release, but she could not touch it. Frustrated, she tried to rub her thighs together, but found herself incapable of even that. She moaned into the sap and screwed her eyes shut. This plant was being mean! It was denying her what she really wanted!

By accident or design, the next time the plant’s vines pulled on her limbs, they dragged her just far enough onto the root to find a misshapen knot that grew out of one side. By this point the root had grown to the width of her calf, and Adellia’s twat was well and truly stuck on it. She was impaled like a kebab, barely able to wiggle around the massive, girthy stem in her guts. As she twitched back and forth, the knot passed between her distended nether lips and came to rest against the coral-pink pearl of her clit. She shuddered as its rough edges scraped against her most sensitive place. This was the last thing she needed to tip her over the edge; her cunt spasmed and squeezed as an orgasm shook her from head to toe. In her current state, it felt like a bloom of light that filled her vision with warmth.

The end of the root had reached her cervix. Obeying instructions printed on its DNA, it began to sprout a specialized flower. Tiny petals curled around the entrance to Adellia’s womb and began to swell with sap. Hydraulic pressure built inside her, an inexorable pushing that grew and grew until
her already-weakened cervix gave way before the relentless assault. The flower was, ironically, beautiful: an iridescent mother-of-pearl that nobody would ever see. It had done its job and already was beginning to wilt.

The root wasn’t done yet. A ripple ran down its length, then another. Something fat and round bulged halfway between the floor of the bulb and Adellia. With each ripple, it pushed farther along. Like a snake slowly digesting a rodent, the bulge moved in fits and starts towards the helpless girl. As it reached her pried-open pussy, the inner voice, which had long since ceased to scream, sighed in exhausted resignation. Not again!

Simple physics seemed to dictate that the root’s cargo could not possibly fit into Adellia’s already-stuffed quim, but the demands of biology were impossible to refuse. Slowly, ever so slowly, her pussy lips stretched farther and farther. They deformed around the seed as it passed into her. It was clearly visible beneath her skin, a fat sphere that moved upward until it reached her womb. Her conquered body offered no further resistance as the seedpod slid from the mouth of the flower and landed in Adellia’s uterus.

The second seed stirred up half-remembered images in Adellia’s mind. She was still in the bulb, but somehow she was also in a dark forest, wrapped up in silk. Still reeling from the intensity of her first orgasm, she could not place the memories. Not that she had attention to spare; the seeds were hitting her G-spot perfectly as they traveled, and each one sent a delicious thrill up her spine. She groaned as she felt the seed inside her plop out next to its companion, even as a third seed began its journey. This was too much for her. Her eyelids fluttered and toes curled madly as pleasure washed over her sap-addled mind and buried the last remnants of rational thought.

Four, five, six, seven… the Ichneumon Lily took its time. Each seed bloated her stomach out farther as the loose sac of her womb expanded impossibly to accommodate them. She gurgled in mindless delight as she felt them jostle each other and clunk together inside of her. Her belly had a pebbled texture, each seed clearly visible through the skin. When the plant had finished, the root began to slide out of her, spraying a nutrient paste behind it as it went. This completed the image of a pregnant woman, erasing the individual bumps as it swelled her stomach to the size of a beach ball. As it pulled itself free from Adellia she whimpered at the sudden hollow sensation. Her mouth lolled open and her eyes stared sightlessly at the wall of the bulb.

Professor Stine made it three-quarters of the way through the papers he was grading before he realized something was amiss. The extra-credit girl Lachan had sent to him still hadn’t come back. Sighing, he hopped off the stool and grabbed his walking stick from where it leaned against the wall. He had been warned that she was reckless, but he had provided very clear safety instructions. It wasn’t his fault if she hadn’t read them. As he stepped into the Omnivore Annex, one look at the Ichneumon Lily’s bulb confirmed his suspicions. He sighed and batted away a questing Snapdragon tendril with his staff. Meandering back to the antechamber, he opened the hallway door.

“You! Yes, you, boy!” The passing sophomore looked around, then down into the wrinkled brown face of Professor Stine. He immediately stood up straight.

“Yes, Professor?”

“Go run along and tell the school nurse that she needs an extraction kit prepared. It’s the Ichneumon Lily again.”

The student swallowed hard. “Y-yes sir. Anything else?”

“No, no.” Stine waved his walking stick dismissively. “Off with you, then come back here with a
stretcher. Make sure you bring another strong young lad to help you. You’ve got some heavy lifting to do.”

As the student fled, Stine sighed heavily and ambled over to his desk, from which he retrieved a metal spray tube with a skull imprinted on the side. Oh, well, he reflected. Botany wasn’t for everyone.
Adellia Hawk's botanical assignment didn't end well. Maybe chemistry is more her speed.

For the second time in as many months, Adellia Hawk woke up in the infirmary. Her eyelashes fluttered and she let out a groggy groan. She had been swaddled in blankets, and her limbs seemed to lack the strength to push them off. Her mouth felt as though it was full of cotton wool. Her cries for help emerged as muffled grunts. Annoyed, she gathered her formidable willpower and kicked out with one leg. The metal bed frame of the old infirmary cot creaked and swayed, but that was it. Even this exertion left her lightheaded. She laid there surrounded by cottony white softness and tried to piece together the events of the last few hours. There was something about that whiteness that chilled her, something just out of--

“Ah, Ms. Hawk! You’re awake!”

Ms. Mandrake, the nurse, loomed over Adellia’s bed, hands clasped to her impressive bosom. The woman looked as though she had been carved from granite: her shoulders were broad, her arms muscular. Legs like beer barrels were pinched incongruously in a white dress uniform that had been starched to a cutting edge. Her voice was husky but cheerful, and she moved like a tiger, all barely contained energy. She gave the impression of a woman who liked brisk uphill jogs in the snow and recreational caber tossing.

“You’ve had a nasty shock, Ms. Hawk. I wouldn’t try to move, if I were you.”

This was in response to Adellia’s feeble attempts at escape. She was sure she could get herself out of these blankets, if her stupid arms would just listen to her brain. Why couldn’t she--

“No, no, don’t try to move. You can’t do that right now.” What little progress Adellia had made was instantly undone as Ms. Mandrake’s powerful hands deftly secured her in linens. Adellia made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat, but that was the extent of her defiance. She had been awake for two minutes and already she was exhausted.

Salvation came from an unexpected quarter. Professor Stine came out from behind the nurse like a tiny moon emerging from the shadow of its parent planet. Compared to the apparition in white, Stine was positively shriveled. He wore a roughspun brown robe almost the same color as his skin. Where the nurse was all geometric angles and endless expanses of starched white cotton, Stine’s face was a maze of wrinkles like a withered old apple.

“Ah, I see my assistant has returned to us.” Stine’s voice was crisp and deep, with a hint of a smile in his words. “You gave us all quite a scare, young lady. What do you remember?”

Adellia swallowed hard. Talking was difficult, but with some effort she was able to force her lips to obey her. “There was… a plant… seeds…’” Images flashed across her mind. She blushed as her memories started to trickle back. “Seeds… I…”

“Yes, yes, it’s quite all right, you don’t have to say it.” Professor Stine patted her on the shoulder.
“The Ichneumon Lily can be very dangerous. You were lucky I found you when I did. We were able to remove almost all the seeds.”

Adellia’s relief was short-lived as the import of his words sank in. “Almost?” she croaked. Stine nodded, then looked up at Ms. Mandrake. “Nurse, if you could unwrap her?” he said. Mandrake’s face creased into a thunderous frown. “Sir, the privacy of my patients is sacrosanct. This young lady deserves—”

“Oh, hush,” said Stine. “I removed the seeds myself. Adellia hasn’t got anything I haven’t seen before, and I’m too old to want to do anything about it. Now are you going to unwrap her or just leave her there trussed up like a roast goose?”

Ms. Mandrake humphed slightly, but she grabbed the blankets and pulled. Little by little Adellia felt the constricting linens loosen and fall away. The nurse grabbed the last blanket and, after looking exaggeratedly in both directions, pulled it off. Adellia found herself lying naked on the bed. She looked down at herself and gasped. Her right index finger was swollen and livid, and traceries of red were creeping up her arm, but that wasn’t what had stolen her attention. Her stomach was as flat and tight as it had ever been, but there was something colorful between her thighs. She squinted, unsure if what she was seeing was real, but it was unmistakable. Sprouting from her pussy, looking for all the world like it belonged there, was a bright flower.

The flower’s petals were pale blue, shot through with tiny red veins. Adellia gaped in disbelief. If this was a hallucination, it was the most detailed one ever. She could see the tiny green frond of the pistil, surrounded by waving stamens. She could even smell something unusual, a delicate floral scent at odds with her usual smell of sweat and leather. “Wh-what?” she stammered. She tried to cross her legs to hide this strange growth, but her muscles wouldn’t obey her.

“Don’t worry,” Stine said in a conversational tone, “it’s temporary. We got all the seeds but one before they could take root. Removing this one was too risky— I might have permanently damaged you. We just have to let it sprout.”

Adellia’s mind filled with a strange image: she was standing naked in the garden, head tilted back, with a bouquet of flowers growing out of her mouth. A thick brown root growing from her quim anchored her in the earth, and Professor Stine was watering her from a watering can. Her eyes rolled in their sockets in dismay. “Calm down, Adellia,” Hawk continued. “As I said, it’s temporary. You just have to try to live with it for a week or so. Then it’ll wilt and we can pluck it. The rest of the seedpod will disintegrate and work its way out of you naturally. Just… don’t go back into the greenhouse for a month or two. If the Lily fertilizes that flower, it’ll start the whole process over again.” He punctuated this last with a stern wag of his finger. “Not that I think you’re eager to go back there, but just in case, you’re banned from the greenhouse. At least until this is all over.”

Having said his piece, Stine pulled out an ancient corncob pipe and, ignoring Ms. Mandrake’s stare of disapproval, lit it and took a puff. He looked at Adellia for a long while, then took the pipe in one hand. “I can’t said I approve of your carelessness, but you did an acceptable job feeding my plants. So I’ll give you your credit. Be more careful, Adellia, and you might make a good hunter someday.” He strode off between the cots, a cloud of smoke trailing behind him. Ms. Mandrake humphed one more time for good measure and went to fetch a blanket. “Very well,” she said. “You may resume your classes tomorrow. But I will be watching you, young lady! Any signs of… of… anything and you’ll be on bed rest until further notice!”

The next day, Adellia indeed felt well enough to get out of bed. To her surprise, Toby Cotton arrived at her bedside, bearing a bag of clothes and a face as red as a ripe tomato. He looked down
as he handed it to her. “Here you go, Adellia. I thought you might want… you know. Also, I’m, uh, I’m sorry.”

Adellia took the bag with a smile. “Sorry for what, Toby?” She had almost gotten used to referring to him by his given name. “Why are you here, anyways?”

“Well, Professor Stine, he said you might want to change before you went back, uh, to your dorm, and I just, well, I heard you got in some trouble, and I just wanted to say, I’m sorry about that. I recommended you to Stine, so if something bad happened to you, it was my f-fault.” He sniffled a little.

Adellia let out a bark of laughter. “Are you serious, Cotton? Come on, I’m tougher than any plant! Don’t be such a wet blanket.” She paused. “Uh, Professor Stine didn’t say what kind of trouble I got in, did he?”

Toby blinked. “N-no. He just said that you were in the Omnivore wing. I should have known, some of those plants are scary, even for--”

Adellia let out a sigh of relief. “No worries, Toby. You’re off the hook. Now scram. I want to get dressed.”

He hurried out-- though not, Adellia noted, without a furtive glance over his shoulder. She rolled her eyes. Same old Cotton Ball as ever. She slid her legs off the bed and dropped to the floor. She was alone in the infirmary, so she padded over to a wall mirror and regarded herself. She flexed one arm, admiring her toned, naked form. Nothing wrong with her muscles. She was as graceful as ever. The only imperfection was that ridiculous flower. It tickled her legs as she walked. She pulled her panties on over it, but it still looked silly through the fabric, as though she had sprouted a lush crop of pubic hair overnight. She hoped it wouldn’t be noticeable through her leather trousers.

Fully dressed, she tried to affect a confident stride back to her dorm. Unfortunately, each step caused the flower between her legs to brush against her thighs. It felt strange, grasping, like a hand groping and pinching her flesh. Each caress sent a shiver up her spine, and she was forced to take tiny, mincing steps. She felt ridiculous. What would she say if someone saw her? Either her fellow students were too preoccupied to notice, or too polite to say anything. She made it back to her dorm and threw herself onto her bed.

The next few days were torturous. Adellia had always been proud of her body. She’d worked hard to stay lean and muscular. Some of the aristocratic daughters of her class pinched their feet in tiny shoes, strapped their bodies into creaking whalebone corsets, painted their faces and their nails and their hair to achieve a sort of chilly, perfect beauty. Adellia preferred the natural look. Her breasts may not have jutted out like Corinthia Swain’s, but at least she didn’t have to bind them before she ran. Her hips may not have been round and lush, but they didn’t interfere with her fencing posture. She liked the way she looked, and she wasn’t shy about other people seeing it. Now, though, she avoided the communal showers, skulking through the bathroom like a ghost and always making sure she was fully dressed if there was any possibility that someone might be around. She even slept in her leathers, a habit which did nothing for her smell.

The damn thing itched, too. Adellia saw the way teenage boys scratched themselves in public practically at the drop of a hat, but when a girl did it, everyone gave her weird looks. It wasn’t fair. They probably thought she had lice or something. It wasn’t as though she could explain the truth. Once, at the end of a long day, she had snuck into the shower and given the flower a furtive tug to try and dislodge it. The cramp that squeezed her guts had taught her not to do that again. Professor Stine surely knew what he was talking about. It would go away on its own.
One night, she could take it no more. She hadn’t showered in three days at that point; it seemed as though the bathrooms were never empty. Finally, finally, the girls of her dorm had been called away to prepare for some soirée or another. Adellia never paid attention to those. It wasn’t as though she was going to be invited, anyways. The important thing was that it meant she had the bathroom to herself. She peeled her leathers off gratefully, wrinkling her nose at the odor. The shower stalls were all empty, but just to be safe, she chose one on the end. They were squat stone cubicles with dividers at about chest height and baroque iron taps set high into the wall. She took a moment to stretch before turning the water on. Ah, but it felt good to get out of her old clothes! She stood with her feet shoulder width apart and her arms outstretched above her head. She bent first to one side, then the other, touching her toes with her fingertips. Twisting that way felt odd; she could feel something shifting inside her, tugging at her with tiny, insistent fingers. It was not painful, but slightly disconcerting.

She turned the tap and the old pipes began to rattle in the walls. As the water gushed forth, she closed her eyes and grinned. Warmth coursed over her and soaked into her pores. She could feel individual droplets dancing against her back. The caked-on sweat and grime of days was pouring off of her. She felt reborn. The shower came equipped with a small stone shelf, which held a heavy block of soap and a loofah. Grabbing the loofah, Adellia began to scrub herself vigorously. She tilted her head this way and that to get at her neck, behind her ears, under her arms. She squeezed out a waterfall of soapy water that cascaded over her breasts and into her navel. Rivulets ran down her arms and leapt from her elbows, poured down the small of her back, trickled between her wiggling toes.

She dragged the coarse loofah across her pubic mound and gasped. As it brushed her clit, an electric sensation shot up her spine and rooted her to the ground. It was as though she had awakened something with that careless touch; a hunger, a yearning need that blossomed at the heart of her. Tentatively, she reached down again with the loofah and ran it around the edge of the iridescent blue flower blooming from her pussy. She could feel it, as though it were a part of her. It was incredibly sensitive. The slightest touch shook its petals and set her body to tingling. The loofah circled, around and around, gently teasing the flower and darting back. She staggered to the wall and leaned against it on one outstretched arm, breathing heavily. Her hair hung down in her face as she panted for breath. What was happening to her?

Once again, Adellia drew the sponge down from her navel, tracing a line towards her clit. At the same time she reached down with her free hand and sank her fingers into the petals of her flower. It was soft and yielding, and seemed to glow with an inner heat. As her fingers darted to and fro between its petals, pleasure exploded across her mind like a firework. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she leaned heavily against the wall. Her breath came fast and shallow as she furiously pumped her fingers in and out of the flower. Her questing fingertips found the bulbous pistil and she rolled it back and forth like a marble. She moaned involuntarily at the sensation. Her clit lay neglected; the loofah slipped from nerveless fingers and splatted against the floor as she dragged her fingers through the forest of petals sprouting between her thighs. She could feel something rising inside her, like sap on the first day of spring, a great systolic push that erupted from her heart. The force that pushed green saplings through six inches of frozen soil was alive in her. She let out a primal cry as it burst forth, not caring who heard, not caring that it echoed off the stone walls of the bathroom and down the hall. Her mind went blank and her face flushed, mouth lolling open, tongue hanging out from one corner as aftershocks reverberated around her lust-ravaged brain.

In the afterglow she became aware of a faint sound. She was leaning over forward with her hands on her lower thighs, trying to catch her breath. It sounded like pattering, like the footsteps of a mouse. A thin drizzle of warm water still sprinkled over her, and she reached over to turn off the tap. Where was that noise coming from?
She looked down. Water was still dribbling off her body, but something looked wrong. The drops were too big, and the wrong color. Her eyes widened as she realized the flower was losing its petals. They were dropping like snowflakes, drifting down between her legs and landing in the draining puddle on floor of the stall. Some clung to her wet calves, but the majority bobbed and swirled on the eddies of the drain before disappearing down the grate. Adellia watched in wonderment as they drizzled downward, flitting like falling leaves. What remained of the flower was brown and dead. As the last petal detached and blew away it shriveled like a raisin in the sun. She felt something shift inside her. It was a curious sensation; it felt like a snake writhing in her belly. She grabbed the shriveled flower and pulled. It slid out of her like a cork from a bottle, dragging behind it a coiling root. The bark scraped her inner walls, still sensitive from her recent orgasm, and she bit her lip to keep quiet. The root terminated in a round bulb which caught for a moment before popping free from her quim with a wet schlurp. She stared at it in mingled amazement and disgust for a moment before dropping it on the floor. It immediately began to disintegrate, its pulpy remains mixing with the petals as they spiraled down the drain.

Adellia stood there, woozy and disoriented, for a moment longer, then shook her head to clear it. She felt cleaner than she had in weeks. She wrapped herself in a towel, scooped up her dirty laundry, and marched off to bed.

The next day, she was sitting in her chemistry class, reveling in the sensation of being able to cross her legs without discomfort. Even with her newly-obtained dedication to coursework, she found chemistry a slog. Partially, this was because of the precision required. Adellia lacked the patience for pipettes, and careful titration was entirely beyond her. She would drift off into daydreams during lab sections, imagining herself as Dr. Volkoff, who had perfected the Volkoff Elixir (the surest weapon against vampires yet discovered). Other times she would be Lady Amelie Pennyfarthing, whose home-brewed tranquilizers made her the most legendary field researcher of her day. Inevitably, Adellia’s own creations tended to sulk and simmer in their beakers, or froth up to splash all over her desk. She had long since run out of willing lab partners, and now did all of her mixing under the disapproving glare of Dr. Dilige.

That was the other part of her distaste. Dr. Dilige was a whip-thin woman with pale skin and thick, bushy eyebrows that grew together in the middle. Those eyebrows twisted into remarkable configurations when she was pleased, shocked, or most commonly, disappointed. Her voice could crack a windowpane and her stare could curdle milk, and that formidable pair was most often turned on Adellia and her wilted concoctions. Adellia tried to console herself that Isidore Dilige had never been a field hunter and probably didn’t know anything about anything that you couldn’t fit in a flask. This made her feel a little better, but it was cold comfort when she failed yet again to distill essence of ambrosia.

“Miss Hawk!” Dr. Dilige’s voice cut through her self-pity. “What is going on in your beaker?”

Adellia’s head whipped around in time to watch her painstakingly measured ingredients sizzle away into a cloud of foul-smelling steam, leaving a mucosal residue on the walls of her beaker. She groaned in horror as the cloud oozed across her desk. Quick thinking on her part saved her notebooks from being engulfed, but the cloud settled on her textbook, causing the paint on the cover to blister and crack. The classroom echoed with the muted giggles of her peers, who took a break from stirring their own perfectly prepared solutions to enjoy their classmate’s misfortune.

Adellia ran her hands through her hair and breathed hard. She had been so careful! What was she missing? Had it been two measures of tincture of fadeleaf, or three? Why hadn’t she double-checked? As Dr. Dilige tutted over her ruined mixture, Adellia once again wondered why she was even bothering to take Chemistry.
“That will be all, students. Leave your solutions on your desks, please, I will be around to grade them. Miss Hawk, a word if you please?”

And now humiliation piled on humiliation. Adellia sighed as she wiped down her textbook with a damp rag. She could feel a dozen pairs of eyes on her as her classmates filed out of the room. Their mingled pity and relief pressed down on her like a physical weight. It just wasn’t fair! She had been working hard, so hard, and she knew she was smart enough. She wasn’t going to spend her life in a lab, getting dizzy on fumes and growing eyebrows that looked like caterpillars mating. Why did she have to know all this mixing stuff?

“Adellia.” Dr. Dilige’s voice had softened. Her eyebrows knotted together in what was probably an expression of earnest concern. “Your papers have been… acceptable, lately. I can see you taking notes in my lectures. Why, do you think, does proper laboratory procedure continue to elude you?”

“I don’t know.” Adellia blinked back tears. She concentrated on her breathing. In, out. In, out.

“Adellia… you know I want to see you succeed. We all do. But there is no shortcut to proper preparation and execution. You are reckless. You hurry through things. That will not serve you well in the field, you know.”

The words “how would you know” bubbled up in Adellia’s throat, but she managed to quash them just in time. What she said instead was: “Yes, Dr. Dilige. I’m sorry.”

“Right now, Adellia, I’m afraid that your labwork is dragging your grades down. You’ll have to have a truly exemplary final to pass my class. However, I have been informed by your other professors that you are very keen on practical assignments. So I have a deal to offer you.”

“A… deal?” Adellia cocked her head. Her last extra credit assignment could have gone better, but she was sure that she could do better. If she had the opportunity.

“Yes. There are certain reagents that we harvest on campus. That’s an important part of chemistry, as important as the actual mixing and distilling. I would be willing to allow you to help out and substitute that assignment for your lab grades. That should help you pass.”

Adellia thought about this, but only for a second or two. Picking flowers and squeezing toads sounded a lot easier than dilution and whatever “stoichiometry” was. “Deal!” she said, and extended a hand, smiling. Dr. Dilige looked surprised for a moment, but her thin lips turned up in a smile and she shook Adellia’s hand. “Very well, young lady. Now remember, this is no picnic. You must be as precise and careful as you would be in a lab. Chemistry is not for the faint of heart.”

Adellia nodded along. Her heart was soaring. Finally, a chance to make good! She would show everyone that Adellia Hawk was just as good at chemistry as she was at hunting. She just needed a chance.

The next week practically flew by. Normally, Adellia dreaded the approach of chemistry class and the impending humiliation it brought with it, but this time she could hardly wait. She sat right up near the front of the lecture and took copious notes. Dr. Dilige droned on and on about the properties of lungwort… its medicinal uses, and the way its extract was used to create repellants. “In addition to basilisks, can anyone name two other monsters repelled by lungwort?” she asked. Two rows behind Adellia, Toby Cotton’s hand shot in the air and waved to and fro frantically. Adellia rolled her eyes. She was sure that he was sticking his hand up more often in their shared classes ever since their rendezvous in the bathroom. Trying to impress her, no doubt. It was kind of
sweet and sappy, to tell the truth, but Adellia wasn’t the sappy type.

“Yes, Mr. Cotton? Before you explode?” Dr. Dilige’s deadpan drew a few titters from the class, but Toby didn’t seem to notice. “Um, soucouyants and ayakashi, ma’am,” he said. “There’s also copper oozes, and—”

“Yes, very well, Mr. Cotton. Good answer.” Dr. Dilige clasped her hands together. “That concludes the lecture portion of today’s class. Please separate into your lab groups. Miss Hawk, you may report to the chemistry department offices for your lab assignment.”

Adellia scooped up her books and almost skipped out of the classroom. She spent the short walk to the offices wondering what her assignment would be. Maybe they would have her visiting the Hoxwald! She pictured herself scaling cliffs to pick eggs from alicanto nests, fording rivers to find rare fungi, fencing werewolves and grues to collect teeth and hair.

“Lungwort.”

She repeated the word, slowly, in case she had misheard. The prefect in the chemistry office nodded. “Yes, we need several bushels. Dr. Dilige says that’s what you’re covering in chemistry, so she needs lots of it. We have plenty growing in the garden.” He paused. “You do know where that is, right?”

Adellia shrugged. “On the far side of the Hoxwald? Guarded by all manner of dangerous beasts I’ll have to sneak past, full of rare and deadly—”

“It’s behind the kitchen. Next to the compost heaps.” The prefect gave her a blank stare. “You might want to bring a clothespin. For the compost, you know?” He mimed pinching his nose.

“Oh.” Adellia swallowed. “You don’t, uh, you don’t have one, do you?”

“Nope.” The prefect looked down at the paper in his hands, then back up at Adellia. “Says here we need three bushels. There’s baskets in the corner.” He pointed. “Those are a bushel each, so three of them. Bring them back here and you’re all set.”

“And that’s it? I just pick flowers for a few hours and that’s the job?” Adellia did not try particularly hard to conceal her distaste.

“Uh, no, then we’ve got you taking samples at the menagerie.”

She brightened up. “Ah, blood and claws, right? That sounds—”

“Slime.” The prefect double-checked the paper again. “Yeah, says here slime from the blue, red and copper oozes.” He held out a rack of test tubes by way of demonstration. “My advice is just leave the clothespin on.”

It was in a foul and gloomy mood that Adellia stomped down to the gardens. Sure enough, the compost heaps were right there, looming against the stone wall of the Academy. After a brief investigation had failed to turn up a clothespin, she had decided to just hold her nose, but the compost smell proved everpresent. It had a certain penetrating quality that she found hard to shake. It was easy enough to find the patches of lungwort; great green bushes of the stuff sprouted in one quadrant of the garden. She had been picking leaves for less than five minutes when she felt the first raindrop. It was followed by a second, a third, and then with a sound like a stampede of tiny feet the heavens opened up on her. She was soaked to the bone in seconds, her hair plastered
limply against her cheeks, her boots sloshing and squishing through the mud. She kept on grabbing and pulling out of sheer bloody-minded desperation, but inside she was screaming. What kind of life was this for a hunter? When she graduated, she decided, she’d have someone for this. And her laundry and dishes. That’d leave her free to focus on the important things.

It seemed to take hours for her to fill the bushel baskets. Crushed lungwort leaves stuck to her hands, her arms, her legs, everywhere. The compost smell had been replaced by wet compost smell, which was, if anything, worse. One by one she dragged the surprisingly heavy baskets to the kitchen and stuck them next to the great cast iron stove to dry off. As she planted the last handful of lungwort into the last basket, she stood back and surveyed her handiwork. It looked as though a very precise but not very thorough swarm of locusts had been through here, partially denuding each lungwort bush of all the leaves within an arm’s reach of the top. She stuck her hands on her hips proudly. They had expected Adellia Hawk to give up, but she was made of sterner stuff than that! She held that pose for a minute, then hurried inside to warm herself by the stove.

Once she no longer looked as though she had been dropped in the lake, she marched back to the chemistry offices, dragging her baskets behind her. A trail of muddy footsteps and crumpled leaves followed her. She didn’t care. Nobody had told her to take her boots off, so she wasn’t going to. Besides, hunters had to be able to deal with a little mud. You got covered in worse when you went fighting monsters. The prefect from before was still in the office, sipping tea from a clay mug and reading a novel. Adellia presented her prizes and sketched a mocking salute. “Reporting for duty, sir! Where to next?”

“The menagerie. It’s in the basement, next to the training smithy. Do you know where that is?”

“Of course!” Adellia lacked the patience (and, she had to admit, the arm strength) for smithing, but she loved to see her beloved Armory’s weapons come to life. The smithy was always warm during the winter months, when it felt like the corridors were just wind tunnels. She was exhausted from picking leaves, but she found the strength to run down several flights of stairs to the basement. The ring of steel on steel told her she was heading in the right direction-- trainee smiths stood at their anvils at all hours, hammering out blanks and shoveling clinkers. She dearly wanted to pop in and say hello to Master Montblanc, the head smith, but she had wasted enough time drying off in the kitchen and was eager to start the second part of her assignment.

The menagerie turned out to be a long, low-ceiling series of rooms, each containing several fenced-off pens. To Adellia’s disappointment, nothing truly wild or dangerous was kept here; a few goats eyed her balefully from their enclosure, while next to them a dozen cheeping kappas splashed and rolled in their shallow pond. The light in here came from a series of flickering gaslamps fixed to the walls, and a thick, cloying animal stink permeated the entire area. One end of the antechamber was given over to an office of sorts. Cubbies on the wall were stuffed to bursting with paperwork, and the desk was practically invisible beneath a teetering pile of ledgers, receipts, and dog-eared reference manuals.

The prefect on duty was a senior girl Adellia didn’t recognize, short and compact with long dark braids. She looked up from the desk as Adellia entered and fixed her with a weary stare. “You’re here to collect samples, right?” she asked. The roar of the furnace from next door was so loud here that Adellia had to strain to hear her. “Yes!” she shouted, nodding enthusiastically. “What do I do?”

The girl handed over a rack of test tubes. “Ooze enclosure is three rooms away, on your left. Here’s the key.” She handed over a thick steel key on a leather thong. “Reds, blues and coppers are kept separately. Don’t mix them up! We need three tubes from each color. Wear gloves-- you’ll need them. And step quickly.” She pointed at a peg board on the wall, from which hung a variety of billhooks, truwls, nets and other, less identifiable instruments. Adellia selected a pair of thick
rubberized gloves and pulled them on. “That’s it?” she asked. “You’re not going to demonstrate?”

The girl shrugged. “They’re just oozes. The cold’s got them slow. Just scoop up some and put it in the tube. Like I said, move fast.” She turned back to the desk. Clearly, the instruction period was over.

Adellia considered sticking her tongue out at the girl’s back, but that would be immature. Besides, this was easy. She’d be in and out in less than twenty minutes. She grabbed the key and the tube rack and headed off into the menagerie.

The smell grew stronger as she went farther. Blood, sweat, waste… it was the smell of monsters, and while the stuffy chemistry prefect might have hated it, she loved it. She was in her element! These weren’t very scary monsters, but they were monsters, and Adellia was born to hunt. There was a swagger in her step as she reached the third room. Unlike the previous rooms, there were no visible occupants. Instead, the entire left wall made up of steel panels, with a door set in them every ten feet or so. Adellia supposed that made sense-- slimes could ooze out through even a thin grating.

The doors were labeled by color. She stepped up to the “BLUE” door, turned the key, and swung it open. There was a hiss as the rubber seal around the door let go, and then she was inside a dimly lit cubicle about ten feet on a side. Two gaslamps lit the room, but it was otherwise unfurnished; the floor and ceiling were bare stone, the walls bare metal. A half dozen deep blue puddles lay scattered about on the floor, as though the roof was leaking. Adellia turned towards the closest and saw that it was quivering slightly. She wrinkled her nose in distaste. Oozes barely counted as monsters. When she reached down with her test tube, the puddle began to flow away from her, but slowly, like thick treacle. She had no trouble at all filling three test tubes. When she had finished, her gloves were covered in greasy residue. It filled her nostrils with an acrid stink. She grimaced and ran out of the enclosure, slamming the door behind her.

The next door said “COPPER.” When she swung it open, the smell that hit her was almost like a physical force. Adellia’s eyes teared up and, not for the first time, she regretted not taking the time to find a clothespin. As before, the floor here was dotted with pools of ochre slime, though these seemed more active than their blue counterparts, their surfaces fizzing and bubbling.

She stepped towards the nearest puddle, and it slid away across the floor as if on greased runners. Annoyed, she took another step, and it retreated further. She turned and made sure the door was locked, then squared her shoulders and marched straight at the largest mass of oozes. They scattered like cockroaches before a lantern.

“Oh, come on!” she groaned. The smell was not going away; if anything, it was getting worse. She could taste it at the back of her throat. It smelled like someone had been burning hair in a chemical dump, with a hint of rotting corpse. She knew she would have to take a long, long shower after this, and even that might not be enough.

One particularly small ooze seemed to be unable to move as fast as the others. It skittered uncertainly across the floor, zigging and zagging like a mouse looking for a hiding place. Adellia set off towards it, her boots thudding on the stone floor. She was five feet away. Three feet. Two…

There was a thick squelch and her boot stuck to the ground. She teetered forward for one perilous instant, arms pinwheeling, before regaining her balance. She tried to lift her foot again, but it was anchored in place. Confused, she looked down to see her boot planted firmly in the middle of one of the largest oozes. As she watched, it began to flow inward and submerge her foot. She turned frantically in time to see her other boot disappear beneath a tide of copper jelly. She was rooted to
the floor by both feet. Oozes were flowing towards her now from all over the chamber, converging on the trapped girl and merging like puddles of mercury.

“Uh oh,” she muttered under her breath.

Her legs were splayed about shoulder width apart, her feet at an odd angle. It wasn’t quite uncomfortable, but it was certainly awkward. The amassing copper oozes flowed into and over each other as they climbed her boots. First they covered her soles, then her toes, then they began to climb her laces. It created an odd optical effect: she appeared to be sinking into a puddle of ochre quicksand. The surface of the slime was more lively now, fizzing audibly. Tiny bubbles formed and popped.

As the slime met the leather of her trousers, there was a loud hiss. The substance was translucent, and through it Adellia could see her hems fraying and shrinking. A note of burning was added to the cocktail of odors filling her nose. She reached down and tried to brush the slime off her legs, but the only effect was that it trapped her hands, too. Iron-hard tendrils wrapped around her wrists and submerged her hand. She tried to pull it back, but it might as well have been cast in a steel block. The slime touching her skin was cool and tingled slightly; it did not burn her, though it appeared to be eating through her leathers with alacrity.

Adellia’s mind raced. This was what she had trained for. She was under attack by a hostile entity. Flight was not an option, and she was unarmed. Her assets included… one hand free, and her mind. *Think, Adellia, think!*

By now the slime had reached mid-thigh. Thick runnels of goo stretched between her legs. From the knees down she had disappeared in a pillar of copper jelly. She could feel the slime on her bare legs; it felt like the worst case of pins and needles ever. The slime rose further and further, exploratory tendrils reaching and encircling her hips. The last of her leather trousers fizzed away, leaving her bare below the waist except for cotton smallclothes. These lasted barely any time at all. Adellia shivered as she felt them disintegrate. What next?

The slimes ceased climbing her body, seemingly content with having trapped her this far. Their combination was complete; every slime in the cell was now part of a single mass. Its surface seemed to dance and shimmer with strange patterns, ripples like waves on an unearthly sea. Thick pseudopods extended from the base of the mass and wriggled upwards.

The texture of the slime was not perfectly uniform. Adellia could feel harder shapes inside it, prodding and poking at her legs. One squirmed between her thighs and brushed against her pussy lips. She gasped involuntarily and the slime froze. Slowly, ever so slowly, she felt the probing shape press against her quim. It pressed… and retreated. Pressed… and retreated. There was a long pause, and she was about to sigh in relief, when it came back. There was a single moment of tension and then she felt a tendril of slime as thick as her wrist squirm into her cunt.

Her eyes shot open and her jaw dropped. The slimy extrusion battered past her defenses and flowed into her, forcing her pussy open wider to accommodate its girth. It was not a solid mass, but an amorphous shape that changed its form even as it tunneled deeper inside her. The same tingling that had overtaken her legs spread to her pussy and radiated outward. It was not numbness, but a strange sort of paralysis, a cool and relaxing sensation. Tiny fronds of slime seemed to be exploring around the base of their parent. They stroked her vulva, tickled her inner thighs, prodded at the hood of her cltit. She gasped as she felt her body awaken to the sensations. The slime was all around her. It was not hard and unyielding, like the Ichneumon Lily’s root, nor as muscular as the ovipositors of the Araqny. It molded itself around her, fitting the contours of her body. It was not static, but flowed in great ripples that massaged her most intimate places. She let out a choked gasp
as her inner walls constricted, responding to the stimulation.

The slime had reached her cervix, and here again she felt tiny fingers caressing and poking. The tingly relaxation had spread here, too. Slowly, but with a kind of inexorability, the mass of slime inside her pressed forward and began to ooze through to her womb. It contorted itself, pinching down narrow and then spreading out again to fill her up. She could feel it happening. She even imagined she could see it, the copper jelly expanding inside her womb like an inflating balloon. Her stomach began to puff out slightly as it reached her capacity… and continued to flow.

More and more of the slime was gushing into her. Looking down, she could see it flow, could see the tidal patterns on the surface of the ooze that held her. Its base began to contract slightly as more of it passed into its captive’s womb. This was a strange sensation, a continuous inward motion that rubbed against every inch of her at once. It was overpowering. It felt as though every nerve in her body was being stimulated at once. The solid core of slime pouring into her pussy widened, as though unable to restrain itself in its eagerness, and she cried out as she felt it stretching her open further. Waves of pressure rolled over her clit, on and off, on and off, on and off, teasing her, driving her to the brink of release but not beyond. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, her eyes rolling in their sockets. She tried to buck and grind her hips against the slime, but its grip was ironclad, as though she had been submerged in cement. Finally, a particularly powerful spasm passed through the slime, and the pressure on her clit built and did not abate. Her velvety channel spasmed and contracted around the slime as she came. It seemed to go on and on, wave after wave of pleasure that built up at the core of her and exploded outward. She cried out in delirious ecstasy as she finally achieved release.

It seemed to take a long time for her to come back to herself. She was panting, still bent over in that awkward position. The slime inside her was still flowing, and occasionally she would let out a weak moan as an aftershock hit her.

She noticed with alarm that her belly had swollen dramatically. It was at least two feet across, her navel inverted, her veins visible below the taut surface. There was a faint orangish cast to her skin that she was sure had not been there before. What’s more, the slime showed no sign of abating. It was already noticeably smaller than it had been when she was first pinned, though there was still more than enough to hold her in place. She tried to estimate its size, but gave up after reaching the inevitable conclusion. It was far too large to fit entirely inside her. Was it smart enough to know that? Or was that its plan, to burst her from the inside and feed on her remains? Fear shot through her, overpowering the last remaining traces of lust. She was in danger, serious danger, if she didn’t think of something soon.

Something was nagging at her attention. She could faintly her Toby Cotton’s voice. Why him? Why now? Toby was far away in the chemistry lab. He wouldn’t be able to--

Wait, that was it. Chemistry. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the memory. What had they been talking about? Lungwort. Properties. It was used as a repellent. On what? Soucouyants, ayakashi…

*And copper ooze!*

She groped blindly with her free hand, hardly daring to hope. There, under her shirt. The rain had gotten her miserably soaked, and she had been down on her hands and knees trying to fill those bushel baskets. There, caked to the inside of her vest, her fingers closed on something squishy. She pulled it out. Her glove was full of wet mud, stinking of compost… and a few leaves of lungwort!

With a triumphant yell Adellia thrust her hand into the ooze encasing her legs. The effect was
immediate. The surface of the slime fizzed like oil on a hot stove. It bubbled and popped, scattering droplets everywhere. The slime seemed to melt off her like candlewax, falling apart in great chunks. The tendril inside her lost all cohesion and seemed to melt. It geysered out of her, coating her thighs and splattering across the stone floor. With a sound like a pierced rubber ball deflating, a great waterfall of liquid goop fountained out of her overstretched twat. She went weak at the knees as she felt it escaping; so soon after her orgasm, her inner walls were still incredibly sensitive, and the pressurized flood of slime escaping her womb brought her back to the brink. Her eyes rolled madly in their sockets and she swayed on her feet. The escaping goop squelched onto the floor in great bursts that painted her legs. She sighed as she felt it finally taper off to a trickle that glugged out of her gaping cunt.

Her belly was still bloated, though she now merely resembled a heavily pregnant woman, rather than one who had ingested a beach ball. She squeezed it with her fingers, producing no effect other than a mild cramp and a spatterly squelch of slime. Groaning, she staggered step by step to the door. Her test tubes lay shattered and forgotten on the cell floor. The remaining copper oozes were huddled together at the back of the cell, fizzing and quivering like gelatin. She ignored them as she carefully, painstakingly opened the door and shut it behind her.

The prefect on duty dropped her book as an apparition filled the doorway to the menagerie. It was the girl from earlier, the student, ashen-faced and covered in sweat. She was naked from the waist down, and her top rode high on her midriff, exposing a stomach that was obscenely swollen. Her navel had inverted, and ochre stains marred her thighs and belly. With her came a chemical reek that was almost indescribable.

“I… I… I…” panted Adellia, smiling triumphantly at the horrified prefect. “I got samples.”

With that, she passed out.
Intro to Fieldwork

Chapter Summary

Adellia Hawk gets some much-needed practical field experience.

“Pens down, class!”

Adellia Hawk let out all of her air in one long exhalation and slumped down on her desk. Her test paper was a frightful mess of scribbled corrections, frantic additions and one big inkblot, but it was done. Finally, it was done. The last exam for the last class. She had done her best; it was up to fate now. As the prefects walked the aisles collecting papers, she scanned hers, double-checking her answers even though there was no time left to correct them. Had she listed all of the gorgon subspecies? Was her phases-of-the-moon chart accurate? She had to hope so. It was too late to do anything about them now.

She handed her paper in with a rueful smile and slung her bag over one shoulder. She gratefully joined the great slow exodus from the classroom, her head hanging low and weary. She had been studying until her eyeballs buzzed, until her dreams were full of anatomy diagrams and ballistics equations. She had denied herself even the respite of the Armory in the past week, and she had to hope it had paid off. A combination of long hours hitting the books and dubious extra credit projects (she had to admit she could have done better there) had brought her grades up to the point where passing for the year was, in fact, a distinct possibility.

Afterwards she wandered in a daze. She was far too discombobulated to try strenuous physical activity, and the thought of cracking a book sent a primal spasm of fear shooting up her spine. She settled instead for collapsing into one of the big armchairs in the Common room. There was always a fire roaring here, and despite the late spring warmth, she was grateful for it. It seemed that a number of other students had the same idea. Most of the chairs were full, and small clusters of students sat around the room talking. She knew they were all looking forward to their vacations, the holidays they would take to faraway places or the hours of relaxation they would enjoy. What she had to look forward to was a dreary three months in the Hawk Estate, a creaking manor house in the middle of fog-shrouded moorlands full of dusty furniture and hunting trophies. She’d have no company there but Mr. Simpkins, the butler, and an army of seemingly interchangeable chambermaids under the command of the redoubtable Mrs. Spittz. Her parents might make a token appearance in between hunts, but they hadn’t spent more than a week at a time at home since she was old enough to walk. She didn’t hate them for it, but she had to admit to some jealousy. After her first year at the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters, she had run home excited to finally join Lord and Lady Hawk on what her father called “the Great Game.” Instead, they had informed her that as a trainee monster hunter, her task was to “hold down the fort,” as Lord Hawk put it.

“But I’ve learned so much! I want to hunt with you!” she’d said, holding back tears. “Now, now, pumpkin,” her mother had said, not unkindly. “We can’t wait for you to join us. But you see, you have to graduate first. Then you can be licensed and it will all be right and proper. Wouldn’t that be better?”
It wouldn’t, really, Adellia thought. It just meant waiting an extra four years. *Anything* could happen in those four years. She could not make herself imagine her parents falling prey to any of the monsters they dispatched—some things were beyond the realm of possibility—but they might get a different assistant. They might not have room for her. Or maybe they’d retire and spend all day swanning around the house hosting fancy soirees like Corinthia Swain’s parents.

With this grim possibility swirling in her head, she found herself nodding off. The chair really was *very* comfortable, and the warmth of the Common Room had grown stifling. She let her eyelids droop and sank into the chair. She’d certainly earned a rest. Maybe she’d just—

“Hey, Adellia!”

Adellia’s eyes snapped open. What happened next owed nothing to thought and everything to reflexes honed since their owner was old enough to hold a spoon. She brought her arms up and together at the same time as she drove her forehead forward and her legs up. The net result was a complicated moment, a succession of loud impacts, and Toby Cotton stumbling away trying to simultaneously cover his bruised ears, dented nose and tottering knees.

Adellia’s hands flew to her mouth. “Oh, Toby, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s quite all right,” he mumbled, his eyes spinning in their sockets and trying to focus on her. He sat down hard on the plush carpet and groaned, holding his head in both hands. Adellia’s eyes grew wide, although in truth she was trying not to laugh. “Don’t sneak up on me like that, Toby! You gave me a real fright!”

“Fnorry,” he said. “Didn’t mean to fnock you.” Adellia leapt out of her chair and extended a hand downward. Toby accepted it and pulled himself upright, or at least into an upright-adjacent posture. He was surprisingly heavy; she rocked on her feet but remained standing, at least partially out of a firm desire to not be seen to be pulled over by Toby Cotton.

“What are you doing here, anyways?” she asked. Toby gave a sheepish smile. “Well, I waf looking for you. I wanted to fnee if you got your exam refultf back yet.”

“Refultf?” She looked at him in confusion. “Oh.OH! No, how could I? I just finished taking them.”

Toby gave a nervous little laugh. “Uh… they’re posted up in the great hall, Adellia. It’s gone nine p.m.”

Adellia’s eyes widened. “Oh! Oh, I must have dozed off. No, I haven’t seen them.” To her utter dismay, she realized she was sweating. “I, uh, haven’t checked them out yet. So I guess I should go there, huh? And see them. My scores.” She tried to smile, but it felt like a death rictus. She hoped she had more time. All of a sudden, all she could think of was the answers she had gotten wrong. She knew that she had left out one of the uses for dragonsbane on her Chemistry final. And she had definitely mixed up Dr. Eihort and Dr. Xua Zhen. She cursed inwardly. She had *studied* that. Why was she so *stupid*?

To Toby, she said, “I could see them tomorrow. I suppose. But hey, why wait?” Her nonchalance sounded a little forced even to her ears. Toby’s swollen face lit up in a grin. “Great!” he said. “I’ll walk with you… if that’s ok.”

“Sure, Toby.” Adellia had to admit that there was something charming about his polite indefatigability. And she *had* just headbutted him in the nose. She might as well let him tag along. They made their way from the Common Room to the Great Hall, a drafty and high-ceilinged room
used mostly for school feasts and ceremonies. Two massive marble staircases spiraled up into the upper levels, and the tiled floor was dotted at intervals with great stone pillars. Today, these bore long scrolls, affixed with dollops of wax that bore the school seal. The students’ names were listed by class and then alphabetically; Adellia traced with her finger until she found the Hs. Josiah Hallett, Mindy Hamm, Thomas Hapsburg… there.

Her vision blurred for a second. She didn’t dare read the scores. Behind her, Toby was peering over her shoulder. “Well, Adellia?” he asked.

_I can do this._ She opened her eyes. There, in tiny, elegant script, was her name. Next to it, her scores. Anatomy, Chemistry, History, Ballistics… they were…

They were ok. Nothing exciting, but they were acceptable. She released the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. They were _acceptable!_ They were acceptable! She turned to Toby and grabbed him in a hug so sudden his eyes nearly bulged from his head. “I passed!” she cried, and tried to lift him. That didn’t work, so she jumped instead, then released him. “Oh, I’m sorry, Toby,” she said. Suddenly she was very aware of the solidity of his arms under his tweed jacket, and the rough texture of his five-o-clock shadow. She blushed. “Sorry. I was just… excited that’s all.”

Toby was blushing far more than Adellia. He had turned a deep crimson and was looking down and away, his hands in his pockets, his body bent over slightly at the waist. He coughed. “It’s fine, Adellia. I’m happy for you. Really, congratulations.” Another cough. “I think I need to go back to my dorm now. I’m leaving tonight. I’ll see you when the fall term starts?”

_Aw, what the hell._ Adellia gave him another big hug and planted a peck on his cheek for good measure. _At least one of us can enjoy the summer break._ “See you in the fall, Toby. Thanks for everything.” She smiled at him. “Don’t read too many books on your break.”

Toby grinned at her. “I’ll try not to,” he said. He waved and turned to head back to the boys’ dorm. Adellia practically skipped back to her own bed. She had passed! She had made it! The Armory was hers for another year, yes, but more importantly: she was on track to graduate! Then her parents would _have_ to take her with them.

The next morning found her throwing clothes haphazardly into her traveling bag. She could field-strip a pistol crossbow or tie off a girth hitch one-handed, but the mystical art of folding had long eluded her. She stuffed everything in that would fit and looked quizzically at the half-dozen pieces that hadn’t, wondering how many pairs of trousers she could wear at once and still move.

“Miss Hawk?”

The voice immediately got her attention. For one thing, on those rare occasions that her roommates deigned to speak to her, they simply called her “Adellia,” (or, more commonly, “Adele” or “Adelaide” or the like). For another, it was not a girl’s voice but a man’s, and a familiar one at that. She turned to see Mr. Lachan standing next to an elegant woman in an ornate dark blue gown with cerise trim. She wore a precisely placed pillbox hat atop her red-brown curls and carried a fan in one silk-gloved hand. The other held a small leather valise, which she now placed on the ground. “This is the girl?” she asked, in a thin, clipped accent.

“Yeah, I’m her,” said Adellia, before Mr. Lachan could say anything. His eyes flashed a warning at her, which she ignored. “Who’re you?”
Lachan began to say something, but the woman laughed, a girlish giggle like a little silver bell. “Oh, I like her, Mortimer. She’ll do quite nicely.”

“Oh, will I--” Adellia began, but Lachan stepped forward and smoothly cut her off. “Miss Hawk, I would like to introduce Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll, Third Baronet of--”

The lady raised her empty hand. “Please, Mortimer. Lady Sofia will be quite sufficient.” She smiled down at Adellia. She was tall, taller even than Mr. Lachan, and her voluminous dress made her seem more imposing still. Adellia gaped up at her.

“I know you!” she blurted out. “I mean, milady,” she added, with a curtsy. “I’ve read all about you! Lady Ebersoll! You slew three gorgons in one afternoon! You drove the Thorvenwald Pack out of their den! You solved the Riddle of Aten-ut-shapet’s Tomb!”

“It’s always nice to be recognized.” Lady Sofia smiled demurely. Mr. Lachan (Adellia had not even processed the revelation of his first name) cleared his throat.

“Adellia, Lady Sofia has come to us with a rare offer. She will be traveling in the area this summer and would like an assistant. Given your outstanding improvement in the past few months and your passion for fieldwork, your professors and I thought that you would be well suited for--”

He stopped. Adellia had fainted dead away.

The next few days passed as though in a dream. Yes, Adellia’s parents had been asked beforehand, and they gave their reluctant consent. Yes, she would be paid (a pittance, really, but room and board were included). No, they were not hunting any great beast. “I’m sorry to bore you, my dear,” Lady Sofia said over tea, “but this is just a fact-finding expedition. I find that the thrill of the hunt grows old after a while. I am collecting notes for a monograph I hope to publish on the fauna of the littoral zones. I’ll need someone to help carry equipment, obtain samples and the like. I trust you will not find this too boring?”

Adellia had been half-lost in a daydream. “No, milady!” she said at once. “Milady, I have so many questions! The gorgons… what was it like? Did you come upon them all at once, or did you--”

Lady Sofia sipped her tea and smiled enigmatically. “There’ll be time for that, my dear. I promise. Now, if you’ve quite finished packing, I think we should be off, don’t you? I’ve chartered a carriage for us.” She stood abruptly in a rustle of skirts and a twanging of elastics. “Your first task awaits.”

“What shall I do, milady?” Adellia bounced to her feet with a grin.

“Carry my bags.”

So it was that she spent her first afternoon in the employ of Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll. In addition to her valise, she had a half-dozen large traveling trunks, each of which seemed heavier than the last, and a number of strange mechanical contrivances secured by leather straps. Adellia grunted with effort as she lifted these into the carriage, admonished by Lady Sofia all the while. “Be quite careful with that, my dear!” she called out. “The glasswork is very delicate.” A light rain had begun to fall, and the Lady stood under a black parasol, while Adellia’s hair was quickly plastered against her face. Despite it all, her heart was light. She could barely believe it! She would spend the summer with the Mistress of the Musket, the Huntress of Thorvenwald herself! Adellia frantically tried to remember everything she had ever learned about Lady Sofia. She had had a set of famed
hunter trading cards when she was small—it was still somewhere in her parents’ house, framed—and she had spent hours sorting and arranging them, imagining her own face adorning a card someday.

Lady Sofia had been an inventor in her youth, but during a field test her husband had been killed by some kind of flying lizard. Thereafter she had dedicated herself to the art of hunting and destroying monsters wherever they threatened. She had never attended Hoxleigh, but had developed her own style over the years, aided by the devices she designed. She was barely into her forties and somehow found the time to publish a book a year, despite continuing to hunt regularly. She had never remarried, but her parties were considered to be the social event of the season, and rumors got around. Adellia prided herself on never listening to gossip, but her roommates were incorrigibly chatty, and Lady Sofia’s name had come up more than once. Adellia didn’t care if the rumors were true. What mattered was that Lady Sofia was everything she wanted to be: graceful, efficient, and incredibly deadly. She hadn’t retired to brood in a mansion full of trophies, or teach students in a dry classroom somewhere. She was a real huntress, and a huntress was nothing without the hunt!

At last, muscles twanging like elastics, she womanhandled the final bag into the carriage. As if on cue, the last few raindrops pattered to the ground and the sun peeked out from behind a cloud. Lady Sofia smiled at her and folded up her parasol. “Well done, Adellia!” she said. “Let’s be off!”

The carriage ride took a bumpy six hours, with a break for lunch and another to “freshen up” (as Lady Sofia put it) at a local inn. Adellia took advantage of the time to ask every question she had been bottling up.

“What was the first monster you ever killed?”
“What was the closest a monster ever came to getting you?”
“What do you think is the most dangerous monster alive today?”
“What have you always wanted to hunt?”
“Do you prefer pistol or crossbow?”

She rained down question after question, barely allowing Lady Sofia to get an answer out before veering onto the next topic. For her part, the Lady was the very picture of forbearance. She smiled indulgently and kept her answers brief and demure. “Really, Adellia, your enthusiasm is quite infectious,” she laughed.

“How did you defeat those gorgons?” Adellia asked. That was the most famous story, the one everyone knew. “Did you use the Perseus Technique? Did you trick them into stoning each other? I heard that you left them all there as statues!”

Lady Sofia snapped her fan open and hid her smirk behind it. “It was quite simple, my dear. They shared a cave, which meant they shared a water source. It fed from an underground stream. I merely tracked it to its headwaters and dosed it with fenugreek, which as you know, restricts gorgons’ ability to aspirate. By the time I arrived at their cave they were nearly incapacitated. It was a simple matter to administer the coup de gras, and of course their bodies petrified after death.”

Adellia frowned. This seemed a bit less heroic than she had expected. “But surely you’ve used the Perseus Technique elsewhere? I read about it! It’s supposed to be foolproof!”

“My dear, no technique is foolproof when you’ve exposed yourself to danger. I much prefer to be prepared. The best hunt is the one that ends before the prey even realizes it’s begun.”

“But your swordplay is famous!” Adellia burst out. “You out-dueled the Comte du Briere in his castle and staked him right through the heart!”
“That is true,” nodded Lady Sofia, “though the reports neglected to mention that I did so in full daylight. I had rigged explosives in the upper reaches of his castle, and when he emerged to fight me, I triggered them. He was barely able to lift his sword, poor thing. It was a mercy to put him out of his misery.”

“That doesn’t seem…” the word fair died on Adellia’s tongue. It was a word they were never encouraged to use at school. “When you’re nine feet tall and weight six hundred pounds, m’lads, then it’ll be fair,” Mr. Grepto had said, when demonstrating some of the unique properties of silver. “Until then, you take every weapon you can get.”

“Sporting?” asked Lady Sofia. Her mild expression turned harsh. “Miss Hawk, we may be hunters, but we are not sportsmen. What we do is for the safety of all mankind. We are not out there to prove ourselves, we are out there to do a job as efficiently as possible. Pride goeth before a fall, young lady, as any number of fallen hunters could tell you.”

Adellia’s cheeks colored. She looked down. “You’re right, milady,” she mumbled. The rest of the trip was spent in silence.

Eventually the carriage deposited them on a rocky strand. The rains had come again, and they beat down against the sagging roof of a cabin at the top of a small hill. A few hundred yards away, Adellia could see the ocean beating endlessly against the shore. This was not a picturesque beach of white sand and swaying palms. A jumble of rocks like blocks from a giant’s toybox lay scattered across the beach, each with its clusters of bladderwrack and barnacles. Seagulls wheeled overhead, cawing mournfully. Every so often one would dive and scoop up a grab before dashing it against the rocks. A small wooden jetty clung to one of the largest boulders. Tied to the far end was a small wooden sailboat that looked only marginally more seaworthy than the boulder itself. Tall cliffs marched away in both directions, giving the beach a claustrophobic feel. Adellia’s heart sank as Lady Sofia stretched and yawned. “Excellent! We’ve arrived. Adellia, if you would be so good as to move my bags to our new base of operations?” She pointed at the cabin. Adellia looked at it, at the heavy bags, at the narrow, stony path up the hill, and stifled a groan.

The cabin itself proved to be musty and filled with the salt smell of the sea. It was, at least, dry, and the previous occupants had left a generous amount of firewood for the potbellied iron stove. Once Adellia had finished carrying in their luggage, Lady Sofia made a fire, and then surprised her young assistant by chopping vegetables for a soup. Adellia was too weary and bone-chilled to stand, instead slumping in a chair that looked to be on the verge of collapse itself. Tall cliffs marched away in both directions, giving the beach a claustrophobic feel. Adellia’s heart sank as Lady Sofia stretched and yawned. “Excellent! We’ve arrived. Adellia, if you would be so good as to move my bags to our new base of operations?” She pointed at the cabin. Adellia looked at it, at the heavy bags, at the narrow, stony path up the hill, and stifled a groan.

Despite the disappointments of the day, a spark of elation rose in Adellia’s heart to hear her hero refer to her by name. She knows who I am! Lady Sofia was a hero, and even if her methods were a bit underhanded, well, that was just good preparation, right? A good hunter was clever. Adellia managed a nod.

“I’ve sailed a bit, milady!” she said. Lady Sofia smiled. “Well, they tell me you’re quite good with knots and lines. That’s most of it, I assure you.”

She brought over a bowl of soup and pressed it into Adellia’s hands. “Go ahead. A vegetable diet is good for the digestion. I myself avoid meat whenever possible.” Adellia looked down at the stew. She herself liked nothing more than a good rasher of bacon, or a pile of crispy crackling. Vegetables were usually a decoration; they added much-needed color to a plate, but they weren’t for actually eating. Still, she made an attempt.
The soup was warm, at least, and though the wind howled outside, they were snug inside. There was one bed, which Lady Sofia claimed, but she found a small cot for Adellia and a moth-eaten woolen blanket. It wasn’t her warm bed at home, but at least it wasn’t the frozen bunks of the Hoxleigh dorms either. Her belly full of stew, she drifted off to sleep, dreaming of stone gorgons and cards that yelled and sang.

The next day, Adellia awoke to the smell of frying bacon. Her mouth was watering before her eyes were fully open. The familiar hiss and sizzle filled her ears, and she practically threw off the blanket in her rush to get upright. Lady Sofia was standing by the stovetop, already fully dressed. She wore canvas trousers tucked into knee-high rubber waders and a heavy sealskin jacket. “Ah, Adellia!” she said brightly. “I thought I’d let you sleep in for today. It’s our first day, after all. We’ve got a full schedule!”

Adellia licked her lips. “Of course, milady!” she replied. “Say, I thought you said you didn’t eat meat?”

“This?” Lady Sofia looked at the bacon she was frying. “Oh, heavens! This isn’t for us! This is bait. I’m going fishing today. Our breakfast is on the table.” She pointed. Two places had been set, each with a cup of tea and half of a cantaloupe. Adellia’s face froze. Corinthia Swain was always eating cantaloupe for breakfast. Adellia had privately thought it made her look ridiculous. “Delicious!” she managed, and sat down. Lady Sofia had set out knives and forks, but Adellia picked up her cantaloupe half and bit into it. A mixture of expressions crossed her face before she pulled it out of her mouth and looked at it. As the delicious scent of bacon wafted gently to her nostrils, she fidgeted with her knife, trying to lever out a chunk of fruit large enough to eat. Her fingers were soon splattered with fruity gore, and she nibbled on the small amount of cantaloupe she had managed to work free. When Lady Sofia sat down across the table, she tucked into her own fruit with great elegance, leaving only an empty rind. If she noticed the mess Adellia had made she was too polite to say anything.

“Thank you for breakfast, milady,” Adellia said sheepishly. She had been too well brought up to neglect her manners. “You’re quite welcome, my dear,” Lady Sofia replied. “Now, shall we move on to business?”

“Oh, heavens! This isn’t for us! This is bait. I’m going fishing today. Our breakfast is on the table.” She pointed. Two places had been set, each with a cup of tea and half of a cantaloupe. Adellia’s face froze. Corinthia Swain was always eating cantaloupe for breakfast. Adellia had privately thought it made her look ridiculous.

“Thank you for breakfast, milady,” Adellia said sheepishly. She had been too well brought up to neglect her manners. “You’re quite welcome, my dear,” Lady Sofia replied. “Now, shall we move on to business?”

“Of course!” Adellia brightened up at once. Why was she worrying about breakfasts? She would finally get to do some real fieldwork! She wondered if they would see their first monster today, or if she’d have to wait. Not to hunt it-- she understood that this was a fact-finding mission only. But just to see it--! And who knew? Maybe their test subjects would get aggressive. Maybe Lady Sofia would be forced to swing into action to defend herself, or-- here Adellia’s heart leapt-- maybe she would get to do it, Adellia Hawk herself! Now wouldn’t that be a story to bring home!

“I shall be taking the boat out for a survey today, Adellia. I have a very important assignment for you.”

“What shall I do, milady?” Adellia asked. “Should I steer? Do you need me to tie off the sail?”

“Bladderwrack.” Lady Sofia smiled and sipped her tea. Adellia was momentarily nonplussed.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Bladderwrack,” Lady Sofia repeated. “I’m sure you’ve seen it. It’s on all the rocks out here. Well,
I need a count. I need you to measure the average length of a strand and the density of strands on each section of the beach. Make sure you separate etoliated and non-etoliated, please. You can log your results in this notebook.” She passed a heavy leather-bound folio across the table. Adellia leafed through it; page after page was covered in tiny, cramped handwriting, detailing phases of the moon, plant measurements, and other observations.

“So, I’ll do this, and then we’ll go out together?” Adellia asked hopefully. Lady Sofia laughed. “Oh, my dear, this is a long term project! This will take you a week or two at least. I’ll be out on the ship. Don’t worry, it’ll be frightfully boring out there. I might bring a fishing rod to at least pass the time!”

True to her word, Lady Sofia took the little sailboat out every day. Adellia spent her time lugging the book around like a millstone, stopping to carefully count out seaweed strands and measure them with a length of knotted twine. She quickly grew to hate the smell, the texture, even the squelching sound of the bladderwrack. Sharp rocks tore at her soles, leaving tiny holes through which the seawater could soak her socks. Crabs scuttled over her feet and nipped at her ankles and seabirds cawed angrily in her ears. Soon her knees and elbows were covered in scrapes from climbing over barnacle-covered rocks, and her hair felt permanently salty, no matter how many times she rinsed it in the washbasin. Every night, they ate a thin vegetable soup with loaves of dry bread, and every morning she had fresh fruit for breakfast. The only living soul she saw besides Lady Sofia was a bent-backed old man who delivered fresh firewood, which Adellia dutifully used to stoke the fire.

It took a month of this for her boredom to reach the breaking point. Finally, one day, she could take no more. She finished chewing a slice of tangerine and looked Lady Sofia in the eye.

“Milady, can I come with you today?”

Lady Sofia blinked quizzically. “Whatever for, my dear? Have you finished the bladderwrack measurements?”

“No, but…” Adellia swallowed. “Milady, I am honored you chose me, but… why me? Of all of the students at Hoxleigh? You could have probably gotten someone much better than I am at all this calculating, measuring stuff. You must know I hate it! Please, can’t I do anything else?”

“That is why I chose you,” Lady Sofia said, with a satisfied smile. She popped a fresh blueberry in her mouth, chewed happily, and swallowed. “You’re very talented, Adellia. I could see that when I met you. But you have to understand that there’s more to hunting than, well, the hunt. Measuring bladderwrack is frightfully boring, but it’s the sort of thing hunters do. If they want to keep being hunters, that is.”

Adellia sagged in her chair. So the whole thing had been some elaborate lesson?

“Still, perhaps I have been unfair.” Lady Sofia set down her silverware and smiled brightly. “How would you like to come with me today? I think I have discovered an ecchiteuthis lair and I was going to mount an expedition. You might as well come along.”

Adellia’s heart sang. She could barely keep herself from shouting, “Yes, of course!”

“Very well then. Finish your breakfast, and make sure to dress warmly.”

Adellia could barely contain her excitement as they walked down the jetty together. The sailboat
did not look encouraging; its boards were so splintered and warped that water sloshed into the bottom with each wave. Somehow, enough sloshed out again that it stayed afloat, but this looked like a temporary condition subject to change without notice. Still, Lady Sofia stepped in with all the grace and self-assurance of a society lady arriving at a soiree, and so Adellia joined her. She caught her ankle on a loose line and nearly tumbled into the bottom, but in the end she made it in high and (mostly) dry. Lady Sofia raised the anchor and took the mainsheet in one hand, and the sail snapped and popped in the wind. The boat wasn’t graceful, but it had a fair turn of speed, and they glided away from the dock and towards one of the imposing cliffs.

At this distance, Adellia could see that they were dotted with small caves. Most of them were little more than tiny holes, mostly under the waterline, but a few yawned like black mouths. It was towards one of these that Lady Sofia was steering their little vessel. From a distance, it looked barely large enough to accommodate them, but in the end the sail cleared the cave roof with a few inches to spare. Inside, it was dim and much colder than outside; Lady Sofia hung a lantern from the boom and lit it, revealing a shallow cove and a pebbled beach. She steered their boat into the shallows, then hopped out and carried the lantern ashore, beckoning Adellia to join her.

They found themselves in a damp, dank cave, the floor dotted by tidal pools. Lady Sofia held the lantern aloft and led the way deeper into its recesses. Adellia followed closely, shivering at the sudden chill. “What are we looking for?” she asked. Lady Sofia held one finger up to her lips, then whispered. “I believe that an *echiteuthis* specimen lairs here. We’re going to check some of the inner pools.”

They trekked onward, passing a forest of stalagmites and stalactites. Water dripped ceaselessly from above and flowed in little rivers towards the tidepools. Things scuttled in the darkness; tiny crabs and prawns, but also larger things, things that Adellia glimpsed only fleetingly from the corner of her eye. Something splashed into the water very close by, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. She hurried forward to stay close to Lady Sofia and the lantern.

At last they reached another wide-open cave, most of which was filled with a shallow basin of black water. Lady Sofia set the lantern down on a flat rock and bent over. She trailed her fingers across the floor, then lifted them and took a deep whiff. Adellia could see some kind of clear glaze sticking to them. “You see, Adellia?” Lady Sofia began. “This is-”

The water behind her exploded into motion. Adellia had a fleeting sensation of thrashing limbs and a vast, pale body, and then she was stumbling backward and falling heavily on her bottom in a freezing cold puddle.

She looked up and her mouth gaped open. Lady Sofia was standing rigid in the large basin, with water up to her ankles. Pale tentacles were wrapped around her wrists, ankles and neck. Behind her, a misshapen white body loomed out of the water, a pillar of rugose flesh with one gigantic, watery eye in its side. It blinked at Adellia as she watched in horror.

Lady Sofia’s eyes were narrowed, her mouth pinched. Neither she nor her captor moved an inch. They made up a frozen tableau, the woman poised in an attitude of flight and the beast looming behind her.

“Adellia,” she said, softly but with a hard edge to her voice, “I want you to do exactly as I say. Pick up my lantern.”

Adellia climbed to her feet and groped at her belt. Her knife was there, where it always was, and she drew it slowly. “I can cut you free, milady!” she hissed. “It’s not moving!”
“No, don’t. The lantern, Adellia-”

But Adellia wasn’t listening. Wild thoughts filled her head. She’d cut Lady Sofia free and they’d escape together. She’d be feted at all of the Lady’s famous parties. They’d write a book together, both of their names on the cover. Everyone would be so impressed. She’d just have to--

She stepped forward into the pool, and then everything seemed to happen at once. The beast moved too fast for her eyes to follow. A tentacle snaked out and scythed her feet out from under her. Another closed around her wrist and squeezed until she dropped the knife. A third wrapped around her midsection and hoisted her off the ground. She let out a startled yelp. She found herself suspended about five feet above the water level, parallel to the ground with her head facing upwards. More tentacles closed around her arms and legs and pinned them in place.

“Ah. Yes, Miss Hawk, this is what I was afraid of. You see, *ecchiteuthis* can’t go on land. It appears that this pool is not deep enough for it to escape with prey, either. As long as a threat remains in its field of vision, it will not make itself vulnerable. Now that you’ve entered its pool, it has incapacitated all outstanding threats, and it is free to move on to the next stage.”

Adellia gulped. “N-next stage?”

Somewhere below her, she heard Lady Sofia sigh. “Yes, my dear. This is a brooding female. It needs hosts for its young. Lucky for it we turned up. I don’t suppose you had a plan beyond ‘rush at it with a knife?’”

“No, milady,” Adellia said. She could feel a thicker tentacle rasping across her body. Its tip was covered in tiny barbs; they caught on her cotton shirt and began to tear at it. Another tentacle shredded away at her trousers.

“I’d be eager to witness your technique in action,” continued Lady Sofia, in the same conversational tone. “Since we’ve evidently decided to go with your plan in preference to mine, I defer to you. What should we do next? In the interests of full disclosure I should add that my trousers are nearly entirely gone. It’s having trouble with one of my rubber waders, though.”

“I’m sorry!” wailed Adellia. “I shouldn’t have rushed in! Do you know what to do?”

“Haven’t a clue, dear. Oh, it’s gotten it. It was just stuck on my foot after all. Just let me know when you think of what to do next.”

Adellia’s mind raced. She could feel the tentacles slithering over her, probing, prodding… the last tattered rags of her trousers slid off into the water and her shirt was soon to follow. Her nipples stiffened against the cold breeze. She wished she could cover them, but two tentacles were pinning her arms behind her back. A wrist-thick tentacle was squirming between her legs; it curled around through her cotton panties and flexed, ripping them right off her body. Her quim was left exposed to the chilly air. She writhed and twisted, trying to push her thighs together, but the inexorable pressure of the tendrils forced them apart once again.

By the flickering lantern light she saw a new tentacle emerge from the water. This one lacked suckers or rasping cilia. Instead, it was tipped with a bulbous head which leaked drops of phosphorescence. It raised up until it was level with her body and began to snake towards her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a similar tendril moving below her. “I don’t know!” she wailed. “What should I do?”
Lady Sofia replied evenly. “There isn’t anything to do now, Miss Hawk. Just one of these tentacles has more muscular power than your entire body. I had a plan, but it rather depended on you staying on dry land. In fact, I- ack!” There was a wet squelch, and her voice cut off abruptly. At the same instant, Adellia saw the bulb-tipped tentacle shoot towards her. It arrowed between her legs and beelined for her exposed quim. She felt it against her thigh, a cold slab of muscle, oozing with unnameable mucous. It squirmed and writhed between her legs, its wide tip pressing against her delicate labia. Her frantic efforts to bar its passage lasted only a few seconds; with a powerful surge, it forced her tight hole open and plunged inside.

“AHHHHH!” She couldn’t help it; she let out an undignified yelp at the feel of nine inches of cold cephalopod muscle sliding into her defenseless womanhood. The tentacle stopped, twisted around inside her, then withdrew almost completely. Adellia had a moment to catch her breath before it rammed home again with a lewd squishing sound. Whatever lubricating ooze covered it was now thoroughly coating her thighs; each thrust caused a wet spatter to erupt from her battered twat as her tight channel was filled beyond capacity. At least she wasn’t alone. From below, she could hear a rhythmic counterpoint to her own violation. Lady Sofia had fallen silent, but Adellia could occasionally hear a muffled gasp or groan overlaying the chorus of wet squelches.

The tentacles pinning Adellia shifted and she felt her body rotating around. She turned through the full 180 degrees until she was facing the ground. Tentacles pinned back her ankles behind her knees, keeping her legs spread, while another encircled her hair and yanked painfully at her scalp. From this position, she could at least see Lady Sofia, though the sight was no solace.

The famed huntress had been stripped of her clothing, much like Adellia. A few tattered rags still floated on the surface of the pool. Beneath it, she had a compact, athletic build, her skin still smooth and tight. A network of scars decorated her belly and upper arms. Her breasts were just beginning to lose their youthful pertness. They were round and doughy, with wide pink nipples that bounced and jiggled with each thrust. Lady Sofia’s legs were tight and trim, and her pubic mound was crested with a modest thicket of dark brown curls that matched the ones on her head. Her delicate, coral-pink inner labia had been rudely pushed aside by the tentacle that had so grotesquely invaded her honeypot. It looked to be almost three inches across and the grey of a stormy sky. Its surface glistened wetly when it withdrew. Looking from this angle, Adellia could see that its bulbous head was actually two separate bulbs, like beads on a string; both were sharply defined beneath Lady Sofia’s skin, which tented up alarmingly in her lower belly. Looking down, Adellia could see a similar bulge moving inside her own body. In and out, in and out, the tentacles pulsed in offset rhythm. Lady Sofia’s eyes were wide and staring, her mouth hanging open. A thin stream of drool ran down her chin. There would be no help coming from that quarter; her head twitched and jerked like a marionette with each thrust.

Adellia struggled against her restraints, but the grip, though wet and malleable, could not be broken. She could feel the tentacle pounding away inside her, deeper and deeper with each thrust. Now that she knew there were two bulbs on its tip, she could feel them individually as they slid in and out of her. The tentacle began to turn slightly, to corkscrew as it thrust, and she shuddered. Something about that turn caused the widest part of the bulb to bump against a sensitive spot deep inside her. With each bump, she could feel heat rising in her loins. She tried to fight it, to deny it, but the familiar sensation threatened to overwhelm her. Her breath became rapid and shallow as she fought for self control.

Smaller tendrils, no thicker than her finger, descended from above. They spiraled inward towards her breasts and encircled them. The tentacle pulling her hair back prevented her from getting a good look at them, but looking down, she could see a similar process underway on Lady Sofia.
These smaller tendrils were dark green, like moss, and terminated in tiny hooks that looked like a bee’s stingers. Adellia thrashed in her restraints, but to no avail. She saw the hooks rear back like scorpion stingers, then plunge forward and bury themselves in Lady Sofia’s nipples a half-second before sharp pains shot through her own chest. The Lady’s face twisted into a terrible grimace, and Sofia felt a stinging warmth began to spread outward from her own nipples. She could feel something draining into her, some vile toxin, but unable to do anything about it, she gritted her teeth against the pain.

Meanwhile, the invader between her legs had not been idle. Each corkscrewing thrust was tunneling deeper and deeper into her warm and inviting body. The bulge had traveled from her waistline almost to her navel. She could feel it poised at her cervix, and dreadful experience had taught her what must come next. She tensed for the final assault, but it never came. Instead, there was another sting deep inside her, and then a curious numbness that spread outward. She could still feel every inch of the monstrous penetration, but it had a thin, dreamlike quality, as though it were happening to someone else. She saw, as if from a long way off, her belly distend as a muscular bulb the size of both of her fists together forced its way into her womb. Below her, Lady Sofia’s belly puffed outward as her own inner sanctum was likewise pillaged. It was hard to bring herself to care, though, when her mind was distracted by the relentless waves of tingling warmth that emanated from her breasts and cunt. Her clit was awake, a needy little pearl nestled between distended lips, and her nipples were as hard as diamonds. She moaned in dismay as she tried to reach them and was thwarted by her captor. “P-please,” she murmured, as though such a thing could hear or understand her. Of course it gave no reaction, but was it her imagination, or had the thrusts of the member colonizing her pussy gotten more urgent? She tried to buck her hips against it, tried to angle herself so that the sensitive bud of her clit could get some release, but to no avail.

The tentacle flexed inside her, and she shivered as an electric thrill crawled up her spine and along her limbs. Looking down, she could see something moving along the tentacle that disappeared into Lady Sofia’s cunt. It was about the size of a cricket ball and moving slowly, but with a kind of inevitability. The huntress’s tight cunny proved a brief obstacle, but one quickly surmounted; her lips bulged grotesquely around the intruder, then swallowed it whole. At the same time, Adellia felt pressure building in her already-overstuffed pussy. Memories came flooding back. The Hoxleigh Academy had been meant to prepare her for any eventuality a hunter of monsters might face, and while they probably hadn’t thought of this one, at least she was prepared. She tried to breathe, to tell her muscles to relax. The eggs were going to come one way or another. It would be better not to hurt herself trying to fight them.

Still, the entrance of the first egg to her womb was trying. The creature didn’t seem to be able to summon up the pressure, and more eggs were backed up behind it in the tube. The thing twisted inside her, and she feared that it might grow frustrated and try to force the issue. Luckily (in the circumstances), a tiny bit more pressure and her womb yielded to the invasion. She felt something round, sticky and a little chilly roll out into her holiest of holies and stick to the wall.

Lady Sofia’s taut belly was starting to bloat up now. Adellia could count five distinct round shapes under the skin, and as she watched, a sixth added itself. Moreover, the Lady’s breasts had perceptibly swollen. Reddish veins stood out under the skin. Her nipples stood proud and erect, practically straining towards the ceiling, and with the removal of the stingers drops of grey-blue fluid beaded up on them. Adellia’s own bosom ached, and she could tell without looking that a similar transformation had taken place. She found the time to wonder why. Was she expected to nurse her monstrous offspring? Hah! No chance of that! she thought, defiantly—though in her current situation, it didn’t seem likely that she’d be able to stop them.

Then another egg passed through her stretched and gaping pussy and all thought of defiance
vanished. This one pressed against that same secret spot inside her and she moaned, her eyes rolling back into her head. The next one made her bite her lip to keep quiet. She wasn’t sure if Lady Sofia was still conscious, and she wasn’t going to be caught groaning like a bitch in heat in front of her. Not that she would have room to criticize; as the stash in her belly grew, Lady Sofia was letting out a chorus of yelps, groans, and amorous noises that would not have put a couple of curious sophomores to shame.

Adellia tried to remain focused, but it was difficult. The burning in her chest had transmuted into an awful feeling of fullness, a pressure that pulsed at the insides of her breasts. She needed, needed release! Each egg that passed her defiled gateway brought her closer to her climax, but left her gasping on its shores. She screwed her eyes shut and bucked her hips. Surely, the next one would--

It hit her with the force of an avalanche, a primal wave of pleasure that welled up from within her. Her eyes snapped open and her tongue lolled from her mouth. Her vision blurred, doubled, then tripled, spots appearing as she fought for breath. Her toes curled and fingers clenched as the orgasm washed over her like a tsunami over a coastal village. Finally it was over; the aftershocks faded gradually, and little by little, she came back to herself.

She was still hanging there like a side of beef. Her stomach was enormously distended and sloshed as she wriggled to and fro. Round shapes stood proud against her skin, giving it an oddly pebbled texture. Below her, Lady Sofia was in much the same condition; her tumid breasts lay heavy against her belly, their nipples pointing accusingly at Adellia. The fat ovipositor that had just finished stuffing her full of eggs was still lodged in her cunt, and her nether lips were livid and puffy. Adellia could feel something moving inside her, and then the ovipositor began to withdraw, leaving her feeling bruised and hollow. It popped free from her quim, which gaped open like a cave mouth. What felt like gallons of sticky goo began to drain out of her, pouring free in a lewd waterfall that splashed over Lady Sofia’s mountainous belly like syrup on a sundae. This was accompanied by a wet, buttery squelch as her abused fuck-channel tried to drag itself back into some semblance of order.

The tentacles holding her began to descend towards the water. She hung limp with her head dangling. Perhaps if it thought her unconscious, the beast might let down its guard. Certainly, Lady Sofia wouldn’t need to sham; the light had gone out of her eyes, and only the slow rising and falling of her chest would tell an observer she was still alive. The squid laid Adellia flat on her back and propped her against a rock pillar. The water here was only a couple of inches deep, though it was icy cold, and she struggled not to cry out. Goosebumps broke out across her flesh but she forced herself to stay still. A tentacle wrapped around her upper arms, pinning them to the stone, but the rest withdrew. She was almost free! All she had to do was--

Her questing fingers found something smooth and hard under the water. There was no mistaking it-- she allowed herself a small smirk as they closed around her knife. The beast was busy now with Lady Sofia. It had withdrawn from her pussy as well and was lifting her over next to Adellia. Adellia took a deep breath, counted to three in her head, then jerked her fist backward towards her shoulder. The blade, held in a reversed grip, impaled the tentacle that held her, sliding in like a hot knife through custard.

A horrible liquid squeal filled the cave, a sound like the world’s largest rubber balloons being rubbed together. Its pitch went up and up and up, climbing until Adellia thought her ears would bleed. The tentacle holding her unwound, and the pale, flabby bulk of the monster’s body swayed back and forth like a tree in a high breeze. Adellia lurched to her feet, pushing off the rock pillar for support, and stumbled forward. Two of the thing’s tentacles whipped out at her, but she met
them with her blade, severing the tip of one and tearing a deep gouge in the other. Thick black ichor spurted out across her breasts and belly, but she ignored it. The monster dropped Lady Sofia, who landed heavily in the water. Fortunately she had only been a few inches off the ground at that point, but the shock of the cold seemed to rouse her from her stupor. “Wha- Adellia!” she cried, and folded her arms reflexively around one of Adellia’s legs. “Don’t worry, Lady Sofia!” Adellia called out. “I’ve got it on the run!”

“The water!” the Lady gasped. “We’ve got to get out of the water!” She scooted backwards on her hands and feet. Adellia nearly tripped over her, then jumped backward, her knife held in front of her. Tentacles sawed through the air. Perhaps they were afraid of her; they lashed out, but curled away from her blade. One foot at a time she withdrew until she felt dry land beneath her feet. The ecchiteuthis hissed like fat on a hot stove, then sank beneath the surface of the pool. A piece of rubbery flesh and a spreading pool of ichor were all that remained to show it was ever there.

Only then did Adellia allow herself to sink to her knees. She was breathing hard and trembling as the adrenaline wore off. Next to her, Lady Sofia was gagging and choking. At last, she spat up a wad of the ichor and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand in a most unladylike fashion. She grabbed Adellia by the shoulders and looked in her eyes with a crazed expression. “The eggs,” she croaked.

Adellia tried to gather her jumbled thoughts. “The eggs? What about them?”

“Remove them… we have to… before hatch…” A coughing fit overcame the Lady, and it was a moment before she could speak again. “Still dilated… got to by hand… no hospital nearby… otherwise, too late…”

“By hand?” Adellia’s mind boggled. Some of Lady Sofia’s legendary poise was returning, and she planted on hand on Adellia’s sternum and shoved. Arms flailing, Adellia went over in a heap, and in a flash Lady Sofia was on top of her. One hand pushed Adellia’s knees apart while the other formed its fingers into a beak. Lady Sofia took a deep breath and then punched forward.

Her hand slid into Adellia’s gaping quim with barely any effort. Adellia gasped as she felt the woman’s knuckles scrape her moist passage. So soon after the ovipositor, they were still sensitive, although the Lady’s arm was not nearly as wide as the tentacle had been. Adellia could feel the fingers moving inside her. It was oddly ticklish. Lady Sofia had her arm buried in Adellia up to the elbow; she squinted with effort, her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth, before her fingers closed on one of the eggs. With a grunt she pulled it loose. Her fist, with the egg inside, caught at the entrance to Adellia’s womb for a moment, but it was so overfull of eggs that it could not fully close itself off. There was a moment of pressure, then Lady Sofia nearly toppled backward. She held up her hand triumphantly. It was sticky with clear mucous and Adellia’s juices, but in her fingers she held a soft grey egg. She threw it against the wall with a sound of revulsion, where it splattered.

“We’ve got to act quickly, Adellia,” she said, her no-nonsense tone returning. “We don’t know how long it’ll be before the relaxant venom wears off. Once I’ve finished clearing you out, you’ll have to do me. Understood?”

“Do… I can’t! Reach inside you? Lady Sofia, I--”

“No option, girl. Come on, you’ll have to do worse when you’re a full-fledged hunter.” Lady Sofia was already bending over between Adellia’s spread legs. “Deep breath, Adellia, that’s the ticket. Ready? Here comes number two!” Without waiting for an answer, she plunged her beaked fist into
Adellia’s cunt and began pushing towards her womb. As Lady Sofia removed the eggs, Adellia’s belly began to shrink. Moreover, she felt a curious sensation from the woman’s fingers. They were smaller, more delicate than the ovipositor had been, and rubbed differently at her velvety walls. She had to stifle a moan more than once. Her face turned beet red. If Lady Sofia noticed and said something Adellia was sure she would die of embarrassment. Fortunately, the woman seemed too intent on her task. Even when Adellia’s tunnel spasmed around her hand, she said nothing. Adellia wiped the sweat from her brow and tried to concentrate.

The last couple eggs were tough to find, and Adellia endured an uncomfortable few minutes as Lady Sofia’s questing fingers searched for them, but eventually they came free and were hurled to join their friends. Then it was the Lady’s turn. She showed Adellia how to pinch her fingers together. “Come on, Adellia, don’t be squeamish,” she said. “It’s just professionalism. Just reach in until I say so.”

“All right,” said Adellia. “Tell me if I go too hard, alright?”

Lady Sofia nodded encouragingly, and Adellia swallowed, then thrust her arm forward. Immediately Lady Sofia’s eyes bulged out of her face and her mouth locked in a toothy grimace. “Sorry! I’m sorry!” Adellia cried.

“No! Keep going! I’m… fine!” croaked Lady Sofia. Adellia nodded nervously and plunged deeper. She could feel Lady Sofia’s tightness all around her, a muscular sleeve encircling her arm. Onward, ever onward, she felt her hand pass through a muscular ring, and then there were the eggs. They were obvious, cold, slimy ovoids with a rubbery texture. She nearly dropped the first one out of revulsion, but she held it tight and withdrew her arm slowly. Lady Sofia was panting now, but she gave Adellia an encouraging smile, so she continued pulling until her hand slid out of the other woman’s yawning cleft with an egg clutched in its fingers. She hurled it at the others with a wild battle cry, then bent forward and prepared to retrieve the next one.

Lady Sofia had, if anything, more eggs than Adellia, and it took nearly half an hour of warm, wet exploration to find the last one. Adellia was sure that she had seen the other woman come at least once in that time, but she was too polite to say anything. Finally, her blindly groping fingers failed to turn anything up. She withdrew and helped Lady Sofia to her feet. Both women were naked, stinking, and covered in all manner of unguessable fluids, but they were alive. They looked into each other’s eyes, and then embraced with an exultant cry. The moment passed, and they withdrew, Lady Sofia giving her ward an appraising look.

“Let’s get back to the boat, Adellia. I think that’s quite enough for this expedition, don’t you?”

“Yes, milady.” Adellia nodded fervently.

“I think you can call me Sofia, Adellia. You’ve rather earned it.”

Adellia felt her feet nearly leave the ground. Her chest swelled with pride. “Yes, Sofia!”

“Now, we shan’t be talking about today’s mishap, shall we?” Sofia asked. Adellia shook her head vehemently.

“No, ma’am!”
“That’s a good girl. We’ll make a hunter of you yet, Adellia Hawk.”

Despite her bruises, despite the soreness in her gut, despite the foul paste drying across her chest, Adellia beamed. They limped onward, leaning on one another for support. “You know,” said Lady Sofia, “the ecchiteuthis relies on the traumatic impregnation process to incapacitate its prey long enough to entrap them. I’m surprised you were able to break free so easily.”

“Oh,” said Adellia, trying to keep her voice casual. “I’ve had practice.”
Amateur Archaeology

Chapter Summary

Adellia digs into the history of the Hawk family

September was always bittersweet for Adellia Hawk, and never moreso than now. It was a time of changes: one season ends, another begins, the warmth and sunshine of summer yielding to the damp coolness of fall. And, of course, summer vacation wound down and school loomed on the horizon.

As a child, of course, she’d hated the prospect of another nine months at her dreary grammar school. Her parents’ efforts to bundle her off again were never less than Herculean. With age had come perspective, however, and the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters was a far cry from the grey stones of Paddington’s School for Girls. She always looked forward to school now: the familiar cafeteria food, the smell of the library, and of course the Armory: climbing walls, running tracks, fencing rings, and an endless supply of young and capable opponents against which to test her mettle.

Of course, summer had its charms. She’d spent two months with Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll, acting as her field assistant as the famed huntress studied the littoral *ecchiteuthis*. Despite a rather unfortunate encounter with a brooding female specimen, both women had pulled through, and the treatise Lady Sofia planned to write promised to be quite enlightening. Adellia had had just about enough surf, sun and sand for a lifetime; she was ready to return to school for her final year. The thought of it put butterflies in her stomach. Yes, she was looking forward to going back to Hoxleigh… but soon enough she would be done. Finished. Graduated! What would she do next? Was she ready? The fear of the unknown warred with giddy excitement.

One step at a time. Return to school, graduate, and then worry about it. She had at least another two weeks before she had to go back to Hoxleigh, and her parents were still out of the country and not expected to return until the winter holiday. She had the run of the house, as long as she stayed out of the way of Simpkins and Mrs. Sherbet and the other staff.

The house was, fortunately, large enough that she never had to see another living soul if she didn’t want to. It occurred to her that there were still areas that she hadn’t explored. Even for Adellia, whose fearlessness from youth had been the bane of her parents’ lives, there were some areas too frightful to contemplate. Chief among these were the catacombs. They connected to the wine cellars, but from there branched out into a gloomy subterranean warren unmapped by man. Nobody could tell Adellia how far the catacombs extended, and her imagination populated them with all manner of horrific creatures: fanged, shambling undead, the corpses of untold generations of Hawks all thirsting for the blood of their descendant.

As a child, she’d been far too scared to think about exploring the catacombs. The past year, though, had hardened her up. After being webbed by araqny in the darkest Hoxwald, imprisoned by the Ichneumon Lily, entrapped by slimes and seized by the dreaded *ecchiteuthis*, the prospect of a few dusty bones was hardly enough to stir her.

That was how she found herself descending the cellar steps on fine late-August morning, armed with a flickering lantern, a pack full of sandwiches, a thermos of tea, and of course her trusty belt...
knife. Just in case. The wine cellars were, by themselves, a fine place to explore; the seemingly endless racks of bottles formed a natural labyrinth. Eventually, however, Adellia found her way to the back of the cellar, where the torches were farther apart and the floor rougher and rockier. There, between the last two shelves, a dark hole yawned in the wall: the top of a flight of steps, rough-cut into the very rock. She swallowed hard. The beam of her lantern played across the steps- they looked almost like a natural formation, not a human creation at all. Two weeping angels flanked the entrance, their stony features worn almost to nonexistence by time and moisture.

*It’s just catacombs. There’s nothing there that can hurt me.* Adellia set her jaw and took a step forward. She wasn’t afraid of a few moldering bones… and perhaps older Hawks had been buried with treasure. That was the tradition, right? Of course it wouldn’t be proper to loot her own family crypt, but just to see would be safe. Maybe she could pay homage to her heroic forebears.

She took a step and nearly fell onto her bottom. The steps were slick, and a drop of water fell onto her forehead from above. She stood stock-still until her heartbeat came back to sane levels, then proceeded carefully. One step at a time, she clambered downward, her lantern held out before her with one hand, her other pressed against the rock wall for balance. The staircase was short, only six steps, and once she felt flat ground under her feet again she exhaled in relief.

She was in a small, square chamber, the center of which was dominated by a large marble block. She recognized this room-- when she was small, her grandfather Herbert Hawk had died, and had been buried down here. Her parents had escorted her, and even with a whole battery of torches lighting the space, it had taken the promise of sweets to cajole young Adellia into the catacombs. This was the vestibule, and old Grampa Herbert’s tomb was over there… she squinted, and sure enough, she could see a door cut into the wall. The room had three doors, plus the staircase she had come down, the four exits pointing in the four cardinal directions. She’d *seen* Grampa’s tomb already, so she tamped down her fear and turned right.

The next room was like the first in size, but instead of a central slab, there were four altars in the walls. Each one was guarded by a human statue, men and women of noble aspect. She could just make out slabby sarcophagi behind each statue. She lifted her lantern and bent forward. There, a carving at the foot of one statue: *Lady Rihannon Hawk*. The statue was of a determined-looking woman with a distinctly Adellia-like set to her jaw. Her hair was short and she carried a sword in one hand and a torch in the other.

This would have been her great-grandmother, then-- a fearsome woman, by all accounts. Adellia’s heart swelled with pride. Lady Rihannon had strangled the Loch Morar Beast and washed ashore with its corpse, coughing up water; Lady Rihannon had brought down a phoenix on the wing with her horsebow. And now Lady Rihannon lay in eternal repose under Hawk Manor! Her statue glared down at Adellia with just a hint of a sneer on its stone lip. For a second, Adellia considered trying to slip around it and take a look at her famous ancestor, but the fierceness in those granite eyes gave her pause. Instead she saluted proudly and headed deeper into the catacombs.

The next chamber held four more statues, as did the one after that. Adellia took only a passing glance at the names-- Rufous Hawk, Bernadette Hawk, Oberon Hawk and Alvina Hawk. The deeper she went, the more worn the statues became, and the dustier and more decrepit the chambers. The walls became rougher, the floor more uneven, and some of the sarcophagi had begun to crumble. Adellia squinted in the flickering lantern-light at some of the names on the statues. Many were so eroded that she could barely make them out. Aelfred Hawke? Cynefrid Hawke? Who knew?

The line of chambers terminated abruptly. The last room was larger than the others, rounder, though it bore the marks of unmistakable age. Twin rust stains were all the remained of the torch
brackets that had once been set in the arched doorway. Most of the room was filled by a titanic statue, at least twice Adellia’s height. Hardy lichen and fungus had colonized it, and the endless drip, drip, drip of water from overhead had stolen its features, but it had a proud and defiant posture that was impossible to mistake. A tarnished bronze plaque was embedded in the stone block on which the statue stood, and Adellia bent forward to read it. “Wulfric Hofac,” she murmured under her breath. “Wulfric… Wulf? Wulf the Wise?”

She gasped. Every schoolchild knew about Wulf the Wise. Her mother had told her stories of Wulf when she was still practically in swaddling clothes. He’d served King Arthur at his Round Table, supposedly, and banished the monsters to the forest and heaths. He’d been the first hunter. Of course, the version of the story she got in school was a bit drier and more scholarly, but he was famed as the founder of the Hawk family, and one of the founders of Hoxleigh (though of course it wasn’t called that then… Adellia never paid too much attention in history class, and even her famous ancestor couldn’t hold her focus for more than half a period).

And here he was! Behind the statue, almost invisible in the gloom of the cave, was a low stone slab. Adellia approached, unaware that she was holding her breath. Just a few feet from her were the bones of the greatest hunter ever to live. Her great, great, great… some number of greats, definitely a lot of them, but her direct ancestor! She felt the weight of history pressing down on her! The name she bore, the proud and ancient name, it had belonged to him originally. Someday, she’d take her place in these crypts, part of Wulf’s silent, eternal hunt.

It was too much. She had to, had to get a look. Just a look. That was all… then she’d leave, and spend the afternoon flipping through the history books in the library. The lid of old Wulf’s sarcophagus was cracked right down the middle, and large chunks of it had already flaked off. She looked quizzically at it. There were holes in the stone, places where it had partially fallen in. Was there something there… some kind of dark patch around the lip of the crevice? A stain? Even with her lantern held close, she couldn’t tell. The ancient stone was weathered and worn. She set her lantern down on the ground and wrapped her fingers around one edge of the stone. With a grunt of effort, she began to lift.

Despite its worn and cracked state, the stone slab was tremendously heavy. Adellia huffed and puffed and the stone gave a tiny shiver, a movement of perhaps a centimeter. She wiped the sweat from her brow and looked down. Darkness stared back at her from the crack between lid and sarcophagus. She stared back, hypnotized. So close…

She bent, flexed, put her back into it, and was rewarded by a creaking groan of stone on stone. The larger half of the lid slid along the sarcophagus for a few inches, then overbalanced and began to tip over the edge. Adellia managed to leap back just in time as it crashed to the ground and shattered into fragments. A great cloud of dust rose up and left her coughing and sputtering. When it finally cleared, she wiped her eyes and bent over the sarcophagus. Darkness yawned below her, and she lifted her lantern to illuminate it.

The first thing that caught her eye was movement. She recoiled with a yelp. Wulfric had awakened! He had sensed her trespass and risen from his eternal rest to slay her! After a moment, she told herself she was being foolish. She had probably disturbed his old bones, that was all. They were settling.

One look into the sarcophagus told her that wasn’t so. Most of the stone box was filled with a vaguely human-shaped suit of armor, scraps of rotten leather and desiccated cloth with the occasional gleam of yellowed bone. Beneath it, though, something rippled and moved, something pale and flabby. Adellia’s mouth formed an O of horror. It wasn’t a zombie or skeleton at all. It was worse.
The grave-grub, sensing her light, erupted from beneath Wulfric’s remains like a breaching whale. It was huge, at least two feet long and as thick around as her thigh. It had no arms or legs, not even a proper head: just an eyeless, spade-shaped protuberance at one end of its fat body. Its skin was the dirty off-white of bone and glistened wetly with unknowable juices. Adellia horrified eyes took in every tiny detail: the thing’s yawning, gawping mouth, the tiny ridges of its skin, its flailing tail. It hit her lantern arm with a wet thump and she swatted it in instinctive revulsion. Her open palm slapped into it with a wet splat and set it flying; it hit the far wall, where it burst in a welter of goo.

“EEYYYYAAAAAAAAHHHH!” she screamed. She had been prepared for blood-drinking undead, but not this.

As though disturbed by her cry, Wulfric’s armored skeleton began to thrash and churn. Grubs boiled out from beneath him, a swarm of them, a host of them, wriggling their fleshy bodies and dripping clear mucous. They squirmed onto the lip of the casket and threw themselves at her, their muscular bodies bunching and flexing. Adellia staggered backward with a choked gasp. Her lantern slipped from her fingers and shattered on the ground, snuffing out the only source of light.

In the dim, flickering lantern-light, the scene had been horrific enough. In pitch darkness, it threatened to overwhelm Adellia entirely. Her mind creaked and frayed in mortal terror. She could feel the cool, slime-slick bodies landing on her arms and chest. They adhered to her by some vile ooze. Individually, they were no heavier than a small dog or large cat, but their combined weight was beginning to bear her down. She felt their soft mouthparts gumming at the exposed skin of her arms. One landed on her neck and slurped at her in a hideous parody of a lover’s kiss.

Adellia let out a sound that was half wail and half hiss. Her mind was almost gone in terror. She was blind, flailing, her ears filled with the wet suck and splat of the grubs, her nose choking on their miasma. Something hard hit her on the back of the head and she saw stars. It was the wall-- she had backed up as far as she could go. She sank down into a sitting position, then slowly toppled over.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay there. She wanted to get up, wanted desperately to flee, but all the strength had run out of her limbs. The grubs crawled all over her, exploring every inch of her body. Behind them, unnoticed to Adellia in her extremity, their faintly acidic slime sizzled at her clothes. The dead were often buried in silken finery, and the grubs lacked the patience to wait for it to rot before taking their meal. Their secretions would do no more than leave a mild stain on exposed flesh, but the soft cotton of Adellia’s trousers hissed and parted like cheesecloth. Damp shreds of cloth fell away like autumn leaves.

Adellia’s flesh, though clammy with fright, quickly proved far too tough for the grubs’ gummy jaws. They slithered up and down her body, leaving their acidic trails behind them. The sizzling goo tingled faintly on Adellia’s skin, like a sunburn. The movements of the grubs seemed oddly purposeful. They spread out and clustered around her hands and feet. One curled around her neck like a fur stole.

Little by little, Adellia’s terror ebbed, and in its place revulsion flowed in. She could feel the moist, sticky flesh pressing on her from all sides. She had to get out--**had to.** She focused, gathered her courage, and climbed to her feet.

Tried to, at least. To her shock, her limbs wouldn’t move. At first she thought she had been paralyzed, envenomed by the grubs, but her elbows and knees flexed just fine. She was pinned to the ground, she realized, pinned at wrist and ankle. The grubs had curled around her like prisoner’s fetters and somehow glued themselves to the floor. She was trapped in living, squishy manacles. She lay on her back, arms outstretched, legs spread. It slowly dawned on her that she was in a
vulnerable position-- and, with her clothing reduced to torn fragments, a compromising one.

At that thought, something brushed her thigh. She yelped in fright at the sudden touch. It was another grub, she was sure of that-- the cold softness was distressingly familiar. It oozed slowly up her thigh, taking its time, its stubby head dragging across her skin like a lover’s finger. The trail of goo it left behind it raised goosebumps on her skin. Slowly, ever so slowly, it was tracing an arc across the pale expanse of her thigh, moving slowly but surely towards her… towards her…

She gulped. There was only one place the grub could be going. Perhaps it was attracted to the moisture, perhaps it could smell her, but it arrowed towards her quim with deliberate speed. She tried to wedge her thighs together, tried to form a barricade, but the creature was far too slippery and flexible. The round tip of its head brushed against her mound, and with a flex of its segmented body, it forced her thighs apart. She wondered if she could crush it, and quickly decided not to try-- not only did her limbs still feel bonelessly weak, but she really didn’t want another one of these to burst while it was caressing her holy of holies. Not to mention the risk of making it angry.

“Please…” she moaned, aware of how pathetic she sounded. “No, please…” She didn’t know what she hoped to accomplish; the grub took not the slightest notice of her cries. It bunched up its body, reared back, and dove forward, burying its head between her delicate folds.

Adellia groaned in terror and surprise. The lump invading her was cold, much colder than it had felt on her skin. Three inches of smooth flesh slid past her gates with a wet squishing sound. Inside, it pulsed and quivered, fluttering against her inner walls like a trapped moth. She could feel the rest of it, a bulky shape pressing against her thighs, straining to go deeper. Another inch or two of head plunged into her pussy.

It was moving inside her-- she could feel it. It swung its head this way and that, as though exploring an unfamiliar space. The shape inside her was stubby but wide, and it grew wider as it forced itself further inside. She felt herself being levered open. There was a little pain, but mostly the sensation was a queer feeling of stretching, of fullness. The grub’s head was not perfectly smooth, and its ridges scraped against her inner walls. They caught, finding a moment of leverage, and then used that leverage to plunge an inch or two deeper.

Adellia’s breath caught in her throat. The grub’s head was fully inside her now, and it was beginning to press forward with its body. Surely, it didn’t intend to go any deeper? Her legs were spread in an awkward position, leaving her cunt vulnerable, but even with her thighs parted as far as they were the grub’s pasty body was pressing up against them on both sides. There was simply no more room.

Yet the grub, with mindless animal fervor, pressed onward. Muscular spasms rippled down the length of its body. Its slimy tail thwapped against the stone floor, and thick strings of ooze were flung off its body by its wild gyrations. Adellia could feel the stuff oozing inside her, as though it were being secreted by hidden pores in the grub’s head. With a wet, undignified raspberry, thick strings of clear mucous splattered out from around the tight seal of her cunt. They lashed her thighs and pooled under her bottom.

Inch by inch, the grub’s mad squirming was carrying it deeper. Adellia groaned in dismay. She wanted to focus on something else, anything, but the pitch darkness of the room meant that there were no distractions. The only sound she could hear was the turgid slap of the grub’s body against her skin and, faintly, a distant squelching sound that she knew was coming from inside her. She tugged frantically at her arms, but to no avail. She was well and truly stuck, trussed up as neatly as a boar in a trap, and easy pickings for the monster currently defiling her tight young pussy.

Pain flared between her legs, and she gritted her teeth and hissed like a teakettle. Her muscles had
fought the good fight as long as they could, but the constant pressure was wearing them out, and the grub took advantage of her momentary weakness to squish another inch or two of its body into her. Her tired flesh yielded before it, stretching obscenely to accommodate the fat-bodied grub. The pain began to subside, and beneath it, a strange and fervid warmth bubbled up inside her. Perhaps it was the way her pussy had distended around the invader, leaving the tiny pink button of her clitoris exposed; perhaps it was merely the sensation of being touched so deeply, so intimately. Whatever the reason, Adellia bit her lip against the unwelcome tide of arousal. All of a sudden, the moisture lubricating her stretched-out hole was not just the work of the grub.

“Nnnnnnggggggh… unnnfffff…” She struggled to restrain her moans. There was nobody down here to hear… except for her and old Wulfric. Somehow, she didn’t want her ancestor to hear her lusty cooing. It was… it was… it was disgraceful, that was what it was! A Hawk was supposed to hunt monsters, and here she was, struggling to keep the lust from crisping away the last traces of rational thought… and all because of a bunch of sticky overgrown worms!

The thought lent strength to her arms. She grunted, strained, and heaved. Muscles moved under her skin. She could feel her right hand moving… ever so slightly…

With a wet *splat*, her hand parted ways with the floor. Gobbets of gluey slime flew in all directions, some spattering across her face or sticking clumps of hair to her neck. Her hand flew free… much quicker than she’d expected. She let out a *whuff* as her open palm smacked into her stomach. The grub that had been anchoring her to the floor thudded against her flesh a moment later, knocking the wind out of her.

By the time she got her breath back and the bright shapes had ceased to dance in her vision, it was too late. Her hand was now as firmly affixed to her lower belly as it had been to the wall. She tugged frantically, but the only result was a flare of pain as her skin stretched. She hissed through her teeth and flopped back against the wall, defeated.

Meanwhile, the grub continued its patient assault on her womanhood. The sounds emanating from between her legs were utterly obscene: a flopping, wet symphony of squishes and slurps. She could only imagine how horribly distended her poor pussy looked. The darkness mercifully hid the grub from view, but from the feel of it the main portion of its body had now reached her entrance. It was at least as thick as a rugby ball, and firmer than it had appeared. The portion inside her was still thrashing and squirming, and the delicate sensation of its head fluttering to and fro against her inner walls was almost too much to bear. She screwed her eyes shut and let out a long, guttural groan. Sweat beaded her forehead, and she could feel her pulse quickening. She tried to calm her breathing and focused her thoughts on escape. Perhaps she could wriggled her other hand free, peel the grub off, push herself to her feet… but it was hard to focus, so hard, as the little tingles and zaps of pleasure raced up and down her spine and blew her thoughts to pieces. She wanted to escape, oh yes, but a part of her-- a primitive part, panting and sweating in the depths of her reptilian brain-- wanted nothing more than to luxuriate in the feeling of delicious fullness emanating from her stuffed and gaping cunny.

Gradually, she became aware of a new sensation. Her right hand cradled her belly just below the navel, and something was pressing against her fingers. She realized in mounting horror that it was her own flesh. The burrowing grub was furrowing her like a fertile field, the thrust of its body raising a bulge that traveled upward from her mound towards her belly. It lifted her fingers by a few inches, stopped, receded, then returned. So tightly was the skin stretched over the invasion that she could feel the ridged texture of its head. She shuddered in revulsion, but she could not lift her hand off her stomach-- the creature clinging to her wrist had her pinned tightly. She was forced instead to endure the repeated sensations of cresting and falling, cresting and falling. Each time, the bulge grew larger, traveled deeper, lasted longer. The grub was passing deeper and deeper into
her.

The pressure against Adellia’s thighs was starting to abate, but this was little solace. The widest part of the grub was at her entrance, and the stretching sensation was reaching its apex. She gritted her teeth and hissed, partially in pain, partially in revulsion. Her resistance had been mighty, but it had also been futile, and now it was done. She had nothing left. Her body was yielding up its secrets, its treasures, its most sacred places, and there was nothing she could do. The grub bunched up its body and thrust forward, and this time nearly four inches of it sank into her at once. Her vaginal passage-- once a tight, sweet channel-- had been utterly plundered, rendered into a slime-slick and cavernous tunnel. Her stomach was now dreadfully swollen, gravid with the nightmare spawn curled up inside her.

And yet it had not finished. Inch by inch, it crawled deeper into her. As the last trace of its tail vanished between her gaping, dripping vulvae, the spade-shaped head nudged against her cervix. She cried out weakly, aware of its hideous goal, but her protests were feeble and she had nothing to back them up. The grub wasted no time. Adellia felt the first impact, a heavy \textit{thud} that shook her all the way up her spine and set her trapped legs to spasming. Like a battering ram at a castle’s gates, the grub pulled back and thrust itself forward again. And again. And again… the feeling of being under siege was palpable and horrifying, and yet to her sorrow and shame, there was arousal mixed in with it, a sort of greedy and desperate lust. It struck at her Achilles’ heel-- her competitive streak. The grub had thrown down a gauntlet, and she would meet it. She would rise to any challenge, take on any beast. The araqny had been more terrifying, the \textit{ecchiteuthis} more girthy. She didn’t seem to be about to die, so why wallow in misery?

“Come on!” she growled. “You can go-- \textit{urk} -- you can go deeper than… \textit{uff} … than that! Is that all you’ve-- \textit{ack}!”

As if responding to her taunts, the grub had redoubled its efforts. Something erupted inside her, a flood of warm and sticky slime, and thusly lubricated the tip of the grub’s head was able to lodge itself in her narrow passage. She let out a groan that turned into a scream as it flexed its muscles, flaring its head and forcing her open wider.

“That’s it!” she crowed. “Deeper! Go on, I can take it!”

The grub paused for a moment, then its body rippled and it began to slither forward. Adellia’s eyes rolled back into her head and her eyelids fluttered rapidly open and closed. The fullness was one thing, but the sensation of the creature passing into her womb, her innermost sanctum, was too much. She surrendered to it and let the wave of orgasmic bliss sweep her away. She barely noticed as the grub squirmed comfortably into its new home; barely felt the skin stretch, the organs move out of the way, her body reconfigure itself to allow this invader access. Her cervix did its best to close behind it, but her pussy still gaped wide open, drooling a river of slime and secretions that flowed away across the stone floor.

Inside, the grub drew itself into a circle, drawing the last of its hindquarters into its snug new home. Not without protest, her womb had stretched to accommodate it, and her walls pressed tightly against from all directions. From the outside, the creature was impossible to hide; her belly was tremendously bloated, as though she were in her ninth month of pregnancy-- and expecting triplets at least. Her hand rested on the underside of the enormous orb, and with her thumb she could feel her navel. It had, unsurprisingly, everted, and now stuck out like a pennant. She could feel the occasional spasm of motion coming from within her as her passenger settled into its new home. A thin stream of drool trickled down her chin; the power and force of her orgasm had abraded away conscious thought, and it was only now starting to return. Deliriously, she rubbed her belly like a proud mother.
Wait…

She rubbed her belly.

She blinked two or three times and shook her head. Yes, it was true-- her hand was moving freely. It was soaked with slime, her fingers completely pruney, and she could still feel the weight of the grub against her wrist-- but it was hers again! In fact, the grub hung limp, like a wet scarf. She flicked her wrist and it tumbled off and splatted against the wall. Her other hand, too, she pulled free with a minimum of effort. The glue that had seemed so unbreakable was merely tacky now. Had the grubs died? Had they sensed that their mission was accomplished? It was impossible to tell. She reached back with unsteady hands, propped herself against the rear wall of the cave, and pushed herself to her feet.

That was the plan, anyways. What resulted was a slow, awkward climb. Her body felt wrong-- she was swollen where she had been flat, sore where she had been limber, and dripping with slime and sticky mucous. Every time she moved, she could feel the creature inside her shifting around. It was a strange, nauseous sensation. She could picture it clearly in her mind’s eye: the pale, soft grub curled up inside her womb, pressing against her guts and sloshing back and forth with every movement. She staggered to her feet, her massive belly swinging free below her. Unconsciously her hands wrapped themselves around it, feeling its contours, palpating the taut and straining flesh. She gave her tummy a little squeeze and felt something inside her push back, as though annoyed the interruption of its repose.

She supposed she should have been horrified, but she felt only a strange, floating numbness. Perhaps she was in shock. She had fully expected to die, poisoned or consumed by these subterranean scavengers, but she had come through after all. The grub had gone to a lot of trouble to climb up inside her, and she didn’t think it likely that it would kill her anytime soon. Still, she would have to find a way to remove it. She couldn’t walk around like this. It was impossible to tell in the darkness, but her belly felt as though it had to be at least two feet across. It flared out wider than her hips on either side, and the upper curve pressed against her breasts and forced them up and out. They felt sore, as well, and a quick exploration revealed twin streams of fluid flowing from her nipples. Was this another consequence of her strange ‘pregnancy?’ She shivered in the darkness.

Walking felt odd as well. Her quim still gaped impressively wide, and with each stride her once-tight lips rubbed against each other. She was forced into an awkward waddle. She felt her way forward one step at a time, relying on memory and her sense of touch. Now that she was upright, she could see a faint and distant glimmer of light-- the torches that burned at the crypt entrance, many rooms ago. All she had to do was navigate back… through all of those catacombs, past all of those looming coffins and their silent, glowering guardians… in the darkness… alone.

Adellia swallowed.

Well, you’re not alone, a tiny voice inside her reminded her. You’ve got a passenger.

“Thanks, me,” she grumbled. “Really. Thanks a lot.”

Just trying to look on the bright side.

When she finally staggered out into the comparative brightness of the wine cellar, she felt like a wrung-out rag. If she stopped moving forward, she knew, she would collapse in a dead feint. The trip through the catacombs had been not only harrowing, but exhausting; the sloshing, unnatural weight of her grossly overstretched belly had swung beneath her like a kettlebell in the Armory’s gymnasium. She cradled it in both arms, hating the too-soft feel of her flesh. I have to do something about this, she thought blearily, before Mother and Father get home.
Fortunately, night had fallen while she was in the basement, and the house was dark and deserted. She knew that Simpkins and the others were likely abed in the servants’ quarters, so she took a circuitous route back to her room. The stairs were very nearly insurmountable in her condition, but somehow she made it, hauling her bloated stomach up step by step and wincing at every errant twitch and flick of the monster curled up inside her. She pulled open her door and hung a red ribbon on the handle-- the “do not disturb” sign, just in case the cleaners decided to tidy up while she slept-- then collapsed on the bed and was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

She woke up to a body that felt like one huge bruise. She was sore from head to toe, but especially around her quim, which felt as though she had taken a punch in it. She padded gingerly over to her bathroom, hissing at every step, and sat down with her legs spread in front of her huge wall mirror. Her pussy had regained its former tightness, though she could see a thin stream of slime oozing out from between her lips and trickling down her leg. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and went rooting around in her cabinets for a pad.

What now? She had to get rid of her unwanted passenger, and she had to do it fast, before someone noticed. But how? She supposed the library might now, but her gravid belly would cause comment. How could she… aha!

Deep in her closet she found what she was looking for. Many years ago, Lord Geoffrey Hawk had replaced his silken dressing gown with a fresh one-- an anniversary gift from his wife. Little Adellia had grown used to sitting on his lap in his old gown, and loved the feel of the ancient silk. She couldn’t bear to part with it, so after much cajoling her father had given it up to her. For a while she’d used it as a sort of security blanket, and now it dwelt in the musty depths of her wardrobe, yet another piece of discarded clothing to molder in the darkness.

Not anymore! She had grown since then, but it still swallowed her up. She rolled up the sleeves and hitched up the shoulders. When she bent over, the voluminous, draping robe hid her belly. Sure, she looked like a hunchback out of some childhood fable, but at least this might avoid awkward questions. She squared her shoulders and headed for the library.

That was how Adellia passed the next week-- alone, drifting between her bedroom, the kitchen and the library, where she would sprawl on a high-backed armchair and read book after book after book. The few members of the household staff who ran into her gave her odd looks, but she told them she was feeling a bit under the weather and sneezed artfully once or twice, and thereafter they gave her a wide berth.

They weren’t the problem, though. Her belly was. Any hopes she might have harbored that the grub would leave on its own were quickly disappointed. The massive, pregnant globe was a dreadful burden, one she could never quite put out of her mind. From time to time, just when she’d grown accustomed to the weight, the grub inside her would shift or squirm. Each tremor sent a ripple of nausea through her and viced her insides with cramps. She found herself ravenously hungry at odd hours, craving barely-cooked meat or raw eggs. It was, she reflected bitterly, all the burdens of a real baby, without getting to enjoy the process of conception.

She would reclaim her body. She would.

She found what she was looking for in an ancient, musty tome from the far end of one of the shelves-- a treatise on herbal teas. Something called Blackthorn was good “for the Extraction of Parasytes most foule from the metra of the Enterprising Huntresse.” Her mother’s apothecarium was well-stocked, and she found the ingredients easily enough. The tea itself was easy to brew, though the mist that wafted off the chipped porcelain saucer would strip the paint off a carriage. She grimaced and pinched her nose shut, hoping that might dull the taste.
It didn’t. She felt her gorge rise and it was only with serious effort that she kept it down.

For an hour— one blessed, pain-free hour— she thought the tea might have failed. Had she made it wrong? Chemistry wasn’t exactly her strongest class…

Then the first contraction hit her, and she knew she had been right after all.

She wanted to scream, to bellow out her pain, but she knew that would bring the house staff running— red ribbon or no. So she bit down on a pillow and let out a muffled howl into that instead. She waddled up to her bathroom and shrugged out of her robe. Beneath it, the skin of her belly was livid and criss-crossed with bulging veins. As she watched, something moved under her skin, something slithery and muscular. Her nipples stood as proud and hard as volcanic peaks, erupting with twin streams of milky white fluid. She doubled over as the next contraction hit. She had planned to draw a bath, but she could see now that there was no time.

A spasm of pain drove her to her knees, and she sat down on the cool tile floor with her legs spread and her knees tented up. Looking down, she could actually see the ripples passing like waves across the curved swell of her belly. The grub was thrashing, spinning, twisting… her guts roiled and squeezed, and she could actually see it being pushed out of her. She laid one palm against her swollen stomach and, heedless of the pain, began to push inward. “Go on!” she hissed triumphantly. “Get out of here!”

Another contraction, the strongest one yet, ripped through her. Tears trickled down her cheeks and mingled with the sweat beading her face. She grunted, strained, and pushed with all her might. There was a moment of resistance as the grub fought back, then she felt something shift loose inside her and a heavy weight slid downward.

It was an odd feeling— she had grown so used to the presence of the grub that it seemed a part of her body. It was moving inside her, shifting, being pushed relentlessly onward. The tea had set an inexorable process in motion, and her body was taking over. It knew what to do, and obeying evolutionary imperatives older than the human species, it was preparing to evacuate her passenger. The creature didn’t want to go— that was plain from its frantic flailing. But there was little it could do. Thrashing, squirming, inch by inch it was forced down her channel. Bulging peaks rose and fell beneath her skin as it passed. She propped herself up on her hands and grinned toothily. “Don’t like that… do you?” she said with a grunt of effort. “Too… bad!”

The grub’s head was the first thing to appear. It popped out from between her cuntlips like a conjuror’s trick, a rabbit appearing from a hat. It tried to duck back inside, but she pushed with all her might and spread her legs even wider. “No you don’t!” she howled, heedless of the noise. “Oh, don’t you dare! Get OUT!”

A torrent of slime accompanied the creature, a trickle that quickly became a flood. Adellia could feel herself being forced open again, stretched to her biological limits, but this time she welcomed it. She was expelling the colonizer and reclaiming her body. Clear fluid coated the floor and squirted out in a geyser that painted the far wall. Triumph filled her, and not only that— a warm, meaty pleasure, an earthy lust that built in her clit and roiled outward. Victory was sweet, but the way the grub’s fat body was pressing against her sensitive inner walls was even sweeter. Her grunts became incoherent moans, and one of her supporting hands snaked between her legs to rub at her aching furrow.

A final contraction squeezed her like a giant hand around her midsection. The bulge beneath her skin quivered and roiled. With a massive grunt of effort and a torrent of breathless profanity, Adellia tensed, flexed, and pushed.
There was a moment of bright-white pain and then a sudden sense of release, accompanied by a wet, meaty *thwack* like a steak being dropped from a stepladder into a bowl of pudding. Gooey slime sprayed out with cannonball force, coating her thighs and splashing into the far wall. It sprayed backward, covering Adellia’s face and squirting into her hair. It dripped down her neck and filled her nose and ears.

A half-second later the grub landed on the floor of the bathroom with a meaty *thump*. It thrashed wildly, spraying goop in all directions. Adellia wiped the ooze from her eyes in time to see it wriggling towards her. “No! Not a chance!” she yelled and kicked out with one leg. Her aim was true-- the wriggling thing left the ground, turning end over end, then hit the wall with a damp squish. It slumped to the floor, leaving a trail of greenish goo behind it, and lay still.

Adellia fell back and lay there, panting, for at least a minute. She was soaked to the bone, exhausted, and her belly felt curiously hollow. The weight she had been carrying for the past week was finally gone. She took a deep breath and let it out after a few moments.

She badly, terribly needed a shower. At least she was already in the bathroom.
Basics of Cultural Exchange

Chapter Summary

Adellia returns to school and meets a rival.

The first thing Adellia Hawk did after stepping off the carriage was inhale deeply.

There was something in the air around the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters. It wasn’t the loamy soil, or the perpetually damp stone walls. It wasn’t the garden, or the stables, or even the Hoxwald, though each had their own special odor. It was the school itself, the richly overstuffed chairs in the common room, the creaking leather of the Armory pommel horses, the musty old books in the library, all blending together to create the perfect olfactory distillation of comfort and familiarity.

She took a deep double lungful and smiled.

After a rocky start, her summer apprenticeship with Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll had been a qualified success. The Lady had promised that her upcoming monograph on the lairing habits of the littoral *ecchiteuthis* would feature a discreet acknowledgement of Adellia's help, and Adellia had promised that their embarrassing encounter with a live specimen would be omitted from any retelling of her adventure. They had parted on good terms and with a promise to reconnect when Adellia graduated. Of course, if she never saw a piece of seaweed again, she’d be happy. She flexed her fingers unconsciously as she remembered her time with Lady Sofia. Once again, she’d gotten herself into a bit of a tight spot, but at least this time she’d been able to get herself out of it again.

The heavy thump of her bags broke her concentration. She looked around at the carriage driver, who was staring at her with barely concealed annoyance. “Got ten more runs to make today, young lady!” he said. “I can’t be having with your dilly-dallying!”

He whipped the horses into a trot and began to pull away along the Academy’s U-shaped drive. She looked around to make sure nobody was watching and stuck her tongue out at his retreating back. So there. Without further ado, she slung one bag over her shoulder and hoisted the other, then headed towards the wide double doors of the Academy. She was back.

The Great Hall was full of students. They milled around like ants. She saw a few she recognized, and a cluster of frightened, impossibly young-looking faces. *Freshmen*. She was in her last year, she realized with a start. About to graduate. It seemed only yesterday that she had been one of those freshmen. Had she ever been so young, so naive? Had she ever had such a dumb expression on her face? She doubted it. These were practically children.

One of her former roommates caught her eye, and she waved enthusiastically. It was Bethany, wasn’t it? Or Brittany. One of those. Bethany or Brittany saw her and gave her a tight little smile, then looked away hurriedly. Adellia was too enraptured to care. She was back! Back at school! The summer months were usually a dreadful bore, and though this year she had gotten some excitement, she had still been ready to come back by mid-July. Now the leaves were turning crisp, the nights were shortening, and she could practically taste the climbing chalk. She would go *straight* for the Armory, as soon as she dropped off her bags.
She had been scanning the crowd for a minute or two before she realized she was looking for someone specific. Toby Cotton did not, however, appear to have arrived yet. She flushed when she realized what she was doing. Well, fine. If he was late, he’d just have to come find her. She elbowed her way through the crowd of freshmen to one of the hall’s pillars, where room assignments had been posted. She was looking forward to the senior housing-- though she had to share a suite with a couple of her classmates, she’d at least have a little room to herself. Somewhere she could leave clothes on the floor where they belonged and not get yelled at. Somewhere she could put up a pistol crossbow target and not be complained about. Maybe somewhere she could get some privacy (and what she would do with that privacy… well, she hadn’t decided yet, but something good). She found her room, humphed with satisfaction, and set off.

The room turned out to be as poky as she had imagined, with all of the charm of the decrepit shack where she had spent her summer. She didn’t care. It was hers. Her bags had barely hit the floor before she was out the door and halfway down the hall. The Armory was close-- another perk of seniority-- and she had to stop herself from running down the plushly carpeted hallways. A hunter didn’t have to run. A hunter stalked.

She wasn’t the only one excited to visit the Armory again. The big room echoed with the sounds of students running, jumping, fencing, and wrestling. A vast canvas sheet hung over the climbing wall, but even as Adellia watched a couple of prefects were pulling it off. As she crossed the room, though, her attention was drawn to a crowd that had gathered around one of the pits. These lined the center of the Armory; they were sand-floored bowls set a few feet deep to allow for competitive sports. Students could stand or sit on the rim to cheer on their champion, and a large group was doing so now. Intrigued, Adellia pushed her way through the students at the back. She emerged in time to watch a girl she didn’t recognize squaring off against Colin Rurrick.

Colin was a year beneath Adellia, but everyone said he was the wrestler to beat, and his name had already appeared on a few of the brass plaques that commemorated trophy winners in the school’s regular competitions. He wasn’t particularly large, but he was sinewy and surprisingly quick. His horsey face had an expression of intense concentration as he settled into a low, wide stance.

The girl opposite him was grinning. She looked to be about Adellia’s age, but if she was student, she was one Adellia hadn’t seen before. She was stocky and muscular, with smallish breasts and a chubby, rounded stomach. She wore a tight tank top and shorts that seemed barely able to contain her thick thighs and broad hips. Her nut-brown hair sprang forth erratically like a potted plant overgrowing its home. Her smile was gap-toothed and genuine, and she flexed her fingers into claws as she circled.

“Get her, Colin!” some of the students were shouting. “Yeah, show her!” Adellia found herself intrigued. The girl moved like a wrestler, and she had to outweigh Colin by two stone. At the same time, she’d never seen a male wrestler able to keep up with him. She found herself rooting for the newcomer. She occasionally dealt with idiots who told her that girls couldn’t be hunters, and despite the self-evident falseness of their assertions, she still felt that she had to prove them wrong.

Colin was too experienced to be drawn in. He closed the distance slowly with his arms up. Both combatants essayed a few swings with their arms, each testing the other’s guard. Then Colin tensed up and lowered his head.

“He’s going for it,” said a student next to Adellia under his breath. “The low grapple. He always--”

Colin dove forward with his arms out. He came in fast under his opponent’s arms and wrapped his own around her waist. He planted his feet for leverage and swung his upper body to knock her down. Adellia’s breath caught in her throat as she saw the girl’s feet leave the floor. She was going
down for sure…

Even replaying the next few seconds in her mind Adellia couldn’t figure out how the girl did it. One second she was toppling. The next she had wrapped her powerful arms around Colin’s chest from behind. She pivoted around her hips and yanked him off his feet. Then both of them were falling to the ground in each other’s arms. Colin, on the bottom, got the worst of it by far. He rolled over with a dazed look on his face and tried to pry her arms off him. The girl recovered quickly and knelt by his side, still holding him in a bear hug. She pinned him to the ground under her body and swept his leg out from under him as he tried to rise. He struggled for a moment in her grip, then went limp.

There was a moment of shocked silence, then the students standing around the ring started to applaud. Adellia hesitated for a moment longer then joined them. The girl’s grin widened and she started to bow, her arms held out theatrically. Colin crawled away unnoticed across the sand with a sour look on his face.

As the crowd started to break up, Adellia wandered over to the climbing wall. She approached one of the prefects and nodded towards the wrestling pit. Trying to keep her voice casual, she asked, “Do you know who that is?”

“Well?” the prefect looked over and shrugged. “No idea. New girl, I think. Transfer student. I heard we were getting one. Hey, can you give me a hand uncoiling this rope?”

Adellia nodded. “Sure.” As she worked, she couldn’t get the girl’s face out of her mind. New girl, huh? Well, how about that?

Classes began the next day. Keen to make a good impression, Adellia double-checked to make sure she had all of her books and made sure to arrive five minutes early. Her first class of the day was an advanced seminar—Practical Tracking, with Mr. Grynder. She had selected it because it was one of the few classes that featured practical sessions in the Hoxwald. Seniors were expected to begin polishing their fieldwork, which meant live training exercises with carefully selected specimens. She couldn’t wait.

To her surprise, Toby Cotton arrived a couple of minutes after she did. She wouldn’t have expected him to take a class like this. Toby? Track monsters through the Hoxwald? What if he broke his glasses? She wondered if he had just taken the class because he figured she would. That was so like him, she decided it had to be true. His expression brightened when he saw her, and he stopped by her desk (strategically located near the back of the classroom, to avoid inconvenient notice by the professor). “Hey Adellia!” he said. “I missed you at dinner!”

“Oh, I ate in my room.” That was true. Adellia had been so engrossed in cataloguing the Armory’s collection of belaying hooks that she had entirely missed dinner. She had managed to scrounge a plate of baked beans from a sympathetic cook and eaten them in her room while flipping through a Practical Crossbows catalogue filched from the library.

“Well, did you have a good summer?”

She thought back to her time with Lady Sofia. Counting seaweed, cantaloupe for breakfast, and one encounter with a giant squid. She smiled.

“Yeah, it was great! I got to spend it all with Lady Ebersoll! We’re writing a book together!”

“You? A book?” Toby looked quizzical. He gave a little nervous laugh. “You’re joking, right?”
Adellia’s stomach writhed. All of a sudden she wanted to punch him right in his stupid face. “Yeah, a book!” she snapped, a bit louder than she’d intended. “That’s a big shock to you, huh? I can write books!” She thought she might be taking a bit too much credit now, but it was too late to turn back. She could see other students turning to look at them.

Toby looked stricken. “Oh, of course, Adellia, I didn’t mean--”

“Whatever,” she said. Her cheeks burned. “Hope you had a good summer, Toby. Good luck in class.” She opened her textbook to a random page and stared down at it in hopes that he would take the hint. Fortunately, he did, and slunk away to his desk. The other students turned back to their own textbooks in silence.

After a few minutes, Mr. Grynder made his way down the classroom aisle. He was tall and dark-haired, with a neat little goatee and a tiny scar on one cheek that seemed perfectly designed to make him look dashing. His voice was rich and deep. “Hello, class! Welcome to Practical Tracking. I look forward to seeing you all in action this semester. Before we begin, I want to introduce a new student. Ms. Sokolova, if you would stand up please?”

Adellia perked up. A few rows in front of her, a girl stood up and looked around the class. It took a moment for Adellia to recognize her in regular clothes, but there was no mistaking that shock of brown hair. It was the wrestler from the other day.

“This is Ludmilla Sokolova,” Mr. Grynder said. “She’s come from the Okhotnik Akademiya as part of a student exchange program. Ludmilla, would you like to introduce yourself to the class?”

Ludmilla took a deep breath. “Hello, Hoxleigh!” she said in a thick Slavic accent. “I am glad to meet you all! I like swimming and wrestling, and I am eager to learn your ways of hunting chudovisshe.” She clasped her hands together and bowed. Her hair bounced wildly as if deciding to make a break for it, then turning back at the last second. It continued settling into place for several seconds after she had stopped moving. The class broke into half-hearted applause as she took her seat again.

“Right,” said Mr. Grynder. “Now that we all know each other, who can tell me the first rule of tracking?”

The rest of Adellia’s classes passed without further incident. She had wanted to take an advanced seminar in ballistics as well, but her marks were barely high enough to qualify for one, let alone two. She was forced to fill her schedule with a boring lecture in history instead. She stood by the classroom door for a moment, watching jealously as students filed into Mrs. Krupp’s shooting range. Next semester, she told herself. I’ll get my shot.

Wait a second. Was that Toby walking into Krupp’s class? Impossible! The idea of him holding anything heavier than a quill pen was laughable. She squinted. It was Toby. And he wasn’t alone. He was matching pace with the new girl, Ludmilla. She had a massive crossbow strapped across her back, one that must have taken both hands and one foot to wind. As Adellia watched, Ludmilla said something inaudible. Whatever it was it made Toby break out into gales of laughter. Adellia’s eyes narrowed. She tried to hunch herself backwards and fade into the crowd of students entering the history lecture hall. It didn’t matter-- neither Toby nor the new girl spared a glance in her direction. They vanished into the ballistics range and Adellia turned back to her class. She almost trampled a freshman girl with long red hair, who squeaked like a mouse and dove out of her way. Adellia didn’t even notice.

Her class schedule had a gaping hole in the middle of it, to ensure plenty of time for a generous lunch. She had missed the cafeteria food. It was hearty stuff that stuck to the ribs: black pudding,
mashed potatoes with gravy, pease porridge, baked beans and plump crispy sausages. Her tray piled high, she scanned the room for a familiar face. There were her old roommates, each of whom had taken what looked like a single carrot and a piece of toast. There were some of her climbing buddies, tearing at bread with hands still white with chalk. There! Toby was sitting by himself in a little bubble of silence with a book propped open in front of him. She crossed the space between them in four long steps and sat down so heavily the dishes rattled. He looked up, startled.

“Oh, hi, Adellia,” he said. He swallowed. “Listen, again, I’m really sorry about--”

“Ohhhhh.” Adellia waved a hand dismissively. “Forget it. I wouldn’t have believed it myself. I’ll get you a copy when it comes out, ok? I’ll even sign it.”

Toby grinned. “I’d like that,” he said. “I’ve read Lady Sofia’s treatise on deep-water scavengers. She’s very well thought-of. Did you know she discovered--”

“Yes, we talked all about it!” said Adellia, anxious to get out in front of what looked like a very long and boring conversation. “Anyways, she said I had real potential. What about you? How was your summer?”

“Oh, it was pretty boring,” Toby sighed. “I mostly just helped out my dad.”

“Wow! That doesn’t sound boring at all! What did you hunt?” Adellia leaned forward and propped her chin up on her elbows. Toby flushed and looked away.

“Oh, uh, my dad’s not a hunter, Adellia. He’s a grocery wholesaler. He said I could stay in the extra room above his offices, but I’d have to help him with paperwork. We just--”

“Hello, Toby!”

Once again, the silverware on the table clattered. Ludmilla Sokolova laid down her tray next to Toby’s. She had piled it high with pork crackling and raw vegetables, along with a heaping helping of potatoes. She looked from Toby to Adellia and back again, smiling brightly. “Toby!” she said. “Will you introduce me to your friend?”

“I’m Adellia,” said Adellia, before Toby could open his mouth. She forced herself to smile and stuck out a hand. “I think we have Tracking together in the mornings.”

Ludmilla engulfed Adellia’s hand in one massive paw. Her handshake was just shy of crushing, but Adellia kept her smile bright through sheer force of will. Just as she began to lose feeling in her fingers, Ludmilla released her and gave her another megawatt grin. “I saw you the other day!” she said. “At the gymnasium. When I wrestled that boy.” She held out her arms and flexed her fingers into claws. “They told me he was the champion. Perhaps he was out of practice, yes?” She let out a belly laugh and bit into a piece of pork crackling with a crunch like breaking bone.

Adellia’s smile stayed where it was, but her eyes were glassy. “You did very well. I was just telling Toby about the book I wrote this summer with Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll. You know, the famous hunter? We worked very closely together.” Closer than you’d believe, she thought. That’s true, at least.

Ludmilla’s eyes widened. She finished chewing, then slapped Adelia on the shoulder with bruising force. “Pozdravleniya! I see why you are such good friends with Toby. Another book-reader, hm?” She shrugged. “I do not have the patience for so much reading. Me, I want to be out there in the field, you know? But I have nothing but respect for the writers. You do hard work!”
Adellia fumed. “Well,” she began, “I don’t really write much. It’s just a, a, a hobby. Mostly I like to climb. And run. And shoot.” She almost stopped herself, but went on, “I’ve got the best all-time in the fifty-second free climb. And I’m almost there in the hundred-meter dash.”

Ludmilla raised her eyebrows. “Very good! Do you wrestle at all?”

Adellia looked at the other girl’s arms. They were as big around as her calves, and it was all too easy to imagine one of those arms wrapped around her windpipe. “N-no,” she managed. “I fence, a little.” She felt herself losing ground and rallied. “So how do you know Toby?”

Ludmilla turned to Toby and punched him on the shoulder, a gesture of familiarity that made him wince and drop his spoon. “This little khlopok? I come here in August, looking to get settled in, and your headmaster Lachan tells me that he is to be my guide. To help me adjust, he says.”

Toby shrugged. “I came back early. Wasn’t too much to do at home in late summer, and I didn’t want to impose on my parents. I was planning to work on my thesis early, but Mr. Lachan said that if I’d help out the exchange program then I could get credit towards room and board. Plus, I speak a little Russian.” His brow furrowed in concentration. “Razve ya ne govoryu po-russki, Ludmilla?”

Ludmilla howled with laughter. “Your Russian is terrible, khlopok. You sound like a child.” She patted him on his bruised shoulder. “Don’t worry. It is charming.”

Toby looked flustered. “I just studied it for a year or two in primary school. I like languages, I guess. Plus I wanted to read Dostoevsky.”

Adellia stared at him open-mouthed. Her parents had insisted on a French tutor for her from a young age, saying that the scion of the Hawk family should be able to move about in polite society. After twelve years of tutelage she could just about order at restaurants or ask for directions. She had never seen the point of languages. Most monsters didn’t speak, and the ones that did had nothing useful to say.

“What a coincidence,” she said weakly. “How lucky for you.” She looked down at her dish of sausage and beans. Her stomach growled, but she couldn’t bring herself to eat. “I have to go, I have a class coming up. Nice to meet you, Ludmilla,” she managed. Toby looked confused, but waved goodbye. “Oh, uh, thanks for stopping by, Adellia. See you in class?”

“Yeah, see you around,” she said vaguely. She whirled from the table and walked away in a daze. She’d eat lunch in her room. And maybe, with luck, she could figure out what she was feeling and why.

It ate at her for the rest of the day. Every time she closed her eyes she could see Ludmilla laughing. Half-formed suspicions tormented her. “He couldn’t,” she muttered out loud, and later, “they couldn’t.” That girl? She looked like a beer barrel with legs. There was something about her gap-toothed smile, though, something infectious. Adellia found herself awake in the wee hours of the night, her heart sloshing with poison, her head heavy. Moonlight slanted down through the tiny window high up on one wall. Was she jealous? Not a chance. Of Cotton Ball? No. No way. She groaned and rolled over in bed.

Fortunately, Practical Tracking was the only class the two of them shared. Ludmilla was a quiet student. She always sat right up in front next to Toby, and Adellia lurked several rows behind her. Every time Ludmilla turned and looked at Toby, Adellia bit her lip. The first few weeks of the class, Mr. Grynder had explained, would be theoretical, discussing the history and practice of tracking before starting practical lessons in the Hoxwald. As always, whenever Mr. Grynder had a question for the class, Toby’s would be one of the first hands raised. Once, after a particularly long
and insightful answer, Ludmilla reached over and gave him a little squeeze on the shoulder. Adellia gripped her pencil so hard it snapped in half.

Of course, the two of them always sat together in the cafetera, too. Adellia joined them a few times, but she found herself muddled and awkward, unable to form a coherent sentence. To her credit Ludmilla was always perfectly polite to her; if there was a tension in the air between them, it was entirely one-sided. Once she learned who Adellia’s parents were, she was full of questions about the Hawk family. Where did her parents hunt? When had they introduced her to the family business? Where were they now? Ludmilla had come, she explained, from a long line of trappers and furriers. Her father had built his fortune on pelts. He didn’t hunt himself, but he employed a many hunters and soldiers to patrol his lands and keep them safe-- and to bring down the chudovisshe, the monsters of the dark forest, whose pelts were the most valuable of all. She had always wanted to join them and, seeing his daughter would not be dissuaded, her father had sent her to the Akademiya in Moscow to learn the art of monster hunting.

Toby was his usual reserved self during these conversations. As time went on, though, Adellia noticed that he stopped flinching every time Ludmilla touched him. And it was often-- she pinched his cheeks, punched his shoulder, once even squeezed his thigh (and let out a hearty belly laugh when he flushed crimson). Adellia noticed every touch, every look, every little laugh at one of Toby’s weak jokes. At night, she replayed them again and again in her head. It wasn’t fair. Toby Cotton may have been soft and kind of a dope, but he had been her soft dope. It wasn’t like she hadn’t liked him or anything. She had just enjoyed keeping him at arm’s length. Now it felt like Ludmilla was sweeping in and stealing him.

She turned over in bed. You’re being ridiculous, she told herself. It’s not like he has your name on him or anything. Plus, did you really want to be with Toby Cotton?!

No, said a voice in her head, but it would have been nice to have that chance. Plus, who knows? Maybe someday.

You haven’t even seen them do anything, she countered. You’re just imagining things.

Oh, come on, the voice scoffed. You see how she looks at him. He’ll go along with anything she tries. He’s so squishy.

Well, if you wanted him, you had your chance. Why didn’t you take it?

She punched her pillow in frustration. Sleep, when it eventually came, was fitful, full of half-remembered dreams. She awoke before sunrise and lay staring at the ceiling for an hour.

She drowsed throughout the morning, her lack of sleep fogging her thoughts and slowing her steps. By the time she arrived at Mr. Grynder’s classroom she was fighting to keep her eyes open. She slumped into her desk and laid her head on her folded arms. Just a moment, that’s all I need. Just a moment…

The next thing she knew, something was prodding her in the shoulder. She startled awake and looked around wildly. “Wha-?” she managed. Mr. Grynder was standing over her with his arms crossed and a thunderous expression on his face. “Are you still with us, Miss Hawk?” he asked. A wave of laughter rolled over her and she blanched.

“Y-yes, I’m, I’m, s-sorry Mr. Grynder.”

He turned his back on her and walked back to the head of the class. Adellia shrank in her seat. She could feel eyes on her from all sides. She cursed herself for a distracted fool. She couldn’t waste
any more energy worrying about Toby and the new girl. She was not going back to the bad old days. She took a deep breath, rubbed her eyes, and sat up straight.

“As I was saying,” Mr. Grynder continued, “it is time that we begin the practical portion of our class. I know that many of you--” his gaze fell on Adellia for a moment, “have been looking forward to this. Starting next week, our Monday classes will be all-day affairs. I’ve spoken to your other professors and you will be excused from afternoon lessons. To answer your next question: yes, we will be in the Hoxwald, and no, that does not mean you are allowed to just go out there whenever you like.” He frowned. “This is a class, not a vacation. You will be working hard. You will be assigned a partner for the practicum, and you will be graded together. If one of you fails, you both fail. Is that understood?”

The class nodded, Adella nodding along with them. Her mind was racing. A partner? She always worked alone. She worked best alone. All the best hunters did. Well, sure, not her parents, but that was an exception. She couldn’t let her grade be dragged down by--

Mr. Grynder cleared his throat. “Your partners are as follows. Justin Joiner with Roger Starling. Ella Grutz with Jonas FitzPatrick. Toby Cotton with Mason St. Hugh. Adellia Hawk with Ludmilla Sokolova. Phoebe Pierce with Padma Acharya…”

Adellia didn’t hear the rest of them. Blood roared in her ears. Had she really just heard that? Three rows ahead of her, Ludmilla had swiveled in her seat and was grinning at her like a pumpkin. Her shaggy hair seemed even wilder than normal today, like a volcano frozen in the act of erupting. Toby had turned around as well and was staring at her with wide eyes. Adellia returned both looks coolly, though her heart was pounding. Just when she thought things couldn’t possibly get any worse.

Somehow she made it through the rest of the day. Grynder had droned on and on about proper safety, field procedure, check-in times, and a bunch of other irrelevant nonsense. Adellia glared daggers at him every time he turned around. He had done this on purpose, she was sure of it. Or that bitch Ludmilla had put him up to it. They were taunting her. As the class dissolved for the day, the other students all sought out their partners. Toby found Mason, possibly the only student softer than he was-- a short boy with eyes like poached eggs behind thick glasses and a wispy mane of blonde hair as fine as cornsilk. Justin and Roger, both red-faced and energetic young men from the rugby squad, were joking around with each. Ludmilla rose from her chair and started to push towards her, but Adellia was too quick. She scooped up her books in one fluid movement, dumped them in her bag, and practically ran for the door. She didn’t even look back.

Once again, lunchtime found her in her room, sullen and alone. It was already starting to acquire the distinct odor of beans, and the crusty plates stacked on her bookshelf gave a hint as to why. She wrinkled her nose and shoveled another forklift into her mouth. She couldn’t understand how this year had gone so wrong so quickly. Here she was, barely a month into her senior year, and she was already dreading going back to class. This year was supposed to be different. After everything she had been through, everything she had fought for, she had thought it would be a new beginning. A second chance, a chance to wipe the slate clean. Instead she was slipping back into bad old habits. She had actually fallen asleep in class! And in her seminar, too, the one class she had been looking forward to for months.

Her eyes narrowed and she took another bite. It was all her fault, she decided. That interfering bitch. She chewed angrily, her fork vibrating with indignation. How dare she! She had waltzed into Adellia’s school, into Adellia’s class, taking Adellia’s friends. Adellia was faster than her, a better shot, and probably smarter, too. She didn’t smile like an idiot all the time. And her front teeth actually touched each other. She wasn’t about to let some barrel-shaped wrestler from nowhere
steal her thunder. She was Adellia Hawk, scion of the Hawk family, and future monster hunter extraordinaire. If that bitch thought she would be a pushover… well, let her think that. For now. For now.

Adellia’s smile would have chilled the heart of any observer. Her bean-flavored burp a moment later rather undermined the effect, but her resolve was set. She’d wait for the right moment. And when it came… Ludmilla Sokolova wouldn’t stand a chance.

That happy thought carried her through all the way to the next week. She waved politely whenever she saw Toby or Ludmilla (or, increasingly often, both of them) in the halls, though she sat a polite distance away from them in the cafeteria. She worked quietly and diligently in class and spent her evenings running laps or climbing in the Armory. Ludmilla was there frequently as well, wrestling when she could find a partner and lifting weights when she couldn’t. She lifted more often than not; word had spread about her, and even the reigning champions steered clear. Adellia studiously ignored her whenever possible and kept pleasantries to a minimum. She knew that they would be spending a lot of time in each other’s company soon enough, and saw no reason to hurry that along.

By the time Monday rolled around, Adellia had regained some of her earlier equilibrium. She woke up early and dressed in practical, hard-wearing clothes: canvas trousers, a cotton shirt and a leather vest. She brushed her hair back, thankful once more that she kept it short, and double checked her pack. Water, a compass, matches, her survival knife, wrapped bandages… her whole survival kit was in there. She slung it over her back and went to breakfast.

Afterwards she made the trek out through the main entrance hall and down to the main road. Her last visit to the Hoxwald had been a furtive affair, an unsanctioned nighttime escape. Now she was actually allowed and she intended to flaunt it. She strutted past knots of freshmen and sophomores in the great hall and out through the wide double doors. A few of her classmates were already en route, and she fell in behind them. A narrow path led away from the main road towards the looming shape of the Hoxwald. As it grew closer, fragmentary memories of her last trip bubbled up in her brain. She shuddered and stuffed them back down. It would not do to throw herself off her game this early. And anyway, she was older now, and wiser.

The Tracking students assembled in a little clearing just past the boundary posts. Mr. Grynder was there already, standing next to a little pyramid of wicker baskets. He nodded at Adellia as she entered the clearing but made no other reaction. The last few students arrived, and he cleared his throat.

“Welcome, class, to your first practicum. It’s time you put to the test the skills you’ve been studying. Your assignment today is simple. Each pair will receive one set of instructions,” he gestured to the baskets, “which will point you to a specific beast somewhere in the Hoxwald. You must track it to its lair and retrieve a guidon which I have left there.” He waved a small pennant in ochre and red, the school colors. “Once you have your guidon, you can come back here. Any questions?”

Mason St. Hugh raised a hand. “Yes, Mason?”

“Um, um, are the beasts we’ll be tracking, um, you know, dangerous?” Mason managed. His voice was thin and reedy, and Adellia rolled her eyes. Poor Toby got the one partner that makes him look tough.

Mr. Grynder smiled patiently. “No, Mason. We’re staying in the Outer Hoxwald today. That means stay on this side of the river. There’s nothing here you can’t handle.” Mason’s smile was short lived, as Grynder added, “Not yet, anyways.”
That seemed to put paid to any further questions. One by one, the partnerships picked up their baskets. Adellia arrived at the pile at the same time as Ludmilla, and darted forward to grab their basket before the other girl could. Ludmilla looked nonplussed for a moment, but recovered quickly. She was wearing her tank top from before, Adellia noticed, with long twill pants tucked into heavy hobnailed boots. Her explosive hair had been gathered into a topknot. She beamed at Adellia and planted her hands on her ample hips. “Good morning, Adellia!” she said. “So, what are we tracking today?”

Adellia made a show of opening the basket slowly and retrieving the scroll from inside. Unwrapping it, she held it between them and scanned it with deliberate care. “Looks like a Bandersnatch,” she said. “Nothing too hard.”

“Let me see?” Ludmilla reached for the scroll. For a moment, Adellia thought about yanking it back, but she knew she was being childish. She reluctantly handed it over, and Ludmilla read it over. She squinted at it and moved her lips as if sounding out the words. “Da,” she said. “I recognize it from the woodcuts. Well? Shall we begin?”

The other students were already heading out of the clearing in all directions. Adellia picked a direction at random and pointed. “This way, then,” she said, and strode forward imperiously. Ludmilla fell in behind her.

It was still early autumn, and the weather had not yet fully turned. Soon Adellia found herself sweating profusely. She stopped for a drink and turned to see Ludmilla, red-faced and panting, leaning against a tree. Adellia allowed herself a moment to appraise her rival. Ludmilla’s face was round but pretty, with bright green eyes and a small, slightly upturned nose. Her cheeks were ruddy with exertion and glistened with sweat. Her breasts were small but well-formed and clung to her sweat-soaked tank top. Her stomach was starting to protrude slightly as her top came untucked, and bulged voluptuously out at the sides. She was shorter than Adellia, but thick and stocky where Adellia was thin and wiry. Her hips were wide and round and her thighs chunky and muscular. She gave the impression of solidity, like a stone from the earth or a sheet of steel. She must have felt Adellia’s eyes on her and looked up. There was no spite in those green eyes, only innocent curiosity and a sense of playful competition. Adellia felt her anger ebbing… and then she remembered Toby. She imagined him holding hands with Ludmilla, their lips locking together, and her jealousy reignited. She stood up abruptly and stuffed her water bottle back into her bag. “Enough break time!” she said. “Come on, we’re losing daylight!”

They set off again. “So what are we looking for, exactly?” Ludmilla asked from somewhere behind her. Adellia put as much scorn into her answer as she dared. “Well, obviously, the first step is to find where the Bandersnatch waters. It prefers moving water, as I’m sure you’re aware, and I think I hear a splash, so let’s get a move on!”

She set a grueling pace. However strong Ludmilla was, Adellia was much faster (and, she thought uncharitably, I’m not carrying around as much extra weight). She scrambled over roots and hopped across gaps. The trees were smaller and farther apart here, and a cool breeze made them rustle overhead. Startled squirrels dashed out of Adellia’s path and chirruped angrily as she passed. She practically skipped over a gully washed clear by rainfall and slid down a short slope on a carpet of scree. She panted at the bottom for a moment, then turned to see Ludmilla struggling through a thicket of ferns fifty feet back. “Come on!” Adellia hollered. “I can hear the river!”

She waited as the other girl huffed and puffed her way down the slope, then planted her hands on her hips. “Are you ready to go?” she asked, making sure to slather her words in sarcasm.” Ludmilla looked up at her with eyes full of hurt and confusion. “Please, just a moment,” she gasped. “This pace you are setting, it is too fast.”
Adellia hopped from foot to foot. “It’s as fast as it needs to be. Monsters won’t wait up for you. Come on!” She waited another few seconds, then dashed forward toward the burbling sound of water. It wasn’t just to spite Ludmilla, either. The hunt was on, and her blood was up. Her heart was racing. This was what it meant to be a hunter!

She nearly ran headfirst into a low-hanging branch, ducked at the last moment, and burst through into a small clearing. The land sloped away, and a shallow, crystal-clear stream raced down the hill. A woodchuck drinking from the stream squeaked in alarm and dove into the underbrush. Aside from that, the scene was perfectly tranquil. Adellia rested her hands on her knees to get her breath back, then looked around.

She tried to remember what Mr. Grynder had taught them. The stream was only a few inches deep but the earth on each side had been churned into mud. She knelt—carefully, to avoid planting her knees in the muck—and looked back and forth along the riverbed. She found what she was looking for just as Ludmilla emerged from the trees.

“Aha!” Adellia cried, pointing with one accusatory finger at the ground. Ludmilla, red-faced and breathing hard, looked down and then up with a confused expression. “Aha what?” she asked between breaths.

“Aha, I found footprints. See?” Adellia pointed at a pair of shallow depressions. They were round, like hoofmarks, but with two parallel striations running out of the sides. “The Bandersnatch, see? Just like in the book. It does water here.” She frowned. “But it wasn’t here when I got here. It must have heard you coming. You scared it off.”

Ludmilla’s eyes widened in disbelief. “I scared it off?” Her face looked like she had accidentally bit into something nasty. “You’re the one running through the woods like a crazy woman! Like this is one of your sprints! What happened to tracking, eh?”

Adellia put on her best affronted face. “I’m just setting a reasonable pace so we can finish before it gets dark. I’d have been here ages ago if I didn’t have to stop to wait for you every five minutes. Maybe if you weren’t—” she cut herself off, aware that she was perilously close to crossing a line. Ludmilla narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “Maybe if I wasn’t what, hm?” Her expression was stormy, but Adellia couldn’t help herself.

“Maybe if you’d run a few laps now and then, you’d be able to keep up.” She crossed her own arms. Ludmilla growled under her breath and took a step forward. Her boots squelched in the mud, and Adellia found herself retreating involuntarily. Ludmilla’s nostrils flared and she held her arms out in a wrestling stance. “Just come out and say it, twig girl. Go ahead.” She snorted like a bull. “You never liked me. You think I’m stupid? I can see how you look at me. Why?”

Adellia backed up another step. Water flowed around her boots, and she could feel her socks getting soaked. She gulped. This had not been part of the plan. “I don’t hate you!” she said in as high-minded a tone as she could manage. “That’s ridiculous. You think just because—”

“It’s because of the khlopok , isn’t it?” asked Ludmilla. “That’s what it is. You want him? Well, you can have him. He talks about you all the time. He worships the ground you walk on.” She spat. “He’s a sweet boy. Much nicer than you deserve, cyka blyat . I know girls like you back at home. They used to call me vibrityy medved , shaved bear. I don’t give a shit. If I wanted your boy, I’d have him.”

Adellia softened. All the tension ran out of her at once. “Well,” she began, “in that case, I guess I don’t--”
“Idiot!” Ludmilla shouted. “You think we’re just going to make nice now? Now that you’re not afraid the curvy girl is going to steal your man? You are as big a fool as they say! You’re not even going to apologize, are you?”

Adellia managed “I’m so-” before her ears had caught her brain fully up to speed. “Wait, who says?” she asked.

Ludmilla scoffed. “Everyone. Your classmates. I heard all about your nighttime adventure last year. And your extra credit projects. You know we’re supposed to hunt them, right? Not fuck them!”

Adellia hissed through her teeth. For a moment, she was speechless. Her cheeks flushed bright crimson. Ludmilla threw up her arms. “I really wanted to be your friend, you know? You are impressive. You have fire in your belly. But if this is how you act when--” she trailed off. Her mouth hung open. Adellia, burning with anger and shame, snapped at her. “What?” she growled. “You have me all figured out apparently, so what do--”

Ludmilla wasn’t looking at her. She was looking past her. Adellia whirled around as a shadow fell over her.

Something loomed out of the forest. It had the long, scaly body of a snake, but a snake the size of a mature oak tree. Its head was broad and flat, with a bright red crest of feathers. A frond of squirming tentacle ringed its neck like a lion’s mane. It opened its mouth and let out a growl so loud and so low that Adellia’s teeth rattled. Its eyes were shimmering, iridescent pearls in which a rainbow of colors danced and mixed. Adellia found herself falling upward into them. Her feet were rooted to the spot. Her mind had gone blank with terror. Behind her, Ludmilla was taking hesitant steps backwards, her feet splashing in the stream. A name swam up in Adellia’s mind, one memorized by rote, and she managed to squeak it out from between quavering lips.

“A-amphisbaena…”

The amphisbaena’s long, pink tongue flicked out, tasting the air. It wound its body forward. Adellia’s feet would not obey her orders. She looked up as it towered over her, up and up. Its crest of tentacles blotted out the sun. For a moment, it was just a silhouette, and then it crashed towards her. Her paralysis broke and she leapt, but not fast enough. The amphisbaena’s spade-shaped head caught her in the stomach and knocked the wind out of her with a grunt. She fell hard on her butt in the stream. Before she could stand, the snake had lunged at her with jaws wide open. Fangs the size of her forearm slotted into place, but they did not close around her. Instead, the tentacles encircled her wrists and pinned her to the ground. The amphisbaena’s tongue flicked out again and shimmied back and forth in front of her, as though inspecting her.

Ludmilla turned to run and got about three steps before the amphisbaena noticed. It whipped its body around towards her, cutting off her escape. Bizarrely, the tip of its tail bore a second, identical head. This one roared at Ludmilla, rooting her to the spot, then nudged her hard enough to knock her down. Tentacles wrapped her up tightly. She struggled, but more and more of them grabbed her limbs and pinned her in place. She practically disappeared beneath their writhing shapes.

Adellia struggled fruitlessly against the amphisbaena. Its tentacles moved constantly, some releasing her even as others grabbed her. They caressed her up and down, wriggling under her clothing and exploring every inch of her body. One wrapped around her vest and pulled it off. Another tore the seat of her trousers and discarded it before returning to rip at the tattered remains. A third yanked off her boot. Their touch was cold and clammy against her bare skin, and despite the warmth of the day she shivered. The amphisbaena was still pinning her down in the stream and
it chilled her bare flesh. Goosebumps rose on her legs and back. She could feel tiny fish nibbling curiously at her, and thrashed to scare them off. In response, the amphisbaena wrapped tentacles around her neck and waist. She caught a glimpse of Ludmilla, who was being similarly disrobed. She was grunting and straining, still trying to fight, but the tentacles methodically stripped her clothing and tossed it aside.

The amphisbaena curled itself into a U-shape. Adellia found herself just a few feet from Ludmilla. The girl was clearly tiring. Her resistance had been impressive, but even her strength was no match for a reptile larger than a coach-and-four. Her topknot had come undone and her hair burst forth in its customary spray. Soaked by the stream, much of it hung limp and lank in her face. She sagged in its grip.

Adellia’s back was pressed up against the amphisbaena, leaving her staring straight downward to the stream a few feet below. Its scales rasped against her bare back. Her legs had been pulled open to an uncomfortable degree and her arms pinned to her sides. She groaned as the amphisbaena dragged her down its underbelly. Its sharp scales sliced her back; it felt like being dragged along a cheese grater. Her bare buttocks got the worst of it, and she was sure she felt blood trickling down her thighs. There was no way to check. A tentacle around her neck limited her range of vision to straight ahead and side to side. She awkwardly swiveled as best she could to see Ludmilla, who was in a similar position. Muscles under the other girl’s skin bunched as she flexed, but to no avail. She, too, was being dragged inexorably downward.

Something soft prodded at Adellia’s exposed pussy. She gasped and instinctively tried to close her thighs, but the tentacles just wrenched them open again so painfully that she was afraid they would rip her leg from its socket. The pressure came again, more insistently this time. She looked over at Ludmilla and gasped. Something long and thin had emerged from a pouch in the amphisbaena’s belly and was slithering up the girl’s leg. It had a bulbous tip that leaked a continuous stream of clear fluid. As Adellia watched, it poked at Ludmilla’s quim. Adellia had half-expected her to have an explosion of pubic hair as over-the-top as her volcanic hairdo, but she just had a few wispy strands atop her plump mound. She was clearly trying to clench her vaginal muscles, but the amphisbaena’s pressure was relentless. It dragged her into position atop its member and then yanked down. There was a moment of resistance, then the fleshy tip of its rod plunged into her. Ludmilla let out a squawk of pain and frustration. At the same time, Adellia felt pressure building at her own entrance. She braced herself, but still cried out when she felt the amphisbaena thrust its way inside her.

The tip of the thing’s rod was as large as her fists together, but the shaft that followed was considerably narrower. Adellia gritted her teeth as the bulbous head plunged deeper into her. It pressed against her inner walls as it did, sending strange sensations throughout her body. She tried to focus, but she was feeling light-headed. Was it just shock and pain? Or was something else happening? The amphisbaena paused and a gout of something warm and sticky spurted out inside her. She felt it splash against her velvety walls, and it left behind a half-numb tingle. The feeling radiated outward inside her. Without realizing it, Adellia let out a low moan. Next to her, Ludmilla wasn’t faring much better. The bulge of the amphisbaena’s prick was clearly visible, even beneath the swell of her belly. Her stomach may not have been flat, but she had clearly taken pride in her appearance. Now her flesh tented out as the reptilian fuckrod tunneled deeper into her body. Her face bore a dazed expression, and Adellia wondered if she was feeling the same spreading warmth inside her.

The amphisbaena pulled partially out and thrust back in several times. Each time, Adellia felt every inch of as it rubbed against her insides. Little tingles of pleasure were mixed in with the pain now, and they made her breath catch in her throat. Another gout of fluid shot out inside her and the pleasure redoubled. Her eyelids fluttered as she fought to maintain control. From somewhere to her
left she heard Ludmilla groaning, though with fear or pleasure Adellia could not tell. There was a sudden jerk and the amphisbaena hilted itself inside her. She could feel the thick orb of its prick-head pressing against her cervix. A small, rational part of her cried out in alarm. It was larger than the ecchiteuthis eggs, larger even than the bulb of the Ichneumon Lily. The thought of it ravaging her most sacred and intimate space was terrifying. Yet it seemed that there was no alternative. Another torrent of warmth inside her, another sense of numbness, and then it was pushing forward, pushing, digging, coring her out, burrowing into her... the pressure was ceaseless, insistent, like waves crashing at the beach... Adellia screamed half in pain and half in joy as she felt it slide past her last defenses. Her stomach bloated as what felt like six inches of scaly member planted themselves in her womb. Ludmilla’s answering cry came a moment later. Her flesh had stretched taut around the invader, and Adellia imagined she could see every vein and ridge of the thing’s head as it stood proud of Ludmilla’s skin.

For a moment, the head lay there, and then the tube began to ripple. Adellia shuddered as she realized what was happening. A spurt of warmth coated the inside of her uterus, then another, but the main event was happening down at the base of the rod. Her cunt had been forced wide open to accommodate this intruder, but now something even larger pushed at it. Unable to see between her legs, she swiveled over to look at Ludmilla. The girl appeared to have passed out. Her eyes were closed and her face blank and slack. Her limbs flopped bonelessly as the amphisbaena’s rippling tentacles pulled her this way and that. A round, hard bulge was visible in the middle of her stomach, but Adellia could also see a thinner cylinder that ran all the way from the bulge to the girl’s puffy, distended pussy lips. Where the tube met the girl’s cunt, it swelled outward, and Adellia knew a similar ovoid was positioned between her own legs. Just as the shape began to stuff itself into Ludmilla’s quim, Adellia felt a horrible stretching sensation between her legs. There was nothing she could do-- she was pinned tightly. She gritted her teeth as her battered cunny stretched and deformed around the object. It was hard, she could feel that much, and slightly slimy. It paused for a moment at the point of maximum distension, then slid the rest of the way into her with a single, fluid movement.

This was different from the head currently filling her womb. It was smoother, for one thing, and accompanied by a rippling peristalsis. She felt each ripple like a tingle that ran up her spine. Each one set off a pattern of lights behind her eyes and made her gasp. The tingles came faster and faster, running together as the shape pushed its way deeper inside her. She felt her breathing turn fast and shallow. Her thoughts were confused and foggy. She was a prisoner, yes? Why did this feel so good? Had the snake done something to her? It seemed to take ages to think a thought all the way to the end, and just when she was reaching a conclusion, a new ripple of warm pleasure would send her thoughts scattering like fish before a shark. A thin stream of drool trickled from one corner of her open mouth. She knew she should feel pain when the round shape forced its way into her womb, but she felt only a sense of relief. She sighed as it plopped out and stuck to the walls of her sanctum, then cooed in delight as she felt another one begin to make its way up her channel. Her vaginal passage had become a loose reptilian fuck-sleeve that spasmed around each new shape-- each new egg, she realized, with a small part of her brain still capable of conscious thought. They piled up like rocks in her belly, pushing out her bloated stomach still further. Each one was accompanied by a spray of warm liquid that suffused her body.

She imagined herself sinking into a warm, comfortable pool. That was ok. That was just fine. She wouldn’t be alone-- she’d have Ludmilla with her. And soon... who knows? The only thing bothering her was that she couldn’t rest a hand on her belly. She writhed feebly in her restraints, but the amphisbaena took no notice. As a final egg squirmed its way through her gaping cunt, she surrendered to the pleasure. Her limbs quaked and her toes curled spasmodically. A great geyser of fluid splurted forth around the edges of the rod that impaled her, a mixture of the snake’s secretions and her own. She lay there, impaled, for a moment longer, then it began to withdraw. As the fat tip...
of the reptile’s prick slithered free from her ravaged hole, it was followed by a torrent of mixed fluids that glugged out of her like water from a broken pipe. Tentacles around her shoulders and thighs pulled her tight to the amphisbaena’s body, but the rest withdrew. Dimly, she looked over at Ludmilla. The wrestler’s stomach had always been a bit chubby, but now it looked swollen fit to burst. Veins stood out beneath her pale skin and her navel had inverted. As Adellia watched, she twitched groggily. The amphisbaena relaxed its grip on her and turned its heads this way and that, as if seeking the path home.

Before it could move, Ludmilla struck. Either her recovery from unconsciousness was remarkably fast, or she had been shamming. She flexed her arms and kicked off with her legs. One of the tentacles unraveled from around her bicep and other tore free. She fell into the stream with a splash and came up sputtering. The amphisbaena roared in stereo and reared up. Adellia felt her own bonds loosen, as though it was distracted. Dimly, she wondered if she should do something.

Ludmilla answered its roar with one of her own. She braced her legs in the stream and sank into her wide-armed stance. Her fingers twitted into claws. The amphisbaena looked down at her, then opened its mouth wide enough to swallow a cow and lunged. Its fangs flicked out, blades long enough to carve Ludmilla’s head from her shoulders. She didn’t flinch. As it struck, she raised her arms and grabbed its jaws, one in each hand. Her head was between them, inches from those teeth. It tried to bite down, but she locked her arms and held its mouth open. They formed a tableau; the massive snake with the girl in its mouth, both straining against the other. Beads of sweat stood out on Ludmilla’s forehead. A vein throbbed in her forehead, and tendons stood out in her neck like steel hawsers. The snake’s jaws closed around her by an inch. Her feet slid in the pebbles of the stream. Another inch.

She took a deep breath and roared again. Her arms flexed, and then she threw them wide open. There was a hideous crack, and the amphisbaena’s jaw hung loose. It let out a terrible shriek of pain from both heads and once and thrashed side to side. Its jaw flapped horribly, like a door hanging off its hinges. Its iridescent eyes fixed Ludmilla with a baneful stare, then it turned to flee. She took a few steps towards it and grabbed Adellia by the wrist. There was a moment of tension, then the tentacles hold her uncurled and she fell on top of Ludmilla with a tremendous splash. The amphisbaena vanished into the trees, the distant sound of cracking timber the only trace of its passage. They lay for a moment in a wet, heaving tangle of naked limbs and swollen stomachs.

Adellia managed to roll off Ludmilla and lay on her back in the mud. She stared at the sky. The sun was starting to set, and the sky was aflame from one horizon to the other. She pushed herself up onto her knees, breathing heavily, and offered Ludmilla her arm. The other girl took it and levered herself into a sitting position. For a long time, they stared at each other. Both were filthy, covered in mud and other, less nameable fluids, with scrapes all down their backs. They were sore, dazed, and nauseous. Adellia laid one trembling hand on Ludmilla’s shoulder, and the other girl mirrored her gesture. Then Adellia started laughing.

She couldn’t help it. It just burst out of her. Ludmilla looked at her for a moment in stark disbelief, then she broke out laughing as well. Her face split into her familiar gap-toothed grin and she howled like a loon. They laughed for a long time, then helped each other up and began the long trek home.
What I Did On My Holidays

Chapter Summary

Adellia gets the unexpected opportunity to spend her holidays with Toby.

Ka-splash!

Adellia threw herself forward as water fountained up all around her. She hit the ground hard and rolled over one shoulder. The ancient cobblestones were soaking wet and slimy with moss, and what was meant to be a tight roll that would put her back on her feet ended in an undignified slide. She bounced off the wall and, somewhat unsteadily, climbed to her feet. Behind her, the ripples were already subsiding, and she leaned against the wall for a moment to catch her breath.

It had all seemed like such a good idea at the time. *They’ll probably put that on my tombstone* , she reflected. The sewers beneath the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters were strictly off-limits to students, which of course had led to a wild proliferation of rumors. The school bred linnorms in there. Or there was a cecaelia colony. The sewers connected to a cavern system that spread as far as the Eibon Valley. Or perhaps dread rituals took place down there, Black Masses attended by robed cultists. Students would commonly dare each other to prise the rusty bars off one of the wooden doors in the sub-sub-basement and venture down there, bringing back some subterranean relic. Adellia had heard of several students accomplishing this task, but now that she reflected on it, only ever secondhand. She’d never met anyone who’d actually been there herself. That should have been a red flag.

Well, she was here now. What was supposed to be a boredom-killing jaunt to fill a lazy Sunday was turning into something a bit more exciting. It turned out that there were no secret caves, no hidden chapels; there were no linnorms, no cecaelias, no boxes of treasure either. What there was was seemingly endless kilometers of fetid canals and aqueducts, crumbling brick passageways, and one very angry and territorial ceffyl-dwr.

*Water horse my ass!* The ceffyl-dwr was supposed to be a graceful beast. It would swim up waterfalls and leap out in clouds of shimmering silver droplets. When she had been little, she had imagined owning one, and riding it to visit the cities of the merfolk. She had drawn pictures in blobby crayon: a fair princess with long, flowing hair, wearing the Mer-king’s crown and riding her beautiful shimmering courser. Little Adellia would not have been charmed by the beast pursuing her now. It had the bloated, rubbery body of a toad, but with a long, slender neck that swayed drunkenly from side to side. Its head was mostly snout, but with bulging, bulbous eyes that regarded her with dim malice. Its limbs were flailing and spastic, but the thing’s vertical leap was impressive, and it had a fair turn of speed in water or on land. Its skin was smeared with a mildly caustic slime that stank to high heaven, and enough of it had smeared on Adellia from various near-misses that her beloved leather breeches were acquiring a distinctly tattered look.

The ceffyl-dwr fed on moss and lichen, she knew, so this one had no motive to attack her except sheer orneriness. She supposed that if she had to live in a sewer, she’d be in a bad mood all the time, too. She had invaded its territory, or something. Whatever was driving it, it was hopping made, and persistent to boot.

There was another *splat* behind her. She half-turned to see the thing’s wobbly, pale bulk splayed
out on the cobbles. She turned and ran. In all the confusion, she had lost track of which staircase she had taken to get down here. She had prepared for this eventuality-- there was a piece of red chalk in her pocket, unless it had been lost in one of her narrow escapes-- but she had forgotten to use it a few turns back, and now she was hopelessly lost. She looked around desperately for one of her red markings on the wall, one that would lead her back home, but all she saw was wet, lichen-coated stone. She was starting to get winded, too. She staggered forward and around a corner just as another heavy *splat* echoed off the walls. Her knife was gone, too, lost in the chaos of the thing’s appearance. It had surged up out of the water as she ambled along, nearly flattening her. Only her catlike reflexes had let her escape with minor bruising. Since then it had been relentless in its pursuit. A couple of times she thought she lost it, only to hear wet, glottal braying echo off the walls a moment or two before another attack.

Something caught her eye. Was it just an unusually bright and fresh brick? She squinted. No! The wall ahead of her was definitely marked with a red X. She had to be close now! All she had to do was--

There was a rush of air, and she ducked forward instinctively. The *ceffyl-dwr* landed where she had been standing a moment ago and brayed in frustration. She forced her tired limbs into motion. She was almost out. She just had to keep moving, that was wall.

*Thwap!*

Something wet and hard hit her in the small of the back, and she cried out. She tried to run forward, but she wasn’t moving. It was as though she was anchored in place. There was an unpleasant pressure growing in her back, and she risked a look around. The *ceffyl-dwr* was staring at her with an ugly look of triumph in its bulging eyes. Its mouth was open, and an impossibly long tongue the width of her wrist had spooled out. It stretched across the distance between them and seemed anchored to her back by some powerful adhesive. She felt herself moving backwards. She was being reeled in like a fish on a line. She tried to brace her feet against the floor, but it was too wet to gain any traction. It wasn’t *fair*! She had almost made it!

The *ceffyl-dwr* pulled once more and she lost her balance. She collapsed to the floor with a wet *thump*. This dislodged the thing’s tongue, but before she could crawl to her feet, it took to the air again. This time it landed directly on her with a meaty *thwack*. The impact knocked the breath out of her, and the thing’s horrific stink filled her nostrils. She gagged; it was like someone had left a rotting corpse in a peat bog for a week, dug it up, and dropped it into a sulfur mine. It wasn’t as heavy as it looked, but it was still squashing her into the floor. Rough cobbles dug into her thighs. She wriggled desperately, but only managed to complete the ruination of her breeches; the last dissolving fragments fell apart. Her cotton undergarments did not long outlast them. Cold slime oozed across her thighs and made her shiver.

The monster pinning her croaked in triumph. Its throat sac inflated and pushed her facefirst into the slimy cobbles. She came up sputtering and spitting. She had another moment to wonder what it would do now that it had caught her, and then she felt something squirming between her thighs.

She gritted her teeth. *This* hadn’t been in the lesson. The *ceffyl-dwr* was wriggling atop her. Every motion trampled a different part of her into the ground. It felt like it was adjusting its position, trying to get comfortable. It paused, apparently reaching an equilibrium, and then sat back. Adellia wheezed beneath it; she struggled to breathe through her mouth, her nose having shut down in self-defense. She managed to suck in a lungful of dank, swampy air, then lost it all again in a surprised huff when she felt something firm probing at her pussy.

Whatever it was was thin but muscular, and it wriggled like a fish out of water. Its tip slid across
her lips, smearing them with ooze, then returned a second later to poke between them. Adellia gasped as an inch or two of it slid inside her, then flailed its way out. A moment later it returned, this time with more apparent focus; she tried to clamp her thighs together, but it was too slippery and dextrous. It burrowed between her legs and plunged into her cunt.

She cried out with what little breath was left in her. Once it was solidly inside her, it ceased its struggles, and began to press forward insistently. The ceffyl-dwr let out a low, rippling croak of what sounded like pleasure. Adella struggled for breath. She was too shocked to process what was happening to her. The thing’s cock or whatever it was inched deeper and deeper into her. It paused and squirted out something sticky, which clung to her inner walls. It was unpleasantly cool and she let out an involuntary shiver. The ceffyl-dwr paused for a moment, then resumed its steady progress. The organ grew thicker near its base, and as inch after inch of it slid into her defenseless quim she could feel herself stretching around it. She groaned and tried to force herself to relax; she didn’t want to hurt herself, but now that she had realized she wasn’t about to die she was starting to panic again. Who knew she was down here? She had told Toby, but he had tried to talk her out of it. No way was he brave enough to come down looking for her.

The ceffyl-dwr let out a chuffing grunt and thrust itself deeper. Now the tip of its organ was prodding at the entrance to her womb. She tried to clench her muscles, to bar the way, but that seemed to stimulate it further; it spurted forth another offering of sticky, clingy fluid, and she felt her muscles relaxing. Her lower half lost all rigidity; her legs felt like strands of spaghetti. She lay there helplessly as the beast focused and pressed itself into her womb.

It held still for a moment, and Adellia twisted around to try to see what was happening. To her astonishment, she realized that the underbelly of the thing was so pale as to be see-through. She could see pulsing blood vessels, gurgling organs, all girded in rings of muscle and strips of fat. Something was moving inside the beast. It looked like a faint orange smudge, with a darker core. She squinted.

She recalled a school project, back before Hoxleigh. Biology. She had had to dissect a frog. Some of her more squeamish friends had refused point-blank, but getting a little dirty had held no terrors for young Adellia. She had dug in eagerly with her scalpel, and had been confused when she pulled out an amorphous sac of translucent tissue dotted with darker spots. Her teacher had explained: it was an egg sac, a collection of slimy, squishy, jellylike eggs. The shape moving inside the ceffyl-dwr reminded her of nothing so much as that, and her eyes widened as she realized the implication.

There was nothing she could do. She was pinned and helpless, almost unable to draw a breath. She felt ripples of peristaltic motion flow along the length of the ovipositor, then a sensation of mounting pressure at her entrance. She stiffened and tried to push against it, but along with the spreading weakness in her lower half came a warmth and a familiar tingle that radiated outward from her clit. She tried to deny it, tried to shove it down, but it blossomed as her pussy lips distended around the invasive mass. It was huge, but soft and blobby, and it squished its way inside her a bit at a time. It stretched the smooth skin of the ovipositor into a lumpy, rough mass that rubbed and pressed against her inner walls as it went, adding urgency to the fire in her loins. Without her conscious awareness, her hips twitched slightly against the mass. She closed her eyes and bit her lip to stifle a moan. Her passage bucked and spasmed around the ovipositor, its frantic clenching serving only to pull the eggs deeper inside her.

They began to slip into her womb, and she could hold back no longer. She surrendered to the sensations running haywire across the surface of her confused and oxygen-starved mind. Colors burst and vanished behind her eyelids. She opened her mouth, but the only thing that came out was a long, thin rattle. Her vision was starting to tunnel. As consciousness dimmed, she was vaguely aware of a second spongy mass beginning to slide down the tube…
“HAHHHHHH!”

Someone shouted very loud and very close by. At the same time, something rocked the ceffyl-dwr and momentarily shoved it off her. Adellia was teetering on the brink of unconsciousness, her mind overrun by lust and panic in equal measure, but her lungs reacted much quicker and sucked in two great gulps of air. She twisted around to see what was happening. She could only make out a blur of motion, a figure that towered over her and a swishing chestnut-brown curtain that hid it from sight. There was a wet squelch and a loud croak, and the weight on her back lifted off again. At the same time, the ovipositor penetrating and pinning her was wrenched free so suddenly that she cried out. There was a brief moment of pain as her painfully stretched body reasserted itself, then she rolled over onto her back and curled up into a defensive ball.

Her brain, aware that it had not been pulling its weight in the past few minutes, frantically assessed the situation overhead. The ceffyl-dwr was thrashing and braying angrily, but it was being held at bay by the thick, muscular arms of Ludmilla Sokolova. Ludmilla was wearing rubber waders over oilcloth breeches, and she crouched above Adellia in a wrestler’s stance. Her broad face was wracked by an expression of concentration, and her trademark eruption of hair was already dripping wet. One of her arms darted out and Adellia saw a flash of metal. The ceffyl-dwr screamed and thick black ichor sheeted down its side. It gave Adellia one last look of frustrated rage and malice, then dove off the walkway and into the dark waters of the canal.

Silence descended. Ludmilla, breathing hard, looked down at Adellia, then extended an arm. Adellia lay trembling on the ground for a moment before taking a deep breath and grabbing it. She allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. Ludmilla looked her up and down, then reached into her pack and wordlessly handed Adellia a folded blanket. She wrapped herself up gratefully; her teeth were chattering from the cold.

“I think this is yours.” Ludmilla handed over Adellia’s knife, hilt first. It was battered and a chip had been taken out of the blade-- not to mention the smears of what Adellia hoped was just moss--but she accepted it gladly. She looked at it for a moment, then handed it back. “You carry it. I’m a bit short of pockets right now.”

Ludmilla stowed the knife in her belt. “You are lucky that Toby is such a worrywart. He comes running to me not half an hour ago.” She clapped her hands to her cheeks and widened her eyes in a creditable Toby Cotton impression. “‘Oh, Adellia went into the sewers. I am so concerned, please Ludmilla go see if she is safe.’ I tell him, ok, sure. And what do I find down here?” She scoffed. “What did I say about fighting the monsters? I keep telling you, my friend, to fuck them, that is a different job.”

Despite herself, Adellia smiled. She clapped Ludmilla on the arm. “I guess I needed another reminder.” She paused, then mumbled awkwardly, “Thanks for the rescue.”

Ludmilla gave a dismissive flip of her hand. “Is of no matter. That is two now you owe me. Next time, you do the rescuing, ok?”

Adellia did her best to look abashed. She had originally hated Ludmilla with a bitter cocktail of rivalry, jealousy, and spite. Their shared ordeal in the Hoxwald had brought them together, and the weeks of recuperation in the infirmary that followed had been a bonding experience without compare. The presence of an amphibiaena-- officially classed as *periculum ultimum* -- in the Outer Hoxwald had been something of a minor scandal. None of the administrators could explain where it had come from, but they had cancelled all practicums in the forest for the foreseeable future, and both Ludmilla and Adellia had been assured of a passing grade in exchange for their silence.

There had been hours to kill in the infirmary and not much to do between operations except lie still
and convalesce. They had filled the time with talk, and Adellia was surprised to find a kindred spirit in the cheerful, friendly Ludmilla. Both pushed themselves to their limit to excel in their chosen fields. Both dreamed of fieldwork, of making their names as hunters of monsters. Adellia gushed about her heroes, like Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll and Abraham Spakler, the Silver Spear. For her part, Ludmilla shared tales of Furious Koshchei and the sisters Galina and Galicia. By the time they were discharged they were laughing and gossiping like old friends. Toby came to visit them frequently, and after he left Ludmilla would needle Adellia mercilessly about her supposed “crush.” For her part, Adellia strenuously denied any lingering affection for the boy, but her protests grew increasingly feeble as Ludmilla’s jokes grew increasingly ribald.

“Why don’t you just tell him?” Ludmilla had asked one afternoon after Toby had spent an hour fussing over Adellia’s bed, arranging her pillows and fetching her fresh tea.

Adellia shrugged. “I dunno. It doesn’t seem like the right time.”

Ludmilla made a face. “The right time. Listen to this girl. When will be the right time? When your guts are uncoiling under a werewolf’s claw? Or maybe when you are old and grey and your kiska is all shriveled up like a prune?”

“If you think he’s so great, why don’t you make your move?” Adellia shot back. Ludmilla blew a raspberry.

“And risk the wrath of Adellia Hawk? Besides, I wouldn’t have a chance with him. Every time you look at him his khuy stands to attention.”

Adellia had blushed and looked away. She hurried to change the subject, but Ludmilla’s words stuck with her. And he worried about me now …

The cold of the sewer brought her back to reality. She tucked the blanket around herself and shivered. “Let’s go, then,” she said. Ludmilla nodded. “We are close to the door your forced. Very subtle, by the way. We need to get you to the infirmary. I wonder if you get a special prize for visiting this many times in a year.”

“No!” Adellia said, louder than she’d intended. Ludmilla gave her a puzzle look. “Girl, I hate to draw attention to it, but you’ve gained a couple of pounds in the midsection area. We have to do something about that.”

Adellia swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes, I know, but I can’t go the infirmary. If they found out I went into the sewers, I’ll be expelled. I’m on thin ice already.” She remembered her conversations with Mr. Lachan last year and shuddered. “No, let’s go to Toby’s room. He’ll know what to do.”

Ludmilla gaped at her. “Adellia, when I suggested you make a move, this was not the move I had in mind.” She stared for a moment longer, then shrugged. “All right. It’s up to you. I can’t wait to see the expression on poor little khlopok’s face.”

The expression on his face, when two bedraggled and stinking spectres stumbled into his room, was indeed priceless. Ludmilla closed the door behind them while Adellia looked around in wonder. She had never been in Toby’s room before-- never been in a boy’s bedroom at all, to tell the truth-- and she wasn’t sure what she had expected. Her own room, perhaps, but with the underwear scattered all over the floor a different shape. Not… this.

Toby Cotton’s bedroom looked like nothing so much as a clerk’s office. He had added a second bookshelf, this one stuffed with file folders and ring binders. Each was carefully labeled and sorted by category; small placards delineated RESEARCH, FLORA from RESEARCH, FAUNA and PROSPECTIVE PAPERS. His desk was similarly neat. He had been writing when they arrived,
with a stack of books to his left and one open to his right. Everything on his desk from the inkwell to the spare paper was laid out with millimeter-exact precision. He had even laid down strips of tape to create a grid. A half-dozen jars of brine sat on a shelf above his desk, each bearing an unpleasant-looking specimen, each carefully labeled in small but impeccably neat handwriting. The rest of the room was similarly tidy. A half-finished model ship sat on top of his dresser, its sails struck as though it was undergoing refitting in the world’s tiniest shipyard. The school pennant hung from the wall next to a framed picture of a smiling man and woman. They had a young boy between them who could only be Toby aged 13 or so.

Adellia took all this in in the time it took him to turn around and assume the aforesaid expression. “Adellia?” he sputtered. His eyes went to the muck in her hair, the blanket wrapped around her, and Ludmilla lurking by the entrance. “Ludmilla?”

Adellia pulled the blanket tight with one hand and reached the other out in what she hoped was a suitably pleading gesture. “Please, Toby. I need your help.”

He gaped at her for a moment, then stood up. “Well, I, of course, of course I’ll help. Of course. What’s wrong, Adellia?”

“Well,” Adellia began, biting her lip, “I was down in the sewers earlier today…”

She forged on, ignoring his comical expression of surprise. “Anyways, there was a ceffyl-dwr down there. It… attacked me. I got away, but it… it left behind…” She sighed and let the blanket drop.

Toby averted his gaze so suddenly and violently that he nearly spun around. Adellia rolled her eyes and took a step towards him. “Come on, Toby, no time for games. I’m serious here. I need help. Can you be a grown-up about this?” She had to admit, looking down at herself, that she was a frightful sight. Her bare legs were covered in bruises and scrapes and covered in slimy muck. Her nether lips were pink and puffy, and a thin trickle of ooze was still seeping out of her battered quim. Her stomach puffed out as well, like a pregnant woman just starting to show. She laid one hand on it and lurched as a ripple of nausea rolled through her.

Toby turned back around and clapped a hand over his eyes. “Oh my God, Adellia!” he said. “You have to go to the infirmary right away!”

“No!” Adellia found herself on the verge of tears. “Toby, I can’t, you don’t understand. Please. Can you please help me?”

Toby looked up at Ludmilla, who was standing stony-faced with her arms crossed. She had positioned herself in front of the doorway, and her you-shall-not-pass stance made her intentions clear. He sighed, then looked down at Adellia. “Oh, Adellia,” he said. “You better tell me what happened. And have a seat.” He gestured at his desk chair, but Adellia sank gratefully to the floor and leaned back against the wall. Toby winced as a dollop of slime squished its way down her thigh and plopped onto the carpet, but he was wise enough not to say anything. He sat down cross-legged opposite her.

Adellia related her sewer misadventure, from the moment she had pried open the door to Ludmilla’s well-timed appearance. Toby nodded thoughtfully throughout, then stood and walked over to his bookcase. His finger scanned through folders for a few seconds before his expression lit up and he reached in to grab one.

“Ah!” he said. “Yes, here we go. Ceffyl-dwr, life cycle of. Let me see…” He opened the folder and rifled through the pages inside for several minutes before pulling one free. Turning it around to
show Adellia, he pointed at a rough illustration of an egg cluster. “This was it, right?” he asked.

Adellia shrugged. “I didn’t get a good look. I, uh, I wasn’t really at a good angle.” She shivered, remembering. “But that feels like it. So what does it mean?”

Toby sat down again. “Well, it needs a warm place to incubate its young. Down there, there mustn’t be much. You know, this is fascinating. It must be an entirely new subspecies! I’ve never read about this, uh, this type of mating behavior before. Are you sure it—”

“Yes!” Adellia snapped. “Come on, am I safe? What’s going to happen to me? Don’t keep me in suspense!”

Toby’s eyes turned back to his paper. “Well, I shouldn’t think you’re in serious danger. The tadpoles are pretty harmless little things. Once they hatch, they should just, uh, pass out of you.” He colored. “It’ll take about two weeks, I estimate.”

Adellia considered this. Two weeks of wearing loose clothing and avoiding the Armory. Not great, but not a heavy price to pay, given how much worse things could have been. She could handle that. The sense of relief was overpowering. For the first time since heading down into the sewers, she started to relax. “Two weeks, huh?” she said. “That’s not so bad. Right, Ludmilla?”

Ludmilla nodded. “Not so bad at all. It’ll be right in the middle of the Christmas vacation.”

Adellia’s face froze. All at once the fear was back, and worse than ever. “Christmas vacation?” she stammered. “ Alone at home? But what if something goes wrong? What if they, I dunno, what if they get stuck?” She turned to Toby. “I need you there, Toby! In case something goes wrong?” Her thoughts were racing. She imagined herself bursting open to disgorge a waterfall of wriggling grubs. Or her skin would turn slick and translucent and her eyes would bulge like a frog’s. No, no, no, this can’t be happening. Panic rose up inside her, and she groped blindly for Toby’s collar. “Isn’t there anything you can do to make it happen earlier? I’ll take a potion or something, just—”

“I have idea.”

Both Toby and Adellia stared at Ludmilla. She looked from one to the other, then shot Adellia a brief wink.

“Why don’t you spend Christmas vacation at Hawk Manor, Toby? I’m sure Adellia’s parents would be happy to host you. And then you can be on hand. You know, in case anything happens.”

Toby’s mouth gaped open, then shut. Then open again. He looked like a fish that had just been released from a hook and was unsure of its next move. For her part, Adellia had instantly flushed a deep crimson. She had to admit— it was a clever move on Ludmilla’s part. Despite her affable appearance, the bitch could be subtle when she wanted to be.

“F-fine,” she managed, hoping that she sounded nonchalant. “I guess. That might work. If Toby wants to, that is.”

“I suppose I—” he began, and Adellia drew in a quick breath and cut him off. “Ok. Then it’s settled. If you’re so sure. I’ll talk to my parents, you talk to yours, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Right now I’m tired so I need to go back to my dorm, thanks for taking a look at me, Ludmilla if you could give me a hand right now please.” She ran out of breath and stood up quickly. Too quickly, as it turned out; a cramp wracked her insides and she nearly doubled over. Toby rushed to steady her, and to his credit barely flinched at all at the slime now coating his palms.
Ludmilla was working hard to contain her giggles. She nodded at Adellia rather than risk opening her mouth. She helped wrap the blanket around Adellia’s swollen stomach, then put an arm around her shoulder. “Let’s get you to bed, my friend,” she said. “You’ve had a rough day.” She tipped a salute at Toby as they left. “You’re a good man, Toby Cotton. Thank you for not saying anything about this to anyone, da?”

All he could do was nod dumbly as they left.

Adellia’s blush still hadn’t subsided in the corridor. “What the hell, Ludmilla?” she hissed. “What was that all about?”

Ludmilla thumped her on the back hard enough to make her stumble. “Just making a move, my friend. A whole vacation with the khlopok, eh? Whatever will you find to do?”

“This isn’t going to set a romantic mood!” Adellia protested. She rested one hand on her belly. It was stiff, and jutted unpleasantly outward— but she’d felt worse. She was already starting to regain some of her equilibrium.

“Ah, you’re a resourceful girl. You’ll think of something.” She stopped at the entrance to Adellia’s room and fished her knife out of her belt. “You’ll be wanting this, I expect. See you in class.”

Adellia went through the rest of the day in a daze. She showered and set out a few loose outfits. Her mother had packed her a number of dresses and blouses, perhaps in the unspoken hope that her daughter might suddenly decide at the age of 18 to be a bit more ladylike. Lady Hawk, despite her custom-made pistol crossbow and wall of trophies, always cut an elegant figure; Adellia had never had time for what she considered “frippery,” but she had to admit that the fancy clothes might come in handy. She tried them on in the mirror, marveling at how they accentuated her curves and followed the contours of her body. Thoughts of Toby and the Spring Formal sprang into her head. Perhaps there was something to fancy dress after all. It was in a thoughtful frame of mind that she laid down to bed that night.

The next week seemed to pass by in a rush. Her telegram home was answered almost at once: of course her parents would love it if she brought a guest. They couldn’t wait to meet the boy in question. They were ever so proud of their little girl. Toby confirmed his availability in a strained mumble. That was how all of their conversations about the upcoming vacation went: both of them staring at the ground, blushing furiously and murmuring one-word answers to the other’s questions.

Adellia had feared at first that, despite Ludmilla and Toby’s silence, she’d be found out for her subterranean escapade, but it seemed that she had gotten away with it. Mostly. Aside from a lingering discomfort in her stomach, she wasn’t suffering any other ill effects. Every night, before bed, she’d lay a hand on her stomach and try to concentrate on what she was feeling. Was there movement inside of her? Was her bump growing? She didn’t think so, and so far the loose blouses seemed to be doing a good job of concealing her condition, but still she worried. She wouldn’t be at ease until these things were out of her.

At last the appointed day arrived. The last exams had been taken and (hopefully) passed. Adellia had suffered through another interminable Winter Banquet, had packed her bags, had turned in her papers and signed up for next semester’s classes. It was time.

The school ran a coach service to the nearby railway station. By the time Adellia stepped out onto the main portico with her bags under her arms, there was a small crowd gathered already. They hadn’t yet had any snow, but the frost had arrived, and she found herself shivering. Luckily, the cold provided a perfect excuse for her to bundle up in layers, and not even the keenest observer could have detected anything abnormal about her figure under the layered coats, jackets, fleeces
and scarves.

She found Toby, similarly encumbered, standing on one of the front steps. “Well?” she asked. Her teeth were chattering, but she found herself smiling nonetheless. The prospect of two weeks with Toby Cotton all to herself was filling her stomach with butterflies. It was a nice feeling, though. It reminded her of what it was like to stand at the bottom of a fresh climbing wall, her hands chalky, her harness pulled tight. It was the feeling of anticipation, of a hard job ahead with a great reward at the end.

Toby nodded to her. “T-thanks for inviting me over, Adellia,” he said. He was wearing a thin wool cap and his lips were starting to turn blue. Adellia unwound one of her scarves and handed it over. “Come on, Cotton Ball. Dress for the weather.”

He smiled and wrapped it around his neck. His breath puffed up from the scarf in little clouds of mist, but he already looked like he was shivering less.

Coaches arrived and left, arrived and left, and the crowd gradually thinned. Finally, the coachman pointed one gloved finger at Toby and Adellia.

“You and you! Hurry up, bags in the boot. Let’s go!”

As the coach rattled and bounced its way along the road, Toby spoke up. He sounded uncertain, like a man not entirely sure of the rules but planning to follow them as best he could. “So, Adellia,” he began, “what are your parents like?”

Adellia hesitated for only a moment. “Oh, you’ll love them!” she began. “They’re great! They’re both great hunters, as I’m sure I told you. Father is president of St. Hubert’s Circle this year, and mother is in the Atalantine Society. They’re very busy, but they’re always home for Christmas. They want to meet you so much! Oh, you’ll have to meet everyone!”

“Everyone?” Toby’s brow wrinkled. “Do you have siblings?”

“Oh, no, none,” Adellia said. “But there’s Mrs. Sherbet, the cook, and Simpkins the butler, and Mr. Frattle the huntmaster, and Mr. Breck the gardener, and…” she trailed off as she noticed the change in Toby’s expression. He was staring at her open-mouthed. “What?” she demanded. “What’s wrong?”

Toby blinked a couple of times. “Sorry, Adellia. I just… I knew your parents were nobles, I guess I just didn’t realize…”

Now it was Adellia’s turn to look embarrassed. “I… yes, well, I mean, it’s just how I was brought up, and…”

They were spared further awkwardness by the bellow of the coachman. “Everybooooooody out! ” he shouted. They clambered out, retrieved their bags from the boot, and mounted the platform. Adellia fished in her pockets for the train tickets and found them on the fourth or fifth pocket, just before she would normally start to worry. She handed one to Toby.

As he took it from her, another cramp viced her guts. She doubled over in pain, eyes screwed shut, and let out a thin whine. Toby put an arm around her shoulders in concern and nearly earned an elbow to the face. She restrained herself at the last minute. “Adellia, do you want to sit down?” he asked, his voice heavy with concern. She managed a short, sharp nod. White-faced, teeth gritted, she allowed herself to be led to the wrought-iron benches at the station and sat down gingerly.

“Adellia, I really think this might be a job for a medical professional,” Toby said. “We can take
you to a doctor when we get to your home. I’m sure they--”

“No!” she said in a strangled voice. “No! No doctors. They’ll... tell... my parents.” As much as she feared expulsion from Hoxleigh, she’d welcome it if the alternative was to bring down her parents’ disapproval. If they found out that their precious daughter had been hurt in any way by a monster... well, that would be the end of her hunting aspirations. And her life, probably. She wasn’t sure if you could die of disappointment, but she didn’t want to be the first to find out.

Toby recoiled from her vehemence. She couldn’t explain, but something in her tone must have come across clearly. He nodded. “No doctors. Right.” He looked like he was about to say something else, but she was spared by the keening of the train’s whistle. Porters collected their bags and she let herself led in to the plush compartment.

Despite the occasional bout of nausea or stabbing pain in her stomach, the train ride was pleasant and relaxing. The cars were heated, and her first-class tickets entitled them both to a luncheon of quail eggs, roast duck and mixed greens. Toby stared at his as though he’d never seen it before. “I know,” complained Adellia. “It’s a poor showing today, but it’s only train food. It doesn’t do to get your expectations up.”

“It’s not...” Toby gulped. “I guess I’ve never ridden first class before. I normally just pack a lunch.” He pushed his food around as though he expected it to attack him. Adellia found she didn’t have much appetite either. After lunch, she regaled him with stories from her childhood in Hawk Manor. The cook had baked her a cake in the shape of a dragon’s head for her fourth birthday, she recalled with fondness, and all of her father’s huntsman had gathered to sing to her in beautiful baritone harmony. That was when she had decided to become a hunter.

“What did the other kids think?” Toby asked. Adellia’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Other kids?” she said. “There was only Simpkins’s son, and he was a lot older than me. I don’t think he wanted to go to a little kid’s birthday. He moved out when I was ten, anyways.”

Toby stared at her. His face, normally so open, was unreadable. “What?” Adellia asked. “I’m telling you, it was the best birthday ever! I got a huge piece. It had a marzipan fang in it.”

“But weren’t you lonely?” he persisted.

“Nah. Whenever mother and father were out on a hunt, the staff would take care of me. They’re good people. You’ll like them.”

“Well... ok.” Toby looked uncertain, but he managed a smile. “As long as you were enjoying yourself.”

By the time the train arrived at their station, the sun was low in the sky. They were the only people to depart at their station, and the platform was mostly deserted. A tall figure in a tweed jacket waved to them from across the platform, and Adellia’s face split into a sunny smile.

“Is that your father?” Toby asked under his breath.

“No, that’s Simpkins.” Adellia turned towards the man and threw her arms out wide. “Simpkins!” she cried, and ran towards him as fast as her stomach would allow. Simpkins turned out to be a cadaverous old man with an enormous moustache and tiny half-moon spectacles that perched on the end of his beaklike nose. He was as bald as an egg, and the top of his head flashed in the lamplight as he swept into a low bow. “Milady,” he said, and then nodded to Toby. “Young sir. May I be the first to welcome you to Hawk Manor. Your chariot awaits.” He gestured to a stately carriage parked next to the platform stairs. It had the Hawk family crest embossed on the door, its
details picked out in gold foil. Adellia grinned and ran towards it, bags forgotten. Simpkins stooped to pick them up and followed dutifully. Toby fell in behind him.

“Come on! Come in! Sit down!” Adellia was practically bouncing up and down on the seat. She took in a deep breath. “I love that smell! It smells like home!” Toby took a deep whiff. To him, it smelled like old, well-cared for leather and pine oil, but he had to admit that it was a warm and comfortable smell. He sat down next to Adellia and nearly fell over backwards. The cushions were so deep and soft… much more like a bed than the thin padding that lined the hard benches he was used to. Simpkins climbed up into the driver’s box, snapped the reins and they were off.

The road here was smooth and well-maintained. Rows of oak and elm trees marched along on either side in an order too regular to be natural. Behind them, the heath rolled away gently in undulating hills and foggy moors. A dark shape on the horizon might have been a forest, and beyond it snow-capped mountains framed the horizon. Up ahead, they were approaching a long, low brick wall that stretched away to either side. In the middle a wrought-iron gate stood open to allow their passage, and beyond it, Hawk Manor loomed out of the fog.

The manor seemed to lean forward precariously, like a beast just woken from its slumber and ready to strike. Its skyline was a veritable frenzy of gables, towers, widow’s walks, cupolas and balustraded balconies. A massive bay window dominated the facade like a staring, cyclopean eye. Beneath it, the manor’s doors were topped by an triangular portico with a frieze showing a group of men on the hunt. The coach pulled around the circular driveway, past a central fountain in which three tiers of stone mermaids poured out sparkling water from their urns. The fountain was ringed by a perfectly manicured hedge and a small flower garden.

Toby’s mouth hung open as he took all this in. His eyes seemed to flit from the windows, to the fountains, to the statuary artfully scattered across the grounds, to the coachhouse and servants’ quarters that clung like a limpet to the east wing. Adellia had to pull his arm to get him to leave the carriage. “Come on!” she said. “I want to get inside! It’s cold out here! There’ll be a fire, won’t there?” This last was directed at the butler, who nodded. “Indeed, milady. It has been stoked all morning, in anticipation of your arrival.”

“And mother and father? Are they home?” Adellia hoped she sounded calmer than she felt.

“Alas, not today, milady.” Simpkins had a hangdog look about him, and shook his head sadly. “They may return on the morrow, or the day after that. Certainly no later than that.”

“Oh.” For just a moment, Adellia sagged, but she rallied magnificently. “Well, then there’s time for the tour. Come on, Cotton!” Without waiting for him, or even for her bags, she set off for the main door. Toby looked hesitantly from her retreating back, to Simpkins, to the coach’s boot. “Should I get my bags, or…?” he began, and trailed off.

“Not to worry, young sir.” Simpkins began pulling the bags out and laying them carefully on the ground. “I will send the boy to fetch them directly. Do not tarry on our account.”

With one last look at the butler, Toby turned and ran to catch up to Adellia.

He reached her just as she threw open the double doors. They were nearly the size of Hoxleigh’s, but they slid open smoothly and soundlessly. Inside, they found themselves in a vast hall. Portraits lined the walls, and fires crackled in hearths on both sides. A wide marble staircase led up to a mezzanine landing, and from there split into two that climbed still further. Toby could see more than a dozen doors on the first level alone. His eyes were drawn upward: hanging from the ceiling on thick cables was a vast shape. It took a moment for him to realize what he was seeing. It was a skeleton, the bleached bones of some massive reptilian creature artfully connected with thin silver
wires. Its bony mouth was open in an attitude of roared defiance, revealing a cave full of teeth like machetes. His mouth dropped open as the sight jogged a memory neuron.

“That’s… that’s an emperor dragon skeleton!” he stammered. “Draco imperator! What, I mean, how…?”

Adellia looked up as if seeing the skeleton for the first time. “What, old Boney there? Yeah, he was one of Father’s trophies. I remember when they were cleaning those bones. They stank. And they wouldn’t let me have one, not even a tiny one from the finger.” She pouted, remembering. “You wouldn’t even be able to tell it was gone. Anyways, he’s been up there for years. Come on, I want to show you my room.” She set off across the hall towards the staircase. Toby stared upward for a moment longer, then followed.

Her room was just as she remembered it: a mess. Aside from the size— it could have comfortably seated a medium-sized lecture— it was just like her room at Hoxleigh. Pictures hung from the walls, some sketches in pencil, others oil portraits. One showed a sour-looking Adellia, aged approximately nine years, in a stately gown. The artist had done his best, but her discomfort was obvious. Piled on every surface were coiled ropes, crampons, hooks and ascenders, and all the other arcane tools of the climber’s art. The rest of the room was full of old toys, piles of books, and a four-poster canopy bed that looked like it could comfortably sleep a family of four, and a lumpy, shaggy brown carpet.

Toby blinked in surprise as the carpet unfolded. It snuffled, whined, then let out a sharp bark. Adellia patted her leg, and the carpet trotted across the room towards her. It looked up at Toby with soulful canine eyes, then its tongue lolled out and it began to pant. “Brutus!” Adellia said, tickling it under its chin. “Did you miss me? Did you? Have you been sleeping in my room, naughty thing?” She threw her arms around the dog’s neck and looked up at Toby. “This is Brutus, Toby. He’s retired. He used to accompany father on every hunt, but he’s just an old softy now. Isn’t that right, Brutus?”

Brutus answered with a lively bark and a burst of canine halitosis that made Toby stumble backwards. Adellia just laughed. “He’s harmless, Toby! Unless he thinks you’ve got a piece of bacon about you. Then you’ll see he hasn’t lost any of his hunting instinct!” She sprang up so suddenly that Brutus let out a startled whine. “Come on, there’s so much more to show you!”

Indeed there was. She took Toby to the library (almost the size of Hoxleigh’s own, and full of rare volumes), the ballroom (vast, with seemingly every surface edged in gilt), her father’s study (so full of hunting trophies that it looked like a museum). By the time she suggested they check out the gardens, Toby was breathing hard. Adellia had practically been flying up and down the staircases, but she stopped at the top of the next one and laid both hands against her stomach. “Urgh… just a moment, please…” she said. Toby approached her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Adellia, maybe you shouldn’t exert yourself. I think I want to take a look at… a look at, uh, you know.” He blushed. “Uh, just to see how you’re doing.”

Adellia stared at him for a moment. Pain crinkled her face, and she managed a weak nod. Half-walking, half leaning on his shoulder, she made her way back to her room.

Brutus lifted his head as they entered. He looked up at Adellia and whined mournfully. When she slumped down into her bed, he leapt up onto it and laid down at her feet. “Poor brave boy,” she said, and reached out a hand to coax him up. “I’m fine, never fear.” She laid back against a tower of pillows and reached down to roll up her shirt. The slightest touch against her belly sent a whirl of nausea roiling through her guts, and she fought to keep her gorge down. Her stomach was a taut, sweat-slick mound that rose like a loaf of freshly baked bread. She squinted at it. Was it her
imagination, or was her flesh slightly discolored? It looked orangey to her, a sickly color that made her look like a squash. Toby pursed his lips when he looked at it. He reached his fingers out, hesitated, and looked her in the face. “May I… may I touch it?” he asked.

Adellia nodded and braced herself. Even the light touch of his fingertips left her gasping and gagging. He prodded her again, muttering apologies, then stood back. “I’m… not sure,” he said. “I’d like to spend some time in your library, if that’s all right. But I think you’re close.”

“Close?” Adellia echoed. “Close how? Close to what?” She tried not to sound as panicked as she felt. Bringing Toby to nursemaid her through this had seemed like a fine idea at the time, but she was starting to regret not simply going to see a doctor. Toby saw her concern and held up his hands in a supplicatory gesture. “Close to the end of this, Adellia. Close to… delivery, I guess I would say. You should be fine. It’s a small clutch.”

Adellia let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She smiled. “So… how close? Like, a day? Two days? Not… three days?” She knew she sound a bit pathetic, but she couldn’t help it. Her stomach felt leaden, alien, like a stranger’s body part cruelly grafted to her. She was aware of it all the time. She felt strangers’ eyes on her everywhere she went, and it had been all she could do to greet Simpkins without flinching away. She had been careful to wear loose clothes and walk slightly hunched, but the drumbeat in her head had grown louder in recent days: they know. They see. They know.

Toby surprised her by patting her on the shoulder. “I don’t know… but soon.” He stood and yawned. “I wanted to have dinner, but I’m exhausted. Where is my room?”

“Oh!” Adellia felt terribly rude. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t even show you! This way!” She rolled her legs out of bad, ignoring the spasm of nausea, and limped towards the door. “Don’t worry about food. Just push the button next to the door. One of the servants will be up and you can ask them for a snack. We’ll eat breakfast together tomorrow.”

As they passed the mother-of-pearl button set in her wall, Toby stared at it. His expression was strangely cloudy. He must really be hungry, poor guy, Adellia thought. He didn’t eat much on the train either. He shook his head and followed Adellia out. She had had Simpkins prepare the closest guest room, only three doors down, and she flung open the door with the air of a museum curator unveiling her latest acquisition. “Ta-daaaah!” she said. “It’s a bit small, but it’ll do. Your bathroom is through that door.”

Toby looked around with his mouth hanging open. This room was more Spartan than hers, but it still had a mahogany armoire, a low cherrywood chest of drawers, and a bookshelf with assorted works of fiction. Next to the shelf sat a handsome writing desk with a gaslamp, an inkwell, and a stack of fresh paper. Portraits of Hawks past stared down from the walls at the queen-sized bed, with its crimson duvet. A bright red Persian carpet covered the floor, matching the rich crimson wallpaper. “It’s very… red,” Toby managed, eventually. Adellia nodded. “I used to love this room. The Red Room. I had a train set in here as a girl, but I think father packed it away somewhere.”

Toby looked around at her for a moment. His eyes were probing, as though he was looking for something in face. Whatever it was, he must have been satisfied by what he found; he gave her a warm smile. “Thanks, Adellia. I’ll see you tomorrow. Maybe you can show me that train.”

“Yeah!” She smiled at him. “Maybe my parents will be back tomorrow, and you can meet them too!”

But they weren’t back tomorrow, nor the day after. The weather turned rainy, and though it wasn’t yet cold enough to snow, it was certainly far too cold to spend any length of time in the gardens.
Adellia found that she could just about manage poached eggs and watercress sandwiches, and Toby ate alongside her at the gigantic table in the dining room. He seemed fascinated by the history of the manor, and filled their lunch hour with questions-- especially after he had gotten a look at the library. “I’ve never heard of some of these volumes!” he exclaimed one afternoon. “Who was Lady Diamanda Marceau? I see her name on a lot of them, but I’ve never heard of her.”

“Oh, that was my great-grandma.” Adellia dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a napkin and continued. “Yeah, she loved to hunt, but I guess they weren’t so keen on women going into the field back then? So she just stayed at home and dissected the corpses great-grandpa brought back. And she wrote all these books. They put them in the library, but I don’t know how many people read them.” She laughed. “She’d be happy to see someone is at last!”

“She’s a genius!” Toby said, then continued in a quieter tone. “That is, uh, she was. I assume. Anyways, her insights are incredible! Do you think your parents would allow her books to be sent to Hoxleigh? I know they could benefit from them there.”

Adellia shrugged. “Maybe. I dunno. They have a lot of old stuff like that lying around. You should just take them if you like them so much.”

“Oh, I, uh, I couldn’t do that,” he said. “I guess I could, maybe, I guess, ask them later. At some point.” He paused for a moment. “So how are you feeling? In the, uh, in the stomach, uh, area.”

Adellia wrinkled her nose. “Not great,” she said. “It’s sore a lot now. I feel bloated. It’s not bigger, is it?” She lifted her shirt, then dropped it quickly-- though not quickly enough to avoid Toby turning red.

“It looks the same as before,” he said in a strangled voice. “Should be soon, though, if you’re sore. I think we--”

She never found out what he thought. A bell rang somewhere above them and there was a great commotion from the direction of the entrance hall. Adellia sprang up, her nausea forgotten. “It’s them!” she exclaimed. “They’re here! My parents!”

Toby was caught up in her wake as she swept out into the great hall. The big double doors were open, Simpkins was gliding forward with practiced butler smoothness, and there, framed by the doorway:

“Mother! Father!”

“Adellia!” said the taller of the two figures. He stepped forward into the hall and the gaslamps threw his features into relief. Lord Geoffrey Hawk was a tall, raw-boned man with salt-and-pepper hair and a handlebar moustache nearly as impressive as his butler’s. He wore quilted cotton trousers and a fine wool peacoat whose breast was embroidered with his family seal in gold thread. His face was tanned and weatherbeaten, but it broke into a smile at the sight of his daughter. Adellia knew what that smile meant: he was home, and for at least a month this time. The sight of it gladdened her heart. They’d be spending Christmas as a family this year.

Her mother shook the rain off her umbrella and stepped up next to her husband. Lady Emilia Hawk (née Meinhoff) was on the far side of fifty, but her golden-blonde hair held not a hint of grey. Her eyes were bright green and twinkled in the lamplight, and beneath her long duster she wore a corseted brocade gown as crisp and unruffled as if she had just stepped onto the dance floor. She held her arms out for a hug, and Adellia ran gratefully into them. “Oh, darling, we’ve missed you so much!” she said. “You must tell us all about school! And this boy you’ve mentioned…” she let go of Adellia and looked past her, to where Toby was standing in the middle of the floor. “You
must be Toby Cotton. Welcome to our home, Toby. I’m so sorry we weren’t here to greet you at first.”

“Oh, I’m sure Adellia kept him busy. Right, young lady?” Lord Hawk’s voice was jovial and self-assured. He always sounded the same, whether he was declaring his intent to harpoon a leviathan off Borneo or announcing the arrival of the plum duff after dinner. Adellia nodded. “Yes, I showed him all around the manor and grounds. He loves the library. He read great-gramma’s books.”

“Old Diamanda, eh?” Lord Hawk chuckled. “She was a treasure. You’d have loved her, Adellia. Fire in the belly, that one. Just like you.”

One of Adellia’s hands crept unconsciously to her belly, and she winced. If only it was just fire in there. Still, she couldn’t be down on herself for long. Not with her parents home at last. “Are we eating dinner together tonight?” she asked. “Should I talk to the cooks? What do you want? Do you want me to take your bags? How was the hunt? Did you bring a new trophy?” The questions spilled out of her all at once. She paused to catch her breath, and her father pushed past her, patting her on the head as he went. “Slow down, Adellia!” he said. “We’ll tell you all about it at dinner. I’ll have whatever the cooks want to make. Right now, I just need to get out of these wet clothes and see my bed again.” He yawned and stretched his arms over his head. “Coming, dear?”

“In a minute, darling!” Lady Emilia called. She bent down and fussed for a moment with Adellia’s collar. “Adellia, honey, you must do something about these clothes. This shirt barely fits you. Look, it’s hanging like a curtain.” Adellia pulled back and hunched her shoulders up. She had always felt vaguely guilty for not caring as much as her mother about appearances. Of course, now the guilt was doubled. She hated hiding secrets from her parents, but it would only be for another day or two. Lady Emilia had long ago given up hope of making an elegant debutante out of her daughter, but Adellia’s desire to make her mother proud still warred ceaselessly with her disdain for any clothes you couldn’t fight or climb in. In the end, she just nodded. “Yes, mother.”

Her mother kissed her on the forehead and then followed her husband up the stairs. Adellia waited until the echo of their footsteps died away and turned to Toby. “Aren’t they great?” she asked. He looked a bit overwhelmed, but she supposed that was natural. “Adellia, honey, you must do something about these clothes. This shirt barely fits you. Look, it’s hanging like a curtain.” Adellia pulled back and hunched her shoulders up. She had always felt vaguely guilty for not caring as much as her mother about appearances. Of course, now the guilt was doubled. She hated hiding secrets from her parents, but it would only be for another day or two. Lady Emilia had long ago given up hope of making an elegant debutante out of her daughter, but Adellia’s desire to make her mother proud still warred ceaselessly with her disdain for any clothes you couldn’t fight or climb in. In the end, she just nodded. “Yes, mother.”

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s see if we can find that train set before dinner.”

Unfortunately, the train had long since been relocated to the sprawling attics. Adellia picked her way through boxes of old clothes and shrouded furniture for about five minutes before declaring the expedition a waste of time. “It was just a baby train, anyways,” she said. “There’s lots of stuff to do around here.” She scanned Toby’s face, looking for the slightest hint of disappointment. She had never had one of her friends over before, and she found herself desperately wanting to impress him. Come on, she told herself, it’s Cotton Ball. He probably just wants to sit in the library all day.

Toby shrugged. “Sure, Adellia,” he said. “I’m having fun. We can do whatever you want. Are you sure you’re ok?”

She wasn’t, but she didn’t want to bother him with little problems. She had been feeling crampy and sweaty all day. Frankly, it was a wonder her parents hadn’t noticed. Instead, she pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes and smiled. “Yeah. I’m fine. Let’s go see what’s for dinner.”
Dinner turned out to be pork tenderloin on a bed of crispy kale, with tomato soup on the side and plenty of barley bread. Adellia’s parents sat at the head of the table with Adellia at their right flank and Mr. Frattle at their left. Ranged along the table were a motley assortment of huntsmen, pages, stableboys, smiths, alchemists and wranglers. Tradition dictated that after a successful hunt, Lord Hawk would share his table with the entire party. A steady stream of servants kept their flagons topped off with thick, dark beer. Adellia personally found it a little bitter, but she had a glass for her father’s sake before switching to sparkling wine. Her mother, changed into a simple cotton frock, was as boisterous as the huntsmen and matched them drink for drink.

The meal was a boisterous affair. Lord Hawk offered toast after toast, recognizing the bravery and achievement of this fellow or that. Each time, the red-faced target would stand and insist that his achievement was not really all that impressive, while the rest of them hooted and hollered in praise. The hunt had apparently been a roaring success; they had brought down a cockatrice on the wing, then flushed out a den of barghests that had been menacing a nearby village. Adellia listened, enraptured, as her father described the beasts’ toxic breath and wicked claws. “I lost a good horse up there,” he said, “but it could have been worse-- and would have been, if not for the quick thinking of Jamison here. Stand up, Jamison!” A young man with short reddish-blonde hair and an unfortunate cluster of pimples on his chin stood and hung his head. “Really, sir,” he said, “I only- -”

“All nonsense!” roared Lord Hawk. “You saved m’life, my boy, and I don’t forget such favors!” He turned his eyes to Adellia. “My daughter here-- stand up, Adellia-- she’ll be hunting on her own, soon, and God willing she’ll have a staff as dedicated as you lot. Adellia, never forget. However fast you are, however strong, however brave, without a good team behind you, you’re just human.” He seemed to notice Toby for the first time. “This lad seems a good start. Toby, right? Are you excited to get out into the field, Toby?”

Despite Toby’s recent growth, there was a core of Cotton Ball to him that it seemed would never change. He paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth and looked up like a deer caught in the coachlights. “I, uh, I’ll, that is, I, uh, Adellia…” He trailed off hopelessly in the face of Lord Hawk’s puzzled expression. “What’s the matter, lad?” he said. “Lamassu got your tongue?”

Adellia felt a stone drop into the pit of her stomach. She wanted to say something, to stand up for Toby, but her mouth was suddenly dry. Another cramp viced her insides and she bit her lip to keep from screaming. *Come on, Toby*, she willed, *say something. Anything*.

“I’m, I’m sorry, sir, uh, milord,” Toby said, and paused. He swallowed, looked at Adellia, then back at her father. “I am, yes. Very eager. It would be an honor to accompany Adellia. She’s been helping me with my studies. She’s a real natural. Clearly she comes by it honestly.”

Lord Hawk’s jaw dropped. “Did you hear that boy, lads?” he asked. “What a flatterer!” He burst into laughter, and the whole table laughed with him. “Well said, boy!” he managed, between gasps for breath. “Well said, indeed!”

Adellia sighed in relief and drained the rest of her cup. Toby shot her a pleading look, and she gave him a surreptitious thumbs-up under the table.

Luckily, it seemed Lord Hawk’s attention had been diverted by something one of the huntsmen had said. He turned away from Adellia and Toby. Lady Emilia’s gaze lingered on them for a moment longer, and she seemed about to say something, but she just smiled enigmatically and turned away. Adellia took advantage of the lull to breathe deeply. The spasms inside her were not going away. If anything, they were getting worse.

Toby leaned over and spoke quietly enough so only she could hear. “What’s happening, Adellia?”
he asked. “You look pale.”

“Don’t… know,” she said. Her breath was coming in big wheezing gasps now. “Hurts. I… think… soon.” Toby grabbed her hand and squeezed. She was so surprised at the gesture that for a moment she forgot the pain. His hands were warmer than she’d expected, and soft, much softer than her own. She squeezed back, then grimaced as another ripple of pain shot through her.

As the dinner entered its second hour, the conversation began to lull. Many of the huntsmen had liberally availed themselves of the beer on offer, and they were starting to droop in their seats. Sedgwick, the fat old doctor of physick, was snoring in his chair at the end of the table while the grooms next to him stacked silverware on his flabby shoulders and broad back. A couple of the senior huntsmen had taken up seats before the roaring fire at the end of the hall and lit cigars. Adellia’s parents were deep in conversation with their new alchemist, Dunzer, a young German with spectacles so thick they made his eyes look like fried eggs. The pain in Adellia’s belly had subsided to a low ache, and she took advantage of the quiet to tug on her father’s sleeve.

“Father,” she began. “Do you want to hear about school? I met another huntress. You’d love her, she’s from Russia, and--”

“Russia, eh?” Her father grinned. “Did I ever tell you about hunting psotniks in Siberia? Tricky things, they were. Nasty buggers.” “Yes, I remember,” she said, “but this girl’s named Ludmilla, she’s amazing! She’s a wrestler, but she can shoot, she has this giant--”

“That sounds lovely, dear,” her father said. “Glad to hear you’re making friends.” He turned back to Dunzer. Adellia, crestfallen, tried her mother instead.

“Mother, there’s an all-school race in May,” she said. “Do you think you and Father can come? I’ve been practicing the four hundred meter, I think I might be in contention this time.”

Lady Emilia smiled at her. “I’m not sure, my love,” she said. “May is a big month for us. There are rumors of trolls in Lapland. We may be out of the country.” She laid a hand on Adellia’s shoulder. “We’ll try to be there for your graduation, though. It’s a big day for you!”

Adellia tried to conceal her disappointment. She reminded herself of how lucky she was to have parents who could come at all. Some students didn’t even have that. “That sounds great, mother,” she said. “Thanks. I can’t wait either.”

Her mother pursed her lips. “Adellia, dear, have you gained weight? You know, you’re not a child anymore. It’s going to be harder to stay in shape. You can’t just eat whatever you want now.”

Adellia nodded. Her parents had just come back from a hunt, it was natural for them to be a little out of sorts. She couldn’t expect them to drop everything and pay attention to her right away. All the same, there was a lump in her throat, and her stupid stomach felt… it felt…

She groaned. The pain was back, and worse than ever. It felt like she had swallowed a red-hot cannonball. She pushed her chair back from the table and staggered to her feet. Toby was by her side in a flash with a look of concern on his face. Even her mother noticed. “Are you quite all right, dear?” she asked.


“I’ll take her to her room, Lady Hawk,” Toby said. He extended an elbow and Adellia took it gratefully. “Thank you very much for dinner. It was delicious.”
“If you’re sure…” Lady Emilia sounded unconvinced, but she nodded. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Toby. Welcome to our home.”

By the time they reached the staircase, Adellia was putting almost all her weight on Toby. Her legs felt like loose strands of spaghetti. Somehow, she managed to mount the steps, her feet dragging on the plush carpeting. “Where…?” she asked. It was about the only word she could manage. Even focusing enough to get that much out took all of her effort.

Toby looked grimly ahead. “Bathroom,” he said. “I’ll draw you a bath. I think… I read, that’s where you should be.” Adellia nodded, or at least, her head lolled forward and back. “My… room…” she said, her voice barely a wheeze. She was thinking of her own private bathroom, the big marble tub with the brass taps and the seven different soaps.

The cramps were constant now, and she felt an unpleasant wetness between her thighs. Somehow she managed to stay upright as they lurched like a three-legged corpse down hallways and up staircases. By the time they reached Adellia’s room, she was seeing spots. Toby had to drag her the last few feet into the bathroom.

He propped her up against one wall and ran to the tub. Soon she could hear water cascading out of the taps. Her eyelids drooped and she fought to keep them open. Dimly, she was aware of Toby crouching in front of her.

“Adellia,” he said, first softly and then louder. “Adellia. Focus on the sound of my voice. You’re going to be ok, alright? You’re going to be fine. I’m going to get you into the bath. I need to take off your clothes, Adellia. Is that ok?”

Her thoughts seemed to be fluttering around like birds in a cage. One that she kept coming back to was Toby! Toby is going to take my clothes off! The seemed so important to her, but she couldn’t figure out why. She nodded, and held her arms up straight. Toby pulled gingerly at her shirt at first. She wanted to help him, but all coordination had gone. In the end he heaved and it slid loose. She had not worn anything underneath, and her breasts tumbled forth, pink nipples standing out proudly. He pulled her shoes off and unbuttoned her trousers. She arched her back as he pulled to make them slide off more easily. The movement seemed natural, comfortable. Toby hesitated for a moment. “Can- can you take off your, uh, your underthings, Adellia?”

She smiled. She was the one half-naked and feverish on the floor, but his discomfort was obvious. “Noooooooo,” she said, and settled back. “You have to.”

Toby knelt down and, anxiety written on every inch of his face, hooked two fingers around each side of her smallclothes. They were silk, some of her favorites, with a fringe of violet lace around the edge. They slid down her bare legs as softly as a whisper. The feeling of Toby’s fingertips tracing down her thighs and along her calves was almost impossibly relaxing. She could feel cool tiles under her bare bottom, and sighed.

By this point Toby was sweating heavily and his cheeks were explosions of color. He jumped back as though Adellia was an unexploded bomb. “I, I, I think the bath is ready,” he said. “Do you need a hand in?”

Adellia raised one arm in answer. Toby grabbed her around the elbow, and she grasped at his forearm. The feeling of skin on skin- the warmth of him, the smoothness- made her stomach flutter. Then she was on her feet, and teetering. She gratefully accepted his help climbing into the bathtub.

The water was hot enough to raise a gasp from her. Steam rose up from the surface. The heat shook
her out of her placid daze, and she opened her eyes wide. “Toby!” she said. “I can feel it! Something’s… something’s coming!”

“Lie down!” Toby said. “On your back. Knees up. I thought the hot water might help. Adellia, you can do this!”

She braced her arms against the sides of the tub and stretched her legs out. As she tented her knees, she felt something wriggling inside her. It was a strange, alien sensation, a squirming deep inside. She grabbed Toby’s hand and squeezed it until her knuckles turned white. He hissed through his teeth but did not pull away. “You’re doing great, Adellia,” he said. “You really are. Can you feel anything?”

“Yes…” She concentrated on the sensations coming from her sore and swollen tummy. She could feel movement there, like a trapped beast testing the boundaries of its cage. “I think they’re ready. I think they want out.”

“Well then, you want the same thing,” Toby said. “Push. Just bear down and push. Deep breaths.”

Adellia felt ridiculous. She wasn’t some soppy mother-to-be in a hospital somewhere. She was a huntress! She had considered children with the same attitude as a window-shopper outside a fancy clothing shop: something nice, pretty, fancy, but not for her… not yet, anyways. Not for quite a while yet. Now, it seemed, her timetable had been updated. Better make the best of it.

She screwed her eyes shut, took a deep breath, and pushed.

“Something moved!” she said, her eyes slamming open. “I felt it! Something moved!”

“Good!” Toby replied. “Keep going! Whatever you were doing, keep going!”

Adellia focused and pushed again. She could feel a pressure building inside her. She felt like she did near the end of a race, on the final lap where she would dig down into her reserves for that last burst of energy. She sought it now. She could feel the pressure cresting, and somehow she knew she was almost there. Almost… almost…

Just when she thought she would burst, something shifted inside her. There was a moment of blinding pain, and then a sensation of pressure relieved. New sensations flooded her; something warm and soft and slimy filling her tight passage, wriggling against her walls. Her eyes rolled back into her head. The feelings were so intense; it was like being licked everywhere at once by a gigantic wet tongue. She drew in a rattling breath and opened her eyes in time to see something small and green push its way out of her quim. Her pussy lips stretched around it as it slid out of her. It was round, with two trailing limbs or tails that wiggled in the water to propel it forward. Faint orange marks decorated its top, and when it flipped over she could see its bottom was pale white. It swam a few inches away, stopped, then reversed direction, as if afraid to move too far from its mother. She didn’t have time to observe it that closely-- a second was following close behind. This one’s tendrils flailed around inside her, brushing against the walls of her channel in a way that made her short of breath. She tried to focus on Toby’s hand, the temperature of the water, anything but the bizarre birth going on between her thighs.

The second creature popped free and joined its fellow. They swam around in other in wobbly circles. Adellia watched them in wonderment. She knew they were monsters, but their tiny chubby bodies and spastic movements were… well, cute. In a way. Their bodies were soft and pliable, and she found that pushing them out hurt a lot less than receiving them had. Certainly the cessation of pressure in her stomach was a relief; she had been carrying the weight around for weeks and had grown used to it, but now she felt light. Her stomach was already returning to its customary
tautness, and as the fifth and last tadpole slipped out into the bathwater, she breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, she just lay there, watching them frolic in the water. She was bone-weary, all of a sudden. All she could think of was bed.

“What do we… what do we do with them?” she asked. Toby shrugged. “We could just put them in a bucket and drop them in the river. They should be fine.” He gave her a curious look. “That would be ok, wouldn’t it?”

Adellia tore her eyes away from the creatures and shrugged. “Sure. Whatever. I mean, I’m not gonna keep them as pets.” She nodded. “Yeah, I dunno how I’d explain that. They’re cute, though, huh? Cute little guys.” She poked one with her finger and it did a slow barrel roll in the water. Toby looked at her strangely, then shrugged back. “Yeah, I guess. They are a little cute. Good job, Adellia.”

She looked up at him, and in that moment, she felt something click into place. It was like an ethereal hook, something so thin and so delicate that the slightest break in the tension would snap it. For just a second, the moment was right. The gears of the universe slipped, and she knew that if the teeth were going to catch, it had to be now.

She kissed him.

It was slow, at first. Her lips met his and parted them as gently as a summer breeze. She was hyper-aware of the softness of his skin, the few wispy hairs on his upper lip, the slight dimple of his cheek. Her tongue brushed over his teeth and she imagined she could count them as she went. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his expression. It would be one of his dumb looks of surprise, and she didn’t want to ruin the memory. She could smell him, even over the steamy smell of the water and the scent of her jasmine and lilac soaps. He smelled of sweat, and hair cream, a hint of mint toothpaste and shaving gel and nervousness. His tongue trembled beneath hers like a baby bird and then he leaned forward and they were tangling, tangling, entwining, embracing. She felt as though she had stepped outside time and she knew, knew that for the rest of her life she would be able, whenever she wanted, to come back to this moment.

It lasted ten seconds, but it felt like a lot longer.

When they finally broke apart Toby’s mouth hung slightly open. He was staring off into space at a point a few inches above her head. He looked as though he had been struck in the forehead by a hammer, but at least his permanent blush had gone. “Adellia…” he breathed, and stopped, as if there was no room in his mind for anything but her name.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for ages,” Adellia said with satisfaction. She pushed off with her arms and stood up suddenly. Water ran off her breasts and cascaded down her flanks. She stood up straighter than she had in weeks and looked down at Toby, still kneeling by the bathtub with an expression of terminal shock.

“Toby?” she asked. He seemed to come back from wherever he had been and looked up at her with awe. “Yes?” he said. There was a tremble in his voice.

“Could you please get me a towel?”
Urban Legends and Folklore

Chapter Summary

Adellia is dealing with some complicated feelings. And monsters, of course.

Adellia Hawk, daughter of Lord Geoffrey and Lady Emilia Hawk, heir to Hawk Manor and latest scion of the foremost hunting dynasty in England, was nervous. This wasn’t a particularly common state for her, and she didn’t relish it. She had just spent the day shuttled from coach to train to coach, and even arriving at the imposing portico of the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters was not enough to quell her jitters.

She had spent most of the ride with Toby Cotton in companionable silence. Toby had accompanied her home to help her ride out the aftereffects of an ill-advised expedition into the school sewer system. Yielding to a long-simmering temptation, she had kissed him, and they had spent the remainder of their holiday together in awkward detente. Neither of them spoke of the kiss, and on those rare occasions when they accidentally made eye contact, both would look away with furious color rising in their cheeks. They found time to do other things: exploring the grounds when the weather cleared, or lounging in front of a roaring fire. Once, Toby had tried to take her hand, but she had pulled easily out of his clammy grip and shoved her hands deeply into her pockets to avoid future entrapments. It wasn’t as though she didn’t want to hold his hand. It was just… well… she didn’t know what it was, and not knowing things annoyed her to the pit of her soul. Every time she looked at Toby her heart skipped a beat, but the thought of actually being with him-- of dancing with him like Corinthia Swain at one of the school’s stupid balls, or holding him in her arms-- made her stomach feel sick and fluttery and wrong.

Christmas itself had been a cheery affair, and Adellia treasured the set of fine camping gear and polished walnut crossbow her parents had given her, while Toby was thrilled to receive a set of leather-bound books published by Adellia’s great-grandmother Diamanda. “Now, you be careful with those, sonny,” Lord Hawk had said on Christmas morning. “They’re the only copies. Keep ‘em safe.”

“I will, my lord!” breathed Toby, not taking his eyes off the beautifully inscribed leather cover. He handled the books like holy relics. Adellia personally didn’t get the appeal-- there were hardly any illustrations, and Diamanda’s tiny, crabbed handwriting hurt her eyes to read-- but she felt a flush of pride that Toby liked something her ancestor did. Her few memories of Diamanda were of a soft, wrinkled hand a toothless smile, but apparently the old girl had been quite formidable in her youth, and Adellia fancied that she bore a strong resemblance to the portraits of young Diamanda hung up about the library.

After the warmth of the Christmas meal, they had retired to their separate rooms. More than once Adellia had lain awake and imagined herself standing up, walking down the corridor to Toby’s room and knocking on the door. He’d answer, and then… what? Her imagination filled her mind with dozens of scenarios, none of which seemed right. She couldn’t figure out what she wanted, so she lay there with the blankets pulled up to her chin and stared at the ceiling until she fell asleep.

Under those circumstances, returning the Hoxleigh was a relief. She hoped that she would be able to return to the comfortable status quo, but something inside her told her that was wrong. She had
crossed a bridge with Toby that could not be crossed back. At Hawk Manor, they had stayed in uneasy equilibrium, but that equilibrium was about to be disrupted. That was what had her so nervous.

Fortunately, she knew just who to talk to.

Ludmilla Sokolova wasn’t hard to find. She was in the Armory, stretching her formidable calves. She wore a tight leotard that clung to her voluptuous curves, showing off her thick, muscular thighs and straining around her broad hips. She moved with the unselfconscious grace of a natural athlete, and one well used to the admiring stares of passersby. Adellia herself favored more modest gymwear; she was dressed in canvas shorts and a cotton shirt with a leather vest over it. She walked up to Ludmilla and stood over her with her arms crossed, waiting for the other girl to finish.

“Can we talk?” Adellia asked as soon as Ludmilla looked up. The wrestler grinned at her and reached out to stretch with deliberate slowness. “Well, merry Christmas and a happy New Year to you too, Adellia Hawk. I trust everything went smoothly?”

Adellia rolled her eyes. “Yes, it all went very well. Your cunning plan worked perfectly. Now can I have a minute?”

“Very well,” Ludmilla said, and clambered to her feet. Her shock of brown hair swayed as she stood. She did not appear to have availed herself of the services of a barber during her vacation; it hung down on all sides like water frozen in mid-cascade. Adellia beckoned her to the corner of the Armory, and Ludmilla followed. They stepped behind a hobby horse for privacy, and Adellia looked both ways before saying anything.

“Well?” Ludmilla demanded, her hands on her ample hips. “Dish, girl. How was it?”

“Not difficult at all,” Adellia said. “I just got in the bath and their slid right out.”

Ludmilla made a face. “Yuck. Not that, girl. Toby! Did you get him? How big is he? In my experience, the boys like him, the bookish ones, have khuys like oak trees.” She made a fist and gripped her forearm near the elbow to demonstrate.

Adellia blushed scarlet and looked away. “I dunno! I didn’t… I mean… I tried to… we just kissed,” she finished lamely. Ludmilla’s eyes grew wide and she boomed with laughter. This only made Adellia’s cheeks grow hotter. She frantically shushed Ludmilla as she doubled over with laughter.

“No! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” the Russian girl wheezed as she tried to catch her breath. “Really. I’m ok. I’m ok. I promise.” She looked into Adellia’s eyes and snorted again. “After all that? Everything you went through? I’m impressed with you, Adellia. I’ve never known a girl so dedicated to blowing up her own hard hard work.” Seeing Adellia’s face, she softened. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t make fun.”

A weight had sunk into the pit of Adellia’s stomach. “If you don’t want to help me,” she said, “that’s fine, just don’t--”

“Adellia,” Ludmilla interrupted. “Relax. It’s ok. You did well, I promise.” She laid a hand on Adellia’s shoulder. “Sometimes, in the hunt, you must lay several traps. You do not always fell the prey on the first shot. You must stalk him, yes?”

Adellia nodded.

“Very well,” Ludmilla said. “This is new to you, I know that. But you’re Adellia Hawk! You are
going to be the greatest hunter of all time, yes? That’s what you always told me.”

“Well, how do you do it?” Adellia asked. She couldn’t keep all the frustration out of her voice.

Ludmilla shrugged. “I just take what I want,” she said. “But I don’t know if that would work on the khlopok. He is sophisticated, that one. Shy. More inclined to flee than fight. See Peter there?”

Ludmilla pointed over Adellia’s shoulder. She turned to see a tall, strapping senior in rugby pads. As she watched, he ran shoulder first at a tackling sled. The impact lifted the sled off the ground and then slammed it back on its runners.

“That’s more my speed,” Ludmilla said with satisfaction. “He’s a nice boy, but not too much between the ears. He’s easy to talk to. And he’s got a khuy like a sledgehammer. Damn near knocked my tonsils out my ears.”

Adellia stifled a giggle. “Ludmilla!” she hissed, though the chances of anyone hearing them were remote. “Aren’t you worried about… you know… babies, and stuff?” She looked around once more, but they were still alone in their little corner of the Armory.

Seeing her discomfort, Ludmilla laughed again and slapped Adellia on the back so hard she stumbled a step or two. “No chance, girl!” she said. “I make a tea from extract of whitethistle. A cup in the morning and I know the wild oats won’t take root. Now, I have to get back to the ring. Someone needs to twist that braggy bitch Catherine’s arms into a pretzel behind her head, and if I don’t, who will?” She cracked her knuckles theatrically. “Take your time with the khlopok, but you have to decide what you want eventually. He’ll wait for you, but he won’t wait forever.” With that, she squeezed Adellia’s shoulder and turned back towards the sunken arena pits at the center of the room. “Get in the ring, Catherine!” she bellowed.

Adellia was left to collect her thoughts. Slow and steady, she thought. Just gotta reel him in. The thought of Toby with another girl made her queasy, but the thought of taking him to her bedroom—into her bed—made her queasy in a different way. She sort of liked the idea, but it scared her too. Not the act itself; she had known what her health class teacher had called “the mechanics” for ages, and her recent misadventures had taught her that she was more resilient than she thought. But it was different with a person. With a boy. A boy she felt something for, even if she wasn’t exactly sure what.

She shook her head to clear it and turned towards the climbing wall. She hadn’t just come in here to hear about Ludmilla’s conquests. The wall was beckoning her, and she relented with relief, hoping to lose herself in the meditative peace of the climb.

The familiar smells of oil and chalk filled her nostrils. She dusted her hands, clipped herself into a belaying harness, and squared off facing the wall. She stretched one last time, then reached up and curled her fingers around the first chunk of stone outthrust from the wall. The handholds in this portion were like old friends. She had done this climb a million times. She could do it in her sleep. This time, she chose a challenging route that she had been practicing before winter break—there were some long gaps near the top, which would require careful consideration. With each step, though, questions bubbled up in her brain.

What if he doesn’t like me?

She reached out for a thick slab near her right hand and hoisted herself up.

What if he starts following me around all the time?
She planted her foot firmly in a narrow wedge between a rocky ledge and the wall.

*What if I don’t know what I’m doing?* With the leverage from her foot, she pushed herself upward and clung two-handed to a spar that stuck out overhead.

*What if he doesn’t know what he’s doing?*

Her other leg bent and stretched to find purchase on a thin outcropping.

*What if he gets bored of me?*

She pulled her foot free from the wedge and swung it around in a wide arc. Her toes barely caught the next stone and she pushed off from it.

*What if I get bored of him?*

She was high up, now, and the grips were sparse. She tried to work her fingertips into a narrow slit, but couldn’t get purchase.

*What if I’m not good enough? What if it’s terrible? What if I blow it, and I lose my chance forever?*

Her fingers scrabbled frantically for a moment, then she lost her grip and fell backwards. She dropped a couple of feet, then the belaying rope picked up the slack. She hung in midair, twisting slowly, before the prefect on the other end of the line began to slowly lower her to earth.

*Shit*. This was a challenging route, but she knew she’d get it. Eventually.

Classes began early the next day. Adellia had finally earned a spot in the marksmanship seminar, and she was eager to put her new crossbow to work. The rest of her classes were boring, mostly kid stuff—she was the only senior in a couple of them, and she tried not to be too embarrassed about that fact. The important thing was that she was on track to graduate. She wouldn’t make honors or anything, but that was ok. The diploma was what counted. She didn’t have any classes with Toby this semester, which was actually a bit of a relief. She knew she had to talk to him, but she wanted to wait until she knew what to say.

Lunches in the cafeteria were awkward affairs. She mostly sat with Ludmilla, who needled her ferociously about her plans with Toby. Once or twice he tried to join them, but both girls were so icily polite to him that he quickly got the message and found a seat somewhere else. That left them alone to plot together. Every conversation started the same way: “Have you talked to him?"

“No!” Adellia would say, at first angrily, then with glum resignation. “I know! I know I should! But when? We don’t have any classes together!”

“What a shame, that he ceases to exist the second you leave class,” Ludmilla said in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “Too bad there’s nothing you can do about it.” She leaned forward and propped herself up on one elbow. “What are you scared of, anyways?"

“I’m not scared!” Adellia said, indignation coloring every syllable.

“What are you scared of?” Ludmilla insisted.

“Nothing!” Adellia scoffed. “That’s totally ridiculous!”

“What are you scared of?”

“Ludmilla, you’re being immature. Grow up.”
“What are you scared of?”

Adellia dropped her eyes to her plate and pushed her fork through her mashed potatoes. “What if I screw it up?”

“Oh, Kroshka,” Ludmilla sighed. “You have a lot to learn. If you put a crossbow bolt in that boy’s arm he’d apologize for standing in the way of your shot. Besides, there’s one apology that always works.” She opened her mouth and curled her fingers in front of it, then jerked her hand frantically back and forth while tonguing her cheek. Despite herself, Adellia burst out laughing. “Stop it!” she hissed. “Come on, we’re in public.”

“Suit yourself.” Ludmilla shrugged and returned to her former posture. “What are you afraid of screwing up? Not like he knows any better. Where is this fear when you’re hunting? You could use it a bit more there, ya?”

Adellia took a big bite of mashed potatoes, mostly to avoid having to say anything else. She had to admit Ludmilla had a point. So why couldn’t she make herself do it? She couldn’t say, but every time she thought about Toby, she felt uncomfortably warm. Before she had kissed him, it had all been a fun game—teasing him, keeping him at arm’s length, even competing with Ludmilla for him. Now it felt real in a way that she wasn’t sure she knew how to handle.

In any event, classes were keeping her busy. To her chagrin, her marksmanship seminar was rather light on practice and much heavier on theory. She learned formulas for arc length, techniques for calculating wind speed and direction, and endless charts of penetrating distance for various types of bow against various types of hide. These last were tedious in the extreme; in Adellia’s mind, the best way to find out if a 150-pound bow could pierce manticore hide from a 30 degree elevation at 90 feet would be to try it. Of course, she had to admit that if the answer was “no” then the bow-woman had put herself in a bit of a bind, but it had to be better than all this studying. She sat in the library, endlessly poring over dense tables in tiny handwriting, while her poor overtaxed brain creaked and groaned like a clipper ship in a high wind.

At first, she was so absorbed in her studying that she did not register the noise coming from behind her. It was only when she heard the muffled “harumph” of a throat being cleared that she realized she was not alone. She spun around, ready to tell some overconfident freshman to find another table, and stopped.

Toby was standing here.

He wore a dark blue frock coat with big brass buttons, as though he had just come in from outside. His hair was impeccably combed and glistened with some kind of oil. She could smell it, too: a leathery scent, mixed with some kind of aftershave. Even his glasses had been buffed to a mirror sheen. He looked frightened—terrified, even— but when she turned around he took a deep breath and launched into what sounded like a prepared speech.

“Um, Adellia,” he began, “I wanted to, uh, to talk to you. Um. About. That time you. Kissed me. At your house. Um. I just… um. I really. Like you. And I was wondering. Um. If you feel. The same way. Um. About me.”

By the end of his little monologue Toby had turned bright red. He met her gaze for the briefest of moments before dropping his eyes to the floor. Adella stared up at him openmouthed. She knew the answer to his question, but somehow, it just wouldn’t come. She groped blindly for a response and heard herself say: “Do I have to answer you right now?”

Instantly she knew it was the wrong thing response. Toby shook his head once, a tight, curt little
gesture, and spun around on his heel. He looked back over his shoulder for a second, and said, in a strained whisper, “Sorry to bother you.” Then he strode off at a pace just short of running, leaving Adellia.

Well, she thought. That could have gone better.

Toby’s cheeks burned as he marched back to his dorm room. As if sensing his anger and humiliation, other students scuttled out of his way. He strode past his astonished suitemate into his room and slammed the door hard enough to shake the frame. Then he sat on his bed and took a deep breath, trying not to cry. He could feel the tears pushing at his eyes, but he willed them down. No. No. Not today.

God damn Ludmilla! She had said it would all be so easy. “Please, khlopok ,” she had insisted as they stirred their alembics in Advanced Chemical Engineering. “She’s wetter than the Volga for you. Poor thing gets all weak in the knees whenever she hears your name. She’ll never say anything. If you want this to go anywhere, you have to do it yourself.”

“Do what?” Toby had asked, even though he had a pretty good idea. He found Ludmilla’s brash confidence fascinating and, frankly, a little scary. She’d rolled her eyes and made an obscene hand gesture that had Toby frantically looking round for their professor. “Talk to her, pridurok . Tell her how you feel. Ask her if she feels the same way. Presto, blammo, she’ll fall to her knees in front of you and thank you.” Another hand gesture demonstrated the kind of thanks Ludmilla had in mind and made Toby look away quickly.

Well, he had followed her advice. Admittedly, it had sounded smoother in her head, but he was pretty sure he’d hit the major points. And what had happened? Adellia had asked him, scorn echoing from every syllable, if she could have some time to decide. To decide if she liked him! It was humiliating, that’s what it was.

He let himself fall backward against his pillow. Ever since they had first met, he had idolized Adellia Hawk. She was so beautiful, so fearless… nothing seemed to keep her down. For a brief moment he had thought she might be interested in him, Toby Cotton, the merchant’s son who thought he could be a hunter. He had been fooling himself, of course. Adellia Hawk was the real deal, and she wouldn’t settle for anything less than a hunter on par with herself.

He sat up. That was it. That was the solution. If Adellia wasn’t sure about him, it was because he hadn’t proved himself worthy of her. If he could do that-- if he could take on a hunt of his own and carry it to completion-- she’d have to admit he was good enough. And she’d kiss him again. His mind went back to that moment, her lying exhausted in the tub, him leaning over… the softness of her lips, the taste of her, the feel of her tongue… he allowed himself a moment to remember. Then he got up and crossed over to his meticulously organized file shelf. There was something here, he knew it.

The next day, he took his seat in Advanced Chemical Engineering with a faint smile on his face. Ludmilla sat down next to him. “Well?” she demanded, as soon as the professor’s back was turned. “How did it go?”

Toby turned to her and whispered back. “She asked me for time.”

Ludmilla looked forward and pounded one fist against her thigh. “Cyka blyat!” she hissed. “I swear, that girl cannot get out of her own way. Let me talk to her, I’ll--”

“No need,” Toby said. “I know what went wrong. She wants a hunter. I’m going to show that I can hunt, and then she’ll have to accept me.”
“No, that’s-” Ludmilla began, then froze as Dr. Dilige whirled around. “Ms. Sokolova, Mr. Cotton, is there something you’d like to share with the class?” she snapped. Both of them shook their heads. “Good.”

Toby took a light lunch back to his room. He had no more classes for the day, and he wanted to get an early start. He pulled out the file he had found last night and spread it across his desk. It was an architectural map of the school, with certain sub-basements marked in red pencil. He had also assembled a few sketches and student records, along with clippings from the school newspaper (the *Hound*) and old class syllabi. Together, they represented the most thorough collection of lore he could put together on an old student myth: the Escaped Specimen.

According to legend, at one point a particularly keen professor had scheduled a live combat demonstration in his classroom. Monsters had been brought in at great expense, and the final exam would consist of a one-on-one duel. Aside from all the obvious flaws in this plan, there had been an error in the shipping process. When the professor arrived to collect his specimens, he had found nothing but a row of shattered and splintered crates and smashed-open cages. The school had shut down all classes and confined students to their dorms while the faculty formed an impromptu posse to hunt down and capture or exterminate the escapees. They had successfully dispatched the lot of them, save one. Nobody knew what had been in the crate marked X-31-- the paperwork had dissolved, leaving only a reddish smear-- but nobody could find any trace of the thing, either.

According to that same legend, the professor responsible had either sworn an oath to find the missing specimen and bring it back, or had been fired in disgrace. Either way, his name wasn’t recorded. In subsequent years, a few students had noted sightings of an unusual figure-- sometimes humanoid, sometimes not-- skulking around the lower levels. A map of these sightings showed that they were centered around a certain passage that led from the basement smithy to the sub-basement storage.

Toby reviewed his preparations. He had some sketches of the thing, and some idea of what it could be. His notes went into his bag, followed by his pistol crossbow. It was an old, unreliable thing, but it was a weapon he at least knew how to use. He packed some food and water, in case his trip took longer than expected, and a pack of matches. Finally he included a collection of clinking vials. He had been practicing his chemistry in the optional after-class labs, and had quite a collection of tinctures and solvents that might come in handy. These were wrapped up in a special velvet bag with built-in cushions. Almost as an afterthought, he threw his knife from the kitchen into the bag. You never knew.

Nobody bothered him on his way down to the basement. Toby was well known all around campus-- there was hardly a professor who he hadn’t tapped for extra credit, or a department unfamiliar with his work. He was on track to graduate with honors, which just made Adellia’s rejection sting all the more. Privately, he wondered if he was really cut out to be a hunter. He loved research, planning, preparing, mixing solutions and calculating angles of approach… but when it came down to it, the actual business of sticking pointy metal objects into monsters made him nervous.

He paused at the door to the subbasement. It was locked, as always, but his research had found an old article interviewing some long-forgotten student about the latest Specimen sighting. “Everyone knows that door doesn’t lock properly,” the student had said. “You just rap on it about two-thirds of the way up from the handle and it pops open.” Toby looked both ways, then stretched out his arm and knocked once, sharply, on the wooden door.

It popped open. A musty smell curled out into his nostrils. He opened the door just wide enough to slip through, then pulled it shut behind him-- almost all the way. He wasn’t sure if the trick would work from the inside.
He found himself at the top of a set of stairs. With the door closed, the room was pitch black, but he had seen a torch hanging in a wall sconce to his right. He found it in the dark, took it down, and lit it from one of his matches. It flared to life, showing him a long, low-ceilinged room at the foot of the stairs. Most of the floor space was covered by rusty iron shelves lined with crates, chests, barrels and jars. Toby descended slowly, mindful of the creaking and uneven stairs, and looked around. The sub-basements were only ever used for storage and, by the looks of it, only ever for things that nobody expected to need anytime soon. The few crates that were labeled seemed to contain useless junk: when would the school ever need SPURS, Sized Extra Small or Jai Alai Cestas (Left Handed Only)?

A flash of movement caught his eye. There! At the end of the row! He looked up just in time to see something disappear behind the row of shelves. There was a pattering of footsteps, light, like a child’s. He gulped and stepped forward.

All at once he wished he had brought something a bit more substantial than a kitchen knife and a pistol crossbow. The torch in his hand felt nice and heavy. He swished it back and forth once or twice, careful to keep it far from the dry wood on the shelves, then continued to the end of the row.

There was nothing there, just a wall made of crumbling bricks and a T-intersection between the passage he had just come from and another leading left to right. He looked in both directions-- further rows of shelves vanished into the gloom. It was impossible to tell just how large the room was from here. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of movement and whirled on it. Again, nothing… just a faint cloud of dust, stirred up by something’s passage. A childlike giggle echoed off the wall. It was impossible to tell where it was coming from; it seemed to bounce between the shelves, fading for a moment before coming back. Goosebumps broke out on Toby’s arms despite the heat of the torch.

He set out along the passage to his right. It felt as good a direction as any. Once again he heard the footsteps. They seemed to be coming from the very next row. He leapt forward and thrust the torch out, but there was nothing there. A seemingly endless line of jars marched away to the limits of his vision. He peered closer into one, and shuddered with revulsion. The murky brine inside thankfully obscured the details of the thing in the jar, but he saw enough to be grateful that he wasn’t seeing more.

A cool breeze blew against his left cheek, and he turned. Up ahead the corridor terminated in an arched doorway. He couldn’t see much past it, but he got the sensation of vast, open space. With one last hesitant look over his shoulder, he stepped through.

The room on the other side was indeed massive. It was a wide, circular pit devoid of any furnishings whatsoever. Stone walls curved away in both directions. The floor here was dirt, like the floor of a coliseum, and the ceiling was much higher than the storage room. Toby realized he must be beyond the Hoxleigh grounds-- otherwise, the ceiling here would project into the basement. He tried to summon up a mental map of the school and retrace his steps. Just how far had he gone?

His concentration was broken by that laugh again. This time, it didn’t echo from everywhere; it was coming from directly in front of him. He lowered his torch and peered into the darkness.

A figure stepped into his bubble of light. For a second, its outline seemed to shimmer. He squinted, and it resolved itself into the person he’d least expected to see down here.

“Adellia?” he asked.

Adellia stepped forward. Somehow, she had beaten him down here. She was nude, and stood with
her legs slightly apart. Torchlight flickered against her skin. She was looking down with a slightly bemused expression on her face. She looked much like how Toby remembered her from her bath: her coppery hair just reached her shoulders, leaving her breasts bare. They were perfect teardrop shapes, her nipples little pink buds that jutted out in the subterranean cold. Her skin was unblemished, her stomach tight and flat, her hips blossoming out curvaceously to the sides. A light dusting of coppery curls thatched her pubic mound. She took a step towards him, and Toby’s breath caught. He stared, hypnotized. Each step caused her breasts to bounce up ever so slightly. Before he realized what was happening, she was in front of him, one arm reaching up to caress his neck, the other sliding under his shirt to lay against his stomach. Her skin was curiously cold and clammy. He opened his mouth to protest, and shut it again when he felt her fingers undoing his belt buckle.

She leaned up and pressed her lips against his. He trembled but yielded to the kiss. It wasn’t like the last; Adellia’s mouth felt dry, and her breath was rotten. Her lips scraped across his. They felt rough and chapped. “A-adellia?” he repeated, and tried to take a step back.

She stepped forward, matching him like a dancer partner. Her fingers closed around his belt, yanked it loose, and slithered into his trousers. Despite his fear, despite his apprehension, he was growing hard. She wrapped her fingers around his member and pulled it free of his trousers. Already at half-staff, it swelled in her hand.

She stepped back and fell to her knees before him. Her legs folded up neatly below her, and she rested her palms on her knees. Without a word, she bent down and licked all along the length of his shaft. He felt himself stiffen beneath her. Her tongue was as cool as her hands, and slimy; she left a trail of her saliva behind as she ran it up and down the firm pink shaft. Toby gasped, and Adellia seemed to take that as her cue to wrap her lips around the head of his member.

Her tongue flicked against his tip: once, twice, then continuously, a swirling motion that teased him. She slid her lips along his rod, further and further, until she was practically kissing his waist. He could feel it sliding past her jaw and into the tightness of her throat. She paused, and extended her tongue to lick the bottoms of his balls. He began to worry about her lung capacity, but just before he said something she began to withdraw. For just a moment, it seemed that the round head of his prick would catch at the back of her throat, but she pulled it all the way free until the tip lay against her tongue.

Toby’s head was spinning. The sensations seemed to be coming from everywhere at once: her tongue darted about as though it had a mind of its own, pressing here, rubbing there. She brought one hand up to pump along his shaft while her lips formed a tight suction around his tip. He could already feel himself tensing, stiffening, preparing for the moment of climax.

A sound made him look up: the soft tread of feet on the dirt floor. A shape entered his bubble of torchlight, and he gasped.

Another Adellia.

This one was subtly different from her twin. Her hair was longer and lighter, more blonde than copper. Her lips were bright red and her cheeks rosy. Her breasts were fuller, her hips wider. Her sex was bare and glistened wetly in the flickering light. She crossed the distance between them in a seductive strut, her ass waggling back and forth. Toby gaped in amazement. This Adellia seemed to have stepped straight out of his daydreams.

She crossed the floor quickly and knelt next to her doppelganger. The first Adellia pulled Toby’s prick free from her mouth with a wet pop, leaving him gasping in frustration. She turned and kissed the newcomer on the lips, a full, ripe, lusty kiss that went on and on. They parted, their
muzzles connected by a thin bridge of saliva, and placed his twitching member between their lips. This time, when they kissed, he was caught in the middle, and he moaned as he felt their tangling tongues rubbing up and down his shaft. This was it; he could take no more. He arched his back and groaned. The new Adellia broke the kiss to plant her mouth against the twitching, throbbing tip of his cock just in time for the first blast of his cum to splash against the back of her throat. Toby’s mind went blank for a moment as the orgasm rolled through. Blood thundered in his ears. He could feel his balls draining; his cock spasmed as rope after sticky rope of semen erupted from the tip. The voluptuous Adellia with his tip in her mouth accepted his offering silently while her thinner twin teased his balls with her fingertips.

Finally the flow slackened off. Toby stumbled back a few steps and leaned against the wall, panting. The two figures kneeling before him regarded him for a moment, then turn to each other. The first one tilted her head up and opened her mouth like a baby bird; the other leaned over her and looked down. She parted her lips far enough to allow a thin stream of jizz and saliva to ooze out between them. It splashed into her twin’s mouth. She widened her lips, and the trickle became a flood. Toby’s seed flowed out of her in a long, liquid waterfall, and her twin accepted it all gratefully. The smaller Adellia’s cheeks bulged like a chipmunk for a moment. Then she swallowed with an audible glunk. An expression of incredible satisfaction crossed her face, then she and her sister turned towards Toby and advanced. He held up his hands in a warding gesture, but words wouldn’t come. They each took one arm in their soft hands and began to drag him down. The torch tumbled from his nerveless fingers and rolled away across the floor. As its light began to gutter, he saw shapes emerging from the darkness all around. A third Adellia. A fourth. And more…

Somewhere far overhead, Adellia sat down at the lunch table with a sigh. She was still cursing herself for her stupidity the other day. Why hadn’t she just said yes? Because she had wanted to be the one to ask? Stupid. It would all end up the same, anyways.

Well, she would find him today. She’d scour the library if she had to, he seemed to live there. And she’d just pray that Ludmilla had been wrong, that no other girl had jumped on the opportunity she had so foolishly squandered. She’d have to find Ludmilla, maybe she’d know what to…

“Cyka blyat!” Ludmilla thumped her own tray down hard enough to rattle the silverware. Adellia looked up into a face twisted in anger and frustration. Even Ludmilla’s volcanic hair looked on the verge of an explosion today. She scowled at Adellia from across the table. “What’s the matter with you, huh?” she asked. “That boy pours out his heart to you and you rip it right out of his chest?”

Adellia thought that “pours his heart out” was a bit strong given the actual content of Toby’s speech, but before she could say so, something clicked in her head. “He told you?” she asked, incredulous. “He told you what he said to me?”

“Zadrota!” Ludmilla hissed. “Who do you think told him to talk to you in the first place? You think he would have ever done that on his own?”

“Now wait a minute!” Adellia said, affronted. “You told him to come talk to me? Why? What the hell, Ludmilla?”

The other girl rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes, you were so eager to tell him how you felt. I saw it.”

“Well, this isn’t a game! This is my life! You can’t just pull the strings like this!”

Ludmilla had the decency to look abashed. “Maybe so. But from where I was standing, you two were going to dance around each other forever. I was trying to help, Adellia!”
“Well, maybe ask me if I want your help next time!” Adellia said. “Now look at us! This is even worse than before!”

“Worse than you think,” Ludmilla said, nodding gravely. “He wasn’t in class today.”

Adellia grimaced. “Probably crying in his room. He’s such a--”

“No, zadrota, listen. He wasn’t in class today. This is Toby Cotton. You know him! Would he miss class just because of a little broken heart? He dragged himself in when his face was half swollen up with Sophit’s Pox!”

Adellia’s heart sank. Ludmilla was right, she knew it. “So is he ok?” she asked. “What do we do?”

“We go find him, that’s what. And apologize.” Ludmilla held up a hand. “I apologize. For messing with you two like that. But if you want to apologize to him too, that’s your business.”

Adellia ground her teeth together. She hated apologizing. But she had to admit that if Toby was missing class, things were more serious than she’d thought. She could make an exception.

However, when they arrived at his dorm room, more bad news was waiting. “No, sorry,” said Adjit Singh, his suitemate. “He’s not in.”

“Well, where is he?” Ludmilla demanded. Singh, a short, compact boy with dark brown skin and the wispy beginnings of a moustache, crossed his arms. “Don’t know,” he said. “He didn’t sleep here last night. Now if you’ll let me be, I have studying to--”

“Out of the way,” Ludmilla growled. She shoved forward. Singh tried to block her for a moment, but he may as well have been trying to hold back the tide; she rolled over him and forced him back a few steps. “Please,” he said, but she had already turned her back. Adellia, following in her wake, tried to put on a conciliatory tone. “We’ll just be a moment,” she explained. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

Toby’s room was as she remembered it: neat and tidy. That is, except for the pile of papers on his desk. It looked as though he had left in some haste; he hadn’t even tidied up. Adellia caught up with Ludmilla by the desk and looked down. “What are we looking at here?” she asked. “What’s all this?”

In answer, Ludmilla’s finger stabbed down at a map of the school. A door in the basement had been circled in red ink. Next to it were a few notes in Toby’s tight, neat handwriting. Adellia read them with mounting unease.

“The idiot,” she said, under her breath. “He’s gone off on a hunt.”

“I wonder who he was trying to impress,” said Ludmilla, crossing her arms and turning towards Adellia. Her penetrating stare broke through Adellia’s defenses.

“All right!” Adellia exclaimed and threw her hands in the air. “All right! I’ll apologize to him when we find him!”

To her credit, Ludmilla didn’t even hesitate. “That’s right,” she said. “When we find him. Meet you by the smithy in twenty minutes, girl. Bring your kit.”

As Adellia packed, she remembered her first, ill-fated trip into the Hoxwald. A shudder ran through her. She hoped that, wherever Toby was, his solo expedition had turned out better than hers had. That seemed so long ago; in truth, it had been little more than a year, but what a year it
had been! She packed her new crossbow and a dozen bolts, then thought for a moment and grabbed a dozen more. Who knew what lurked in the Hoxleigh sub-basements? The sewers were dangerous enough.

When she arrived at the marked door, Ludmilla was already there. “Look,” she said, beckoning Adellia forward. “It’s not locked. Someone forced it and swung it back.” She opened the door a crack to demonstrate. A puff of breeze blew out, carrying with it a nasty, rotten smell. Adellia pinched her nose. “This looks like the place on his notes. Any idea what’s down there?”

Ludmilla shrugged. “He didn’t seem sure. Something about an old escaped specimen, or something. It might just be a myth.” She pulled a torch out of her bag, then opened the door wider and stepped through. “Coming?”

Adellia nodded and swallowed heavily. Once again, she felt herself transported back to the Hoxwald. *This time, things will be different*, she thought. *For one thing, I’m not alone*. She looked at Ludmilla; the other girl was dressed unusually for her, in long trousers tucked into her tall boots and a thick overcoat. Bronze plates sewn into coat clinked softly against each other as she moved. A thick leather belt cinched across her waist pinned the armored coat to her figure, and a bandolier slung across her chest held several clanking metal devices Adellia couldn’t identify. This was a professional’s outfit, she realized. Ludmilla may have been a genial sort (outside the wrestling ring, where she was a holy terror) but she was every bit as serious about her calling as Adellia.

“Well?” she said, turning around as the torch ignited. “What are you waiting for? Off we go, to rescue the handsome prince.”

Adellia set her face in what she hoped was an expression of grim determination. She was a professional, too. Almost. Close enough, really. She took a deep breath, stepped through the door, and closed it behind her.

The air on the other side was thick and stuffy. There was no sound but their breathing and the faint crackle of the torch as they descended the stairs. The room on the far side looked like some kind of storage annex; rows and rows of boxes and jars filled almost every inch of the floor. Ludmilla reached the bottom of the stairs first and pointed down at her feet.

“What?” Adellia asked automatically. She blushed as Ludmilla held one angry finger to her lips. Silently, Adellia nodded, then looked down. She saw what Ludmilla had seen at once: footprints, in the dust. One set, medium-sized, heading deeper inside.

Both girls crept along as quietly as they could manage. Strange shadows flickered on the walls and ceiling as the light filtered through dusty old jars; some of the shapes they showed made Adellia’s stomach queasy. She kept her eyes on the footprints. They led to the end of the row, then turned.

Ludmilla held up one hand and stopped so quickly that Adellia almost ran into her. She cupped one hand to her ear theatrically. At first Adellia frowned quizzically, but then she could hear it too: a faint sound that echoed off the walls. Her eyebrows knotted as she tried to place it. Sort of a wet squelching, and a low moan…

Her blood ran cold. Visions filled her mind-- Toby, dismembered, his pieces scattered across the floor. A ghoulish gargoyle face smeared with his blood. His eyes, staring at her in betrayal. *Where were you?* they seemed to be saying. *Why didn’t you save me?*

The noise was coming from a cavernous space off to her right. She could see an area of deeper darkness, an archway that led into a side cave. Abandoning all subtlety, she pushed past Ludmilla
and charged forward. Her hand was already going to her belt. Ludmilla ran after her with the torch held high. The noises grew louder as they went, until they burst through the archway and came up short.

Toby lay on the ground. He was naked and covered in bruises and scratches. His mouth was open, and a thin stream of drool ran down his cheek; his eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling. His chest rose and fell, but that was the only sign he was still alive. Surrounding him and climbing all over him was… a pack of Adellias. There were at least a dozen of them, all nude, most smeared with sweat and dirt and less identifiable fluids. Some looked just like her, right down to the birthmark under her left breast. Others looked the way she could only dream of: their hair was longer and straighter, their breasts larger, their hips rounder, their skin paler and more smooth. Their faces had a kind of icy patrician beauty, but they were still recognizably Adellia. They crawled all over Toby and rubbed their bodies against him. One was suckling at his toes; another pressed her breasts together, pinning his arm. Two more were kissing his mouth at once while yet another knelt above his head, grinding her pubic mound across his face. One of the largest, a statuesque beauty with proportions that Adellia could only dream of, took pride of place; she was sitting upright atop his cock, grinding her hips back and forth in a slow, luxurious rhythm. She had his free hand clutched in both of hers and held it to her breast, dragging his limp fingers across the hard pink nub of her perfect nipple. The others writhed sinuously around him, kissing and fondling each other and grabbing at his flesh. They pinched and poked, prodded and caressed, stroked and rubbed and squeezed every inch of his prone form. Adellia looked on in aghast horror. One of the two kissing his face, she realized, didn’t share her face-- this one was a Ludmilla, though her stomach was slightly flatter and her breasts noticeably larger.

The clones looked up at her as she stumbled to a halt. Revulsion twisted their features. A few of the closest stood up to face her; as soon as they let go of Toby, more of the pack fell on him with cries of longing. The lead doppelganger facing her was one of the most beautiful. A thin trickle of white fluid leaked out from between her delicate, coraline labia and traced a stream down her thigh. She twitched her head to the side, cracking her neck, then narrowed her eyes angrily at the new arrivals. Her mouth opened to reveal a forest of sharp teeth and she let out a hiss that would not have been out of place coming from a boiling tea kettle. A long, black tongue flicked out from between those teeth.

“Puca!” cursed Ludmilla.

Adellia risked a look away from the advancing clones. “What was that?” she said over her shoulder.

“They’re puca!” Ludmilla repeated. “Shapeshifters! They don’t have brains, they just reflect your desires back to you! They’re feeding on him!”

Adellia drew her crossbow from her belt and made sure a bolt was slotted into place. “Can we shoot them?” she asked.

Ludmilla shrugged. “I don’t see why no-”

Adellia’s first bolt caught the lead puca in the middle of the forehead. The thing’s eyes crossed, then she fell over backward like a toppled tree. Her sisters hissed angrily and darted forward. Adellia was fumbling with the crossbow to reload, but Ludmilla shouldered past her and met the oncoming rush. She grabbed one of the puca around the waist and shoved it hard as it flailed at her with Adellia’s arms. Close to, Adellia could see the imitation wasn’t perfect-- she didn’t have such long, jagged claws-- but it was still disconcerting to watch her own face distort in a look of pained surprise. The other puca slashed at Ludmilla, but its claws rang off the metalwork sewn into her
jacket. She braced herself against the ground and floored it with an uppercut. The first one was scrambling back to its feet, murder in its eyes, but by this time Adellia had reloaded. She paused for a moment—this was one of the “normal” Adellias, and the thought of shooting herself, even in self-defense, was jarring. Then it opened its mouth impossibly wide and growled like a predator, so she put her shot right through the back of its throat.

Sensing the threat, the other puca began to converge. They hissed and spat as they came. Adellia and Ludmilla were quickly surrounded; a clawed hand slapped Adellia’s bow out of her hands as she tried to reload, and she barely managed to get her knife up in time to deflect the next attack. Her blade lopped off two of the puca’s fingers, and she paused as she saw her mirror image’s face twist with agony. Then something sharp sliced across the back of her neck and she threw herself forward. Her knife buried itself in the wounded puca’s stomach and something thick and oily seeped out. Not blood— it smelled like decaying plant matter and looked like fertilizer. The puca folded up around the blade and collapsed.

Adellia was quickly separated from Ludmilla in the melee. She caught a glimpse of the other girl grappling with a tall Adellia; the puca had grabbed a handful of Ludmilla’s hair, but released it with an indignant squawk when the wrestler grabbed its exposed nipple and gave it a vicious twist. She laid her hands on its shoulders and brought her head forward with an sound like someone dropping a coconut off a stepladder. Then another puca dove on Adellia and bore her to the ground. Her knife clattered away across the floor.

This one wore Ludmilla’s face, which was currently twisted in a grimace of hatred. Its fingers wrapped around Adellia’s throat and began to tighten. She gasped for breath and only managed to half-fill her lungs before her airway cut off.

“I… thought… you said… these things… reflect… desires…” she gurgled from floor level. Somewhere overhead, Ludmilla called back: “They do! They look like what you want most!”

“Then… why… does… this… one… look… like… you…” Adellia choked out. Ludmilla’s answer sounded almost indignant.

“I don’t know! Ask your boyfriend!”

“He’s… not… my… graaaaa…” Spots danced before Adellia’s eyes. Her vision started tunneling. She groped blindly with her free hand. It closed around something sharp. Her knife? No, thinner. It felt like a crossbow bolt. She gripped it with all the strength she had left and brought her fist around. The bolt punched into the side of the puca’s skull, splattering her hand with peaty goo. The ersatz Ludmilla’s eyes went dull and she collapsed on top of Adellia. At least her grip slackened, allowing Adellia to draw in a painful, rattling breath, but now she was pinned. She squirmed helplessly for a few seconds before the real Ludmilla reached down and kicked the body off her.

The wrestler was bleeding from a cut under one eye and her jacket was torn and filthy. Half of her bandolier was empty. “Look out!” she rasped, and extended a hand to help Adellia to her feet. “More coming!”

These didn’t resemble her. They didn’t look like much of anything. They were tall, thin shapes, mere outlines against the deeper darkness, that her eyes refused to focus on. Then they stepped closer and she realized she had been wrong. They had had shapes all along. Toby’s shape.

There were a half dozen of them— tall Tobys, short ones, Tobys rippling with muscles (shirt parted to reveal a set of washboard abs that would put Adellia’s to shame) and Tobys with flowing golden locks. Ludmilla gave her a quizzical look. “Really, Adellia?” she asked.
“What?” demanded Adellia. “What’s that look mean? What are you saying?”

Ludmilla snorted. “They look like the cover of dime store romance novels. Girl, when we get back, let me lend to you from my private library. You can do better than this.”

“Come on!” Adellia said, throwing her hands up. “This isn’t fair! They didn’t ask me what I wanted! Besides, look at that one!” The puca on the end bore a striking resemblance to Peter the rugby player. His tight athletic shorts did nothing to conceal a bulge the size of a ripe cucumber. Ludmilla shrugged. “Fine. Guilty as charged. Come on, let’s get them!”

The pucas charged in, leaving Adellia no time to catch her breath. Despite their size and apparent musculature, they were no stronger than the Adellia-pucas had been. One of them swung a fist at her face, which she easily dodged. Her riposte with the knife cut into his belly, and he stumbled backwards, pressing both hands to the terrible wound. A pleading looking crossed his face, and he held out one hand in a gesture of supplication. Adellia hesitated…

Another puca leapt on her from the side. Its teeth gnashed inches from her face. She could feel the claws tearing her shirt to ribbons. Any second now, it would find purchase, and--

The weight was lifted off her. Ludmilla held the thrashing thing like a kitten that had been naughty, regarded it for a moment, then dashed it into the floor. It let out an angry squawk, so she bashed it again. The second impact sent up a spray of vegetable-smelling gunk and the thing fell silent.

Both girls stood, breathing heavily, in the center of a ring of bodies. Toby was still lying insensate on the ground, and the Adellia clone that had been riding him was still doing so. She turned now, with exaggerated slowness, and climbed to her feet. Toby’s penis slid free from her quim with a wet *slurp*, and a trickle of fluid began to inch down her thigh. She was tall, standing head and shoulders above the other pucas, and possessed a fairy-tale beauty; she looked like the Ice Queen from Adellia’s childhood stories, except wearing her own face. Her breasts were perfect pale mounds, her hips beautifully flared out to create an alluring bubble butt. Her lips were bright red and so was her tongue, which she extended to lick across them in a slow, sensuous movement. She overtopped Adellia by a foot at least. When she stepped towards them, a smell came with her. It smelled like roses, like sugar water, like musk and sweat and cum. It was the smell of desire. She crooked one finger at Adellia, beckoning.

Adellia reached into her bag. Her pistol crossbow was gone, lost in the melee, but she still had her Christmas present. It was wound, notched, and loaded; she tested the bolt with a finger and found it sharp enough to draw blood. She raised it carefully and aimed directly for her doppelganger’s heart. The giant Adellia only smiled.

Twang! The moment her finger tightened on the trigger she knew the shot was perfect. The bolt flew across the space between them in less than a heartbeat. Her twin’s smile never wavered; her hand moved like lightning, there was a sound like the snapping of a giant tree branch, and then she was holding the bolt between thumb and forefinger. She looked at it as though it was a piece of trash she had found on the floor and tossed it aside.

Adellia stared in disbelief. She looked down at the crossbow in her hands. It gleamed up at her, as shiny and new as when she had unwrapped it. *Not my fault*, it said. *I did my job.*

Toby was starting to stir. He groaned and pushed himself up into a sitting position. His eyes were unfocused, and he wiped the drool off his cheek with one hand. “Adellia?” he murmured, looking from one Adellia to the other. “Wha-?” The giant puca laid one hand on his shoulder protectively. With her other hand, she pointed at Adellia, then tapped herself on the chest. The gesture was
Something snapped inside Adellia. She dropped her bag and her bow and balled her hands into fists. “Careful, girl,” said Ludmilla, her tone low and warning. “Maybe we should…”

It was too late. With a ululating battle cry, Adellia charged forward. The puca’s eyes widened as she crossed the gap between them, feet pounding, arms held out overhead. She brought one fist down and the puca barely managed to block it. She let go of Toby, who slumped backwards, and brought one huge fist around. *Pow!* The impact staggered Adellia, and for a moment she saw stars. The puca towered over her, an angry phantom wearing her face. Adellia looked up at it in fury. It was perfect, everything she knew she could never be. Everything Toby wanted her to be. Those full lips, those ripe breasts, that soft skin, those delicate fingers… the real Adellia looked like the counterfeit, and a poor counterfeit at that. She could never compete. She sagged and let out a defeated breath. As if recognizing her despair, the puca smiled. One hand reached out towards Toby, who moaned and tried to push himself away.

Adellia’s head snapped up. Warm blood flooded her veins. She could feel her muscles cramping and creaking, but she brought her arms up anyways. Her legs tensed and bunch and then she leapt straight up. It was the greatest leap of her life—she knew now, without a shadow of a doubt, that she would be able to make that final jump on the climbing wall. She soared forward, arms outstretched, and tackled the puca to the ground. Her doppelganger’s mouth fell open in surprise. The two of them rolled in the dirt and Adellia came out on top. She straddled the puca across her perfect, flat stomach, grabbed her head in both hands and dashed it furiously against the ground. The first impact stunned the creature. Its eyes crossed and its tongue lolled out. She did not relent, even at the sight of her own face wearing such a hurt expression. *Thok!* The puca’s skull bounced off the ground again, and Adellia held on grimly.

“Let!”

*Thok!*

“Go!”

*Thok!*

“Of!”

*Thok!*

“My!”

*Thok!*

“MAN!”

*Krrunch!* This time she felt the impact all the way up her arm. Something had given way. The puca’s eyes rolled back into her head and she collapsed lifelessly to the ground. She was left panting hard, spattered with peaty ichor and covered in bruises and cuts.

Ludmilla limped across the room and, without saying anything, helped her to her feet. Leaning on each other for support, they walked over to where Toby lay. He looked up at them bleary-eyed and waved a hand in a weak gesture of warding. Adellia fell to her knees next to him and cradled his head in her lap.

“Toby,” she said, and gave his hand an urgent squeeze. “Toby, it’s me, it’s Adellia. The real
“Rea’?” he breathed. His eyes focused on her. They were full of fear and exhaustion. Adellia squeezed him again and cradled his lolling head. “Yes! Real! The real me, I promise!”

“You… came…” he managed, and broke out into a coughing fit. Adellia nodded. “Yes, Toby! I came! I wanted to tell you… your question, in the library… yes. Toby, yes! I do! I do! I wanted to tell you, I just…” she floundered for words, gave up, and kissed him. It was just as she remembered it: the warm softness of his lips, the feel of his jaw against hers. She could taste something slightly rotten, but she didn’t mind. She closed her eyes and their surroundings fell away: the two of them were at the school dance, whirling in pristine formalwear while the other dancers turned around them like clockwork. The vision lasted for only a moment, but she knew she’d be back to revisit it later. She broke the kiss and hoisted Toby up into a sitting position. “Come on, Cotton Ball,” she said. “Let’s get you to the nurse’s office.”

Two weeks later, Adellia closed her eyes and clung to the wall. She could feel the rope harness digging into her thighs and hips and the gentle tug of the belaying rope. The smell of chalk dust filled her nostrils. Her hands clung precariously to a couple of tiny grips; her feet were braced against a larger stone. She saw the next grip up ahead. It looked impossibly small, impossibly far away. She looked down. Toby was down here, watching anxiously. He seemed so tiny from this height. When he saw her looking he gave her a thumbs up and then, sheepishly, blew her a kiss. She smiled and looked back to the wall.

Nothing for it. She’d have to jump. She took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Her foot shifted imperceptibly to get a better angle. She tensed her muscles, flexed, and leapt.
Anthropology of Courtship

Chapter Summary

Adellia Hawk stalks her most dangerous prey yet: the teenage boy.

Consider clothing.

Why do we drape ourselves in the hides of beasts, the excretions of silkworms, the spun product of the cotton plant? Why do we cut, measure, sew, dye, cinch, buckle, tie, strap and clip? Modesty could just as surely be attained by a heavy tarp-- which would surely keep out the elements as well. But of course clothing is much more than just shelter and warmth. The way we dress is like a second language. The cut of our clothes, our choice of colors, the way we conform to or deny the fashions of the era: they speak volumes about our values and personalities. There are rules and exceptions, standards that determine which items of clothing are (wholly arbitrarily) within the bounds of decency and which are outside. What was once a simple, utilitarian invention meant to keep humanity warm and dry has become an anchor around our necks, paralyzing us, forcing us to expend tremendous mental energy on a daily basis just to avoid embarrassment and ridicule.

Or so Adellia Hawk believed, anyways. Adellia, daughter of the famous and highly regarded Hawk family and senior at the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters, had gone through most of her eighteen years of life choosing her clothing by a simple heuristic: whatever happened to enter her field of vision first and did not obviously smell got put on. Not that it mattered much: the vast majority of her wardrobe was full of hard-wearing, practical leather and cotton, clothes practical for running and climbing and hiking. Hunting, in other words.

She remembered once, at the age of seven, her mother had had a dress tailored for her. The Hawk family was sitting for a portrait, and it would not do for young Adellia to look anything less than ladylike. She had fidgeted all through the fittings and wound up with a ruffled confection in silk. It had outlasted the completion of the portrait by about one week; after a series of experiments proved it impractical for tree-climbing, the tattered remains disappeared into what Lady Hawk referred to as a “hope chest.” Just whose hope, Adellia wasn’t sure; she had the idea that it was supposed to be hers, but as she stubbornly refused to become a “proper lady” she suspected it was her mother’s. If so, it was to be a forlorn hope. That dress, Adellia had sworn to herself, would be the last she ever wore.

She sighed. Yet another promise broken.

Beside her, Ludmilla Sokolova beamed. It was a warm Saturday in early spring, and the two young women had taken advantage of the free day to ride a coach into town. Adellia was still of the opinion that everything worthwhile in life could be found at Hoxleigh-- baked beans, a climbing wall, and Toby Cotton-- but Ludmilla had insisted. Graduation was on the horizon, but before that, a test more fiendishly difficult than any of Adellia’s final exams. The Spring Formal.

Technically, it was open to students of all ages, but seniors were expected to attend. It was customary. Adellia had never been asked, although she had noticed a sharp uptick in nervous male attention in the weeks before previous Formals. There was something about her manner that unnerved potential dates, she had decided. They must be intimidated. It was just as well; she’d always enjoyed the solitude, and had spent previous Formal nights climbing. That wasn’t an option
this year. Neither was attending stag. For the first time, she had a… a… she hated the word boyfriend, it sounded so immature, but what else was Toby? Ever since she had rescued him from his ill-advised subterranean venture, they had shared an understanding. They ate together, studied together, shared tentative and bashful kisses whenever they parted and… that was it.

Perhaps that was why Ludmilla had insisted that Adellia accompany her into town. She had broached the subject in her usual delicate way. Ambushing Adellia in the library during one of Toby’s many extra credit assignments, Ludmilla had laid one meaty hand on top of the other girl’s book and pushed it out of the way. “So,” she’d said, a jack-o-lantern grin on her face, “you done it yet?”

Adellia had blinked. “What? Homework? No, I--”

“No,” scoffed Ludmilla, “it. You know? You and Toby? The horizontal barynya?” Adellia hadn’t heard the word, but she understood the hand gestures readily enough. She colored. “No!” she said, a bit louder than she’d meant to. “Not yet.”

Ludmilla frowned theatrically. “What are you waiting for? Angels to descend from heaven? Written permission from the Headmaster? Him to ask you? You’ll be seeing the angels first, if it’s that last one.”

Adellia gritted her teeth. Ludmilla was her best friend—best in a pretty small pool, it had to be said—but just occasionally her meddling became intolerable. “We’re just waiting for the right time,” she snapped. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Well, surely you’re going to the Formal with him, no? He’ll expect it after that,” Ludmilla said. Adellia blanched. She hadn’t really thought about the formal, but now it loomed large in her mind’s eye. She looked up desperately. “Well…” she began. “I…” she swallowed. “I dunno. I haven’t thought about it.”

Ludmilla planted her hands on her hips. “Girl! That won’t do. You’re going to remember this night for the rest of your life! It has to be special! You have a dress at least, right?”

Adellia’s hopeless look must have given her away. Ludmilla threw up her hands and grimaced as though the gods had taken her firstborn. “My work is cut out for me! Adellia, kroshka, we are going shopping this weekend.” She laid one arm over Adellia’s shoulders. “This is going to be fun!”

So that was how she had ended up here, standing on the cobblestones in front of Hebert’s Elegant and Industrious Tailor Shoppe (For All Occasions), on a perfectly good Saturday when she could be getting in a solid five or six hours at the Armory. Toby had offered to come, but Ludmilla had brushed him off. “This is girl’s business, khlopok,” she had said. “Let me just borrow this delicate flower of yours for an afternoon, yes?” The obvious, clanging falseness of that description had clearly thrown Toby for a loop; he’d nodded blankly and waved a timid goodbye.

Adellia had faced the unknown terrors of the Hoxwald, the carnivorous plants of the greenhouse, and the monster-infested sublevels of the school, but just at that moment she’d have gladly gone back to any of those places rather than set foot inside the dress shop. Or shoppe; she still wasn’t sure of the distinction. But Ludmilla had hooked her elbow through Adellia’s and was dragging her forward. The door swung open and the tiny brass bell set in the frame rang out her doom.

Inside, the shop(pe) was dim and musty. Headless wooden mannequins wearing elegant dresses lined the walls; to Adellia, it looked as though a bridal party had been attacked by a Scalptaker Lizard, but she felt instinctively that this observation would win her no prizes. Instead she
murmured in what she hoped was an appreciative tone as the shopkeeper droned on at length about
the quality of their fabrics, the skill of their tailors, and the exquisite beauty of the two obviously
very intelligent and discerning young women before her. Ludmilla seemed to be having the time of
her life; she giggled coquettishly in a way that Adellia found hard to square with her frankly
terrifying history in the wrestling ring. Gone was the girl who had threatened to knot Catherine
White’s arms into a pretzel (and nearly done it, too). Ludmilla had dressed in a modest cotton skirt
and blouse, but she seemed eager to try on every dress in the shop. The shopkeeper looked at her
with the jaded expression of one who had been through the same routine with dozens of girls in the
past couple of weeks. When she looked at Adellia, though, her eyes lit up. Adellia squirmed self-
consciously as the lady looked her up and down. Whatever she saw plainly pleased her; she
descended on Adellia and laid a palm on her back to guide her deeper into the shop. “How about
your friend here, first?” she said. “Young lady, I have some gorgeous designs that will really set
off your eyes.”

Adellia shot a pleading look at her friend, but there was no help coming from that quarter. “That
sounds lovely!” crowed Ludmilla. “Come on, come on, Adellia, on the pedestal!” Adellia felt like a
trophy as she climbed up; she had to resist the urge to strike a little pose. Instead she clutched her
hands together and tried to make herself as small as possible. At least the shopkeeper pulled a little
curtain around them so passersby would not be able to peep in the windows. She bustled over to the
wall and returned with a russet-colored dress with puffy sleeves and a crinoline petticoat. The
reluctant Adellia struggled into the dress; more than once she felt as though she was drowning in
the overlapping folds of fabric, but eventually Ludmilla and the shopkeeper succeeded at lining it
up, at least roughly, with the contours of her body. Adellia looked into the nearest mirror and
scowled. She looked like a bell; she imagined if she swayed back and forth too fast, she’d ring. Her
arms stuck out awkwardly at her sides like a child in a too-large coat. A wide ruff around the neck
made her feel like her head was being served on a platter. Still, she tried a smile. “It’s… nice,” she
said. “I’ll take it. Ok, Ludmilla, your turn.”

Both Ludmilla and the shopkeeper were shaking their heads. They shared a look, as though passing
some secret between them. “What?” demanded Adellia. “What’s wrong with it?” She had hoped
for an early escape, but it seemed her ordeal was just beginning.

Many hours later, Adellia decided that she had been wrong. She had struggled before at Hoxleigh,
but she had always forced herself to keep going. She had buckled down, worked hard, and studied
her brains out, because she had always believed that being a real monster hunter was worth any
trial. Now, though, she knew the truth. If this was what it took to be a hunter, maybe she wasn’t cut
out for it after all.

She had tried on what seemed like a hundred dresses. Two hundred. Dresses in every color: red,
black, navy blue, bright green. Long dresses that trailed behind her and short ones that left her
ankles exposed. Dresses with bustles, with petticoats, with panniers and hoops and all kinds of
creaking whalebone scaffolding that made her feel like a clipper ship. Dresses with long sleeves,
short sleeves, no sleeves… her head was spinning, she was getting dehydrated, and she had ceased
to be able to tell one dress from the next. Each time, she had declared herself satisfied, and each
time Ludmilla had shook her head no. Finally, as the setting sun was starting to spread tendrils of
flame across the horizon, Ludmilla stepped back and gave a single, curt nod.

Adellia was wearing a slim, dark purple dress with just a hint of starch in the petticoat. The bodice
was fringed in black lace, as were the wrist cuffs and the satin edging on the skirt. The shopkeeper
and folded and pinned the skirt just so, and when Adellia moved the dress swished back and forth
as though it was a wave and she was riding it like a mermaid. Adellia caught a glimpse of herself in
the mirror and stifled a gasp. She would never get used to the sight of herself in a dress, never…but she might get used to the sight of herself in this dress. Maybe. From time to time.
“We’ll take it!” said Ludmilla, punching the air. “Yes!” The shopkeeper bobbed around them, all obsequious smiles as Adellia changed back into her regular clothes. “You can return for it in a week, my dear,” she said. “The alterations will be done by then.”

Adellia slouched back against the wall and wiped her brow. “Well!” she said. “That was fun. Your turn, Ludmilla.” Ludmilla waved a hand. “Oh, I bought mine a month ago. Don’t worry about me.”

Adellia’s jaw dropped. She was too tired to be angry. Instead she just shook her head. Ludmilla saw her expression and doubled over laughing. “Oh!” she said, gasping for breath. “Your face!”

Arm in arm again, the two of them left the store. “You know,” Ludmilla began, as they walked back to the carriage depot, “there’s other things you can do with Toby. I’m just saying…”

Adellia let Ludmilla’s voice wash over her. She was still thinking about the purple dress, the way it had moved. She imagined herself at the Formal, wearing it, and was surprised to feel a tickle of unease in her tummy. Once the image might have made her laugh. Her, Adellia Hawk, swanning around at some fancy dress party? Now all she could think about was the many ways it could all go wrong.

Back in her room, she searched frantically through her shelves and across her desk. It’s somewhere, it’s here, I saw it… aha! She swept a whole semester’s worth of anatomy notes onto the floor and pulled out a monthly calendar. It was marked with her birthday, graduation day, and not much else. Now she dipped a pen in her inkwell and scrawled across the date, two weeks from now: SPRING FORMAL. She circled it twice for emphasis, then thought for a moment and added an underline. This done, she tacked the calendar up against the side of her desk so that it would be the first thing she saw every day. Great, she thought. Now I’ll be motivated. Like a death row prisoner.

Her Monday afternoons were spent in study hall with Toby. To tell the truth, she quite looked forward to it. He was quiet, but he respected her occasional need to sniff, fidget or drum her fingernails on the table while she studied. The two of them would carefully arrange their chairs so that their thighs brushed against each other when they sat side by side. Once, he had taken her right hand in his left; they held that position, each staring at their book and sweating profusely, neither daring to be the one to break contact. Eventually she had gotten up to use the bathroom, muttering excuses and blushing furiously. She liked the physical contact. It was… nice, in a way that she didn’t have words for yet. Not arousing, not like her little “favor” so many months ago, but comforting. The trouble was that their unspoken understanding remained, well, unspoken. His kisses were chaste, almost shy, though there was nothing chaste about the knock-kneed half-crouch he always affected after they’d spent time together. Adellia knew what that meant.

This Monday they were sitting quite close, so every time Adellia turned a page her arm would rub against his. His forearms were bare and warm, and those brief moments of skin-to-skin contact made Adellia’s stomach flutter. She found herself distracted. Her thoughts seemed to chase each other around and around: I’m studying with my boyfriend. Toby Cotton, my boyfriend, is studying with me. Just me and my boyfriend, in the library… It sounded weird even in her head. She certainly couldn’t say it out loud.

“Um.” It was a little sound, a placeholder word while the mind worked out what it wanted to say next, but it captured her full attention. She turned to Toby. He had slotted a bookmark into place and was looking at her with a calm expression. At the sight of her, his eyes flickered nervously, but soon returned. There was determination in his gaze, the will to see through a difficult and thankless task.
“Adellia,” he began. “Do you… that is, uh, what are you doing two Saturdays from now?”

“Oh?” she asked with forced casualness. “That’s the night of the Spring Formal, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yes,” he said. “It is. That night. That night is when it is, actually. Are you, uh do you plan on going?”

“I hadn’t decided yet.” Adellia’s smile was plastered to her face. She could not turn down the corners of her mouth, even if she wanted to; it was as though her face had become a mask. Thank God it’s just the two of us here, she thought.

“Well,” said Toby, forging ahead, “would you like to go? With me, I mean. Would you like to go with me?” Hope thrummed on every syllable. Despite the awkwardness, Adellia felt a great surge of affection for Toby. This was her Cotton Ball: soft, mushy, but brave as anything. Braver than me, anyways. I wasn’t about to ask him.

“No,” she said, “I’ll pick you up, Mr. Cotton. And you’d better have a corsage.”

He drew back with a solemn expression on his face. “Of course, Adellia!” he said. “Oh, I will, I promise!” She scanned his eyes for hints of sarcasm, but found only a sense of resolute duty that was sweet and a little embarrassing. She covered her giggle with one hand. “Now, can we study a bit?” she asked. “I have a quiz tomorrow on arrowhead designs and I’m barely scraping a C in that class as it is.”

That night, when Adellia returned to her room, she sat up in bed and stared at the circled date. To her, the circles looked like dancers, whirling around and around while violin and cello filled the air with music. The underline would be a line of admirers, and she wasn’t sure what the random speckles of spilled ink might represent. Festive confetti, maybe? She closed her eyes and saw herself dancing. Dream-Adellia moved with lissome grace across the floor. Her back was straight, her skin as pale and smooth as porcelain, her hair falling in elegant waves across her shoulders. She was pretty sure her bosom was larger, too, although she had never had any complaints in that area. The lights would glitter off of every sequin and polished button, and all eyes would be upon her. They’d sigh as her handsome beau made an appearance and held out one well-muscled arm, and as she took her first steps across the polished marble, applause would break out like a light summer rain…

She shook her head to clear it. What the hell kind of fantasy was that? She was Adellia Hawk, Monster Hunter Extraordinaire, and if she was being applauded it would be for the manticore’s head she carried in one blood-soaked fist. Yet try as she might, her triumphant fantasies kept featuring silk gowns and quiet waltzes. A treacherous little voice whispered in her ear: you know, you can be the best monster hunter that ever lived and dance in that beautiful dress. Ask Lady Ebersoll. Ask your mother.

The voice had a point, she had to admit. She flopped down, pulled the sheet over herself, and hugged the pillow close. As she drifted off to sleep, a faint smile crept onto her face and stayed there. She could still hear the music.
The fantasy recurred during breakfast the next day, and halfway through her morning class. It was just starting up again at lunchtime when Ludmilla interrupted with the *clank* of her laden tray onto the table. “Well?” she asked. Adellia looked up in confusion as the last traces of her daydream melted away like snowflakes.

“Well what?” she asked.

“Girl, your feet barely touched the ground all morning. What happened? Is it Toby?” Ludmilla’s smile became predatory. “Did you… ahem?”

“No!” Adellia practically squeaked. “I mean, no. But he asked me to the Spring Formal. You know, formal… ly.”


“Of course I did!” Adellia replied indignantly. “I was very polite.” She stared off into space thoughtfully for a moment. “It was nice of him. It felt… nice.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Ludmilla said, nodding. She tore into a crust of sourdough bread with her teeth and chewed thoughtfully. When she next spoke, it was slightly muffled by a mouthful of bread. “Ou otta e areful, ough.”

Adellia’s brow furrowed as she tried to puzzle this out. Ludmilla held up a finger for patience. She swallowed and repeated, “You got to be careful. These big dances… there’s expectations. Romance! Magic! You’ll remember it for the rest of your life. Make sure it’s a good memory, yes?”

Adellia rolled her eyes. “Is that all you think about, Ludmilla?” she asked. Ludmilla shook her head, her bushy mane of hair cascading back and forth in a wild torrent. Her face was all bruised innocence. “Certainly not!” she protested. “But the Formal… ah, I may be the shaved bear, but I can have a romantic soul, no? The first dance… the music all around you, the flowers and chivalry…” she clasped her hands to her bosom. “I am bringing Peter, and if he can manage not to step on my feet, that will be a success, I think. But Toby has read books. He will try to make it perfect for you.”

Adellia’s expression turned queasy. She shuffled the potatoes around on her plate with her fork, but despite their crisp and appetizing smell, she couldn’t bring herself to eat. “It’s just a stupid dance,” she mumbled, but in her heart she knew it wasn’t true. “I don’t care about all that mushy stuff. I’d rather just go for a… a walk in the woods or something.”

“You don’t want to be the kind of girl who cares about the mushy stuff,” Ludmilla said. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t care about it. You can be the big tough huntress and look forward to the dance. It won’t turn you into… who is you always complain about? Cordelia?”

“Corinthia Swain,” muttered Adellia and looked down. Corinthia was certainly looking forward to this dance. Corinthia had her dress picked out already-- had had it for months, Adellia would bet. Corinthia knew all the steps to every dance, and every eye would be on her, even though the one time Adellia had seen her pick up a crossbow she had dropped it on her foot. Adellia would never, ever be like Corinthia. She’d die first.

*But it wouldn’t be so bad for one night, would it?* said that same tiny, treacherous voice. *Not forever. But to know what it’s like, just for a night…*

Ludmilla shook her head. “The hair, the makeup-- your eyebrows, Adellia, we have to do something about your eyebrows. And then the dance steps…”

Adellia listened in mounting horror. The Spring Formal was looking less and less like a pleasant evening and more and more like yet another test she’d barely pass. And what would Toby do? When his date showed up in disarray, tripped over his feet, and blew her nose on her sleeve? Her mind’s eye looked on in horror. She pined for the days when she’d simply tolerated his little schoolboy crush. Things were simpler, then. And less scary.

“I can’t do any of that stuff!” she cried. “Have you made your appointments yet?”

Ludmilla rolled her eyes and growled. “Weeks ago.” Her expression softened at the sight of Adellia’s pleading gaze. “You really haven’t done any of this stuff before?”

“No,” said Adellia with a downcast look. “I mean, I never… usually my parents would make appointments, or Simpkins.” She looked down at her food. “Can I go with you?”

For a moment, it looked like Ludmilla would refuse, but she relented. “Ach, fine,” she said, with a wave of her hand. “Just be on time, alright? Day of the dance.”

Adellia had never had a haircut done by anyone except old Mrs. Porsh, her mother’s lady-in-waiting. Mrs. Porsh knew exactly one cut, and that was the one Adellia had worn every day for the past decade: a sort of loose bob, with the longest strands resting gently on her shoulders. It turned out that there were other ways to cut your hair, and she spent a dizzying afternoon having them explained to her. She was lathered, scrubbed, combed, clipped, and primped, and when she looked at herself in the mirror, she could barely believe it. She was still the same Adellia, of course… and this wasn’t the most practical hairstyle for hunting… and it was all for Toby, because she thought all this stuff was a waste of time… but maybe she liked it. A little. Ludmilla surprised her; the stylist did something to her hair that made it lie down and behave, then plaited it into a single long brown braid that nearly reached the small of her back.

After that they whisked off to a second type of salon. A wash of unfamiliar words threatened to drown her: shading, highlighting, undertone, contour, smokey eye and winged eye and more. She fidgeted ceaselessly until Ludmilla pinned her wrists to the arms of the chair. When she at last let up, Adellia turned to the mirror and gaped in surprise. She had always liked her face. It was slender, her features sharp, but it was hers. The face staring back at her from the mirror, well… it was hers, too, but subtly different. This was an Adellia who hadn’t spent every waking hour in the Armory, an Adellia who had made some time for what she always derided as “fripperies.” Her skin was dusky, her cheeks rounded. Her lips were a deep, matte fuschia and her eyes were rimmed with kohl, giving them a deep-set and alluring look.

On the carriage ride back to school, Adellia kept trying to look through the window at the front mirror. Ludmilla wordlessly produced a small hand mirror from somewhere about her person and handed it over. Adellia tilted it this way and that, trying to see every detail: was there makeup on her ears? There had always been one tuft of hair that fell down into her eye when she was trying to focus. Was that gone? That tuft had been like an old friend! And her nails were, were, clean!

She needed Ludmilla’s help to get into her dress. Frankly, at the moment it felt like she needed Ludmilla’s help to open doors. She felt like she was drifting, as if in a dream. As the other girl’s sure fingers cinched up the laces of her bodice, she stared at the mirror on the wall. A stranger stared back at her. A beautiful stranger in purple, fingers wrapped so tightly around her decorative fan that her knuckles were white. She wondered if this stranger’s tummy felt as though it was full
of butterflies, too, or if that was just her.

Afterwards they went back to Ludmilla’s room. A mannequin against one wall wore a sea-green gown with gold trim. Ludmilla stepped into it and showed Adellia where to do up laces or snap closed buckles. “Not too tight, mind you,” she cautioned. “I need to be able to get out of in a hurry later on tonight.” She winked, but Adellia couldn’t bring herself to rise to this bait. She tied off the last bow and stood up. Ludmilla was a vision in green: artful panels in the dress pushed in just here, out there, sculpting her voluptuous curves into a form calculated to strike the male libido like an ice pick. Her face had a sultry look to it quite at odds with her normal open grin. She noticed Adellia’s attention and smiled. “Da, I clean up good, don’t I?” Her eyes flickered from Adellia’s hair to her bust to her hip. “You too. Should I brew an extra cup of whitethistle tomorrow?”

Adellia’s surprised herself by nodding. It happened very quickly-- she had taken in a breath to chide Ludmilla once again for her one-track mind, but instead her head bobbed back and forth once. “Ah! Confidence, eh?” Ludmilla said. “Well, I hope you--”

The great grandfather clock in the hall struck five times. No sooner had the last chimed died away than Adellia was on her feet. “Shit!” she hissed. “I was supposed to pick up Toby at five!”

Ludmilla gave her a blank look. “Girl!” she said. “You better get moving!”

“Not too fast!” she called at Adellia’s retreating back. “You aren’t used to walking in those shoes yet!” A heavy thump and a torrent of inventive cursing showed that her warning had come a moment too late. She shook her head and turned back to her dresser.

Adellia hobbled desperately through the halls. At this time, they were close to deserted-- most students were either putting the finishing touches on their ensemble, or safely ensconced with the beaus already. She pulled her off shoes and held them in one hand, then scooped up an armful of silk and satin and ran for it. Her bare feet thudded on the carpet. She skidded around one final corner and nearly bowled over Adjit Singh, who was dressed to the nines in a tailed coat and cradling a bouquet under one arm. He gave her an appraising look, and then a single, courteous nod. Adellia was in too much of a hurry to even acknowledge him. She ran past towards Toby’s door and stood there panting for a moment before hammering on the wood.

The door creaked open and there he was. Adellia wondered if she was just slumping over, or if Toby had grown an inch or two. His hair was pomaded back in an elegant wave that framed his forehead. His dress jacket was navy blue, with shiny brass buttons, and he wore a navy cummerbund around his midsection. A royal blue bow tie cinched around his neck. His face was as pink and earnest as ever, but it gleamed as though polished. His teeth shone bright and white as he smiled at her. “Adellia,” he began, “you look--”

“Sorry! Late!” Adellia grunted. She took a deep breath and straightened herself upright. “Corsage?”

Toby fumbled with something behind him and then turned around. He presented a cluster of pink tulips pinned to a leather band. Adellia slipped it around her arm and settled it in place. Only then did she allow herself to smile. There was a clock inside his door, and she resolutely ignored it. She looked instead up at Toby. His eyes were roving from her head to her toe, and blooms of color were creeping into his cheeks. “You’re…” he began, “you look beautiful tonight, Adellia. Not that you don’t normally look beautiful. You look beautiful every night. But tonight, you look, you look…” he trailed off into embarrassed silence.

“I know,” said Adellia casually. Inside, her heart was thumping. It was real. It was really happening. She extended an arm for Toby to take. “But thanks for saying so. You look nice too.
Should we go?"

Toby allowed himself to be led out the door and down the hallway. The two of them made their way slowly and carefully towards the Great Hall. As they traveled, other couples filtered out to join them. None spoke. They were all floating in their little bubbles, worlds of two that brooked no trespass. Adellia saw Adjit walking with the tall, pale Peony Haversham, his head barely reaching her shoulder. Ludmilla practically dragged her rugged date across the floor; he looked out of place in clothing without a helmet and pads. As Adellia and Toby arrived at the top of the staircase, she caught sight of Corinthia Swain.

She was surrounded by her court, of course. Her date, prefect Julius Hepple III, was a forgotten footnote in one corner. Corinthia’s dress was gold-chased ivory, a truly massive skirt replete with trains, pearls, and ruffled layers of taffeta. Her blonde hair had been woven in and out of the spokes of a golden tiara, making it look as though she had her own personal halo. She greeted her friends with effusive praise of their own beauty; they returned it with supplication and assurances that she would be the brightest star in the sky tonight.

Adellia gave Toby a sharp look to make sure he wasn’t staring at Corinthia. She needn’t have bothered-- he was looking around in generalized awe. She had to admit that the school masters had gone all out. The Great Hall was normally a drafty place, the only decorate the moldering school banners dangling from the rafters. Tonight it was a riot of color and light. Fires burned in every hearth, dispelling the nighttime chill and filling the room with warm light. Garlands of flowers decorated the walls and tables and hung down in loops from the ceiling. Pure white tablecloths and elegant crystalline stemware had been produced from storage, and each table bore a magnificent floral centerpiece-- roses, orchids, zinnias, tulips, and lilac and jasmine wafting their scent through the air. The center of the hall had been cleared to make a dance floor and a string quartet occupied a small stage near the bottom of the stairs. Adellia blinked twice and looked closer. Mr. Bentham sat in one chair tuning a violin, his stiff posture the only hint of his artificial leg. Mrs. Krupp cradled a cello in her arms, her one eye closed in an expression of rapture.

Huh. I guess they do more than hunt and teach, after all.

The gentle press of the crowd brought them to the top of the stairs, and they began to descend hand in hand. Adellia was grateful for the long gloves that had come with her dress. As soon as Toby’s fingers closed around hers she could feel her palm soaking in sweat. She focused on walking in her heels, one stair at a time. Each step clicked against the marble. Step… click. Step… click.

As she walked, a memory swam up in her mind.

She was seven or eight, and her parents were hosting a soiree to celebrate the engagement of a friend’s daughter. Little Adellia sat in a chair a little too big for her, playing with her doll under the table. Just as the doll staked yet another conniving vampire who had foolishly tried to trick her into marriage, a hush fell over the room. She craned her neck to see what all the fuss was about and found every head pointed towards the staircase. She looked, and her mouth dropped open. A girl was walking down the stairs-- no, a woman, even though she couldn’t be more than a decade older than Adellia. Her skin was pale, her hair dark, and though her eyes looked frightened they also gleamed with fierce pride. How could that be? Could you be proud and frightened at once? Adellia stared at her in awe, the marital misadventures of her doll quite forgotten.

She tried to recapture the look on that girl’s face, the grace of her steps. That was her now. It was her turn. She held her head high and descended the stairs. Each footfall seemed to ring out across the hall. She was entranced, remembering that beautiful girl all those years ago.

“Miss?” A elderly voice in her ear brought her back to the present. An elderly seneschal stood by the foot of the stairs. “We are announcing all couples. Your names, please?”
“Oh. Uh, Adellia,” she said. “And Toby.” She paused, then realized she had forgotten something. “Hawk.” The seneschal gave her a quizzical look, then turned aside and cupped his hands to his mouth. “Presenting!” he said, in a voice that carried more than Adellia had expected, “Mr. and Mrs. Toby and Adellia Hawk!”

Shit.

Adellia’s cheeks burned. She could hear muted giggles all around her. As they stepped forward, a boy leaned out of the crowd and punched Toby lightly on the arm. “Hey, congratulations, Cotton! Where’s the ring?” He laughed. Toby shrugged and looked away; he was flushing red as well. “I’m really sorry, Toby!” Adellia whispered in his ear. “He put me on the spot! I wasn’t ready!”

“It’s ok, Adellia,” Toby whispered back. “I’ve been meaning to get rid of Cotton anyways. What kind of name is that for a hunter?”

Adellia stared at him for a moment in shock. His solemn expression held, then cracked into a little smirk. And just like that, they were both laughing. She punched him on the arm in the same place the boy had struck earlier, making him wince. “Was that a real, honest to God joke out of Toby Cotton?” she whispered, incredulous. His response was a shrug and a rueful smile.

They found a pair of seats at one of the large tables. Each seat had a blank placard; Adellia and Toby wrote each other’s name, as was the custom, and sat down to wait. They weren’t waiting long. Ludmilla, looking like a cresting wave, appeared with her date drifting in her wake. She sat down next to Adellia, smiled and grabbed two placards. As her date struggled with the pen, she watched patiently over his shoulder. “No, that’s one ‘d’ and two ‘l’s. No, not… just give it to me, you silly man.” She finished her own name and plunked the placard down. “There! Was that so hard?”

Peter gave Adellia a little rueful wave. Eh, what can you do? it seemed to say. He seemed like a friendly sort, with a genial smile and easygoing manner, but Adellia suspected that if he turned his head just right she’d be able to see daylight through his ears. Ludmilla seemed happy with him, at least. Apart from anything else, he was likely one of the few students strong than she was. She clung to one titanic bicep with both arms and laid her head against his shoulder. “Isn’t this nice?” she said. “The decorations! The music! The drinks!” She pointed at a table against the opposite wall festooned with bottles. “Boys, will you get Adellia and me some wine? Please and thank you.”

Peter stood up immediately with the air of one used to receiving orders. Toby followed him more hesitantly, but after Adellia gave him an encouraging smile and nod, he set off with an air of purpose. As soon as they were gone Ludmilla propped her head up on one hand. “You made it!” she said. “See? No problem.” She reached out to adjust something in Adellia’s hair, then patted her on the shoulder. “You look gorgeous, kroshka. Really. You should dress up like this more often.”

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Toby and Peter were making their way gingerly across the floor with wine glasses in each hand. Adellia took hers with a grateful nod and sipped at it. She had always thought of her body as a temple— but wine was ok for a night, right? It wasn’t as though she was going to get drunk.

The foursome sat and watched as the hall gradually filled up. A few of the braver couples dared the dance floor, but for the most part they stuck to the tables. The night was young yet. Adellia sipped at the wine and made a face at the tart taste. Her parents had occasionally decanted bottles from Hawk Manor’s extensive wine cellar for guests, but left to their own devices, her father preferred
beer and her mother gin. Adellia herself had never seen the point of any of this stuff. It made you clumsy and your head hurt the next day. Ludmilla seemed to be enjoying hers, so maybe it was an acquired taste.

Her musings were interrupted by a sharp note from the musicians. As one, they took up their places and began to play the school anthem. Headmaster Lachan, resplendent in a two-tailed black jacket and crimson tie, stepped up onto the dais. Silence fell across the hall. His gaze swept from one end to the other, and then he cleared his throat.

“Students of Hoxleigh! I want to congratulate you on completing another successful year. You have all worked hard, and tonight is your reward.” He waited for the muted applause to die out before continuing. “I am especially proud of our senior class, who are about to go out into the world to make it a safer place for all of us. It is my great pleasure to announce tonight’s Lord and Lady of the Hunt-- Mr. Julius Hepple and Ms. Corinthia Swain!”

This time the applause was loud and enduring. Lachan reached down to help Swain up onto the dais, while her date scrambled up on his own, unheeded. She stared out at the crowd with a shocked look on her face. Yeah, right. Like you didn’t see this coming, Adelli thought. Corinthia’s face lit up a dazzling smile and she bowed again and again while blowing kisses. Adellia humphed and crossed her arms until she saw her tablemates clapping, then joined in reluctantly. Finally the noise died out.

“My friends,” Lachan said, “I urge you-- be merry! Tomorrow, you will go back to studying and practicums, but tonight belongs to you!”

With that, the musicians started up again, and the Lord and Lady of the night stepped down onto the dance floor. Hepple took Swain by the hip and shoulder and led her in a waltz. Soon they were at the center of a planetary system, satellite couples orbiting them on all sides. Porters turned down the gaslamps, leaving the hall lit by the flickering glow of the hearths. Adellia watched the dancers move, and tried to remember the few steps she had practiced with Ludmilla. She had expected this to be easy? What had she been thinking? Dancing, to Adellia, was mostly swaying back and forth vaguely in time to the music. This was something else entirely. More than once she was sure that couples were about to crash into each other or fall in a heap, but they passed elegantly through the space the other had just occupied like the meshing gears of a clock. She hoped Toby didn’t expect her to do that.

“Corinthia looks beautiful tonight, doesn’t she?” Toby asked, his voice all innocent admiration. “But you can see she’s a bit slow on the chassés. Hepple is having to lead her. You’ll probably do a lot better, Adellia.”

Adellia drained her drink in a hurry. “Ludmilla,” she said, her voice full of brittle brightness, “I think I need a top-off. Will you come with me?”

Ludmilla’s glass was still a third full, but she gulped it down and stood up. “Of course, dear!” she said. “You boys stay here.”

The two of them took a wide circuit to avoid the dancers. At the bar, Adellia plunked her glass down and turned to Ludmilla with desperate pleading in her eyes. “I don’t know what I’m doing!” she hissed.

Ludmilla waved over the attendant. “Keep the pinot flowing, my friend,” she said, then turned to Adellia. “You’re doing fine, kroshka. Stop worrying so much. Toby knows what he’s got. He’s happy to be here with you.”
“Are you sure?” Adellia asked. “I-- shit!” She had picked up her glass a little too quickly, and wine sloshed over the rim and spattered her sleeve. Ludmilla grabbed a folded cloth napkin from the nearest table and thrust it at Adellia. “It’s a purple dress,” she said. “Scrub quickly. Nobody will notice.”

Adellia could only nod glumly.

By the time they got back to the table, the musicians had changed to a slower song, and the movement of the dancers had become sedate. Toby’s knee was twitching and he tapped his fingers on the table in rhythm to the music. When he saw Adellia, her brightened up and lurched to his feet. “Adellia!” he said. “Would you like to dance?”

“No,” she realized, wasn’t an option on the menu. “Love to!” she said. She took Toby’s proffered hand and let him lead her onto the floor. It’s a slow dance, she thought. It won’t be hard. He laid one hand on her waist and, after a moment of confusion, guided hers to his shoulder. Their free hands clasped each other, and then they were off.

Adellia’s heart thudded in her ears. She was hyper-aware of every sensation: the steady pressure of Toby’s hand against her waist, the rustle of her petticoats as she moved, the flicker of firelight in his glasses. Other students were moving all around her, but they were vague shapes on the edge of vision. None of them intruded in the private envelope of space around her and Toby. She could see faint hairs on his upper lip that the razor and missed and the sweat beading on his earlobe. His chest rose and fell with every breath. Adellia had to remember to breathe herself-- it was as though her brain had bent all of its power to controlling her feet. She tried to calm herself with long, deep inhalations, but to no avail. She felt a warmth that came from neither the fires burning along the walls nor the press of bodies around her. She and Toby swept along, just two tiny cogs in the great machine whirling across the dance floor. It seemed to go on forever and ever. Her fingers tightened on his shoulder-- she knew instinctively that if she let go, the moment would end, and she would never be able to find it again.

The music died out, the last violin note seeming to hang in the air like a falling leaf. There was a pause, then they started up again-- a fast, jolly song. Toby took the lead once more, but this time Adellia found herself struggling to keep up. The effortless grace with which she had moved before had entirely deserted her. Now she could barely figure out where her feet were supposed to go. She wanted to say something, to tell Toby to slow down or stop, but her mouth seemed frozen. He crossed over in front of her, turning back to pull her along, and she felt one foot go out from beneath her. For a moment she thought she could salvage her balance, but then she felt her center of gravity tipping and she tumbled to the floor in a sprawled heap. She landed on one shoulder with a bruising impact. Her skirts puddled around her in an undignified heap.

Toby’s mouth formed an O of horror and he bent down to help her up. “Sorry! I’m so sorry Adellia!” he was saying, but she barely heard him. That preternatural clarity had returned, and with it she could see every face turned towards her. She and Toby were at the center of a widening gap on the dancefloor. Nobody was laughing-- they were looking on in silent concern, which was somehow worse. Corinthia Swain stepped away from her partner and leaned out of the crowd. “Oh, Adellia, are you alright?” she asked. Sympathy dripped off every syllable. She didn’t sound sarcastic, but that proved nothing.

Adellia seized Toby’s hand and pulled herself to her feet, almost bringing him down on top of her. Hot tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. She stared at him in humiliation. More than anything else, Adellia hated being seen to cry. Gathering up her skirts in one hand, she fled for the safety of the bathroom.
For a blessing, it was empty when she arrived. She looked at her face in the mirror. Her eyeliner or eyeshadow or whatever it was was starting to run. She pounded both fists down hard on the marble countertop and fought down a scream. It wasn’t fair! It had been working! She had been making it work! And now… and now… her treacherous memory kept going back to those silent, worried faces, all staring at her with pity in their eyes. Poor Adellia. She thought she could be a lady.

The door behind her clicked open. “Go away,” she growled, without looking up. “There’s other bloody bathrooms.”

Instead a hand rested on her shoulder. “Kroshka, you can’t hide in the bathroom all night,” said Ludmilla. Her voice was softer than normal, gentle. “Why not?” Adellia sniffed. She grabbed a washcloth and blew her nose into it.

Ludmilla stepped back, put her hands on her ample hips, and cocked her head. “Why are you here, anyways? You don’t like dancing and you don’t like wine. Why did you come to the Formal?”

“Toby asked me,” Adellia said. “I never go to these stupid things. This is why.”

“Toby,” Ludmilla repeated. “Toby. Well? Are you having a good time with Toby right now?”

“No!” Adellia said, and felt fresh tears on her cheeks. “He’s out there. He’s probably so embarrassed he wishes he was dead. Or I was dead.”

“I doubt that,” Ludmilla said. “He’d be in here, but I told him that if he went into the girls’ room I’d knock him out. You think he loves to dance? That khopok? He probably wishes he could stay in his room with a book tonight.”

“That’s great,” Adellia said, and threw her hands up. “He doesn’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here. Why are we wasting our time?”

“You’re not listening,” Ludmilla said patiently. “He wants to be here with you. And you want to be here with him. ‘Here’ isn’t important. The important thing is, whatever you do, you do together. It can be nice-- trust me, it can be very nice--” she waggled her eyebrows suggestively, “and sometimes it can be embarrassing or boring or whatever. But as long as it’s together, it’s worth it. You’ve only got a couple of hours left and then the dance is over forever. Do you want to spend them in the bathroom? Or with Toby?”

“With Toby,” Adellia muttered. “I guess. How can I go back out there, though?”

Ludmilla surprised her by bundling her up in a tight hug. All the breath went out of Adellia as she was crushed against Ludmilla’s corset-fortified chest. “Oh, kroshka,” she said. “Poor Calliope Cutress already threw up in the azaleas. You’re not the only one having a rough night. Now get back out there and make some memories.” She swatted Adellia on the butt. “Don’t wait up for me. I need to make room for more wine.”

Adellia dried her last few tears and pushed open the door. She took a deep breath before stepping back out into the Hall.

This is ok. You can do this.

Toby was waiting at the table with an anxious look on his face. “Adellia!” he said. “Listen, I’m so sorry, I never meant to, that is, I didn’t--”

“It’s alright, Toby,” Adellia said, and surprised herself by kissing him on the cheek. “Let’s just get our breath back before we go back out there.”
They sat for a while in silence. Toby wordlessly took Adellia’s hand, and she gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. Then, by silent but mutual agreement, they went back out on the dance floor. The music flowed into her ears, and Adellia was once again lost in an endless moment. Rondos, waltzes, foxtrots, tangos… at one point Mrs. Krupp struck up a lively fiddle tune, and Headmaster Lachan took to the floor, his coattails whipping about as he danced a lively jig. Adellia laughed in surprise and clapped to the beat along with everyone else.

Finally the dance began to break up. Couples slipped out of the hall one by one, or retired to private corners. Adellia was sweaty, exhausted, and slightly seasick, but the happy grin plastered across her face didn’t seem likely to go away in a hurry. She took Toby’s hand and led him off the floor and along the corridors. She knew exactly where she was going, but she wanted to make a stop along the way.

They passed through the darkened kitchens, deserted at this hour. Pots and pans hung down from the ceiling, made sinister by the shadows that filled every corner. Adellia pushed open the rear door and stepped out into the gardens. The last time she had been here, it had been a rainy and miserable day; now it was a warm and peaceful night, the moon a bright silver coin hanging low in the sky. It almost looked as though she could reach out and touch it. Adellia wrapped one arm around Toby’s waist and just looked up at the moon. Neither of them spoke. The silence here felt like a precious and fragile thing.

There was a rustling in the hedgerow at one end of the garden, and a muted giggle. Adellia looked around for its source. By the light of the moon, she could see a rumpled shape. A discarded dress, sea-green, its laces undone. She smiled and rolled her eyes. Toby must have seen her expression.

“What’s wrong, Adellia?” he asked.

“Nothing, Toby,” she said. “Nothing’s wrong. Nothing is wrong at all.” She looked over at him: his face was so earnest, so serious. Silvery moonlight sparkled on the steel frames of his glasses. He had the look of someone determined not to screw up. Adellia knew. She’d worn that look enough times herself. She smiled at him, and when he smiled back, she leaned in and kissed him. It wasn’t like the first time. She had known it wouldn’t be. But it was sweet, and warm, and she felt Toby on the other end of it: his life, his desire, his urgency. He trembled slightly under her arm. His hand rested on her shoulder, and she pulled it tight around her. They stood there in each other’s arms for a long time, neither wanting to break the kiss. Finally Adellia drew back.

“Adellia,” Toby said in a quiet voice. “I want you to know I think you’re… really great. And I had a good time tonight.” He paused and licked his lips nervously. “I think I love you.”

Adellia couldn’t think of what to say back. All of her words seemed inadequate. She took Toby by the wrist and led him, unprotesting, to her room.

The second the door clicked shut behind them they were kissing again, not the gentle and affection kiss they had shared before but ferociously. One of Toby’s arms wrapped around Adellia’s waist, the other hand tangled in her hair. She grabbed his head with both hands as though he would fly away the second she let go. They ground against each other with manic intensity. When they finally came up for air, it was only long enough for Adellia to tear at the laces of her dress. Toby helped, his fingers surprisingly dextrous, and one by one they undid the ties and cinches. They seemed to be endless; with each bond undone, Adellia’s frustration rose. Finally the dress slid off her shoulders and puddled on the ground. She was much less careful with her petticoats. One tore as she ripped it off, but she didn’t care. Toby fumbled with his cummerbund, his jacket, his pants, all at once, as though he couldn’t decide which item to remove first. His jacket fluttered down on top of her dress, then his cummerbund, which flew into the corner and coiled up like a snake.
Once he had disrobed he stood there for a moment, panting, and Adellia soaked in the sight. She had seen him naked before-- in the subbasement, when he had run afoul of the pucas-- but she hadn’t been in a position to admire the view. Ever since freshman year he had been Cotton Ball to her, a soft round white thing, but she had to admit that that nickname had run its course. His body lacked the lithe muscle tone that she saw in the mirror every day, but his stomach was mostly flat and she could see some definition in his abdominals. There was a light dusting of black hair across his chest and arms; it took away some of the boyishness, made him look more serious, more adult. The expression on his face was best of all, a sort of terrified yearning and hoping and eagerness all mixed up. She wondered if she had the same look.

She hooked her thumbs through the band of her underwear and slid them to the floor. She normally preferred hard-wearing cotton, but Ludmilla had convinced her to try something cream-colored and satin, and she was grateful for it. As she kicked them away across the floor, she saw Toby’s eyes go to her sex. He stared with frank wonder on his face. She knew he’d seen her before, but… not like this. The cloth of his drawers started to tent.

She planted one hand on his chest, reveling in the soft scratchiness of his hair against her palm, and pushed him gently backward. He put up no resistance at all; he toppled back onto her bed, landing butt-first and sending his legs flying into the air. She climbed up next to him and reached forward to grab his drawers. He arched his back to allow her to pull them down, and like a conjurer pulling a tablecloth out from under the place settings, she yanked them off with one movement. His penis slid free. It was already at half-staff and swelling before her eyes.

She leaned forward, letting her breasts dangle over his chest. He didn’t seem inclined to do anything about it, so she reached down with one hand and grabbed his wrist, then lifted his hand to her chest. He got the message quickly-- his thumb brushed lightly across her nipple, which stiffened at once. He began to massage with his fingertips, squeezing the soft flesh while his thumb teased and tickled her hardening bud. An electric thrill shot through her. She had felt this sensation before, but right now those hardly seemed to count. Now, in her own bed, at a time of her choosing, with Toby… yes, it was different. It was better. Much better.

She leaned all the way down and kissed him again. Her body pinned his hand against his chest, but he did not stop. His other hand wrapped around her back and began to caress it. That was almost as pleasing as the hand on her breast. She ran her fingers through his hair, feeling the stickiness of the pomade cake beneath her fingernails, her nostrils filling with its smell.

His member poked her in the belly. It was rock-hard now, and a tip of precum oozed from the tip. She felt it smear across her navel. She didn’t care. Reaching down with one hand, she grabbed it by the base. At the same time she scooched her hips up to his. She lifted one leg and hesitated for a moment. She felt dreadfully exposed, all of a sudden. Memories flashed through her: the terrible feeling of helplessness, the anticipation as her sex was exposed. This time, she was in control. She took a deep breath and guided the tip of Toby’s cock inside her.

As he slid into her, he let out a breath, a little sigh of relief. There it was. After all this time and tension, there it was. This wasn’t like the araqny, or the Ichneumon Lily, or the echiheuthis, or any of them. She could feel him inside her, the warmth of him, the life. This was its own thing. This was special. She lay down on top of him and she felt his heart hammering in his chest. She supposed her own was beating the same way.
He lay there, completely still, as if waiting for instructions. That was fine. Adellia could work with that. She drew herself up, back straight, knees bent against the bed. Laying one hand down on his chest for balance, she began to roll her hips back and forth. The movement came easily. Back and forth, back and forth… she ground against him, feeling his member slide easily in and out of her furrow. At the limit of her forward motion, it brushed against her clit, and the waves of pleasure that rolled outward from each brush filled her with comfortable warmth. His cock seemed the perfect size and shape for her; she marveled at the feeling of their bodies intertwined, each fitting into the other as snugly as puzzle pieces. This is where you belong, Toby, she thought. This is where I need you. She was not being stretched, or bruised, or stuffed overfull; she felt fulfilled in a way she never had before. She closed her eyes as she rode him. Her mind was, for once, blank. She focused on the warmth of him, the closeness, the pressure of his hips and legs and belly against her, and the pleasure, always the pleasure.

“You can move,” she whispered. He gave no indication that he had heard her, but she felt his hands wrap around her waist, and he began to pump his hips up and down. She timed her own motions to compliment his. They rolled together, like breaking waves, then apart; together, then apart, together, then apart. She could feel a climax rising inside her, but slowly, gently, taking its time, gathering steam like a locomotive. This was not something unwilling that was being fucked out of her by brute force; it was something alive, something tender, something they were nursing together. She sped up, and Toby matched her speed. “Toby,” she breathed, “oh, oh, Toby, oh, faster, please, Toby, like that, just like that, oh, OH, OHHHHHH!”

She had thought she had more time. Her orgasm came upon her suddenly, breaking like a storm. She twitched and trembled as the pleasure thundered in her brain. She could feel her tight passage squeezing and clamping around him. All thought was banished, all control was lost; she threw herself on Toby, showering his face with kisses, bucking and grinding wildly. The sensation she had felt before—what she had thought of as pleasure—was a cheap copy of this primal satisfaction, a pale and shadowy imitation. The tiny part of her that was still conscious and thinking heard his breath change just as his cock began to twitch inside her. This, too was familiar, but she felt it now as communion. She accepted him into her, accepted his offering. “Adellia,” he moaned. “Adellia, Adellia, Adellia…” it seemed to be the only word he could remember. It was the only word he needed.

As the last tremors receded, Adellia collapsed on top of him, her head against his chest, her arms encircling his head and playing with his hair. She could feel him softening inside her, but she didn’t want him to pull out. Not yet. There would be plenty of time for that later. For the moment, they lay there on the bed, their bodies overlapping, arms around each other. Tomorrow, Adellia knew, she would have to go back to school, back to class. There would be a day beyond that, and another, and then she would graduate and have her whole life ahead of her. For now, though… for now, she was content. She had wondered sometimes what this moment would be like, when it finally came.

It had been worth the wait.
Corinthia Swain has run into trouble, and Adellia Hawk is the only person who can rescue her.

She couldn't help it. She knew it made her look like a character from a children's story. She knew it was ridiculous. But as Corinthia Swain made her way along the riverbank, she couldn't stop herself from humming a happy little tune.

She just felt so great! Whatever her friends said, she had been genuinely surprised and gratified to be named Lady of the Hunt. She had approached the night of the dance with the same focus and diligence she applied to everything: testing swatches of fabric, carefully matching her earrings and necklace and tiara, spending hours to ensure her hair looked just so. The whole night she had been on tenterhooks, terrified that an errant blot of wine would stain her white dress, and she’d limited herself to water. But it had all been worth it. Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll had been Queen of the Hunt in her time, as had Lady Marguerite Desmond and the great Eliza-Belle Hartt. And now Corinthia Swain’s name was added to that list of great and notable ladies.

As a little girl, she’d dreamed of that moment— her in her beautiful dress, waltzing the night away with her handsome prince. And then her dream had come true! Alright, so Julius Hepple wasn’t a prince, but he was a perfect gentleman and an excellent dance partner. He had even asked her! The grandson of the great Oswald Hepple himself! He’d actually been a bit shy, as though there was the remotest shadow of a chance she’d say no! The memory of that night, even a week later, was still buoying her up.

Besides, it wasn’t as though there was anyone out here to hear her. Corinthia was in the Outer Hoxwald, gathering ingredients for what she hoped would be a breakthrough in chemical engineering. This was as far as she dared to go; nothing truly dangerous lived in this part of the forest, but she’d already had to detour around a menehune nest and avoid a hunting pack of keelut. Her journal was full of pages of meticulous notes, records of experiments past that she had painstakingly gleaned from the library, and a rough sketch of the formula she’d need. She just needed a week in the lab— and plenty of hogstooth, gravelily and pioneer beetle extract. She felt a pang of guilt that she had snuck out to get them, but she had always kept on her best behavior, and maybe she was owed a little excursion. She gently shooed a pack of thistlepixies away from a cluster of flowers and bent down.

Corinthia liked flowers. She always had. Maybe it was because she was a proper lady. She’d always liked beautiful things, even as a child. But maybe it was because they didn’t bleed. That, in fact, was the problem that lurked on the edge of her mind like a looming stormcloud. The Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters was one of the most well-thought-of finishing schools in the country. It took in the sons and daughters of the titled classes and gave them a fine, well-rounded education in maths and history, science and music and literature. It encouraged them to form friendships that would last a lifetime, ensuring a leg up when they began their careers. It turned awkward children into well-rounded adults. And also, as a side note, it taught them to hunt and kill a wide variety of monstrous beasts.
Corinthia loved the reading and the math and the art. She had found herself in the whirling social melee, blossoming from a shy butler’s daughter to a confident social butterfly. Her lab work was outstanding, and there was already talk of a fellowship for post-graduate work. As for the killing… that, she wasn’t so sure about.

It wasn’t as though you had to kill something to graduate. And not every Hoxleigh graduate went on to hunt for a living. The world needed bankers, clerks, artists… chemists…

She really felt she was on the verge of a breakthrough. She could see the elixir in her mind’s eye. It sparkled like an unearthed treasure, tantalizingly out of reach. That was what she loved about chemistry: that moment when a pinch of this, a tincture of that came together to make something greater than the sum of its parts. A repellant powerful enough to keep travelers safe even in the darkest forest; a sleeping draught that could knock out a dragon. If this worked, she’d become legendary, like Lady Amelie Pennyfarthing-- and all without having to kill a beast that was just doing what Nature intended for it. Not too bad for the granddaughter of a bootblack!

A shadow fell over her. Corinthia looked up and squinted in confusion. For a moment, she couldn’t make sense of what her eyes were telling her. Then her brain caught up with current events and she dropped the bundle of flowers she was holding.

And screamed and screamed and screamed.

—__—

Adellia Hawk was screaming too. Of course, her tone was a little different.

“Harder!” she yelled. She had to, to be heard over the rhythmic, wet slap of skin on skin. “Harder, you bastard!”

Behind her, Toby Cotton was red-faced and sweating. His hands were wrapped around Adellia’s waist. His face was locked in an expression of extreme concentration, though it must be said that he appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. His breath puffed out in little gasps every time he thrust, and at Adellia’s words he grunted and adjusted his grip.

The tempo of his thrusts stepped up markedly. Adellia swung her body back against him, grinding her ass into his hips with each impact. Her chest and shoulders lay flat against the bed, with her knees bent and her bottom in the air. She shifted position slightly. Now his thrusts were hitting her just so, the head of his cock rubbing against that special place on her inner walls. She reached back with her free hand and began to massage circles around the sensitive pearl of her clit. She could hear the wet shlick, schlick sound as Toby’s cock slid between the dripping folds of her pussy.

“Nnngh… yeah…” she moaned. “Pull… my… hair…”

Toby looked down at her quizzically. He removed one hand from her waist and twirled it through her coppery locks, then gave a tentative tug.

“Unngh! Not like… that!” Adellia said. “Put your… nnnf… back into it!”

A worried expression crossed Toby’s face, but he yanked on her hair, pulling her head back. Adellia let out a wild, whooping yell. He let go at once and snatched his hand back as though he had touched a hot stove.

“Did I… say… stop?!” Adellia said, gasping for breath. “Again!” She shut up abruptly as her climax overtook her. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she squeezed her hands into fists. Her inner walls, too, squeezed and spasmed around Toby. That was too much for him; his hilted his
prick one more time in her warm furrow and twitched as it exploded. She could feel thick, sticky ropes of his cum filling her up. When he finally withdrew, a thin trickle of white drooled out of her well-fucked quim and down her thigh.

Toby collapsed on the bed next to her, breathing hard. He stared at the ceiling with glazed eyes. Adellia recovered first. She propped her chin up on her hands and looked down at Toby with a broad smile on her face. “That was nice,” she cooed. “Thanks, love.” She leaned down and planted a kiss on his lips. He smiled back up at her with a dazed expression on his face.

“You’re amazing, Adellia,” he said. “Every time it’s like... I think this is all a great dream I’m having, but soon I’ll have to wake up. And I never do.” He looked as though he was worried about something. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Pfft. Don’t worry, Cotton Ball. I’m tougher than I look.” Adellia flexed one arm to prove it. “Quit worrying so much. I’m fine. Now come snuggle me.” She wriggled into his arms and laid her head on his chest. She could feel his softening cock pressed against her belly. It was still wet, but she was going to shower before bed anyways. Toby folded her up in an embrace and kissed the top of her head.

“I really like lying here like this,” he said. “With you, I mean. I don’t have to think about class, about exams, about graduation…”

Adellia hadn’t been thinking about graduation either, but now she was. She was still basking in the afterglow, but an uncomfortable thought wormed its way up from the depths of her mind. “Toby,” she said. “What are we going to do after graduation?”

She felt Toby shrug. “I dunno. I guess I was going to move back home, maybe set up a practice…”

“No.” She pulled away from him enough to push herself semi-upright. “I mean, what are we going to do. We.” She made a circling gesture with one finger. “I mean, there is a we, right? Or an us?”

“Well, I don’t want to break up with you,” Toby said. “I really don’t. I dunno. Maybe we go into business together? Hawk and Cotton?”

Adellia made a face. “Not with that name. It sounds like a farm.” She hesitated. An image had crept into her brain: Toby, staying in the guest room at Hawk Manor over the last Christmas. Would she want him back there all the time? What would her parents say? She opened her mouth to say something, and then shut it. Instead she kissed Toby on the forehead. “We’ll deal with that when we graduate. For now, let’s just relax.” She burrowed back into his arms and smiled against his chest.

“Sounds good to me,” Toby said, pulling her closer.

The next morning she met Ludmilla for breakfast. Before she could even open her mouth, the Russian girl laid a small silver teapot on the table and poured out two glasses. “I saw the way you and Toby were eyeing each other when we left the shooting range,” she said, by way of explanation. “You need some tea, yes?”

“Thank you,” Adellia said. She sipped at her cup and made a face. “Ugh! This stuff is so foul. It always makes my tummy hurt.”

“Not as much as morning sickness, kroshka ,” said Ludmilla. “Besides, you get used to it.” She tilted her own cup up with one pinky held out like a society matron. “So how was it?”
Adellia looked left and right, then leaned in close and whispered. “I made him pull my hair, like you suggested.”

Ludmilla arched her eyebrows. “And?”

Adellia’s answer came in the form of a smile and a shiver. She sipped again.

“Aha! I knew it, girl. The trick is convincing them you won’t break if they’re a little rough. We’re not made of china.”

“You’ll have to teach me to make this stuff,” Adellia said. “We’re graduating in a month.” She looked up. “I’m gonna miss you, Ludmilla.”

“Ah, and I you,” Ludmilla said, draining her cup. “I assume you’re going back home?”

“Yeah,” Adellia replied. “At least for now. I might go hunt with my parents before I get started on my own.”

“And the boy?” Ludmilla asked. “Where’s he in all this? After everything you went through to get him, I assume you’re not dropping him in a month.”

“Oh course not!” said Adellia. “I still haven’t--”

“Excuse me?”

The voice that interrupted their conversation was upper-crust to its core. Slightly nasal, every vowel beautifully rounded, every consonant slotting into place, it was a voice that sounded as though its owner had worn a sailor suit to school until the age of ten. Adellia turned to find herself staring into the slightly worried face of Julius Hepple III, prefect and scion of one of the only hunting families as distinguished as the Hawks. Hepple had the strong chin and prominent nose of his family, framed by a mop of blonde curls. He would have looked dashing except for the expression of worry etched into every line of his face. Behind him, Adellia could see three girls she didn’t know. She recognized them vaguely, as mouths laughing at Corinthia Swain’s jokes or heads nodding along to one of her pronouncements. Of Swain herself, there was no sign, though her whole court appeared to be in session.

“Yes?” asked Adellia. She finished her tea quickly in case any of them recognized it. “Are you at the wrong table?”

“I… I hope not,” Hepple said. “You are Adellia Hawk, yes?” His eyes flickered from Adellia to Ludmilla and back.

“Ye-es,” said Adellia slowly. “And this is--”

“Ludmilla Sokolova, at your service,” said Ludmilla, leaning over the table to shake Hepple’s hand. His face blanched as his fingers were squeezed in an iron grip. He managed to extract the hand and shook some life back into it, then turned to Adellia.

“Yes. Um, Adellia, that is, Miss Hawk… I’m rather in need of your help right now.”

Adellia patted the bench next to her. “Why don’t you have a seat and tell me what the problem is? Why can’t you ask Corinthia about it?”

“Well,” said Hepple, sitting down, “that’s rather the problem. Corinthia has gone missing.” He gulped. “In the Hoxwald.”
Adellia’s eyes widened. “What was she doing there?”

“She was gathering ingredients,” said one of the girls. The three of them huddled together. They looked as though they had been crying.

“Ingredients for her final project,” said another.

“She said she needed things she couldn’t get in the school’s garden.”

“But she didn’t come back last night.”

“We warned her not to go.”

“We’re scared for her!”

Adellia’s gaze flicked from one of Corinthia’s courtiers to the next. When the last one had finished, all three sniffled and threw their arms around each other. Hepple cleared his throat. “Um, that is broadly correct,” he said. “I fear something dreadful may have happened to Miss Swain. I know that we are not… close, but I didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“Um, I can think of some people,” Adellia said. “Like, anyone else? One of her friends? Someone who’s talked to her more than twice? I’m sure you’re worried, Hepple. I just don’t see what this has to do with me.”

“Well…” Hepple’s face twisted in an agony of indecision. He looked like a man trapped between warring impulses: the desire to say what was on his mind, and the noble breeding to know it wasn’t a good idea. Desperation forced his hand.

“Wellll,” he began. “Corinthia… she wasn’t exactly… that is, we’re not supposed to travel to the Hoxwald alone, but… she insisted, and… well, none of us have been, but we know that you, that is, you’ve been before, alone, when you…”

Realization dawned. “You’re saying I don’t pay attention to rules, so you thought I’d break one to help your friend?”

Hepple’s face flushed bright crimson, but to his credit, he didn’t look away. “I would have said, perhaps, that you are… experienced. Daring. I would accompany you, of course, to ensure your safety.” The look on his face was so painfully chivalrous that Adellia nearly laughed out loud.

“Julius, I’ve been there before, but--” Adellia stopped. They were coming to her. What had he said? Daring? A swell of pride rose up in her chest. Daring, oh yes. Nobody could gainsay that. No wonder they’d come to her first. She was Adellia Hawk, she feared nothing. She’d ventured into the Hoxwald alone and returned to tell the tale. Of course she was the natural choice to rescue a more hapless and inexperienced student. And the idea that it was Corinthia Swain, the Queen of the Hunt herself, who needed her help-- well, that was just the cherry on top, wasn’t it?

Adellia set her face in what she hoped was a fierce expression and growled deep in her throat. “Fine!” she snapped. “Fine, I’ll go looking for her. But I don’t need you slowing me down, Hepple.” Hope bloomed across Hepple’s face, and Adellia smiled pleasantly up at him. She had to admit that the thought of the perfect Corinthia Swain in trouble was a little delicious. But a bigger part of her hoped she’d find the girl. Adellia herself had been lucky before. There was no reason to assume that Corinthia would share her luck.

“Oh, thank you!” said Hepple. He snatched up the surprised Adellia’s hand and, before she could
react, planted a genteel kiss on her knuckles. She yelped in surprise and pulled her hand back, wiping it on her pants.

“Don’t do that!” she hissed. “Just tell me where she was. I’ll leave after lunch.”

“She was looking for gravelily,” said one of the girls, still hovering over the table.

“She said it grows by riverbanks,” said another.

“She left from behind the stables,” said the third.

Adellia tried to picture the Hoxwald in her mind’s eye. Someone cutting across the moor from the stables would enter here, and the river cut through the forest there … “Ok,” she said. “Ok, that’s helpful, thanks.” She looked from one of them to the next. “Just cover for her if you can. Say she’s sick or something. And me, too, if it comes to that.” She rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe I’m skipping marksmanship for this.”

After they had left, she turned to Ludmilla. The other girl was chewing thoughtfully. “Well?” Adellia asked. “I expect you’re going to tell me that I’m making a big mistake.”

“Not at all,” Ludmilla said. “This is what monster hunters do, no? Run in to rescue the fair maiden and save the day?”

“I’m pretty sure Corinthia’s not a maiden,” Adellia said, crossing her arms and sticking out her lip. “I can’t believe she’d run off into the woods like that. It’s so… so unlike her.”

“Yes, it’s kind of an Adellia thing to do,” Ludmilla said. Adellia’s mouth dropped open.

“What? What was that? What are you saying?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” said Ludmilla innocently. “Why do you hate Swain so much?”

“I don’t hate her!” said Adellia, perhaps a little too quickly. “I don’t, really. She’s just… annoying. She’s the perfect little lady all the time. Have you ever seen her with a hair out of place? And it’s not like she ever runs or climbs or shoots or does anything interesting. I’ve never even seen her lift a crossbow.”

“Not so Adellia, then,” said Ludmilla with a nod. “Is she cruel? I know girls like that. Ice princesses, like in a fable.”

“Well… noooooo,” Adellia had to admit. “She’s pretty much nice to everyone. Which is another weird thing. She’s so fake.”

Ludmilla shrugged and shoveled another spoonful of peas into her mouth. They ate in silence for a while. Adellia dropped her spoon and ran her fingers through her hair. “I shouldn’t have agreed. I should just go to Lachan.”

Ludmilla shrugged again. She had a very expressive shrug; when her shoulders shifted, her head bobbed slightly, causing her wild mane to shake like a windblown willow tree. “Maybe,” she said. “Safer for you, probably. This close to graduation.”

“That’s not it!” Adellia said. “I’m sure she just got lost. But she wouldn’t stick her neck out for me.” Then, out of fundamental honesty, she added “I think.”

“I didn’t turn you in when you went down in the sewers,” Ludmilla pointed out. “And we didn’t
sell out Toby when he went poking around the sub-basement.”

“That’s--” Adellia froze. She was about say “different,” but she knew Ludmilla’s follow-up question would be “how?” and she didn’t have a good answer for that. Instead she just sighed. “Fine,” she said. “Ok, fine, I’ll go. And she’ll owe me a favor.”

Ludmilla cracked her knuckles. “You want me to come with you? Many hands make for light work.” Adellia waved her off.

“Nah. I’m sure she’s just sitting under a tree somewhere with her dress all ripped up.” The mental image gave her a certain spiteful pleasure to imagine.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Ludmilla said. “But I guess if you go in there alone and rescue her, everyone will know who the real Lady of the Hunt is.”

That point hadn’t been lost on Adellia, but instead of responding, she just smiled to herself. She already knew, even if nobody else did.

After lunch she stopped by her room to pack some essentials. She thought back to that first Hoxwald trip, more than a year ago. Then, she hadn’t been sure of what she would need, so she brought everything. Now she packed a bit lighter. The crossbow she had gotten for Christmas went in the bag, its stock neatly folded away. She threw in rope, matches in wax paper, her compass, and a handful of caltrops. Finally she included a change of clothes. She had no desire to stagger back to school naked… again.

Her pistol crossbow and trusty knife she strapped to her belt. She pinned her hair back in a tight bun and took a moment to survey herself in the mirror. Perhaps it was just self-image, but since the night of the Spring Formal, she’d felt… taller. More confident. She felt secure in her body in a way she hadn’t before. Mirror-Adellia looked like she could take on the entire Hoxwald for breakfast and still have the energy to climb a wall after lunch. She tossed the girl a wink before heading out the door. Go get ’em, Adellia.

Corinthia’s track wasn’t hard to pick up. She had left a trail of broken twigs and crushed grass behind her. She had been wearing heavy boots-- a first, as far as Adellia was concerned, as she’d never seen the girl in any shoe she couldn’t dance in. The track led to the Hoxwald on a straight-arrow path. It wasn’t the fastest route-- Adellia herself would have detoured around some of the ditches and areas of mud-- but it was direct, at least. She remembered the lessons she had taken in stealthy movement, and wondered what classes Corinthia had been taking instead. Probably flower arranging or pastry cooking or something stupid like that. She didn’t even know if Hoxleigh had a flower arranging curriculum, but if it did, Corinthia would probably score high marks in it.

The trail led right to the edge of the Hoxwald. The boundary posts stood in an ominous row, and Adellia couldn’t help but shiver as a scintilla of fear shot through her. The late afternoon air was still and heavy, hot with the promise of summer. She took a deep breath and smelled peat and loam. She closed her eyes, stuck out her leg, and crossed the boundary.

Inside the Hoxwald the air was at least five degrees cooler. The light was muted, too, by the thick canopy overhead. Corinthia’s trail was harder to follow here, but she saw faint signs. There, a bootprint almost covered over again by the wind. There, a patch of moss, crushed by her passage. Up ahead, a scrap of cloth that waved in the breeze, hanging from a bush.

Something lay in a limp bundle on the ground. Adellia crouched down over it and prodded it with her fingers. Gravelily. The flowers had been carefully picked, but then something heavy had
trodden on them, snapping the fragile stalks and crushing the delicate petals. Adellia frowned. It was hard to tell, but this print didn’t look like a boot print. It was thinner, longer, like a carriage-wheel tread or-- she tried to shut the thought out, but it snuck back in treacherously-- like a single talon.

Adellia grimaced. She had hoped Corinthia was just lost somewhere, but that hope was growing harder and harder to maintain. Still, there was no blood around here, no stink of carnage. Another one of the long, thin tracks caught her eye, and then another. They seemed to lead away at an orthogonal angle to the one she had taken to get here. She slid her knife free from its sheath and, clutching it closely, followed the tracks.

They led deeper into the Hoxwald, and soon Adellia found herself climbing a short hillock. This area of the forest was still and quiet, she noticed, only the cawing of robins and thrushes in the branches overhead breaking the silence. They brayed in irritation at having their solitude disturbed. Adellia tried to ignore them and focus on the trail. It was starting to descend. The far side of the hill sloped down into a little valley, surrounded on three sides by boulders dropped here by long-ago glaciers. Adellia hopped down off the top of one and landed in a little bowl-shaped depression.

She froze. She had just heard… well, it might have just been the wind in the trees, or the sound of some distant animal. But it might have been a groan. Her head whipped around, and there it was. Carved into the side of the hill was a narrow cave mouth. The wind whipped up again and blew through the mouth with a long, sibilant sigh. Adellia smiled in relief and began to relax.

“Oooohhhhh…”

This time there was no mistake. It was definitely a groan. And it was definitely coming from inside the cave. Adellia tensed up all at once. She peered into the gloom of the cave, but could not penetrate farther than a couple of feet. There was nothing for it. She’d have to go inside.

The cave mouth was wider than it looked. Adellia was able to slip in without difficulty. The cave was warm and slightly damp, which she hadn’t expected, and soon she was sweating. She picked her way across the stony floor for twenty feet or so, rounded a large stalagmite blocking her way, and froze.

The light here was somewhat dim, but the figure before her was unmistakable. There, hanging on the wall, was Corinthia Swain.

She looked terrible. Shallow cuts and scrapes covered her body. She had been wearing sturdy trousers and a cotton blouse, but both had been shredded, leaving only fragments that clung to her shoulders and ankles. Her belly was tremendously swollen, a massive orb the size of a prize harvest pumpkin. It glistened with a sheen of sweat. Her legs were spread, exposing puffy, livid pussy lips smeared with dark goo. She appeared to be somehow embedded in the wall, as though the stone had stretched around her like taffy. She jutted out of it like a bas relief. Her thighs and breasts were badly bruised, and one eye was swollen shut. The other stared in undisguised astonishment at Adellia. What looked like dried vomit caked her chin. Corinthia’s lips moved, but no sound came out.

“C-corinthia?” Adellia managed. She couldn’t help but stare. “What happened?”

“C-c,” Corinthia breathed. “C-cut me down! Quick!”

Adellia scratched her chin pensively and looked at the other girl’s predicament. “I don’t think I can cut through stone, Corinthia. How did you get in there?”
“N-not stone,” Corinthia managed. “It’s--”

Her one open eye rolled back into her head and she let out an animal moan. Her belly gurgled visibly, ripples spreading across it like a pond into which a stone has been tossed. Her mouth fell open and her tongue lolled out. Adellia couldn’t tell if it was pain or pleasure that wracked her face, or a mixture of both. As she watched, a bulge separated from the gravid orb of Corinthia’s belly and slid down under her skin. Adellia tracked its progress, fascinated. She knew what was happening, but had never seen this process from the other end. The girl’s pale skin tented around the lump as it made its way down her tight passage. As the bulge reached her pubic mound, something grey and shiny appeared between the girl’s nether lips. Her cunt distended around it as it grew. Her thighs strained and quivering around it as it emerged from her, forcing her pussy open wider and wider as it came forth. Its shape became clear: it was a smooth ovoid about the size of Adellia’s fists together. For a moment it seemed to catch, wobbling to and fro half-in and half-out. Then Corinthia let out a mewing whine. Adellia could see the other girl’s muscles clenching. The egg finally plumped free, landed on the ground with a faint thud and rolled away into the shadows.

In its wake it left Corinthia breathing hard, her gaping quim slowly closing up. The whole process had taken perhaps ten seconds.

Corinthia was breathing hard, her face flushed. Adellia stared at her in slack-jawed amazement. “Don’t l-look!” wailed the trapped girl. “D-don’t… uunngghhh…”

“It’s ok!” said Adellia. “It’s gonna be ok, Corinthia. I’m going to get you down.” She drew closer. The stone around Corinthia looked… wrong. It seemed to grow over her. Raised ridges stuck out like rib bones. Adellia reached out and gingerly tapped it with her fingertip. It was as cold and rough as stone, but softer and more yielding, like muscular flesh. Looked at in that light, it was impossible to miss. Corinthia was trapped by some kind of organic growth on the cave wall, something that mimicked the texture and color of stone. Adellia raised her knife and pressed it against the wall. The stuff parted beneath her blade, peeling back like skin from a wound. She paused periodically to flick clots of it off her knife. As she cut, she could see the whole membrane quivering like a leaf in a high wind. Corinthia’s eyes tracked the knife. Her teeth were gritted and terror was plastered across every inch of her face. Adellia tried to distract her.

“It’s alright, Corinthia. Look at me. Look at my face. I’m going to get you down. What happened here? What trapped you? I need to know.”

Corinthia’s eyes were wide and staring. Her teeth chattered, though the cave was almost uncomfortably warm. Beneath Adellia’s blade, she could see a hint of pink. She cut away another chunk of greyish flesh and she could see Corinthia’s hand. “I’ve almost got you!” she exclaimed. “Do you think you can walk? Once you’re free, we need to--”

She trailed off. Corinthia was staring over her shoulder, mouth agape. Adellia turned just as the other girl screamed.

How the thing had snuck up on her, Adellia would never know. It must have moved like a cat. It was tall, nearly the height of the cave, but skeletally thin. “Skeletal” had jumped to Adellia’s mind for a reason; the thing seemed to be all bony carapace. It was faintly humanoid, though it moved on four legs that extended like callipers, and its ribcage was splayed out like an anatomy diagram. Adellia could see a pulsing, semitranslucent sac of organs hanging down inside that cage of bone, shielded by a thick sternum like a knight’s breastplate. The worst part of all was its head; it looked perfectly human, though with a faint greenish cast to its skin. It was a woman’s head with a long mane of smooth black hair and its face twisted in an avid grimace. It hissed at Adellia and swung one long, bony arm around in an open-handed slap.
The force of the blow sent her flying into the wall and separated her from her bag. She turned her fall into a forward roll, narrowly dodging a strike that would have crushed her skull. The thing turned towards her and hissed angrily, an all-too-human expression of frustrated rage distorting its features. Adellia scrambled to her feet and held her out in front of her in a reversed grip.

The only weak point she could see was the organ sac. She wondered if she’d be able to get close enough to stab it. The monster was facing her now, but not charging— it had seen her speed, and was wary. It held out its arms in a way that reminded Adellia of Ludmilla’s wrestling stance. Its fingers twitched constantly, the tiny bones clattering against each other like maracas.

It lunged towards her and she dodged left. The cave was hampering her movements. Her foe had positioned itself between her and the exit, and she didn’t know how far back this passage went. She had a feeling it could see in the dark better than she could, too. Its reach was far superior to hers; she’d have to close. She stood still, muscles coiled under her skin, waiting for her chance.

It came a few seconds later when the thing charged towards her, all four legs pounding the floor of the cave. It brought its hands together in a ringing clap that just missed Adellia’s head. The sound deafened her for a moment and she felt the shockwave ruffle her hair, but she was already moving. She ducked forward and sprang up. One hand closed around its rib bone and her feet scrabbled for purchase against its hip. It screeched at her and tried to reach its arm around to pluck her off, but she kicked off its hip and vaulted upward. This was a much easier climb than the wall at school, although it had to be said that the wall had never tried to buck her off. Adellia used the thing’s momentum against it. It reared up and she let the motion flip her over onto its back. She wrapped one arm around its neck and brought her knife down against its head.

Its skull was much harder than it looked. The blade partially scalped the thing, but didn’t penetrate the bone; instead it scraped along the side, juddering in Adellia’s hand and eliciting a frenzied scream of rage and pain from her prey. She pulled back her arm and adjusted her grip, but by now it had managed to reach one and one hand grabbed her by the scruff of her shirt. It yanked her off and hurled her against the wall like a shotput. She had a momentary impression of flight, then she hit the hard stone with a thud and slid to the floor dazed.

Her knife flew from her grasp and tumbled end over end before thudding into the fleshy growth next to Corinthia’s head. It stuck in the wall and vibrated. Adellia pushed herself up into a sitting position and drew her pistol crossbow as the thing advanced on her. She lined up a shot on the sloshing bag, but the thing ducked and her bolt spanged off its thick breastbone. Then it was on her. Skeletal fingers closed around her throat and lifted her off the ground. Adellia pawed helplessly at the thing’s hand as she gasped and choked. It slammed her into the wall hard enough to stun her, then turned and carried her across the cave. The other hand came up and hooked bony fingers into the waistband of her trousers. With a single sweep of its arm it tore through them; the edges of its fingerbones were razor-sharp, and the fabric fell away in ribbons. One more swipe ripped her cotton underwear in half and scored red lines across her inner thigh. Adellia hissed in pain. She squirmed in the thing’s grip and kicked out wildly, but her feet drummed off its thick bony plates. It took no more notice of her resistance than a spider might of the feeble thrashing of a fly.

Her captor pressed her against the wall with one hand and held the other out at its side. Something was happening in its belly; Adellia heard a loud gurgle, and she could see bones shifting. Something like a fat grey caterpillar squirmed along the monster’s arm. It was a tube, Adellia realized, something extruding from its organ sac and growing along a channel in the thing’s bones. It bony fingers folded back like the petals of an opening flower to reveal a yawning gap. The tubelike organ extruded from this gap and stopped.

There was another gurgle, another ripple, and grey sludge began to drip from the tip of the tube. It
looked like wet cement, and as the beast brought its limb closer, Adellia realized that was what it was. It poured out onto her arms, quickly drying and hardening in the air of the cave. As it did, it swelled up into the familiar ridges. It was some kind of organic putty or wax, she realized, something the creature used to trap prey. She tried to pull her arm free, but the stuff was tacky and dried quickly. Her exposed fingers flailed helplessly, but the rest of her arm was soon cemented to the wall. The creature repeated the process at her shoulders, then pressed her legs against the wall to seal them in as well. It left her head, neck, belly and groin exposed. Adellia caught a glimpse of Corinthia’s obscenely bloated belly and shivered with fear. Was that to be her fate too?

When the thing had locked her firmly in place, it paused and stepped back to review its work. That almost-human face regarded her with an placid expression. Then, as if satisfied, it stepped forward. Now they were almost face-to-face; Adellia cringed back from its breath, which carried a rotting, charnel stink. She could feel its claws caressing her belly; they pricked like tiny needles, though they did not break the skin. That caress drew downward and Adellia yelped as she felt thin fingers prodding the delicate folds of her sex. Whatever the creature thought of her, it was clearly satisfied.

It opened its mouth impossibly wide an extended a long, black tongue. This licked Adellia’s cheek, starting from her chin and working upward towards her ear. She screwed her eyes shut and tried to shut out the mental image.

Something soft prodded at her vagina. It wasn’t the bony hand; Adellia didn’t want to open her eyes to look down, but it felt like another tube, this one with a bulbous tip. It left a slick smear of goop across her thighs and nether lips. The slimy tongue reached her earlobe and tickled it gently, then withdrew just as the tube thrust its way inside her.

She let out a long, thin whine between her teeth. The bulb invading her sex felt as big as an eggplant. Her misadventures had accustomed her to this sort of violation, but it was still jarring and uncomfortable, as her body’s intimate places were forced wide open. She could feel the member inside her flexing like a bicep. It pushed against her walls, stretching her tight hole, tenting her lower belly. The creature’s tongue descended on her again, this time on the other side of her face, and she shivered and tried to pull her head out of the way. Her range of motion was severely limited by the plaster that affixed her to the wall, and the best she could do was spare her lips and nose. All the while, the thick shaft inside her was plumbing her deepest places, boring out her slick vaginal passage and roughly displacing her organs. Her joints creaked as her body struggled to make room for this intrusion. It was not perfectly smooth, she found; ridges and bumps brushed against her taut pussy lips and nudged at her clit. A lump began to form in her throat as the constant rubbing grew unignorable. Nor was her captor blind to the effect its ministrations were having; it chuckled, a wet, burbling sound, and laid one bony hand against her cheek in a very human gesture.

It drew back and smiled, a temptress’ grin.

Adellia cried out as another few inches of stuff meat slid inside her. The thing’s tip was now laying directly against her cervix. One look at Corinthia’s egg-swollen belly told her everything she needed to know about the creature’s intention. She was no stranger to this sort of beast, but the egg that had slithered forth from Corinthia’s battered quim was larger than any Adellia had previously seen, and she prepared herself for the worst.

Even so, she screamed as she felt the monster force its way into her womb. She couldn’t help it. There was a terrible pressure, a sensation of stretching, and then a sudden bright flash of pain. She blinked dully in the aftermath. Looking down, she could see her skin stretched taut in her lower stomach over a fist-sized bulge. As it penetrated deeper, the base had grown wider, and she could see a slick length of arm-thick monster cock lodged in her overstuffed cunt.

It shuddered, and the motion transferred to Adellia. The vibration drove her to distraction. Lodged as it was deep within her body, there was no sharp pain, only a dull ache that seemed to bloom into
warmth and spread throughout her body. As the creature shifted its position, each tiny movement stirred her up. She was breathing hard already, and when the first egg began to pass into her, she bit her lip to keep from crying out. It seemed to fit entirely inside the tube, so she only felt a gentle pressure on her inner walls as it slid inside. Still, this was enough to set her off. She writhed in the plaster like a woman desperately trying to scratch an itch. She could feel the egg as it burrowed into her, every inch of its progress marked by a new sensation. No part of her was spared. The creature knew her innermost secrets and had planted its flag in her most intimate places. The egg plunked into her womb with a familiar heavy sensation in her belly, and she sighed. Another one was already on its way.

The creature had drawn back slightly, and it stared into Adellia’s eyes from a few inches away. Its long black tongue drooled out of its mouth and dangled from its chin. Adellia had looked several monsters in the eye before, and had never seen anything more than the feral hunger of a predator. Here, though… there was a mocking intelligence in those eyes. Her captor knew what it was doing to her and enjoyed it. It knew she knew, too. Its eyes sparkled with malice, and the creature leaned in and licked her cheek again. She tried to force herself to look away, lest she go mad.

Over the thing’s shoulder, she could see Corinthia staring at her. The other girl’s expression was part horror, part embarrassment, and part rapt attention. She saw Adellia looking at her and looked away hurriedly. Adellia had no time to process this information— the next egg was coming, and brought with it sensations so intense that she bit her lip to keep from crying out. It wasn’t exactly pleasure, but a stimulation so intense that her body was reacting to it all on its own. She struggled for self-control and managed to calm her breathing, but it was a constant struggle as a seemingly endless procession of eggs was deposited in her womb, swelling her stomach near to bursting. Her navel inverted and she felt a roil of nausea as it grew to the size of a pregnant woman’s. Finally, when she felt that she could take no more, the creature withdrew. The round tip of its organ caught for a moment between her distended pussy lips before popping free with a wet schlurp; a torrent of gooey slime drizzled out after it, painting her thighs and pooling on the ground between them.

The creature regarded its handiwork with a quizzical expression on its human face. Then, satisfied, it scuttled off towards the cave entrance. It left Adellia reeling from the experience, her whole body feeling bruised and sore.

She hung in silence for a few minutes, trying to gather her thoughts. Finally she looked up at Corinthia Swain. The other girl was still hanging there, staring at the far wall. Adellia jerked her head to try to get Corinthia’s attention. “Hey!” she stage-whispered. “Hey, Corinthia! Are you awake?”

At first, it seemed she wasn’t. She gave no reply. Adellia was about to repeat herself, when Corinthia’s head turned to her. “Yes,” she said, her voice flat and dull.

“You friends sent me,” Adellia said. “They’re worried about you. This was supposed to be a rescue.” She looked around. “Sorry it didn’t work.”

“Some rescue,” said Corinthia in that same dull voice. “You shouldn’t have come at all. I’m not worth the rescue anymore. I’m ruined.”

She sounded utterly defeated. It was impossible to reconcile this bruised, tearful Corinthia with the lady who had cut such an elegant figure at the Spring Formal.

“Oh, come on, this isn’t the end of the world,” Adellia said. “I’ve had this kind of thing happen before. It’s a pain in the ass getting rid of the things, but you’ll heal.”

“That’s all very well for you,” said Corinthia, bitterness in every syllable. “You’ve had this happen
to you before. You were already… already…"

“Ruined?!” Adellia snapped. All at once she remembered why she hadn’t wanted to help Corinthia in the first place. “You… arrogant… bitch!” she hissed. “You’re the one who got herself stolen by some kind of bony freak! Miss Perfect herself! The Queen of the Hunt!”

Corinthia turned up her nose. “What, did you want it? So sorry I took something that belonged to you, your ladyship. I’m sure you expected to just walk right in and be handed the tiara and scepter. You’re lucky your last name does all the work for you, because as far as I can tell you’ve never done any yourself!” All the despair had drained out of her voice, but to Adella’s surprise she sounded furious.

“I… I… I never wanted it anyways!” Adellia sputtered. “All that frou-frou crap bores me! It’s all playing, none of it’s real, none of it helps you actually hunt in the real world!”

“Well, of course you don’t like it,” Corinthia said. “If you can’t climb it or shoot it, it might as well not exist to you. Life is just one big hunt, right? Art, music, culture, all that can just pass you by, can’t it? You just want to sit around shoveling beans into your mouth—disgustingly, I might add—and waiting to be told where to go next. You’re like a… a crossbow, they just wind you up and point you in the right direction.”

Adellia thought that sounded pretty good, but from the girl’s tone it was clearly meant to be insulting. She huffed. “That’s not true!” she insisted. “My house is full of art and stuff! I’ve read lots of books!”

“How many without pictures?” Corinthia shot back. “You’re just lazy, that’s all. You never do anything that actually challenges you.”

“Oh yeah? Then how come my name is on half the plaques in the Armory? Where’s yours? I looked for it, but I couldn’t find it! Maybe they couldn’t fit ‘stuck-up twat who thinks she’s too good to hold a crossbow!’”

“Oh please. I said challenges. You’ll run and climb forever because it doesn’t ask anything of you. You’ve worked out all of your muscles except the one in your head, haven’t you? You’re sitting in one of the finest schools in the world, surrounded by brilliant minds solving the biggest problems of the day, and all you can think about is your trophy wall.”

“Uh, in case you didn’t notice, it’s a school for hunters,” Adellia said. “As in, people who have to go out and get their hands dirty? Maybe you and your fancy friends can treat that as a, a hobby or something, but for some people it’s life and death! You just care about parties and dances and looking good in front of people! You think they’d name you Queen of the Hunt if they saw you now?”

Corinthia burst into tears.

For the second time that day, Adellia was stunned into silence. She watched the other girl weep, great wracking sobs that shook her whole body. Her gigantic belly wobbled and jiggled as she cried, and the tears carved tracks through the cave dust griming her face. “Hey,” Adellia said. “Hey, come on. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. We’re gonna be rescued. They’ll go to the Headmaster, you’ll see.”

“You don’t get it!” Corinthia wailed. “You’ll never get it! It’s all so easy for you, isn’t it? The hunting and the killing! This school was made for people like you, brainless upper-crust bullies!” Adellia was so baffled she forgot to be angry. “Bullies?!” she said, gawping at the other girl.
“When have I ever bullied you in my life?”

“Not me,” Corinthia sniffed, “but you shoot anything that moves. You never think about the sanctity of life or the pursuit of science. It’s all just trophies to you. I don’t know why I bothered coming here. I don’t even like hunting.”

“Well, why are you here then? If you don’t want to hunt, why come to Hoxleigh?”

Corinthia fixed her with a red-rimmed glare. “It’s easy for you. You’re born to it. Both of your parents went to school here. There was never any question of whether you would attend, was there? You never even had to think about it.”

The venom in her voice was unmistakable. Adellia stared at her in shock. “Wha—” she managed.

“What do you mean? You just said you didn’t want to be a hunter!”

“I don’t!” Corinthia yelled. She took a deep breath. “I don’t. I’m not talking about hunting. I’m talking about nobility.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Of course not,” Corinthia snapped. “You grew up in a big old house, didn’t you? Hawk Manor. My father used to show me pictures in a book. The Hawk family, motto: venari est vivere. Crest: a falcon sable over an ermine field.” She recited all this in the even tone of a rote teaching. “Well, do you want to know the Swain crest? It’s probably a, a, a mop sinister over a field of dishes! I grew up in a big old house, too, but in the basement along with the other servants! My parents spent every crown they had sending me to this place, because this is where the lords and ladies go, and they wanted me to have a better life than they did!” She looked down at her bloated belly and let out a hoarse bark of laughter. “Do you think it’s working?!”

Adellia thought about old Simpkins the butler and all the other people who bustled around quietly keeping Hawk Manor running. They had been her friends growing up—her only friends, if she had to admit it—but even then she’d known a gulf separated her and them. “But you are a lady,” she protested. “Much more than me. I mean, you always look so put together, everyone loves you. You get good grades. I just assumed you were like… like…” Like me, she had meant to say, but the words died on her tongue. Corinthia Swain was nothing like her and they both knew it.

“It doesn’t matter,” sighed Corinthia. “You’re Adellia Hawk. You always will be. It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go. And you love all this hunting, don’t you? That’s just the cherry on top. You actually enjoy it.”

Adellia shrugged, a difficult maneuver with her shoulders trapped in organic cement. She tried, anyways. “I guess,” she said. “I never thought about it. My parents hunt, their parents hunted, I’m going to as well. That’s just what we do.”

“Well, I’m not going to be a scullery maid!” Corinthia said. “I’m not going to spend my life bowing and scraping. I’m going to be somebody. Or I was. Now look at me.” She sniffled again and tears trickled down her cheeks. “I’ll be a laughingstock. They probably won’t even let me graduate.”

Adellia hesitated, but it wasn’t as though she had much dignity to protect for Corinthia. The girl had seen everything. “Corinthia, you won’t be a laughingstock. This kind of thing happens. It’s just an occupational hazard.”

“It doesn’t matter if it happens to you,” Corinthia retorted. “You don’t get it. You’re still Adellia Hawk. Nobody is ever going to doubt that. Just being who you are, you’ll get infinite second
chances. Why do you think they didn’t expel you after you snuck out for the first time?"

Adellia opened her mouth and closed it again. Color bloomed in her cheeks. “That’s not fair!” she managed. “Lachan wants us to succeed. He told me so himself. He wants you to succeed, too, even if you are… are… not noble.”

Corinthia’s only response was another bitter laugh.

Adellia tried a different tack. “Look, Corinthia, I don’t know where you got this idea that nobility is all… ballrooms, and fancy dresses, and using the right fork. My dad’s as noble as it gets and half the time he just eats with his hands. And when he’s done he tosses the bones on the ground for the dogs to finish up. My mom hosts these fancy parties, but when everyone leaves she just lounges around the house in her shift and leaves apple cores everywhere. And I wear the same trousers every day for a week. I have closets of these dumb dresses and I hate them all.”

Now it was Corinthia’s turn to look shocked. To her credit, she rallied quickly. “You can do that because you don’t have anything prove to anyone. I do. Do you think I haven’t heard whispers? They say I don’t belong at school, I don’t know my place.”

Adellia rolled her eyes. “Corinthia, nobody says that. Nobody I’ve heard, anyways. Plus, your grades are incredible! You made the dean’s list six semesters running!”

“Well, I like some classes,” Corinthia said reluctantly. “I like history. And chemistry. And art, really. It’s just the… the shooting and killing stuff I don’t like. And this is why.”

“Somebody needs to be good at that stuff,” Adellia said. “All that labwork bores me to tears, but Toby loves it. He’s not noble either, you know, but it doesn’t bother him. He’s smart as hell.” She sighed. “I wish he was here. He’d know what that thing was.”

“Oh, that’s a penanggalan,” Corinthia said. “A brooding female. That’s why it captured us instead of killed us. It’s probably out hunting now.” She sniffled. “I’m afraid that once all of its eggs are finished incubating, we’re next on the menu.”

Adellia grimaced. “Any idea how long that’ll take?” She looked down at her swollen stomach. It protruded noticeably more than Corinthia’s-- but the girl had a pretty sizable head start on her.

“Oh, a day or two,” Corinthia said. “You said they’ll send someone to rescue us? I almost hope they don’t, if this is the kind of thing I have to look forward to.”

“You don’t have to be a hunter if you hate it,” Adellia said. “Just like I don’t have to be a lady. We can… we can trade. Trust me, you would get bored of it quickly. At least I don’t have to wonder what I’m going to wear every morning.” She sighed. “You know, Corinthia, when I was younger I was jealous of you. Everyone likes you. I love hunting, but I kept thinking there was something wrong with me, that I didn’t like any of that fancy stuff. Dancing and dressing up and looking nice and playing an instrument. You made it all look so effortless. I mean, I like myself the way I am, but it would be nice to, you know, sometimes try something different.”

Corinthia looked shocked. “Well,” she said, “I never really wanted to be you. Except the name. But I don’t know how you can go around like that. I mean, at least wash your trousers more often.”

Adellia cracked a grin. “Well, this pair’s just about had it, I should think.” She looked down at her bare thighs poking out of the stone. She laughed, and Corinthia laughed too, and then they were both dissolving in a storm of giggles. Adellia’s belly shook with the force of her laughter. She
laughed until she thought she’d throw up. When she finally wound down, she was breathing hard. She looked up to see Corinthia staring at her with an expression of concentration. “What?” she asked. “What’s up? Is there something on my face?” She twitched her chin this way and that.

“Nooo…” said Corinthia, slowly. “No. I just realized two things. First: I’m going to do a way better job of being a noble than you did.”

Adellia nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Second: I can move my arm.” Corinthia strained for a moment. The grey material covering her left arm bulged and flexed. The cut Adellia had already made widened, tore, and suddenly Corinthia’s arm was waving free. Adellia’s eyes widened. “Grab my knife!” she said. “There, next to your ear! No, farther up! Little too far! Ok, now to your right! No, sorry, my right, your left!” Corinthia’s fingers closed around the handle and she tugged. Adellia gritted her teeth. “Come on!” she said. “Almost got it!”

The knife came free with a heavy thunk. There was a terrifying moment when Corinthia nearly lost hold of it, but she adjusted her grip and wrapped her fingers tightly around the handle. “Now what?!” she asked helplessly.

“Reach across! Cut your other arm out!” Corinthia clearly was trying, but her flailing motions did little more than knock little chips of plaster off of the main mass.

“No, not like that!” Adellia said. “Come on, you have to get in there! Stab it!”

“But what if I cut myself?” Corinthia asked in a wavering voice. “I might--”

“Is it worse than being eaten alive by an inside out monster with a freaky human head?” Adellia roared. “Come on! Put some muscle into it!”

Corinthia took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and stabbed the tip of the blade into the cement next to her elbow. Gradually, wiggling the knife back and forth, she worked that arm free as well. Next came her legs; she managed to free her ankles, then braced her feet against the cave wall and pushed off. With a wet tearing sound, the last vestiges of goop around her shoulders and upper chest ripped free from the wall. She toppled forward, the knife skittering out of her hand, her arms in front of her to cradle her belly. She landed shoulder-first and cried out, but picked herself up quickly. She looked around for the knife.

“There!” Adellia said, wishing she could point. “A couple feet in front of you, next to that little pillar.”

Corinthia waddled across the floor. Her heavy belly made her movements ungainly, but she managed to scoop up the knife. “Now do me!” Adellia said urgently. She could feel a rumbling in her tummy, a roiling nausea that built up steadily.

The next few minutes were among the scariest of Adellia’s life. She kept expecting the penanggalan to return. More than once she thought she heard the bony tapping of its calliper limbs on the cave floor, but nothing came. The knife nicked her a couple of times in Corinthia’s inexpert hands, but she was too flooded with adrenaline to care. Finally she felt herself falling forward off the wall. Corinthia stepped back just in time to avoid being flattened. Adellia landed on her side with a bruising impact that knocked the wind out of her. She rolled over and tried to get up, but fell flat again as a huge fist grabbed her insides and squeezed.

“Urk!” she managed. She looked down in time to see her flesh rippling. She moaned, and tossed
her head back. She could feel a heavy egg sliding free from her womb and pushing its way along her tight passage. Her channel had just begun returning to its prior state; now it was being forced open again, and she whined in protest. She could see the bulge under her skin, visually track its passage as it pushed inexorably outward. Her muscles were acting on their own to expel the intrusion. She cried out again as she felt her pussy stretch and distort to accommodate the unnatural birth. It appeared between her distended lips, a glistening grey sphere slick with her juices. She groaned and pushed with all her strength. The egg caught for a moment, then popped free. A tremendous sense of relief washed over her. She could feel the gaping hole between her thighs slowly start returning to normal.

Corinthia was staring at her with undisguised disgust. “Is that what I looked like?” she asked.

Adellia, ashen-faced, nodded.

Corinthia shuddered. “I am never leaving a laboratory again,” she declared. She reached out an arm to help Adellia to her feet. “Come on, let’s get out of here before it…. comes… back…”

She trailed off. A look of dismay twisted her pretty features. Adellia sagged. “It’s behind me, isn’t it?”

Corinthia nodded, white-faced.

Adellia turned just as the penanggalan lunged towards her. Its long, thin arms reached over its head and it let out a high-pitched wail that felt like it was trying to burst Adellia’s eardrums from the inside. She screamed back and grabbed the knife from Corinthia’s unresisting hands. As the creature loomed overhead, Adellia threw herself to one side and rolled away, using the weight of her belly to build momentum. The penanggalan’s lunge missed Adellia, but it managed to wrap one arm around Corinthia’s waist and lifted her bodily off the ground. She screamed and beat at it with her fists.

The monster turned its attention between the screaming girl in its arms and the one on the floor, but seemed to reach a decision. It turned to the wall and pressed Corinthia against it, readying its free arm to seal her back in place. Its back was turned to Adellia, and she took the opportunity to pull herself to her feet. Every step was an ordeal and her limbs squawked in complaint, but she bullied them into shape through sheer force of will and lurched at the beast’s back like vengeful, shambling mummy. She held her knife out ahead of her two-handed. Three steps away… now two... now one...

The penanggalan shrieked as the tip of Adellia’s blade punctured the bottom of its organ sac. Thick dark gouts of ichor splashed across the cave floor, along with looping bundles of meat. Its rotten guts burst through the ruptured sac and dangled from its inverted ribcage. It keened in fury and pain, but when it turned on Adellia, it only succeeded in cutting itself further open. Corinthia fell from its fingers and slumped heavily against the wall. The stink that arose in the cave was appalling, a mixture of rotten meat and burnt blood. The thing’s human face was twisted in a grimace of absolute hatred as it stumbled deeper into the cave. It screamed the whole way, but gradually the echo faded, leaving only a lingering odor and several large, dark stains on the stone. Adellia let her knife clatter to the floor and fell to her knees, swaying. Up ahead, Corinthia let her head loll forward and threw up. But, it must be said, in a very ladylike way.

Eventually the two of them staggered to the entrance, leaning on the cave walls and each other for support. Every step was agony for Adellia’s bruised, sore quim, but she forced herself to keep moving. Only when they were hundred yards outside the cave mouth, leaning against a tree, did they relax.
Adellia took stock. She still wore the tattered remnants of her shirt, now stretched tremendously over her gravid belly, though her trousers were a total loss. Corinthia was totally naked aside from a few sticky patches of grey cement. More of it hung in chunks from her lank hair. Both girls were totally out of breath from their short journey. It was hard to walk with bellies so swollen, and the best they could manage was a sort of rapid shamble.

“Thank you for the rescue, I guess,” said Corinthia. She looked down at her stomach and grimaced. “This has really happened to you before?”

“More than you’d believe,” Adellia said. “The infirmary’s seen it all. They can help you. They’re even discreet about it.”

“I hope so.” Corinthia sighed heavily. “Are all nobles like you, Adellia?”

Adellia shrugged. “I dunno. I never thought about it. I’m just me. My parents are just my parents. Everyone’s just who they are.”

“That’s a pretty trite observation.” Corinthia pursed her lips. “But maybe there’s something to it. I’m not going to end up like you, Adellia. If society needs butchers as well as shepherds, I know which one I want to be.”

“That’s your choice,” Adellia replied. “It’s all your choice. I’d like to think that no matter who my parents were, I’d still want to be a hunter. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to be.” She stuck out her hand. “Truce?” she asked.

Corinthia looked her up and down. Her eyes took in the bruises, the cuts, the filth and grime, the plaster still smearing Adellia’s legs and torso. Then she took the hand. “Truce,” she agreed, shaking it. Adellia fished around in her bag and retrieved her spare set of clothing. “You know, I have a shirt and pants here,” she said. “You can--”

No sooner had she started talking than Corinthia had snatched up the clothes. She held them out with an appraising look on her face, and Adellia just knew the other girl was biting back some comment on her fashion sense. She expected Corinthia to choose one item and hand her the other, but the girl put on both. Adellia reflected sadly that the clothes looked better on Corinthia than they ever had on her.

Well, I guess I’m walking back naked after all, she thought. If it came down to it, she knew she could get her clothes back from Corinthia, but she was too exhausted to care. It was a nice day. She could let the poor girl have something.

Being clothed, even in hand-me-downs that creaked ominously around her gravid belly, seemed to buoy Corinthia up. She strode ahead confidently. Adellia found herself flagging and held out a hand. “Wait up a sec…” she called. Corinthia turned back to her with a slightly embarrassed expression. “Um, I think it’s better if we go back one by one,” she said. “You know, we can sneak in?”

Adellia gave up. “Sure thing,” she mumbled, and Corinthia gave her a last smile and wave as she set off down the path. Adellia sat down on a rock by the side of the trail and twisted her neck back and forth to get the cricks out of it.

They weren’t friends. They probably never would be. They were just too different. But right here and right now, she thought she understood Corinthia, at least. Everyone’s just who they are, she thought. Well, she was Adellia Hawk. All that was was a name. What it meant was up to her.
At long last, Adellia Hawk graduates from the Hoxleigh Academy.

Adellia Hawk regained consciousness in stages. First, she became aware of pressure under her arms, around her waist, and on her wrists and ankles. Next she flinched as the pain twisting and worming through her forehead made itself felt. Then she blinked twice, slowly, trying to open her eye the tiniest possible fraction. The dim thread of light that lanced into her cornea felt as bright as the sun at noonday, and the headache kicked up another notch. Finally-- most definitely finally-- a motley assortment of recent memories tumbled into her forebrain like toys from an overturned toychest.

This vacation had gone to hell in a hurry.

Right up until she saw her name on the Board of Honor, a few days after final exams, she hadn’t been sure graduation would happen at all. Apparently her essay on the uses of mithrilseed had been better received than she’d expected, or her her exceptional Small Arms Marksmanship score had been considered. Regardless, the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters had put its stamp of approval on her record. She was-- in a few weeks-- officially a graduate. Of course, Toby Cotton had managed magna cum laude. She couldn’t even find it within herself to be jealous of him.

Adellia kept her eyes closed as she tried to feel out her environment. Wherever she was was warm and wet, like the moorlands after a summer rain. She could feel something rough pressing into her bare back, but it was softer than stone. Bark? She tried to move her limbs and found that she couldn’t. Her ankles were bound to her thighs, forcing her into a bent-kneed kneeling posture. Of course, she wasn’t kneeling on anything. As best she could tell, she was suspended some unknown distance in the air. Her arms were spread out like wings and bound in place by some kind of vine-- it certainly felt more like plant matter than any rope she’d known. Similar binds looped around her shoulders and waist and anchored her to whatever surface was behind her.

Graduation day had been terrifying and exhilarating, all at once. Chairs had been set aside for all of the parents, and the yawning gap in the crowd stood out all the more to Adellia, who knew who was supposed to be there. Her fancy graduation robe was, in truth, too hot for a late-spring day like today, but she broke out into a cold sweat all the same. They’ll be here, she told herself. She believed it. She really did.

Still, it was a relief beyond compare when two figures, one tall and stocky, the other slim and elegant, made their way along the row. They sat down, murmuring apologies to their neighbors, and Adellia released the breath she would never admit she had been holding. The last piece had clicked into place. Her parents were here.

Her stomach gurgled and she risked instant blindness by looking down at it. She groaned. As recently as that morning it had been as flat as a washboard, possibly with a little pooch if she’d had a big breakfast. Now it hung like a boulder. Its surface was noticeably pebbled. The skin had stretched so taut that she could see the outlines of the individual eggs beneath. She recognized eggs when she saw them in her own body. These were small, no larger than golf balls, but there were a
lot of them. Nausea rolled through her as they shifted and settled. She wriggled in her restraints and tried to put her scattered memories in order.

By the time her name had been called, Adellia was practically vibrating with excitement. Lachan’s voice was just another piece of background noise. It took Ludmilla prodding her in the back to snap her out of her daze. She’d hissed a curse under her breath and scampered out onto the stage just as the headmaster was preparing to call her name again. He’d given her his most patient smile and held out the wax-sealed scroll of her diploma. Adellia had gratefully accepted it, carrying it with the care and reverence due a holy relic. As Lachan had recited the school’s motto, the audience had showered her with polite applause-- all except her father, who stood up in his seat and brought his huge hands together over his head with a series of echoing cracks . Even this display of parental pride couldn’t embarrass her. This was her day, and she was damn well going to enjoy it. She beamed from ear to ear as she walked off the stage and went to join Toby and the other students who had already walked.

Her eyes had begun to adjust a bit, and she found that she could look around for seconds at a time now without feeling like her eye sockets were being rubbed with sandpaper. She tried to take stock of what she knew. Unfortunately, that didn’t take long. She was outside… somewhere, strapped to… something tall, her feet dangling twenty feet or more above the ground. She was, in fact, in some kind of jungle. Thick green canopy swayed overhead and filled her vision in every direction. The air was filled with the cheeping, squeaking, singing and distant roaring of animals-- birds, tree frogs, the occasional unseen predator rumbling through the underbrush. A distant crowing froze the blood in her veins, though she couldn’t have said why. She dug around in her memory and came up with a word: Kapuas .

“Kapuas, my dear!”

Adellia leaned forward and propped her chin up in her hands. She was sitting with her parents in the cafeteria, which felt oddly personal. It was like an invasion of her space. She told herself that they’d both been to Hoxleigh-- had met there, in fact-- and they’d surely eaten at the cafeteria. But still… parents belonged at home. Seeing them at school was… well, it was weird, that was what it was. But not a bad kind of weird, not necessarily. She was a graduate now, too. They had that in common.

She realized that Lord Geoffrey Hawk had been speaking to her and shook off her reverie. “Sorry, Dad?” she said.

He smiled down at her and sipped at his tea. “Kapuas, on Borneo. It’s where your mother and I honeymooned, you know. We wanted it to be a surprise. A nice little vacation, just a couple of weeks for you to unwind. You know, shake off those exam blues, get a chance to forget some of what you just learned, what? We can all go.”

Borneo. That was where she was. Borneo, at a hunting lodge that belonged to St. Hubert’s Circle. The Circle was one of the oldest and most prestigious of the hunting lodges, and of course the Hawks had a generational membership. Someday Adellia would be able to travel here on her own and stay as long as she wanted-- as long as she was hunting. For now, she traveled with her parents. Lord Hawk had been very clear about that. Hawk she was, and graduate she may be, but she was not a full-fledged huntress, not yet.

So, they’d arrived… call it a week ago. Jungle all around them, and the river within walking distance, along with a broad wooden jetty perfect for fishing. So why was she hanging up somewhere in the jungle? The answer came to her in a rush, and she groaned.
The first real row had come within twenty-four hours of their boat docking. They’d been enjoying a pleasant family dinner at the lodge: roast duck in banana leaves, with a fruit medley on the side. Lady Emilia ate daintily, while Adellia and her father had slobbered fruit juice all down their faces. In between bites, Adellia had asked: “So, what are we here to hunt?”

She hadn’t noticed the uneasy look that passed between her parents, but she’d certainly noted the cautious tone in her mother’s voice. “Well, Adellia,” she’d said, “we-- that is, your father and I--we have arranged a hunt for you for later this week. The two of us may pursue rumors of a kawuk nest a few miles upstream.

“Arranged?” Adellia brow wrinkled in confusion. “I thought I was going to hunt with you?”

“Well, dear,” her mother began, and Adellia recognized her “delivering bad news” voice. “You’ve just graduated, after all, and the kawuk is savagely dangerous. We thought it best to start you off with something a bit--”

“Start me off?!” Adellia said, loud enough that heads turned at some of the nearby tables. “I’ve just been through four years of work! I’m not a child anymore! I thought the reason that we were coming here as a family is so that we could hunt as a family!”

“Now, Adellia,” her father had said, trying to be reasonable. “Let’s just think about this…”

Even in her current state, Adellia could spare some energy to be mad at her parents all over again. How dare they? She’d hoped that things would be different now that she had graduated, but she was still their little girl. She figured that’s all she ever would be. The thought of it made her so angry that for a moment she forgot to be afraid. She tested her bonds and found them springy, with a surprising amount of give. She flexed her wrists and felt plant fibers shaving away from the edges of the rope that bound her. She kept rubbing until the friction burn became uncomfortable. Yes, the vine definitely hung a little looser on her wrist now. Flexing her laterals, she strained with one shoulder against the tie that bound it and was rewarded by a bit of give. Not much-- but now there was some slack where she had previously been anchored tightly to what she was now sure was a tree.

She’d nursed the fires of her grudge against her parents for the rest of the trip, and by the end of the first week it was a smoldering inferno. The “arranged hunt” had proved to be the stupid baby game she’d expected. They’d released a bunyip, which wasn’t even native to Borneo, and it soon found itself disoriented in the jungle. Native guides had flushed it out until Adellia, feeling bad for the damn thing, had shot it down in the path. The applause they’d given her afterwards had felt patronizing. To make matters worse, her parents had already departed on their kawuk-seeking expedition and wouldn’t be back for two days. Adellia angrily refused the offer of a repeat performance tomorrow. That was when she decided: she was going to go on a real hunt on this trip. For real stakes. And be damned to her parents.

Well, if these weren’t real stakes, she wasn’t sure what was. She braced herself against one rope and shimmied her other arm a little farther into the other one. Now, instead of her wrist, it looped around her forearm. She flexed the arm, rolling it back and forth, and was rewarded with a bit of stretching, a bit less grip. She pushed her arm further through the loop and repeated the process. Little by little, she widened the circle until she could, by dint of great effort and with much wriggling, pull her fingers through it.

With one arm free, releasing the other was the work of a minute or so. The knots securing her to the tree had been pulled savagely tight, but they were not particularly sophisticated. She supposed the thickness of the “rope” had something to do with that. Still, it was a remarkably complex restraint for a monster. She reached down towards her waist, but the loops restraining her shoulders
made it impossible for her to do more than slightly slacken the vine that wrapped around her like a belt.

Slipping away from the lodge had been the part she’d feared the most, and yet when the time came, it was the easiest. The few guards were there to keep riff-raff out and trapped monsters in, and they had an automatic and unconscious deference to the nobility. As soon as they recognized Adellia as the daughter of Lord Hawk, all questions ceased. She was allowed ready access to the lodge’s modestly stocked armory. To her brief disappointment this was just a couple of rooms full of weapons and tools—there was no racetrack, no climbing wall. She missed Hoxleigh already. She picked out a few things that might be useful, threw them in a bag, and then simply waited for nightfall. Her bed proved sturdy enough to anchor her rope, and she slid out the window and down the wall into a moonlit Garden of Eden. Frog calls and the stridulation of insects filled the air, underscored by louder bellows that echoed off the trees.

Something was coming. The animal sounds around her quieted as, one by one, creatures decamped for greener pastures. The branches rustled as unseen birds departed *en masse*. She listened hard for the thump of heavy footsteps or the breaking of branches, but heard nothing. Just as she was settling down again a blood-curdling call echoed off the trees. *A-hooOOOOOOOOOOLLLLLLL!!*

Her parents had hunted an ahool together on their honeymoon, Adellia remembered. The head was still hanging over the fireplace in the drawing room. She wondered idly if it was a relative to the one that had trapped her. Now *that* would be ironic.

Adellia had expected the jungle to be much like the Hoxwald, only warmer and wetter. She was disabused of this notion almost at once; compared to Borneo, the Hoxwald was as empty and sterile as the desert. Sounds rose up all around her, the complaints of nocturnal creatures whose routines she was interrupting. There was no path, and she found herself climbing over wrist-thick roots that bulged out of the earth like writhing snakes. She tripped more than once; the moon was full, but little enough of its light trickled through the canopy. Her eyes were adjusting slowly to the dimness and she goggled at the sights all around her. Sweet-smelling orchids in all shapes and colors dangled from liana vines overhead, and delicate ferns swayed in the nighttime breeze. Geckos and flying squirrels scrambled up and down the thick trunks of trees, and unseen frogs cheeped and trilled from overhead. Her fight with her parents was forgotten. This was a paradise, a prelapsarian garden of unearthly beauty. She kept on track due east from the lodge, figuring that would make it easiest to get back once she’d bagged a trophy, and carried her crossbow in a relaxed two-handed grip. It wasn’t as good as the one she’d gotten for Christmas, but it would certainly do.

She’d been traveling for nearly twenty minutes when she realized that she was standing in the middle of an expanding circle of silence. The breeze had stilled, and she could hear the night sounds of the jungle fading into the distance. She had time to wonder what was going on before a chilling cry split the air: “A-hooOOOOOOOOLLLLLLL!”

She looked around wildly, but the clearing she was standing in was totally deserted. Too late, she remembered why her parents had kept only the head of the ahool. “The wings were too fragile to transport,” her father had explained. “Shame, really. It really looked impressive, swooping to strike like that.”

Something bowled into Adellia from above, impacting high up on her back. She yelped in surprise and tumbled forward. As she fell, something sharp raked along her back. Her shirt tore and the loose edges of fabric billowed in the cool night air. She tried to turn her fall into a roll, but somehow her ankle had become tangled with a root, and she landed in an ungainly sprawl. She
rolled onto her back and raised her crossbow as a shadow blotted out the moonlight. She caught a confused impression of leathery wings, a small furry body, and flailing claws, and then she squeezed the trigger. The recoil thrust the crossbow’s stock into her gut, knocking the wind out of her, and the bolt sailed away into the darkness. There was a wet thud and a furious screech, and then the thing was on her. She tossed the crossbow aside and scrambled in her belt for her knife. Wings buffeted at her face and arms and talons tore at her clothes. She screamed and punched upward with one fist. It hit something soft and warm and the creature yowled again. But it was still on top of her, pressing down, and she felt muscular limbs wrapping around her sides like pincers. Two, three, four… she flailed wildly, but the encircling arms held on tight. Another pair looped around her arms and pinned them to her sides with crushing strength. The ahool screamed again, this time the triumphant throat-roar of an apex predator, and unfurled its massive wings. They looked like bat’s wings; Adellia could see the veins beneath and tufts of fur along the edge of the membrane. One of them had a ragged hole in it about the size of a crossbow bolt.

Hole or not, the creature was soon airborne again, with Adellia held beneath it. She had ceased squirming; if it dropped her now, she’d surely break her neck when she hit the ground. The ahool flew with terrifying speed, trees whooshing past on both sides so closely that Adellia flinched away involuntarily. An impact that this speed would surely kill them both,

The ahool shed speed as it approached a massive tree. Creeper vines hung from it like decorative bunting. Adellia looked for a nest or knothole, but instead the ahool perched on a sturdy branch and relaxed its grip. It shoved Adellia hard against the trunk, and for the first time, she got a good look at her captor.

Adellia had always thought of the ahool as a type of giant bat, and indeed, the thing now giving her an appraising stare certainly had a batlike face and leathery wings. That was about the limits of the comparison, though. Its legs were long and double-jointed, tipped with taloned claws, and it had a long tail that flicked lazily to and fro. Her attention was drawn, however, to its body. Like most bats, its wings sprouted from its shoulders, and they even had rudimentary claws on the ends. Growing from its chest, though, were six more arms, disturbingly humanlike arms with four-fingered hands. Two of them pinned her shoulders to the tree, while the other four bent and flexed to gather creeper vines. Adellia struggled, but the ahool had her pinned by both biceps, and she couldn’t quite reach her knife. It cried out again, a-hoooollllll, and its cry was answered in kind from somewhere below.

Heavy wingbeats announced the arrival of a second ahool. This one’s fur was lighter, and a pair of heavy dugs swayed beneath its nest of arms. A mated pair, Adellia realized. They squawked and jabbered at each other in a way that surely couldn’t be an actual language. Whatever they were saying, they reached an agreement, and the female pushed off the branch. Adellia could hear her wings beating at the air as she circled the tree. When she returned, she grabbed Adellia’s wrist in one of her humanoid hands and pulled until her arm was painfully stretched. The ahool’s other hands were already holding a liana vine, which she used to tie Adellia’s wrist to a dangling branch.

Adellia’s mouth dropped open in shock. Some monsters were nearly as intelligent as people, she knew, especially the ones that looked like people—vampires, werewolves and the like. But the aholos were bestial. She hadn’t expected tool use. They were a kind of ape, she remembered, a divergent evolution that had stayed in trees while mankind had migrated to the ground. And there were other changes, too.

Adellia tested her bonds, and the female ahool whipped her head around to hiss in her face. The sudden blast of sound, accompanied by the thing’s foul breath and a barrage of spittle, frightened Adellia into silence, and she watched wide-eyed as her other wrist was pinned and tied. Once she
had been secured, both aholos went to work on her shoulders. They pulled the vines so tight
against the tree trunk that Adellia cried out in pain. She could still feel her arms—barely—so the
circulation wasn’t quite cut off, but she felt as though her shoulders were dislocating. Another vine
around her waist took up her weight and eased the pain in her shoulders a bit, but it was still a
deply uncomfortable position. Her legs dangled free and she kicked outward at her captors, but
they evaded her flailing feet with contemptuous ease. They slashed at her trousers with their
wingtip claws, and the material fell away into the jungle in shredded rags. The sudden coldness
raised goosebumps on Adellia’s bare thighs and she tried to pull her legs together. The female
descended on her again with vine loops in her hands and forced Adellia’s knees to bend, tying her
wrists to her thighs. She struggled, but the creatures were terribly strong, and she was already
feeling faint from terror and exhaustion.

In the end the male withdrew, leaving her alone with the female. She perched on a branch a few
feet from Adellia, cocking her head this way and that like a bird’s. It was impossible to read an
expression on that hideous batlike face, impossible to gauge what was going on behind those dull
black eyes, but there was definitely a malign intelligence at work. The female ahoon leapt off the
branch and glided away into the night, only to return a moment later. Her tail twitched back and
forth beneath her like a pendulum, and only now did Adellia see that it was heavily swollen
compared to the male’s. Fluid dripped from its tip.

The ahoon sped towards her with her wings outstretched. Adellia only had a moment to brace
herself for impact before the warm, furry body struck hers. At the last second, the ahoon threw its
wings open as an air brake, but the impact still knocked the wind out of Adellia. The ahoon’s face
was inches from her own. Its arms spread out to cling to the tree and its wings encircled Adellia
like a cloak. The stench of the thing filled Adellia’s nostrils, an unwashed and musky odor like the
monkey cage at the zoo. She had no time to be revolted, though. The ahoon’s prehensile tail was
already sliding along her bound legs.

She tried to squeeze her thighs together, but the vines made it impossible. The ahoon gurgled and
coooed in her ear as her tail traced a path up Adellia’s thigh and towards her exposed pussy.
Adellia tried to lunge forward to bite her captor, but the thing’s hide was tough and the foul taste
of its hair made her gag. Its burbling chuckle filled her ear.

The tip of the tail was brushing against her nether lips now. It teased them at first, sliding ever so
slightly inside her before withdrawing. She tried to push it out, but she was tired and the tail was
surprisingly muscular. It dipped in and out of her once more, twirled insolently, and then plunged
home.

Adellia screamed. The violation was sudden and sharp, six or more inches of tail sliding neatly
along her channel. The tail was bare flesh, and warm, and Adellia shivered as she felt it disgorge a
flood of sticky liquid inside her. It seemed to have a mind of its own. It spun like a drill as it moved
in and out, stirring her up, stimulating every part of her at once. Her breathing began to grow
short. Her clit was awake now and crying out. The tail was slightly ribbed, and as it spun, the
bulges rubbed against Adellia’s delicate lips and the velvety walls of her passage. Her breath
cought in her throat.

The ahoon seemed to be aware of the effect its ministrations were having. It nuzzled its face against
Adellia’s, cheek to cheek, and increased the speed of its shallow thrusts. The tail spun first one
way, then the other. Its warm, furry body pressed against Adellia’s torso. There was something
erotic about the closeness, the feel of skin on skin, even in the middle of this nightmare. Adellia
tried to focus on keeping her wits about her, but now and again the spinning tail would hit her just
so and she would lose herself in a blissful sigh.
It was going deeper now, and each thrust was accompanied by a miniature geyser. Adellia could feel a tingling numbness deep inside her that spread slowly throughout her lower body. When it reached her legs, they went rubbery, and her last futile efforts to shut out the invader ceased. Despite the horror and hopelessness of her situation, she began to relax. She couldn’t do anything to escape right now, but clearly the aholes didn’t mean to kill her— at least right away. Her thoughts grew muddled and cloudy. Part of her was screaming to focus, to kill this thing now, but she couldn’t see how she was supposed to do that. Anyways, it felt nice. She bit her lip and closed her eyes as a wave of pleasure crested and carried her up with it.

Each thrust buried more than seven inches of muscular tail in Adellia’s dripping cunt. The fluid that dribbled out to paint her thighs was only partially the ahole’s; her own lubricant juices flooded her slick channel. The tail still twisted continuously as it burrowed deeper and deeper. It bumped against her cervix once, twice, and despite the sudden pain Adellia sighed in satisfaction.

She wasn’t aware of it, but Adellia had started cooing softly. Her moans grew more intense as the twisting tail cored deeper and deeper inside her. The pressure, the motion, the heat, the friction, the pleasure, the wetness, the yearning ache… they built and multiplied and spread inside her until all she could think about was the urgency of her desire. She cried out in ecstasy as, with a final shuddering jerk, the ahole buried its tail in her womb. Her internal muscles, weakened and numbed by its paralytic venom, relaxed to allow it entrance. If she had looked down, Adellia would have seen her skin stretched taut over the bulbous tip of the tail.

Nor was the ahole content to merely rest here. It flexed and gushed forth a stream of fluid that ballooned Adellia’s belly outward. It had to adjust its grip to accommodate the swelling, gravid orb. Along with the fluid came a series of hard objects. They were smooth and slightly ovoid, small enough that Adellia could have carried several in her palm. They clacked against each other inside her. She could feel them dragging her down and her rope restraints bit painfully into her flesh. She squirmed uncomfortably. Still the ahole kept pumping her fuller and fuller. The goop flooding her body flowed into the spaces between the eggs, cushioning them from each other and Adellia’s body.

Her mind whirled in delirium. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth and her eyes had rolled back far enough that only the whites were visible. She was lost in the pleasure. It felt as though she was being tossed by a tornado. The winds buffeted her and spun her end over end. She was dimly aware of her physical body, but it seemed to be a long way away. The only sensations she could feel were the ones that threatened to overwhelm her: fire in her clit, her breasts, her belly, her thighs, across the puffy pink folds of her sex and the needy button between them.

She sighed as merciful unconsciousness rose up to claim her.

The snap-crack of leathery wings interrupted Adellia’s reverie. She shook her head to clear it. Even remembering the ordeal raised strange, dark sensations, heat that gathered in her loins. She had to snap out of it. Her arms were free, but the rest of her was not. She grabbed at one of the shoulder loops and tugged hard. She could feel it unraveling, and her fingers found where the vine had been crudely looped to tighten it. It was the work of a moment to undo the loop.

She lurched forward suddenly and her stomach flipped. It occurred to her that untying a rope that secured her to a tree while she was naked and fifty feet off the ground might be a bad idea. She threaded her arm back through the loosened loop and grabbed on to the vine that had previously bound her wrist. Now she was in the same position in which she had awoken, but held up by the strength of her grip.

Not a moment too soon, either. The ahole rose up in front of her, wings beating for altitude. This
was the male, she could see. A bright red penis dangled between his legs. She hadn’t seen it before; perhaps it had been in a sheath or something. Regardless, there was no mistaking his intent. His cock stuck out before him like a banner as he glided closer.

Adellia waited until he was a couple of feet away from her. As he began his final approach, she pulled her right arm free and let herself fall forward. Her momentum carried him into him and she caught him in a fierce headlock. Her left shoulder was still tied to the tree, but with all of her weight on that knot and the one around her midsection, she could feel it beginning to unravel. The ahol screeched in surprise and frustration. His wings buffeted at her and his six humanoid limbs beat at her sides, but she clung on with stubborn, terrified strength. There was a crack and Adellia felt the vine around her waist give way. The one around her shoulder lasted a second longer, but with a final lurch it parted and she felt herself falling. She instinctively brought her other arm around in a bear hug. If the ahol managed to shake her off now, she’d surely plunge to her death. That seemed likely to happen anyways. He had lifted her earlier, but now her belly was swollen with eggs and ahol secretions, and he was clearly struggling. The two of them spiraled ever-downward. He shrieked in her ear, a-hoooOOOOL! a-hoooOOOOOOOOOOOOOLLL! She grimaced and jerked her head forward. The sound of their foreheads meeting was a ripe, hollow thok.

Adellia’s eyes crossed, but she clung on tightly. The ahol, on the other hand, went limp. Their controlled glide sputtered out. “Oh, shi-” Adellia managed before the jungle floor rushed up to greet her.

She drifted in and out of semi-consciousness several times. In those brief moments she caught snatches of conversation in a language she didn’t speak and had the sensation of movement. Something heavy settled on top of her, and then there was light, and warmth, and… She awoke with a start.

She was lying on her back on something soft, with something else warm and fuzzy on top of her. Gradually more details filtered in. She was in a structure of some kind, a wooden house— the walls were made up of strips of reed or bamboo, reinforced by wooden crossbeams. The roof looked to be thatched. A couple of narrow windows let in enough light to allow her to see the far wall. It looked like the armory at the lodge, but with lances and shields instead of crossbows or muskets. She turned to look down and found herself in a hammock with some kind of fur blanket laid atop her. A peek beneath confirmed she was still nude, and her stomach still bloated with the ahol’s eggs. Her chest and arms were badly bruised and she winced at the sudden pain when she tried to move.

“Awak terjaga?”

The voice came from somewhere behind her, and Adellia jerked the blanket up in surprise. She tried to turn to see who had spoken and succeeded only in infuriating all of her bruises. It was a female voice, elderly, with a thick accent Adellia didn’t recognize. Of course, she didn’t recognize the words, either.

“Sambutan,” the voice continued. “Kamu telah diserang.” The speaker stepped forward into Adellia’s vision. It was an old woman, her skin light-brown and as wrinkled as a prune. She wore a knee-length skirt with a tasseled fringe and bangles on her arms and neck. Leather pouches dangled from a belt around her waist. She was topless and her dugs hung down to her belly, but that wasn’t what drew Adellia’s attention upward. Around her neck the woman wore a leather thong stringed with some of the largest and sharpest teeth Adellia had ever seen. Each fang was larger than Adellia’s knife…

Her knife! She winced at the memory. Gone now, most likely. She’d loved that knife. She’d had it
since her acceptance at Hoxleigh. It had been a present from…

Her parents. That thought was accompanied by no small amount of embarrassment. How would she explain this to them? Would she even see them again?

The woman was speaking again. "Kamu telah diserang," she repeated. "Ahool." She pursed her lips and let out a soft howl: "A-hooooo!" At the same time, she held out her arms and flapped them like wings. The intent was unmistakable.

Adellia nodded miserably. The old woman patted her on the shoulder. "Kamu penuh dengan telur." She held out a clay cup filled with something hot that smelled faintly of cloves. "Kamu perlu minum ini."

Adellia raised her upper body as best she could and hissed as her bruises flared. She reached out and took the cup in both hands. Her arms trembled with the exertion of raising it to her lips, but she was dreadfully thirsty. She reflected on how lucky she was to have been rescued by such a hospital person.

One sip and she was already reconsidering her gratitude. The stuff in the cup smelled like tea, but it tasted foul beyond belief. It was as though someone had left a perfectly fine cup of tea to fester in a ditch somewhere and periodically returned to dump moss in it. She spat and sputtered and thrust the cup away.

"Perlu," repeated the woman, and grabbed the cup. With her other hand she tilted Adellia’s chin up and pinched her cheek to force her mouth open. Adellia squawked in dismay but could do little else. The old woman was strong, and her fingers felt like iron bars. She forced most of the contents of the cup between Adellia’s lips, then pinched her nose to make sure she swallowed. Adellia struggled, but her host took no more notice of her flailing than she might of a child’s tantrum. The last dregs of tea poured down Adellia’s throat and let out a defeated whimper.

The old woman sat down on a wooden stool and ran her hands through Adellia’s hair. She murmured gently in what was clearly meant to be a soothing way. Adellia didn’t feel very soothed, but at least the tea’s aftertaste was a little nicer— it was sweet, and slightly spicy.

She laid there for a few minutes, and just when she thought she try to stand up, a cramp tore through her body. She spasmed and her eyes shot wide open. She tried to scream but managed only a strangled squawk. The old woman got to her feet in the creaky way of one whose joints have begun to act up. She crossed the room and returned with a wicker basket, just in time for a second cramp. This one was, if anything, stronger, and Adellia groaned. She could feel something wet between her legs. She tore off the blanket and stared downward, though of course she couldn’t see anything past her massive orb of a belly.

The old woman took one of her hands and squeezed it. Adellia squeezed back as hard as she could, not worrying about injuring her host; the woman was clearly at least as strong as she was. The woman didn’t seem to mind, in any case. She laid a damp cloth against Adellia’s forehead and then rested one hand on her gravid stomach. Adellia flinched at the touch, but she couldn’t exactly do anything about it. She was in a private world of pain now, a tight and private agony that screamed and stomped in her guts.

Gradually she became aware that the woman was trying to speak to her. “Tolak!” she was saying. “Tolak!” She mimed pushing something away from herself with both hands, and Adellia understood. She gritted her teeth, bore down, and pushed.

The trickle of wetness between her thighs became a flood. She couldn’t see what was happening,
but she could feel a thick broth of ahol slime gushing out from between her battered and gaping pussy lips. Along with this sudden eruption came a lewd, wet raspberry, a sound like one she might have made as a child to pester her mother. The thick, splattery noise continued for ten seconds or more. Then the tenor changed; Adellia could feel a gurgling in her stomach, then something seemed to come loose and slide out of her womb. She could feel it slipping down her vaginal passage; it bumped and skittered as though it had a life of its own. It caught for just a moment at her lips, then shot out into the old woman’s waiting hand. Adellia caught a glimpse of something grey and speckled, like a sphere of granite, then the brown hand whisked it away and dropped it into the bucket.

The second egg came fast on the heels of the first, and before it was even out of her she felt the third shifting. They bounced off each other like billiard balls. She felt light-headed and giddy; each new egg sent a static shock crackling across her nervous system. The sensation was not unlike being tickled, though with a delicious frisson of arousal that rubbed across her brain’s pleasure centers like a violin bow. She fought hard for self control, lost, and let her tongue loll out of her mouth. Occasionally a limb would jerk in the throes of rapture. If the old woman noticed her patient’s disorder, she said nothing. She collected the eggs as calmly as if she were picking up shells at the beach. Bit by bit Adellia’s tummy deflated until she was left panting and sweating in the middle of a puddle of sweat and less identifiable fluids.

It took her a minute or two to realize that the two of them were no longer alone in the room. Standing at the foot of the hammock was a girl of about Adellia’s age. Her skin was as dark as the old woman’s, but her style of dress was markedly more modern. She wore a long roughspun skirt and a cotton blouse. Her dark hair was tied up in a bun and tiny gold hoops sparkled in her ears. When she saw Adellia looking at her she bowed. “Welcome to Kampong Bukit,” she said, in heavily accented but understandable English. Adellia blinked in surprise at her for a moment. “You…” she began, “Where…”

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting,” the girl went on. “My name is Pandela. Pemburu,” she indicated the old woman, who was now industriously washing her hands with a wet cloth, “insisted that you be kept separate until you were purged.”

“How was it?” Adellia asked. Her head was spinning. This was too much, too fast. Pandela coughed politely and gestured towards the bucket.

“The ahol’s eggs. She has a remedy that helps your body purge them, but it is a difficult process. She thought you would prefer privacy.”

“Where am I?” Adellia blurted out. “I mean, sorry. My name is Adellia Hawk. Thank you for helping me, but where is this?”

“You are in Kampong Bukit. Our village. Pemburu found you in the jungle nearby, tangled with the ahol you killed. It was a great victory. You can take the teeth, if you want.”

“Uh… thanks,” Adellia managed. “I came from the lodge. St. Hubert’s lodge? Do you know it?”

Pandela nodded solemnly. “You have come a long way, then.”

“Can you take me back?” Adellia tried not to sound too desperate. Now that she was out of immediate danger, the thought she kept circling back to was her parents. They would be worried sick. She had no idea how long she had been gone. For all she knew they would already be frantically scouring the jungle looking for her. Somehow, she felt that this misadventure was unlikely to make them rethink their treatment of her.
“We can,” Pandela said. “But you are still in danger. The ahool you slew was part of a mated pair. His mate will want revenge. She will sniff you out and hunt you down.”

All thoughts of her parents were instantly shoved aside. All at once she was on the tree again, that stinking breath in her face, those arms pinning her tightly, and the tail…

“I’m not afraid!” she said, but it came out in a squeak. She pulled the blanket up her body and gritted her teeth. “I killed one, I can kill the other!”

The old woman interrupted her with a string of rapid-fire speech that Adellia couldn’t hope to follow. She stared bewildered as Pandela answered with a similar torrent. Both women looked at Adellia, then the older one-- Pemburu-- gave her a snort of disdain that needed no translation. She muttered something under her breath and picked up the bucket of eggs. They clattered against each other as she dragged it out the door.

Pandela clasped her hands together and looked at Adellia with a mixture of pity and concern. Adellia hated being pitied. She felt her cheeks flush. She had killed one of the things, hadn’t she? Granted, it had been mostly an accident, but she’d freed herself at least. It wasn’t really fair for them to treat her this way. Everyone seemed to think she was a child!

“Pemburu says that we can take you back to the lodge as soon as you are well enough to travel. She says… she says it should be soon. She doesn’t want to bring the ahool down on the village.”

The girl held out a bundle of fabric. “Here. New clothes.” Adellia took the pile gratefully, and the girl turned around. She was halfway out the door when she paused. “Oh!” she said. “I almost forgot. We found this near where you fell.” She reached into her belt and pulled out something long and silvery.

“My knife!” Adellia reached out and took it gratefully. She had never been so relieved to see a short length of sharp metal. She still felt as though she were lost in a vast green ocean… but now she was lost with a life preserver. That mattered. It mattered a lot.

Her limbs were still sore, but the garment she had been given was loose and comfortable. It took a few false starts to figure out how to wrap and tuck the skirt properly, but in the end she managed to figure out how to walk without the whole thing coming unraveled. She wished she had a mirror. If Toby could see me now! she thought. As a last touch, she found a loop in the skirt into which she could tuck her knife. Thusly armed and outfitted she stepped out into the sunlight.

The building she had been resting in turned out to be an impressive wooden longhouse with a thatched roof over wooden support beams. It sat at the edge of a jungle clearing, its stilts lifting it over the babbling waters of a river. The center of the clearing was an industrious hive of activity. Women sat in a circle weaving, while an old man surrounded by children whittled away at a chunk of wood. A circle of small carvings surrounded him. Elsewhere, men in loincloths were occupied in skinning and butchering what looked like wild boar. None of these people took the least notice of Adellia. She stood on the balcony for a moment and enjoyed the feeling of the cool breeze in her hair.

A movement caught her eye. Down below, Pandela was waving up at her. Next to her Pemburu wrestled with the ropes of a canoe. Adellia looked around until she found a set of stairs and descended carefully, mindful of the creaking wood beneath her feet. By the time she arrived the ropes lay coiled on the dock and Pemburu was climbing into the boat. She gave Adellia a look of barely concealed impatience.

Pandela held out an arm in an “after you” gesture, so Adellia gingerly stepped into the boat. It rocked underfoot and she pitched forward. Her skirt came untucked and billowed around her. There
was a moment when she thought she might arrest her fall against one of the canoe’s benches, but the wood was smooth and wet and she tumbled all the way to the bottom. She landed with a clatter and a loud curse.

She brushed the fabric out of her face and froze. Inches away from her nose was a razor-sharp blade. Its edge winked in the sunlight. And around it were more blades, a forest of blades, inches away from where she’d fallen…

She swallowed hard and pushed herself upright. Wincing at the fresh bruises that were already starting to form over the old ones, she took a seat on the bench and began to rewrap her skirt.

Pandela climbed into the front of the canoe, her expression contriving to indicate that she had not seen anything interesting happen in the last ten seconds. Adellia tried to ignore the muted sniggering coming from the back seat. Pandela reached down under the seat to retrieve an oar, pushed off gently from the shore, and the canoe began to drift gently downstream.

Once Adellia’s clothing situation had been managed, she took a moment to look around the canoe. It was long and shallow, with colorfully painted sides. Cluttered in the bottom were what looked to Adellia’s non-nautical eyes like fishing supplies. Nets, poles, mysterious bags… the cluster of spears that had nearly impaled her looked a bit out of place. She picked one up by the haft and spun it experimentally before her eyes. The shaft was wood, inlaid with incredibly elaborate carvings that twisted in on themselves. Little ivory carvings of bats and dogs dangled from strips of leather. They clattered together as she spun the spear in her hands. She hoped she wasn’t being disrespectful, but neither of the other women in the canoe passed comment. Adellia tested the blade with the edge of her thumb and yanked her hand back in a hurry. It was sharp.

“Itu bukan mainan,” said the old woman in a chiding voice. Pandela swiveled around in her seat and saw Adellia sucking at her thumb. “Be careful with those,” she said. “We’ll need them.”

“We will?” Adellia asked, mystified. “Where are we going?”

“We’re taking you back to the lodge,” the girl explained. “But Pemburu says we’re going to be attacked along the way.” She spoke matter-of-factly, as if discussing the weather.

Adellia shivered. The memory of her last attack hadn’t faded yet. She sat in silence as they sculled along.

Despite her nervousness, she had to admit that it was quite a pleasant day. The sun shone overhead and frogs chirruped in the bushes along the banks. From time to time something larger would splash off to Adellia’s left or right, but she never turned fast enough to see what it was. Overhead birds soared back and forth and twittered inaneely from the branches. There was a beauty to this place, a raw sense of nature’s power that made the Hoxwald look like a cherry orchard. Adellia wondered what fearsome beasts still lurked in the deep places of the jungle where no human had ever tread.

She found herself growing bored. “May I row for a while?” she asked. Pandela looked at her in surprise, then handed back her oar.

“Apa sekarang?” grumbled Pemburu, but Adellia ignored her. She dipped her oar in the water and pushed. It was much harder work than Pandela had made it seem, and soon her arms were tired. They were slowing down, too-- she could feel the canoe wallowing, where formerly it had glided along. Only stubbornness kept her going. That, and the desire not to hear Pemburu snigger any more. She’d had enough of the old woman for one afternoon.
After what felt like hours, Pandela came to her rescue. “Let’s have some lunch,” the girl declared. Adellia laid down her oar with weary gratitude. Even Pemburu had nothing sarcastic to say. Pandela handed back two leaf-wrapped bundles. Inside, Adellia found a handful of rice, a couple of peeled tubers, and a banana. Her typical taste in food inclined towards the “beans and beef” end of the spectrum, but the sight of the fruit reminded her that she didn’t know how long it’d been since she’d eaten. She tucked in greedily. Pandela gave her a clay cup that turned out to be full of delicious sweet tea. Adellia wolfed down the food and then sat back in the canoe with a contented expression on her face. Her hosts ate more sedately.

“Kamu makan seperti kanak-kanak,” scowled Pemburu, but there was no real malice behind her words. When they had both finished, Pandela took the oar from Adellia and dipped in the water, and they were off once again.

About an hour after lunch, Adellia was drowsing comfortably in the middle of the canoe when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She started awake at once. “What?” she blurted out, then colored as Pemburu put a finger to her lips and shushed her-- an apparently universal gesture.

It was then that Adellia became aware of the bubble of silence all around them. No birds sang, no frogs cheeped. They drifted gently in the current, the only sound the wind through the leaves overhead. Adellia held her breath, then started suddenly at the loud and angry cry: A-hooooOOOOOOOOLLLL!

The other two women were already holding spears, and Adellia grabbed one as well. She sat up in the canoe and swiveled her head around wildly. The ahol was out there. She could feel its eyes on her, yet wherever she looked, she saw only an endless carpet of green.

She was about to say something when the call came again. A-hoooolLLL! It sounded close this time, but she still couldn’t tell if it was coming from the left or right bank. Every muscle in her neck was drawn as tight as a crossbow string. Her nerves jangled and her teeth chattered against each other. It was the anticipation, that was the hard part, knowing that something was out there, but not knowing where it would--

A blur of grey erupted from the leaves on the left bank. The ahol burst forth, shredded greenery falling away behind it. Its batlike face was twisted in an all-too human expression of rage. It dove for Adellia and she threw herself flat in the boat. Both Pandela and Pemburu jabbed at it with their spears as it shot past. It was inches above the surface of the water and raised a frothy trail in its wake. Then it was gone again and the leaves returned to stillness.

Adellia peeked her head up. The boat was rocking gently, but aside from that there was no sign that anything had happened at all. She wrapped her fingers around her spear and sat up.

A-hooooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOLLLL! The cry echoed strangely. Adellia looked right, to where the beast had disappeared, but saw nothing. At the speed it had been traveling, it could be anywhere by now. She craned her neck to look up at the small slice of blue between the overhanging canopy on each side. She could see white, puffy clouds in the distance, but no birds or flying insects, and certainly not the batwinged silhouette of the ahol.

It left them alone for perhaps five minutes while the canoe drifted along with the current. Neither of Adellia’s companions relaxed their grip on their spears, but she found herself losing focus. She wondered how close the lodge was. They had been traveling for hours, it seemed like, they must be--

A-hooooooOOOOL! This time, the screech seemed to come from right behind her. It was her only warning. The ahol exploded out of the trees and dove straight for her. She tried to duck, but
too slowly-- there was a sharp impact against her shoulders and then she felt herself moving backward. Time seemed to stand still for a moment. There was the ahool, grinning viciously at her from a few inches away; the canoe, tilted crazily to one side; Pandela, her face twisted in horror; Pemburu, looking grim and thrusting with her spear; the river, seemingly still and tranquil, stretched out like glass beneath her. Adellia could see every individual drop raised in the ahool’s wake and every scale of the curious fish gathered beneath her. Then, all at once, time flowed back into the world.

The ahool grabbed at her with its six arms, but she was already falling. The impact had knocked her into a backwards somersault and she splashed into the river. She floundered wildly for a moment before realizing that it was shallow enough for her feet to touch the bottom. The ahool screeched in frustration as it zoomed off.

The beast had knocked her farther than she’d thought. She was only a couple of feet from the bank, but the boat seemed to be yards away. Both Pandela and Pemburu were gesturing at her to come back to them, but she could hear the ahool’s wings beating as it fought for altitude and began to turn. She would never make it back before it could dive again. Instead, she threw herself forward onto the bank and scrabbled to her feet. The ahool was at home in the air; she was out of her element in the water. Maybe on land she’d have a fair fight.

Adellia could see it high overhead. It was no longer bothering to conceal itself from its prey. It banked and turned towards her, then snapped its wings out into a dive. Talons gleamed in the sunlight. It wasn’t going to play with its food or try to take her captive; this was for keeps. She groped around for her spear and realized she’d lost it in the river. Panic gripped her for a moment, then her fingers closed around the hilt of her knife.

Of course.

The ahool’s dive had begun. It was gathering speed as it went, wings out, head tucked in, mouth open in a feral grimace. Its six arms flexed. Adellia fancied she could see its fingers twitching in anticipation. It began to level out, ready to carve the flesh from her bones. If she missed, she realized, she’d never know it. It would be like running full speed into a mincer.

It was fifty feet away now. Forty. Thirty. Adellia stood her ground and braced herself. Twenty. Ten. The thing’s mouth opened for a savage roar of triumph. “A-hooooooOOO--”

Adellia dropped flat with one arm upraised. Her knife gleamed in her fist. The ahool, going far too fast to stop, didn’t even try. It ran straight onto the knife. The impact sent Adellia into a tumbling roll. She could feel its talons rake across her shoulders, but the cuts were shallow.

The ahool’s howl ended in a cut-off squawk. It tumbled end over end, tried to flap its wings once, then spun out. It might have plowed straight into the ground had a tree not arrested its path. There was a sickening crunch as it hit, closely followed by a wet splatter. What fell to the ground resembled a bat only in the loosest sense. It looked more like a burlap sack of bones that had been dropped down a long flight of stairs. It lay on the forest floor, arms twitching, in a spreading pool of blood. Adellia forced herself to her feet and staggered a few steps over to it, in time to watch the thing’s one visible eye roll up into its head. It twitched one last time and lay still.

Adrenaline pounded in Adellia’s veins, and her limbs trembled. She was faintly aware of the canoe beaching itself behind her and the soft, leathery hands that fell on her shoulders. She collapsed to her knees, shaking. Only then did the tears come.

Pandela held her while she cried, great shuddering sobs that shook her from head to toe. Normally Adellia hated being seen to cry, but right now she was glad of the companionship. Her tears didn’t
come from fear or rage or humiliation. She was alive, and the thing that had tried to kill her was
dead. That was all. That was the only thing that mattered.

They sat there for a good ten minutes while she got control of herself. Pandela rubbed her back and
made soothing noises while Pemburu spread some kind of stinging ointment on the shallow cuts to
her shoulders. “Ini akan menghalang jangkitan,” the old woman said, but Adellia didn’t hear her.
She was staring over Pandela’s shoulder at the dead ahol.

Her knife gleamed like a diamond in the midst of its sodden fur. She grabbed it and wrenched it
out, then groaned in dismay. The blade had been chipped; now it was bent nearly double, and the
handle had been shattered. The knife had served her well, but she could tell by looking at it there
was no coming back from this. Somehow that hurt worst of all and she felt like crying again.

She allowed herself to be helped up and guided back to the boat. As the old woman pushed them
off from the shore and began sculling downriver, Pandela took Adellia’s hands in her own and
looked into her face.

“You have done a great thing, Adellia Hawk,” she said. “You slew two ahol in one day. You
should be proud.”

“I am,” sniffed Adellia. “It’s just… it’s so intense. I never thought it would be like… like this. I
was so scared.”

“Me too,” Pandela said. “And I’m sure Pemburu was as well, though she’d never admit it.” She
pointed ahead of them. “We’ll go ashore just around the next bend. The lodge is very close, no
more than ten minutes’ walk from here.”

A noise from behind her made Adellia turn. Pemburu had shipped her oar in the bottom of the
canoe and was reaching inside one of her pouches. She drew forth something long and thin and
held it out in one hand. “Mandau,” she announced.

Adellia took the thing and turned it over and over in her hands. It was a knife, she realized, in a
leather sheath. She drew it out and stared it in wonder. It was unlike any knife she had ever seen,
convex on one side and slightly concave on the other. It looked like steel, good steel, but with
inlaid brass forming an intricate pattern on the blade. The hilt was carved bone or horn, covered in
images of running deer and armed human figures. Feather plumes dangled from the hilt and sheath.
She weighed it in her hand and found the balance perfect. This wasn’t just a weapon, it was a
masterwork piece of weapon craft. Barely daring to breathe, she slid it back in its sheath. “I can’t--”
she began.

“Mandau itu milikmu sekarang,” the old woman insisted.

“It’s yours,” Pandela translated. “I have something for you, too.” She fished around in her skirt and
came out with a strip of leather. Something white dangled from the middle, and Adellia realized it
was a tooth. A necklace, she realized, just like Pemburu’s. “The tooth is from the ahol you killed
earlier,” Pandela explained. “You’ve earned a second one, but I think there’s not much left to
salvage.”

Adellia wordlessly accepted the necklace and stared at it. For once in her life, she couldn’t think of
what to say.

For everything.”
Pandela smiled. “Happy hunting, Adellia Hawk.”

It sounded like a formal goodbye, so Adellia nodded solemnly and responded in kind. “Happy hunting, Pandela.” She turned to the old woman. “Happy hunting to you too, Pemburu. Thank you for rescuing me.”

“Pemburu,” the old woman said, pointing at Adellia. “Pemburu.”

“Adellia,” said Adellia, tapping her chest. “Can you tell her I already know her name?”

Pandela laughed. “That’s a title, not her name. It means ‘hunter.’”
Adellia is ready to start her career as a squire for an illustrious monster hunter.

Sometimes she still couldn’t believe it was real.

Adellia Hawk, scion of the Hawk hunting dynasty and graduate of the Milton J. Hoxleigh Academy for Monster Hunters (even if the ink was still drying on her diploma), sat at the vast mahogany table in Hawk Manor’s dining room. Clutched in her hands was a scrap of parchment that was already starting to fade. Her thumb brushed over the raised seal. It had been stamped directly into the paper and pressed into the blob of crimson wax that sealed the envelope: a manticore with a mane made up of dagger blades, the personal crest of Lord Henry Gaelence himself. And (she scanned the contents of the letter again, as though daring them to change on the thousandth reading), he wanted her to serve as his squire.

She couldn’t believe it. But she had to. The career she’d dreamed of since she was old enough to walk was unrolling in front of her and it started right here.

When she’d first graduated, she’d assumed in a half-considered way that she’d join her parents on their hunts. The Hawk Family, all together at last. Of course it didn’t work that way, as she well knew. After graduation came a period of squiredom serving a senior hunter—what those in the trades might call an apprenticeship (though such a low term ill befit the noble art of hunting). She should have known that she’d have to find a master outside of her family. Squiring for one’s own parents? Only the dullest and most hopeless hunters would take such a route. Their whole careers would be overshadowed by the unspoken question of whether they’d truly earned their spurs.

Of course, most up-and-coming hunters had to settle for a master less renowned than Henry Gaelence, Lord of Barrow-lake, Scourge of the Schwartzwald and slayer of the Fogbeast of Toulouse. Every hunter knew about him. Only thirty-five, Gaelence had already ensured the immortality of his name through a string of jaw-dropping achievements. He hadn’t even been born to the peerage, but had earned his title after slaying a dozen selkies and their fearsome Queen in one afternoon. He’d spent two years alone in the Black Forest and had emerged long after everyone had given him up for dead with a sledge full of trophies. He’d delivered the people of Toulouse from the monster that had haunted the hillsides around the town and killed any man sent against it. And he wanted her to be his squire.

It was all too much.

Adellia’s hand trembled as she set pen to paper. She’d already responded to his letter, of course. Now she wrote to Toby Cotton to tell him of her incredible luck. The two of them had exchanged a volley of letters since her return from Borneo; the postal coach had been speeding back and forth from Hawk Manor so often that it was starting to carve deep ruts in the road. Three or four days after sending each letter, she’d sit in the study overlooking the manor approach watching for an approaching coach. When it appeared she’d leap up and bound down the stairs to the entrance hall two or three at a time. The coachman knew by now to hand her her letter before digging out the rest, and she’d run back to her room with it clutched to her chest. She’d write back that very afternoon and send Simpkins out to the train station with her response. It wasn’t anywhere near as
good as having Toby around, but sometimes she’d pull out all of his letters from the cedar chest at
the foot of her bed, scatter them across her sheets, and then lie on top of them. It helped… a little.

He’d be glad to hear this news. His own squiredom was much more modest, but he’d been thrilled
about it all the same. He was to accompany Dr. Rufus Varnisham, a well-known author, on an
expedition to Svalbard to research the elusive tupilek. Adellia thought that fitted Toby right down
to the ground, though if pressed she’d have admitted that to her it sounded like the most boring
year imaginable. She’d taken a look at Dr. Varnisham’s books-- the Hawk Manor library had the
full set-- and they were filled with tiny, cramped handwriting and no pictures at all. But that was
Toby all over, and she loved him for it.

Adellia’s next year promised to be much more exciting. Lord Gaelence had chartered a boat to
circle the southern coast of the Mediterranean, and Adellia could already see herself sunning
on red-brick patios in Tunisia and wandering the souks of Morocco. And hunting, of course,
stalking prey through the necropoli of Egypt or the cedar forests of Algeria. Her bags were packed,
hers tickets bought, and all that remained was to write this last letter. She wrote quickly, telling
Toby about her excitement and relating a few of Lord Gaelence’s better-known escapades (just in
case he hadn’t heard of them). She paused near the end of her letter, then added:

I miss you more every day. As soon as you return from your trip, we must see each other again. You
own a part of me, and as long as we are separated I am not whole.

Love always,

Adellia

PS Brutus says hello.

She blinked away a tear as she put her quill back in the inkwell, then raised the letter to her lips to
blow it dry. She did miss Toby terribly; it was the one thing that put a crimp in her enjoyment of
her trip. She knew they would see each other again, but a year! To be separated for so long was a
dreadful hardship.

She folded up the letter, then remembered something Ludmilla had told her. She fished around in
her pocket and retrieved a lipstick that she had pilfered some weeks ago from her mother’s cabinet.
Even with the aid of a mirror, her application was rather unsteady, but eventually she managed not
to look like a confused clown. She pressed her lips against the folded letter and was rewarded with
a rather crude and blobby outline. Close enough. She slipped the letter in an envelope and then
went looking for a wet cloth to clean her face.

The coach arrived later that day. Adellia’s parents waved a tearful goodbye at the front door.
“We’ll miss you, love!” her mother called.

Her father smiled through his moustache. “Bring us back a trophy, eh!” he called as the coach
pulled away. Adellia waved back, her vision suddenly blurred. Her heart was in her throat and she
could think of a million things she wanted to say. None of them seemed to fit, so she simply waved
in silence until Hawk Manor dwindled to a dot on the horizon.

The train ride seemed to take forever, but eventually the conductor appeared at the door. His voice
jolted her awake; at some point she had begun drowsing. Daydreams fled and she pulled herself
together. It was finally time!

She stepped out onto the platform, looked left and right, and caught her first glimpse of Lord Henry
Gaelence.
He stood by the wall of the station, dressed in a long brown leather coat and a battered, wide-brimmed hat. His face was tanned, his hair thick and dark. He had a small, neat moustache and matching goatee, and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles perched on his aquiline nose. He was holding a placard in his hands with the words ADELLIA HAWK printed on it in block capitals. When he saw her looking at him, he tucked it away and gave her a wave.

Adellia had to restrain herself from running across the platform. It wouldn’t be dignified. Besides, her mother always said you only ever got to make one first impression. She wasn’t a child anymore, sneaking out of school to prove herself. She was a graduate and a veteran hunter and she was going to show Lord Gaelence that she was ready for whatever he could throw at her.

“Good Gaelence, Lord Afternoon!” she said. Uh oh. He gave her a quizzical stare, so she tried again. “Good, uh, good afternoon, Lir--” she had tried to say lord and sir at the same time and hopelessly tangled her tongue. Her cheeks burned.

“Good afternoon, sir,” she finally managed. “My lord. I’m very pleased to meet your acquaintance.” That almost came out right, so she left it at that, for fear of messing things up worse. Lord Gaelence fixed her with an unreadable stare for a moment, then broke into a dazzling grin. His teeth were perfectly white and straight and there was not a hint of anger or frustration in his eyes.

“You must be Adellia!” he said, enveloping her hand in his and pumping it furiously. “Jolly good to meet you, m’dear. Jolly good. Hope your father’s keeping well. And your mother, of course. Top-notch, the pair of them.”

Adellia’s chest swelled with pride. Lord Gaelence had heard of her family! Of course, everyone had heard of her family, but he sounded as though he meant every complimentary word.

“I’m sure their daughter’s a chip off the old block,” Gaelence went on. “That’s why I picked you, you know. Your pedigree is very impressive. All your teachers spoke very highly of you too, of course.”

Adellia felt light-headed and looked down to make sure her feet were still touching the ground. If she inflated any more she’d probably leave the ground. She relaxed and exhaled in a single long breath that left her seeing spots.

“Come along, we’ve got a boat to catch,” Lord Gaelence said with a smile. “Your bags are marked for the porters, correct? The Lady Vorpal, that’s our vessel. She leaves with the tide.”

Adellia nodded. “Yes, my lord! I’m ready, my lord!”

“Please, Adellia, just call me ‘sir.’ I should be calling you ‘my lady,’ you know, your family name’s one of the oldest there is.”

Adellia blushed again and had to suppress a giggle. “Very well, sir!” she said. “Let’s go!”

“Love your enthusiasm! Right this way, then…”

As they walked, Adellia took a moment to study her new master. He cut a handsome figure in his round hat and long jacket. Beneath it he wore a crisp grey vest over a pinstriped dress shirt with a light blue cravat. His trousers were starched until the pleats formed a cutting edge and he wore shiny brown leather boots. Overall, he gave the impression of a lawyer or doctor, but the active sort, one who might climb mountains on holiday and go on safari.
His face looked surprisingly youthful. Of course he was, at least compared to Adellia’s parents and their social circle, but most hunters acquired a distinctly weathered and scarred look. Gaelence had a fine, all-over tan, quite unlike the shoe-leather common to anyone who had spent as much time in the field as he had. His hair was even elegantly coiffed. His reputation had been built on more than just his bravery in the field-- he was a famous wit and a fixture on the social circuit. She wondered if he would expect her to attend soirees with him. He hadn’t packed any dresses, but that was all right. Leather was what a proper hunter wore anyways. She was already picturing the two of them in their matching outfits, sipping drinks at a bar in Cairo or a hunting lodge in Casablanca.

The docks were a short walk from the station, and Lord Gaelence led her directly to a quay where workmen were busy loading boxes and barrels onto a long, sleek three-master. Its sails were furled and a large paddlewheel was just visible below the stern. “There she is,” Gaelence said with obvious pride. “The Lady Vorpal. Sails and steam, that’s the coming thing, eh? We shan’t be becalmed. Come along, Adellia, let’s find our cabin.”

Adellia’s experience on boats was fairly limited, and her last visit to the seaside certainly hadn’t left a positive impression. But she was relieved to find that “cabin” was a rather modest word for the stateroom Gaelence had reserved. It was a suite, with a smaller room set aside for her use. She had half-expected to be asked to sleep on the floor. You heard stories sometimes.

Her room was cramped, but it had all the amenities of home, and after four years at the Hoxleigh dorms she was used to tight quarters. There was even a bathroom with a shower for her to perform her ablutions. Gaelence left her with an agreement to meet for dinner that evening, and she set to wandering the ship. The engine room in particular fascinated her; it looked like a portal to clean and well-organized sort of Hell. The furnaces roared and the stokers shoveled madly. The whole ship was a frenzy of last-minute activity, with men in sharp uniforms running around doing complicated nautical things while other men shouted at them at the tops of their voices.

Things above-decks were far more sedate. A platform near the front had been set aside for the use of the passengers, and it was here Adellia found herself as the ship departed. She clung to the rail and luxuriated at the feeling of the breeze in her hair. Fall was just peeking over the horizon, and the air was still warm and balmy. She reflected that she’d be spending winter in the Mediterranean, tried to summon some sympathy for her parents and friends stuck back home, and failed.

It took her a moment to realize that she was no longer alone on the deck. A polite cough made her turn her head. There, standing not three feet away and giving her a friendly smile, was Lady Sofia Jane Ebersoll.

“Lady Sofia!” Adellia threw her arms out for a hug, realized that the woman was not reciprocating, and settled for a professional handshake. “How do you do, milady?”

“Quite well, thank you, Adellia,” said Lady Sofia. She was dressed in a long tweed skirt and matching jacket and her hair was up in a bun; she looked like a sensible librarian, or perhaps a tax accountant. There was no trace of the fearless adventuress from the summer before, though a steely glint in her eye told Adellia that she was still in there. “How are you, my dear?”

“I graduated!” Adellia burst out. “I’m off on my squiredom! Are you going to Morocco as well?”

“I’m afraid not, Adellia,” Lady Sofia said with a faint smile. “I’m with you as far as Porto. There’s a meeting of the Littoral Preservationists’ Society, then I’m going to investigate rumors of a flock of alojas.”

“Oh.” Adellia’s face fell for a moment, but she recovered quickly. “Well, I’m going to spend the whole year on the Mediterranean coast! Maybe I’ll write another book with Lord Gaelence!”
Lady Sofia’s smile stayed where it was, but the rest of her face went glassy around it. “Oh. You’re squiring this year, you said. Lord Henry Gaelence, eh? Well, well, well…”

Something about her tone struck Adellia as slightly off, but before she could make a followup inquiry, she felt a hand on her shoulder. “Ah, Lady Ebersoll!” said a voice just above her head. “You’ve met my squire, have you? This is Adellia Hawk. Lord Geoffrey’s daughter, you know.”

“Yes,” Lady Sofia said. “We’ve met.” Her tone was clipped and formal.

“Adellia,” Lord Gaelence said, releasing her shoulder, “I think our bags have arrived. Make sure you’ve got everything you need, eh? I’d like to have a quick word with Lady Ebersoll, then I’ll come join you.”

Adellia nodded enthusiastically. “At once, sir!” she said, resisting the urge to salute. As she left, Lady Sofia gave her a brief, brittle smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Their bags had, in fact, been delivered, and Adellia immediately set to work unpacking. She stuffed her clothes into the drawers beneath her bed any old how. That done, she turned her attention to more important matters. She hadn’t been sure what kinds of climbing opportunities would be available on the trip and, mindful of her father’s advice to bring only what she needed, had settled for one set of carabiners, one pair of crampons, two descenders, and assorted hexes. Plus rope, of course. Beneath all of that… she lifted her crossbow with the reverential care of one handling a holy relic. She laid it out on the bed: the unstrung bow, the string, her polishing cloth, oil, and wax for the wooden parts. It had been a Christmas present and had served her well so far, but a huntress was only as good as her toils. She sat cross-legged next to it, squirted a tiny dab of oil onto her cloth, and set to work.

She would happily have stuck with it all night, but Lord Gaelence poked his head in around seven PM to call her to dinner. They were sharing the captain’s table, as it turned out, and waiters served them a fine medley of braised shrimp and tossed vegetables. Adellia picked at hers for a while, then loaded up on roast potatoes and devoured those instead. She tried to follow the conversation, but the Captain and Lord Gaelence were discussing some arcane political matter (or recounting events at a party several months ago, she wasn’t sure which). Eventually, the topic moved to hunting, and here she felt she was on firmer ground.

“Tell us about the Fogbeast!” Adellia said. She would have been bouncing up and down in her chair if she hadn’t been exercising iron self-control. This was the hunt that had made Lord Gaelence’s fame, after all, the hunt he’d be remembered for. He smiled down at her and nodded.

“If you insist,” he said, modesty radiating off every syllable. “I was twenty-six and new to my craft. The people of Toulouse had been plagued for weeks by a creature that brought with it an unnatural fog, from which it hunted with terrible precision…”

Adellia listened, rapt, as Gaelence described stalking the creature through the omnipresent fog. More than once he’d caught sight of it slinking away from the scene of some terrible violence. It hunted cows and sheep, primarily, but every time the fog lifted it took at least one unfortunate soul with it. Some were farmers trying to protect their herds; others were hunters drawn by tales of the beast. No two witnesses could agree on its exact shape, but they all feared its terrible jaws and clutching talons. Gaelence had vanished into the fog for three days and all had presumed him dead, yet he’d emerged with the thing’s massive head under his arm and the people of Toulouse had hailed him as a hero. That had been the start of a meteoric rise, one that had seen his name spoken of in the same breath as legendary heroes like Johnathan Starling and old Galahad Hawk.

As he finished his tale, Adellia let out the breath she had been holding and trembled with
excitement. Now she was part of the living legend! And how lucky to have Lady Sofia on the very same boat! She half-hoped a kraken would attack them en route, if only to see two professionals in action.

Once she had adjusted to the rolling pitch of the deck-- which involved a couple of unpleasant nights spent running to and from the privy-- Adellia found that she quite enjoyed the view. The sky was bright and the horizon endless. She wandered the ship from fo’c’sle to bilges and watched the sailors at work, or spent her time listening to the other passengers. Lady Sofia remained somewhat elusive. She greeted Adellia in a friendly manner when the two of them crossed paths, but she never had time for lengthy conversation. Whenever Adellia ran across her she always seemed to be en route to some other important engagement. It was a bit of a disappointment to say goodbye when they docked in Porto, but Adellia quite enjoyed the chance to stand on dry land again and eat something other than seafood.

At least Lord Gaelence was good company. He was happy to relate stories of his hunts, all of which he recalled in vivid detail and with plenty of action. “Slash! Stab!” he’d shout, miming with a salad fork. “I dodged the beak and cut the beast from neck to gizzard.” He was quite a skilled fencer, as well, and demonstrated for Adellia a variety of techniques suitable for the swaying deck of a boat. Sometimes off-duty crewmen would come out to watch them duel on the observation deck, and while Adellia never managed to beat him, her efforts earned her a number of hearty cheers.

The weather grew hotter and hotter as they steamed south, and by the time they pulled in at Casablanca she was sweating and rueing her clothing choices. Lord Gaelence had brought a selection of caftans and thawbs, and he offered to take her shopping when he saw her discomfort.

“Nonsense,” Adellia replied as sweat soaked through yet another shirt. “I’m fine.”

Fortunately for her, he insisted. By the time they retired to the hotel, Adellia was swaddled in a lightweight tunic. It was far more covering than her old clothes had been, and yet she felt at least twenty degrees cooler in it. She drew any number of admiring looks from merchants, all of whom complimented her on her beauty and Lord Gaelence on his fine taste. It occurred to her that they must have thought she was his bride, and she made a face. He was a handsome man, but too old. And she had Toby waiting for her, besides.

Gaelence had booked a separate room for her here, as well, and graciously offered her first use of the bathroom. When she emerged nearly an hour later, dripping and pruney but wonderfully clean, he was lounging downstairs playing some game of white and black stones with a hugely fat man in a red caftan. “Ah, Adellia!” he said. “Come on over! This is Osman. He was telling me about the shadhavar. It’s native to the Atlas peaks, apparently. Sounds a bit of a challenge.”

Osman turned his eyes on Adellia and grinned. Most of his face was squashed between a pair of thick, bushy eyebrows and a beard like a gorse bush. Gaelence said something to him in a language Adellia didn’t understand and he responded with a rumble like a volcano getting ready to explode.

“I told him you’re a hunter,” he explained. “He said he knew, because your arrow has already pierced his heart.”

Adellia blushed, but both Lord Gaelence and Osman burst out laughing and she reluctantly joined them. She could smell something delicious wafting in from the next room and her tummy rumbled. “Have a seat,” Lord Gaelence said, patting the chair next to him. “I’ll teach you to play dhamet, then Osman’s treating us to dinner.”

Dinner turned out to be lamb couscous and thick baguettes of whole wheat bread. Adellia chowed
down with gusto. Besides Lord Gaelence and Osman, the table was filled with adults she didn’t
know, a mixture of locals and European travelers. Lord Gaelence seemed to be the guest of honor,
and hardly five minutes went by without another person standing up and offering him a toast. He
took all of these with modesty and good humor, and Adellia drank to each one. The wine on offer
was rich and fruity and she quickly lost count of how many times her glass had been topped off.
By the end of the meal she was swaying and dizzy. She had stuffed herself silly and laid back in
her chair, trying to move as little as possible.

Lord Gaelence was off at the other end of the table, setting up bread rolls to demonstrate how he
had lured the nest of selkies into a trap. Adellia watched him for a moment before realizing that the
seat next to her was no longer empty. She turned to see Osman looking down at her. It was hard to
read his expression between the beard, moustache and eyebrows, but when he spoke, his voice was
strangely soft. His English was heavily accented but Adellia found that she could understand him
easily enough.

“You are enjoying Morocco?” he asked. Adellia nodded, but slowly, so she wouldn’t throw up. She
really had drunk a bit too much.

Osman’s eyes flickered to Lord Gaelence, just for a moment. “Lord Henry is a brave man,” he said,
as if trying to convince himself. “He treats you well?”

She nodded again. “I’m goin’ be a hunterer, jus’ like him,” she slurred. She started to tip over, but
Osman laid one massive hand against her shoulder and gently pushed her upright. He muttered
something under his breath that she didn’t quite catch, then said aloud, “You should… be very
careful, young lady. The mountains can be very treacherous. Always be on your guard.” Adellia
squinted at him. She was, admittedly, quite drunk, but she felt like there was something
underneath what he was telling her, something he wanted to say but didn’t dare.

Before she could ask any further questions, Lord Gaelence’s voice interrupted her train of thought.
“Well!” he said from somewhere overhead. “Good to see you two getting along! Be careful of this
one, Adellia, he's a charmer!”

A grimace twisted Osman’s features, but it passed in an instant and he let out a jolly laugh. “Oh,
you flatter me, my lord!” he said. “I was merely saying how lucky you are to have such a lovely
squire! She blooms like a rose in the desert!”

She retired to bed early and slept well, though she awoke with a clanging pain in her head. The
merest hint of sunlight scorched her eyes raw and her tongue felt as though it had been dipped in
wood shavings. She groaned and rolled over. Her joints were terribly sore, though they were
playing a distant second fiddle to her forehead, which felt like it was stuffed with red-hot rocks.

Eventually she managed to stagger downstairs. Lord Gaelence was reading a newspaper and
chewing thoughtfully on a sausage. “Ah, Adellia!” he said as she stumbled blearily into the
common room and collapsed in a seat. “I figured I’d let you sleep in. Big day today. We’re being
hosted at a reception at the local museum. Want to go to the market first?”

Adellia buried her head in her hands. Never again, she promised herself. The next time her master
invited her to a fancy dinner, she’d drink water.

That was how they spent their first three weeks in Morocco. By day, Lord Gaelence would sit in
the common room, playing endless rounds of bridge or chess or dhameet. Sometimes he would
send Adellia on errands, shopping for food or clothes or other necessaries. By night, they attended
a seemingly endless succession of parties. Adellia grew accustomed to standing at his elbow to be
dutifully trotted out and introduced around. “Lord Geoffrey Hawk’s daughter, you know,”
Gaelence would say, to general acclaim.

The errands she did not mind; it was part of a squire’s duty to take care of the lowly chores so that her master would not have to. Every second she spent waiting in line or haggling with fruit sellers was a second Lord Gaelence had free to focus on hunting.

The problem was that he seemed to have no interest in hunting at all. Every day brought a new plan; he spoke excitedly about his desire to go into the import/export business with Osman, or invest in an ivory-hunting safari led by a pair of wiry German brothers. He bought art and had it boxed up and shipped home. He even spent what Adellia considered an unseemly amount of time with Amira, the daughter of the hotel owner, who couldn’t have been more than a couple of years older than Adellia herself.

Whenever she wasn’t at Gaelence’s beck and call, Adellia was left to her own devices. She occupied herself exploring the city. It turned out to be a veritable maze of twisty little alleys and winding backstreets. The buildings nearest the souk were mud-brick and perfect for climbing. She amused herself by traversing as much of the city as she could from the rooftops. She shimmied along drain pipes, dangled from window ledges and swung across narrow alleys, often barely ahead of the angry shouts of homeowners. Street children looked up at her in awe. In those glorious moments, her eyes closed, hair streaming behind her, she could almost forget her boredom.

Other times it was harder to ignore. She wrote letters home, though she couldn’t bring herself to tell the full truth. She said that she was happy and learning a great deal and left it at that. She wanted to write to Toby as well, but by now he was probably living in a frozen hut and eating seal blubber. She began a long letter to him and kept it in her bottom drawer. She’d hand-deliver it on the day they saw each other again.

By the end of the third week her patience had reached its limit. She knew she had to say something soon, or she’d explode. The difficulty was in finding the right time to bring it up. Lord Gaelence was always shuttling to and from various social engagements, or locked in conversation with a revolving cast of expats (and, increasingly, Amira, who laughed at all of his jokes and stared daggers at Adellia whenever she wandered past). Finally she found her chance while walking home from the latest evening out.

“My lord,” she began. Gaelence looked down at her quizzically. He had been drinking a little, and his steps were slightly uneven.

“Yes, Adellia?”

She swallowed hard. But it was no use backing off. She had to say what was on her mind.

“My lord, when are we going to… you know… hunt?”

He looked at her as though he hadn’t heard. “Hunt?” he repeated.

“Yes, my lord. I am your squire, and I’m very grateful for the opportunity… don’t get me wrong… but I was just expecting, well, a bit more… actual hunting. While we’re down here and everything.”

He still seemed to be having trouble with the concept. “When will we hunt?” he asked, half to himself. “Well, aren’t you enjoying yourself? We’ve been having a grand old time here in Casablanca, haven’t we?”

“Yes, of course;” Adellia said quickly. “It’s been wonderful, really it has, but I was just… I wanted
to learn, you see, and I... how can I learn from your example if we don’t go out on a hunt?”

“I suppose there is a logic to that,” he admitted. “Tell you what, Adellia. Why don’t you talk to Osman tomorrow? He’s a big wheel in their local hunt club, the Lodge of al-Saqr. Get some ideas from him and I’ll give them due consideration.”

Adellia’s heart leapt. “Oh, I will master! I will! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She practically skipped the rest of the way home.

The next day she went looking for Osman as soon as she broke her fast. Lord Gaelence still hadn’t made an appearance, which was a bit of a relief. She found the fat man sitting on a stool outside, playing draughts with a wiry old man who looked like he was made out of jerky.

Osman looked up as Adellia appeared and his rugged face broke into a big smile. “Ah, my beautiful peach blossom! What brings you to old Osman today?”

Adellia smiled and pulled up a chair. “Oh, not much. Lord Gaelence sent me to ask you about opportunities for a hunt around here. We’ve had enough time to settle in, we want to go find a trophy.”

“He said that, did he?” Osman asked. Adellia nodded. It wasn’t exactly true, but the sentiment was there, so she figured it counted.

“Well, as luck would have it, we could use your help. Emir Ibrahim was supposed to lead an expedition into the hills this evening to hunt the shadhavar, but he’s broken his leg. They were going to cancel the whole hunt. Should I tell them your master will lead it instead?”

“Oh, yes!” Adellia cried. All at once, all of the excitement that had leached out of her over the past three weeks was back. Her legs were tingling and her heart was racing. “Yes, yes, of course!”

“Excellent!” Osman clapped his hands. “I’ll go and inform them. You should leave around midday.”

No sooner had he left than Lord Gaelence strode into the common room with a yawn. “Ah, Adellia!” he said. “And how are you this fine morning?”

“Oh, wonderful, master!” Adellia said. She clasped her hands together by her head. She was practically vibrating with excitement. “Excellent news! Osman says that there’s a hunt for the shad- -the shaddaver this afternoon, and you can lead it! We leave at midday!”

Lord Gaelence froze. “We... leave?” he asked. His voice was a dry croak. “You and me? Today?”

A frisson of uncertainty entered Adellia’s voice. “Yes, master,” she said. “Remember? Last night you told me to find out about hunting opportunities?”

“Well, yes,” said Gaelence with a little chuckle, “yes, to find out about them, certainly. Not to- to sign us up all by yourself...” He swallowed with a dry click. Adellia’s brow furrowed.

“Is there a problem, master?” she asked. “I’m terribly sorry, I didn’t mean to-- that is, I thought you--”

“No, no problem,” said Gaelence with a wave of his hand. He seemed to be regaining some of his equilibrium. “Just... surprised me, that’s all. This afternoon, eh? Splendid! Why don’t you get packed up?”
Adellia needed no further prompting. She ran to her room and threw a travel bag onto her bed. Let’s see… she’d need her crossbow of course, and the hills might have some sheer surfaces. Better to bring some climbing gear… she paused with her knife in her hand and hooked its sheath onto her belt. She loved this knife, the strange curving shape of it, the intricate filigree on the blade. It wasn’t at all like the one she’d lost in Borneo. It was something new, something beautiful and deadly. *Just like me*, she thought, and blushed. That was the kind of sappy thing Toby would say. Finally, she’d have a story to share with him!

It felt strange going on a hunt without her leathers, but the one time she’d tried to wear them she’d be soaked to the bone within minutes. The past weeks had taught her to move in a loose-fitting caftan. By the time she made it downstairs, Lord Gaelence was already dressed and waiting. He, too, wore a Moroccan robe, although his was considerably finer than Adellia’s. He had taken the time to comb his hair and he cut quite a dashing figure. The sword in his belt was a curved *nimcha* with forward-pointing quillions and ornate scrollwork covering its ivory hilt, and the way he rested one hand upon it made him look like a figure out of a portrait. Adellia grinned from ear to ear at the sight of him. Now *there* was a hunter!

He noticed her and gave her a brief smile. “Well, now that we’re all here, shall we set out?” he asked. “We’re departing from the al-Azhar gate, Osman says. Come along.”

The gate was easy enough to find. A large paddock just outside held about two dozen camels which were currently being cajoled by a small group of men. This was accomplished by means of repeated blows with sticks and lots of shouting. The men would shout, hit the camels, and shout again; the only effect this seemed to have was to raise great clouds of dust, as though they were beating carpets, but the random motion of the camels seemed to be gradually coaxing them into some semblance of order. At last they formed a sort of rudimentary line, and the men began filling their saddlebags. Lord Gaelence led Adellia to the front of the line, conferred briefly with the man there (who had no stick and seemed to be shouting twice as loudly to compensate), and turned to Adellia.

“This is Khalid. He’ll be our guide into the hills. Have you ridden a camel before?”

Adellia eyeballed the nearest camel, which eyeballed her back. She gave up quickly. It had the look of someone who would try to outstare the sun. One carpet-thick ear twitched in her direction, then the beast went back to chewing its cud.

“I’ve ridden horses,” she said doubtfully. She’d never worn those silly pants that made you look like you had bowling pins in their pockets or one of those little round helmets. Adellia had never seen the *point* of horses. They smelled awful and you couldn’t get them up sheer surfaces. She could ride to a point, but she preferred to trust her own two legs.

“Practically the same,” Gaelence assured her.

It wasn’t. It really wasn’t.

After the first hour, things got easier; Adellia’s buttocks were, if not asleep, at least bruised into unconsciousness. She kept shifting her position to get comfortable, but paradoxically, each new position seemed less comfortable than the one before. There was no least painful way to ride a camel, but there were a lot of most painful ways, and she was trying them all out. Her mount plodded on beneath her, heedless of her occasional kicks or swats. It wouldn’t speed up when she spurred it, but it wouldn’t slow down either. It had clearly picked a pace that it intended to maintain all day.

Adellia was grateful for the sloshing canteens that filled the saddlebags. She’d thought she had
everything, but of course she’d forgotten to pack water. The sun hung in the sky like a copper coin and soon it felt like she was riding through an oven. Her voluminous robes kept her somewhat cool, but the desert heat crept in nonetheless. She’d always thought of deserts as vast dunes of sand, like the beach, but this was a baking expanse of reddish rock and tiny scrub-bushes. Falcons called in the distance and lizards squatted on their rocks, watching her pass with infinite patience.

The road narrowed as they went and began to wend its way upwards. Stunted cork oak and date palm trees clung to the rocks. They had to travel in single file here, and before long the road grew too steep even for the camels. Lord Gaelence called a halt, and while they stood around stretching their limbs and watering the animals, Adellia heard the *shadhavar* for the first time.

The wind carried the sound to her, so faintly at first that she wasn’t sure if she had imagined it. She closed her eyes and there it was again, a faint, melodious piping. Her head turned towards it as automatically as a flower turning towards the sun. She was completely absorbed in the melody. It wasn’t musical, exactly… it was like what you got before music, a rude mass of undifferentiated sound, but filled with complex harmonics that echoed off each other and reverberated. She opened her eyes and saw, to her surprise, that everyone was staring at her.

“What?” she asked. “I was just listening to the piping. Didn’t you hear it?”

Khalid stared at her with wide and fearful eyes. “Shadhavar!” he exclaimed, and spoke quickly in Arabic. The other porters murmured between each other and a few of them made curious warding gestures, holding up their right palms with the fingers slightly spread. Gaelence consulted briefly with Khalid, then turned to Adellia.

“You heard a piping?” he asked. Adellia thought she heard a faint quaver in his voice, but that was probably just the wind.

“Yes,” she said. “It was weird. Not scary, just… strange.”

“We should go on alone from here,” he said firmly. “I don’t want superstition getting in the way of our hunt.”

“Are you sure?” Adellia asked. “I mean, they don’t look that scared…”

“Alone, I said.” Gaelence’s mouth was set in a thin line. “They’ll wait for us here.”

Adellia shrugged. She preferred to work alone anyways.

They followed the path up and around the rocks. The trail here was narrow and treacherous. Each footstep caused a miniature avalanche of scree. Adellia was far more sure-footed than Gaelence, and soon she was forging ahead. She waited a few times for him to catch up, but her impatience was getting the best of her. She could hear the piping all the time now, and Gaelence could clearly hear it too. He cocked his head as if trying to triangulate the source of the noise. It grew louder as they went on, and Adellia found herself increasingly distracted. Was there a song in there? Somewhere, on the edge of hearing? She hummed to herself, realized what she was doing, and stopped.

They turned one more corner and Adellia gasped. The path widened here into a rocky depression, a bowl-shaped valley cut into the rock. Coarse desert grasses and acacia bushes filled the bowl and there, at the center, was the *shadhavar*.

It looked a little like a horse, a little like a reptile, but mostly like nothing Adellia had ever seen. Its body was long and low, resting on four stumpy legs. A tiny stub of a tail twitched back and forth.
Its neck was long and flexible and topped with a spade-shaped head. It was covered in scales, but tiny patches of fur tufted them here and there. The creature’s eyes were oily black beads, its teeth serrated knives, its tongue a ribbon of pink muscle. What captured Adellia’s eyes, however, was its forehead.

A cluster of tendrils like the fronds of an anemone sprouted from the center of its head. They wrapped around each other, unwrapped, tangled and twined. The piping seemed to be coming from them. Adellia could see gaps in some of them like the holes in a flute. The melodious piping was coming from the wind, she realized, as it blew through the holes. Some of the tendrils were tipped with prehensile-looking graspers, others with bulbous clubs or even claws. The creature’s back was to them and it was rooting around in the carcass of some animal. It looked like it had once been a deer, but it had been so savagely mauled that it was hard to tell. Some of the tentacles still dripped blood.

Still, for all its fearsome appearance, it was a rather smaller beast than Adellia had expected. Lord Gaelence must have thought the same. “How’d you like to take this one, Adellia?” he asked in a whisper.

“M-me?” The tremble in Adellia’s voice was not from fear. She had expected to sit back and watch Gaelence land the killing blow. Maybe she’d get to clean up afterwards. But to deliver the strike herself … “I’d be honored!” she said, then clapped her hand over her mouth. The shadhavar did not stop or turn, so she figured she’d gotten away with it.

She laid her pack down, reverentially unpacked her crossbow, and made sure the string was taut and the firing mechanism was well oiled. When she was satisfied she slotted a bolt into place and grabbed a few more. This done, she hefted the bow in her hands and began to make her way down the path into the basin.

She was three-quarters of the way down when her feet betrayed her. One boot dislodged a heavy stone and it tumbled down on a carpet of scree. The bouncing and rattling took a while to die down, and when it did, the shadhavar lifted its head and looked directly at her.

Shit.

She raised her crossbow, aimed right between the thing’s eyes, and fired. Her aim was true, but the thing lurched into motion as she pulled the trigger and her shot landed in its shoulder. A trickle of blood leaked out around the bolt and it hissed in pain. It was gathering speed now, galloping towards her, and she reloaded frantically. Her second bolt caught it on the leg, but a bony plate over its knee deflected the missile. Then there was no more time to reload. She dropped her bow to her left and rolled right. The shadhavar galloped through the space she had just occupied, braying loudly. Its head whipped around and two of the claw-tipped tentacles arrowed for her.

Adellia barely got her knife up in time. One bony claw rang against her steel, the other tore through the sleeve of her caftan and scored her arm. She winced, but it was a shallow cut, and it wasn’t bleeding very much. The shadhavar lunged forward again and she jumped to the side, lashing out with her knife. The curved blade bit into one of the tentacles and left it hanging limp.

She assumed a fencer’s stance and held her blade in the guard position. The shadhavar had superior reach, but it was slow and clumsy, especially compared to her. Its hide was tough, but it would be vulnerable around the eyes. She just had to--

The tentacles wrapped and knotted around one another, forming a strange shape that bloomed like a flower. The shadhavar inhaled deeply, then blasted out a storm of rancid breath. The rush of air poured into and through its crest of tentacles and the melodious piping became a roaring screech.
The sound hit Adellia like a breaking wave. A wall of noise blasted into the grey meat of her brain and tore apart her thoughts. She could feel her muscles seizing up. Her arms and legs went stiff and she slowly toppled over forward.

Panic rose up inside her. She lay on the ground, cheek against the hot dust of the canyon floor, and tried to stand. Her limbs wouldn’t obey her commands. She felt like a prisoner in her own body. Her eyes rolled and her lips moved soundlessly-- those, it seemed, were the only parts of her still under conscious control. She couldn’t even cry out for help. **How embarrassing**, she thought. **Lord Gaelence will have to rescue me on our very first hunt together. Whatever will he think?**

She could feel the *shadhavar* looming over her. Its foul breath gusted out and made her eyes water. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, at any moment expecting its teeth to tear into her neck. *Please, master*, she thought. *Please hurry!*

The bite never came. She strained her ears to listen for footsteps, but heard none. The only sound was the wind in the bushes and the *shadhavar’s* laboring breaths. *Is Lord Gaelence paralyzed, too? Did I ruin everything?*

Then there was no more time for thought, because muscular tentacles were wrapping themselves around her wrists and lifting her off the ground. She jerked into the air and dangled there like a puppet with its strings cut. The *shadhavar* had her by both wrists, and as she hung there a third tentacle wrapped itself around her waist and took up some of the weight. She found herself staring into its beady black eyes. It was regarding her with curiosity, not the feral hunger she’d expected.

Two of its tentacle-claws slithered towards her and her heart fluttered with fear. They sliced into her caftan with the sound of shredding silk, but did not touch her flesh. She watched, confused, as the tentacles flailed back and forth. *Surely it can feel that it’s not cutting me. Can’t it?*

Scraps of cloth rained down and still the creature kept up its methodical work. It seemed almost gentle. On those occasions when a claw brushed against her flesh, it would pull back before breaking her skin. This had to be deliberate. It was trying to keep her alive.

Somehow, the thought wasn’t comforting to Adellia.

She could feel the numbness in her limbs receding, though the ferocious pins and needles that replaced it were hardly an improvement. Her jaw worked and she drew in a deep breath.

“Mashter!” she cried. Her voice was slurred, but the word came out recognizable. “Mashter, help!”

For a long moment there was no reply. Then, just as she was beginning to fear that he had succumbed after all, a quavery voice that sounded quite unlike Lord Gaelence said “Adellia? Are you alive?”

“What?” For a moment, she was so flummoxed that she couldn’t frame a response. “Of coursht I’m alive! Help!”

“I… I…” Gaelence stammered, then went on “I’ll go get help!”

“You’ll-- what? Mashter, pleash! What’sh wrong?”

“I… I can’t…”

The *shadhavar* turned Adellia around in its grip and began cutting at the rear portions of her caftan. This brought Lord Gaelence into view, and Adellia’s jaw dropped. He was standing on the lip of the canyon, looking down at her with a terrified expression on his face. He held his robe in both
hands and scrunched it furiously. His cheeks were red and his eyes wide. Adellia couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“Are you… afraid?”

“Of course not!” he exclaimed in a high-pitched whine. “I’m… I’m just…”

“You are!” The realization hit Adellia like a thunderbolt. “What’s wrong? You’re the Scourge of the Schwartzwald! You killed the Fogbeast! This is just some overgrown lizard! Help me!” Her speech was returning to normal, though her limbs still felt as wobbly as jelly.

“I didn’t-- that is to say, I might have…” Gaelence swallowed heavily. “I think it’s best if I just go get help. I promise I’ll be right back.” He turned away.

“WAIT!” Adellia shouted, and even at this distance she saw him flinch. He turned around with a guilty look on his face. She could feel the suspicion turning in her mind like a worm, but still it was a struggle to put words around it. “You… master... you did, didn’t you? You did kill the Fogbeast, didn’t you? You did defeat the Selkie Queen?”

“I… I did…” Gaelence took a deep breath. “Of course I did, young lady. How dare you suggest--”

“You didn’t.” Adellia’s voice was flat and toneless. She had seen everything she needed to see in his eyes.

“I, I, I,” he babbled for a moment, and then sagged. It was amazing to watch. One minute he was Lord Henry Gaelence, tall, rugged and handsome, the next he seemed to deflate. “I didn’t,” he admitted.

“Why?” Adellia asked, for the moment so startled she forgot her fear. She could feel the shadhavar’s claws scraping at her back as it tore away the last shreds of her dress, but somehow this seemed more important. “How? What did you do?”

“That’s not important, young lady! Come on, I need to get help, we’ll soon have you--”

“Tell me!” Adellia demanded, and Gaelence threw up his hands.

“I went into the fog, yes! I didn’t think it would find me! I planned to slip away, but one minute I was sitting on a log, the next minute it was there. I ran and it chased me until I blundered into a quarry. I managed to hold onto the edge, but it fell in and broke its neck.”

“And the selkies?” Adellia felt like she was picking at a scab, but she couldn’t help herself. She’d idolized Gaelence while she was in school. Was it all lies?

“They killed each other,” he admitted. “Some kind of civil war, maybe? The queen was the last one alive, and grievously wounded. I stumbled on them in the aftermath and finished her off.”

Adellia’s head was spinning. She felt as though her world had turned upside down. The great Lord Henry Gaelence! And to think she’d been so excited to be chosen as his squire…

“Why me?” she asked. “Why pick me for your squire, if you don’t actually like to hunt!”

“I have a reputation to uphold!” he said, and even in her current state Adellia caught the indignation in his voice. “You’re the scion of the Hawk family! I assumed we’d just find some harpies or something. This creature looked harmless enough. How was I to know what it could do?”
“That’s your job!” Adellia screamed. “You’re a hunter! Didn’t you go to school?”

“Well, yes,” Gaelence said, “but I was rather an indifferent student, to tell you the truth. Better lucky than good, I’ve always said…”

The last scrap of cloth fluttered to the ground. Adellia hung naked in the grip of the shadhavar, sweat beading on her skin. Gaelence was staring at her, but without a trace of lust in his eyes. In fact, he looked terrified. “If you die, that’s it for my career!” he moaned. “Losing Geoffrey Hawk’s daughter? They’ll--”

“Your career?” Adellia squawked. “It’s my life! Do something!”

Gaelence's eyes darted between Adellia and the path from which they had come. Then he turned and fled.

Adellia cursed his retreating back. Now that her shock and anger had worn off, fear was creeping back. The shadhavar turned her around and dropped her none-too-gently onto the canyon floor. Tentacles pinned her wrists to the ground, and two more snaked out and grabbed her ankles, drawing them apart into a painful spread-eagle. The beast’s head descended on her and turned this way and that. Then its mouth cracked open to reveal a croggled mass of fangs.

This is it, Adellia thought, but the shadhavar didn’t bite her. Its tongue slid out and flopped wetly against her skin. Taking no notice of her cry of disgust, it began to lick her, starting from the knee and working upward. The tongue was massive, even relative to the size of the beast; it felt like someone dragging a wet piece of raw steak along her leg. It traveled up her thigh, leaving a trail of translucent saliva behind it, and brushed gently against her pussy lips. Moving on, it slid past her navel, along the crest of her stomach and between her breasts. She grimaced and flinched away as it caressed her neck, but she was unable to prevent it from sliding across her cheek. It smelled terrible and she buttoned her lips up tightly to keep from swallowing any of its rancid saliva. Fortunately, it quickly lost interest in her head. It began to retrace its path downward, slathering a second layer of drool on her skin. It paused when it reached her mons and proceeded slowly downwards. She tried to pull her thighs together, but they were still barely responding to her commands, and she was helpless to stop the tip of the tongue probing the soft furrow of her sex.

This seemed to get its attention, and it pushed its head forward. The tip of the tongue slid between her cuntips and Adellia let out an involuntary gasp. It prodded gently, then withdrew. Her relief was shortlived. One of the tentacles, this one tipped with a round bulb, separated from the pack and arrowed towards her quim.

She tried one last time to break the beast’s grip, but to no avail. The tentacle rested briefly against her entrance, then bunched up and thrust itself forward. Her nether lips offered no more resistance than her robe had. There was a wet, meaty squelch and the tentacle buried itself inside her.

Adellia was pinned, but she wasn’t going to give up without a fight. She bore down with her vaginal muscles and tried to force the invader out of her. It didn’t seem exceptionally strong, especially not compared to horrors like the amphisbaena or penanggalan, and it struggled against her determined effort. She could feel the round tip of the tentacle inside her, pressing against her inner walls and trying to burrow deeper, but she was winning. She strained and grunted with exertion. Centimeter by centimeter, she was pushing it out. Muscles honed by long and unfortunate experience were making themselves felt.

The remaining frond of tentacles rearranged themselves into a new shape, and the shadhavar blew again. This wasn’t an ear-splitting screech, like the noise that had paralyzed her; it was softer, more insidious, a piping melody that rang in her ears. She tried to block it out and focus on her
squeezing, but it wormed its way into her brain and reverberated around in there. The melody seemed to awaken strange visions inside her, and she could feel her cheeks growing hot. She saw herself in the desert, nude but for gold earrings and bangles on her limbs, dancing and cavorting in a circle around a seated figure. It was Toby, she realized, Toby in a desert *thawb*, staring at her with lust in his eyes. In her vision, she ran to him and threw her arms around him. He kissed her and his lips tasted like cinnamon. She struggled with his robe. She wanted to pull it off him, to see him, to feel him, touch him, love him…

Eyes closed, she writhed in the grip of the *shadhavar*. The melody filled her world. Her vaginal muscles gave up the fight and the tentacle slid ever-deeper inside her. Its passage was eased by her treacherous body. Her lubricating juices filled her tight channel and splashed out to soak her thighs. In her head, Toby had laid her down on a convenient dune and was preparing to make love to her.

Now that the *shadhavar* had subdued its prey, it established a rhythm. Its tentacle slid into and out of Adellia’s quim. Each thrust was a little deeper than the last; each withdrawal left her needy and shuddering. “Toby,” she whispered, and bit her lip. The bulb at the end of the tentacle nudged against her clit with each push, and in her head, Toby’s questing fingers slid between her legs and found the stiff pink nub. Still the piping filled her head. It spoke to her in her own voice, echoing back the wild cries that she sometimes made in the throes of passion. It moaned and screamed orgiastically. Every time the music swelled in her head, so too did her lust, and so too did the frenzied rutting of the tentacle inside her. It spurted what felt like warm, viscous slime, coating her inner walls and spurting out from between her stretched and straining pussy lips.

Still it plunged deeper and deeper. The tip was the thickest part, but the tentacle itself was as girthy as Toby’s cock, and it rubbed most deliciously against her inner walls. The questing tip bumped gently against her cervix once, twice, then nestled up to it and began to rub. It flexed like a fist inside her and Adellia moaned. Her eyelids fluttered and her mouth hung open. All thought of resistance had fallen away. She was floating on a sea of music, each crescendo bringing new heights of pleasure. Her body twitched in time to the *shadhavar*’s tune. The tentacles around her limbs were hardly necessary anymore, but they remained, limiting her movements to the occasional buck and thrust of her hips. Part of her was grateful that Lord Gaelence was not here to witness this shameful display, but she had no more control over her body’s reactions than she did over the sun and the tide.

The tentacle inside her flexed once more. Adellia let out a little yelp at the sudden sensation of pressure. It built rapidly to the point of pain, but the music in her head would not let her focus on it. She felt something shift and yield inside her and then, as the manic piping reached its crescendo, it thrust its way into her womb.

She felt the impact from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. Her whole body shuddered and squirmed. Something was *wriggling* inside her, deep inside her, something warm and wet and alive. Her eyes rolled frantically in their sockets and she let out little puffing breaths. Every second was a struggle for self-control. It was in her, touching, probing, caressing, squeezing, pushing… the sensations were overwhelming, far more than she could handle. The music in her head made a mockery of her attempts at thought. All she could do was ride the wave. Her vaginal muscles contracted frantically around the tentacle, perhaps still trying in vain to keep it out, but all they accomplished was to milk more of the creature’s gooey secretions. A thick dollop of creamy monster cum squirted out into her womb. She watched helplessly as the smooth, taut skin of her tummy began to bulge outward.

The tone of the music changed, and as it did, the tentacle inside her began to ripple and contract. Each time it flexed, the muscular shaft pressed against another part of her channel. It played her like a piano. Sensitive nerves cried out and filled her head with pleasure, the notes coming so fast
they overlapped. She twitched and moaned and a thin line of drool trickled out of the corner of her mouth. Another tentacle, this one thinner than the one stretching out her quim, darted towards her mouth. It seemed to sniff at the saliva drying on her cheek for just a moment, then plunged in between her lips. She could not muster the slightest resistance. Instead, she sucked feebly at its tip. In her fevered imagination she was pleasuring Toby with her mouth as his fingers worked her slit.

The rod filling her fuck-channel flexed faster and faster. Something was traveling along it: she felt it, a round growth like a bead on a string, pressing against her distended cuntlips. Her pussy was already stretching around the tentacle and for a moment it seemed that it would stretch no more. The music grew discordant. Adellia shifted, her thoughts starting to coalesce back into shape…

With a loud wail, the shadhavar bore down on her, and the growth shoved its way inside her. Adellia let out a muffled scream. The tentacle in her mouth belched forth a thick wad of chunky goop into her mouth and she swallowed desperately, trying not to choke. Some of the stuff squirted out of her sinuses and basted her cheeks; the rest of it slid down her throat like sticky porridge.

The round shape inside her was still moving. Its progress towards her uterus was marked by a dramatic tenting of her skin; she could see it crawling closer and closer. A part of her--a tiny part--was screaming and pleading, but the rest watched in rapt anticipation. Any second now, that little round bump would slip into her most intimate place, and then she’d… and then she’d…

There was a moment of tension, but she could not resist the patient pressure any more than she could drive the incessant piping out of her head. The round shape--the shadhavar’s egg--shot free from the end of its ovipositor, accompanied by another torrent of warm fluid. The feeling of it filling her, cushioned by warm goop, was too much for Adellia’s frayed brain. She gurgled mindlessly around the tentacle in her mouth and surrendered to her orgasm.

It began deep inside her, where the egg had just been planted, and rippled outward. Pain twined through the pleasure, the pain of a body stretched and stuffed beyond capacity. The two were a heady combination. She twitched and jerked as though struck by lightning, while inside her head the music had reached its grand climax. Juices squirted out around the tight seal between the tentacle and her soaking-wet furrow. Her muscular spasms served only to draw the second egg deeper inside her. When it popped into her womb, it knocked gently against the first like a billiard ball, and the pang of the impact sent a whole cascade of aftershocks rippling through her body.

She lay there on the desert ground, panting and covered in sweat, for a few minutes before realizing something had changed. The music had ceased. Perhaps the shadhavar needed all of its efforts to implant its eggs, or perhaps it considered her fully subdued. Her addled brain stitched itself back together and thought returned--though she was distracted by the occasional twinges of pleasure and the weight of her grotesquely bloated stomach.

There was still a tentacle in her mouth. It was barely moving and she spat it out in disgust. Her eyes crossed to look at it, and she shivered in horror; it looked like a living flute. The tiny holes covering it stared at her like empty eye sockets.

Memory kicked a neuron. There was something about those holes… an idea flitted past and Adellia froze, not daring even to breathe in case she dislodged it. She tried to think. Something about a flute…

She could already feel the third egg knocking on her door. She had to act. She didn’t dare think about what she was planning, in case she realized how desperate and hopeless an idea it was. Leaning forward with her upper body, she pursed her lips and locked them around the end of the tentacle. She drew in a deep breath, filled her lungs, and blew.
The effect was immediate and dramatic. A discordant honk filled the air and the shadhavar’s eyes widened. It stumbled backwards a step or two and Adellia cried out as its swollen member yanked free from her womb. She could feel the opening inside her yawning wide. More importantly, however, were the tendrils locking her wrists and ankles in place. The beast had withdrawn those, too.

She lacked the strength to leap to her feet, but she rolled over. The ovipositor slid out of her pussy and splatted wetly onto the ground. The shadhavar reeled, stumbling back and forth on its stubby legs. It roared and thumped towards her with two claw-tipped tentacles leveled. She had ruined its coitus, it seemed, and it was keen to make her pay with her life.

Adellia managed to prop herself up into a sitting position and stared down the charging monster. It really was quite small. Without its sonic weaponry, it was just an ugly-looking deer-lizard. She held her hands out in a wrestling stance she had learned from Ludmilla and, as the tentacles plunged towards her, grabbed them just behind the claws. The beast tried to arrest its forward motion, but it was traveling too fast. Adelia yanked down and turned her wrists inward and the shadhavar ran face-first into its own claws. There was a horrible wet noise, a roar of pain and surprise, and a spray of nasty-tasting ichor, and then Adellia was bowled over by the tumbling body. The two of them rolled over and over for ten feet and then lay still.

It took at least a minute for Adellia to pull herself free. Her back and bottom were raw with friction burns and her face was covered in the thing’s blood, but it had fared far worse; the tentacles lay in an ungainly sprawl, all except for the two that impaled it through its eye sockets. In death, it seemed pathetic, and she spared a moment to feel sorry for it. Only a moment, though. The thing had just violated her, after all.

She staggered to her feet and shook off her numbness. The entire area between her navel and her knees felt like one big bruise and she was still sore where its swollen bulb had yanked out of her. She could feel the eggs sloshing around inside her and rested one hand on her belly. It was slightly tented, like a woman just starting to show, and she wondered what the local folk remedy for shadhavar egg infestation was. She supposed she’d have to find out. There was something she had to do first. Well, two things.

Finding her knife proved easy enough. It lay in the sand where she’d fallen. She scooped it up and was pleased to see that it had come through undamaged. The shadhavar’s neck looked to be too thick and scaly to cut, but she severed two of its claws easily enough. She managed to find a long, intact strip of cloth and tied it around her waist. It wouldn’t do much to protect her modesty, but at least it showed she was trying. Unfortunately, there proved to be no surviving pieces large enough to cover her breasts, but she wiped the grime and slime off herself as best she could. Then she set off up the trail.

Lord Gaelence was, at least, easy to track. Now that she was looking for it, the trace he left was impossible to miss. What a fraud, she thought bitterly. A child could follow this trail. I should see if Lady Sofia needs a squire.

Adellia walked for about ten minutes before she heard voices. She paused and then squatted behind a rock and strained to listen.

“...she was very brave,” said one voice. It was Lord Gaelence. “She charged in before I could say anything. Sadly, she was overcome. I ran in, of course, but before I could reach her it had delivered the killing blow.”

The response was in Arabic, but the tone sounded skeptical to Adellia. Gaelence paused, then replied in an affronted voice.
“Of course I did! And I gave her a proper burial, too. She was avenged at least. Come, we should return to the city. I will need to compose a message to her parents.”

Adellia had heard enough. She rose up from behind the rock and strode out into the sunlight. Lord Gaelence was standing at the center of a small ring of porters. All of them gaped at her, none wider than Gaelence himself. “Adellia!” he sputtered. “You’re… you’re…”

Adellia tried to think of a witty retort and couldn’t. Instead she threw the claws down at his feet and pointed at them. When he looked down in astonishment, his chin met her fist on the way up. It was the most satisfying blow of her life. His glasses flew off, twinkling in the sunlight, and he spun around and folded up on the dirt. Adellia stood there, panting furiously, her chest heaving with exertion. Only then did she realize that a dozen pairs of eyes were staring at her… and, at some point, her makeshift belt had slid off.

“You!” she said, pointing at the nearest porter. She didn’t know if he spoke English and didn’t care. “I need something to wear! Now!”

Her intentions were clear even if her words weren’t. Wordlessly, he pulled off his robe and handed it to her. It was far too large for Adellia and she felt like she was wallowing in it, but it was a start. “Right!” she said. “Now, let’s get this one,” she pointed to Gaelence, “back to the city. And then I need to write a letter.”
Freed from Lord Gaelence’s service, Adellia seeks adventure across North Africa.

By the time she passed through the al-Azhar gate into Casablanca, Adellia Hawk was grimy, sweaty, and madder than she’d ever been. It wasn’t just the discomfort of the the trip or the gritty feeling of sand in her most intimate cracks and crevices. It wasn’t just her still-fuming anger at Lord Henry Gaelence, the idol who had proven out a fraud. It was the humiliation. She had trusted Gaelence and followed him out into this miserable desert and he made her look stupid. And if there was one thing Adellia Hawk hated above all others, it was being made to look stupid.

He was trussed up now across the back of her guide’s camel. He had regained consciousness midway through their trip back, but he had enough survival instinct to know not to talk to her. Adellia had rode three camels ahead of him, but the black cloud of her rage must have been visible even from a distance. She had thought the trip out was bad, but with her entire lower body feeling like one big bruise, the way back was a hellish ordeal. Every bounce and jostle set the eggs inside her rolling and clacking against each other. The result was a dull, nauseating ache like a thunderstorm on the horizon, always threatening to spill over into agony but never quite reaching it.

Khalid, her guide, nodded towards the bound hunter. “What shall we do with him, lady?” he asked. Adellia considered this for a moment. “Leave him at the hotel,” she said. “I’ll figure something out.” She limped over to where Gaelence was hanging. He was in a sorry state. His glasses were somewhere out there in the desert and his neat little moustache was crusty with dirt. He looked up at her with watery eyes.

“Please, Adellia, I never--” he began.

“Shut up.” She wasn’t interested in his excuses. She planted her hands on her hips and tried to ignore the ache in her guts. “I’m not going to hurt you. But I am going to write a letter detailing exactly what happened out there, and you’re going to sign it and seal it. And then I’m just going to take it and… go.” She was making this up as she went along, but it sounded right.

“Yes, I’m going to go and you’re not going to follow me. You can stay here in Casablanca bedding local girls or slink home to your manor, but don’t you dare try to weasel out of this, I’d rather keep this between us, but if I have to go public, I will.” She hesitated. “Oh, and you’ll be financing the rest of my trip. So write out some banknotes.”

His brief look of defiance melted like butter in a furnace in the face of her angry glare. He groaned and gave her a meek nod.

“Alright. Khalid, you can take him away. I’ll-- urk --” she stumbled and threw out one hand. The only thing near enough to break her fall was a camel, so she leaned against it and fought to keep down her gorge. Her bruised quim hurt, but it was nothing compared to the awful, stretched feeling of her belly.

“Milady,” Khalid said, hurrying over. Adellia stuck out her arm.
“I’m ok! I just need a… urrrggh …”

“The shadhavar, milady. It… um… it is known to, sometimes, with… with woman, and…”

“Yeah,” she snapped. “I know. You got a good look at my belly, no need to come over all bashful now.”

“Well,” he said, “you need to be… cleansed. You need those eggs out.”

“Are you volunteering?” Adellia snapped. Khalid blushed bright red and backed away with his hands up.

“No, milady! But, my sister… she can help you. The alley by the Plaza of Broken Moons, the one with the balcony. You know it?”

“Yes,” she said. “And?”

“She keeps a vase of pink roses in her window. Tell her I sent you, and explain your problem. She will help.”

Adellia nodded, then grimaced as a spasm of pain doubled her over. She would be glad to get rid of these eggs. She just had one errand to take care of first.

--

Osman didn’t seem surprised to see Adellia, nor did he comment on her wretched state. He listened to her story (minus the more intimate details) and nodded politely. When she finished, he gave Lord Gaelence a withering glare.

“I am sorry, o lovely one,” he said. “I had heard rumors of his perfidy, but I did not credit them. I should have done more to warn you.” He bowed his head. “What shall be done with this snake? I can have his head off his shoulders in a trice. Perhaps you would like to keep it?”

Gaelence threw himself down on his knees. “Please! Mercy, milord, milady! I never meant to hurt anyone, I swear it!”

“That hardly seems necessary,” Adellia said. “Don’t kill him or anything. Just keep an eye on him, alright?”

“Certainly.” Osman bowed his great head and reached out to take Adellia’s hand. He planted a rather slobbery kiss on her knuckles. “And yourself?”

“Well, I came here to hunt,” Adellia said. “I think I ought to. He’ll pay for it all.”

“I will!” Gaelence exclaimed. “Oh, I will, I will!”

Adellia left him at the hotel and set off for the Plaza of Broken Moons. It was late afternoon and the shadows were growing longer, but she was eager to be free of the burden in her belly. She didn’t know how long these eggs would take to hatch, or what might happen to her when they did… so better safe than sorry. The alley was where she remembered it, and she followed it until she reached the house with the pink vases in the window. She could hear children playing on the other side of the mud-brick wall, and she caught a glimpse of a fruit tree through a diamond-shaped window. The air here was at least ten degrees cooler than the market and carried a soft, sweet scent. She paused to fill her lungs before knocking on the wooden door.
It creaked open to reveal a small child of indeterminate age and sex. Adellia looked down, momentarily perplexed. She wasn’t quite sure how to talk to children. She settled for “Is your mother home?”

The child stared up at her with big, dark eyes, then shouted something she didn’t understand. There was a brief shuffle from deeper within the house, and then a tiny, doe-eyed woman with dark skin and wavy black hair came to the door. She stared up at Adellia with the most appraising look in her eyes.

“Uh, hello? My name is Adellia. Um. Khalid sent me?”

At the sound of Khalid’s name the woman blinked and refocused. Now her eyes went to Adellia’s midsection. She was still wearing the robe she had borrowed from one of her guides, a massive and baggy thing that swaddled her from head to toe, but she just knew the woman’s gaze was penetrating the layers of fabric to the swollen belly beneath.

“He said maybe you could help me?” Adellia went on. “The shadhavar, it, uh…”

“Come inside.” The woman’s voice was curt and final, less an invitation than a statement of what the future would hold. Adellia stepped into the house and the child shut the door behind her.

“Follow me,” the woman said. She stood no taller than Adellia’s shoulder yet radiated complete confidence. Adellia simply allowed herself to be drawn into her wake. She walked through the vestibule, into a cramped kitchen filled with the smell of simmering soup, and then outside across a brick path. She caught a glimpse of a half-dozen children staring at her from the yard, then she passed into another small round building. The woman closed the door behind her and lit a lamp. It took a moment for Adellia’s eyes to adjust to the gloom, but when they did, she saw that she was in a sort of bath house. Two stone steps led up into a large square tub. It was currently empty, but her hostess reached up and tugged on a great brass lever. There was a clank and a distant gurgle and water began to pour from a grate set in the wall.

“Strip,” the woman commanded. Adellia reddened.

“Don’t you want me to--”

“Strip. And then get in.” The woman looked up at her and sighed. “I know why you are here. My wastrel of a brother took you on one of his hunts, yes? The shadhavar? And it got the better of you. You think you are the first? Women come to see me for one of two reasons, and I know you are not with child. Strip, and we will cleanse your body.” She sniffed. “And wash it, too.”

Stunned into silence, Adellia pulled off her robe and tossed it aside. The skin beneath was red with sunburn and covered with sand. It clung to her everywhere and collected in her armpits, beneath her breasts, and in the crack of her bottom. She had always loved the beach, but this was rather pushing it.

As the tub filled, the woman busied herself with a row of clay jars resting on shelves. They appeared to be full of herbs; she’d open one, sniff at it, then pluck out a handful and toss them into the water. By the time the bath was full it looked and smelled like a giant cup of herbal tea. She turned off the tap and then turned to Adellia.

“Well?” she said. “Get in.”

Adellia needed no second prompting. She climbed the steps and let herself slide into the bath with a prolonged and deeply satisfied sigh. As the hot water touched her bruises she winced, but once
she was in she could feel the tension ebbing out of her muscles. She opened her eyes in time to see her hostess shrug out of her own robe. Beneath it her body was lithe and compact, with a flat stomach and small, perky breasts tipped with dark brown nipples. Her legs were smooth and shapely and a delta of dark fur covered her sex. She flexed her arms and legs without apparent self-consciousness, then climbed into the bath next to the gawping Adellia. The tub was wide enough for both of them to sit comfortably, although Adellia shivered when she felt something warm and smooth brush against her calf.

“Oh, be calm,” the woman said, seeing Adellia’s expression. She stared at her for a moment longer, and then sighed wearily. “Alright. My name is Zainab. I am a midwife. I am going to help you get rid of those eggs. How pleasant that will be is up to you. But you will have to relax and trust me, understand? I will try to make this as comfortable for you as possible. First we scrub you, then we relax you, then we deliver your burden.”


“We’ll see.” Zainab reached over to the lip of the bath and pulled a cedar chest closer to herself. She unlatched it and withdrew a cube of jasmine-smelling soap and a fist-sized sponge. “Lie flat,” she commanded, and began to lather up her hands.

Adellia did her best. She inhaled deeply and filled her nostrils with the floral scent of the soap. She closed her eyes and smiled up at the ceiling. Her body had fully adjusted to the temperature now. It was a warm and comforting presence all around her. The water lapped gently at her sunburnt neck and gurgled in her ears. She could feel the sand being carried away by the micro-currents of the tub. For the first time since she had left on her ill-fated expedition, she began to relax.

Something soft and rough pressed against her belly. Her eyes shot open and she splashed frantically at the surface of the water. It took her a moment to realize that Zainab was standing over her and pushing down with the sponge. She laid one hand on Adellia’s forehead and pressed her gently but firmly backwards.

“Hush now,” she said. “As I said, first you must be clean.”

Adellia’s was about to say that she could do it herself, but her protests died on her lips. There was something fierce in Zainab’s expression, and something mischievous, too. Adellia’s heart fluttered in her chest. She thought of Toby for a moment, then chastised herself for being silly. This was a medical procedure, nothing more.

Zainab’s soft hand descended on her again and she began to rub the sponge across Adellia’s belly in concentric circles. Periodically she would stop to lather up the fingers of her free hand and rub the soap onto Adellia’s skin. Her fingers were warm and pressed softly against Adellia’s aching muscles.

She began at Adellia’s belly and worked outwards. Her sponge circled and circled, working up Adellia’s sides and into her armpits; along her arms, in between her fingers, and across her palms. Their hands brushed against each other and Adellia squeezed reflexively. Zainab gave no indication that she had noticed. She worked in meditative silence with a solemn, neutral expression on her face.

She returned to Adellia’s chest and circled around her breasts, lifting them up and scrubbing the sand out from beneath them. Her sponge traced spirals around Adellia’s nipples, which to her embarrassment began to stiffen. Zainab took no notice of that, either, though as she rubbed the jasmine soap into Adellia’s skin the pad of her thumb brushed against one stiff, ripe bud. Adellia tried to focus on her breathing and ignore the feeling of Zainab’s legs pressing against hers. The
other woman was standing in between Adellia’s outstretched legs and her chocolate-brown nipples dripped bathwater as she leaned forward.

To Adellia’s relief her companion soon moved northward. Her fingers squeezed Adellia’s collarbones and massaged her sore neck. This area was particularly sunburnt and the slightest touch stung, but Adellia clamped down on her hisses of pain. The smell of the soap filled her nose; when she ducked her mouth underwater, she fancied she could taste it. Thin but powerful fingers rubbed behind her ears to eradicate the last traces of sand, and Zainab produced an ivory comb and ran it through Adellia’s matted hair. She winced painfully at each tug, but she had to admit that her head felt better when it was done.

Zainab stepped back and began to massage her feet. Her thin fingers slid in between Adellia’s toes and rooted out the dust and sand. She massaged Adellia’s calves and scrubbed behind her knees, then moved up her thighs. Adellia trembled in anticipation as she felt those fingers sliding up her leg. The sponge kissed Adellia’s sex, just once, then Zainab withdrew it and rested it in the cedar box.

“You are clean,” she pronounced. “Now, you must relax.” She crept closer until her body was pressed up against Adellia’s. Her legs straddled Adellia’s thigh and the wiry thicket of hair between her legs scratched at Adellia’s soft skin.

“Hey, wait-” Adellia began, then froze as she felt fingers descending on her quim. Zainab pressed herself in closer. Her nipples poked at Adellia’s chest and her head lay in the crook of Adellia’s shoulder.

“Relax,” she repeated in a sultry whisper. “There are herbs in this bath that will relax your muscles and help you deliver your burden. But you will have to do the work yourself. If you are wound up as tight a watchspring, you will never be able to rid yourself of these eggs. Just let me soothe you.” She smiled like a hyena and pulled back slightly. “This is an essential part of the process. No need to be embarrassed.”

As she spoke, her fingers were busily exploring Adellia’s body. They caressed her mound, parted her inner lips, traced along the border of her vulva and teased her hooded clitt. Beneath their patient touch her flower bloomed; she felt her body awaken, the blood coursing through her veins, her heartbeat loud enough to echo in her ears. Sparks danced across the surface of her skin. This was nothing like Toby’s eager fumbling or her own hesitant experiments. Zainab moved with the confidence of an expert. One fingertip lingered just inside Adellia’s cleft while another tickled her lips. Zainab gradually increased the pressure as she went. Her fingers slid back and forth, in and out, even side to side to stimulate all of the hidden nooks and crannies. Adellia found herself staring, hypnotized. Zainab’s lips were full and luscious, curled up in a secret smile. Adellia couldn’t take her eyes off them. She could count every tiny crinkle. She wondered what it would feel like to have those lips on her: kissing, suckling, licking…

They moved in front of her. “Would you like me to stop?” Zainab purred. Adellia’s head felt as though it were encased in lead. It was all she could do to shake it back and forth.

“No,” she murmured. “Please…”

Zainab did not stop. She reached out with her free hand and wrapped it around Adellia’s shoulders. Her hips began to grind back and forth. The dark hair between her legs scratched back and forth across Adellia’s thigh, but she didn’t mind. She could feel something beneath the hair, something warm and wet and pliant, something that rubbed back and forth along her leg. Zainab buried her head in the crook of Adellia’s neck and kept going. Her nipples, diamond-hard, bored into
Adellia’s chest. Her breathing was coming faster now, sharp shallow breaths that gusted into Adellia’s ear.

All the while her fingers kept up their ministrations. Adellia could feel her climax building inside her. She wondered if she should say something. Embarrassment warred with arousal and lost out; she would not have asked Zainab to stop even if she could. All too soon she found her body stiffening, twitching, shaking. Her eyes rolled back into her head. Her feet beat silently against the floor of the tub. She tried and failed to button her lip, and her soft moans soon echoed off the bathing hut’s walls. Zainab did not let up for a moment. Even as lightning crackled across Adellia’s skin and silent fireworks went off behind her eyes, the dusky woman’s nimble fingers were still pumping in and out of her cunt and flicking at her swollen, sensitive clit.

A strange sensation deep inside her brought Adellia back to herself. She felt something shifting and sliding around. Zainab felt it too. She pulled back and stood up. Adellia gave a little wistful sigh as Zainab’s small head lifted off her shoulder.

“You are ready,” Zainab announced in that same solemn voice. She knelt between Adella’s sprawled legs. Her hands went to Adellia’s thighs and pushed them apart. She kneaded at the muscles like a masseuse. A sudden twinge of pain made Adellia cry out. She could sense the eggs inside her moving. Her time had come.

Accompanying the motion was a terrible sense of pressure, an internal stretching. Beads of sweat dotted Adellia’s forehead. She clenched her teeth and bore down with all her strength. This was difficult; her head was still spinning, and her long soak seemed to have robbed her of strength. Yet she knew that it was now or never. She gathered her formidable willpower and focused on pushing. The pain inside her built rapidly until it was a daggerpoint of agony, but just when she thought she could take no more, there was a sudden spasm in her guts and the pressure subsided. She felt something in her channel now, a round and alien object, and she tried to flex her internal muscles. Zainab’s fingers found her belly and squeezed and the egg slid a few more inches along. Being touched there was nauseating, but Adellia choked down her gorge. She just had to keep pushing.

The egg reached her pussy and stopped. Try as she might, she could not push it out. She felt it blocking her entrance. It was so close! The other was already passing out of her womb, she could sense it, but it was all for naught if she could not push it the last inch. Zainab cupped her hands like a supplicant. Adellia closed her eyes, set her jaw, and gave it one last tremendous effort. For a moment, she felt herself stretch, then the egg popped free and practically shot itself into Zainab’s hands. The second held on for just a moment longer. Adellia growled deep in her throat and flexed and the second egg shot out of her in a cloud of bubbles.

She was left panting and drained, with weak rubbery legs and a lolling tongue, but she was empty. The weight she had been carrying around since the desert bowl was gone. A trickle of the shadhavar’s gooey slime was leaking out of her distended pussy and clouding the water of the tub, but she was too tired to care. Zainab stood up straight, water pouring off her flanks, and held out the eggs as though they were a sacred offering. “You should keep these,” she said.

The oddness of that suggestion brought Adellia’s attention back to Earth. “I should?” she asked. “Why? They’re nasty.”

“They might be valuable. There are many uses for a shadhavar egg. Good for fertility, you know.”

Adellia shuddered. She had had about all the fertility she could take. But perhaps she could sell them. “All right,” she said. She could hear the weariness in her voice, but with the eggs gone, she was already starting to feel a bit more like her old self. “All right, I’ll keep them.”
Zainab helped her out of the bath and even gave her fresh clothes to change into—cotton underthings and a tunic cut more appropriately for her figure. She lingered by the door as Adellia took her first step back out into the hot, dry evening. The sun was just setting and filled the narrow alley with crazed shadows. Zainab gazed at her with heavy-lidded eyes and ghost of a smile dancing around her lips. “Good luck to you, Adellia,” she said. “May you find what it is you seek.” With that, she closed the door, leaving Adellia alone in the alley.

By the time Adellia returned to the hotel, Lord Gaelence had already retired to his room. Osman greeted her in the lobby and handed her a leather satchel. She peered inside long enough to confirm its contents: a thick sheaf of traveler’s cheques, each made out to “bearer.” Osman stared thoughtfully at her as she tucked it under her arm.

“And where will you go now, Adellia Hawk?” he asked. “No longer tethered to that fool, no worries about money… are you going home to England? Or perhaps a vacation in the south of France?”

Adellia thought about it. She had always wanted to see France. Maybe she could even go to Svalbard and surprise Toby. But really, there was only one option. She had come to Morocco for a reason, after all.”

“What do you think?” she asked. “I’m going hunting.”

She left the next morning carrying only what would fit in one traveling bag— a couple changes of clothes, her cheques, her crossbow and knife, and of course the eggs, wrapped in a leather sack. Clutched in one hand was a name and address: the head of the Lodge of al-Saqr in Algiers, courtesy of Osman. The *Lady Emmeline* weighed anchor that afternoon, and when it sailed, Adellia was on it.

The head of the Algerian Lodge was an extravagantly moustached man named Daoud. He greeted her with no small amount of astonishment— apparently, Osman’s telegraph had warned him of the coming of a European hunter, but neglected to mention her age and sex. Nevertheless, he proved to be a generous host, and she spent a week hawking in the desert. They brought down a flock of olitiau, giant cyclopean batlike creatures, and Adellia selected the largest for a trophy. Daoud promised to have it taxidermied and sent to Casablanca to wait for her.

From Algeria she set sail for Tunisia. She arrived in time to hear rumors of a pack of crocottas running wild in Carthage. She spent two weeks stalking them through crumbling temples and ancient amphitheaters. One by one they fell to her knife or bow until only the packleader remained, an ancient and massive female covered in scars and missing patches of fur. In the end, disarmed and cornered, Adellia strangled the beast to death with a length of rusted chain and spent three weeks recuperating from a savage bite. When her fever broke she penned a letter home telling her parents not to worry. She had never felt so alive.

In Libya she heard tales of a child-devouring lamia and joined up with an expedition sent to slay the beast. Ibrahim, the expedition leader, taught her how to find water and shade in the desert, which plants to avoid and which to eat. His men grumbled a bit at having to take a woman along, but after Ibrahim saw Adellia jumping and climbing across the rooftops of Tripoli, he silenced their complaints with a glance. They tracked the lamia to a clifftop nest deep in the wastes and Adellia was sent up the wall to steal its eggs. She sorely regretted leaving her climbing gear behind, but inch by inch and handhold by handhold she made her way up the side of the cliff while her party watched anxiously from below. The lamia returned just as Adellia finished pillaging its nest and howled in maternal fury; despite its all-too-human upper body, the sound that emerged from its lungs was an animal’s bellow. Adellia evaded its scything paws and dove over the edge, counting
on her rappelling rope to save her. She made it to the ground seconds before the arrow-riddled corpse of the lamia.

By the time she fetched up in Cairo, she was ten pounds lighter and three shades darker than when her boat had landed in Casablanca. She had traded in her tunic for a lightweight but colorful *qamis* and her copper hair-- normally never longer than her shoulders-- hung down her back in thick braids. She had even picked up a bit of Arabic-- enough to order tea and respond in kind to the ribald jests of other hunters.

Summer had given way to a mild Mediterranean winter, and at night she had to bundle up against the cold. That didn’t bother her much, but the prospect of home was starting to tug insistently at her brain. If asked, she would have said she was having the time of her life. This was how hunting should be! Traveling from place to place, freeing villagers from the yoke of fear, collecting trophies and spending lavishly. In truth, however, homesickness had begun to gnaw at her. She missed her mother and father, the way Mrs. Sherbet fried eggs, the smell of Brutus at the foot of her bed… and Toby. Toby most of all. She’d attracted plenty of admiring attention from young and well-muscled hunters in her travels, but she’d politely declined them all. Every night she spent at least twenty minutes composing a new letter to Toby. The sheaf of them was now the size of a hefty book, but she knew that when she got home he’d read every one. That was what she loved about him.

That would have to be soon, too. Her stack of cheques was, in truth, growing worryingly thin, but this was at least partially compensated for by the grateful gifts of the locals. Her clothing, the braids in her hair, the wrapped packages of dates and salted meat she’d been living off of-- they had all been presented to her after felling this monster or that. She could make their largesse stretch, but sooner rather than later she’d have to head for home. She had come this far out of a stubborn desire to make it all the way across the continent, but if she had to admit it to herself, it was starting to get *boring*. She had fallen into a routine. Sure, sometimes it was three-eyed hyena-lizards and sometimes it was a house-sized snake with wings and a woman’s upper body, but the formula was always the same. She’d show up, join an expedition, run out into the desert and fill the beast with crossbow bolts. She felt less like an adventuring hero and more like a highly credentialed dogcatcher.

So when she heard a rumor of crocodile-maids luring men into the Nile, she let it pass. When a wild-eyed man stumbled into the hunting lodge and swore that a colony of gigantic termites had razed his village, she sat back and ordered another bottle of wine. Someone else could handle those minor emergencies. She was waiting for a truly big hunt. She wasn’t sure what it would look like, but she’d know it when she saw it.

Her moment came sooner than she’d expected. She had become friends with Soraya, a wire-haired older woman who ran the laundry at the Wadi Hotel where Adellia was living. Soraya’s face was as wrinkled as a peach pit and her teeth were stained brown from the *qat* she chewed constantly, but she had a hearty belly laugh and told some of the foulest jokes Adellia had ever heard. The two of them whiled away the hours playing backgammon and telling stories. Adellia had just finished relating her betrayal by Lord Gaelence (omitting the more sensitive details) when Soraya leaned back and spat into a brass bowl.

“Huh,” she said. “I thought you were here looking for the other white lady.”

“Other white lady?” Adellia was intrigued. She’d seen a few other European travelers, mostly tourists but with the occasional hunter or scientist. They had nearly all been male; some traveled with their wives, dainty little doilies in sweat-stained white dresses. They were out of their element here. They peered at Adellia in mingled fascination and horror, which suited her right down to the
ground. She had never been overly worried about making friends.

“Yes, she passed through, oh, about sixteen months ago,” Soraya said. “Smart-looking lady. A bit like you, in fact. She said she was going up the river.” No need to ask what river she meant; here, the river was always the Nile. “To the source, she said. She was writing a book.”

Adellia wondered who she meant. She racked her memory for the names and faces of female hunters of renown. “Did she have scars?” she asked. “Or a glass eye? Did she walk with a cane?”

“No, no.” Soraya shook her head. “She had spectacles and a big straw hat. And books. Lots of books.” She stuck a fresh wad of qat into her cheeks and began to chew. “I wonder what became of her? She said she’d be back within a year.”

That did it for Adellia’s concentration. She lost the next two rounds and politely excused herself from the game—though not before wheedling out the name of the charter captain the mystery woman had hired. Finding his office was easy enough. He grumbled a bit when Adellia asked him to check his records, but a few coins across his desk greased the way easily enough. A few moments later, and Adellia had a name: Dame Bridget Kuhn, of the University of Stuttgart. Feeling pleased with her detective work, she returned to the hotel, but not before sending a brief telegram. This was it, she could feel it. This was why she hadn’t gone home yet.

Her response was delivered early the next day by a young street boy who ran up to her and breathlessly dropped the telegram slip in her lap. She tossed him a coin for his trouble and slit the envelope with her thumbnail.

CAN CONFIRM EXPEDITION OF MS. KUHN STOP RETURN EXPECTED FOUR MONTHS AGO STOP NO WORD SINCE DEPARTURE STOP INVESTIGATION AND RECOVERY APPRECIATED STOP

Adellia grinned and crumpled the piece of paper in her fist. She was packed by lunchtime and out the door before tea.

As luck would have it, the same captain that had take Dame Kuhn upriver was still in the city. When Adellia rolled into his office, he didn’t try to bluster or bluff her. He simply named his price.

“That’s highway robbery!” Adellia stammered. The captain shrugged. He was a short man, with a mop of unruly black curls and a close-cropped beard.

“No highway around here, dame,” he said. He seemed to think “dame” was a term of general address for European women. “Only the river. Take it or leave it.”

“Maybe I will leave it. You think you’re the only captain looking for business?”

“Only one who knows where I dropped off the other dame,” he said with a grin. One of his front teeth was gold, and it winked in the sunlight. “If you want to wander around the jungle looking for her, that’s fine too.”

Adellia grumbled, but he had her dead to rights and they both knew it. She quickly counted her cheques. She could afford the man’s price, but then she really would be just about tapped out; she’d have just about enough to make it home if was quick and frugal. The thought was a little sad, but she couldn’t feel down when she was this excited. She was going on a real expedition to the heart of the Nile! A rescue mission! This would make her name, she just knew it. She wouldn’t just be Geoffrey and Emilia Hawk’s daughter anymore.

“Deal,” Adellia said. “You take me to where you dropped her off.” She paused for a moment. “But
“Ah, no worries, dame,” the captain promised. “We’ll head on to Juba and then turn around. That should give you two weeks to find your missing friend. Then we’ll take you back. No extra charge, even.” He grinned again. Adellia studied his face closely.

“How do I get back?”

“Fine,” she said. “But you don’t get the second half of the payment until you pick us up. Fair?”

“Fair.” He spat on one hand and proffered it. If he had been hoping to discomfort Adellia, he was disappointed; she spat and shook his hand.

“When do you want to leave?” he asked. She shrugged.

“No time like the present.”

His boat turned out to be a small lateen-rigged felucca, its hull painted candyfloss pink. He whistled as they approached and a round, startled face popped up in the nearest porthole. “Hassan!” the captain shouted. “Help this woman with her bags!”

Hassan turned out to be a massive bald man with a surprisingly smooth and childlike face. He stared in wonder at Adellia as the captain helped her aboard. “Welcome, milady,” he said, and bowed. Adellia had to stifle a giggle. His voice was softer and higher-pitched than hers.

“Don’t bother her, you oaf!” the captain snapped. “Hurry up and prepare to cast off! We leave with the tide.”

This boat was nothing like the Lady Vorpal, the great steamship that she had taken down to Morocco. Instead of a paddlewheel, it was equipped with a great triangular sail. Instead of a cabin, Adellia had a bedroll, spread under the wooden canopy that shadowed the deck. And instead of a washroom, with modern conveniences…

“Into the river,” the captain explained, clearly enjoying her horrified expression. “More hygienic.”

Adellia shuddered. She was having second thoughts already.

The captain and Hassan were the only two crew members, and Adellia sat and watched as they ran around tying off lines and hoisting sails (unless it was the other way around). Soon they were bobbing gently along, but as they cleared the wharfs the wind picked up and the sail snapped and cracked overhead. It billowed outward and she felt the boat accelerate. They were on their way.

The trip upriver unfolded at a languid pace. Adellia frequently offered to help around the boat, if only to stave off her boredom, but the captain waved her off every time. “I have Hassan for that,” he said. “You relax. Enjoy the trip.”

There was a lot to enjoy, she had to admit. The baking Egyptian heat was somehow more bearable on the water, and the canopy provided plenty of lovely shade. They were well provisioned with salted meat and dried fruit and the captain would while away the evenings fishing off the side. More often than not he’d pull up a good-sized perch and cook it in the boat’s small potbelly stove.

The Nile was truly impressive. She had assumed it would be like the river that wound past Hawk Manor, a burbling ribbon of blue amidst the greenery. The Nile was nothing like that. It was as massive and monstrous as the crocodiles that lurked on its banks. She looked at the map and tried to make sense of it. The Nile seemed to go on and on and on until it vanished into the thick jungles of equatorial Africa. She knew that there had been several expeditions dispatched to find the source, but for now, the Nile seemed to be a timeless and endless thing. It lay across the landscape
like an artery, and from it, life sprang forth for hundreds of miles.

She stayed up late most nights, lying on the aft deck where the canopy didn’t reach and staring up at the stars. There were so many of them and they were so vivid. Without the lights of the city to sap their brightness, it felt as though she was sitting beneath a velvet curtain covered in diamonds. The moon hung low in the sky and stared at her. It was neither baleful nor protective; to Adellia, it looked curious. Who is this intruder? it seemed to ask. Who seeks the source of my river?

She slept with her knife under her pillow-- the captain and Hassan did not seem malevolent, but there was such a thing as caution, and she was well aware of the risks facing a young girl traveling alone. Her precautions proved unnecessary. If anything, the captain seemed to see her as a daughter, and Hassan appeared terrified. On those occasions when their paths crossed he would genuflect and back away hurriedly, finding some knot to retie or some piece of equipment to stow.

“He’s a simple man,” the captain said one day after Hassan nearly jumped overboard to avoid her. “He wants a simple life. To sail up and down the river, that’s all. He didn’t like the other dame, either. She kept asking him questions. Hassan doesn’t like to talk about himself.” He turned to Adellia and grinned. The two of them were standing by the railing with their elbows propped up on it, staring at the passing bank. Scrubby palm trees and papyrus reeds waved in the breeze.

Adellia knew an opportunity when she heard one. “The other lady,” she said. “What can you tell me about her? Bridget Kuhn, right?” She paused. “You know ‘dame’ is a title, right? You don’t have to call me that.”

The captain’s flashed her another gold-toothed grin. “As you say, dame. This other one… well, she wasn’t like you. No fire in her belly. She had these little round spectacles. And dresses, she always wore long dresses. She carried a bag of books around with her. Didn’t like the food. She was sick every other day, it seemed. No sea legs.” He spat over the side. “I don’t know what she wanted in the jungle, a little thing like that. I warned her, but she didn’t want to listen.”

“Warned her of what?” Adellia asked. Fire in the belly, huh?

“The *biloko*. I don’t know what you call them… jungle people? Little people. Not like us.”

“A lost tribe?”

“No, no. They’re… magic people. They make bread rise, tear holes in fishing nets, steal small things. They are spirits, in a way, but real, solid. They cause trouble.”

That all sounded familiar to Adellia. Many cultures had legends of a race of tiny tricksters: menehune, gremlins, redcaps. Often they were invented to explain the inexplicable-- they weren’t *real*, like harpies and sirens.

“If you’re going to look for her, you watch out for them too,” the captain warned. “They may seem harmless, but they bear a grudge against us for taking over their home. They can be trouble.” He sounded so solemn that Adellia could only nod.

As they traveled, the plant life along the banks became thicker. The desert gave way to savannah and, gradually, to rainforest. They stopped in at riverside towns with names like Al-Goled, Ad-Damar, Shendi, and finally Khartoum. Here, Adellia availed herself of a proper washroom and a long, hot bath. She emerged feeling more herself than she had since leaving Cairo.

It took another week of travel to reach their destination. By that time the river had narrowed and the rainforest crowded in on both sides. Birds hooted overhead and frogs cheeped from their
perches. They furled the sail and dropped the anchor. As Adellia repacked her bag, the captain stood over her with his hands on his hips.

“You can take the canoe ashore here,” he said, pointing. “This is where we dropped her off. But be careful. Make sure you can find your way back to the bank. We will return in a week for you.”

Adellia nodded. “And you’ll get paid then, never fear.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of that,” the captain said. His expression softened. “Please, dame, be careful in the forest. You are a brave girl, but the *biloko* will not care about that. I hope your friend makes it out safe… and you do too.”

“Thanks,” Adellia said, “but I’ll be fine. One week, right? See you then.” She swung herself into the canoe and Hassan obediently got in behind her, lifting her end out of the water. He paddled ashore and pulled up on a sandy beach. Adellia stepped out, tested her footing, and then climbed the bank to the edge of the forest. She paused there and looked around. Both the captain and Hassan were watching her carefully. She gave them a jaunty wave and disappeared into the trees.

She had been walking for fifteen minutes when it occurred to her that she wasn’t exactly sure what to look for. The forest here was primeval and seemingly undisturbed by man. Any trail Dame Kuhn had made would have been covered over a year or more ago. Surely, though, the woman herself had been dropped here for a reason? She had to have been looking for something. Whatever it was, Adellia would surely find it. She thought back to her tracking classes. What should she look for? A beaten trail? Footprints? Signs of tool use?

To her surprise, she found all three.

Just ahead, the trees parted and formed a small clearing. In the center was a little pond, a watering hole for forest creatures. Around the far side the ferns and bushes had been bent back as though by frequent passage. She circled the pond and knelt beside them. There— they had not just been bent back, but *cut* back, and recently. The mud by the edge of the pond was churned up, but she could see faint impressions in it. Whatever they were, they certainly weren’t human. They were too small, the toes peculiarly elongated. Were those claw impressions? She couldn’t tell.

She followed the tracks across the grass of the clearing to its edge, where once again the plant life had been expertly pruned back. A trail, faint but recognizable, stretched away into the distance. Adellia drew her knife and held it close. Now she was getting somewhere.

The trail proved easy enough to follow. It was clearly well-worn, and now that she knew what to look for she could see tell-tale signs of frequent use. Something human— or at least humanoid— came this way several times a day. Adellia kept her eyes peeled as she stalked along. The sounds of the rainforest filled her ears. She scanned for movement, for signs of life, for anything out of the ordinary. Every rustle of the bushes caught her attention. Every distant howl or squeal set her teeth on edge.

And yet, somehow, she was still caught by surprise. One minute she was walking along the path, the next she pulled up short. It was that or walk directly into a stone-tipped spear. Her eyes widened in shock. The spear had appeared to come from nowhere. The point wavered between her eyes. She looked at it, then along the shaft, and her jaw dropped.

The hands wrapped around the spear shaft were small and green and warty. They belonged to a tiny humanoid creature, no higher than her navel, with a snouted face and dark, deep-set eyes. It wore a leather loincloth and nothing else, and its skin was mottled either by dirt or some kind of paint. Whatever it was, the mixture of green and brown was excellent camouflage. Adellia might
have been staring at the thing and not seen it until it chose to reveal itself.

She stepped backward and something poked her in the lower back. Another of the creatures was behind her. This one stared up at her suspiciously. Their faces were almost human, but for their snouts. These were tipped with broad nostrils and thin lizard lips. There was a vaguely reptilian look to the things, as though their skin was covered in tiny scales. Two more appeared at her sides and boxed her in. She swallowed and moved her knife arm slowly into position, but a vicious jab to her side made her wince and freeze. The nearest creature chattered something up at her. It sounded like a question, but Adellia had no way of answering. She hated herself for it, but she had no choice: she dropped her knife. “I mean you no harm,” she said, holding her hands open. “I’m just looking for someone.”

There was a rustle from the bushes ahead, and then a woman stepped out from behind a tree. Adellia goggled at her. She was tall and slender, with alabaster skin and long, dark hair. She wore what had clearly once been a rather nice cotton dress. It had clearly been repaired over and over by someone making a good-faith effort, but time and the jungle had taken their toll. Her hair hung down in a long, loose braid woven with flowers. Adellia could just make out faint dark traceries on her neck and wrists—tattoos, possibly, or some kind of paint, she couldn’t tell. The woman’s features were fine and delicate: a thin nose, high cheekbones, dark and soulful eyes. She wore steel-rimmed spectacles, which perched on the edge of her nose.

She gave Adellia a long look and then opened her mouth. What came out bore no resemblance to any human language Adellia had ever heard. It sounded like the little green creatures’ chattering. They looked up at her in obvious surprise, then lowered their spears and stepped away from Adellia.

Adellia took a deep breath. “Dame Kuhn, I presume?”

Bridget Kuhn broke into a broad smile and held her hands out. “Indeed! Welcome, my dear! You’ve come a long way.”

Adellia allowed herself to be led along the path, with Kuhn before her and the tiny green men flanking her on both sides. As they walked, Kuhn spoke excitedly. Her English was excellent, with only a trace of a German accent. “I came out here a year ago to study the biloko,” she explained. “I had an idea of writing a paper on them. Once I arrived, I found that mere observation was insufficient. To understand these people— to really understand them— I had to live among them.”

“Yes, people. They are, you know. They have quite a complex society. They’re fascinating! And to think the locals just consider them monsters!”

“Imagine that,” Adellia said weakly.

“Yes, I am hoping to change all that when I publish. I have quite extensive notes, you know.”

“Well, that’s actually why I’m here,” Adellia said, taking advantage of the opening. “The University of Stuttgart is quite worried about you. I have a boat coming back in a week to take us home. Then you can publish, and—“

“Oh, heavens no!” Kuhn laughed out loud. “I can’t leave now! There’s so much to do!”

“More research?” Adellia asked. “Surely, you have—“
“What? Oh, yes. Research, yes, that’s what I need,” Kuhn said. She seemed momentarily thrown, but rallied magnificently. “Yes, I think I am close to a breakthrough. They trust me, you see. Why don’t you stay for dinner?” She turned, saw Adellia’s expression, and laughed again. “No, don’t worry! They eat fruit, mostly, and a little fish. You’re perfectly safe, Ms…”

“Adellia Hawk,” Adellia said. “Listen, Dame Kuhn…”

“Please, call me Bridget. And I can’t leave just yet. But perhaps I could send some of my notes home with you. The jungle air really isn’t good for them, I’m afraid. We can discuss it tomorrow. Ah, here we are!”

“Here” turned out to be a clearing devoid of any sign of habitation— that is, until a rope ladder fell out of the trees and dangled in front of Adellia’s face. It was a crude thing, rough-hewn planks held together with sturdy woven hemp. She looked up and gasped.

The branches here supported a network of bridges and huts, like the world’s largest and most complex treehouse. Most of the huts were made of wood, but some seemed to be constructed from reeds or palm leaves. She could just see more of the biloko moving around between the huts. Others gathered on the branches to stare down at her.

Kuhn helped her up onto the closest platform. It looked rickety, but the other woman was taller than Adellia and she walked across the planks without fear, so it was probably sturdy enough. She led Adellia through a labyrinth of criss-crossing pathways until they reached a large circular platform at least thirty feet across. At one end of this was a carved wooden altar: a crude humanoid figure with its hands cupped in front of it, forming a shallow bowl. Its mouth was open and its eyes were wide and staring. Scattered around it were low wooden benches, most of them crowded with biloko. There were big ones and small ones, but as far as Adellia could see, they all looked roughly the same; none of them wore anything more complex than a loincloth, and if some were female, it was impossible to tell which ones.

“Why don’t you join me for a meal?” Kuhn asked. “You must be exhausted. I can offer you a place to sleep as well. Tomorrow I will tell you some of my discoveries.” She laid a hand on Adellia’s shoulder. “I promise you, it’s perfectly safe here. I’m all right, aren’t I?”

This was possibly true. She certainly looked composed and comfortable, like a society lady sipping tea in a salon. The image wasn’t perfect, of course. Her eyes were rimmed with some kind of dark paint and her hair was full of twigs and leaves, in addition to the flowers. She smelled, too— not the stink of an unwashed body, but a deeper, more subtle scent, almost a musk.

Still, she seemed friendly enough, and one glance around her showed Adellia that her hosts were still well-armed. Besides, she was hungry. Fresh fruit sounded appetizing after weeks of salt meat and dried dates. “Alright,” she said. “I accept your offer. Thank you.”

“Excellent!” Kuhn clapped her hands and gurgled something in the language of the biloko. The creatures all over the platform sprang into a frenzy of activity. Some of them fetched clay jars of water, others carried in plates piled high with melons, breadfruit and others Adellia didn’t recognize. Some brought sliced yams; others, plates piled high with what looked like dried crickets. Adellia watched in horror as Kuhn bit into one with a satisfied crunch. The scientist chewed with a blissful look on her face, oblivious to the way her guest’s face was turning green.

The rest of the biloko ate all around them. “They’re very informal,” Kuhn explained. “They don’t even have a chief. Decisions are made democratically, and if an eloko disagrees, he’s welcome to do something else. Really, it’s a wonder that anything gets done around here at all! The crudity of their appearance belies a rather sophisticated informal hierarchy.” She sounded as though she was
quoting from an academic work.

“They all seem to obey you,” Adellia pointed out. Kuhn waved a hand dismissively.

“Oh, no, I’m just a guest to them. Treating guests hospitably is very important to the *biloko*. They were curious about me at first, but they accept that I know all kinds of useful things. I helped them clear some land for yams, for instance.”

“Plus you can get things off the high shelf,” Adellia volunteered. Kuhn burst into laughter while the nearest *biloko* stared at her, confused.

Kuhn proved to be an excellent dinner companion. She inquired politely about current events, and seemed to accept that the arcana of German academic politics held no interest for Adellia. Kuhn turned out to have been a Hoxleigh graduate, as well-- specializing in some of the more theoretical coursework-- and the two of them reminisced about professors they had in common. “I can’t believe Krupp is still teaching!” Kuhn laughed. “She was old when I was a student!”

Little by little, Adellia relaxed. She was a little disappointed, in truth, that she wouldn’t be riding in to the rescue after all. Still, she felt a sense of vicarious pride at Kuhn’s accomplishment. “So you haven’t contacted the University at all since you’ve been out here?” she asked.

“How could I?” Kuhn shrugged. “They’d rather believe something dreadful might have happened to me than that a woman could make it out here on her own. There was plenty of grumbling when I announced this sabbatical. I’ll get the last laugh, though, when I publish my notes.”

Adellia ate until she felt stuffed and her chin was sticky with fruit juice. She sat back and rubbed her belly appreciatively. It was starting to get dark, and there appeared to be no torches anywhere in the hanging village. All at once fatigue was creeping up on her. She had never really slept properly on the boat. Her jaw opened in a tendon-twanging yawn.

“Ah, would you like to sleep?” Kuhn asked. “We do have a place set aside for guests. Arook! Aracamac! Tal va totoloro!”

One of the nearest *eloko* stood up and waddled over to where they were sitting. He exchanged a few words with Kuhn, looked at Adellia in an expression of disdain that required no translation, then beckoned her to follow him. He led her along a spiraling ramp higher into the tree, then stopped outside a small reed hut. It was perhaps half the size of her dorm room at Hoxleigh, with a ceiling so low that she could barely stand up inside it, but she thanked him all the same. She crawled inside and pushed her pack into one corner. It was quite dark by now. Still marveling at the strangeness of her day, she laid her head down on the pack and went to sleep.

She wasn’t sure how long she was out, but when she awoke it was fully dark. The jungle was alive with sounds all around her: the creaking of the rope bridges, the cheeping of frogs and thrumming of insects, the distant roars and howls of nocturnal predators. She sat up and rubbed her neck. It was a bit sore; she hadn’t fallen asleep in the most comfortable posture. She adjusted her pack and prepared to lie down again, but something stayed her.

There it was again: a noise, a sort of murmuring chant. She peeked her head out of the door of her hut. She squinted at it. Her sense of direction wasn’t perfect, but it seemed to be coming from the platform where she had eaten. The murmur came again, and this time she heard a faint liquid squelching sound. She crept out of the hut onto the footpath and looked down. There were several layers of leaves in the way, but there was definitely something going on down there. She could see faint movement at the edge of vision. She shuffled forward as quietly as she could. Slowly, inch by inch, she descended the spiral ramp.
Every time her weight caused it to creak she froze, her heart thumping in her ears. The leaves thinned out as she went. Almost there… a little farther… she rounded a corner and stuck her head over the edge. From here, she had an unobstructed view of the platform, perhaps twenty feet below.

She wished she hadn’t. One hand went to her mouth to stifle a scream.

Dame Kuhn was down there, and she wasn’t alone. She lay on her back in the statue’s cupped hands. Two torches had been thrust into holes carved in its face, so it appeared to be staring down at her with fiery eyes. They provided enough light for Adellia to see everything.

Kuhn was naked, with her legs spread. A thick mane of dark hair adorned her mound. Her belly rose in a gentle hillock, as though she were pregnant and just starting to show. Sweat shone on the pale flesh of her belly and the pink peaks of her nipples. Dark brown lines traced themselves up and down her body: up her thighs, spiraling around her navel, curving along the swell of her bosom and up her neck. More followed the contours of her arms. Adellia remembered the dark shapes she had seen earlier beneath Kuhn’s dress. What was this? Body paint?

Kuhn was staring down with an expression of ecstasy. Between her legs was an eloko, divested of his loincloth. Despite his tiny size, the cock that hung down between his legs was at least the size of Toby’s, if not larger. He reached out and grabbed Kuhn by the thighs and his prick stood to attention. Behind him were at least two dozen more biloko, each holding something round in their hands. They were swaying back and forth and chanting.

The eloko gripped the base of his member in one hand and guided it in. Dame Kuhn sighed as it slid between her pussy lips. Even from here, Adellia could see that it was knobby and gnarled, with irregular bumps along its length. It disappeared into the scientist’s cunt with a wet slurp. Her pussy lips were swollen and puffy and glistened with moisture. She threw back her head and sighed as her monstrous partner sank himself inside her to the hilt. His bollocks hung down like yams and began to sway back and forth as he thrust in and out of her.

The slap of flesh on flesh reached Adellia’s ears. Setting it off were the guttural grunts of little green man and Dame Kuhn’s higher, more feminine moaning. She tossed her head back and forth. Each impact made her heavy tits bounce, sending droplets of sweat flying everywhere. Still, she made no move to escape. Instead, she seemed to be grinding her hips into him, fucking back as hard as she could. Every time he pulled out, her pussy lips clung to him as though unwilling to let him go; every time he plunged back in, her cunt gripped him tightly. Dame Kuhn was thrashing now, and some of her cries were in english. “Oh!” she moaned. “Oh! Mein gott! Fick mich! Fuck me harder, you little wicht!”

His thrusts grew more frantic. With each buck of his hips, his cock plunged deep inside her quim, only to withdraw almost all the way. Each thrust was accompanied by a wet squelch and a shuddering moan from Kuhn. Finally he hilted himself fully, thrusting forward so far that he had to stand on his tip-toes. His balls twitched and spasmed as they drained into her. Adellia squinted in amazement. She couldn’t tell, but it looked like her stomach had risen by a centimeter or so...

The eloko withdrew. His wilting prick fell out of Kuhn’s pussy, followed by a slow waterfall of off-white cum. It ran down her butt cheeks and into the bowl in which she rested. The next eloko was already stepping up. As he stepped into the light, the object in his hands became clear: it was a little bowl, perhaps made of wicker, filled with some kind of dark brown pigment. He dipped two fingers in it and smeared them across Kuhn’s body. The shape he made was roughly triangular; it looked like a leaf, growing off the twining stems that ran up and down her body. He finished this addition and then fisted his cock, pumping his hand back and forth until it stood at attention. This
one was, if anything, larger than the one before; he positioning it between the gaping lips of Kuhn’s quim and slammed home. Thin streamers of cum shot out around the tight seal, and Kuhn’s eyes widened. She reached down between her legs and began to rub at the swollen blossom of her clit. Soon her delirious moans once again echoed off the trees.

Adellia tried to count the leaves growing from the painted vines. They traced up both of Kuhn’s flanks, along her legs, across her chest… Adellia lost count after forty. Forty! And there were dozens more *biloko* down there, each one with his own pot… Adellia’s head was spinning. She wanted to tear her eyes away, but she was mesmerized by the sight below her.

This *eloko* seemed larger and stronger than the one before, and with each thrust, he shook Kuhn’s entire body like a ragdoll. Her breasts bounced and flopped, slapping into each other with thick wet *thwaps*. Kuhn shouted something in the *biloko* tongue, and another one of the little beasts scrambled up onto the altar. It ignored the one pumping away between her thighs and straddled her chest. After adding a perfunctory leaf to the vine on her neck, it settled down to sit on her tummy and laid its cock between her soft, pillowy mounds. Each hand grabbed a fistful of titflesh, and Kuhn squealed with delight. Her pink nipples, now rock-hard, jutted out from between the creature’s fingers. Holding them like handles, he began to thrust through the valley of her cleavage. The head of his cock burst forth from between them and butted into her chin. Kuhn tilted her head forward and opened her mouth in time to catch the next thrust between her lips. The *eloko* couldn’t go deeper than that, despite his length-- the majority of his shaft was trapped between walls of soft, yielding flesh-- but he tried anyways. Kuhn’s tongue slid out and caressed the warty head of his prick. Every time he thrust, she locked her lips around his tip for a moment before reluctantly letting him go. He gibbered with excitement. Kuhn’s own sounds of passion were stifled by his meaty cockhead.

The *eloko* between her legs was still thrusting away. He increased the tempo until he was fairly jackhammering away at her slit. His balls, each nearly the size of an egg, slapped and bounced against her buttocks. The mixture of *biloko* cum and her own juices leaking from her hole had been churned up into a froth which matted her pubic hair against her body. His tongue was hanging out as he humped away. Both creatures mounting her seemed to reach their climax at once. The one sitting on her belly pulled back in time to blast a thick rope of viscous cum all over her plump breasts. Some of it splashed onto her face and dripped off her chin. She licked eagerly at it and scooped up as much as she could with her tongue. At the same time, the creature inside her cunt hooted in triumph. He jerked his hips forward in a series of microthrusts as he blew his load inside her. When he finally withdrew, a syrupy mixture glugged from her stretched-out hole with a lewd, buttery noise.

Both creatures swayed drunkenly as they climbed down off her. The next one was already stepping up. He withdrew a glop of dark paint and, slowly and with great care, drew a leaf on her swollen stomach. Then he lined up his prick at her waiting entrance and shoved forward.

Adellia had seen enough. She was suddenly very aware of how exposed she was. She had no desire to be caught staring at this obscene spectacle. She pulled back and, with total concentration and delicate care, began to crawl back to her hut. The wild, orgiastic noises from below followed her all the way.
Adellia Hawk competes for her life with Dame Bridget Kuhn

Adellia woke up convinced that it had all been a dream.

That was it, wasn’t it? It made sense. She hadn’t really seen Dame Bridget Kuhn lying in a cum-addled daze while forest kobolds took turns fucking her senseless, right? She hadn’t really seen the elegant anthropologist lying prostrate in the hands of a heathen statue with her belly swollen and cum leaking from her gaping pussy?

A dream. It had all been a dream. She’d been tired and hungry and confused, lost in a strange land far from home, and missing Toby terribly. It was funny-- Adellia had gone eighteen years without once having sex, but now that she hadn’t had it in a few months, it was all she could think about. She chided herself for her unprofessionalism. She couldn’t let mere base urges distract her from her mission. Today, she’d talk to Kuhn, and it would all be sorted out.

Her certainty lasted all of ten minutes. That was how long it took her to dress, re-pack her bag, and make her way down the swaying rope bridges to the large central platform of the biloko village. Dame Kuhn was there waiting for her, and one look at her told Adellia more than she wanted to know.

Kuhn was wearing the same dress from yesterday. It had clearly been repaired inexpertly over and over, and while it had lost most of its shape, it was not yet baggy enough to conceal the visible swelling in her belly. Adellia could still see the painted lines on Kuhn’s body, visible at her neckline and her wrists, only now they were decorated with leaves. She remembered the biloko climbing all over Kuhn and painting the leaves on, and suppressed a shiver. Worst of all was her hair. Adellia’s gaze kept skittering back to it involuntarily. It looked as though it had been brushed neatly across her forehead, but just there… just above her temple… there was clearly a wad of dried something.

“Good morning, Adellia!” Dame Kuhn said brightly. “How did you sleep?”

“N—not too well,” Adellia stammered. It was the truth. She had tossed and turned all night. In her dreams she kept hearing the anthropologist’s wild, bestial cries and the slurp-slurp-slurp of biloko cock sliding in and out of her cunt.

“It takes some adjustment,” Kuhn admitted. “I didn’t sleep well when I first arrived, either. But soon you’ll be as right as rain. Think of it as getting your ‘tree legs!’”

“Oh, that’s quite all right,” Adellia replied. “I won’t be staying long anyways.”

For a moment, Kuhn’s expression went glassy. She recovered well and gave Adellia a bright and sunny smile. “Of course, dear!” she said. “You said. You wanted to bring me home, correct?”

Adellia nodded. “The University of Stuttgart is very concerned about you. And I’m sure they’d love to publish your research. It, uh, it looks like you’ve learned a lot.”
“Oh, I have, I have!” Kuhn’s head bobbed up and down. “But we can discuss that later. How about some breakfast?”

Breakfast turned out to be sliced melon and cooked yams. “They’re a bit unimaginative when it comes to food,” Kuhn said. “But one does one’s best.” She ate lightly. Of course, she had a big meal last night, Adellia thought. Her stomach turned over.

“As I said, I certainly can’t go back with you,” said Kuhn as they polished off the last of the fruit. “But I could be convinced to send back some of my notes. Would you like to see them?” She led Adellia along a criss-cross route until they were high in the canopy. Her hut appeared to be slightly larger than most of the others, and contained both a woven hammock and a primitive desk made from three flat planks. Piled atop the desk were more than a dozen notebooks. Each had clearly been traditionally bound once, but someone had carefully rebound them with metal rings as they grew. Random bits of paper, leaves, and other detritus poked out from between the pages, some of which appeared to have been written on vellum or canvas or even scraps of cloth. “I wish you had brought more paper,” Kuhn complained. “Or at least ink. It is a bit of a trial out here.”

“There’s plenty of paper at Stuttgart,” Adellia pointed out. “Are you sure I can’t convince you?”

Dame Kuhn laughed. She had a hearty laugh, deep and husky. “Ho ho ho! You are a charmer, young Adellia. No, I’m afraid, my mind is made up. I feel as though I am close to a breakthrough with these people.” An idea seemed to strike her. “Say, why don’t you go hunting with them this afternoon? I’m sure you could learn a lot from their traditional techniques. And if you are to be the ambassador of my work, I think it would benefit you to learn more about the biloko.”

Adellia gave her a quizzical look, but there was nothing but friendly enthusiasm in Kuhn’s face. And the idea had its attractions. Her trigger finger had gotten itchy on the long boat ride south, and she was sure there were boar in the woods around here. Fresh bacon would not go amiss. Besides, it would get her out of the trees and away from the horrid statue. Every time she looked at it she remembered Kuhn’s lewd moans as the biloko drained their balls into her.

“Sounds good,” she said. “When do we leave?”

Kuhn introduced her to Enniektu, who she insisted was the best hunter in the village. To Adellia’s eyes he was just another warty little kobold with a long snout, but he held his spear with the relaxed confidence of a veteran. “Follow Enniektu,” Kuhn told her. “He’ll lead you right.” She smiled in a slightly unsettling way, and Adellia wondered just where Enniektu had led Dame Kuhn. Before she descended the rope ladder she made sure that her knife was in its belt sheath.

Enniektu led her and two other biloko on a curving path away from the village. Adellia tried to memorize landmarks so that she could navigate back if need be– here, a flat boulder, there a tree whose trunk had been split by lightning at some point in the past. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she could get back if she had to. She had been traveling for about half an hour when Enniektu held up his hand and burredled something meaningless. The other biloko halted, so Adellia did too.

The four of them were in a little clearing at the foot of a hill. The sun filtered down through the canopy and filled the clearing with dancing shadows. The second Adellia stopped moving, the ever-present cloud of jungle insects descended on her, and she waved her hands around her head to shoo them off. They didn’t seemed to bother the biloko.

“Well?” she demanded. “What are we here for, eh? Did you smell something?” She fidgeted with the safety catch on her crossbow. There was a look in the little eloko’s eyes she didn’t like.

Enniektu planted his spear point-first in the loamy earth. He barked something in his language and
reached down to fumble with his loincloth. It fell away to reveal a warty green cock almost the length of Adellia’s forearm. She gasped at the sight, and it began to stiffen, as if responding to the sound of her voice. The other *biloko* did likewise. One of them began to stroke his swelling prick, staring at her all the while. Enniektu pointed at Adellia, then pointed at the bulbous tip of his cock, which was already beginning to leak clear fluid. “Anak te!” he said. “Anak mayum Kuhn!”

Adellia raised the crossbow, then hesitated. If she killed one of these little beasts, she might be in serious danger. But if Dame Kuhn had sent her out here to introduce her to the joys of kobold sex, she was going to be disappointed. “Not a chance, you horrid little beast!” Adellia snapped. She wasn’t sure if he could understand her, but perhaps her tone brought the message across. He snarled and reached for his spear.

“All dock ney!” he screeched, his voice sounding reedy and petulant. “All dock--”

His angry exhortation was cut off as Adellia took a step back, braced herself, then swung forward and planted one booted foot right between his bollocks.

His reaction was everything she’d hoped for. His tirade trailed off into a wheeze, his eyes bulged like a frog’s, and his tongue flopped out of his mouth. The other two *biloko* stared at Adellia wide-eyed, but made no move to intervene. As Enniektu collapsed in a knock-kneed crouch, they turned to stare at her with expressions of frank astonishment. “Anyone else want some?” Adellia growled. The *biloko* realized at the same time that their own genitals were terribly exposed and decided that, no, nobody else did. They ran to the side of their stricken leader and babbled urgently in his ear. He was preoccupied groaning in pain and rolling on the ground, so Adellia took that as her cue to leave.

She turned back the way they had come and ran. No more games, she decided, as ferns and branches whipped at her. She’d take Dame Kuhn— or just the woman’s notes, if that was all she could get— and she’d leave. She’d just get out. The boat would be back in a few days, and surely she could sleep in a tree or something until that point. She turned right at the lightning tree and left at the flat stone, and before she knew it, the first rope bridge appeared in the trees overhead. The ladder was just around the next tree. She could--

She stopped.

The land below the village had been cleared for farming, and several *biloko* were standing in it now. A single glance told her that they weren’t involved in any kind of agricultural activity. There were a dozen of them at least standing in a rough semicircle. In the middle of them was Bridget Kuhn. She had taken off her dress again and knelt on the grass with her hands clasped between her knees. Adellia sidled behind a large fern leaf and hunched over. What lunacy was this, now? She couldn’t interrupt their depraved ritual— that would give the game away. Her best bet, unfortunately, would be to wait it out, and hope that the hunting party didn’t come back right away. She told herself that if she saw or heard Enniektu coming then she’d burst out on them, regardless of what Kuhn was up to, and take her chances with the tribe.

Besides, it wasn’t just self-preservation or idle curiosity that stayed her. She could feel her pulse quickening and a lump rising in her throat. Slowly, carefully, conscious at every moment of the sound she was making, she peered between the fronds of the fern.

From this angle, she could see every vine painted on Kuhn’s body and the dozens of leafs protruding from them. Every leaf represented an *eloko*, she remembered, a misshapen green cock and an eruption of pearlescent goo. There were so many of them! For all her faults, Dame Kuhn’s stamina was impressive. The vines bent and flexed as the anthropologist leaned forward. Her breasts, heavy mounds capped with hard pink nipples, swung outward. Her ruby lips, so full and
ripe they looked like berries, parted to reveal a slender tongue. The *eloko* closest to her already had his cock out. It stood to attention as Kuhn leaned in as though magnetically drawn to her wet and welcoming mouth. Adellia found herself holding her breath in anticipation. Closer, closer… finally, with a sigh and a gentle wet sound, Kuhn closed her lips around the flared cockhead. Without realizing it, Adellia sighed as well.

Kuhn did not rest on her laurels for a moment. As soon as her mouth was wrapped around the warty green cock, she began to bob her head up and down. One hand wrapped itself around the base of the *biloko*’s shaft, the other cupped his head, dangling balls. Her tongue peeked out around her lips from time to time. Adellia could see it press against the inside of her cheek. She swayed forward and backward, nearly letting the cock slip entirely out of her mouth before taking it to the root. Her nostrils flared, her eyes closed, and she forced herself farther still, until a cock-shaped bulge formed in her throat. She held that posture for a moment before she had to pull back with a chuffing cough. The *biloko*’s, cock, slick with spit and throat-slime, glistened in the waning sunlight for a moment before vanishing once again between Kuhn’s lips.

She set to work with admirable verve. The other *biloko* crowded and jostled around her, but none dared approach too closely. The one currently being serviced had a dumbstruck look on his face. He stared at the sky with his mouth hanging slack. Kuhn spared him not a glance; she was wholly focused on her task. She pumped her hand briskly back and forth along his shaft while tongue-bathing his mushroom tip.

Adellia was horrified, but the sight was oddly arousing as well. There was something about Kuhn’s businesslike, almost mechanical motions. She looked like a woman in complete control of her situation, a puppeteer holding a dozen sets of strings. She beckoned with her free hand and another *eloko* stepped up. This one’s member was longer and thinner than the first, looking a bit like a misshapen cucumber. Without breaking stride Kuhn wrapped her other hand around it and began to stroke. Both arms pumped in synchrony. Kuhn mumbled something muffled around the cock in her mouth, and the *biloko* murmured in awe.

She sped up as she went. Her head thrust forward and backward. Her hands blurred. The subjects of her affections twitched and writhed, thrusting their hips forward and flailing with their thin arms. The one in her hand came first, twitching and shooting rope after rope of chunky off-white cum onto her cheeks and nose. A moment later, she stopped moving, and Adellia saw her throat work. She swallowed once, twice, then pulled the cock free from her mouth with a wet *pop*. A thick wad of off-white spunk sat on her tongue like a marshmallow. The prick she had been sucking fired again, basting her forehead with a sticky glaze. She swallowed one last time, stuck out her tongue as if to show it was empty, and beckoned at the crowd. The two *biloko* she had just finished off stumbled backward dreamily as three more stepped up.

She took one of these in each hand and the third in her mouth and immediately resumed her efforts. Adellia watched in awe. The woman was a *machine*, her every gesture full of that German efficiency. Her own hand crept unbidden beneath her belt. It was all too much: here she was, trapped in the jungle with a lunatic researcher who had decided that the path to publication lay in indulging these horny little beasts at every opportunity. And yet the last time Adellia had enjoyed any relief was at the hands of Zainab in Morocco. It was all so strange and she couldn’t think straight with her pipes as backed as this. She just had to… just had to…

The first caress of her pussy nearly gave her away. She slid two fingers between her soft pink lips and had to bite back a moan. Her panties were already slick with juice. She stiffened her fingers and began to rub her sex in a clockwise motion. Her lips felt so sticky, so puffy, so *sensitive*. She brushed her clit and stifled a gasp. Even just these light touches left her breathless.
She sat back against a tree with her legs sprawled before her. She was in a natural lean-to, a shady little crevice that hid her perfectly from the revelers out there. Not that they were likely to notice much in any case; all eyes were on Dame Kuhn’s beautiful face, frosted as it was with *biloko* cum, and her pouty red lips. She really was lovely, Adellia thought vaguely, despite her age and the obvious rigors of life in the jungle. There was something primal about her, something almost feral. Perhaps it was the energy with which she slurped and sucked and stroked. How had it begun? Adellia could imagine her caught up in some wild dance, coupling in the firelight with all comers, her skin sheened with sweat. Perhaps she had spied on some fertility ritual and felt the stirring in her loins, just as Adellia did now… slipped one hand beneath her dress, just as Adellia was doing… touched herself, slowly at first, then faster and faster, parting the petals of her flower and rubbing at the hot urgent seed between them, shuddering as the lust overtook her? Even as this thought crossed Adellia’s mind, the three *biloko* that Kuhn was pleasuring came almost in unison. Two jets of cum criss-crossed in midair and splattered across her cheeks, nose and lips, while the third fired its load deep into her belly. She kept her lips locked around the shaft until every last drop of spunk had drained into her throat, then released her lucky partner. His eyes crossed and he sat down hard. Two others ran forward to drag his semiconscious body out of the way. Kuhn was just beginning.

She took them all, sometimes one by one, sometimes two or three at a time. About half of them finished down her throat, the rest painted her face and chest with their ejaculate. By the time she was halfway finished she was covered in it, practically bathing in it; she blew languid cum-bubbles from her nose and licked up the froth that spilled from the corners of her mouth. Sometimes, when her throat was being stretched especially brutally by a meaty shaft, her eyes would water and tears would carve rivulets through the caked-on jism. Still, her expression was never less than joyful, her cries never less than ecstatic. She switched to a squat, and from that angle Adellia could see moisture beading from her swollen cuntlips and dripping onto the ground.

Adellia herself came twice-- once upon seeing three *biloko* cocks erupting in unison all over Kuhn’s forehead, and again when the lady herself could no longer restrain her moans. She cried out hungrily, begging for more cock and more cum, and Adellia nearly raised her own voice in chorus. She came close to dashing out herself and throwing herself on the clearing ground. It was a passing fancy; as she shivered and came down from the ecstasy of her orgasm, shame began to creep in. What had she been thinking? The sight of Kuhn had surprised her, but more than that, it had triggered a deep, hidden longing. *God,* she thought, *I’ve got to get back to Toby.*

Outside, Dame Kuhn lay insensate on the ground; only the occasional twitch of a foot and the sound of her breathing showed that she was still alive. The *biloko* dispersed, though four of them manhandled Kuhn between them and carried them off with her. Adellia was left alone, breathing hard, in a sweat-stained shirt and thoroughly soaked panties.

She waited a solid ten minutes after they were gone, then clambered to her feet. The rainforest was not a comfortable place to be in wet clothes. She told herself that she had a fresh set in her hut. She only had to make it there.

There was no sign of Dame Kuhn, which was probably for the best. Adellia wasn’t sure what she’d say to her now if she did see her. Instead, she crossed the bridge to her hut. She was very conscious of beady eyes on her, but it didn’t seem like there was any angle at which privacy would be assured; in the end, she simply hunkered down in the corner and changed as fast as possible. She hadn’t brought many spare sets of clothes, but she didn’t think she’d need them. Soon, she’d be on her way… with or without Kuhn.

The anthropologist turned out to be in her hut. Adellia climbed up and knocked gently on the wooden wall next to the door. Kuhn, who was sitting at her “desk,” turned and favored Adellia with a slightly surprised smile. “Ah, Adellia,” she said. “You’re back early. How was the hunt?”
She was wearing her dress again, and her face was completely clean. She certainly didn’t look like a woman who, half an hour earlier, had been guzzling *biloko* sperm like a champion.

“I felt a bit sick,” Adellia said. “I think it might have been something I ate. I came back early.”

“Oh, I do hope you’re all right!” Kuhn replied with genuine concern. “I had that very problem when I began living here. I found the leaves of a plant which—*urp.*” She covered her mouth with one hand and gave a nervous little laugh. “Pardon me. That was hardly ladylike.”

“I’m fine,” Adellia said quickly. Just for a moment, she caught a whiff of something foul and slightly salty. “Just fine. Just needed a rest. What are you working on?”

“Just some notes,” Kuhn said. “You know, seasonal rituals and things. I have the idea that the *biloko* calendar is influenced by the height of the Nile. You know, floods and things. I haven’t been able to figure it out exactly… their language is curiously basic, you know, and some things don’t translate.” She laid her quill down. “To tell you the truth, I don’t think I’m getting anywhere. Perhaps I should take a break. They’ll be back with their kill soon, and I can help them cook it. How are you in the kitchen?”

“Not great,” Adellia admitted. “I think I should… maybe I should just…”

“You know, you *really* don’t look well, dear,” Kuhn said. She frowned. “Why not lie down for a nap? I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.”

“That sounds nice.” Adellia allowed herself to be led back to her hut. She laid down, but she had no intention of sleeping. As soon as Dame Kuhn’s footsteps died away, Adellia was back on her feet. She peered out the window long enough to confirm that Kuhn was somewhere on the platforms below, then she sidled out the edge of the door and began to climb. She had to be gone before Enniektu came back. She’d take something, a notebook or keepsake, and present that to the University. She could say that was all she could find of Bridget Kuhn, and they’d mourn her, but it was probably for the best.

Reaching Kuhn’s hut was easy enough. Adellia looked for just a moment. She could see a dark shape far below that had to be Kuhn, surrounded by small green figures. She appeared to be peeling vegetables. With any luck, that would keep her for a while. Adellia turned to the desk and stepped forward.

It was covered in spiral-bound notebooks. She seized one at random and opened it. Kuhn’s handwriting was small and neat, and her notes were interspersed with drawings— the hand of a talented amateur. She drew plants and animals and, above all, *biloko*, caught in different poses and wielding various primitive tools. Adellia flipped from page to page, scanning the notes at random.

*July 10. Arrived at village. Local guides frightened—superstitious fools! The *biloko* accepted my gifts of fruit and meat, as I knew they would. They’re not frightening at all! Offshoots of the common kobold, at a guess. This will be easier than I thought! Already planning the introduction to my book. Title: Six Months Among the Biloko?*

*August 14th. Some progress with language. It’s quite ancient, predates the rhotic split. Possible common ancestor older than I thought? They tolerate me well, but their curiosity has worn off. No signs of hostility yet, which is good. The weather here is frightful. One dress ruined already; I was caught out in a rainstorm and slid down a muddy slope. I’ll wash it as best I can and use it for scraps.*

*August 29th. I despair of reaching the *biloko*. They understand me, I’m sure of it, but they’re not*
interested in what I have to say. I’m afraid that I must have caught some dreadful jungle malady. I write this from the privy… well, I say privy, it’s more of a hole in the ground… in any case, I’ve become intimately familiar with it of late. At least I have my own hut now. It’s low to the ground, which I have been taken to understand means that my status in the tribe is rather low, but it’s better than nothing. Perhaps the problem is that I have no role. Maybe I could cook for them? Help them with their yam cultivation? I think I would be rather useless as a hunter.

September 20th? I am beginning to lose track of the dates. Some kind of holy season approaches. The biloko are taking part in all manner of ritualistic behaviors. Possibly centered on the statue in the village? They are becoming somewhat standoffish. I am still an outsider, it seems, and not part of their festivities. Some of them have been at least a little kind. One, Juwarabo, always shares his breadfruit. The stuff is starting to grow on me. It’s sweet and not a little sticky. I always used to love strawberries as a girl...

Mid-October. I am forcibly ejected from the village at times… not painfully, but quite firmly. It appears that there are some customs that I cannot witness. How frustrating! Just when I was beginning to make a breakthrough! I intend to sneak back to observe. I feel rather guilty abusing Juwarabo’s hospitality this way, but I really must see what they are up to. I feel on the cusp of something amazing. I fell into some kind of briar and ruined another dress, but I was able to repair two more with the pieces. I have begun binding up my hair, too, to stop it getting everywhere. Bug bites are getting easier to bear since Juwarabo shared his lotion.

Late October? Once again I have been turfed out. I tried to explain to Juwarabo what an anthropologist is and what I am doing, but I don’t think he understood. To the biloko, all the tall people are like a bad dream… they think I am some kind of spirit who has come to watch and judge them. They are afraid of me, and that limits my ability to learn from them. Some of their rituals are kept secret, and few of them will talk to me, even now that my grasp of their language is improving. I cannot exactly pass for one of them, but there must be some other way to gain their trust… it is frustrating to be so close, and yet so far, from my objectives.

Adellia frowned as she paged through. Kuhn’s penmanship grew spikier and more erratic as time went on. Strange stains discolored some of the pages, and the order of the entries appeared to be jumbled. There were still occasional illustrations, but unlike the meticulously-labeled scientific drawings from earlier, these were wild and creative, showing leering biloko with comically exaggerated features.

November sometime. I can hardly write due to the excitement! Part of me is still sick to my stomach, but mixed with that I feel awestruck! I was escorted out of the village for another monthly ritual, but this time, I was determined to sneak back to observe. I slathered mud and leaves on myself, just as Juwarabo showed me when he goes hunting. I waited until the chanting began, then circled back. The rope ladder had been pulled up into the village, but there was a tree a modest distance away that I found quite climbable. I shimmied into its lower branches and waited. From there I had a perfect view of the central platform. The entire village was there, standing in a semi-circle… and naked! Immediately a mystery that has plagued me was solved: where are the female biloko? There aren’t any! They are sexless, perhaps, or their sexual dimorphism is different than humanity’s; each and every eloko was equipped with a member of prodigious size, relative to their bodies. They were engaged in some kind of sexual ceremony, that much was obvious at a glance. They stood in a circle, chanting and swaying, then one by one they began to masturbate. Erect, their penises were even larger. I must confess I am not possessed of enough data to make a rigorous study, but they appeared to be at least the size of those of human males twice their height.

Each eloko ejaculated a copious volume into a hollowed-out gourd, then the gourds were all poured into a cauldron. The chief stepped forward and spoke some ritualistic words-- none I had...
ever heard before-- then stirred the cauldron over a carefully contained fire. More chanting followed, for at least an hour. They boiled their seed until it was almost all gone, then one of the largest elo ko reached into the cauldron and retrieved three large seed-pods. Had they placed them there beforehand? They must have, correct? I cannot see an alternative. These were produced to much cheering, then they descended to ground level and planted them in what Juwarabo had always told me was the “special garden.” I wondered what it was for! What do they expect to grow there?

I washed myself off in the river and returned later. My heart was pounding so fast that it is a wonder they didn’t hear it and grow suspicious. I must have stumbled on something of incredibly importance to these people. I wonder what?

December??? This is impossible. I fear that I must be hallucinating, due to illness or malnutrition. I cannot even commit these words to paper--

No. I must. I have calmed down a bit now and I think I can make an accurate account of what I saw… what I believe I saw… no! I did! I swear it!

Green shoots have been coming up in the “special garden,” but they were not from any plant I recognize. I found occasion to pass by there to study and sketch the plants, but this seemed to provoke tremendous hostility from the biloko. For the first time I feared for my life. Juwarabo rescued me and led me away, and I explained to him that I was just confused as to what kinds of plants those were. He told me not to worry, then suggested I go for a swimming excursion.

Well, I did briefly, but curiosity got the better of me and I snuck back once again. I hid in the brush as I approached and waited to see what they would do in my absence. I had hardly been waiting any time at all when Juwarabo convened a meeting of senior biloko. I could not hear what they discussed, but when they had finished, they entered the special garden and began to dig. Their backs were to me, so I did not see everything that transpired, but what happened next is clear in my mind. There was a great commotion, a fountain of earth, and then three biloko I didn’t recognize clawed their way out of the dirt! Their fellows helped them to their feet, cleaned them off, and dressed them with loincloths.

What did I just see? Are… are the biloko vegetables? Is this where they come from? So many questions! I fear that I cannot continue to observe secretly! I must speak of this to Juwarabo. My fear is that, having violated his trust, he will expel me from the village entirely… or worse…

None of the later entries had dates. Some of them were so messy that Adellia could barely read them; they appeared to have been written in berry-juice or some other homemade ink, and they had both run and faded.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I know we were always warned about connecting too closely with the communities we observe, but science demands sacrifice. I am a woman of science, first and foremost, and what I do here I do in the name of discovery.

I told Juwarabo I needed to speak to him. He seemed nonplussed, but followed me into the woods. There, I told him bluntly what I had seen: their masturbatory ritual, and the crop from the “special garden.” As I suspected, he was enraged. He threatened me at spearpoint. I do not think he would have killed me, but he would certainly have exiled me from his village. So I had no choice. I did what I had to do.

I told him to remove his loincloth and I would explain. He did, a bit confused. He reacted defensively when I reached for his penis, but patient and gentle words sufficed to let down his guard. As I suspected, it had never been touched by another being-- and my hands are much softer
than his. I had intended to just stroke it, but some kind of fever came over me and I put it in my mouth. It barely fit! I have little expertise in this field, but I believe I was able to pleasure him sufficiently. In any case, he ejaculated quickly—too quickly, in fact, for me to pull it out in time. I had to swallow a little of his semen. In truth, it did not taste as bad as I had expected. It was something like warm vegetable broth. Afterwards, he seemed docile, and agreed that I could stay. I asked him if I could observe the ritual more closely next time, and he said he would consider it.

There were a couple of empty pages, and when the entries resumed, the handwriting was barely recognizable. Two of the pages stuck together, and Adellia pried them apart with a disgusted grimace on her face.

Juwarabo was able to secure my participation in the next ritual! There was, however, a cost. I had to participate naked, as they do—which I considered a small price to pay—and I had to demonstrate my “mouth technique” for some of the other senior biloko. I anticipated something like this, and while it would not have been my preferred option, it was far less unpleasant than I had suspected. They do not grab my hair or attempt to thrust their members down my throat. Indeed, they are quite sedate throughout the process. I found confusing feelings welling up inside me as I conducted my business, which might explain my subsequent choices.

They seemed quite taken with my naked body, but confused when I removed my last scrap of clothing. Juwarabo asked me where my penis was. I laughed at that and explained my anatomy to them. They were utterly mystified, and I believe this reinforced the idea in their heads that I am some sort of spirit or angel. One of them asked if he could put his penis in my “penis-hole” and I found myself agreeing. Mostly, I was curious as to what he would do. And it’s not like there is anybody here to see me. I think I shall be leaving this portion of my adventure out of the book.

He mounted me hesitantly and with a great deal of fumbling, but with my help, he was able to achieve penetration. The feeling was… quite unusual… I am at a loss to describe it, but the knobbly texture of his organ was tremendously satisfying. He managed only a few thrusts before ejaculating, but his output was quite impressive, and the feel of it inside me… leaking out and dripping down my thighs… it is distracting to remember, even now…

And later:

The ritual is over! I find myself dizzy with excitement. I feel that I have crossed a line tonight, but one that I would willingly cross again! Everything began as it had before—there was some grumbling at my presence, but Juwarabo and the other elders explained that I had earned the right to participate. The biloko masturbated as before, and I decided I would join them. I sat down in the middle of the circle and began to stimulate myself. Before long, however, it became clear that my presence was a disruption. The biloko were all staring at me, disrupting their chant and interrupting their onanistic frenzy. One of them—the one who had made congress with me before—shuffled forward, knelt before me, and asked if he could repeat the act. I was quite excited by that point and eagerly agreed. He had no trouble thrusting himself inside me this time, and his rutting seemed to stimulate the others to greater heights of excitement. Once he had finished, another one lined up behind him and asked me for a turn—a favor I was inclined to grant, as the brief interlude with his fellow had failed to bring me to climax. This one’s… well, his cock, I know the word, I shouldn’t be shy in my own journal… his cock was even mightier than the first, and it soon had me swooning.

By the time he had finished it became clear that self-pleasure was no longer satisfying for the others, and they swarmed around me. It was only with great effort and much shouting that they could work out an order in which to take turns. By the end of the night, so much biloko… cum… had been poured out into me that my belly was showing marked swelling. I am still a bit nauseous
and crampy, but never mind that. I took on the whole tribe! And while I can tell myself that I did it for science, the truth is I loved every minute of it!

Still later:

Two days after the ritual, I had one last surprise. My cramps had gotten worse, not better, and the swelling in my stomach had not subsided. I suspected an allergic reaction and was cursing myself for my lustful foolishness, when I suddenly felt something shift inside me. I sat down, legs spread, and squeezed my belly with both hands. This was somewhat painful, but it produced another shifting sensation-- I clenched, pushed, and bore down, and soon found myself giving “birth” to seedpods identical to the ones I had seen produced from the cauldron. They were quite small, only the size of tennis balls, and I passed them easily enough, and when my womb had been evacuated I felt much better. The entire tribe had produced three seeds from the cauldron; my body produced seven. I took them to Juwarabo and explained their provenance and he looked up at me in astonishment.

I knew I was close to a breakthrough! This bizarre ritual has more than doubled the fertility of the biloko! I now believe that my original trip here, though I believed it to be a scientific endeavor, was actually ordained by Providence. I have been sent here to help these wonderful people repopulate their jungle. They have suffered terribly at the hands of encroaching civilization, but with my help they can rebuild their numbers and reclaim their lands! My book was a selfish fantasy anyways. This is why I’m here!

From there, the book trailed off into near-incoherence. Adellia read with mounting horror as Dame Kuhn related gleeful anecdotes of her favorite biloko and what she liked best about their cocks; one was listed as “savage and with stamina outmatching even a raging bull; he rutted me for an entire afternoon” while another was said to possess “testicles of such overweening vitality that his issue can be measured in liters.” These were paired with crude erotic drawings: swaggering biloko with penises the size of tree trunks, and nubile young women moaning in ecstasy as biloko swarmed over them.

A tiny noise interrupted her concentration-- barely audible above the wind in the treetops, but all the more noticeable for it. It was the merest creak of wood. Adellia turned slowly, in mounting horror, to see Dame Bridget Kuhn outlined in the doorway.

“Hello, my dear,” she said, a bright sunny smile plastered across her face. “Enjoy your nap, did you?”

Adellia craned her neck. Behind Kuhn were at least a dozen biloko carrying spears. She gulped. “Uh, I did, thank you very much. I think your book is going to come out really well…”

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“I suppose this was inevitable,” Dame Kuhn sighed as she marched alongside Adellia. “I should have known you’d get curious.” Armed biloko flanked them on both sides. Adellia’s wrists had been tied with vine ropes. She could have freed herself easily enough, but surrounded by spearpoints, she had no plan for what came after. So she’d wait. For now.

“How much did you read?” Kuhn demanded. She pinched Adellia’s chin between thumb and forefinger and turned it around. “How much did you see?”

“Enough,” Adellia replied. “You’ve become some kind of… of tribe mother or something.”

“I suppose you could say that,” Kuhn replied. “Their word for me translates as ‘life-cauldron.’ It’s
from one of their myths-- the sky goddess cooked up the first eloko in a cauldron and poured him into the jungle. Did you know, when I arrived there were barely two dozen of them? There’s more than fifty now!”

“So what happens to me?” Adellia asked. “Am going to become a second ‘life-cauldron’?”

“Does the idea excite you?” Kuhn purred. Her fingers stroked Adellia’s cheek. “Perhaps. With our growing numbers, we will need one.”

“And then what? Are you going to conquer the continent with an army of pygmies? With you as Queen? Dame, this plan makes no sense!” Adellia held out her bound wrists. “Look, just cut me free. We can get out of here together. These little monsters can’t possibly keep us here.”

“Oh, no, no, I could never do that,” Kuhn replied dreamily. “They need me. They need us.”

The biloko brought them before the great wooden statue. They forced Adellia to her knees before it, two of them holding her shoulders while three more aimed spears at her head. Dame Kuhn climbed up into the statue’s cupped hands and sat with her hands folded in her lap. She had a prim expression on her face, like a teacher getting ready to collect the class’s homework. “Before we can accept you into the tribe, of course, you must be tested. We will see if you are fit to bring the next generation of biloko into the world.”

“Fit? What the hell are you talking about, you madwoman?” Adellia looked around the swarming biloko, many of whom had already begun to remove their loincloths. “This has gone far enough, Kuhn, tell them to let me--”

“Fertility, my dear! The goddess’s favor! It’s quite simple. I should think even an untrained mind like yours could understand.”

“If you think I’m spreading my legs to this horde of little… little beasts, you’ve got--”

Kuhn reached out and casually slapped her across the face. The crack echoed off the trees. It wasn’t a hard slap, but it stunned Adellia into silence. She looked up in disbelief. Kuhn was smiling down at her like a patient teacher. She went on as though Adellia had never spoken at all.

“Oh, Adellia, once you have taken your place among us… it’s like nothing you’ve ever known.” Her fingers danced across Adellia’s blouse, undoing her buttons and pulling the fabric aside. She grabbed one of Adellia’s pert breasts and gave it an appraising glance and a little squeeze, as though she was inspecting a piece of fresh fruit.

“You’ll love what it does to your figure, dear. A few ceremonies, and these will begin to grow.” Kuhn was clearly trying to keep her tone professional, but she licked her lips as she spoke, and her eyes blazed with avidity.

“Wonderful.” Adellia looked at the horde of little green men-- they were already staring at her in sweaty anticipation. “When does it begin?”

“Now,” Kuhn replied, and tore Adellia’s blouse right down the middle. The fabric parted with a loud rip, sending buttons bouncing away across the planks. Adellia yelped in dismay. As though a signal had been given, the biloko surged forward, hands out to grab and tear.

They shredded Adellia’s trousers right off her body; her underpants lasted long enough for one of them to hook a finger through the band, then they too disappeared into the roiling mass. Dame Kuhn pulled her dress over her head and tossed it aside. Beneath it, her body was lean and athletic,
still bearing the body paint from before. Tiny hands grabbed Adellia under the thighs, the shoulders, the buttocks and the back and lifted her up. She was carried on the living tide into the statue’s hands and rudely deposited there on her back. Her head bonked into the wooden palm and she saw stars for a moment.

Dame Kuhn nestled side by side with her, their thighs pressed up together, shoulders jostling for space. The cupped hands of the statue were wide enough for both of them, but barely, and they shoved at one another to make room. Some of Kuhn’s hair fell in Adellia’s mouth and she spat furiously. “Get off me, you little slut!” Kuhn hissed. “Move aside! This is my spot!”

“You get off me!” Adellia spat back. “You crazy bitch! They can keep you, as far as I care! I should never have come out here!”

The chant began, just as Adellia remembered it. Someone in the back of the crowd began to beat on a hide drum. The first wave of *biloko* surged forward. The ceremony had begun.

The *eloko* that hopped up before Adellia looked very familiar. He stared at her with undisguised loathing on his face. It was Enniektu, she realized-- an ugly purple bruise discolored his hanging ball sack. She grinned at him. “Does it hurt?” she asked in a singsong voice. He couldn’t understand her, but it made her feel better, at least.

He pried her thighs apart with surprising strength and stepped in between them. His cock was already standing to attention, bruise or no bruise. This close, Adellia could see every individual lump and bump. It was a knobbly thing, like an elongated squash, with a flared tip that dripped clear fluid. He reached out first with two fingers and jammed them into Adellia’s pussy. She squeaked, more out of surprise than pain. His fingers were small and blunt, and she could feel them poking and probing her tight channel. He withdrew them, gave them a suspicious sniff, then lined his cock up with her entrance. More gooey precum oozed out and he took his time smearing it around her lips with his fat mushroom tip. He took his time lubricating her up, but soon enough he reached out and grabbed her thighs. His grip pinched slightly, but she had no time to complain-- with a single, powerful thrust, he shoved his cock inside her.

She gasped as she felt it fill her up. Every inch was covered in warts and bulbous protrusions, and these rubbed against her soft lips and velvety inner walls. The sensation was not entirely unpleasant-- the *eloko* ’s member slid in easily enough, its way eased by its own lubrication. Adellia knew from experience that proper breathing and relaxation would make this process more bearable. She tried to put the looming threat of death out of her head. Next to her, a fat *eloko* was hammering away at Dame Kuhn’s cunt with wild abandon. The lady herself was getting into it. Her breasts heaved and bounced with a *slap, slap, slap*. She urged her partner to greater heights in mixed English and German. “Oh, yes, yes, more, mehr, mehr, kleiner kobold!” She laughed ferociously when she saw Adellia’s eyes on her. “Are you jealous yet, little girl?”

“Hardly!” Adellia rolled her eyes. “You really are mad, you- urk, you know that?” Despite herself, though, she felt something stirring inside her-- not lust, but competitive pride. She was Adellia Hawk, and she would not let herself by beaten, not by this washed-up academic and her tribe of little green worshippers.

She gasped as Enniektu fell into a rhythm. His thick shaft pulled almost entirely out of her, its knobs tickling her insides, before slamming back in. Every thrust was accompanied by a wet *squish* and a spurt of fluids, and she had to admit that not all of them were his. Her body was reacting, warming itself up. Perhaps it was Dame Kuhn’s fervid moans. The woman sounded as though she were being gored by a wild boar. It was a bit overwrought, in truth; Enniektu, at least, was an indifferent lover. He had established a solid tempo, but he seemed to have no idea where her clit
was and not the least interest in finding it.

Soon enough, his body stiffened and he let out a little yelp. Adellia could feel something wet and hot shooting from the tip of his prick. It puddled inside her, and when he pulled out, a thin stream of white drooled from between her pussy lips. He gave her one last triumphant look, stepped back, and vanished into the crowd.

The next *eloko* was already stepping up. This one was a bit taller and had a slightly paunchy belly. He lifted it out of the way so that he could slip his penis into her, then let it fall. Adellia gasped involuntarily. The weight of him pressed down through his belly onto her mound as he began to thrust. There was something about the steady pressure-- perhaps it was his member, which was thicker than Enniektu’s. The bumps and boils that dotted its length felt like tiny fingers tap-tap-tapping at her walls. She shifted her hips back and forth slightly and was rewarded with a kaleidoscope of sensations. Each of them was maddeningly faint, but all were counterpointed by the steady, warm weight of his gut pressing against her clit. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. In her mind, Toby lay on top of her. His stomach was still slightly soft, and she loved to stroke and squeeze it and feel it atop her. Was this so different?

The fat *eloko* came even quicker than Enniektu had. He stayed rooted to that spot the whole time as thick, slippery gouts of cum volleyed out of his cocktip, then nearly swooned backwards. The next one to step up was quite tall, and as he pressed the tip of his prick against her slit, Adellia’s eyes widened. This one was huge, at least compared to her previous two partners. She gritted her teeth as the first couple inches of his rod slid into her cum-slick channel. “Wait,” she whimpered, “don’t--”

It was too late. He bellowed fiercely and slammed his hips home with such force that Adellia actually lifted off her back for a second. She howled too at the sudden fullness. This *eloko* didn’t take his time to build up speed-- he went full-bore from the word go, his hips bucking wildly, his massive cock slamming into her cervix with each thrust. Adellia tried to clench her vaginal muscles around him to slow him down or limit his depth, but he battered aside his feebly resistance. As he rutted, he leaned forward and grabbed her nipples with his fingers. He pulled and twisted the soft pink flesh heedless of her whimpers and cries. “N-not so rough!” she panted. Despite her protests, her breath was growing short and her face was flushing alarmingly red. Her clit begged for release and she groped for it with bound hands. She managed to bring her pinkies fingers together with the stiff nub between them and began to rub furiously at herself. At that moment, she didn’t care if Dame Kuhn saw, didn’t care what the other woman would think-- she needed release!

Not that Kuhn was in any position to criticize. Her own features were twisted in a lewd and lustful expression with her tongue lolling like a dog’s. Somehow, she had cajoled two *biloko* to fuck her at once. One lay flat across her belly with his cock planted firmly in her twat, the other stood behind him and thrust his hips forward to bury his shaft in the same hole. Her labia had stretched quite alarmingly to accommodate the double penetration, but the air was full of her hedonistic moans. She managed to grin at Adellia through the sweat plastering her face. “How… many… have you… taken?” she asked. “Not… enough… I think!”

She actually thinks she’s competing against me, Adellia realized. She really is mad. She thought back to what Kuhn had said. The goddess’s favor? So if she births more seeds, she gets to stay in charge, is that it? Well, two can play at that game! She gritted her teeth and scissored her legs forward to pull her *eloko* partner close. Compared to the ahol, this is nothing. I’ll play her little game, beat her, and then Miss Queen of the Biloko will be laughing on the other side of her face!

Adellia cried out in ecstasy. Each thrust buried more than seven inches of green fuck-meat inside her. Each withdrawal left her clenching and spasming. A runny mixture of her own juices and
"Give it to me!" she growled, and grabbed one of her partner’s wrists with her bound hands. He looked up at her in surprise. She narrowed her eyes and repeated her demand. “Give it to me!” Whether he understood her words or the urgency in her tone pushed him over the edge, he obliged her. His prick twitched inside her, he planted it as deep as it would go, and a gout of sludgey kobold jizz exploded into her womb. So great was his ejaculation that Adellia imagined she could hear it, a watery bubbling sound like the eruption of an oil well. She certainly felt it: he stood still with a dumbfounded look on his face as his balls drained into Adellia, pumping an endless flood of semen directly into her most intimate parts. She imagined that she could see her stomach rising, although of course that was ridiculous. When he pulled out, the fat tip of his cock caught at her entrance for a minute before coming free with a sound like a child popping its thumb out of its cheek. There was a beat, then a waterfall of cum tumbled free from her gaping pussy and began to pool in the statue’s hands. She frantically covered her quim with her hands to stem the tide. She couldn’t afford to waste any of this precious life-giving goop.

Fortunately for her, the next eloko was stepping up. Less fortunately, his aim was not as good as his fellows-- either that, or he was laboring under some serious misapprehensions about the terms of the contest. Adellia’s eyes grew wide as she felt the spongy tip of his prick line up with her anus. “Wrong hole! Wrong hole!” was all she had to to shout before he grabbed her by the thighs and slammed his way inside.

Adellia went cross-eyed. She and Toby had made tenuous experiments in this direction, enough for her to know that proper enjoyment of the backdoor required lots of preparation and patience. The eloko used neither. Fortunately, the runny mixture dripping down from her pussy served to lubricate her pucker, otherwise she might have been in serious trouble. As it was she squealed in pain and surprise. It felt like… it felt like… well, it felt like a thick meat-rod plumbing her bowels, that was what it felt like. At least this eloko was less well endowed than her previous partner. As it was, she thought his cock might split her in half. As he thrust and jabbed, though, the pain subsided to a dull ache, and a strange and feverish pleasure rose up inside her. Each thrust seemed to press against her vaginal walls, but from the other side. She shifted the angle of her hips slightly and gasped as she felt a soft pressure against her most sensitive spot. There, just inside her entrance-- whenever Toby’s fingers found it (and he was getting better and better) she would dissolve into a blissful puddle. The eloko was finding it now, and though the sensation was muted, it was the same warm pleasure.

She sighed and closed her eyes. Her second climax was rising now, she could feel it, and she drew in a deep breath. The warmth spread and suffused her body and lifted her up. For a moment, she could forget her circumstances. She wasn’t trapped in a jungle battling against a crazed scholar in a lewd test of endurance; she was lying in her bed, legs splayed, ready to make love to the man of her dreams. That mental image did it. Her sigh turned into a gutturral moan and she arched her back. Her toes curled, her hands beat frantically against the wooden ones, and her asshole clenched spasmodically. The eloko began to cum as well, and his spurts of seed lined up perfectly with her clenching, as though she was milking him dry. When he finally withdrew, a thin trickle of cum oozed out alongside him.
The next one was already approaching, and fortunately, he found the right hole on the first try. Adellia cooed softly and spread her pussy lips with her fingers. Her entire groin was a frothy, wet mess, dripping with sweat and cum and girl-juice, and the musky smell that rose from it filled her head with images of writhing bodies and smooth, soft flesh. “Hurry up,” she said, her voice a pleading whine. “I want more! More!”

Next to her, Dame Kuhn was wrapped up in her own throes of ecstasy. Her hair had come undone from its braid and lay in a coal-black puddle around her head. Here and there it was matted with wads of cum. Her mouth was glazed, as well— at one point she had pleased three *biloko* at once, two rods sawing in and out of her cunt while a third rammed his member straight down her throat, his balls resting on her forehead like a hot-water bottle. Mostly, though, she was directing them to pour as much of their issue as possible into the yawning crevasse between her legs. She had much more practice than Adellia, that much was clear at once. A second *eloko* stepped up and tried to add his member to the one already plundering the young huntress’s quim, but had to give up after a minute or so of fruitless prodding. Kuhn, meanwhile, was easily handling two at a time.

She turned to Adellia and gave her a wicked grin. “Give… up… yet…” she panted. Her menacing expression was somewhat undermined by the thick glaze of *biloko* spooge frosting her lips and chin.

“Never… old… woman…” Adellia managed in between gasps for breath. “Your cunt’s… all… used up. It’s a… wonder… anything… grows there… at all.”

“You wretched… little… cooze!” Kuhn reached out with one shaking hand and grabbed Adellia’s nipple. The pink bud was as stiff as a diamond already, and after multiple climaxes it was incredibly sensitive. Adellia cried out in pain as Kuhn’s fingernails dug into her flesh. With a vicious smirk, Kuhn *twisted*, and a flash of pain seared across Adellia’s brain. Her eyes filled up with tears. The sudden shock made her flex every muscle in her body, and between her legs, the *eloko* currently pounding away froze and began to cum.

Peace was only achieved when an extra-large and heavy *eloko* shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. Both women forgot their quarrel and stared at him in slack-jawed awe. He would have come up nearly to Adellia’s chest; his arms looked like tree trunks, his legs like beer barrels. His prick seemed to be of average size, but dangling below it was a pair of the biggest, roundest, *ripest* balls Adellia had ever seen. They must have been the size of cantaloupes, and with every step the cum inside gurgled and sloshed. Adellia’s eyes widened. Whichever lady received that outpouring of genetic goodness was sure to gain a leg up on the competition.

“Young lady! This is where you earn your keep! Pick me!” Adellia cried. “You don’t want that used-up old tart! Look here, I’m fresh and tight!”

“Nonsense! Pick me!” Kuhn yelled. “That little slut doesn’t know how to handle a prick like I do! I know every trick in the book! I’ll drain you dry and leave you begging for more!” She reached down and spread her pussy lips, revealing her cum-logged passage. “Look at this beautiful pink
flower! It’s all for you!”

“That? That’s a dried-up old prune!” Adellia fumbled with her fingers and managed to part her own nether lips. She spread her legs as wide as she could, kicking Kuhn’s knee out of the way in the process. “Now this is a pussy! Look at it, young and ripe! You’ve probably had her a million times, she’s all blown-out and loose!”

Both women thrashed back and forth, elbowing and shoulder-barging and head-butting as the prodigiously equipped eloko trudged forward. He looked from pussy to pussy, his chin in his hands, as though making a difficult and weighty decision upon which much would depend. Then, with a satisfied grunt, he turned to Adellia, fisted the base of his prick to line it up, and thrust his hips forward.

Kuhn’s angry snarl was music to Adellia’s ears. She barely had time to savor her victory, though, as the eloko between her legs began to pound away. He was tremendously strong, and each thrust caused her breasts to bounce wildly and smack against each other. Kuhn, meanwhile, beckoned three biloko at once, hooking two fingers into the sides of her cunt to hold it open for them. So, she wants quantity instead of quality, eh? Adellia thought. We’ll see who wins that race.

The enormous eloko hammered her with furious strength. Adellia came twice more: once, rubbing her clit in a frenzy as he plunged in and out of her quim, and again when he stiffened and let out a howl. The feeling of his gigantic balls emptying their contents into her womb was almost more than she could take. She didn’t have to imagine her belly rising now-- she could see it happening in real time when she looked down. On and on he went as what felt like liters of thick gruel pumped into her tummy. When she was sure that she would burst, that she could take no more, he grunted again and stepped back. A stream of spooge followed his withdrawal, but it was not even close to all of it-- Adellia could feel the rest inside her, hopefully taking root.

The contest went on well into the night. Adellia lost count of how many biloko mounted her-- certainly some queued up more than once, including Enniektu and, unfortunately, the one who preferred her butt. By the time the last of them staggered off to his bed, she was semi-conscious, exhausted, and covered head to toe in a froth of sweat, cum and her own juices. Dame Kuhn lay next to her in a similar condition. Both women’s bellies were noticeably swollen, as though they were four or five months pregnant. When Adellia turned over, she could feel the cum inside her slopping around. Next to her, Kuhn was snoozing softly, each snore accompanied by a cum-bubble blowing out of one nostril. Her soft, pillowy breasts looked like the perfect place for Adellia to rest her head-- after all, it wasn’t as though her hair could get dirtier. Still, she forced herself to her feet. She had something important to do.

A flash of light caught her eye. Her knife lay on the ground, discarded by the biloko as they tore off her clothes. She would need that. She scooped it up, unsheathed it, and then carefully turned it inward to cut the ropes binding her wrists. This done, she sheathed it again and carried it in her teeth.

Climbing to her hut took forever, but she put one foot in front of the other and used her hands as much as possible, clinging to safety ropes and tree trunks. She nearly lost her balance on the rope bridge but managed to fall forward and crawl the last few paces. Inside, she collapsed and took a moment to catch her breath. There was her bag: fresh clothes, weapons and… something else.

She fished around the bottom until she found what she was looking for. The shadhavar eggs had shrunk since she had removed them-- they had an odd, gummy texture, like dried fruit. She held one in trembling fingers and stared at it. What had Zainab said? “Good for fertility?” What did that mean? She was too tired to think straight, but she had an idea of what she was supposed to do.
She propped herself up against the wall of the cabin and spread her legs. A thin stream of *biloko* semen drooled continuously out between her gaping lips. After several hours of near-constant fornication, her pussy was nice and limber, at least. She took a deep breath, held the egg between two fingers, and slid it up inside her.

It was about as thick as the *biloko* cocks had been, and though her wrist was noticeably thicker, she managed to get that inside too. She pushed and pushed, ignoring the strange little tremors of pleasure, until it was as deep inside her as it was going to get. She left it there and withdrew her hand. Her fingers dripped with unnameable goo, and she wiped them idly against her bare thigh before collapsing to the ground and falling asleep.

When she woke up the next day, her whole lower body was one huge bruise. She could barely stand. Not that she had anywhere to go-- four spear-armed *biloko* guarded her hut. She probably could have taken them, she figured, except for the stiffness in her limbs and the terrible pain every time she tried to walk. Around noon, they retrieved her from her hut and frog-marched her down to the center of the village for lunch. Dame Kuhn was already there; she fixed Adellia with a haughty stare.

“How are you doing, my dear?” she asked with mock politeness.

“Very well, thank you,” Adellia made herself say.

Kuhn smirked at her. “I do hope the *biloko* weren’t too rough with you, Adellia. Don’t worry. Once they crown me as the favored of the sky goddess, I will ensure you get gentle treatment.”

Adellia said nothing to that. The fruit had just arrived, and her stomach was gurgling. In fact, it was roiling. She tried to force down a bit of melon and nearly gagged. “What’s wrong?” Kuhn asked sweetly. “Something you ate?”

The pain didn’t go away. As Adellia looked down in horror, she thought she could see her guts roiling. *What did I do to myself?* she thought. Kuhn looked a bit concerned too.

“I say, Adellia,” she managed, “you do appear to have… a bit of swelling…” Kuhn’s own stomach jutted out like a pregnant woman’s, but Adellia’s looked like a fully inflated rubber ball. If she was pregnant, it was with twins, at least.

Nor had it stopped growing. By nightfall, she could barely move; the gravid orb pinned her to the ground, and regular contractions ripped through her. She thought back to birthing the infant cefyll-dwr in her tub. This was like that, only worse. The *biloko* swarmed around her and chanted wildly. Dame Kuhn was in similar straits as the moon rose, though her own condition was far less expansive. The two of them sweated and strained side by side.

Finally, around midnight, Adellia let out a strangled cry. She could feel movement inside her. She pushed and grunted, strained and squeezed, until the pressure inside her abated. A tremendous muscle spasms shook her from head to toe, and something wet and round and green plopped out between her legs. “GRRRRRAAAAHHHH!” she cried and bore down with all her strength. This first seed was followed by another, and another, until they were falling out of her like hailstones. She lost count after two dozen, and still it seemed her tummy had hardly shrank at all. The *biloko* and Dame Kuhn looked on awestruck. The pile between Adellia’s legs grew and grew, and by the time her stomach was flat again, the seeds formed a pyramid nearly the height of an *eloko*.

Kuhn’s own delivery started shortly thereafter, and it was clear from the outset that it would be a meager one relative to Adellia’s. Seeds plopped and rolled out from between her cuntlips, bouncing
away across the planks. They left a trail of ooze behind them like slugs. Not only were there fewer of them, but they were smaller, too, compared to the plump ones in Adellia’s pile.

Juwarabo watched both piles grow in stony silence. When the last egg had rolled free and both women’s stomachs were flat again, he rumbled something in the *biloko* language. Dame Kuhn looked up at him with desperate fear on her face and burst into tears.

The *biloko* paid no heed at all to her crying. They marched past her, Adellia on their shoulders, and carried her all the way to the statue’s hands. For a moment, she was afraid that they would breed her again, but yesterday’s celebration seemed to have taken all of the fire out of their loins. Instead they marched in a circle around her, chanting and singing. Occasionally one would dart forward with a flower in his fingers and twine it into her hair. The rich, sweet scent of them filled her nostrils. Others reached out paint-smeared fingers to draw looping vine patterns across her belly, breasts and arms. Adellia was too tired and bemused to stop them.

That night, they roasted a pig in celebration. To Adellia, who hadn’t had bacon in more than a month, the savory scent wafting from the fire was nothing less than heavenly. Her mouth filled with saliva at the thought of those dark, crispy rashers, dribbling with fat…

It was halfway through dinner that she realized Dame Kuhn was gone. She looked left and right, but the woman would have been easy to spot-- she was twice the height of the tallest *eloko* in the village. Adellia turned to Enniektu, who was sitting next to her. “Where is Dame Kuhn?” she asked?

He stared up at her in polite incomprehension. Adellia cursed under her breath and held a hand above her head to indicate height. “Tall lady?” she said. “Dark hair?” She cupped her hands in front of her chest to suggest Kuhn’s huge, round tits, then used one hand to shade her eyes and looked left and right in pantomime. Enniektu’s eyes widened in recognition, then he shrugged. It was a remarkably economical gesture that required no translation. *Who cares?*

After dinner, Adellia wandered up to Kuhn’s hut. The papers were in disarray, scattered all over the floor; it looked as though someone had thrown a fit. She couldn’t tell, but it appeared that some of the books were missing from the desk, too. Adellia cursed inwardly. She should have been paying more attention-- but the *biloko* had showered her with attention for hours, and there had been little she could do to get away from them. Even now, three of four them followed her everywhere she went like curious children.

Well, Kuhn wouldn’t last long in the jungle. She couldn’t have gotten that much of a head start, and she would be easy to track. Adellia made for the rope ladder, only to find her progress blocked by Enniektu and a pair of his fellows.

“Come on, guys, I have to go look for her,” Adellia protested. An *eloko* grabbed her hand and gave it a gentle tug back towards the village. “She could be hurt out there! Don’t you care about her at all? She lived with you for more than a year!”

If any of them understood her words, they gave no sign. For the first time since winning the strange contest, a thrill of fear crept up Adellia’s spine. *They won’t let me leave, will they? I’m their life-cauldron now.*

“Well, if you won’t let me go, it’s time for bed, I suppose.” Adellia stretched her arms and yawned theatrically. That set off a cascading round of yawns from the *biloko*; some behaviors, it seemed, were universal. She turned away and took a step or two towards her hut, then turned back in a flash and ran for the ladder. The *biloko* were on her before she had gone two steps. They mobbed her, bore her to the ground, and carried her back to the center of the village, arms and legs thrashing.
“Let go!” Adellia shouted. “You hideous little beasts! Let go of me this instant! I’m your queen now, aren’t I? Listen to what I say!” She kicked and spat. Her flailing legs laid out a couple of incautious biloko, but more stepped up to take their places. They bore her towards the altar. At some point, a coil of vine rope had been slung across the statue’s palms, and two biloko were unwinding it now. Panic seized Adellia’s heart. She had a sudden vision of her future: her belly swollen, her eyes glazed, her skin covered in painted vines, each bearing dozens of little leaves. She balled up her fists and lashed out with sudden, hysterical strength. Her arm tore free from the grasp of the biloko, and one solid punch laid out another of the creatures. They flinched back in surprise and dropped her onto the wooden boards. She rolled as she landed and came up swinging. A few of them had spears, but they weren’t jabbing at her yet. Don’t want to damage the merchandise, she thought bitterly. She wasn’t going to hold back, just because they were. She slapped the nearest down hard enough to spin him around, knocked another two over with a haymaker punch, then wound up and kicked as hard as she could. Her foot curved up under Enniektu’s loincloth and landed with a satisfyingly meaty thunk. For the second time in as many days, he went cross-eyed and fell over.

That opened up a space for her and she took it. A single vaulting leap cleared the remaining biloko, who fled before her like villagers from an avalanche. Their shouts and jeers filled her ears, but she was already past them, her feet thudding heavily on the bridge. She made for her hut. Her knife was there, and her crossbow…

Her stomach cramped and she stumbled on the bridge, swaying to and fro for a moment. She looked down and caught a vertigo-inducing glimpse of the forest floor far below. No time for nausea—she made herself run onward, ducked into her hut and scooped up her bag. She didn’t have time to dress, so she shoved her sheathed blade between her teeth again and stepped out onto the platform.

The biloko were coming, and they looked furious. The way they were holding their spears told her that her reprieve had ended. They did not mean to let her escape. If they couldn’t have their life-cauldron, no-one could. They were blocking the only exit, and climbing higher would only prolong the inevitable. She looked around wildly for another means of escape.

There! Dangling from a branch next to her hut was a liana vine. It looked sturdy enough, though she’d only heard of people using them this way in the pulp serials. Well, desperate times… she took a deep breath, backed up a couple of steps for a running start, and leapt out over the abyss.

Her fingers grasped at empty air and for a moment she was sure she’d fall. Then, as her heart leapt into her throat and she began to descend, she found the thick vine and seized on it. Her downward plunge became a wide, parabolic arc. She could feel the vine bending and shearing, so at the apex of her swing she let go. She flew through the air, wind whipping past her face, and catapulted into a hanging tree branch. She managed to grab it and swing from it, then let go and dropped another few feet towards a second branch. In theory, she could have made it all the way to the ground this way, except that she missed her grip on the next branch and fell screaming to the ground. Her fall was broken after about ten feet by another branch, this one perfectly positioned to whack her in the midsection. The next branch slapped her upside the head, and the one after that delivered a neat karmic revenge for her repeated kicks to Enniektu’s anatomy. Gradually, with much shouting and many bruises, she made it to ground level. A second later, her knife landed hilt-first on her head with a rich, full thok.

She lay there for a moment or two until the world stopped spinning, then climbed to her feet. She paused, cocked her head, and spat out a bloody tooth. She scooped up her knife, adjusted her grip on her bag, and took a swaying step. There was no time to rest on her laurels. The biloko were coming.
She thought she could remember which way the river was. She set off on a jog that quickly turned into a run. Gradually, the sound of angry voices and small footsteps dwindled behind her. The *biloko*, it seemed, were not keen on pursuing her into the jungle. That suited her just fine. She had seen enough of the wretched creatures for a lifetime. She’d find the shore, and set up a camp, and when her boat came she’d never, ever speak of this again.

It was while she was contemplating this happy thought that she became aware that she was not alone. Something heavy crunched the leaves behind her. She immediately dropped into a hunter’s crouch and pulled out her knife. In her weakened state, she doubted she could fend off a tiger or panther, but at least she wouldn’t be easy prey.

Something hard and heavy caught her between the shoulder blades and nearly knocked her over. She turned in time to see an indistinct figure raise a paw to swat her again. No, not a paw—*a book*.

“You!” Dame Kuhn growled. She was naked, her hair in disarray, one lens of her spectacles cracked. Her legs looked badly lacerated, as though she’d stumbled through a briar bush. Clutched in her hands was one of her research books. “You *drecksauf!* You rotten cunt! How dare you!” She swung with the book again, but clumsily, and Adellia was easily able to dodge out of the way.

“How dare you! *Schweinhund!* You filthy, usurping slut!” To Adellia’s shock, the other woman was crying. “You took it! You took everything from me! Everything!”

“Calm down, lady!” Adellia shouted. “I don’t want your fucking village! You can run back to them, I’m sure they’d be happy to have you!”

Kuhn wasn’t listening, or in her enraged state she was beyond comprehension. She lunged at Adellia again, swatting with her book. She was raving now in *biloko*, calling Adellia who knew what manner of foul names.

Adellia tensed, cocked a fist, and landed a punch on Kuhn’s jaw that spun the other woman around and knocked her spectacles flying. Her second punch landed just above her navel and expelled all her breath with a sound like *uff*. She toppled over backwards and landed hard on her butt. Her book flew out of her grasp. Adellia knelt on top of her, and Kuhn scratched at her like a rabid predator. Adellia held out her knife, and the blade winked in the moonlight. As soon as she saw it, all the fight went out of Kuhn. She sagged like a marionette with its strings cut.

“Go on,” she said wearily. “Finish me. You already took everything else, why not my life?”

Adellia fought to steady her breathing. She looked down at Kuhn and tried to remind herself that this woman would have seen her trapped in brutal sex slavery, turned into little more than a living brood mare for the *biloko*.

The woman beneath her didn’t look like a jungle queen. She looked like a sad, disheveled lady who had been exiled from the one place where she’d ever mattered. Adellia sighed, sheathed her knife, and stood up. Maybe the *biloko* would take Kuhn back, she figured. But that didn’t make it right to leave her for them.

“I’m not going to kill you, you lunatic. You’re coming home with me.”

“W-why?” Kuhn asked in a quavery voice. “When they find out what happened… my reputation… my book…” She blinked, and for a moment, Adellia saw the scholar again, the woman who had hoped to write a book that would make her name. She sighed.

“They’ll love your book,” she said, extending a hand. “I bet you’d sell a million copies.” *More, if*
you just told the truth, she thought. She’d have to keep an eye on Kuhn. It wouldn’t do to let a story like this circulate. “My boat’s in a few days. You should be on it. They miss you in Stuttgart.”

Kuhn allowed herself to be helped to her feet. She blinked owlishly until Adellia found her spectacles. The frames had been badly bent and one lens was cracked, but with them on she seemed a step closer to the researcher she had once been, not the raving madwoman of a moment ago.

“You know,” she said, “I had an idea for a chapter about traditional *biloko* garments… they’re quite adaptable, despite the simplicity…”

Adellia allowed the wave of chatter to wash harmlessly over her. She trudged onwards with Kuhn following at her heels. It was hard to tell, since Adellia had never been much of a biologist, but she was certain that an academic dissertation shouldn’t have quite this many digressions about cock. Toby would know. He’d probably want a signed copy of the book.

One foot in front of the other, the thought of Toby dragging her on, Adellia headed for home.
Imprisoned

Chapter Summary

Toby's in trouble at the roof of the world.

Halfway between Reykjavik and Svalbard, Adellia Hawk decided there could be too much of a good thing after all.

She’d grown to love sea travel. She’d certainly spent enough time on boats during her tour of North Africa. She’d loved her elegant stateroom on the steamship Lady Vorpal, the smell of the warm salt air in her nostrils as they cruised the Mediterranean, the sun shining on her cheeks. Perhaps, she had started to think, there was something to all this sailing business.

Now, caught in a valley between towering slate-gray waves, she wondered why she had ever left dry land. The only reason she wasn’t throwing up was that her stomach was completely empty, having been evacuated of its contents over the railing not twenty minutes before. She lay curled up in a ball on the wooden floor of her cabin, groaning and trying to remember what it felt like to be warm.

It was her own fault, she supposed. She’d returned to Hawk Manor barely a month before, after a brief stopoff in Stuttgart to drop off Dame Bridget Kuhn. Any hopes Adellia had that getting that anthropologist out of jungle might straighten her out had been dashed in Sicily, where she had wandered away for a few hours while Adellia was collecting her luggage. She had finally found Kuhn in a local tavern, regaling a group of horrified onlookers with graphic tales of the biloko’s sexual prowess. Fortunately, Adellia had managed to drag her off before she’d lifted her skirts for a demonstration, but after that she kept the poor woman under tight observation. The head of the Department of Teratic Studies in Stuttgart had been glad to see his prodigal researcher return and had paid Adellia handsomely for her trouble, but it soon became clear that she was in no condition to resume her academic duties. Still, the Stuttgart Sanitarium was a pleasant and airy building and the attendants seemed patient and kind, so maybe she had some hope after all.

After that it was a seven-day drip back to the foggy moors of home and the comforts of Hawk Manor. Adellia spent the last days worked up into a lather. Her squiredom had extended far beyond its original three-month plan, and that meant that Toby’s had probably finished weeks ago. That meant he was at home. That meant, at long last, she could see him again. She thought of nothing else as her steamship puffed along the channel, nothing else as the train rattled and bounced its way to Hawk Manor. She’d unpack, say hello to her mother and father, and then…

“He’s what?!”

She inserted a pinky into one ear and squeegeed it left and right. Her finger emerged with a lush harvest of earwax, but unfortunately it did not change the news from Simpkins.

“He’s not home, young mistress. As per your letter, I made haste to the address you listed. It was indeed young master Cotton’s residence, but his father vouchsafed to me that he has not returned. Indeed, he seemed somewhat perplexed by this development. I can assure you, no-one is sorrier than me to have to tell you this.”
Adellia’s heart sank. She could feel her face growing hot. She wouldn’t cry. She wouldn’t.

“He’s still out there? He hasn’t come back?” Adellia repeated the question, as though the answer might change if she worded the question differently. She was more angry than surprised, and more scared than angry. The image filled her head: Toby Cotton, teeth chattering, alone in the frozen wastes of the Arctic with an icicle dripping from his nose. She knew she shouldn’t have let him go off without her.

By dinnertime she knew that she would have to go after him. It was that simple. If poor Cotton Ball had bit off more than he could chew, who would rescue him? His greengrocer father? Mr. Cotton was a nice man, Adellia was sure, and a dab hand with a butcher’s cleaver, but he wasn’t about to trek into the icy tundra. Not even to save his only son. No, it fell to Adellia. All she had to do was persuade her parents.

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“Sounds fine, dear.” Her mother looked up briefly from her knitting and flashed Adellia a sunny smile. Her father was snoring gently in his overstuffed armchair with the newspaper tented over his face.


“Yes, dear.” Her mother’s needles resumed their clacking. “A voyage to the frozen north to rescue that Cotton boy. Danger, peril, adventure, all that sort of thing. It sounds smashing, doesn’t it, love?”

From beneath the newspaper came a muffled assent. For a moment, the room was silent aside from the crackle of the fireplace.

“Well… well then, I guess I’ll…” Adellia stammered into silence. She felt rather like a soldier who, having heaved the battering ram to the enemy’s gates, had found them unlocked and unbarrèd. Her momentum carried her onward.

“It’ll be dangerous,” she said, in the manner of one probing an sore spot to test how bad it was. “Monsters. Ice. I might be gone for months. I might not make it back at all.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll make it back.” Click-clack. Click-clack. “You’re a resourceful girl. A Hawk, after all. And you do have an education.”

Lady Emilia sighed and looked up with a patient smile. “Oh, Adellia. I’m your mother. I’ll worry about you whatever you do, but you’re an adult now. You have to have your own adventures.”

“Thank you, mummy!” Adellia crowed. She kissed her mother on the forehead and ran to her bedroom to pack.

She hopped onto the first ship to Iceland, from which she could buy passage on a whaler heading to Svalbard. At least after cashing the cheques from the University of Stuttgart she didn’t want for money. She wasn’t sure how cold it would be, but she threw in all of her winter gear. As it turned out, even that wasn’t enough; she bought a sealskin jacket in Reykjavik and a pair of heavy insulated boots, but her teeth still chattered every time she strode on deck. Icicles dangled from the ship’s railings and the rigging overhead. She spent her time in the ship’s kitchen, curled up as close to the potbellied iron stove as she dared. The seas grew stormy as they traveled north, and soon she found herself missing the tiny felucca that had taken her down the Nile. That trip, as pleasant as it had been, had done little to prepare her for this.
As she lay moaning on the floor of her cabin, debating whether she could risk another cup of thin vegetable soup, her thoughts turned to Toby. She hoped that, wherever he was, he was having a better time than she.

Toby Cotton woke, yawned, and stretched his hands. He shook his head to clear the grogginess. One finger wiped sleep-sand out of the corner of his eye, and he sat up…

…and found himself face-to-face with a polar bear.

He groaned. His day had been ruined within three seconds. That might be a new record.

The polar bear’s black gums peeled back, revealing a mouthful of teeth like shards of glass. It stared at him with unnatural intelligence. There were two things about this particular bear that set it apart from the common *ursus maritimus*. First, its eyes: they were bright, icy blue, robin’s egg blue, and shone with far more than the regular animal cunning. Second, below the neck, it wasn’t a polar bear at all.

A pair of dusky hands pushed Toby down. He fell back into the pile of furs that served him as a bed. He could struggle, he knew, but it would be pointless. The hands that pushed him down were dainty and feminine, but they were strong enough to pull a man’s heart out through his chest if they so desired. The thought reminded him of Dr. Rufus Varnisham, and he shivered. The poor old man hadn’t deserved to die like that. Nobody deserved to die like that.

Nobody deserved to die like that.

Toby lay back and sweated. It was hard to believe sometimes that he was in a structure made of ice. Furs and hides lined the walls and floor, forming an insulating layer so thick and effective that the oil lamps and Toby’s body heat were enough to keep the room sweltering. Of course, it was rarely just *his* body heat in here. Today, his companion was Ivaasaq, and she only ever wanted one thing from him.

Ivaasaq was one of the *tupilek*, the mysterious and elusive haunters of the northern ice. Like all of her kind, she was a mixture of human and animal parts; a polar bear’s head, the hooves of a reindeer, the fur of an arctic fox. A vestigial fin very much like that of an orca sprouted from her back. But her hands were human, and so were her loins, and her tastes were very human indeed. She straddled Toby and tugged the fur blanket down to reveal his nakedness. His cock flopped limply against his thigh. Even as he watched it began to stiffen. His captivity of the past few months had taught him several things, but chief among them was the aphrodisiac power of fear.

Ivaasaq’s fingers closed around his member. They were as warm and soft as Adellia’s had been, and her grip was gentle as she began to stroke. Still, Toby had seen that fearsome strength in action. He knew what she could do if angry… or disappointed. She leaned in close and a cloud of foul breath gusted into Toby’s face. The *tupilek* ate meat: any kind of meat they could get their hands on. And they ate it raw. Her vicious teeth clacked shut an inch from his nose, and he yelped. The polar bear head pulled back a few inches and chuffed loudly. This noise, Toby had come to recognize. Ivaasaq was laughing.

His cock had stiffened beneath her patient fingers and she lifted one leg. He tried to move, to adjust his hips for greater comfort, and her teeth snapped in his face again. She was frightfully quick-- he hadn’t even seen her move. He flinched back and nodded. “I’ll be still,” he said. “Message received.”

She lifted one leg and knelt atop him. Between mid-thigh and neck, she was mostly human, apart from the dusting of white fur on her arms and shoulders and the fin protruding from her back. Her
skin was russet-brown, her breasts small and pert, with dark nipples. Her mound was thatched with a sprinkling of white hair. Her nether lips were smooth, though, wet and warm. His cock slid easily past her slick folds and into the welcoming tightness of her sex. She laid one palm atop his chest and splayed her fingers, then began to buck her hips forward and back. She gazed down at him with her ice-blue eyes. It was hard to read emotion in those eyes, but insofar as a polar bear could look smug, she did.

Her hips rolled gently forward and back. She had taken Toby’s prick to the hilt, her perfect honeypot swallowing every last inch of his cock like a hungry mouth. Her velvety walls pressed in on him from all sides and slick honey dripped from her furrow. His balls lay exposed and she dragged her puffy pussy lips across them. It was as though her nether lips were smooching his sack, teasing it, preparing themselves for its sticky cargo. She reached out with one hand and tweaked Toby’s nipple. It stiffened immediately under her touch and he bit his lip. He had never believed a man’s chest could be so sensitive, but under Ivaasaq’s expert touch his nipples hardened into diamond-cutters.

She saved the lion’s share of attention, however, for his cock. Ivaasaq was not quite as tall as Toby, and her body was as wiry and compact as Adellia’s, but her insides were something else entirely. Her pussy was flawless, her tawny lips perfectly smooth, her clit a shy bead just poking out of its hood. She seemed to have total control of her vaginal muscles and each buck of her hips was paired with a gentle squeeze, as from a soft, wet fist.

Despite his discomfort and Ivaasaq’s fearsome appearance, Toby’s prick remained rock-hard. His only experience was with Adellia, and while he loved her with his heart and soul, she knew no more about the carnal arts than he did. Ivaasaq, despite appearances, was a knowledgeable and eager lover. Her insides seemed to milk his pipe. He could feel her stretching and squeezing around him. Her human parts were almost impossibly alluring; her belly was flat and muscular, her breasts perfectly formed teardrops. Beads of moisture welled from her chestnut nipples and plinked down onto his chest. Her butt swelled upward in two firm, fat globes that jigged and slapped against each other as she ground against him. The parts of her that were not covered in foxfur were smooth and hairless. Her skin shone in the lamplight as though it had been oiled.

She let out soft moans as she rode him. These were unmistakably feminine, though distorted by the polar bear’s face into something feral and threatening. Her free hand stroked along his side, then reached down behind her and between his legs. He felt fingertips probing at his balls, and gasped as those gentle prods became painful pricks. Jet-black claws had slid forth from her fingertips and she raked her other hand across his chest-- not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to let him know that she could. If he disappointed her.

Her movements sped up. She closed her eyes and threw back her head. Her small breasts jigged and bounced as she threw herself up and down. Toby watched his fat prong vanish into her pussy and reappear like a conjurer’s trick, over and over again. She would lift herself nearly entirely off of it, then slam back down, burying his rod in her guts. Her internal muscles would squeeze and massage him until he could barely catch his breath, then she’d flex her rippling thighs and do it again. She humped away in a frenzy, spittle flying from her lips, her pussy lips squelching and stretching around his rod. They seemed to cling to him with each thrust as though unwilling to let him go. Her jiggling bubble-butt slapped against his thighs over and over, filling the igloo with the ringing sound of flesh on flesh. His cock speared into her white-furred cunt and churned it into a dripping, sopping mess of precum, sweat, lubricant, and warm pink flesh.

Toby could feel his balls roiling and sloshing. No matter how many times Ivaasaq or one of the others drained them, they always refilled-- seemingly with unnatural speed. He knew it would do no good to try to deny her. She would ride him for hours if need be, ride him until she had milked
him dry of every last sticky drop. She wanted his cum and she meant to have it. With a mournful sigh, trying to think of Adellia as he did it, Toby surrendered.

His cock twitched once. Before it could discharge its precious cargo, Ivaasaq slammed her hips down in the most violent thrust yet. Toby could feel her compressing her body against his, could feel the pressure mounting as she jammed him against her cervix. There was a moment of terrible squeezing, a brief flash of pain, then his cocktip burst through into her womb just as he began to cum.

He shuddered in ecstasy as he came. His balls twitched as, obeying instructions printed on his brain, his reproductive system sprang into action. Valves opened and muscles clenched, propelling his seed along the meaty length of his prick and into its destination. Whether tupilek could even become pregnant by humans was a question Toby had never considered. Ivaasaq always wanted him to fill up her womb, and he was hardly in any position to argue. The first thick spurt of baby gravy erupted from his prick and he let out a feeble groan. Ivaasaq, as though she could feel the splash of his seed inside her, threw back her head and howled. Her body surrounded him entirely; he could not pull out, even if he had the presence of mind to desire it. His trapped cock squirmed and let out another volley of spunk, and then another. Over and over he felt it draining out of him and filling her up. Her vaginal muscles seemed to milk him. They tugged at his member and squeezed out every last drop. He let out all of his breath in a single long sigh. Finally, after what felt like minutes, his prick squirted one last dollop of cum and fell still. Ivaasaq stood up so abruptly that she tugged his softening cock with her, and there was a split-second when he felt as though she were pulling it off. Then it popped free of her womb with a wet plop and landed on his thigh.

She stood with her feet shoulder width apart and flexed her legs, heedless of the white trail slithering down one thigh. Her cuntlips were flecked with froth, a churned-up mixture of precum and her lubricating fluids. She reached down between her legs and wiped her hand across them. She inspected her palm, then bent and rubbed it against Toby’s cheek. He could feel the wetness smearing across his face and grimaced at the sudden, musky scent. Ivaasaq barked laughter and turned her back. Her hips swayed seductively as she walked out of the tent.

Toby was left fighting to catch his breath. That hadn’t been so bad, as sessions with Ivaasaq went. She would surely be back later that day, but at least he had a few hours to recuperate. There were times when she demanded back-to-back performances… and when he couldn’t deliver, she could turn nasty. Well, nastier.

Ivaasaq was the worst, but she wasn’t his only jailer. He wasn’t sure how many tupilek lived in this patch of tundra; at least a half-dozen paid him regular visits. No two looked exactly alike, but they had three things in common. They were all patchwork creatures, amalgamations of spare parts by some trickster spirit of the North. They were all female, or at least their human portions were. And they all had voracious appetites for meat, mead, and cum.

Some of them could speak-- the seal-headed Oqqapia had taught him their names, and the fox-headed Kukka had asked him a few questions during their time together. She was the youngest and the most curious about the “green lands.” Ivaasaq, though, either couldn’t speak or didn’t have anything she cared to say. He had seen her snarl viciously at the other tupilek if they had something she wanted. Sometimes that was a haunch of ox meat. Sometimes it was Toby. He had come up here to study the tupilek, to catalogue them and perhaps learn something about their diet and habits, and he had learned one lesson above all:

Sometimes, monsters really did need slaying.
Not for the first time, he swore that if he escaped, he’d return with fire and steel. That, of course, presupposed rather a lot. He wasn’t tied down or manacled; there were no chains binding him here. The tupilek kept him prisoner by the simple expedient of stealing his clothes. He wasn’t sure exactly how cold it was outside, but the whipping wind drove needles into his exposed skin whenever he poked his head out. He surely wouldn’t make it a mile nude and exposed. The igloo, at least, was warm and cozy, and they brought him fish to eat… even if he did have to cook them himself, holding the meat by hand near the oil lamps until his hungry belly could stand no more. He spent most of his time reading over Dr. Varnisham’s surviving notes. The tupilek ignored them; Toby wasn’t sure they understood what a book was. Whenever he was alone, he pored over the pages of tight, neat script. There had to be something in here that could help him. There had to be.

The prospect of death scared him, but to his surprise, it wasn’t what kept him going. Hardly an hour went by without his thoughts turning to Adellia. He hoped that, wherever she was, she was doing better than he.

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By the time the whaler put in at Longyearbyen, Adellia had started to regain a bit of her equilibrium. The stench of whale oil had long since sunk into her skin and hair and lost its power to make her retch. The swaying of the deck under her feet was, likewise, just an inconvenience now. She didn’t dare chew mouthfuls of seal blubber like the crewmen, but at least the sight didn’t turn her green anymore. She had even learned some dice game, and after losing a goodly sum to the bosun, had won a sealskin parka. It seemed permanently greasy, but it was incredibly warm and comfortable, and when she stepped onto the dock wearing it nobody gave her a second glance.

Longyearbyen was barely a town at all— a village, really, save for the dockyards and the rendering plant. Adellia had done her research, though, and made her way to the Herregardjeger, the local outpost of the Norwegian Hunter’s Circle. It turned out to be little more than a saloon, albeit one with some fairly impressive trophies mounted on the walls.

The bartender introduced himself as Arvid. He was a strapping man, big and blonde, and sullen at first… until Adellia casually mentioned that she was here to hunt. Then he perked up.

“What, a little slip of a thing like you?” His English was good, if heavily accented. He looked her up and down. “What could you be hunting way up here?”

“A man,” she said, and leaned on the counter. Arvid waggled his eyebrows and flexed one arm.

“I think you found one, little lady,” he said and smiled to reveal a mouthful of tobacco-stained teeth.

Adellia rolled her eyes. “A specific man. Two men, actually. They would have come through here, oh, four or five months ago? Researchers. One of them was about my age, the other older. English, both of them.”

The light of recognition popped up in Arvid’s eyes. “Oh! Those two! They came up looking for tupilek, I think.”

“That’s them!” Adellia couldn’t conceal her excitement. “Where are they? Have you seen them?”

Arvid shook his head. “They’re in the tundra. Past the mining camp, north of here. But you’re wasting your time.” He looked downcast. “If they went looking for the tupilek, they’re already dead.”
An ice cube settled in the pit of Adellia’s stomach. Cold worms of fear wriggled up around her heart. She tried to keep her voice steady. “They’re resourceful types. What is a tupilek, anyways?”

Arvid’s eyes narrowed. He looked left and right before answering, though they were alone. “Spirits,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Inuit spirits. They say their shamans make ’em out of scraps and give ’em some task. Murder, maybe, or theft. They feed on men’s souls. Suck the life right out of ’em.” He shuddered. “Never catch me on the ice after dark. They’ll snatch you up and scatter your bones.”

Adellia found this grisly story less than satisfying. “So how do I get out there?” she asked. “The tundra. And how do I find the tupilek? Doesn’t anyone hunt them?”

“You might could find someone with a kayak to lend,” Arvid said, leaning back and polishing a glass. He met Adellia’s glare for a moment, and looked away. “Alright, I’ll ask around. As for finding ‘em… don’t worry about it, girlie. They’ll find you.”

True to his word, by that evening Arvid had managed to locate a kayak. Adellia stared at it with undisguised suspicion. It looked like a tiny, lightweight canoe, a whalebone frame covered in oiled hides. It sat low enough in the water to make her nervous. Arvid showed her the double-bladed paddle and how to use it. “Make sure not to tip over,” he warned her. “The water here’ll freeze the breath right out’n your lungs, and I borrowed this thing from Hafbor. If he don’t get it back I’ll be in trouble.”

Despite her urgency, Adellia was touched. Here was yet another reminder that the fraternity of hunters was global. Wherever she went, a brother or sister would be there to look out for her. *And I’m looking out for you, Toby. I’m coming.*

She hoped she wasn’t too late.

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After a brief period of trial and error, Adellia found the kayak surprisingly easy to navigate. She splashed along, the nose of her boat pushing aside drifting chunks of ice. She passed a number of other paddlers-- weathered-looking men and women with spears and nets. Their own boats glided smoothly through the water, while she wallowed along. The wind bit into every square inch of exposed skin. Adellia huddled in her parka and pulled her scarf tighter about her face. When she blinked, she could feel tiny icicles forming on her eyelashes.

She followed the directions Arvid had given her. Svalbard wasn’t properly island-shaped at all; an island, to Adellia’s mind, should be nice and round and easy to navigate. This was a mixture of fjords and rocky inlets, a coastline that meandered like a piece of dropped string. More than once she had to double back to circle around a particularly large chunk of sea ice. She figured she’d paddle until night began to fall, but as the hours passed she realized that wasn’t going to happen. She was in the Land of the Midnight Sun, after all. The sky overhead was a uniform paper-grey. The air was still and cold and crisp. Seabirds honked in the distance and seals watched her from their floes. Fatigue was starting to leach into her bones. She squinted-- was that smoke on the horizon?

Another twenty minutes of industrious paddling brought the dark column into relief. She made her way to the shore, batting at ice shards with her paddle. A crude dock stood on thick wooden pilings, though there were no boats tied up. This, she realized, was Ny-Alesund, the mining camp Arvid had spoken of. A few figures stood on the shore, watching her with suspicious eyes just visible under the swaddling layers of cloth. She beached her kayak and stepped out.
“Hello?” she said. “Arvid sent me? My name’s Adellia.”

The watchers murmured among themselves for a moment, then one of them stepped forward to greet her. He pulled down his scarf to reveal a grizzled, bearded face.

“Wot’s a gurl like you doing so far out’n here?” he asked. His Norwegian accent was so thick Adellia could barely make his words out.

“I’m a hunter,” she replied, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “I’m looking for the *tupilek*.”

The man looked away and spat. It hit the ground as ice.

“You gotta deathwish, girl?” he growled. “Jus’ like those two from spring. I told ‘em.”

“They’re who I’m looking for!” Adellia couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice. “Where are they? Have you seen them?”

The man pointed northward. “I pointed ‘em to the Devil’s Finger. And that’s where they bones lie now, you can bet’t. Fools.”

“Devil’s finger?” Adellia asked. The man nodded.

“Oh, ya. Big spur ‘o rock jutting outta the hillside, about twenty mi’ north of here. That’s where the *tupilek* live.” He cocked his head as if seeing her for the first time. “You’re too pretty to die out there on the ice, girlie. Turn that kayak around and head home, you want my advice.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Adellia replied. “For now, I could use something to eat and somewhere to sleep. Can you help me?”

For a moment she thought he would refuse, but he nodded curtly and jerked a thumb at the ridge behind him. “Bunkhouse is just over the ridge. Grab a bowl of stew and bed down anywhere ya like. I don’t take no responsibility for grabby hands, though. Not many women out here.” He leered at her.

Adellia scrambled up over the ridge. Just past it was what she took at first for a logpile. It turned out to be the most ramshackle wooden structure she’d ever seen. Smoke curled out of a tin chimney in the roof. The walls were stained nearly black with soot. Inside, there was a single long table with benches at both sides. A huge iron stove filled one end of the room, and a few men sat clustered at that end of the table. They looked up from their bowls for a moment, then returned to their meal as Adellia let the door close behind her. After the brightness outside she found herself nearly blind, and she took a moment for her vision to adjust. The room was dimly lit by a couple of oil lamps that crackled unsteadily in the corners. She could see a huge metal pot on the stove, with a stack of tin bowls and utensils beside it. She served herself and sat a respectful distance from the others—but still close enough to feel the heat radiating off the stove.

The stew was full of fish and shriveled bits of carrot and potato. It had been prepared without spices except for a frankly excessive amount of salt. Adellia didn’t care in the slightest. She wolfed it down and sighed as she felt fingers of warmth spreading outward from her stomach. For the first time since leaving Longyearbyen she was feeling slightly warm. When her bowl was empty she stretched and wandered over to the beach to retrieve her possessions. She had packed a bedroll, and this she unrolled on one of the benches of the bunkhouse. The men eating at the table stole the occasional idle glance at her, but something in her face must have warned them away. Not one of them so much as said a word to her as she stretched out, catlike, and went to sleep.
She awoke some time later with a terrible crick in her neck. A different crew of men was eating, and from outside she could hear the rhythmic clink of metal on stone. She ate another quick bowl of stew-- the contents of the pot had been topped off at some point while she rested-- then leaned out the door. A group of men in coal-stained leathers were unloading a mining cart. They tossed hunks of spoil down the ridge, where they bounced and collected in a pile. The sky was still the same uniform grey, and the oppressive chill covered everything like a blanket. There was a dreamlike quality to the whole scene; even the sounds seemed curiously muted, as though Adellia was seeing and hearing through a thick layer of gauze. She shivered, less from the cold than the strangeness. After the sweltering heat of the Nile, Svalbard seemed like an alien world.

Twenty miles, the man had said. Adellia shouldered her pack. She had brought, in addition to her bedroll, a lightweight tent and a few days’ smoked fish rations. She didn’t want to spend more than a night on the tundra, but she would if she had to. Toby was out there somewhere. She pushed her kayak out alongside the dock, slung her bag in, and hopped in behind it.

Ny-Alesund lay nestled on one side of an inlet. The bay was covered in floating chunks of ice that bobbed away as her paddle cut the water. Seals clustered on the larger floes, along with some larger, tusked creatures. Walruses, she thought, though she’d never seen one before. The land on the far side of the inlet was rugged and desolate; she followed the coast for more than an hour before she found a shore smooth enough to beach her kayak. By then her teeth were chattering, despite her thick parka. The wind coming off the ocean cut like a knife. She pulled her kayak onto dry land and behind some rocks, then looked around for some landmark. She’d need to remember this location if she came back.

When. When she came back.

There were no trees, not even stunted ones like in the Moroccan desert, but there were plenty of rocks, and one formation that looked rather like a pyramid. She sighted on it, decided it could be seen from a reasonable distance, and set off northward. Her boots crunched over the snow. In the distance she could see white-capped mountains; closer, an endless field of rocks. Seabirds wheeled and complained overhead. The wind howled mournfully until she crossed into the lee of a rocky ridge. Without the blade-edged wind she felt almost warm.

She had been walking for perhaps two hours when she caught sight of the Devil’s Finger. There was no mistaking it-- it rose up out of the ground like a tombstone. It did look vaguely finger-shaped. Tumbled boulders lay all around its base, as though it had burst up through the ground like an erupting pimple.

She had thought she was close, but it was hard to get a sense of scale in such a barren land. Another hour seemed to bring her no closer. The sight of it had invigorated her, though. She stopped and sat on a rock to eat some salted fish, then sat and lit a crude fire to defrost some of her water. She’d bought some cans of oil in Longyearbyen, and it took most of one to turn one of her icy bottles into something drinkable. By the time she felt safe to drink it the water was lukewarm and tasted of tin, but it was better than nothing. She tossed the empty can aside, covered her fire with rocks, and set out.

As she drew closer to the Finger, details began to stand out. It climbed out of a hillside at an oblique angle. The sides of it were mottled and cracked, crevices in some places running for dozens of meters. She wondered idly how climable it would be. Indeed, there was something on top of it. A structure? It looked irregular and possibly man-made, but from this distance, it was hard to be sure. All she could see was a little round shape, the same slate-grey as the rest of the rock. The base of the Finger was a few hundred yards away, jutting out of the side of a gentle slope.
Something moved in the corner of her eye. She threw herself flat. Lying among the rocks, she reached back into her bag and pulled out her field glasses. It took a moment to twiddle the dials into focus, and when she did, she gasped.

A woman was capering among the stones at the foot of the Finger. She looked to be about Adellia’s height and wiry. She was dark-skinned and naked except for an antlered headdress. There was something on her arms, too, some kind of cloak…

Adellia adjusted the focus again and nearly dropped the glasses. The woman’s arms were covered in feathers. In fact, they weren’t arms at all, but wings. Her feet were the talons of a raptor. And that antlered headdress wasn’t a headdress at all. She had the head of a reindeer, crowned with great curving horns. Blood dripped from her muzzle as she climbed over the rocks. It was smeared all over her belly and breasts. She scrambled up the slope towards the Finger. There, near the base of the stone pillar, Adellia saw an irregular bump in the snow. It looked like an icy dome. A piece of hide hung across one end, and as Adellia watched, the reindeer-headed woman twitched it out of the way and headed inside. A little house, made of ice. And inside…

Adellia put away her glasses and swore. If Toby was alive, he was in there. She knew it as surely as she knew her own name. And that woman-- that creature-- was one of the tupilek. Arvid’s words echoed in her ears. Made ‘em out of scraps. The thing had been a taxidermist’s nightmare, a patchwork creature. Surely nothing like that could be natural.

The smart thing to do would be to rest. She could scout the area, regain her strength, go in refreshed and restored with some sort of plan. She’d gather intel on the nature and quantity of her foes and come at them prepared, taking them by surprise. She’d rescue Toby and be gone before they knew what hit them. That was the professional approach.

She shrugged off her bag, made sure her knife was at her belt, and ran down the slope full-tilt.

The little ice house grew in her vision. The rocks had given way to snow, and her feet crunched through the crust. She drew her knife. Her breath puffed into the air in little clouds. She could see with what seemed like preternatural clarity. The house was made of ice blocks, the seams between them just barely visible. The hide covering the door was raw and bloody. It looked to have been torn off its previous owner with bare hands… or claws. Adellia pulled it out of the way, grimacing at the blood on her fingers, and ducked inside.

The heat slapped her in the face. It was at least thirty degrees warmer inside, and it got even warmer the further in she went. The entrance was a long, low tunnel, and she had to stoop to avoid grazing her head. Up ahead, she could see indistinct shadows. Unseen lamps cast a flickering yellow light. She could hear something, too-- a rhythmic slap, slap, slap of flesh on flesh, and a guttural moaning. She reached under her parka and drew her knife from her belt.

The corridor opened out into a round room. Hides had been stretched over every wall and oil lamps burned to Adellia’s left and right. They smelled acrid, like burning fat. The floor here was covered in a thick layer of pelts as well, with a larger pile in the middle forming a sort of cot. The room was uncomfortably warm-- beneath her parka and her layers of clothing, Adellia was starting to sweat. She wasn’t paying attention to that, though. There, in front of her, two shapes writhed on the floor. It took a moment for her to realize what she was seeing, and when she did, she recoiled in disgust.

Toby was lying on the floor on his back. A leather thong had been tied around his neck, loosely enough to let him breathe but tightly enough that he could not remove it. The other end led to a wooden stake driven deeply into the ground. There was enough slack in the leather cord to let him get up and move around, but it clearly would not allow him to leave this room. Not that he looked capable of that at the moment. His face was pallid and wan, with deep bags under his eyes. A
scruffy beard covered his cheeks and chin. His glasses had been lost somewhere, and his hair was matted and filthy. He was naked, and Adellia could see numerous cuts and scrapes on his exposed limbs-- fresher ones covering up half-healed wounds, all surrounded by a network of mottled bruises.

The deer-woman Adellia had seen straddled him. This close, the interface between human and animal parts was vivid and unnerving. The shaggy fur of her head melded seamlessly into her dusky skin. Brown and white feathers, like an owl’s, grew out of her arms, and her fingers were just a little too long and thin. Her feet were killing talons. Adellia could see blood clotted on their tips. Between the talons and the feathers and the bestial head, though, the rest of her was hideously human. Her skin was dark and hairless, her breasts heavy, her nipples wide and dark. Beads of sweat stood out on her back. Her butt-cheeks were ripe and fleshy, a pair of alluring globes that jigged and bounced as she moved. Her stomach was flat as a washtub and still dripped with blood. It dribbled down from her muzzle and spattered from her chin onto Toby’s chest. She flexed her hips in rhythm, and with each flex, Adellia could see a couple of inches of Toby’s cock sliding in and out of her slick pussy.

Adellia stared at her in frozen shock. She couldn’t help it. Here was the monster, the horror she had come to defeat. And here was her boyfriend, trussed up like a game hen and… and…

Her mind rebelled. Losing Toby would have been a mortal blow. To see him like this, his eyes glazed, his lips hanging open, buried balls-deep in some whorish freak from beyond the realm of sanity… it was almost worse.

With a wild yell Adellia fell on the *tupilek*. The weight of her dragged the creature off of Toby, and his cock slipped out of her with a wet *shlurp*. She brayed in dismay as she toppled. Adellia’s knife flashed through the air and a few feathers went flying, but the *tupilek* squirmed out of the knife’s path. Her talons tore through Adellia’s parka and carved shallow scores into her flesh. They wrestled, woman and demon, across the floor of the ice hut, while Toby stared at them with his jaw hanging open. The *tupilek* squealed and roared; if she was capable of human speech, in her enraged state it was beyond her. She shook her head and swept her massive rack of antlers at Adellia. Viewed close up, those prongs didn’t look majestic-- they looked lethal, a forest of blades growing out of her head. Adellia threw herself backwards in time to dodge, but an errant piece of antler caught her trouser leg and tore it.

She somehow landed on her feet, switched her grip and came at the *tupilek* with her blade dancing and weaving through the air in front of her. She lunged forward, but with a sweep of her antlers the *tupilek* caught the thrust and turned it aside, then spun and kicked out with one taloned foot. Adellia had to jump aside; a kick that would have disemboweled her instead tore the front of her parka to ragged shreds. The *tupilek* followed that up with a wild swipe of one hand. Except that it was barely a hand anymore; the fingers had sprouted bony talons, which caught the tattered remnants of cotton beneath Adellia’s parka and pulled them off. Her breasts spilled out and for a moment she hugged herself to cover them, then realized she was being foolish. She was in a fight for her life. No false modesty here.

The *tupilek* snorted and lowered her head. She charged forward, but Adellia had seen her coming and thrown herself flat. Her knife snaked out and, quick as a wink, sliced into the creature’s ankle. Adellia had expected her blow to draw blood or, if she was lucky, to cut the thing’s tendon. She hadn’t expected it to remove the foot entirely. It bounced away across the floor, still twitching and curling, and the *tupilek* fell forward. She rolled awkwardly and banged her head against the wall of the hut, then sat down hard. Adellia didn’t intend to give her time to recover herself. She pounced, landing on the creature’s back, and sliced downward. Her knife bit into the *tupilek*’s shoulder and one entire arm fell off. Impossibly, it crawled away across the floor, the elbow bending like an
inchworm. No blood poured from the wound. Instead, the *tupilek* turned and delivered a ringing one-handed slap that knocked Adellia to the floor. She bounced up like a rubber ball and sprang forward, blade-first. She ducked under the antlers and buried her knife to the hilt in the thing’s neck. It went in smoothly. With a noise like tearing silk she ripped it out and the reindeer head flopped onto the ground. The headless body folded up beneath it and collapsed.

“Adellia…” Toby’s voice in her ear was little more than a whisper. He sounded hoarse and exhausted.

“Toby, you’re alive!” Adellia said, rushing to his side. “I’ll get you out of here, I swear!” She fumbled with the leather cord around his neck.

The *tupilek* stood and turned slowly towards them. She bent, grabbed her errant arm, and straightened, holding it to its socket. There was a wet noise, and when she released the arm, it stayed in place. She flexed it a couple of times, rotated it in its socket, then reached down and grabbed her head. Her eyes blinked and her jaws gnashed as she lifted it into place. She set it on her neck and shrugged her shoulders, then turned towards Adellia and Toby. All at once, the blood dripping down her front looked very fresh.

“She’s a… made thing…” Toby gasped. He swallowed, and when he spoke again, his voice was tight with pain and tension. “Created… they all are. Shaman’s hut… on top of the Finger. Dolls. Break them… you break the *tupilek.*”

“Hate to break it to you, Toby, but I don’t think I’m going to make it up there,” Adellia replied. “Unless they have some other weakness? One closer to home?”

“Sexual… energy…” he managed. “They feed… on it…” he slumped backwards, as if that much speaking had tired him out.

The *tupilek* advanced on them with her arms out. Adellia settled into a low stance, preparing for a fight she knew she couldn’t win. She’d make the creature hurt, at least. She could do that much. The reindeer head snarled at Adellia. Bloody froth flecked her lips. She pawed at the ground with her talons, then froze.

Somehow Toby had managed to climb into a kneeling position. He was naked, his hands planted on his hips, his cock jutting out between them like a ship’s mast. The *tupilek* stared at it with undisguised hunger in her eyes. “Come on,” Toby said, his voice full of defiance. “This is what you want, isn’t it? You can deal with her later.”

The *tupilek* looked from one to the other. Her bright blue eyes were full of confusion and lust. Toby wrapped the fingers of one hand around her prick and pumped it once, twice, then squeezed until a clear drop of precum beaded the tip. That did it. Ignoring Adellia, the *tupilek* tackled Toby to the ground, her hips humping furiously away at him in her haste to get his meat inside her.

“Go!” Toby cried as the sounds of wet, slapping flesh filled the air. “Go!”

Adellia fled.

Outside she took a long look at the Devil’s Finger and groaned. Normally she’d never attempt a climb this technical without hooks, ropes, belaying tools, hexes… and this wasn’t a normal situation. She shivered in the wreckage of her clothing. There was no other option. Her choices had been reduced to two: climb, or die.

As she got closer, she felt a little better. The rock was covered with zigzagging crevices and rough
outcroppings. She sized them up for a moment, then planted one booted foot in a crack in the rock and hoisted herself up. Slowly, foot by foot, Adellia began to climb.

The sounds that echoed out of the ice hut were distracting in the extreme. High pitched moaning and Toby’s lower grunts and groans chased her up the rock face. The cold was starting to set in, too. Adellia’s fingers curled into numb hooks. She focused on the rock in front of her. Step, pull, press, grab, squeeze… soon, she was short of breath, but she forced herself to keep going. One inch at a time. One handhold at a time. One step at a time.

She dared not look down or up. The first might terrify her into freezing; the second might extinguish all hope. Very quickly she lost track of how far she had come. She had no memory of her past movements, nor anticipation of the future; she lived in an eternal now, a single moment that stretched out from handhold to handhold, from grip to grip. Once she slipped and felt herself begin to fall away from the wall. She tensed every muscle in her body and rammed her foot into a tight crevice in the wall, then seized the nearest outcropping she could reach. It took a long time for her breathing to return to normal. Then and only then did she resume her progress.

She paused at the threshold. The hut was Spartan inside; there were a variety of snowshoes, hooks, and nets on the wall, but the only furniture was a low stone slab covered in tiny bone figurines. They looked like people and animals, all mixed up and mashed together without regard for sense or sanity or anatomical feasibility. A heavy sealskin parka had been laid neatly on the ground. Beside it was a human skeleton, a few scraps of flesh still clinging to the bones. Adellia was not surprised to see that its pelvis had been crushed. The skull seemed to be smiling at her.

She wasn’t alone in the hut.

Standing in front of her was a tupilek with a polar bear’s head and reindeer hooves. Tufts of white fur covered her body. The skin beneath was as brown as leather and smooth, with small, perky breasts and a washboard stomach. Her hands were human but for the inch-long claws jutting from her fingertips. She roared in Adellia’s face, filling the hut with bloody mist.

Adrenaline thundered in Adellia’s ears. She knew that, if she was wrong, the rest of her life would be measured in seconds. “All right,” she muttered. “Come here, girlie.” She climbed to her knees as the thing loomed over her, brandished her knife, then threw it with a twitch of her wrist. The tupilek’s head turned, snake-quick, to follow the flashing blade, but Adellia was already in motion. She lunged upright and turned her momentum into a full-body tackle. The tupilek fell backward, arms windmilling, and let out a squawk of alarm. Any second now, she’d recover her bearings, and that would be it.

Adellia tried to remember what Ludmilla had taught her about wrestling holds. The key was to find the balance point, the exact levers of pressure here and here so that the foe couldn’t break your hold without dislocating something. She kicked the tupilek in the back of one knee, forcing her to the ground, then planted her own kneecap in the small of the creature’s back and shoving her down. She pulled one furred arm around behind the tupilek’s back and pinned it there. With her free hand, she reached down, down, and around, groping until she found what she was looking for.
The *tupilek*’s folds were wet already and furnace-hot. Two of Adellia’s fingers reached between them and began to stroke at her moist slit. The rest of her fingers spread out, rubbing across the creature’s mound and caressing her inner thighs. Her clit was already poking out of its hood, and a few light touches left it firm and swollen. Moving quickly, expecting at any moment to feel teeth tearing her flesh, Adellia began to rub back and forth in short, sharp jerks. She pressed her thumb against the monster’s clit and began to rub in a tight circle. First one finger, then a second plunged into the *tupilek*’s cunt. Inside, she felt like any other woman—tight and hot and wet, her inner walls clenching and squeezing. She squirmed beneath Adellia, but the moans and grunts coming from her muzzle sounded almost human.

The seconds stretched out and still the killing blow didn’t come. Adellia began to move faster, afraid that if she stopped for a second she’d break whatever spell was subduing her captive. She reached around with her other arm and pinched at the *tupilek*’s nipples. Her areolae were wide and dark, their texture softly pebbled, and beneath Adellia’s fingers her nipples began to swell and stiffen. Her mounds were so soft, so gently curved… they were slightly sticky with blood, but Adellia didn’t have time to worry about that. She kneaded and massaged the warm, pliant orbs, her fingers sinking in to the first knuckle. Taking one nipple between thumb and forefinger she wiggled it back and forth then pinched ever so slightly. She was rewarded with a g songs of the creature’s sex and plunging in and out with abandon. Sticky juices coated Adellia’s fingers and a musky smell rose up from the *tupilek*’s loins. It smelled like pine sap and mint and something more, something raw and earthy that made Adellia’s mouth water.

She let up the pressure of her knee and rolled the *tupilek* over. The creature lay there on her back, shuddering occasionally, with her eyes shut and her mouth hanging open. Adellia bent down and seized one of those smooth, dark legs in each hand. The *tupilek* offered no resistance at all as Adellia lifted them up and laid them against her shoulders. She took a deep breath, leaned forward, and planted her tongue between the *tupilek*’s pussy lips.

It was tough going at first. Adellia had never done this before, though she’d encouraged Toby enough times to know which maneuvers worked and which ones didn’t. Her tongue slipped into the *tupilek*’s slit and quested around her tight, quivering box, seeking her most sensitive places. Sweet honey drizzled onto Adellia’s tongue and she lapped at it with gusto. That piney taste was stronger than ever here. Her nose prodded the *tupilek*’s clit and she teased it playfully once, twice, before pulling back and locking her lips around it. She sucked at it as though it were a cock, pursed her lips and swirled her tongue around the little nub, before returning to the creature’s nether lips.

The noises the *tupilek* was making were halfway between animal and human, but there was no disguising the pleasure in her moans. She bucked her hips and thrust her mound upward towards Adellia’s questing tongue. Adellia’s hands groped blindly until they closed around the *tupilek*’s butt-globes. She seized a double handful of plump flesh and began to knead it like dough. She was rewarded by another guttural moan and a fresh torrent of juice. The *tupilek* writhed around on the floor and cried out in ecstasy. Her sex bloomed like a flower, the lips parting to allow Adellia’s tongue access to her deepest, most secret places. Inside she was so warm and so smooth; Adellia slid a finger in alongside her tongue, past the puffy folds, rubbing the humid, swampy walls of the *tupilek*’s cave.

She had completely forgotten about the danger when she felt strong arms grip her by the shoulders. It took a moment for caution to break through the fog of passion filling Adellia’s head. She looked up to see the bear’s head leering down at her. The *tupilek* extended one arm, fingers splayed. She traced them down Adellia’s front, along the smooth curve of her belly and past her navel. Two fingers spiraled down along Adellia’s mound, past the light dusting of chestnut hair, and slid along either side of her clit. The sudden touch sent her burgeoning arousal into overdrive, and Adellia’s
mouth hung slack, strings of spit dangling between her lips. She fought for self-control, but the *tupilek* curled her fingers inward and slipped them into Adellia’s quim, and she was lost.

She had seen the creature’s talons, and knew that if she wanted to, she could rip Adellia apart. But no pain came. Instead, she felt those fingers swirling and churning inside her, stroking her walls, seeking out that secret spot just within. At the edge of hearing, Adellia could just make out a soft, wet sound, a fleshy sound, the sound of their bodies locked in congress. A third finger joined the other two. She could feel the *tupilek*’s urgency, her fingers seeking, excavating, finding buried pleasures Adellia had never imagined…

That thought brought her back to the present. This wasn’t just sex. It was war. And Adellia Hawk never lost.

She plunged her own hand between the *tupilek*’s legs, and she offered no resistance. Her thighs, already slick with sweat, parted to allow Adellia access. This time, Adellia was not gentle; she did not build up her touches slowly and delicately. That time had ended. Now, she curled her fingers up like the tusk of a boar and carved her way into the other woman’s dripping pussy. She thrust with all the force she could muster, leaning in to press as deep as she could. Her thumb sought out the *tupilek*’s clit and harried it, allowing her no respite. Her arm pumped back and forth like a piston. With each thrust, the *tupilek* shuddered around her. At the same time, she could feel fur tickling her sex and slim fingers rubbing and caressing her lips. The *tupilek* brushed against Adellia’s clit and she let out a gasp. She felt those fingers hesitate, then circle, realign themselves, and bear down on the sensitive little pearl. Her breaths became sharp and shallow. The warmth inside her was spreading, creeping into her veins, quickening her heartbeat and fluttering her eyelashes. At the same time, the walls around her fingers pulsed and quivered, and the braying moans coming from the bear’s head were growing faster and higher-pitched.

It came down to a race. The two of them were inextricably tangled, each with a hand between the other’s legs, each biting down on their grunts of pleasure. Each was focused wholly on the other. Adellia’s world shrank to her hand, the *tupilek*’s swampy quim, and the sensations coming from her own sex. She ground her teeth together and reached down inside herself for a last burst of energy. With a howl that reverberated off the icy walls, the *tupilek* came, her pussy clenching and spasming around Adellia’s fingers. Her nerveless hands fell away from Adellia’s cunt, but a moment too late; her own orgasm boiled up inside her and filled her head with thick pink smoke. Adellia’s eyes rolled back into her head and she keeled over. For a solid minute the two of them lay in a tangled pile, bodies dripping with sweat, shivering and sighing and gushing forth torrents of lady-juice from their twitching pussies.

Adellie recovered first. She pulled herself to her feet and limped over to the stone bench, collapsed beside it, and scooped up the nearest figurine. It was crude, barely human at all, and covered in tool marks— but there was no mistaking the roaring polar bear head. Adellia raised her arm over her head and dashed it against the ground.

It shattered with a brittle sound like an icicle breaking off a roof. As it did, a cool breeze puffed past Adellia’s ear, carrying with it a faint and distant howl of fury. The effect on the *tupilek* was immediate. She jumped to her feet, clawing at her body in a frenzy, then collapsed. It was like watching a rotten tree succumb to woodworm: the human parts of her body seemed to implode, while the animal pieces shredded apart into wet chunks. In seconds all that was left of her was a pile of grey dust and a collection of half-rotted chunks of gore. Adellia shrugged, picked up the second, and smashed that too. One by one the figures exploded into pieces against the stone floor, each with its own little scream of rage and frustration. When she had finished, Adellia slumped down next to the skeleton and sighed.
She really was very cold. Part of her wanted to just take a rest here. It was ok, she told herself. She’d rest for just a moment, then come back refreshed and save Toby. The rest of her knew that if she slept here, she’d never wake up. She looked at the corpse again, then at its discarded parka. Its erstwhile owner had been about the same size as Adellia. The idea was ghoulish, but she could feel herself growing number by the second. She stripped and pulled on the new outfit. It was a bit stiff, but she could feel herself warming up already. Only then did she allow herself to sit back against the wall and relax.

When her breath had returned she looked up at the wall and gave her chin a thoughtful stroke. One of the fishing nets collapsed as soon as she pulled it down, but the other felt sturdy enough when she tugged on it. The harpoon was still sharp, too, and she set to work slicing the net apart. She was left with a few long coils of rope. Tying the knots was a challenge with her stiff fingers, but she had learned every climber’s knot by rote and could practically tie them in her sleep. She finished and regarded her makeshift rappelling rope. It might snap, but she knew she’d never climb back down before she froze to death. It was this or nothing.

The rope actually held through almost all of her descent. She was about eight feet from the ground when it finally parted ways with the rock. The impact knocked the wind out of her, but she managed to stagger to her feet and towards the ice hut. It was ominously silent inside. She pulled aside the flap at the entrance and stepped inside.

The first thing she noticed was the smell. It smelled like an abattoir in here, a slippery stink of gore and old blood. She made her way along the passage, the smell growing with each step, and then froze with her hands over her mouth.

Toby lay where she had left him on the ground. His eyes bulged in terror and he had pulled the hides up to his chin. What little of his skin she could see was smeared with blood the color of old rust. Lying scattered across the floor of the hut were a random assortment of animal parts-- a reindeer’s head, an owl’s wings, a fox’s tail, a hawk’s claws-- and a vast, shallow pool of dust. Mixed among these hideous trophies were strange bone fetishes and scraps of cloth.

She drew her knife and bent down next to Toby. The leather cord binding him to the ground parted with a single flick of her wrist and he threw his arms around her leg. “Adellia!” he cried. “You came! You actually came for me! All these weeks… I hoped, I dreamed, but I never dared to believe…”

“Hush,” she said, running her fingers through his hair. It felt filthy and matted but she didn’t mind. “Of course I came, you silly man. Look at what happens when I leave you alone for one summer! Never again.”
Chapter Summary

Reunited at last, Adellia and Toby take a lovely holiday to Greece, where the native fauna prove welcoming.

She loved Toby Cotton. She really did. Being separated from him for so long had only confirmed the idea in her mind: this was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. He was her soulmate, her partner, and her best friend.

But, Adellia Hawk reflected, that didn’t mean that he was always easy to deal with.

“You’re holding it upside down!” she shouted, and made to swipe the map from him. Toby yanked it backwards just out of her reach and angrily pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Adellia hadn’t even realized you could do that angrily, but she was learning new things every day.

“It’s not upside down!” he said indignantly. “It’s a map. You hold the N facing up and it’s right. If it was upside down all the place names would be upside down. You think I wouldn’t notice that?”

“They look upside down to me!” Adellia insisted. “Come on, we’re totally lost. Give me the map.”

“They look upside down to you because you can’t read Greek. Come on, Adellia, we’re not lost. I told you this route was going to take a while.”

Adellia sat down in a huff on a nearby boulder and crossed her arms. She wasn’t about to say so to Toby, because they were fighting, but the view was spectacular. The Aegean Sea sparkled far below. They were perched halfway up a mountain on the eastern shore of Euboea-- Py-something, she was terrible with Greek names. The climate here was temperate, even in the middle of winter, and Adellia had shed her jacket and tied it around her waist about half an hour before. They’d even brought a picnic lunch. All in all, it was pretty much the perfect day out…

If only Toby would lighten up a little.

The whole thing had been his idea. After returning from Svalbard, they’d spent a month recuperating in Hawk Manor. Toby’s parents had been overjoyed to see their son return-- at first. Then his father had sent a telegram summoning him home, and there had been Words.

Adellia had only gotten the story secondhand, and it wasn’t something Toby was keen to talk about. His parents, it seemed, had liked the idea of their son as a hunter… until the reality set in. He hadn’t told them the details of his ordeal in Svalbard, but they’d seen his weary, frostbitten condition upon returning home. The life of a greengrocer was dull, but at least it was safe. At first they’d asked him to reconsider his choice of career, then commanded, and finally begged. Toby would not be dissuaded. He pointed out the immense cost of his education at Hoxleigh, his excellent grades, and not least, the fact that he had, in fact, returned safely. His parents, in turn had blamed “that Hawk girl” for putting foolish ideas in his head. There had been more-- Adellia was sure of it, though Toby hadn’t given her any details-- and the net result was that he’d fetched up at Hawk Manor again with his worldly possessions in two large suitcases.
Her parents accepted their houseguest without complaint. They loved Toby, even if he wasn’t the kind of hunter they were used to. They certainly liked the effect he had on Adellia, who had set to cleaning her room for the first time since childhood. Adellia’s mother was quite the amateur biologist herself, and she and Toby monopolized each other’s attention at dinner with discussions about chitin thickness and Dr. Seville’s pioneering taxonomic classification system. Adellia and her father merely sat back with their eyebrows raised during these long talks, sipping brandy and (in her father’s case) smoking cigars, but both of them glowed with vicarious pride in their cerebral partners. “Head and heart, Adellia,” her father had said one night. “That’s what every hunter needs. Head and heart. You and that Cotton boy, you’re a good pair.”

Of course, a true hunter needed to, well, hunt. A couple of weeks after Toby’s arrival, Adellia’s father had surprised her in the garden while she was target-shooting.

“So,” he’d said, taking up a position next to her and sighting along the stock of his crossbow. “What’s next for you kids, eh?” His bow twanged and his bolt thudded into the inner ring of the canvas target. Adellia looked up in surprise. She’d been so keen on aiming that she hadn’t even heard him approach.

“Well, I think Toby’s all healed up,” Adellia replied. “I was thinking… maybe we go on a trip somewhere.” She fired, but her concentration had been ruined and her shot barely grazed the outer circle. She cursed inwardly. She hated to screw anything up in front of her dad.

“Somewhere?” he asked, the inverted commas clanging into place. “Given it much more thought than that, have you?”

Adellia hadn’t, but she didn’t want to admit that. “Uh, Greece,” she said, in a moment of spirited improvisation.

Her father’s face brightened up. “Ah! Excellent choice, especially at this time of year. When the snow arrives you’ll be well out of it. Your mother and I were thinking of stopping over in Persia this winter.” He slotted a new bolt into place and cocked his head to aim. “What will you be hunting?”

“Uhhhh…” Adellia cursed her memory. She knew that Greece was home to a dizzying variety of creatures great and small. Some of the greatest hunters in history had stalked their prey through the olive groves and rugged hills. So why couldn’t she remember any of them?

“I’m sure you’ll find something to keep you busy when you arrive,” Lord Hawk said with a twinkle in his eye. He winked at her and fired again. His bolt split the back of the first one and jutted quivering out of the target.

And so they had. Toby had welcomed the idea of a trip-- especially one in the warm-- and had jumped to make the arrangements. After that, he’d secluded himself in the library. On the few occasions when Adellia swung by, he’d been elbow-deep in a stack of books. Myths and Monsters of the Aegean, The Trials of Heracles, Tracking the Erinyes, and a number of weighty alchemical treatises. Adellia tried to peek in at a few of them, but despite the exciting titles they turned out to be dense and ponderous, and she bored quickly. She settled for bringing him sandwiches from the kitchen and spending her time looking at maps and travelogues. A few of them had tintypes, showing smiling bathers at the waterfront. On days when the frost crept tendrils up the windows, those images were quite appealing.

And so they had set out, by train and then by boat. This time, they rode a tramp steamer, a far cry from the Lady Vorpal that had carried Adellia down to Morocco so many months before. The ship was dank and greasy and belched clouds of foul steam from its smokestacks, but Adellia wouldn’t
have traded it for anything. Their tiny cabin felt like the finest stateroom-- because Toby was there. True, there was only a single, narrow bed, but they made ample use of it.

Still, it was a relief to disembark at Piraeus. Toby fussed around with their suitcases while Adellia stepped onto the dock and stretched her legs. She took a deep sniff of fresh sea air and smiled. Already, the cold of Svalbard was a fading memory. The city stretched out before her, and beyond it, the looming green shadows of the mountains. Out there was danger and glory. Out there was the hunt.

A rustling sound brought her back to the present. Toby was fighting to unfold one of the larger maps. As Adellia watched, he turned it this way and that with a puzzled look on his face. She smiled in vindication. *Told you it was upside-down.*

“Are we lost?” she asked. Toby turned and rolled his eyes. “No. For the last time, we’re not lost. I’m just trying to see if the cave the villagers told us about is on this map.”

“Oh, come off it. They were pulling your leg, Toby, seriously. There’s no cave. They were just getting on over on you because you’re a tourist.”

“There’s got to be a cave!” Toby insisted. “The common chimera exclusively lairs underground. Sunlight irritates the membranes around its eyes. And those were chimera claw marks we saw in that cow, I’m sure of it.”

“How can you be so sure?” Adellia asked. She wasn’t trying to start a fight-- she was genuinely curious. Toby had studied the butchered carcass for all of ten minutes before pronouncing his findings in what she thought was a pretty authoritative voice. She would never, ever tell him so, but she was kind of in awe. All the best hunters did that kind of thing in the stories... they’d dip their finger in a muddy footprint, sniff the air, and then say something like, “Well, Hodgkiss, I can tell you only that a Purple-Backed Manticore passed this way not three hours ago limping on its right rear leg and having fed within the past day.” Adellia thought she might recognize a Purple-Backed Manticore if it stared her in the face. Maybe.

Still, once you found the things, you had to kill ‘em. Toby carried a crossbow, but without much enthusiasm, as though he was afraid it would bite him. Adellia had her own strapped to her back, plus a bandolier of ammunition and her knife. She’d been persuaded to leave some of the more esoteric gear at home, but she still had a couple of silver-tipped bolts and a vial of blessed water. You never knew.

Toby sighed. “Look, Adellia, do you actually want to know? Are you asking me about striation markings and claw width and the angle of penetration? Or are you just being difficult?”

“Come on, Cotton Ball, lighten up!” Adellia said. She threw her arms over her head. “The sun is shining, it’s nice and warm and dry, the view is gorgeous, and it’s just the two of us up here. Let’s have a picnic. What’s your hurry? The cave is either there or it isn’t, and either way it still won’t not be not-there after we take a rest.” She considered that sentence and decided to let it lie.

“We have to beat the sunset!” Toby insisted. “If we get there before sundown, we have a tactical advantage. It won’t want to leave its cave in case we need to retreat. And don’t call me Cotton Ball, I don’t like it.”

“Come on! We’ve got *hours* before sundown. It won’t take too long. My tummy’s rumbling. Besides, I want a snuggle.” She reached out her hands and flexed her fingers in a *gimme, gimme* motion. “I’m sorry about the Cotton Ball thing. I think it’s cute. I think *you’re* cute. Come here!”
Toby sighed and let the map slump. “I’m sorry. You’re right, Adellia.” He sat down next to her on the boulder and she threw her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder with a big grin. Toby put one arm around her shoulders and ran his fingers through her hair. God, she loved that. “Let’s have lunch,” he said. “You’re right. We should be enjoying our time together. This is kind of fun. I just…”

“You just what? Are you scared?” Adellia spoke without lifting her head from his shoulder. “I’ll protect you, Toby. Never fear. Adellia is here!”

She had been joking, but his tone was deadly earnest. “I know you will, Adellia. I’m not scared. I’m just… I’ve never been on an actual, you know, an actual hunt before. Both times I’ve actually run into monsters, you had to rescue me. I don’t want to…” he sighed. “I don’t want to be a burden to you. I don’t want my parents to be right. I am a hunter, Adellia. I really am. Maybe not like you, maybe I’ll never be as good as you, but I’m a hunter.”

She sat up straight and cupped his cheek in one hand. “Oh, Toby. Of course you’re a hunter. Did you ever doubt it? I get so jealous of you sometimes! You know all these things, and I feel like I’m just making it all up as I go along. I just get lucky. You’re a great hunter, and we’re a great team, and we’re going to do… great. Ok? Besides, you already hunted down the most dangerous creature of them all.”

“Oh?” Toby’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “What are you talking about, Adellia?”

“The wild Kiss-Beast!” she shrieked, and tackled him. She planted wet smooches all over his face, giggling madly. His cheeks, his nose, his lips; her tongue slipped into his mouth as she climbed on top of him. He lay sprawled across the stone, his arms flailing madly. “And now she’s got you in her clutches!” One hand crept inside Toby’s shirt. The other brushed the hair out of his forehead. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips against his, savoring the sweet warmth of him. He trembled below her, and when she shifted her position, he pushed her off with both hands.

“What?” she said, momentarily taken aback. “What’s wrong, Toby?”

“Adellia!” he hissed. Absurdly, he looked both ways, like a naughty child preparing to sneak a cookie from the jar. “We’re in public! What if someone sees us?”


“Adellia, no!” he whined. “Please!”

“There is nobody up here but us, Toby,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But fine. If you’re going to be a baby about it, I know a way we can both keep our clothes on.” She reached one hand down below his waistline and fumbled with his zipper. He was wearing tough denim trousers in the American style, and she took a moment to work the brass button, but beneath he had on his typical white cotton drawers. Her fingers snaked in over the hem and cupped his manhood. It stiffened immediately at her touch, and she smiled. “Here’s someone!” she cooed. “I think he wants to say hi!” She pulled down the waistband and Toby’s cock popped out. It was already swelling beneath her hand, and while Toby let out a low whimper, he didn’t make any move to stop her. She kissed him once more on the corner of her mouth and slid down the rock, one hand wrapped around his prick the whole time, until it was staring her in the face.

Ludmilla had given her some pointers here, but Adellia was far from an expert. Still, she did her best. She began by kissing underneath his round cockhead. She stroked his shaft one-handed as she
She paused to lick her palm and then rubbed it up and down his length until his pink skin glistened with her saliva. A fat drop of precum oozed out of his tip, and Adellia smeared it all over her palm before resuming her rubbing motion. Now when she kissed his cock she tasted a faint saltiness. She loved that taste-- it meant that she was on the right track. Her soft lips parted slightly and her tongue darted out, a wet triangle that danced across his skin. She kissed his prick down to the base and then back up the shaft under his cockhead was nestled between her soft pink lips. When she judged that he had reached the breaking point, she parted those lips and let his cock slip between them.

She started slow-- with just his glans in her mouth, she swirled her tongue around and around. It teased his hole and was rewarded with another dollop of salty precum. She swirled it arround and applied a gentle section. His member seemed to pulse in her mouth. Her hair dangled down into her eyes, and she brushed it back with a sweep of her right hand; she wanted to see every detail of this. His cock was diamond-hard now, a jutting length of pink meat nestled in a forest of wiry brown hair at the base. She could still see her spit glinting along its surface. As soon as she stopped moving, Toby shifted uncomfortably, like a sleeper awoken from a nightmare. She adjusted her posture. That wouldn’t do at all.

She began to bob back and forward, enjoying the sensation of his penis gliding along her tongue. It poked into the hollow of her cheek. She sucked more firmly and began to slide her left hand along the base of his shaft-- just an inch or two, in rapid, tight movements that made him grunt and twist his hips to and fro. While she did, she pulled back almost all the way, until her lips jutted out before her. They were still wrapped around his cock, kept there by suction. She kept her head there for a moment, enjoying the sensation, before relenting and pushing forward again. This time his cock pushed into the back of her mouth, almost to her tonsils. She held it there for a beat and let her tongue swish to and fro, making sure she covered every inch of him in warm wetness.

Toby groaned beneath her. He still lay sprawled across the boulder, as though all the strength had gone out of him. Occasionally he would twitch or moan feebly. “Adellia,” he said in a breathy voice, “we shouldn’t… what if…”

In response, she sped up. Spit and precum frothed up around her fingers. Her mouth was full of saliva, and she let it drool onto him. The air was filled with wet slurping and squishing noises-- which had the convenient effect of drowning him out. Adellia inhaled deeply through her nose and slammed her face forward, thrusting his cock into the back of her mouth and down her throat. She held it as long as she could, and when she began to gag, she pulled it off. Pausing only long enough to catch her breath, she gathered her hair behind her one-handed and dove her head in again.

GLLLLLK! GACK! MMMFFFFF!

She gurgled and spit loudly. In truth, she didn’t have to be quite so demonstrative. Practice-- and a few tips from Ludmilla-- had left her quite adroit at relaxing her jaw. But if Toby wanted quiet, Adellia was going to make as much noise as she could. It was fun. And he needed to lighten up a bit. Besides, she liked the challenge. Anyone could suck a cock. Corinthia Swain probably did it, though Adellia imagined she always used a doily and kept her pinkie out. No, the real challenge for the expert fellator was to suck the whole thing . And Adellia always rose to a challenge.

She wasn’t particularly experienced with different dicks-- at least, not human ones-- but Toby’s was an impressive specimen by any measure. It was fat and pink, with a girthy head and the slightest curve to the shaft. She found that, by sliding it to the back of her mouth and swallowing once or twice, she could coax the final few inches down her throat-- allowing her lips to smooch up against his groin. Her tongue poked out of the bottom of her mouth and tickled his balls, which tightened up in response. She held this position until she started to see stars, then pulled back all at
once. For a half-second his cockhead caught in her throat, then it popped out with a delicious feeling of release. Drool gurgled out of the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were watering from the effort, but she had a huge grin on her face. She took in a brisk double lungful of mountain air and went right back to slurping at his prick without a second’s pause.

Both of her hands were so sticky now that she didn’t dare touch her hair. It fell in her eyes and tickled her forehead while she worked. Enough was enough, she decided. Time to finish things. Her right hand wrapped around his shaft and began to pump up and down while she suckled at his cockhead. Her tongue danced around his hole, teasing and poking at it, while her fingers blurred. Wet squishing sounds filled the air. She could feel his cock twitching in her hand. Any second now, she could tell… any second…

“Adellia!” he gasped. “I’m… I’m going to…”

That was the signal she was waiting for. She plunged her head forward, not quite deep-throating him but making sure that his cock was firmly planted in the warm cave of her mouth. It pulsed once, then she felt the first sticky rope of semen splash onto her tongue. Toby moaned in release. Over and over his member twitched, and with each twitch a fresh wad of cum burst into her mouth. It pooled in her cheeks, ran across her tongue, dripped down her throat… her mouth was full of a deliciously sloppy mixture of precum, spit, and Toby’s spunk. It dribbled down her lips. She swallowed and felt a thick, warm bolus slide down her throat and splash into her tummy. Ludmilla always complained about the taste of Peter’s cum, but she had advised Adellia to swallow anyways; “Ladies don’t spit,” she always said. Maybe it was something in Toby’s diet, but she quite enjoyed the salty, slightly-sweet taste of his issue. Maybe it was just because it was his.

Whatever the reason, today she was enjoying a double-helping-- whether he was backed up due to a few days of celibacy or it was just the Greek food agreeing with him, his output was prodigious. He lay there grunting for a full minute, his cock firing off salvo after salvo after salvo of baby-batter down Adellia’s gullet. She swallowed dutifully until the flow had dried up, then wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and wobbled to her feet. She could feel his cum sloshing around in her belly and grinned. Maybe she wouldn’t be hungry for lunch after all.

It took Toby another minute of breathless, sweaty fumbling to sit upright. As he zipped up his trousers, Adellia looked down and giggled. A dark stain had spread across his groin. He looked down, cursed, then sat down heavily with his hands on his lap.

“I didn’t-- it’s not--” he sputtered, and Adellia patted him lightly on the shoulder. “I know, love. I made a mess. Sorry!”

Toby sighed. “It’s fine. Adellia, I-- thank you for that, obviously, but-- we’re on a hunt right now, aren’t we? Shouldn’t we try to be serious?”

“I am! I am serious!” Adellia protested. “This is my serious face. But Toby, look **around** you! The sun is shining, the ocean is sparkling, we’re alone up here, and we’re in **Greece**! And come on, a chimera? What are you worried about? People were hunting these things with bronze spears three thousand years ago. We’re **fine**.” She patted her crossbow. “My biggest worry is that this is going to be boring!”

“Well… if you say so,” Toby said. He didn’t sound convinced. “The villagers we talked to were pretty scared. They have hunters here, too, Adellia. If they didn’t think they could handle it, maybe it’s a bigger threat than you think.”

“Amateurs,” Adellia said, with a dismissive flick of her wrist. “Goat herders with spears. They’re not trained. Hey, I’m not saying they’re bad people! But they’re not hunters. We are.” She sat
down on another rock and rummaged in her pack. “Come on, that got my appetite up. Let’s have sandwiches.”

They had packed mutton sandwiches-- Adellia had taken one look at the plethora of sticky, sweet, be-tentacled dishes on display at the local agora and decided to stick with home cooking. She had been persuaded, however, to try dolmathes, stuffed grape leaves, and as she bit into her first she was glad she’d taken the chance. The insides were full of rice, dill, and a hint of lemon, a mixture that melted on her tongue. She closed her eyes as she chewed. Next to the dolmathes, her dry mutton was about as tasty as cardboard. Next time, she reflected, she’d dare the local cuisine.

Toby seemed to be enjoying his sandwich, at least. Adellia was unsurprised to see a book open across his lap. Crumbles of rice fell from the corners of his mouth and stuck to its pages. He’d even brought one of his books on a hike. Typical Toby. She might have been mad at him for ignoring her, but she was still basking in the sunlight and enjoying the quietude of the mountainside. For now. Toby caught her looking at him and shot her a smile that melted her heart and put a flush in her cheeks. She’d enjoyed spending him with him at Hawk Manor, but this… this was something else. It was something she could get used to, too.

After lunch they continued up the trail. It grew thinner as they climbed, and the boxwood trees that hemmed them in on other side grew sparser as well. Sharp limestone formations jutted up out of the mountainside like jagged teeth. Adellia saw few other living things-- the occasional deer peeked out from behind a tree, and from time to time she caught a twitter of birdsong from the branches overhead, but mostly they hiked in companionable silence. The air grew colder and a chilling wind whipped in from above; Adellia was grateful for her jacket after all. She found a couple of broken branches by the side of the trail and tossed one to Toby, and armed with their sticks they forged ahead. As the trees thinned out into nothingness and bare rock loomed before them, Adellia grew fretful. She always enjoyed a good climb, but the slope ahead wasn’t steep enough to provide any challenge, and there was no sign of any cave. Besides, it was starting to get uncomfortably cold.

“I don’t think there’s anything here, Toby,” she said, and turned her head towards him. “Maybe we’re on the wrong mou-”

Toby shook his head. He was looking past her shoulder. He reached out with one arm and pointed.

There, about a hundred yards above them, was a dark void in the wall of rock. Adellia could barely see it from her current angle, but if she shifted her head to look past the limestone outcroppings, it became clear: a fissure, a crevice in the rock wide enough for the two of them to walk through abreast. A cave.

“Well, well, well,” she said. She didn’t mind being wrong this time. “Would you look at that. There is a cave after all.”

Now that the quarry was in sight, all of her enthusiasm had come back, and she scrambled easily up the slope. Toby followed a ways behind, huffing and puffing. More than once, Adellia stopped and waited impatiently for him to catch up. He wasn’t half the climber she was, she reminded herself. It wasn’t his fault. “We’ve got to get you some time on the rock wall,” she teased as he slumped against a stone spar to catch his breath. He looked up at her with a mask of sweat covering his face and said nothing. His expression was one of exhaustion and wounded pride.

Little by little they made their way to the cave. Adellia pulled herself up onto a little ridge that opened out into a narrow plateau. The cave mouth was at the far end, and from here, even she could see the trail of their prey. Thick claw marks scored the edge of the stone-- it looked as though the world’s largest cat had sharpened its claws here. The cave itself was a ragged little thing.
barely a crack in the rock. Staring at it made Adellia’s heart beat faster. She had meant every brave word on the mountainside, but now she was here and looking her destination in the face. It occurred to her that she was glad Toby was here.

“Toby?” she breathed, and reached out with one hand. His fingers closed around hers and gave her a little squeeze. “You ready?” she asked.

“Yes,” he whispered in response, and stepped up next to her. “It should be asleep. Do you know where to aim?”

Adellia tried to think. “Uh, the goat head is the weakest one, right? So right between the eyes?”

Toby shook his head. “Adellia…” he began, then sighed. “Adellia, it won’t necessarily have a goat head. It’s a patchwork creature. The one in the textbook is the classic shape, but it could have, well, any animal parts you can think of. That’s the point of them. No two chimerae are exactly the same.”

“Well, where do I shoot it, then?” she asked. She was starting to get a little nervous.

“You want to aim for the interfaces. The joins, you know, where two animals come together. That’s where it’s weak.”

“That all?” Adellia asked, trying to sound braver than she felt. “Psssh. Easy. It’s probably asleep, you said. I can just walk right up to it and stab it. Presto, no more chimera, we go home for a reward.”

Toby looked he was about to say something, but then his mouth slammed shut and he nodded. “Not a bad idea, actually. No risk of missing your shot and waking it up. But be careful, alright? Please?”

“Of course!” she replied, and laid a hand on his shoulder. As soon as she touched him the storm clouds gathering in his face blew away. He grinned at her and gave a double thumbs-up. It did her heart good to see Toby smiling. He was so seriously, especially lately. He really did need to relax.

The two of them crept towards the cave on tip-toe. Close to, it looked a bit like a yawning mouth, an association which did Adellia’s heart rate no favors. The entrance was tall and triangular, about ten feet across at the base and fifteen feet high. Scree tumbled away from Adellia’s footsteps. She looked down and shuddered. This wasn’t scree-- thousands of bone fragments littered the floor of the cave, snapped bits of rib and femur with splintered ends. A foul wind gusted out from the murky depths of the cave and made her wrinkle her nose.

There was something down there, a vast dark bulk that sprawled amid the stalagmites. The cave was shallower than she’d thought, and the late afternoon sun poured through the mouth and illuminated the slumbering monster. Its hide, she could see, was a uniform brown, mottled here and there by dried patches of blood. A pair of leathery bat wings covered it like a cloak. Its neck was long and scaled, ending in a furry canine head. She could see four limbs curled up beneath it, but they were wrong, sinuous and boneless, more like tentacles than proper arms and legs. Worst of all was its abdomen; it was chitinous and tapered to a bulbous point, marked by black-and-yellow stripes like a gigantic wasp.

Now that she was looking at it, though, she could see the joins. Where parts from two animals came together, the flesh was darker, almost like a bruise. The beast chuffed in its sleep and turned over. Its muzzle fell open, revealing a mouthful of needle-sharp teeth. Its limbs flopped and wriggled as though it was dreaming of prey. Adellia could see sucker-mouths on them opening and
It was one of the most loathsome things she had ever seen, and she knew at once that she had to kill it.

Toby stood paralyzed on the threshold. He stared down in terrified awe. “Adellia,” he breathed, groping blindly for her hand. “Adellia, it’s too big. Let’s go. We’ll get help, come back…”

She took his hand politely but firmly and pushed it aside. “No, Toby,” she whispered. “We have to do this now. You wait up here, I’ll go down there. It’s going to be ok, alright? I swear it is.”

Toby gulped and nodded. He still couldn’t tear his eyes off the beast. Adellia made sure he was standing still, then slowly eased her pack off over her head and laid it down gently on the floor next to him.

She picked her way across the bone-strewn floor, padding on the balls of her feet. Every step was a test. The omnipresent bones were as dry and brittle as twigs, and Adellia had no doubt that stepping on one would be the biggest mistake of her life. And the last one too, probably. She stepped slowly and carefully in the manner of one navigating a minefield. For a girl with a terminal aversion to cleaning her room, this kind of creeping progress was familiar and comfortable. It’s just like at home, she thought. Only instead of building blocks, it’s bones. And if I mess up I have a lot more to worry about than a bruised foot.

Inch by inch she descended the sloping cave floor until she stood level with the chimera. This close it seemed even larger than before. It stank of blood and offal, and every time it shifted, she got a good look at its patchwork anatomy. The sight of it offended her on a visceral level. It was an affront, a thing that should not be, and she could barely keep down her revulsion. By sending it back to whatever Hell had spawned it, she would be doing the world a favor. She reached down to her belt and drew her knife. She had lined her sheath with velvet, and the blade slid out as gently as a lover’s kiss. This close, she could see the joint she wanted. Where the scaly reptilian neck met the bloated body… she’d sever the head in one stroke. The joint was visible through the thicket of stalagmites, tantalizingly close. She was in among them, now. Just a few more steps…

The beast grunted in its sleep and turned over. One tentacle-limb flailed out and crashed into Adellia. Into the place where she had been, anyways-- in an impressive display of reflexes, she’d leapt up onto a stalagmite and clung to another one-handed. She stood there like a pirate from a woodcut, leaning off the mast. Her heart hammered in her throat. She could feel her sweaty fingers beginning to slip. Below her, the chimera grumbled in its sleep and settled down. Only when she was absolutely sure that she was safe did Adellia relax and slide to the floor.

She looked up at the cave mouth and saw Toby staring at her, wide-eyed and white-faced. She gave him a cocky grin and a thumbs-up that looked a lot more confident than she actually felt. Then she stepped gingerly over the tentacle and towards the chimera’s neck.

This close, the joint looked sickly and misshapen. More than normal, anyways. It smelled, too, an acrid stink discernible even above the general miasma of the cave. Adellia wrinkled her nose and raised her dagger. She was in killing distance now. One swing of her arm, and the threat would be over. She let the blade fall comfortably into her fingers, extended her arm, bent her elbow. She was the fulcrum. Her arm was a lever, a simple machine, a force amplifier. She would bend, and flex, and swing, and stab, and…

Tingggggg!

She had hit it square. She knew she had hit it square. She had seen the strike in her mind’s eye, and
then it had come to pass just as she’d envisioned it. And yet… here she was, holding a blade that shuddered as it rebounded off the chimera’s iron hide, and there it was, shifting and growling as it woke from its slumber.

It wasn’t fair.

A high, keening screech battered her eardrums. The beast was awake now, its wolflike head staring balefully down at her. Its neck darted out and its jaws snapped shut on empty air where she had been just a moment ago. She rolled as she landed and stabbed upward wildly, hoping to catch it in the jaw. It easily lifted its head out of the way and its leathery wings unfurled. They snapped out, stiffened and beat at the air, and the beast lifted off the ground.

Adellia leapt up onto a flattened stalagmite, then off its top, her free hand flailing at the air. Her fingers closed around one of the beast’s tentacles and she hauled herself up. The tentacle thrashed wildly, but somehow she managed to keep her grip. It had a spongy texture and it was unpleasantly soft and smooth. She grimaced, then carefully placed her knife between her teeth and grabbed on with her other hand.

Hand over hand she climbed up. It was just like the climbing rope from Physical Education. She’d always been great at that. The beast was rocking to and fro, trying to shake her off, but her fingers dug into its soft flesh and held on tight. The furry bulk of its body loomed in front of her. She reached up and grabbed a handful.

The chimera screamed again, and Adellia had to resist the urge to clap her hands to her eardrums. Up here, that would prove fatal. Its head snapped at her again and she rolled her body barely out of the way. She pulled herself up onto its back and pressed flat against it. She hated being this close to the thing-- it smelled awful, and felt worse-- but at least she was safe from its jaws. Its pinions beat at the air on either side of her. She drew her knife and looked for the interface between wing and body.

There it was, a bluish scar. She stabbed at it, and once again her knife bounced off. She cursed. What was she missing? Had Toby been wrong? She peered a little closer and started back in surprise. What she had taken for bluish skin was chitinous plating. Somehow, the chimera had grown it over its vulnerable joints. No wonder this one had persisted into the modern era. She tried to work her dagger blade beneath the scale to pry it up, but the beast rolled sharply to the left, and Adellia tumbled off its back with a squawk.

The ground rose to meet her. The stalagmites loomed like spikes in a punji trap. She crossed her arms in front of her face, for what little protection that would provide, and braced for impact. It never came. She felt something curl around her ankle and her fall was abruptly arrested. She swung in midair. The chimera soared out of the cave, and caught a brief glimpse of Toby Cotton’s face as she passed overhead. He looked horrified and fumbled in his pack for something.

“Tobyyyyyyyyyyyy!” Adellia cried as she passed, the wind whipping the words out of her mouth. The chimera flew out of the cave and spiraled upward towards the mountain peak. Adellia was treated to a prime view of the ground, far far below. She swallowed and shut her eyes. Heights normally never bothered her… but normally, she was the one in control.

The top of the mountain turned out to be a flat plateau a couple hundred feet above the cave. The chimera circled in for a landing with slow, lazy beats of its wings. When it was five feet off the ground, its tentacle uncurled and she dropped unceremoniously to earth. She scrambled to her feet and yelped at a sudden, piercing pain in the small of her back. Half-turning, she saw the wasplike abdomen of the chimera hovering inches away from her. Something jutted from its tip— a stinger the size of one of her mother’s knitting needles. The beast yanked it out of her flesh and swooped...
past overhead. Adellia staggered. Cold numbness was spreading through her body, and a sensation of pins and needles. Her legs wobbled beneath her and gave out.

_Blast_ , she thought. _In front of Toby, too_. Toby… she could only hope he’d get away. He’d probably have time, while the monster was gorging itself on her. It just wasn’t _fair_.

But the bite never came. The chimera settled to earth above her, resting on its splayed tentacle-limbs like a seated dog. She could hear it chuffing and breathing, but its jaws never came close to her. She was lying on her belly, and she tried to roll over to stare death in the face. This proved more difficult than she had anticipated. The numbness had spread to her arms, and her body was only erratically registering her brain’s commands. Finally she managed to wobble over onto her back and stared upward.

The chimera was giving her what, coming from a human, she would consider an appraising look. Two of its tentacles snaked towards her. Talons slid from their tips, shiny black and glossy. They descended towards her and once again she closed her eyes and braced herself for the end. Even through the numbness, she could feel a faint tickling pressure on her belly and legs. _So this is how it ends. At least there’s no pain_.

Well, there was _some_ pain. She could feel a faint scraping sensation. It went on for a long time, too. Even envenomed as she was, being disemboweled alive should hurt more than this. She risked cracking an eyelid.

The beast hadn’t slain her at all. What it had done was, somehow, worse. Her trousers and the bottom half of her shirt had been shredded into scraps and scattered to the four winds. The panties she’d worn beneath-- a sturdy triangle of white cotton-- lay in tatters as well. Her pussy was exposed… her red, swollen pussy, its lips engorged and dripping lubricant, its clit stiff and poking out from its hood…

_Hm_, she thought, with a clarity born of terror. _That’s probably not good_.

The chimera stumped to and fro on its tentacle-limbs and shifted its position until its abdomen was pointing forwards. There was no sign of the needle that had pierced Adellia’s flesh. Perhaps it had retracted after delivering its payload. Instead, the creature’s chitin was peeling back like a blooming flower. A mass of wet, grey flesh wriggled forth from inside its body: a long, thick tube, threaded with veins and banded with rippling muscle. Its flared tip pulsed and quivered like a heavy-lipped mouth and drooled streams of transparent slime. Slowly, ever so slowly, it extruded from the chimera’s body and crept towards Adellia’s sex. She tried to push her legs together, but they might as well have been two dead lengths of wood for all that they responded to her commands. She could not even cry out in terror. The slimy tentacle inched closer and closer, and as it did, the fear in Adellia’s belly mixed with a sick anticipation. Her breath grew short. From the navel down, her body was a numb lump, but she was still receiving one signal loud and clear. Her arousal was an itch in the back of her brain that would not go away.

The chimera’s (cock or whatever it was) nestled gently against her entrance, and Adellia almost screamed. She could feel _that_ all right. The slightest touch of its flared head sent tremors of arousal skittering up and down her spine. Her cuntlips were glistening now, wet and swollen, _yearning_ , and the feel of its rough grey flesh against her soft pinkness was almost too much to bear. It looked colossal, and she was sure that any attempt at penetration would burst her like an overripe fruit. And yet she wanted it. No, _needed_.

The chimera seemed to need it too. It pushed forward, and the flared head of its member slipped easily between Adellia’s lips. They bulged out on either side. It had barely moved at all-- just the leading edge of its tip was inside her-- and yet already she felt stuffed to the brim. There was no
pain, though it seemed like there should have been. Indeed, her flesh had a strange, stretchy quality to it. The organ drilled in by another couple inches and Adellia’s supple pink pussy distended around it. It seemed impossible, like an optical illusion. There was no way something that large was sliding into her, was there? It had to be the size of her calf. And yet, despite the fierce and mounting pressure, there was no pain. There was only a sensation of fullness, as though she had eaten a delicious meal. One more thrust, and Adellia’s cunt swallowed the last of the cockhead. The grey tube stretched up and away, an impossible length, and yet the chimera did not let up for a second. It pressed its abdomen forward and inch after rippling inch of meat began to slide into Adellia’s quim.

She had thought she was full before, but that was nothing compared to what she was now experiencing. A bulge had formed in her lower belly, tenting her flesh outward. It stretched taut over the massive prong now tunneling into her guts. The flared head was clearing visible beneath her skin. Its thick shaft—easily the size of her bicep—rubbed against her inner walls. She could feel it demolishing her once-tight passage, forcing it open wider than Nature had ever intended. Worst of all, she was enjoying it. Her juices were flowing freely, and every time the chimera moved, a spatter of mixed fluids would squirt out around the edges of her overstuffed cunt. Her tight channel was being turned into a blown-out, lube-soaked fuck-sleeve, and all she could think about was getting more.

Perhaps it was the venom. Perhaps it was the desperate nature of her plight. Perhaps it was just the bumpy, ridged surface of the chimera’s cock, which seemed to hit all the right places inside her to trigger endless waves of pleasure. She was lost in a fog of lust, heedless of whatever damage the colossal penetration might be doing to her body—or what fate awaited her after the chimera had gotten its monstrous rocks off. She whimpered and moaned, unable even to reach down to stroke her clit or hold open her lips. Drool trickled out of the corner of her mouth and down her cheek. She vaguely remembered that she had come here to slay this beast, but she couldn’t for the life of her think why. It had the most stupendous, magnificent cock she’d ever known. Had she come here to kill it? Or had this been the plan all along? Surely, if she had known that such a stallion awaited her on the mountaintop, she’d have come much sooner.

The motion inside her stopped, and she whined in frustration. Inch by battering inch, the chimera had made its way to her cervix, and there it halted. It wasn’t still for long… slowly, it began to withdraw. As each ridged segment slid out of her, they rubbed against her clit, and Adellia’s whine became a long, ululating moan. She desperately, desperately wanted to rub herself, but her paralysis wouldn’t allow it. Instead, she screwed her eyes shut and filled her head with visions: her, Toby, and the chimera, locked in unnatural congress. As the gargantuan member vacated her abdomen, it left her feeling stretched and hollow. It withdrew almost entirely, leaving only its flared head inside her, before suddenly reversing direction and thrusting forward again. Adellia gasped with joy as, once again, her insides were stuffed to capacity with rock-hard chimera cock. It fell into a regular rhythm, fucking her briskly and filling the air with buttery squelching sounds. The bulge in her tummy rose and fell with every thrust. Her quim was being violated by a monstrous cock the size of her arm, and she couldn’t get enough. Her voice rose in a gurgling cry of ecstasy and was answered by the monster’s keening roar.

The thrusts came faster and faster. Adellia’s body twitched and jerked with each brutal penetration. She needed more, wanted it deeper, and her silent pleas were answered. With a final, massive shove and a sky-splitting bellow, the chimera hilted itself in her soaking pussy and buried the head of its cock in her womb. The flared bulge beneath her skin shoved higher than seemed possible; she felt as though if it thrust any harder, it would come out her mouth. There it stayed, slowly leaking a puddle of warm goo into her innermost sanctum. Satisfied, the chimera rocked back and forth to get comfortable. Even this tiny motion set off fireworks in Adellia’s brain, and she mewled pitifully.
A spasm shook the length of its cock, and the chimera grunted. Adellia looked down in time to see a bulging sac emerge from its body. The beast’s prick jutted from this, she realized, which made it not a prick at all. It was an ovipositor. The wasp body… it all made sense. Parts of her brain were sounding alarm bells. She was already as stuffed as could be. If the creature intended to deposit eggs inside her… surely, her body couldn’t take it. Could it?

It looked as though, ready or not, she was about to find out. The first egg was already moving along the tube. It reached her entrance and paused. Her cuntlips were already as distended as they could be. Could they possibly stretch farther? Adellia gritted her teeth at the building pressure. Somehow, there was still no pain. Nor, as she had expected, did she burst. In a display of unnatural resilience, her quim accepted the egg and swallowed it whole. She could see the lump moving inside her, even beyond the massive bulge that already stood proud of her skin. Waves of peristalsis drove it deeper. Each one tickled against her velvety walls; each one filled her brain with warm, distracting pleasure. They came faster and faster as the egg went deeper and deeper. Adellia could feel her climax building, and even if she wanted to resist it, she was pinned and helpless. She surrendered.

A crashing wave of ecstasy broke across her brain. She cried out in a wet, gurgling voice. Her limbs flailed weakly against the ground. Her vaginal passage spasmed madly, and its wild squeezing served only to pull the egg deeper inside her. There was a moment of exquisite pressure, and then it slid free from the ovipositor’s flared head and settled in her womb. Accompanying it was a flood of warm goop. It slithered forth like a lump of custard and stuck to the inside of Adellia’s womb, gluing the egg to her wall. Her belly rose like a loaf of bread. Adellia rocked gently back and forth, aftershocks playing across the surface of her brain like tiny lightning strikes, as the second egg began its long journey.

This one’s passage was much easier-- her body, already stretched to capacity, had somehow made space for it. She was ultrasensitive after her recent orgasm and every nudge and tickle of the egg made her shiver. She came again when it reached her womb. The feeling of her skin stretching to accommodate the egg was strange but pleasurable. Even with just two eggs inside her, her belly was swelling like a pregnant woman’s. And there were more coming: two were sliding down the shaft, and there was a third ready at its base, and beyond it a fourth…

These sensations were familiar, unfortunately-- but with experience came acceptance. The chimera was laying eggs in her, which meant it had no intention of killing her. The process didn’t seem to be fatal. She couldn’t escape now. So the eggs were a problem for a later day… and for now, she didn’t have to worry about them.

She could focus on the pleasure.

Perhaps the chimera had simply grown eager, or perhaps Adellia’s panting and spasming was encouraging it. The next two eggs came together. They clacked gently against each other inside her, and each impact sent a shiver up her spine. By now, her loose hole posed no obstacle whatsoever, nor did her formerly tight channel. The eggs faced no obstacles at all until they reached her womb. Her cervix, stretched as it was, made a token effort to keep them out, but it was fighting a losing battle. Her womb had bloated around the eggs already inside her, and inflated further as two more plopped free. By now her belly was grotesquely swollen, with veins clearly visible below the skin and a faintly uneven texture where the eggshells pressed outward. She looked as though she was about to deliver twins. And still the eggs came.

Finally, her seemingly endless capacity for expansion ran out. The sixth egg slid all the way up her passage, but no amount of squeezing or cajoling could win it entrance to her womb. Adellia whined, less in pain than in frustration at this failure. The chimera, apparently deciding enough was
enough, began to withdraw, leaving this last egg to roll freely to and fro in her canal. The feeling of it wiggling back and forth was almost enough to push her over the edge again. The ovipositor pulled free, catching for just a moment at her entrance before popping out with a wet sound, and the egg followed it-- only to catch at her doorstep. Her pussy was already working valiantly to close itself up again, and while the truly gargantuan penetration left her gaping, it wasn’t quite enough for the egg. It sat there with a few inches of glistening shell visible between her moist and dripping lips.

As the ovipositor withdrew, Adellia felt some sensation returning to her limbs. They had moved earlier, when she came-- only a little, and not with any coordination, but it seemed that the venom was wearing off. As it did, feeling flooded back, and she groaned. Her whole body below the navel felt like one big ache, and there was a deep, bruising pain in her cunt.

Her thoughts were returning to something resembling order. She stared up at the chimera with undignified loathing. She could faintly recall some of the thoughts that had passed through her lust-addled mind, and she hated it more than ever now. She hoped it would fly away, but her luck did not bend that far. Instead, it gripped her legs with two tentacle-limbs and lifted them up. Panic rose inside her. Its ovipositor had not retracted. Indeed, now it was stiffening again, and she felt its tip brushing between her butt cheeks. The flared end rested against her tight pink pucker, and she felt a scream clawing its way out of her throat. There was absolutely no way it would fit, she was already stretched to her utmost extent, and yet the beast’s fearsome strength bore down on her. Was this the end? Would her broken corpse lie on this desolate mountaintop until the wind and rain reclaimed it?

“YOU BASTARD!”

Through the fog of pain and fear she heard the voice: young, male, and enraged beyond reason. She turned towards it and her eyes widened.

“T-toby?”

It was indeed. He came charging up the rocky slope, his feet pounding heedlessly across the rocks. He held a crossbow in each hand. These were full-sized bows, not the little pistol variety, and he shouldn’t have been able to lift them one-handed-- yet he raised them over his head as he came. Ammo bandoliers bounced and jangled against his chest. He skidded to a halt at the edge of the plateau and leveled his bows. The chimera turned to him, momentarily distracted, and Adellia felt the terrible pressure at her backdoor abate.

“Adellia!” Toby cried. “I’ve… come… for… you!” He was panting, clearly out of breath from his mad dash up the mountainside. He took careful aim at the chimera. “The… joints! I… told you!”

“Toby, no!” Adellia cried. Hope swelled in her breast, but when she saw Toby about to make the same mistake she had, it curdled into fear. “It’s armored! Not the joints!”

Toby looked at her for a moment in shock. The manic energy that had propelled him up the mountain seemed to drain away. His hands wilted, dragged to earth by the heavy bows. “But…” he began. His mouth opened and closed. “But, then… then what…?”

The chimera roared angrily and lashed out with its head. It was still well short of Toby, but its jaws snapped angrily at the air. It was jealous of its prize and would not have it stolen. Adellia felt the pressure build at her rear entrance and squealed in panic. “For God’s sake, Toby,” she screamed, as her flesh began to yield, “shoot it!”

He perked up at the sound of her voice. The fearful, uncertain expression dissolved from his face,
and in its wake, his features hardened. His eye narrowed, his mouth set itself in a grim line, and he lifted both crossbows. Adellia could see his arms trembling with effort.

“Hey!” he shouted. “You! Ugly!” The chimera surely couldn’t understand a gibe like that, but its head whipped around at the sound of his voice. It stared down at him and hissed. He met its gaze and raised the crossbows.

Adellia actually saw him pause. She saw his expression turn pensive, and realized that he was trying to think of a good line. She rolled her eyes. Toby was a better hunter than he gave himself credit for, but he read too many books.

“JUST SHOOT IT!” she screamed. There was a stereo twang as both crossbows loosed their bolts. The paired recoil sent him stumbling backwards. He tripped over a stone and sat down hard.

Adellia wasn’t watching that, however. She looked up in time to see the bolts hiss through the air with a sound like tearing silk. They landed with a pair of wet thuds-- one sticking out of each of the chimera’s eyes. It swayed for a moment, then fell over sideways with an earth-shaking crash. The awful pressure that had been building between her butt cheeks dissipated in an instant Adellia tumbled forward and landed on her side.

“Oh, Adellia!” she sobbed. “Oh, I’m so sorry! I was so scared! How can you… can you ever forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” Adellia untangled herself from Toby’s arms and gently lowered his hands to his sides. “Why would I need to forgive you? You saved me!” She leaned forward and planted a kiss on his lips. He was still staring at her in shock.

“But…” he stammered, “my advice, it didn’t… and then the beast… oh, Adellia, your stomach…”

She looked down and grimaced. “Yes, Toby, I know. We’ll have to get that looked at.” She looked up at him again and cupped his chin in one hand. “This isn’t the first time something like this has happened to me, Toby. I’ll be ok. But look at you! That was an excellent shot!”

“I just… I didn’t…” he still seemed unable to form a complete sentence. “I was just so angry. And scared. And then it all seemed so clear, what I had to do. I just aimed and fired. Did I really kill that thing?” He craned his neck to get a look at the gigantic corpse.

“You really, did, Toby. And you really saved me. My knight in shining armor.” Adellia smiled at him, and he smiled back. The last couple of tears dried up on his cheeks.

“That’s… not really like how the books said it would be,” he said. “I was a lot more scared. I just knew that I had to do something.”

“The people who wrote those books were pretty scared too, Toby,” Adellia said. “They just don’t put that part in because it sounds sissy. Now, come on, let’s get back down before the sun sets. It’s getting colder, and I’m a little short of clothes.”
They began to descend, Adellia leaning heavily on Toby for support. Each step was easier than the one before. The last traces of venom were working their way out of her system.

“You know,” Toby said, as they passed the cave, “I think I may have an idea on how to remove those eggs. There’s an elixir I read about in one of Dr. Wullet’s treatises. *Borneo by Kayak*, I think it was. The tribes there have developed some astonishing botanical medicines in response to local predators. I wonder if there’s a local equivalent?”

Adellia let his voice wash over her. She smiled to herself. He may have slain a chimera to save her, but he was the same old Toby. Some things would never change.

And she wouldn’t have it any other way.
Double Trouble, Part I

Chapter Summary

When they bite off more than they can chew, Adellia and Toby find themselves teaming up with another pair of hunters.

Tarasque!

The rumors spread like oil, pouring down out of the hills and pooling in the scattered villages of Provence. And like oil, they sat and fumed and awaited a spark.

Tarasque!

They reached as far as the cluttered streets of Marseille and crept into the marble halls of L’Academie Des Chasseurs, France’s premier seat of teratology and the hunting of fabulous beasts.

Tarasque!

Nobody had seen one for hundreds of years, and every description of the beast differed. Some said it had a shell like a turtle, others described its striking, stinging tail. Still others focused on its baleful gaze and lion’s mane. When pressed, none of the tale-tellers would admit to having seen the beast in person; their accounts filtered in second-hand, from a distant cousin or friend of a friend who had narrowly escaped the monster’s clutches.

Tarasque!

The spark came in late February, when an itinerant preacher stumbled white-faced into Le Sifflet D’or, a crossroads tavern near Brontes. Men like him were a common sight; many of the villages clinging to the slopes of the Maritime Alps were too small to have their own full-time clergyman, and he would travel on foot from church to church, staying long enough to preach and forgive before moving on. His next stop was supposed to be the tiny hamlet of Clovis-et-Cour. He had arrived to find a ghastly, burnt-out ruin: houses toppled, fields torn up, and everywhere the wide, clawed tracks of the Tarasque. Bodies and parts of bodies lay scattered everywhere, a scene of such awful carnage that the priest’s hair had gone white. Of the sixty-odd souls who had made their homes in Clovis-et-Cour, only fifty-two could be identified among the remains. The remaining eight-- young maidens all, although this connection was not made until much later-- were assumed to have been swallowed whole.

Within a week, every hotel in Marseille was booked solid. The hunters had arrived.

Two of these were Adellia Hawk and Toby Cotton. Fresh from Greece and flush with tan, the two of them had heard the rumors while booking passage home in Piraeus. As far as Adellia was concerned, there was no question: they would be hunting the Tarasque. She had been going stir crazy for the past several weeks. The procedure to remove the chimera eggs had been extended and difficult; she had taken several doses of a powerful elixir, then expelled the eggs over the course of three days. Three days of grunting, sweating, and straining. Three days of contractions and painful stretching. Toby had been supportive, of course, but she didn’t exactly relish the prospect of him seeing her like this. Afterwards, she had been strictly confined to bed rest on doctor’s orders, with
Toby as her reluctant jailer. The one time she had tried to break out, she’d gotten three steps before falling over and curling into a ball on the floor.

But she was back now! She was back, damn it, and fit as a fiddle. Her stomach had regained its former flatness, and her intimate parts were all shipshape as well. She suspected that the number and variety of numbing agents and relaxant venoms she’d been exposed to had rendered her innards somewhat rubbery, though this was a thesis she was in no mood to test. In any case, she could walk again, and she could certainly shoot. The chimera head would look great on her wall-- once the taxidermist they’d hired replaced its eyes with glass orbs-- but it wasn’t enough. And besides, Toby had gotten the kill, anyways. Adellia’s trigger finger was itchy. She wasn’t going to go out on a hunt this long and not shoot something.

By the time they arrived in Marseille, most of the good hotels had been taken, but they found lodgings in a youth hostel by the docks. Their landlady was a plump, matronly woman with dribbling blonde curls. “Are ‘ou two students?” she’d asked when they checked in.

“No, ma’am. We’re hunters.” Toby had sounded so earnest and proud, but their hostess’s laugh had visibly deflated him.

“You? Hunters? Mon ami, you’re just children!”

She’d been gracious, though, and hadn’t said a word about the lack of a ring on Adellia’s finger. And she cooked, too, big puffy loaves of fresh bread served with soup and fried fish. She always pushed a second helping on her guests and made sure their wine glasses remained topped off.

Of course, this wasn’t a vacation. Toby spent the first couple of days provisioning, while Adellia took advantage of her family membership in St. Hubert’s Circle to gather information. She hobnobbed at the local Lodge, buying drinks for retired hunters and keeping her ears open. She learned much from this: the beast had been sighted in the Maritime Alps, or else in the Lower Alps; it had already been taken by the famed hunter Gascoigne, or else Gascoigne was recovering in hospital from a near-fatal wound; it was ten feet long, or thirty, or fifty; it was a fake, a hoax, perpetrated by local children. She filtered out the nonsense and focused on those accounts she could corroborate. After three days, she was fairly certain of where to go. Most sightings clustered in the foothills north of Cannes, and coaches were running out that way every day. She saw experienced hunters-- big, serious men with thick moustaches and plate armor-- buying coach tickets to the town of Grasse. That’s where we’ll go, she decided. Then we’ll take down the Tarasque.

Most of the other customers waiting in line at the coach depot were hunters, too. Festooned as they were with traps, chains, crossbows, caltrops, grapnels, hooks and weighted nets, they clanked when they walked. Most of them were older, too: they looked practically grizzled, wrapped as they were in pelts and leather.

In the midst of this crowd, the couple in front of her stood out like a sore thumb. For one thing, they were close to Adellia’s age. Both were tall and slim, with blonde hair; the man’s was bound back in a ponytail, while the woman let hers cascade down to her shoulders. She had taken them for a couple, but when they half-turned she caught a glimpse of two startlingly similar faces. Siblings, then, possibly even twins. They spoke to each other in hushed French, a language Adellia barely spoke. Her parents had tried to teach her, but languages were just boring.

She tried to restrain her curiosity, but she kept peeking at them. It was rude to stare, of course, but she didn’t want to stare. Just to look. They were hunters! Her age! She knew that she was a hunter, of course, and she didn’t need reassuring… but still, it was nice to see a fellow adept of the chase that wasn’t grey and grizzled.
She must have been staring too closely. The man turned to face her and she found herself looking into a pair of dazzling blue eyes. They were soft, those eyes, but they sparkled with mischief. A neat blond goatee framed his chin and wreathed his smile. His teeth were white as snow and perfectly aligned. For a moment, Adellia could only gaze at him in wonder.

The sound of his voice brought her back to earth. “I’m sorry?” she said, and shook her head to clear it. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak French.”

“Ah. My apologies,” the man said, bowing courteously. “I am Philippe Martel, and zis is my sister Colette.” Colette waved at Adellia demurely.

“We were just wondering, madam-- are you a hunter as well?”

“Me?” Adellia stabbed a finger into her chest rather harder than she’d intended to. “Uh, yes. I am. I am a hunter, actually. Yes.” She trailed off as Philippe broke into a broad grin.

“Magnifique!” he cried. “Ah, it is so wonderful to meet another our age! I was afraid my hair was going grey just standing among these grand-peres! And so beautiful, too! Isn’t she, Colette?”

“Oui!” Colette nodded enthusiastically, sending her blonde curls bouncing. “You must share our coach, my dear, you must!”

“Oh!” Adellia hid her blush behind one hand. “Well, I’m here with my boyfriend, actually…”

The Martel siblings shared a wordless look, then turned back to Adellia as one. “Of course!” Philippe said. “We cannot wait to meet him!”

“You are English, non?” Colette asked. “Hoxleigh?”

“Yes!” Adellia said, quite a bit louder than she’d intended. She clapped one hand over her mouth. “I mean, yes. You know of it?”

“We’ve wanted to visit for a while now!” Philippe said. “I have heard you have the most magnificent running track.”

“And the library!” sighed Colette. “Largest in ze world! Oh, to spend an afternoon among the books!”

“Once we’ve bagged this Tarasque, we shall have to visit.” Philippe laughed heartily. “Ah, who knows? Probably it will be gone by the time our coach arrives. But we have to try. Everyone wants a piece of this monster. Whoever catches it will be legendary.”

“Why don’t we hunt it together?” Adellia asked. She was surprised at her own daring, but there was something infectious about Philippe’s enthusiasm. “Four heads are better than two, right? And we can split the reward.”

The siblings looked at each other again, then turned back to Adellia. “Ah, how can I say no to such a beauty?” Philippe asked. “You are right, of course. We would be honored to accompany you.”

His sister smiled and her eyes narrowed. She looked as though she was laughing at some private joke. “After all,” she said, “who cares about the reward? Any true hunter knows that the joy is in the thrill of the chase.” She giggled behind her hand. Adellia thought the look Colette was giving her was a little strange, but before she could say anything, the line had brought the siblings to the ticket counter.
“Two—four tickets to Grasse, please,” he said, giving Adellia a wink. “Do not worry about the cost, mon coeur. To hunt by your side is all the payment I require.” He handed Adellia two tickets. “Our coach leaves tomorrow morning. I will see you on it!” He bowed again, deeper than before, and clasped her fingers in one hand. He raised them to his lips and planted a delicate kiss on her knuckles. She stifled a laugh at the feeling of his goatee tickling her skin.

“T-thank you,” she stammered. His forward manner was quite disarming.

“Make sure you bring your petit copain!” Colette said. “I cannot wait to meet him!”

Adellia practically skipped all the way back to the hotel room.

Toby was packing when she waltzed in. “Did you get the tickets?” he asked. “Were they expensive? I’m trying to budget for—”

“They were free!” Adellia spun around on her heel and collapsed onto the bed, heedless of the careful piles of clean laundry. “Toby, I met some people!”

His brow furrowed. “Some people?”

“Hunters! Young hunters, like us! Philippe and…” she struggled for a moment to remember the girl’s name. When she closed her eyes, she could still see Philippe’s big blue eyes. “Uh, Colette. They want to hunt with us! The four of us can track down the Tarasque together. They bought us tickets!”

“Oh. That’s, uh… that’s nice, Adellia,” Toby said. He seemed nonplussed. “So, did you find out anything about them?”

“We’ll have plenty of time on the coach ride,” Adellia said. She hadn’t been looking forward to it, in truth, but now the prospect delighted her in ways she couldn’t quite define. “Let’s finish packing and get some rest. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

They arrived bright and early at the depot, their bags in tow. Adellia had bundled up in a hooded parka, while Toby was swaddled in a thick jacket and woolen hat. The morning was cold enough that Adellia’s breath fogged in the air. She looked around for a few moments until a waving hand caught her attention. At the far end of the platform, two jacketed figures stood side by side, the taller one waving at them. “Coucou!” called Philippe. “Adellia!” He was dragging a wheeled suitcase behind him, and it clanked and rattled across the concrete platform. His sister waved as well. She wore a long fur coat with a matching stole and carried a smaller, more elegant valise. Her hair had been put up in a tight chignon held in place with two silver pins.

“Zis must be le copain,” Philippe said, extending a hand towards Toby. Toby took it and shook, a momentary grimace passing across his face.

“Toby Cotton, sir. Pleased to meet you.”

“Oh, Toby! Such a pleasure!” Colette threw open her arms and, before Toby could react, flung them around him in a hug. She kissed him on each cheek and squeezed him close. “What a lucky girl you are, Adellia! I am Colette, Toby. And my brother here is Philippe.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Toby said. He sounded a little out of breath, and his face was redder than the weather alone could justify. “I’m looking forward to hunting with you.”

“Oh, we will make an unstoppable team. I can feel it.” Philippe grinned and elbowed Toby in the
ribs. “You and me, eh? We’ll show ze ladies how it’s done.”

“Nonsense!” Colette tossed a hand dismissively and linked elbows with Adellia. “While zese lummoxes are stamping around in the woods, Adellia and I will be claiming ze prize.”

Adellia felt herself relaxing. Colette’s laugh was infectious. Even Toby was smiling (and surreptitiously trying to rub some feeling back into his fingers). The coachman called out their ticket numbers from the edge of the platform, and the four of them hoisted their suitcases. “Shall we be off?” Philippe asked, gesturing towards the coach with one hand. “Please, madam, let me carry your bag.” He swept it out of Adellia’s unresisting hands.

Adellia cleared her throat to get Toby’s attention and jerked her head towards Colette’s valise. He looked confused for a moment, then light dawned. “Ah, miss, uh, Colette,” he said. “Would you like me to carry your bag?”

“Such a gentleman!” Colette sighed, and mimed a swoon. She handed over her valise and Toby hefted it alongside his own bag. “And so strong!”

The coach was well-insulated, at least, and with the four of them inside it soon warmed up to comfortable levels. They were able to shed their coats and relax. Adellia’s pool of conversational topics was never very deep—once she had exhausted the weather she was pretty much down to climbing techniques and local monsters— but she found the Martel twins easy to talk to. They listened with interest as she and Toby described Hoxleigh. Philippe told her about something called “free-running” which sounded like a blend between running and climbing; he promised to demonstrate as soon as they could stretch their legs. Colette, meanwhile, hung off of Toby’s every word as he described the library and labs. “It sounds incredible, mon beau,” she said. “We attended L’Academie in Marseille, and it was very fine, but Hoxleigh is renowned the world over. She sighed and knotted her fingers together in her lap. “Perhaps someday you can show me.”

Adellia wasn’t one to stare, but she couldn’t help but notice that as Colette leaned forward, her arched back thrust her chest up and out between her arms. She had unbuttoned the top button of her blouse and her bosom strained at the fabric. She wasn’t the only one who’d noticed, either; Toby’s eyes kept dropping to Colette’s ample cleavage before he remembered himself and looked back up at her face. His cheeks went even redder. Adellia rolled her eyes, but she didn’t want to embarrass him—and if Colette hadn’t noticed, Adellia wasn’t going to draw attention to it. It was getting rather warm in the coach, anyways; she couldn’t be blamed for wanting to unbutton a bit.

Instead, Adellia looked at Philippe. He had rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscular forearms covered with a light dusting of blonde hair. He wore a cross on a gold chain around his neck, and as the coach rattled along it bounced against his broad chest. Toby may not have been Cotton Ball anymore, but Philippe was on a whole different level. He had a jawline like an anvil and his muscles bulged beneath his silk shirt. He saw Adellia looking and tipped her a wink. She blushed and looked away quickly. Strange thoughts were rising unbidden in her chest, but she shoved them down and focused on the story Toby was telling.

“—so anyways, we dragged it down the mountain and had it stuffed.”

“Fantastique!” Colette clapped. “A chimera! And it was just the two of you facing it down? How brave!”

“Ah, it was nothing,” Adellia said. She wondered how the twins would react if they heard the whole story.

“Beautiful and modest!” Philippe laughed, and his sister giggled. Then Toby was laughing, too,
and Adellia had no choice but to join them.

By the time they reached Grasse, the sun was starting to set. “Come, we know a good hostel,” Colette beckoned. “We will have dinner and set off into the mountains tomorrow.”

Adellia’s legs and bottom were dreadfully sore from the coach, but at the word ‘dinner’ her stomach rumbled. She hadn’t been able to eat during their short lunch break; the jostling motion of the coach had turned her stomach to water, and she was afraid that anything she swallowed would come right back up again. Toby and Philippe unloaded the suitcases, and as they did, Colette came up to her and linked elbows again.

“So, mon chou,” she began, a note of mischief in her voice, “that is le copain, eh? How did the two of you meet?”

“Oh, we were at school together.” Adellia smiled at the memory. “He… helped me study for a test.”

“You are a lucky woman. He is quite handsome.”

“Thanks!” Adellia felt a little strange about the compliment, but she didn’t want to offend the girl. The Martels had been so generous so far. Her father had warned her about the French. They had their funny little ways. “And yourself?” she asked, trying to be polite. “Do you have a… a copain?”

“Mais, non,” Colette said, flicking her wrist in the universal gesture of dismissing that which was not important. “I do not have the time. Perhaps someday… but I could not be with any man who could not keep up with me in the field. You understand, yes? You are lucky, to have a man who shares your interests.”

“My parents are the same way,” Adellia said. “They met at Hoxleigh, too. They hunt together all the time.”

“That is true love!” Colette replied. “For me, nothing compares to the joy of the chase. It is when I feel most alive.” She looked at Toby while she spoke, and there was a predatory gleam in her eye. For the first time, a ripple of unease flickered through Adellia.

Before she could say anything, Colette went on. “My brother is the same way. He has a passion for the hunt. This Tarasque… this hunt could be our biggest yet. It will make us famous!”

Adellia had to admit that she’d considered the same possibility. “I thought the Tarasque were extinct?” she asked. “Where did this one come from?”

“Nobody knows,” Philippe said, and lifted a bag off the back of the cart. Adellia had packed this one herself and knew how heavy it was, but he slung it over one shoulder as though it was full of feathers. “There are strange things in the mountains. Mysteries. Who knows what lurks in the shadows?” He waved his fingers and whistled eerily between his teeth. Colette laughed and punched him in the shoulder.

“It was probably just torpid,” she said. “Ze last recorded sighting of a Tarasque is in 1325. It could have remained in torpor zat whole time, easy.”

“But for more than five centuries? Only a mature adult could have remained torpid for that length of time!” Toby exclaimed. “That would mean it’s… oh, at least six or seven tonnes!”

“At least,” nodded Colette in agreement.
“Well… we came prepared!” Philippe said. He reached into one of his bags and pulled out something like a cross made of metal. “Folding hand ballista. Nine hundred pounds of draw. Don’t try to cock it without the windlass, you’ll break your back.”

Adellia’s jaw dropped. She’d seen such things in the museum at Hoxleigh, but she’d thought her own crossbow— one hundred and eighty pounds of draw— was a serious weapon. She’d swaggered around in front of the mirror with it, shooting imaginary sphinxes. This bow, though… it made her crossbow look like a child’s toy. It was sleek, and oiled, and as powerful as a threshing machine, and it existed for one purpose and one purpose only: to put metal bolts the size of her forearm through six inches of armor plating.

It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and she knew at once that she had to fire it.

Just… one time. Just to see how it felt. She didn’t even care if she hit something. She brought one hand up to her face just in case she was drooling. Philippe must have seen the avarice in her eyes. He chuckled and put the beautiful, deadly thing away.

“You’ll get your chance, ma cherie,” he promised. “For now… dinner!”

The hostel turned out to be a comfortable wooden cabin nestled on the slopes of a mountain just north of town. Philippe stoked the fireplace until it was roaring and Colette diced vegetables for soup. Adellia’s offer to help was waved off. “Please! Settle into your room!” Colette ordered. “It has been a long trip for you two! Let us be gracious hosts.”

Adellia and Toby’s room was small but well-appointed, with a wide canopy bed and a small writing desk. Adellia began to unpack her bag while Toby went around the room lighting the gaslamps.

“So what do you think of them?” she asked. She heard Toby’s footsteps pause.

“The rooms? They’re small, but—”

“No, stupid. The Martels.” Adellia stood up and closed the door, then spoke again more quietly. “Philippe and Colette. Do you like them?”

“Oh.” Toby turned and shrugged. “They seem nice. Very knowledgeable people. You met them at the coach office?”

“Yeah, can you imagine?” Adellia grinned. “Lucky break, eh?”

“I guess so.” Toby went back to the lamps. “Colette is so knowledgeable! She has a list of books in the Hoxleigh library that she hasn’t been able to find anywhere else. Some of them I hadn’t even heard of!”

“She’s pretty, too,” Adellia said. She tried to keep her tone carefully neutral. Toby gave her a look like a boy who’d gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “I- I hadn’t noticed,” he stammered.

“Don’t rupture something, Cotton,” Adellia said. “You’re fine.”
“Speaking of fine,” he said with a wan smile on his face, “that Philippe, eh? He’s quite a specimen.”

“I…” Adellia cursed inwardly. She had hoped he hadn’t noticed. “He’s got a great bow,” she admitted. “I want one just like it.”

“Well, maybe he’ll let you touch it,” Toby said, and winked at her. Now Adellia was blushing herself.

“Look, I’m sorry, Toby,” she said. “They’re nice people, ok? We can agree on that.”

“Yes, of course.”

“We can look, but no touching.”

“Agreed.”

“You’re the one that I want, anyways.”

“The feeling is mutual.” Toby flopped down onto the bed and Adellia threw herself in beside him. She kissed him on the cheek, then he turned his neck and their lips met. She cradled his head in the crook of her arm and twirled her fingers through his hair. His mouth opened below hers and she savored the taste of him, the warmth, the--

“Dinner!”

Colette’s voice echoed off the cabin walls. Reluctantly, Adellia drew back from the kiss. Toby gave a little frustrated grunt, too, but he pushed himself up onto his elbows. “Later,” he whispered, and Adellia smiled.

“Promise?”

Dinner turned out to be a hearty stew with chicken and vegetables, and Philippe produced a bottle of red wine from the bottom of his bag. “An essential tool for hunting!” he called it. “No chasseur would dream of leaving the house without it!”

“A toast!” Colette declared, raising her glass. “To our new friends Toby and Adellia!”

“A toast!” Philippe agreed. “To the Tarasque! May it be a worthy foe!”

They toasted, and toasted again. Adellia drained her glass and allowed Philippe to fill it up again. The fire crackled merrily in the hearth. The wind swirled outside and clattered the shutters against the cabin walls, but inside they were warm and dry and comfortable. Warmth blossomed in Adellia’s belly from the soup and spread outward. Despite what came later, this would be a happy memory for years to come.

The Martels were easy to talk to. They started the evening with a discussion of the history of the region and the literature on the Tarasque, but as the wine flowed, more serious topics fell by the wayside. Philippe sang French drinking songs in a booming tenor, and Colette told the most delightfully dirty jokes. Even Toby contributed a few, much to Adellia’s surprise. His delivery could have been better-- perhaps it was the wine tangling his tongue-- but Colette laughed fit to bursting at each one. She laid one delicately manicured hand on his forearm. “Oh, monsieur Toby, you are so funny!” she said, breathless with laughter.

Adellia tried to ignore the sight of that graceful hand on Toby’s arm. Instead, she looked over at
Philippe. “What’s that you were singing, Philippe?” she asked.

“Oh, ‘*Il est les notres,*’” he said. “It means ‘he’s one of us.’ *Amie Philippe, leve ton verre, et surtout, ne le renverse pas!* Friend Philippe, raise your glass, but definitely don’t spill it!” He raised his glass to demonstrate. “Then you touch your glass to your body, like so.”

> “*Et porte-le du frontibus,*” he sang, and raised the glass to his forehead. “*Au nasibus,*” he moved it to his nose, “*au mentibus,*” to his chin, “*au pedibus,*” to his foot. He finished by taking a huge sip and bowed. “It is like a game, you see?”

“I think I get it!” Adellia held out her own glass for a refill. “Ok, do me.”

Philippe waggled his eyebrows, took a deep breath, and broke into song.

> “*Amie Adellia, leve ton verre, et surtout, ne le renverse pas!*”

> “*Et porte-le du frontibus,*”

> “*Au nasibus,*”

> “*Au mentibus,*”

> “*Au nates.*”

Adellia was confused by this one for a moment, then memory kicked a neuron. These weren’t French words, they were Latin. She rose slightly from her seat and reached around behind her to press her glass against one butt cheek. Philippe laughed and clapped, then sang:

> “*Au ubera!*”

Adellia’s eyes grew wide and she snorted with laughter. She pressed her glass between her breasts and shimmed her body back and forth to make them shake. Wine splashed out around the rim of her glass and soaked her shirt. She knew she should be self-conscious, but it was hard to see why. Wine, friends, and food… she was having a great time! And Philippe’s appreciative gaze roaming over her chest made her feel a tingle that was not entirely from the wine. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Toby scowling at her, and a rebellious little part of her brain thought Good! Serves you right!

All too soon, it was time for bed. Adellia found that she was rather unsteadier on her feet than she had expected, and it was only with Toby’s help that she made it to bed. She stripped down to her skivvies and crawled under the covers. The room was spinning around her. Toby got in next to her and pulled the blankets up to his chin. Adellia’s hand slunk about under the covers and slid across his waist, but he gently took her wrist and pushed it away.

“Maybe tomorrow, Adellia, alright?” he said. “I’m a little tired.”

Adellia pouted. “Is this because I did the wine glass dance?” she asked.

“No,” Toby said, a little irritably in Adellia’s opinion. “I just had a lot to drink, ok?”

“Well, what about you?” Adellia was suddenly angry. “Oh, *monsieur* Toby, your jokes are so funny! Please touch *les tetons!*” Her imitation of Colette’s voice was rather nasal, but it got the point across. “Do you want me to go get her?”

“You’re one to talk!” Toby snapped. “Splashing wine all over yourself so Philippe can get a good
look! You think he liked what he saw?"

“Maybe I’ll ask him!” Adellia shot back.

“Maybe you should! Hmph!”

“Hmph!”

They each grabbed one half of the blanket and rolled onto their sides in opposite directions. The blanket pulled taut and yanked them back towards each other. There was a moment of tension, then Adellia sighed and wrapped her arms around Toby. “I’m sorry, love,” she whispered. “Look, let’s just slay the Tarasque and say goodbye to our new friends, ok?”

“I’m sorry, too.” Toby planted a kiss on the middle of Adellia’s forehead. “You’re right. They’re just… friendly, that’s all. And French.”

The next morning, Adellia sorely regretted her indiscretion. Her head felt as though a brass band had set up shop inside it and were tuning their instruments. By the look of him, Toby wasn’t faring much better. They dressed themselves in fits and starts and stumbled out into the cabin’s main room to find Philippe and Colette happily cooking breakfast. If last night’s festivities had left a mark on either of them, they didn’t show it.

“Ah, mon ange, you are awake!” Philippe said, winking at Adellia. “Ready for ze big hunt?”

“I hope you slept well, Toby,” Colette said with uncharacteristic shyness. “You should be well rested for today’s adventures!”

The table was laid with fruit and buttered baguette toast. Adellia fell on it gratefully. She had drunk more than she meant to the night before, and not eaten enough. Toby was starving, too, by the looks of it. As they polished off the remains of breakfast, the twins were packing and checking their gear.

“Les chasseurs will be as thick as flies today, I think,” Philippe said. “But they don’t know where to look. We do.”

“Rimbaud’s _Morte de Tarasque_ says that the beast will often lair in cool, shady valleys,” Colette explained. “Yesterday I spoke to a local woodcutter. A perfect valley lies not fourteen kilometers north of here. Zere’s no guarantee, but… it could be a lair site. One of several.”

The temperature outside was brisk, if not exactly chilly, and Adellia dressed in her comfortable leathers. She had missed them sorely. She wore thick-soled hiking boots and a bandolier around her chest. Her crossbow seemed tiny and insignificant compared to Philippe’s portable ballista, but she felt practically naked without it. She filled her pack with water bottles, fresh socks, grapnels, chalk dust, and other portable climber’s tools. Finally, she double-checked to make sure her knife was at her belt. It hung differently than her old one-- the blade was longer and wider, the bone hilt lighter than her old metal one. She wouldn’t have traded it for anything, though. It was a reminder of Pandela and Pembru and how far she’d come.

_Look out, Tarasque_, she thought with a smile. _Your days are numbered._

Their hike began as a mild walk in the woods. The trail quickly petered out, and Philippe took the lead. They bushwhacked through copses of juniper trees and across trickling rills fed by snowmelt far above. As they climbed, a gradual gloom settled over the group. It wasn’t anything like as dramatic as a gathering of thunderheads, but the sky seemed to dim. Their happy conversations
trailed away and they each stared grimly forward. They began to see signs of other hunters: discarded bottles, broken lengths of chain, rusted traps. The woods grew quieter, too, the birdsong fading away. There was no rustling of small animals in the bushes, no distant howl of wolves. They were alone.

Up ahead, the mountainside humped up into a steep rock-strewn hillock. Philippe and Adellia bounded up it on all fours. Toby and Colette lagged behind. Adellia stopped at the top and turned with her hands on her hips. “I told you I’d have to teach you to climb, Cotton!” she called. “Come on, this is easy!” Behind her, Philippe dashed ahead. The ground here leveled out into a broad, flat plain before starting to climb again in the distance.

Toby was panting and sweating by the time he reached the top. Adellia helped him up, then sat and watched Colette manage the last few meters. The French huntress huffed and puffed and her blonde hair had been gathered into a pragmatic ponytail. She had worn sturdy canvas trousers with black braces that ran over her cotton blouse. It was a perfectly serviceable outdoor outfit, but it also flattered her figure much more than Adellia’s leathers. She told herself that she was being uncharitable, but the memory of last night still rankled.

“Allo?” Philippe’s voice called from up ahead. “Ah, mes amies… I zink I have found something…”

He stood about fifty feet away at the edge of an escarpment. As Adellia approached, he grimaced. “Ah… I do not know if ze ladies want to see zis…”

“Oh, boil your head, Philippe,” Colette snapped. “I am not some wilting violet. Are you, Adellia?” She scoffed. “I thought not. What have you found?”

They joined him on the ledge and he gestured downwards with one hand. “Ze missing women,” he said grimly.

They stood at the lip of a shallow canyon. Steep, rocky walls sloped downward and met to form a divot carved out of the earth. The inside was lightly forested; most of the ground was taken up by an uneven moraine broken up by erratic boulders. Strewn on the ground among them were pink shapes. At first, Adellia couldn’t make sense of what her eyes were seeing; then she adjusted for the depth of the valley and cringed in disgust. At least a dozen women lay on the ground of the canyon. All were nude, and by the look of it, heavily pregnant. Their bellies were grotesquely swollen orbs of pale flesh. The youngest looked barely out of her teens; the oldest was in late middle age. All of them lay stiff and still. Adellia thought the nearest might be dead, but she watched her for a little while longer and the girl’s chest rose and fell. Her eyes stared sightlessly upward.

“It is as I feared,” whispered Colette. “The Tarasque… she is a brooding female.”

“A female?” Toby asked. “How… how can you…?”

“Zose victims? She paralyzes zem with her sting and lays her eggs within. Once zey hatch, zey eat zeir way out. It is a most agonizing way to die.” She pointed at one of the victims, whose shape was mercifully obscured by distance and a pile of rocks. All Adelia could make out was a pink blotch covered by a dark red smear.

“How dreadful!” she said. “Is there anything we can do for them?”

“Well, ze eggs take at least a month to hatch. Anytime before hatching zey can be removed. It isn’t pretty, but it’s doable. We can’t do it here, though. Their wombs will have closed back up. We
need to get zem back to civilization.”

“And the Tarasque?”

“She’ll be nearby,” Colette said. Her mouth was a thin, bloodless line. “Hunting. She won’t stray far from her brood. After they polish off their mother, they’re still ravenous.”

“We have to rescue those poor women!” Toby said. “We know where she is, we can hunt her later…”

“If we dive in there, we’re as good as dead ourselves,” Philippe answered. “We can wait out here. She’ll have to come back. We set up the ballista, and when she returns… ZAM! We kill the bitch!”

Toby shook his head. “Look at all the rocks down there. You’ll never get a clean shot. And who knows how long she’ll be gone? This is our chance!”

“I have an idea!” Adellia clapped her hands over her mouth. She’d almost shouted. But the plan had come together so perfectly in her head! “How about two of us go down there and two of us stay up here and set up the bow? Then if she comes back from this direction, we have advance warning. And if she sees the two that are rescuing the victims, they can lead her into this narrow end of the canyon. It’ll be like shooting fish in a barrel!”

Philippe looked at her for a moment and rubbed his chin. “It is possible…” he began. “But I must stay up here to set up the ballista. Who shall go down?”

“I had better,” Toby said with a sigh. “I don’t think Adellia and Colette can carry those poor women between them.”

Adellia was torn. She almost volunteered to climb down with Toby… but then she caught a glimpse of the oiled steel ballista frame sticking out of Philippe’s pack. Her mouth practically started watering. She wanted to fire it so badly. Just to see how it felt! It wouldn’t even matter if she hit anything… although, of course, it would. She had to remind herself of that. This was no game. The Tarasque had slain dozens and might kill hundreds more if not brought down.

As she wrestled with her dilemma, Colette raised a hand. “I will go with Monsieur Toby! You two stay up here and set up the bow!”

Adellia’s eyes narrowed. There was another reason to volunteer. Too late now, of course. Her eyes kept flickering towards the bow. “All right,” she said. “Be careful!”

A shallow cut in the wall of the ravine provided a way down. Toby and Colette moved slowly and carefully. Their every step sent tumbling mini-avalanches of loose rocks and dirt. Adellia watched for a moment until Philippe’s voice caught her attention.

“Allons-y! Adellia! Help me with zis!” He beckoned her over. The ballista frame lay on the ground before them, separated into pieces. Following Philippe’s directions, she planted screws in place, assembled the supporting scaffold, and strung the great bow. The ballista’s bolts were heavy shards of steel with barbed heads. Philippe showed her how to set the spring-loaded release that would, on impact, drive the barbs outward into their target.

As they worked, Toby and Colette crept across the canyon floor. She stuck closer to him than was, perhaps, strictly necessary, but even Toby had to admit that the sense of foreboding had only increased once they descended the ravine. The light seemed dimmer here, and every step caused the rocks to shift and clack against each other. The sound echoed off the steep walls of the canyon.
He kept swiveling his hard back and forth, expecting at any moment to see the Tarasque charging from behind some boulder.

They reached the nearest victim—a pale-skinned girl in her mid-twenties, by the look of her. Her face was frozen in an attitude of terror and her hands raised before her head in a warding gesture. Toby shuffled around uncomfortably for a moment or two, looking for a grip. There seemed to be nowhere to put his hands that didn’t fill them with warm, pink, yielding flesh. The woman’s gravid belly jiggled as he picked her up under the shoulders. Colette hoisted her by the ankles and, step by step, they began to carry her back the way they had come.

They had not gone more than ten paces when an ear-splitting crash filled the air. It sounded like the mountainside had cracked open. It was followed a moment later by a terrifying bellow that turned Toby’s guts to ice water. Massive footsteps shook the earth and set the stones to clacking and jouncing against each other.

The Tarasque had returned.

Colette’s face was white with fear. She lost her grip on the unconscious woman’s ankles, and the full weight of her fell on Toby. He tumbled over backwards with her on top of him. He yelped in fear and revulsion and flailed his arms to push her off, but only succeeded in tangling himself up further. Her head flopped around so that her sightless eyes were staring him right in the face, and her swollen stomach pinned him to the canyon floor. Colette reached down towards him, hesitated, and turned.

The Tarasque loomed over them both. Toby’s first impression was of a massive turtle. Its head was angular and reptilian, crowned with a bony crest. Most of its body was covered by a thick, knobbly shell the color of stone. Six legs like an elephant’s supported it, three on each side. In between the ridges of the shell wriggled what Toby thought at first must be worms. Parasites? No, he realized; they were tentacles, wriggling prehensile limbs that somehow projected from the Tarasque’s body itself. Three were much larger than the others, one in the middle of its back and two on each side, and these were tipped with vicious stingers that came to needle points.

Toby froze. His only hope, he knew, was to avoid the beast’s notice. It snuffled loudly and swung its head from side to side. Colette stood stock-still. Only the whites of her eyes were visible. She was whining, high and thin, a sound of pure terror. “Hold still, Colette,” Toby hissed. “I don’t think it can--”

Too late. She let out a strangled yelp and bolted. The Tarasque’s head whipped around. It lumbered after her, and despite its massive size for a moment Toby thought she would make it to the path that led up and out. Then its stinger-tentacle lashed out. It seemed to stretch in an instant to many times its normal length. There was a sound of cloth tearing, then it snapped back into place.

From her position, Adellia saw it all. She watched as Toby fell, saw the Tarasque standing over him, then saw Colette’s desperate flight. She gasped as the stinger punched through the huntress’s cotton shirt and drove itself deep into her lower back. Colette froze, her face twisted in agony, then fell over forward.

“No!” Philippe screamed, and made as if to dash out into the canyon. Adellia barely stopped him in time. “We have to shoot it! That’s how we save them!”

He looked at her, wild-eyed and desperate, and nodded. The two of them worked feverishly. Adellia slotted a barbed bolt into place and took aim while Philippe frantically worked the windlass. The air was filled with the sound of tortured metal. Sweat poured off his face and his arms pumped back and forth. Little by little, the bow creaked into position. The steel cable that
served as its string thrummed with tension. Adellia pulled out the safety catch and rested her finger on the trigger. Her heart hammered in her ears. She drew in a deep breath and sighted along the bow.

“No!” Philippe shouted. “Hold! Not yet! Not until it’s fully wound!”

Adellia nodded curtly. The bowstring pulled back, farther and farther, inch by torturous inch.

“Now?” she asked.

“No!”

Philippe couldn’t see what she could see. The Tarasque stood over Colette, slaver dripping from its jaws. As Adellia watched, it scooped her up in one supple tentacle. Another curled around her suspenders and tore them off her body. Her trousers ripped along the seam. The Tarasque was clearly clever enough to know what clothes are; it worked to strip her with practiced efficiency. Another tentacle slithered out from the crevices of its shell, this one with a bulbous, flared tip.

“Now!” Adellia shouted. “It has to be--”

She wasn’t sure, even later, if she had pulled the trigger deliberately or if it had been a spasm of excitement. Regardless, the result was the same. The bow twanged and the bolt flew straight and true. Wind whipped through its fins as it carved the air, causing it to trail a loud screech. The whole hand ballista apparatus shook with relieved tension. The bolt crossed the distance to the Tarasque in two heartbeats and struck it right between the eyes.

Where it stuck.

Adellia stared in disbelief. The bolt had lodged in the beast’s bony crest. Half of its length stuck out like a unicorn’s horn. A few inches deeper, she knew, and she’d have cored out its brainpan. The Tarasque roared and shook its head back and forth, but it did not seem substantially impaired.

Philippe’s jaw dropped. He stared at Adellia in horror. “What have you done?!” he cried. She knew he wouldn’t have time for another shot. If Colette was to be rescued, it was up to her.

She hit the slope at a dead run and pulled out her knife. The Tarasque’s armored shell was obviously impermeable, but its tentacles looked thin and squishy. She never knew how she kept her balance on the downslope. Rocks skidded and clattered beneath her feet. She leapt from ledge to ledge, leaving one footing a half-second before it crumbled into dust. By the time she landed on the canyon floor, her knife was held overhead. She could see the tentacle holding the helpless Colette; its surface was mottled and veiny like an overripe melon. One of the stinger tentacles darted towards her and she ducked out of the way. The second arced in from overhead and she somehow caught it on her knife-blade, deflecting the needle-sharp spine.

Too bad there were three, then.

The third stabbed in under her arm. Before she realized what was happening, there was a sharp pain, then a spreading coldness that radiated outward. She tried to flinch away, but her arm already seemed frozen. The knife clattered out of her hands and spun away across the rocks. Her momentum carried her forward for a moment longer, then she collapsed forward. She struggled against the numbness, but to no avail. She was locked, rigid as a corpse, in a body that was no longer obeying her commands.

A tentacle curled around her waist and lifted her up. The Tarasque hefted her as easily as a child
playing with dolls. She could see Colette, a few yards away, and the Frenchwoman’s eyes swiveled to meet hers. Those weren’t paralyzed, at least. Colette let out a strangled groan. Her clothing had been reduced to tattered scraps and, as Adellia watched, the bulbous tentacle oozed its way up her thigh, leaving a trail of slime behind it. Adellia knew what it had to be— one look at the poor women in the canyon floor would have confirmed it. Colette seemed to realize, too, by the mad rolling of her eyes. Adellia watched in horrified fascination as it crept closer and closer to the huntress’s tight slit. Just before it arrived, the Tarasque spun her around, perhaps for its own convenience, perhaps to torment Adellia with a close-up view of what she was about to experience.

Adellia couldn’t look away if she wanted to. She saw everything: the blonde curls thatching Colette’s soft mound, her puffy pink outer labia and meatier inner lips. She saw the tentacle-- the bruised green of a rotten fruit-- quiver and convulse. She saw the flared head pull back, then spear forward and impale Colette’s cunt. She saw the huntress's lower belly swell outward and her legs spasm as, just for a moment, the traumatic penetration overcame her envenomed paralysis.

She could do little more than twitch, though, as little by little the tentacle slid deeper inside her. Adellia found herself watching, fascinated. She could see every ripple of muscle, every flex and every jolt. Colette’s delicate folds bunched up around the sides of the tentacle. It cruelly thrust itself forward and inward, pushing them out of the way. This close it was impossible to deny the scale of the beast. Its tentacle was at least as thick around as Adellia’s bicep, and it grew thicker by the inch. Colette’s slender frame seemed hideously mismatched with her monstrous paramour. Surely, her hips would shatter; surely her flesh would give under the strain. Inch after inch of slimy, ooze-slick flesh forced its way into her quim, stretching and distending her pussy lips around itself. The skin of her mound tented out, leaving nothing to the imagination. Adellia thought she could see the tentacle’s veins through Colette’s skin. She could only hope that the venom had a pain-dulling component. She could only imagine the devastation that was being wrought to the French girl’s innards.

Nor was Colette’s ordeal over. The tentacle paused in its journey and flexed along its length. A bulge traveled through it, a clear wide spot. It looked like a snake digesting a badger. When it reached Colette’s body, the bulge squished and deformed itself to pour into her. Not an egg, then; Adellia’s suspicions were confirmed a moment later when Colette’s stomach ballooned outward. It bulged this way for a few seconds, then with an almighty spattering raspberry, a massive torrent of off-white goo squirted out from her ravaged hole. The tentacle inside her was stretching her almost beyond recognition, but Colette’s body somehow found enough give to allow a massive geyser of monster spunk to escape. It poured from her cunt like a waterfall, coating her thighs and falling down fifteen feet to splatter against the rocks. Even after the initial torrent had passed, a symphony of wet squelching sounds signaled twenty or thirty smaller expulsions. Soon enough her belly was almost entirely flat again, though her legs now dripped with slime to the ankles and the puddle on the ground was growing enormous.

The tentacle began to thrust again, and now it did so accompanied by a lubed-up, buttery squishing sound. Its movements became sharper, more powerful. Each thrust set Colette’s limbs to flailing, merely from the force of impact. She was clearly still paralyzed, but from the rolling of her eyes and her muffled groans, she could feel at least some of what was happening to her. Her blonde hair had been shaken free from its ponytail and hung in limp, sweat-soaked strands. With each punishing thrust, the ringlets bounced and swayed. Every ten or fifteen thrusts, the tentacle would pause and fire off another volley of slime. Each one puffed Colette’s belly out farther before escaping from her cunt in a sloppy spray.

The muscles of the tentacle bunched up between Colette’s thighs. It paused in its assault for a moment, then flexed. Adellia could actually see the bulge moving under her skin; for a moment, Colette’s body was stretched to what had to be the breaking point. Her eyes widened and she let out
an inhuman squeal. Just when it seemed inevitable she might burst, her body shuddered and the bulge moved higher. The tentacle relaxed and withdrew slightly, leaving a fist-sized lump protruding just below her navel. The monster had violated her womb.

Nor did it give her a chance to rest. The tentacle shimmied and flexed. Something round was making its way along its length; it was hard to judge perspective, but to Adellia it looked enormous, almost the size of a cricket ball. From her perspective, Colette couldn’t see it, which was just as well. The girthy, inhuman mass currently invading her quim had clearly pushed her to her limit. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Adellia felt a pang of pity for her, mixed with dread at the prospect of sharing the same fate. Whether the Tarasque could only impregnate one victim at once or simply preferred to taunt her by forcing her to watch, she couldn’t tell-- and it didn’t matter much, either.

Something was changing in Colette’s manner. It was hard to tell from just her eye movements and the sounds that she made, but her groans were no longer purely of pain and fear. The fluids that trickled out around the edges of her stuffed and straining pussy were not entirely the Tarasque’s, and her clit was visibly swollen. It peeked out of its hood. Her nipples, too, were rock-hard. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she let out a throaty groan. As if in response, the tentacle inside her shivered. A ripple passed along its length.

Adellia could imagine the sensation, the way its fleshy surface must be tickling Colette’s inner walls. She had experienced the same thing herself, after all. Unbidden, warmth began to rise inside her, and she found strange and lustful thoughts filling her mind. She tried to tell herself that this was serious, that she was at the mercy of a deadly monster and poor Colette was already being victimized, but her body would not obey her commands. Her sex was waking up and a dull itch built in her lower belly. She could feel moisture beading her plump pussy lips.

Bizarrely, her first reaction was embarrassment. Here she was, paralyzed and suspended high above the earth, in the clutches of a beast that had killed dozens and would likely kill her, too… and yet she could only pray that Philippe did not notice her arousal. After all, it was his sister that was being violated. She hoped that he and Toby would escape while the beast was distracted. At least it would not kill her right away. That’s right, she told herself. You might linger, paralyzed and in torment, until its spawn devour you from the inside out. The danger was real, and yet all she could think about was whether Philippe was seeing her shameful lust. She hoped not. Toby, too, of course… though he’d seen her in positions more compromising than this. And you didn’t think about Toby first, did you? asked a treacherous little voice from somewhere in the dark recesses of her brain. She shook it off.

The first egg had reached Colette’s entrance, and there it halted. It nudged at her once, twice, but it could not force its way through her lips. Her pussy had been a tight, delicate thing, a coral-pink rose; now it was a stretched and gaping cavern, forced open by sheer muscle power, and yet it still would not yield to the egg. Colette could feel it battering at her cunt, but she could not see; Adellia supposed that made things worse. Still, the Tarasque was determined. The tentacle flexed, muscle piling up behind the egg, and shoved. This time the circle made it about a half-inch into Colette before halting. Again: the muscle bunched, there was a moment of tension, and in it went, a full inch this time. Over and over the Tarasque squeezed and shoved. It was endlessly patient. Little by little, its egg disappeared, Colette’s folds closing over it like the petals of a flower. Adellia found the sight strangely hypnotic. Even after it had left her view, she could see the shape beneath the other girl’s skin like a massive blister. It slid steadily deeper, closer and closer to the flared bulge that marked the tentacle’s end. When it reached her womb, Colette’s guttural moans became frantic, but there was nothing she could do. Her body had been thoroughly colonized, her innermost sanctum laid bare. She was utterly defenseless.
Sure enough, the two bulges drew closer together, inch by inch. Adellia watched, breathless, as they merged into one. When Colette’s terrified groaning tapered off, Adellia knew that the process was complete: right now, a bulbous, sticky egg was defiling the other girl’s womb.

Nor would it be alone for long. The second egg had already reached her pussy. This one found its passage much easier. Whatever feeble resistance Colette had been able to muster was exhausted now. Her alluring and delicate sex had been rendered a fucked-out meat-sleeve. Her eyes were glassy now and drool ran out of the corner of her mouth. She gave no reaction as two more eggs were pumped into her, even though each one caused her belly to swell to alarming proportions. Veins stood out beneath her alabaster skin, marring the otherwise smooth surface of a stomach the size of a beach ball. When the tentacle finally withdrew, a stream of spunk glugged out of her ruined cunny, but her tummy barely shrank at all. She looked like a woman about to give birth to triplets-- which, Adellia supposed, she was, though the spawn now growing in her belly would bring death with them.

The Tarasque lowered Colette to the ground with surprising gentleness. Its huge head turned towards Adellia and studied her with beady eyes. She felt a trickle of ice slide down her spine. Her body gently rotated until she was facing the Tarasque directly. She couldn’t turn her head to see what was going on behind her, but she knew all the same what was happening. She could see it in her mind’s eye, and when something wet and warm and soft pressed up against her inner thigh she could all too easily picture the tentacle. Now it was sliding along her skin now, leaving a slime trail behind it… now it was prodding gently at her slick pink folds… and now it slid inside her, its passage eased by the juices that had beaded her furrow while she watched Colette.

The paralysis had brought with it a sort of numbness. Adellia could feel the tentacle inside her, but faintly, as though it was pressing at her through multiple layers of fabric. From the sheer size of it, she felt as though she should be in pain, but she wasn’t. There was only a sensation of fullness. More and more rubbery flesh packed into her, distending her pussy lips and pressing against her inner walls. She could feel herself expanding to accommodate it. She could not see the swelling in her lower abdomen, but she could imagine it. Slick squishing sounds filled the air:

SPLRT! PLSH! SKLRPT!

Adellia would have not believed her own body capable of producing such lewd noises. Each unwelcome thrust filled the air with droplets of moisture, a mixture of the beast’s foul secretions and her own juices.

SPLAP! THWSH! PLLWP!

Her insides were getting a vigorous plumbing. The tentacle sawed in and out of her. Each thrust forced her open wider, shoving her innards aside to make room for its girth. Each withdrawal left her hollow and gaping. She could not move, could not even bend her legs into a more comfortable position. Her breath became shallow and raspy. She wanted to gasp, to beg for a reprieve, but even if she could move she knew the beast would not understand her pleas-- and even if it did, it would show no mercy. It was conquering her, molding her to its purposes. The only part of her that the Tarasque valued was her fertile womb, and it would soon be staking its claim.

Despite the chorus of lewd slurping and squishing-- not to mention the way her whole body shook with each pummeling impact-- the sensations Adellia was feeling below the waist were still distant and gauzy. She could feel her organs moving aside to make room for the monstrous invader, could feel her body yielding and stretching around the enormous ovipositor. That wasn’t all, though; a lump rose in her throat and she felt a strange, pleasurable tingling radiating outward from her clit. The rosy little bud ached, and right now she would have given her left arm just for a little bit of
freedom… just enough to reach down and rub that tender spot between her legs. She knew that foremost in her mind should be escape, but right now, all she could think of was release.

Slowly but surely, her channel yielded before the Tarasque’s vigorous fucking. The flared head of its tentacle scraped against her inner walls. If her limbs hadn’t been paralyzed, she’d have been weak-kneed and shuddering; as it was, she was helpless to do more than gasp and drool in ecstasy. No part of her body was left un plundered, no stone unturned. She could feel it deep, deep inside her, thrusting, twisting, squirting, mating. Her vaginal lips had stretched around it; now her insides were stretching too, expanding to accommodate something far larger than Nature had ever intended. And yet there was still no pain. Instead, she felt a kind of detached bliss. Each new inch that squirmed into her wet and welcoming channel brought with it a sense of euphoria. She felt as though she was locked in a competition, and the only way to win was to take every squirming, slimy inch.

Not that she had much choice. Smaller tentacles still bound her limbs, but it was barely necessary; the paralytic venom had done its work, and her every limb was frozen in place. She wanted-- desperately wanted-- to thrash, to curl her fingers and toes, to slide a hand between her thighs and rub furiously at the hooded button she’d find there. But she couldn’t. The most she could do was roll her eyes, and this she did with gusto. The rapture built inside her; she could feel every thrust, every slime-slick penetration, every desecration of her most sacred places. And every motion elicited a new twist of euphoria. Her mind was going blank. Her fears for Toby and Colette, her humiliation at being so publicly violated… none of that mattered or held up in the face of the pleasure. It rolled like an avalanche, like a forest fire, scorching clean any trace of worry or shame. Her orgasm overtook her and for a time, all she knew was white heat.

Her vision came back at around the same time sensation did. Below the waist, everything was still comfortably numb, but there was a new presence sitting in her belly like a stone. It twitched, and she could feel the thick meat-rod impaling her like a spear. The ovipositor had reached her womb, then. Her heart hammered in the aftermath of her orgasm. She wished she could speak, if only to beg for a reprieve… but there was no time to rest, the eggs were coming. She could not see them, though she could easily imagine those fat lumps trickling along the length of the tentacle. The anticipation pounded in her veins. Any second now, she would feel the rounded edge of the first egg forcing her open wider still.

When it came, though, she wasn’t as ready as she’d thought she was. The Tarasque was out of patience, perhaps, or it had merely learned from its experience with Colette. The egg did not arrive gently, but riding a cresting wave of muscular peristalsis. It slammed into Adellia like a thunderbolt, and the very first impact drove it almost halfway through her portal. She felt the breath leave her in a single gusting sigh, and her scream of surprise became a choking rattle. No sooner had she managed to catch her breath than the egg shoved itself further inside her.

She was aware only of the terrible pressure inside her, the feeling of something huge and alien forcing its way past her defenses. It filled her to the uttermost extent. She was being deformed around it, distended, her body reshaped by the massive lump plunging into her cunt. She managed a weak croak, but soon even that was impossible. The egg was inside her now, coring her out as it tunneled towards her womb. She could not see it, and that was perhaps the worst part: the helplessness, the sense that at any moment her world could be turned upside down without warning. She could feel it, though, could feel every shuddering pulse that drove it deeper, deeper into her body. She could feel it when it squeezed through the narrow ring of muscle and dropped free into her womb. Her ravaged insides, already ultra-sensitive after her first orgasm, could take no more. As the second egg arrived at her doorstep, the world dissolved into a pink mist. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she rode the wave of pleasure, the sparks dancing across her skin from her forehead to her fingertips. Her eyelids fluttered and, behind them, fireworks filled her
She was not sure how long she was out, but it could not have been too long; when she returned, she was still in the Tarasque’s grip. She could no longer feel movement inside her, but her stomach was a pendulous weight that dragged her down. Without looking she knew that she was grotesquely bloated with eggs. She felt like a stuffed sack— which, from the perspective of the Tarasque, was all she was. Was that to be her fate? Would she burst like a rotten melon, bleed out her last on these cold rocks to feed the next generation of monsters? Would her bones scatter in the rain on the mountainside?

Rage rose up inside her and denied this. She would not fall here. She would not. Tendons stood out like hawsers on her neck. Slowly, ever so slowly, she forced her head to turn by sheer force of will. The sight that greeted her made hope soar in her bosom.

Philippe had not been idle. He had reloaded the great siege bow and was even now furiously working the windlass. Muscles bulged and shifted beneath his bare arms. Sweat poured off his forehead. His teeth were gittered and his eyes narrowed in an expression of intense concentration. There was a loud click and the bow’s string locked into place. He grabbed it and hauled it into position. The metal framework vibrated under tension. Adellia could see the agony of indecision in his face. His gaze went from the Tarasque to Adellia and back again. She took in a deep breath and poured all of her will and determination into making her jaw work. Her shout came out muffled but unmistakable:

“SHOOT!”

Philippe’s eyes widened, but to his credit he did not hesitate. He pulled the trigger and the bow rocked in its cradle. The bolt ripped away with a sound like tearing silk. This one impacted just below the first, at the junction between the Tarasque’s skull and its bony crest. The effect, however, was radically different. The first bolt had lodged in place; this one pulverized the monster’s skull. Born and horn collapsed and fell away in sticky chunks. The Tarasque bellowed in pain and rage and thrashed to and fro. The tentacle holding Adellia whipped through the air, but somehow it did not drop her. Little by little, the Tarasque’s struggles grew weaker, and as it entered its death throes its tentacle sank to the ground. It finally let go entirely when Adellia was two feet off the ground, and she fell the rest of the way to land bruisingly hard on her ass.

From this vantage point, she had a front-row seat to the Tarasque’s demise. It had dropped her in the little pocket between it and the end of the canyon, and from this angle she could see how immense it truly was. Its shell completely filled the gorge, plugging it up as neatly as it had plugged up Adellia’s quim. Somewhere on the far side of it were Colette and Toby. As it thrashed its last, Adellia felt a spasm of fear— it could easily stomp her into jelly, and she still couldn’t move her limbs to get out of the way. Luckily for her, though, the shell weighed the creature down and prevented it from moving too far. It sank to the earth, gave one last wail, and expired.

For a moment, there was total silence. Then, from somewhere above, Philippe raised his voice in a whooping cheer. Toby answered it from beyond the Tarasque. “Philippe!” he shouted. “You’ve done it! It’s dead! It’s dead!”

“Toby!” Philippe answered back. “Monsieur Toby, are you free?”

“I am!” came the reply. “I can see Colette! She’s alive, Philippe! How is Adellia?”

Philippe leapt into the path and skidded almost all the way to the bottom. He ran over to where Adellia lay and grabbed her under the shoulders, pulling her up into a seated position. Adellia once again felt a twinge of shame at the handsome Philippe seeing her in such a compromising
position, but the feel of his hands against her skin was also tremendously comforting. It was a simple thing, a human touch, but it made so much difference. She was acutely aware of the deadly weight in her belly. She wondered how long she had.

Philippe ran a hand across her forehead to pull her hair out of her eyes. “Do not worry, ma cherie,” he murmured. “We will save you. We will find a way.” To Toby, he called out: “Ze girls! We must remove zese eggs! How long will ze paralysis last?”

“It should wear off within a day without the Tarasque around to give regular injections,” Toby replied. “But we can probably get rid of it sooner. I think Colette said she had essence of moonthorn in her pack? And I saw flowering aconite on the hike up here. If we mix those, we can formulate an antivenom.”

“Toby, you genius!” Philippe called back. “But ze eggs? How do we get zem out? Is zere a potion, or…”

Toby took a long time to reply, and when he did, he sounded uncertain. “Um… no, it’ll require surgery. The fluid the Tarasque secretes will adhere them to their wombs when it solidifies in an hour or two. Of course, we could…” he trailed off.

“We could what, man? Speak up!” Philippe stood up and cupped his hands around his mouth. “If zere is something we can try, we must!”

“You won’t like it!” Toby called back. “They should still be pretty dilated. We could… remove them by hand. We’d have to act fast, though…”

“You mean… reach our hands into…”

“Yes! I told you you wouldn’t like it!”

Adellia focused her will again. She hated, hated being helpless like this. Still, she was not going to go through a risky, uncertain surgery.

“Do. It.” she spat between gritted teeth.

Philippe looked down at her in surprise. “Adellia says to try it!” he shouted. “I will handle her if you can do Colette!”

They both heard Toby’s voice echo off the canyon walls. “Colette, do you want me to…” there was a pause. “She nodded! I think!” he shouted back.

“Very well then.” Philippe flexed his fingers and looked down at Adellia. “I am afraid we are going to get rather intimately acquainted, mon poussin. But it is to save your life, no?”

Without waiting for an answer, he knelt down next to her. Fortunately, she had been frozen in mid-stride, and her legs were widely spread apart. Her pussy still gaped open like a cave mouth. Goosebumps stood out on her thighs from the cold mountain air. Philippe leaned over her and laid one palm against her forehead. “You will have to be brave, Adellia. Ready? Here… I… go!”

She tried to prepared herself, but the feeling of his knuckles scraping against her inner walls still elicited a gasp. He beaked his fist and thrust forward. Her quim swallowed his hand to the wrist almost immediately with a wet shurping sound. She could feel his arm hairs, wiry little things that tickled her sensitive lips. Fortunately, he was not wearing any rings and his nails were trimmed short. He grabbed her by the shoulder to brace himself and pushed his arm further. As he slid deeper, her nether lips flapped and smoched at his skin. The noise was humiliating, but to tell the
truth, there was a frisson of excitement, too… Philippe had shed his shirt and his chest was broad and muscular, his pectorals neatly defined, his nipples little dark circles. She could smell him, too: a musky combination of scent and some kind of piney aftershave. His hand was deep now, so deep. It seemed like she couldn’t tell where she ended and he began. Despite their dire circumstances, she felt a strange intimacy with him. Moreover, the thought of Toby doing this with Colette… what rose up in her heart wasn’t exactly jealousy, but a sort of fermented longing. She told herself that this was necessary, it would pass, and they would never speak of it again.

Philippe’s fingers had reached her womb and slid inside without difficulty. The tentacle had left her raw and gaping, and she had to believe that the great quantity of fluids sluiced into her channel were helping keep her relaxed. She felt him scrabbling, then his fingers closed around one of the eggs. “I think I’ve got one!” he cried, and began to tug. Like a child reaching into a cookie jar, his hand was at first too large to escape her womb. She moaned low in her throat, less in distress than from the strange and tingly pleasure that emanated outward from her holiest of holies. The rubbing of his knuckles against her innermost parts… it felt sublime, but in a strange way that she would have never admitted to anyone. A blush began to creep into her cheeks again.

Fortunately, Philippe mistook her arousal for pain. “Oh! I am so sorry, Adellia!” he said. He tried again, this time gently wiggling his fingers to ease through her narrow gap, and his motions pushed her over the edge. This time there could be no disguising what was going on; she gasped and moaned, and a torrent of lady-juices dribbled out onto his forearm. Her channel, as stretched and abused as it was, spasmed and clenched around his arm. Now it was Philippe’s turn to blush. He looked away as he withdrew his arm. Perhaps he pulled a little too quickly: the egg caught at her entrance, and she sighed again at the feeling of it brushing her swollen clit. Finally the egg was free, and he held it up in front of her face to show her. An obscene mixture of her own juices and monstrous ejaculate dripped from it, and it looked even larger than it had felt. She had had that inside her? And there were more, too…

Once again Philippe thrust his arm inside her. She could hear liquid squishing sounds echoing off the canyon walls, and not all of them were coming from her. She thought she could hear a high-pitched, breathy squeal as well, though perhaps that was her imagination. Then Philippe grabbed the second egg and she suddenly had no more room for thought.

The Tarasque had laid four eggs in total, and Philippe drew them out one by one. By the time he laid the last one on the rocky canyon floor, she was a dripping, gurgling mess. One eye didn’t seem to want to open, and the other cast about for places to look that weren’t Philippe’s face. At least by the look of it he was as embarrassed as she.

From the other side of the Tarasque came Toby’s voice. “I got them all, Philippe! How about you?”

“They’re all gone!” Philippe cried. “Is Colette well?”

“She’s, uh…” Toby sounded embarrassed, and Adellia realized her counterpart had probably had much the same reaction as she. “She’s fine! She’s strong! How’s Adellia?”

“A fighter, that one!” Philippe crowed. “You go pick that herb you found! I’ll see if I can carry these two out of the canyon!” He turned to Adellia. “Don’t worry, dear Adellia! I promise we will get you to safety. Rejoice! We’ve slain the Tarasque! We’re heroes now, you’ll see!”

Despite everything, Adellia found pride upwelling in her bosom. She may be paralyzed, naked, and smeared with unnameable juices, but she had won. Once again, she had tested her mettle against the beasts of the wilds and come out victorious. She gathered her willpower and forced her mouth
to bend upwards in a smile.

Hero. She liked the sound of that.

TO BE CONTINUED...
Adellia, Toby and the Martels have defeated the dread Tarasque, but now must deal with a different and more dangerous monster... one with green eyes.

Heroes!

The word was on every set of lips, from Marseille to Lille. Monochromatic daguerrotypes appeared in every paper in France, showing them in a nervous huddle with wan smiles on their faces.

Heroes!

The fearful reign of the dread Tarasque had been ended-- not by the grizzled hunters of L’Academie Des Chasseurs, but by four untested young people, barely out of school.

Heroes!

The letters poured in: congratulations, thanks, pleas for aid with this local monster or that. Some accused them of faking their great feat, others offered to manage their publicity “for a reasonable consideration.” Along with these came the gifts: bottles of wine, silver pocketwatches, new shoes, flowers upon flowers upon flowers. A new bouquet arrived each day, and Adellia could barely give them away fast enough.

Heroes!

It was all quite overwhelming. Adellia politely declined both offers of management and proposals of marriage (she received quite a few of these; Toby slightly fewer, though his were more graphic). She consented to one brief interview, stammering out her answers without meeting the reporter’s gaze. It was odd-- even sitting alone in a hotel room with a reporter from Le Figaro, she could feel the eyes of the world on her. The stare made her squirm. This wasn’t what she had signed up for.

Even the Martels, who had initially welcomed the spotlight, quickly tired of it. They spent their days huddled in their hotel room (provided, of course, free of charge by a grateful city), reading endless fanmail and discussing their options with Toby and Adellia.

“Another key?” Philippe asked as Colette unwrapped a bulky package. “Where is zis one from?”

Colette squinted at the placard set into the oversized key. “Uh…. somewhere called Forbach. Do you know it?”

Philippe shrugged. “Toss it on ze pile.” One end table was entirely taken up with keys, trophies, placards, and commemorative coins.

“This is getting a bit ridiculous,” Toby said. “I mean, don’t we get any rest? Look at these!” He brandished a stack of gilt-edged cards. “Invitations! To parties! If we accept all of the ones that don’t overlap we’ll be going out every night for the next month!”

“I personally would very much like a rest,” Colette said quietly. She hadn’t fully recovered from
her ordeal. Toby’s mixture had cured their paralysis, and they’d managed to scavenge clothes from some of the Tarasque’s unfortunate victims. Adellia had rested up for a few days until the soreness went away and her body reasserted its natural shape, but she was used to this sort of thing. For Colette, the experience had been far more traumatic. She seemed to cling to Toby now, and her expression grew fearful when he wasn’t around. Adellia was going to say something soon if he didn’t. Enough was enough.

Philippe, fortunately, had been a perfect gentleman. He’d doted on Adellia ever since their return, checking up on her while she convalesced and bringing her news from the outside world. Toby, to his credit, had organized the logistical details: the Tarasque’s corpse had been removed by a squad of forest rangers and sent to a rendering plant, where many useful compounds could be derived from its blood and tissue. Its shell would grace Le Grande Musee de Bête in Marseilles, and its skeleton would travel to Paris, to be displayed at the Sorbonne. All but the skull— that would be mounted and sent to Hawk Manor. Adellia’s first trophy! She couldn’t wait to see what her parents thought of it.

The Tarasque’s surviving victims, meanwhile, were healing in hospital. The doctors had done their best, but of the sixteen women they’d rescued, only twelve had survived. Their grateful families were among the most effusive in their praise of “les jeunes héros,” and it had largely been thanks to their efforts that the letters and gifts had started to pour in.

Philippe gestured at the pile of envelopes, and Toby handed them over. Philippe sifted through them, tossing them on the floor as he went. “Skip… skip… none of zese matter. Colette is right. We should rest. Some of us,” here he looked meaningfully at Adellia, “have been through Hell.”

Adellia was touched by his concern, but in her eyes, it was misplaced. She’d survived tougher than the Tarasque. She even thought she might be ready to declare her vagina ready for action again soon-- if she could get some privacy. That was the trick. Every time they left the hotel, adoring fans mobbed them and begged for autographs. The reporter had assured her that that would pass-- the people of Marseille were faddish, and right now les jeunes héros were the flavor of the month-- but until it did, she was going stir crazy.

“We should go to one ;,” she said shyly. “Just… maybe that’ll shut people up, you know? And it’ll be good for us to get out of the suite.” She looked to Philippe, who nodded encouragingly. Even Colette was paying attention to her, though the look on her face was more frightened than excited.

Toby reached down to the loose pile of envelopes on the floor by Philippe’s chair. “I think… I think I saw… here!” He pulled out one, a thick white card edged in gold leaf, and held it up triumphantly. “Check it out! The Duke of Aix-en-Provence is having ‘a masked Extravaganza, a display of most Delicious Deceit and Costumed Extravagance!’” He squinted at the card. “Says ‘masks will be provided.’ Nobody will recognize us. We can blow off some steam there. There’s a banquet, too. I’m tired of eating the hotel food.”

“Me too!” Adellia said. In her head, she thought And there we can probably get a quiet moment together, too. We can slip away. The idea excited her, and it took her a moment to realize that she was staring at Philippe instead of Toby. She quickly corrected her gaze, but a look in his eyes told her that he had noticed.

Colette was quiet for a moment, but then a sunny smile bloomed on her face. “What a wonderful idea, mon loup !” she squealed, and she grabbed one of his hands in both of hers. She squeezed his hand and looked up happily. “A mask! Ze perfect idea! Oh, let’s go, please!”

“It appears we are unanimous,” Philippe said, with a wink at Adellia. “Will you hire us a coach, monsieur Toby? When is zis party, anyways?”
“Tomorrow night,” Toby read. “I’ll book us some tickets. We’ll do this, but that’s it for publicity, right? We’re all eager to go back to our homes, aren’t we?”

They were. On that point, there was agreement.

That night, Adellia lay curled up next to Toby and traced her fingertips across his chest. Something had been bothering her, and she wanted to get it out.

“So, you excited for the party?”

Toby shrugged. “It’ll be nice to get out. I’m feeling a little cooped up in here, to tell you the truth.”

“Me too,” Adellia said. “Plus, it’ll be nice to get some privacy, right?”

That was a question with a hook in it, but Adellia lacked the patience for fishing. Toby shrugged noncommittally.

She tried another tack. “Colette seemed excited to go to the party. It’ll be nice to see her enjoying herself, poor thing.”

“Agreed,” Toby said, rolling over to face her. “When the Tarasque got her… I could see the whole thing from where I was, it was so awful. The look on her face-- pure terror, frozen in place. She’s been so brave about it all, but I can tell how badly it hurt her.”

“It got me, too,” Adellia reminded him. “I took as many eggs as she did.”

“Yes, of course,” Toby said, perhaps a little too fast. “You were incredibly brave too. You always are.” He propped his head up on one elbow. “Of course, you had Philippe to help you. He seems quite protective.”

Now it was Adellia’s turn to get a little flustered. “Well… yes,” she admitted. “It was difficult for him, having to watch his sister attacked like that. And me, of course. He feels responsible. He was the one with the ballista.”

“Indeed,” Toby agreed. “And he’s handsome, too.”

“Just what do you mean by that?” Adellia tried to keep her voice to a whisper. She knew that the twins’ room was separated from theirs by just a thin wall.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Toby’s face was innocence personified. “I just don’t want him to get any ideas, you know. The two of you had an… intimate… connection after the Tarasque was slain. By necessity, of course! But it wouldn’t do for him to take that as a… a signal.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Adellia growled. She could feel herself growing angry. “What about Colette? You spend a few minutes rooting around elbow-deep in her guts and she starts following you around like a lost puppy! Are you looking to enjoy a little French pastry before we go home?”

Toby gasped. “Adellia!” he hissed. “Keep it down! And no, I don’t want to… to do that! You’re being paranoid!”

“So are you!” she shot back. “There’s nothing going on with me and Philippe, alright?”

“Alright!”
“We’ll go to this party, and then we’ll go home and we’ll never see them again!”

“Right!”

And that would have been it, except that, at the edge of hearing, Toby murmured, “Last chance, then, eh?”

Adellia socked him right in the face with her pillow. The thump it made, and his indignant squawk, would keep her warm on cold nights to come. Before he could retaliate, she shoved him out of the bed. He landed on the floor with a heavy thump.

“There’s a chaise lounge at the other end of the room,” she whispered angrily. “You can sleep on it tonight… unless you want to try to sneak into Colette’s bed.”

Wisely, Toby didn’t reply, but slunk off into the darkness. Adellia snuggled up around a pillow. Her head hurt, and guilt was starting to creep in, but she reassured herself that she had been right. Toby was being jealous and paranoid for no reason. And that Colette…

Her dreams were disturbing. She was chasing Toby through the endless rooms of an empty mansion, rooms that melted and ran like wax before her eyes. Doorways swooped and collapsed around her as she waded through the treacle-like floor. When she finally caught him up, Colette was crawling all over him, her naked body twisting like a viper. She turned and hissed and Adellia woke up with a gasp of fright.

Morning sunlight was already filtering through the window. Toby had awoken before her and wisely left the room on some errand or other. Adellia dressed herself, muttering sullenly beneath her breath. She had been too long away from home, too long in this strange country, with its rich foods and wanton people. She and Toby needed to get back home. Everything would be fine once they made it back.

The other three were already in the hotel restaurant, and greeted her warmly as she arrived. Toby showed no sign of anger or resentment from last night, and she noticed he was careful to maintain a respectful distance from Colette (much to her obvious disappointment). When Philippe stood to pull out Adellia’s chair, Toby practically leapt up and beat him to it. Smiling, Adellia sat down and scooped a spoonful of scrambled eggs onto her plate.

“So, are you all excited for the party tonight?” she asked. Philippe nodded.

“Oh, oui! These masked balls are famous. Everyone unmasks at midnight, as is traditional, but before then you must never show your face.”

“But surely guests recognize each other from… their clothes and so on?” Toby asked. “The whole thing seems unnecessarily theatrical to me.”

“Mais, non ,” Colette replied. “You will be given a robe to wear. It is part of your costume! You can remove that at midnight as well, but until then, we will be anonymous.” There was a hint of mischief in her voice, a tone that Adellia wasn’t sure if she liked.

“Well, our coach for Aix-en-Provence leaves in a couple of hours,” Toby said. “Short trip, but it’ll give us some time to take in the sights. Why don’t we change and meet down here?”

Adellia chose a simple silk dress edged with lace and festooned with pearls. She had never seen another dress she liked as much as the one she’d worn to the Spring Formal, but she conceded that, as an adult, there were some social functions for which hard-wearing and practical leather was simply not an option. When she returned to the lobby, she saw Colette had opted for a ruffled
taffeta gown, artfully cut to expose the maximum amount of chest and shoulder while producing the minimum amount of outrage. The men wore dark frock coats with narrow sleeves and matching pleated trousers. Pocketwatches were in fashion this season, and both Toby and Philippe sported chunky watch chains trailing from their pockets. Toby was all smiles as he offered his arm to Adellia.

It was indeed a short trip, and Adellia found Aix-en-Provence positively enchanting. The city seemed full of fountains; ancient ones dating back to Roman times, more modern installations covered in ornate statuary, fountains featuring laughing nymphs and other, more fantastical beasts. She wandered the streets, Toby in tow, and lunched at a small bistro. Nobody here seemed to recognize their faces, and she enjoyed getting out into the fresh air.

Soon enough, the great cathedral bells began to chime the five-o-clock hour. “We should head for the ducal palace,” Philippe said. “If we are late, all the good masks will be gone!” He pointed upwards, towards a vast mansion that overlooked the city from the top of a hill. It dwarfed even Hawk Manor. Adellia stared, spellbound. Where her ancestral home was squat and gloomy, the ducal palace was bright and regal. Its facade was dressed with white marble, its vast portico supported by a row of gleaming columns the size of sequoia trees.

By the time they arrived at the gatehouse, a line was already forming. Most of the other attendees were older, tall men with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and elegant women in furs and broad hats. Adellia felt rather out of place among such finery, but she reminded herself that, like everyone else, she’d be masked.

And so would Toby. That worried her a bit. If he wanted to sneak off for a dalliance with Colette, this would be the perfect opportunity for him to do so. From the look on the French girl’s face, she had the same idea. She kept stealing glances at him. Philippe was trying to get Adellia’s attention, too, but she ignored him. She was well aware of his flirting, and while it entertained her-- to a point-- she had no intention of allowing him to take any further liberties than he already had.

Toby, meanwhile, shifted uncomfortably in line. This party seemed important to Adellia, and so he wasn’t about to say anything to bring her down-- but a knot of worry had been growing in his gut since they stepped off the coach. This type of thing, fancy society balls, this was meat and drink to Adellia. She’d been raised on it since she could walk. He’d seen her mother’s dress closet, a forest of silk and satin and lace that he could have lost himself in. And the ballroom! Hawk Manor’s grand ballroom would have fitted the entire Cotton residence and their shop with room to spare. It was all too easy to picture Adellia pirouetting across the dance floor arm in arm with some rakish scion of the upper classes. This wasn’t Toby’s world, and every haughty stare from the other guests reminded him of that.

Then there was the matter of the Martels. Colette was one thing-- her clinging need for closeness was annoying, but he sympathised after the trauma she’d been through. He’d resolved to gently but firmly say something if she persisted. Philippe, though, was staring at Adellia with a hungry look that Toby didn’t like at all. He’d have to keep an eye on him. After last night, he knew that Adellia would scoff in his face if he brought her his concerns… but if he could catch Philippe red-handed… then, maybe then she’d trust him. The thought that perhaps he could not trust her wriggled in the back of his mind, but he could not think it yet. Not yet.

At long last they reached the front of the line and presented their invitation. If the valet at the door recognized les jeunes héros, he was discreet enough not to say anything. He took their tickets and led them to a table on which were spread a wide variety of animal masks.

Adellia wasn’t sure what she had expected, but it certainly wasn’t this. The masks were colorful
and detailed, every feather and whisker in place. Aside from the hollow eyeholes, they looked almost ready to leap off the table. Nor were they simple domino masks that would only cover the eyes and nose; these would conceal the wearer’s entire face, ensuring complete anonymity. Apparently their host took the idea of costumed secrecy very seriously indeed.

She selected a mask in the shape of a tabby cat, its mouth open to reveal ivory fangs. Toby hesitated over the table before picking out a seal’s face with broad and drooping whiskers. Philippe grabbed a snarling German Shepherd, while Colette picked a lamb’s face surrounded by a halo of fluffy white wool.

Once masked, they were helped into their robes by a cadre of silent attendants. The robes were lightweight and voluminous, serving mostly to conceal their wearers’ outlines. They were ushered through the antechamber and emerged, blinking, in the palace’s grand ballroom.

This room dwarfed its counterpart in Hawk Manor. Indeed, it dwarfed even the Grand Hall of Hoxleigh. Adellia counted eight blazing hearths, four on each side, and a dozen massive chandeliers twinkling overhead. Two curling staircases led up to a wide balcony that ran all along the wall above. One wall had been given over to tables loaded with an eye-popping variety of sumptuous delights: quail’s eggs, profiteroles, an assortment of cheeses, and of course a forest of wine bottles of every size and color. Attendants-- dressed in simple black-and-white outfits and mouse masks-- circulated throughout the crowd, carrying silver trays of refreshment. A raised stage in one corner housed a small orchestra, even now tuning their instruments. As Adellia watched they filled the air with quiet, gentle chamber music.

Next to her, Toby was standing and staring. The Martels, too-- evidently, they had little experience of this kind of rarefied high society. To Adellia, it was all dreadfully familiar, although the masks added a pleasant frisson of danger and mystery.

The first hour was spent in quiet conversation. Adellia stuffed herself on delicacies; luckily, she had selected a mask with an open mouth. Toby, lacking her foresight, had to lift his slightly to allow ingress. The wine, too, flowed freely; Adellia noted particularly that Colette’s glass, though often drained, never seemed close to empty. *Steeling yourself, eh, girlie?* she thought viciously. *We’ll see about that.* She drank plenty herself, but she was eating, too, so that was alright, wasn’t it?

Occasionally, they would try to join a conversation in progress, but on those rare occasions when the other guests were speaking in English, they were always discussing what sounded to Adellia like meaningless gossip. She quickly remembered why her parents’ parties had bored her so much. *At least I’m out of the hotel*, she thought. *And we go home tomorrow.* She tipped back her wine glass and beamed behind her mask as she felt the warmth spread through her belly. This wine really was quite excellent. Perhaps she’d have another glass.

As the evening went on, she watched Colette carefully. She noted every gesture, every giggle at one of Toby’s jokes, every seemingly random movement of her hand. Was the girl getting closer to Toby? Or was that just Adellia’s imagination? It didn’t matter, she realized. As long as she was present, Toby wouldn’t *dare* make a move. Part of her thought *well, that’s all right then*, but a larger and growing part was frustrated. Even if he didn’t cheat… well, if he *wanted* to, that was just as bad, surely? She couldn’t watch him like a hawk forever. She’d have to test him.

“I think I have to powder my nose,” she said, and turned on her heel. She felt two pairs of eyes boring into the back of her head as she went. In the depths of her wine-sodden brain, a plan was unfolding, and she counted herself lucky that her mask hid the evil grin spreading on her face.
Toby watched her go with concern. Adellia had been acting odd all night. She seemed stiff, nervous, as though constantly on edge. Was she planning something? What? He didn’t know, but he was sure it had something to do with Philippe. The Frenchman was certainly standing rather close to her, and he’d been a little too eager to help top off her glass. Toby had had a bit to drink as well, and was feeling slightly unsteady, but part of that was due to the cloying Colette. He kept having to step away from her to avoid her grasping hands.

As Colette tottered off towards the bar, an idea struck Toby. He turned to Philippe. “Say, Philippe,” he said, pitching his voice to keep it as level as possible. “I just had a rather funny idea. What do you say we switch masks?”

“Switch masks?” Philippe asked. “Whatever for, monsieur?”

“Well,” said Toby, thinking on his feet, “it would be rather amusing, wouldn’t it, as a prank? Imagine us unmasking at midnight and surprising the ladies!” It was rather a feeble excuse, in his opinion, but perhaps Philippe had drunk more than Toby thought. The dog-face regarded him impassively for a moment then nodded.

“Quite risible, Toby,” Philippe said. He beckoned to a shadowy corner beneath the stairs. “Quickly!” he said. “Before anyone can see!”

The switch took all of a few seconds, and then the comforting weight of the new mask settled against Toby’s skin. “Very good!” he said. “Let’s go out and mingle a bit. We’ll meet back up at midnight?”

“But what about Adellia and Colette?” Philippe asked. Toby waved a hand. “If you see them, just tell them to meet under the big chandelier at midnight, and I’ll do the same.”

Both men nodded, turned on their heels, and went their separate ways.

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Adellia found the ladies’ washroom easily enough. It was massive, with a long mirror taking up the entirety of one wall above the sink basins. A few chairs had been provided for women to sit and adjust their makeup. Doors in the back wall led to separate chambers for private ablutions. Adellia made a show of standing at the mirror and adjusting her mask until another woman walked in. This one wore an owl mask with great furry eyebrows.

“I say! Mademoiselle!” Adellia waved to get the owl’s attention. The other woman turned and regarded her from behind her mask. “Oui?” she asked.

Adellia struggled to remember her French. “Voulez... voulez-vous... changer... uh...” she gave up. “Would you like to switch masks?” She pantomimed removing her mask and handing it to the woman, then rotated her hands around each other. The eyes behind the vision slits in the mask narrowed.

“Mais, non,” the woman said, and turned towards the nearest door. Adellia shrugged, wound up her arm, and cracked the other woman a blow on the back of the head. The owl staggered a step and her head thudded into the tiled wall. She collapsed like a fallen tree.

It was the work of a moment to drag her into one of the bathroom chambers and close the door. Inside, it was cramped, but Adellia managed to prop her up on the toilet and remove her owl mask.
The face beneath was lovely, a dark-haired woman a few years older than Adellia. She hoped she hadn’t hurt her too badly; the goose egg rising on her forehead looked nasty. She was already starting to come round. With a murmured apology, Adellia pulled her own mask off and slipped it over the woman’s face, then put the owl on her own head. She stepped back, closed the door, and as an afterthought wedged one of the chairs under the handle. She made it to the exit just as the bathroom door’s knob began to twiddle fruitlessly.

She emerged, blinking (owlishly, she thought) into the comparative brightness of the main room. There was no sign of Toby or the Martel twins. To be frank, that fitted her plans perfectly. It had occurred to her earlier that Colette was merely a symptom, not the main problem. If Toby was willing to dally with her, well, he’d be willing to dally with another. Therefore, Adellia had resolved to test him. She scanned the room for the seal mask. She’d show that little hussy. Adellia Hawk could be seductive if she wanted to be.

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Philippe chuckled under his mask. Poor monsieur Toby! He was a sweet lad, but a bit dull, and if this “prank” was the most exciting one he could come up with, Philippe pitied Adellia Hawk. Now there was a girl with some fire! He had been pitching his best woo at her since their meeting, and he had the feeling that he was on the verge of breaking through. He’d hoped that the anonymity of the masked ball would free her wanton side— but in Toby’s mask, he saw an easier way to put a new notch on his belt. All he had to do was find the cat-faced girl and a private room, and he’d have a new conquest to brag to Colette about.

He swaggered across the room, his eyes scanning the masked guests. Here was a frog, there a bull, and over there a glowering wolf. Where was Adellia? A grey-furred cat blocked his path and he brushed her aside irritably. His eyes were set on the tabby cat.

Something moved in his peripheral vision, and before he could look he felt slim fingers wrap around his arm. He turned to see a slim, feminine figure in an owl mask staring at him. “La, sir,” she said, her accent unplaceable beneath her mask, “What kind of seal are you to have swum into such roiling waters?”

It took him a moment to remember that he was wearing Toby’s seal mask. “A busy one,” he replied. “A pleasure to meet you madam, but if you will excuse me…”

He tried to wriggle out of her grasp, but her fingers just slid tighter around his arm. Her free hand came up and traced a line down his chest.

“Busy, eh?” she purred in his ear. “We’re at a party. I think you need to relax, monsieur seal. I know a room where we can unwind with a chilled bottle of champagne. Please, sirrah, I am dreadfully cold… I need a sealskin jacket to keep me warm.”

Philippe hesitated. His eyes flickered across the serried ranks of masks, but nowhere did he see a tabby cat. And a stirring in his loins told him that, while Adellia Hawk was his quarry for the night, a true hunter never missed an opportunity…

“But of course, my dear,” he said. “Lead on.”

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Adellia fumed under her mask. She’d expected to catch Toby in the act, of course. But she hadn’t expected it to be so easy! She grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him across the floor. Fury crackled in her veins. She’d push him farther… a little farther… and then she’d rip off her mask
and reveal the truth. There would be words, yes there would. He’d better have a very good explanation for this-- and she couldn’t even begin to think of what it might be.

She led him up the stairs and onto the balcony. In truth, the bit about the bottle of champagne had been a fabrication, but she didn’t think he’d mind. Men! He should be wearing a pig mask, she reflected. The two of them slipped past the uniformed footmen at the top of the stairs, who did not give them so much as a second glance.

The two of them scampered like naughty children through the plush hallways, across rich crimson carpets and past gilt-framed paintings. The occasional muffled giggle or thump could be heard through the thick oaken doors, indicating that they were not the only guests to seek out private diversions. Finally, a half-open door beckoned; Adellia pushed it open the rest of the way, revealing a small guest bedroom lit by flickering gaslamp. The room was bare but for a vanity in one corner, a small end table and a magnificent four-poster bed with cobalt blue sheets. A door in one corner suggested a closet.

Leading Toby by the hand, she darted into the room and closed the door behind her. Once their privacy was assured she turned and began to back up towards the bed with what she hoped was a seductive wiggle of her hips. “Won’t you join me, Mr. Seal?” she asked in a breathy voice. When he reached up to his chin, she quickly held out a finger. “No, no-- we leave the masks on. A taste of mystery, no?” It wouldn’t do, she reasoned, for her to give up her ruse so easily.

Toby shrugged and stepped forward. His hands encircled her waist and pulled her close. “How can I resist, my lovely owl?” he whispered. “You have wrapped my heart in your talons. Please, remove your robe, so that I may feast on your--”

An abrupt knock at the door startled them both.

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Colette drained yet another glass of wine and set it down, a little unsteadily. She crossed her arms and let out a little huff. She had returned from the bar to find her brother and new friends scattered. The nerve of them! Leaving a lady alone at a party like this! That was… that was not done, that was what it was. You heard stories. All kinds of naughty shenanigans went on in places like this.

Of course, that had been her plan all along. Brave, handsome monsieur Toby had been succumbing to her wiles, of that she was certain, but it remained to her to land the finishing blow. He would never take the first step away from his beloved Adellia. In truth, Colette bore the girl no ill will, but she seemed not to value what she had. Why else would she let Colette wrap Toby around her little finger? Adellia was neglectful, and those who neglected their prized possessions could not complain when someone came along who knew their true value.

Steeling herself for that final, forbidden step was the difficult part. Colette was not much of a drinker, and the vast quantity of wine she had imbibed had gone straight to her head. With it came a flush of confidence. Since her misadventure with the Tarasque, she had fretted endlessly about the implications for her future. Was she a ruined woman now? Had the monster’s tentacles destroyed her femininity, her allure? No! Certainly not. Toby would prove it.

She just had to find him.

She couldn’t exactly ask after him, but other quests were quick to point her in the right direction. The seal-mask had been seen only recently, fleeing up the stairs hand in hand with a woman wearing an owl’s face. The thought of it filled Colette with delight. Staid, sober Toby Cotton was not the faithful squire he seemed! If he would dally with some strange harlot, surely he would dally
with her; and tomorrow, she’d return triumphantly to her brother and gloat. She’d claim her prize, while he would go without-- for surely, Adellia was devoted to her swain, no matter how much he strayed.

She staggered up the stairs, leaning heavily on the handrail, and teetered away down the corridor. A helpful footman pointed out which of the identical doors held the prodigal seal and owl, and she took a moment outside of it to straighten her posture and clear her throat. Then she rapped her knuckles against the door, waited a moment, and called: “Coo-ee! Toby Cotton?”

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Inside the room, both lovers froze. Adellia had been about to twitch her robe aside as part of her triumphant reveal. Toby seemed more startled than she did. “Colette!” he hissed. “Quick, hide!”

Adellia cursed her rotten luck. But this could only be more evidence of his perfidy. She pulled back. “Who’s Colette, my sweet?” she asked, feigning innocence.

“A nobody,” Toby replied. “A girl I know. Please, my dear, under the bed-- I will get rid of her, and we can resume.”

“Are you sure you don’t-” she began, but the knock came again, and the doorknob began to turn.

“Hide!” Toby hissed and practically pushed her to the ground. Adellia shrugged, rolled over and slid under the voluminous sheets. The space under the bed fit her comfortably, and though hanging sheets covered both sides, she could see a little slit of light under the foot of the bed. Two robes were visible, one slimmer than the other.

“Oh, Toby!” came a voice. There was a rustling noise, as of someone removing a mask, and the voice suddenly became clearer. “Please! My heart aches for you! I cannot bear to be separated! Please, let me show you my devotion!”

“Colette!” came Toby’s surprised reply. His mask muffled his tone, but his surprise was obvious. “You… you should not be here! Go!”

“Oh, monsieur Toby, you are wasted on that girl Adellia! Please! Grant me but one night, I will pleasure you like--”

There was a brief scuffle, and Toby reeled backward. “Unhand me, woman!” he said. He seemed to be deliberately pitching his voice lower to sound more intimidating. “My heart belongs to Adellia alone! Be grateful that I do not tell her of your trespass!”

Colette let out a stifled sob. “Please! Toby! You came here with a girl, didn’t you? Surely she cannot compare to me! You felt that connection, didn’t you, when you removed the Tarasque’s eggs!”

This time Adellia saw Toby visibly shudder. “Do not touch me again!” he barked. “Go! I told you, Colette, I do not want you!”

Colette wailed and turned on her heel. Her feet beat at the carpet and she fled. As Toby locked the door behind her, Adellia’s heart was in turmoil. Toby had declared his devotion to her! But… at the same time, he was about to cheat on Adellia with a stranger he had just met! She had thought he was on the verge of being seduced by the Martel girl, but was it possible that she had him exactly backwards? Was he a philanderer with every girl but Colette? Before she could make sense of this revelation, his seal mask appeared under the sheets. “You can come out now, my sweet,” he said,
helping her to her feet. “Where were we?”

“I think I was about to leave,” Adellia said coldly. “Who was that girl? And who is this ‘Adellia?’”

“That girl?” Toby laughed nervously. “A nobody, as I said. She carries a torch for me, poor thing. As for Adellia… she thinks she has my heart, but she is trying to cage that which yearns to breathe free. Please, my owl, let me prove it to you-- let me love you!”

Tears stung Adellia’s eyes. She couldn’t believe she had misjudged Toby so badly. She felt humiliated and heartbroken, and worst of all, she had done it to herself. She had gone prying. It was a relief to know Toby’s true colors, but she couldn’t believe she had had him so wrong. After all they had been through…

Well, two could play at that game. “You know, I think I should rejoin the party,” she said coldly. “I’m finding that I don’t want that sealskin after all.”

“But… my love!” pleaded Toby. “Please, do not let some drunken waif’s ramblings ruin our evening! Let me show you my--”

“I think you’ve shown my quite enough,” she said, trying not to cry. “Why don’t you run back to your Adellia? If she’ll still have you.” Without waiting for his reply, she stormed out the door.

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Colette fled down the hallway bawling. She only regained control of herself by degrees. Toby’s rejection had only confirmed her worst fears. Thoughts whirled and chased one another: Ruined. Wrecked. Unlovely. Unwanted. She had been right; Toby would never want her now, nor would any man.

She paused. Toby might not want her, but he wanted Adellia. Yes, that was right. He had said so. In her wine-soaked mind, one idea stood out bright and clear: if she could cajole Toby Cotton into bed, all this would go away. She would reclaim her birthright and her beauty. All would be well.

And for that, what she needed was simple: an orange tabby-cat mask. She took a deep breath, adjusted her garments, replaced her lamb’s face, and tiptoed along the corridor. She was a huntress, and now she had her prey. The rest was simple arithmetic.

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Lady Eloise Fabergé awoke with a groan and looked around blearily. She appeared to be slumped in the lady’s bathrooms, and her mask was missing. Lady Eloise had been to enough of these parties to know that sometimes you woke up in strange rooms with your clothing in disarray, but normally you remembered having more fun first. She remembered a brief tussle and then a sharp pain in her head. Some wretched strumpet had attacked her! She wondered why: a jealous wife? How would she have recognized Eloise under the mask?

It didn’t matter. She was upright, she had her faculties mostly under control, now all she needed was a mask. A few moments’ groping behind the toilet found one, but it wasn’t her mask. She regarded the tabby-cat face with dismay.

Needs must. She pulled it on, wincing as her fingers brushed the sore goose-egg rising on her head. She swept out of the bathroom, and took a moment to adjust her robe in the mirror. Satisfied, she opened the door, stepped out into the hall, and collapsed again.

Behind her, Colette lowered the silver candlestick, which now had a rather pronounced bend in the
“Sorry, ma cherie,” she whispered. “I need him more than you do right now.” She peeled off the cat mask and stared in horror at the face beneath. This wasn’t Adellia! But what was this woman doing with Adellia’s mask?

No time to wonder about that. Colette pulled on the cat mask and dressed the unfortunate woman in her lamb mask, then dragged her into the bathroom again and propped her up against a toilet. Leaving the silver candlestick on the sink counter, she made she her cat face was centered properly, and left in search of Toby.

--

Adellia stomped through the halls in mounting fury. She hated, hated, hated being seen to cry, so her mask was a welcome shield. Toby had turned out to be a philandering liar, and she’d heard it from his own lips (a bit muffled by the mask, true): she was caging him! He yearned to breathe free! Well, she’d give him all the freedom he wanted. Freedom forever! But first, she’d even the score a little. She knew Philippe wanted her. She’d seen his eyes devouring her body. Well, he was a handsome man, and strapping. She’d enjoy him for a night, and then brag about it to Toby. She’d show him how little he mattered to her. A tiny inner voice begged her not to, warned her she was making a mistake, but she silenced it with a swig of wine.

Philippe wasn’t hard to find. The dog-face mask wandered the dance floor as though looking for someone. Adellia took a deep breath, adjusted her owl mask, and glided over to him.

“Well hello there, pup,” she cooed, draping herself across Philippe’s shoulders. “I’ve been watching you for a while now. How’d you like to get better acquainted?”

The dog-face turned towards her and startled backward. “Oh! Good evening, milady. You surprised me.” Philippe sounded a bit nervous, but perhaps it was just her imagination.

“I’m full of surprises,” Adellia purred in his head. “Why don’t you follow me and I can show you some?”

“Oh… I think I’d better not,” Philippe said. He really did sound unsure of himself. “I’ve… well, you see, I’ve got a lady already, and I rather want to keep her. But thank you for the offer anyways. You have a pleasant evening now!”

Before she could say anything else, he peeled her arm off his shoulders and slipped away into a thicket of people. Adellia was left staring after him in wide-eyed shock.

“What the hell just happened?” she asked out loud.

--

Toby Cotton was feeling a little uncertain. The plan had made perfect sense in his head: he’d pretend to be Philippe and pitch some woo at Adellia. She’d acquiesce, of course, and he’d dramatically reveal the truth. And then… what? They’d have a talk, that was for certain. A talk about loyalty, and what it meant to actually be in a relationship and take it seriously.

Now, though, he wondered what he’d been thinking. This idea just seemed cruel. And stupid, too. What would it prove? That Adellia could be seduced by her own boyfriend? Some revelation! It was manipulative, and distrustful, and beneath him. So what if she’d been a bit overfriendly with Philippe? They had been forced into uncomfortable intimacy by circumstances. Toby trusted her, and he wasn’t about to throw away the best thing that ever happened to him with mindless jealousy.
Then there was the matter of the woman in the owl-faced mask. She’d practically thrown herself at him! Why? Was that just what people did at these parties? Toby realized that, no matter how much time he spent with them, he’d never understand the rich. He didn’t want Colette, or that owl woman, or anyone but Adellia. He promised himself that he’d never even think of straying again.

Begging Adellia’s forgiveness in his head, he went looking for his mask.

--

To the outside observer, Philippe was the absolute image of calm, but inwardly he raged.

Adellia Hawk was a beautiful woman, to be sure. Toby Cotton was lucky to have her. But the world abounded with beautiful women. Philippe was, to his core, a hunter, and a hunter cared for one thing: the chase. He’d been pursuing Adellia subtly for quite some time, carefully baiting his line and laying conversational traps that she inerrantly stumbled into. He was sure he had in her his grasp. Yet a hunter was only as good as his quarry-- and this mysterious woman in the owl-mask was proving herself to be worthy prey indeed. She had baited him! Lured him up here, brought him to the brink of distraction with her teases and flirts… and then turned the tables on him, shutting him down and shutting him out.

This wouldn’t do. This wouldn’t do at all. Philippe Martel always caught his quarry.

Adellia could wait. It occurred to Philippe that by courting the lover of another hunter, he might be biting off more than he could chew. He needed this owl-faced woman in his life. Needed her. And he’d get her, too. Unfortunately, he feared he’d rather blown his chance. Her last words to him had dripped with contempt. He needed a fresh slate. That was the hunter’s way-- if one approach fails, try another. Patience above all. She had clearly written off the seal-masked man, but what if he approached her in a different guise? Say, as a dog?

All he had to do was find Toby.

As he descended the staircase, something cannoned into him from below. He almost fell, and when he regained his balance, he was startled to find Adellia Hawk staring up at him from the lower stair. Her tabby-cat mask was slightly dented, as though she’d walked into something, and he thought she seemed a little shorter than he remembered-- though she was standing two stairs down from him.

“Oh, Toby!” she breathed, and reached out to take his hands. “This party bores me so! Can’t we slip away? We can get some privacy and lose these wretched masks!”

Philippe cursed inwardly. He’d spent all evening planning his liaison with Hawk, and here she was throwing herself at him! Of course, if he took her upstairs, that would be it. He wouldn’t be able to perform later for the owl-masked woman. It pained him terribly to do so, but he gently pushed her hands away.

“I’m sorry, Adellia dear, not now,” he said in his best Toby Cotton voice. “I… I… I’m just not in the mood, all right? Later, I promise!” He mentally apologized to Toby-- surely Hawk would hold a grudge against him for this. She was staring at him in slumped shock. It wasn’t Philippe’s problem, though. Before Adellia could rally, he pushed past her and hurried on down the stairs in search of Toby and his mask.

--

For the second time that night, Lady Eloise Fabergé awoke with a headache. Now her poor skull
ached in two places at once. This really was, she reflected, no way to treat a lady. At least her assailant had left her a mask. She pulled herself to her feet and tottered, a little unsteadily, over to the mirror. Her face right now appeared to be a lamb (though her vision was a little blurry and it was hard to tell). She could feel the tears rolling down her cheeks. It just wasn’t fair. She’d come out to have a good time and so far she’d be attacked twice and stuffed into a water closet.

She opened the bathroom door a cautious crack and looked this way and that. The hallway seemed deserted, so she scurried out and into cover beneath the winding staircase, flinching away from any partygoers who strayed too close. She’d find a quiet room upstairs to ride out the rest of the party—or at least until she was feeling better. Hugging the bannister, she began to climb.

--

Toby looked up just in time to see his seal mask descending the stairs towards him. He crossed the dance floor as quickly as he could while maintaining his dignity and met Philippe at the base of the stairs.

“So, uh, how are you finding the mask?” he asked, coughing nervously. Was it his imagination, or was Philippe shifting uncomfortably as well?

“Oh, you know. It’s fine.” Philippe said. “Say…”

Toby spoke up quickly, cutting him off. “This dog mask is a little uncomfortable, to tell you the truth. If you wouldn’t mind--”

“Of course, of course!” Philippe said. The two of them scampered under the stairs, where they were able to switch masks again in private. Philippe seemed to be in rather a hurry to get his mask off. Perhaps he was uncomfortable too, Toby thought.

“Well. Enjoying the party?” Philippe asked, once they had regained their original disguises.

“Oh, yes,” Toby said, with forced jollity. “Quite.”

They stared at each other for a moment in awkward silence, then muttered goodbyes and turned to go their separate ways. To tell the truth, Toby was feeling quite a bit better now that he had his own mask back. The idea of playing such a mean trick on Adellia had weighed on him. He’d find her, and maybe the two of them could slip away for some… quality time together. He grinned beneath his seal-face. Yes, that was the ticket. A little privacy would do them a world of good.

He found her in her cat mask by the wine bar, pouring herself a worryingly tall glass. “Adellia?” he asked, tapping her on the shoulder. She whirled and startled backwards.

“Oh!” she cried. “Toby!” She looked downcast. “I’m… I’m sorry, I… I didn’t mean to…”

“Never fear!” Toby said brightly. “You look gorgeous, by the way. My little kitten.” This last sounded a little patronizing to him, and he winced, prepared for Adellia to give him an earful. Instead she clasped her hands to her bosom and looked up at him.

“Really?” she asked. Her voice sounded so thin and brittle. Toby wondered how much she’d been drinking.

“Of course!” he said, and rested a hand on her shoulder. “How would you like to… you know… slip away? We could find a quiet room together…”

Adellia’s hand was shaking so badly now that wine was sloshing everywhere. Toby gently took the
overfull glass from her hand and set it down on the bar. “R-r-really?” she asked. “B-but… I thought… thought you said…”

Beneath his mask, Toby wrinkled his brow in confusion. “Said what? What do you mean, Adellia?”

She hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. “Nothing. Nothing. Of course, Toby! Lead on!”

Toby’s heart somersaulted in his chest. He took Adellia by the hand and tugged her towards the stairs. The two of them scuttled off on their private errand, each suppressing their giggles.

--

Philippe stalked the halls of the Ducal palace with his head held high. He had regretted turning down Adellia just now, but it had to be done. The owl-masked woman was out there somewhere. Perhaps in the upper halls? A quick scan of the dance floor had turned up nothing.

He padded cautiously across the thick carpet of the hallway. Once a hunter, always a hunter, he supposed, even if the nature of the prey was different now. In love as in hunting, the principles at play were the same: stealth, caution, and when the quarry was in sight, the rapid, decisive strike.

He paused outside one mahogany-paneled door. The faint sounds of bedsprings squeaking emanated from some of these rooms; he knew better than to knock on those doors. From this one, though, issued the faint sound of sobbing. These were the quiet, choked sobs of someone trying to hide their misery from the world. He hesitated, but for all his boastfulness, he considered himself a gentleman at heart-- and a gentleman would never ignore a lady in pain.

He gently pushed open the door to reveal a small but well-apportioned bedroom, the wallpaper seafoam green. Most of the back wall was taken up by a handsome four-posted bed, and sitting atop it was… a slim, feminine figure in a familiar lamb’s-head mask.

All thought of the owl-woman left Philippe’s mind. That was pleasure, yes, but this was family. Family came first. He knocked gently at the door and Colette looked up. Watery eyes stared at him from the mask’s eyeholes. “Are you alright?” Philippe asked, crossing the room. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

He sat down beside his sister and rested one hand on her elbow. “Oh, my dear, what has happened to you? Tell me, so I can make it right!” Ever since they were children, that had been the way of it: Colette would cry to her brother that Amelie had stolen her doll, or she had burnt her scones, and he would find some clever way to make it all work out. “Are you not enjoying the party?” he asked. He thought back to her frequent trips to the wine bar. “Too much to drink, perhaps?”

Colette shook her head. When she spoke, her voice sounded curiously low and indistinct, though Philippe supposed it was the muffling effect of the mask.

“No, no. But everyone at this party is so mean! I came out to have a good time, and honestly, I keep being attacked!”

Philippe gently rubbed her shoulder. He gently chided himself for his selfishness. Colette, he knew, had had her eye on Toby Cotton… a fool’s gambit, as anyone could see that he had eyes only for his precious Adellia. Of course she had made a move, and of course she had been shot down. Philippe couldn’t exactly blame Cotton for his faithfulness, but he hoped that the boy hadn’t been too cruel to his poor sister.

“There, there,” he said. “Dry those tears. You don’t need anyone else to have a good time. You’re
at a party! These things happen sometimes. It doesn’t mean you’re a bad person!” He hesitated. “Is there anyone else? Anyone at the party who has been cruel to you?”

“I think so,” she admitted. “But I couldn’t tell who. They were wearing a mask, of course.” She sighed. “I just wanted to dance and have a nice time and maybe meet someone. I didn’t sign up for all this.”

Philippe patted her on the shoulder and gave her a friendly side-hug. “I know you will meet someone, my dear. You are a beautiful girl. Any man would be lucky to have you. Now dry those tears, eh? What do we do when we fall off the horse? We get right back on.”

Colette nodded and sniffled under her mask. “Oh, you’re right, of course,” she said. She looked up at him. “You’re ever so kind to comfort a foolish, sobbing girl when you could be doing much more fun things.”

“Nonsense!” Philippe waved a hand. “What could be more important than reassuring such a lovely woman? I want to be the wind beneath your wings!”

Now the look she was giving him turned strange. “How lovely of you to say,” she said. “You know… I don’t think I need to go back out into the party to meet a fine man at all. I think I have one right here.” One slender hand slid across his lap and cupped his groin. She gave his manhood a gentle squeeze through his robe. “Why don’t you let me show you how grateful I am?”

Philippe scrambled backwards in horror, nearly falling off the bed. He knew Colette had had quite a lot to drink, but this much? Behind his mask, his jaw had dropped and his eyes were wide. “W-what are you doing?!” he stammered. “This isn’t… we can’t… no! Don’t you see how wrong this is?” He regained his feet and took two staggering steps away from her grasping hands. “I… I… goodbye!” He turned on his heel and ran, wrenching the door open and slamming it behind him in his haste.

“Wait! Come back!” pleaded Lady Eloise. She watched in shocked horror as the door slammed behind her latest swain. After a moment, she began to cry again.

--

Adellia Hawk reached the top of the stairs and leaned against the wall. She was done with parties, she decided. Done, done, done. This had been a confusing, heartbreaking night. Tomorrow, she’d speak to Toby and tell him how things were. She wasn’t looking forward to it, but it had to be done. All of her ideas for revenge had fled; she was just tired and wanted the night to be over. She figured she could find an unoccupied room and wait it out until midnight. That would give her time to cry it out, too, which she sorely needed.

She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she practically ran into the fleeing Philippe. There was no question that it was him—his dog-mask stared down at her.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s you.” She was already blushing crimson under her mask. She’d made such a fool of herself in front of him earlier!

Philippe drew up short. “Milady!” he said, bowing. “Oh, your beauty took me aback for a moment.”

“My… beauty?” Adellia asked. “All you can see is my mask.”

“And a lovely mask it is!” Philippe agreed. “But I can see the radiance of the soul beneath. Oh! My darling. Please, take me… the hour grows late, and I cannot bear the thought of spending such a
lovely evening alone.”

“Didn’t you just…” Adellia began, and trailed off. So what if he’d changed his mind? Everyone had been drinking. Her lips curled upward into a smile. All at once, revenge was back on the menu.

“Didn’t I just what, my turtledove?” Philippe asked. “I have only just met you, but already I am entranced by you. I would follow you to the ends of the earth. Lead on! Lead on, I beg you, that I might show you my devotion!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Adellia muttered, and grabbed him by the arm. “Come on. I know a place we can go.”

--

Colette’s heart was thumping in her chest. This was it! This was her chance! Toby Cotton closed the door behind them with a click and turned to her. He lifted his hand to his chin and began to peel off his mask.

“No! No!” Colette squeaked. If she was forced to remove her tabby-cat mask, her ruse would be ruined. “Let us keep them on! To… increase the mystique!”

Toby hesitated for a moment, then lowered his mask. “I like that idea, Adellia,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “Very creative.”

Colette flounced onto the bed and patted the space next to her. “Please, join me! I want to show you… there are things I can do with my hands, things I have been practicing…”

As he crossed the room towards her, there came a knock at the door. Three knocks, actually, and a raised voice that sounded dreadfully familiar. Philippe! “Hello?” he asked. “Hello, is there anyone in there?”

Toby opened his mouth to answer, but Colette covered it with her hand. What if Philippe recognized her? He’d ruin everything! “Hide!” she whispered. “Hide!”

“Why?” Toby whispered back. “Can’t we just?”

“I… I want to watch them!” Colette said in a burst of inspiration. Her cheeks burned red as Toby gave her a penetrating stare.

“What a strange appetite you have, Adellia,” he said. “But it’s creative. I’ll give you that.” He hopped off the bed and stepped into the closet. He beckoned her to join him, but instead she pushed the slatted door closed, then threw herself flat and rolled under the bed just as the door creaked open. In truth, she had no desire to watch her brother in the act. She’d simply have to wait him out.

--

Philippe led the owl-masked woman into the bedroom and gently pushed the door closed behind her. He peeled off his dog-faced mask and hung it on the doorknob. “It is so nice to breathe again,” he said. “My sweet, will you unmask? Will you give me a glimpse of that lovely face? My heart burns for it!”

“Why not maintain a little mystery?” she asked coquettishly. “Let me leave my mask on, sirrah, at least until we’ve… gotten to know each other a bit better.” She crossed the room towards him in three quick steps, sashaying her hips to and fro. “Besides, I have much more… interesting parts than the ones beneath this mask. Would you like to see them?”
Philippe could barely keep his tongue from lolling out of his mouth. He nodded enthusiastically.

Before the owl woman could disrobe, though, there was a sharp knock at the door. “Hello?” came a muffled voice from the other side. “Are you in there? Please, sir, give me a chance!”

Philippe cursed. Colette had never behaved like this before. What had gotten into her?

“Who is that?” asked the owl woman, freezing in midstride. She cocked her head suspiciously. “Is she asking about you?”

“I… uh…” Philippe figured that, for once, the truth was the best policy. “It’s my sister. She’s had a bit too much to drink tonight, and she’s having a rough time. I comforted her earlier… I was hoping she’d just sleep it off. If you let her in, we’ll never get rid of her.”

The pounding at the door came again, a little louder this time. The knob began to turn.

“I should hide!” Philippe hissed. “Please, tell her I’m not here!” Before his partner could say anything, he ran to the closet, pulled open the door, and threw himself inside.

Where it turned out he wasn’t alone.

“Cotton?” he whispered incredulously. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

Toby Cotton stared down at him. “I could ask you the very same question! Adellia and I slipped away to… well, to…” he trailed off, mumbling awkwardly. Philippe gave him a broad grin and slapped him on the back.

“Well! Good for you, then, eh? Same story, as it happens. There’s this woman in an owl mask… I met her earlier, and we decided to find some privacy. Some coincidence, eh?”

--

Adellia cursed inwardly. Yet again, on the cusp of consummation, she had been thwarted. If she didn’t know better, she’d think the universe was trying to tell her something. Still, she figured she could get rid of Colette easily enough. She reached the door just as it burst open and a woman stumbled in.

It wasn’t Colette. She could tell that much from one glance.

In fact, this woman seemed strangely familiar. She carried Colette’s lamb-mask in one hand. Her face was lovely, marred only by a black eye. She took one look at Adellia and her eyes widened. One finger came up in an accusatory point. “You!”

“Me?” Adellia asked, gesturing towards her chest. Her thoughts raced. Where had she seen this woman?

“You! That’s my mask! You stole my mask!”

Oh. That’s where.

Th woman’s arm shot out and slapped Adellia across the face. “You’re the one who hit me! Salopet.” She looked to and fro. “I suppose you’ve stolen my beautiful dog-faced suitor, too! Where is he?”

“Suitor?” Adellia asked, incredulous. “Just how many women has that dog seduced tonight?!”
"You’re a fine one to talk of seduction, you cat-faced bitch!" The woman stuck her hands on her hips. “Why’d you get rid of your tabby cat mask, anyways? It suits you! You must be in heat, to act so crazy!"

Before Adellia could reply, there was a commotion from behind her. The closet door burst open, and Toby Cotton tumbled out in his seal mask. “Tabby cat?” he asked, staring at Adellia. “Adellia, is that you?”

“Nooooo!” A wail from under the bed made them all turn around. A short woman rolled out and climbed to her feet, her tabby-cat mask tilting crazily on her face. “No, do not listen! Do not listen!”

The closet wasn’t done disgorging its contents. Philippe, unmasked, stepped out and looked from the new arrival to the girl from under the bed. “Colette?” he asked, confusion ringing on every syllable.

There was a brief moment of silence, then the air filled with shouts and yells and pointing fingers.

“You attacked me!” cried Lady Eloise, her finger wavering between the owl and cat masks.

“Cheater!” Adellia yelled, leveling her own finger at Toby.

“I’m cheating? You’re the cheater!” Toby roared. “With him!” He jerked a thumb towards Philippe.

“Which one of you is Colette?” Philippe asked helplessly. “Which one of you is my sister?”

Colette simply wailed, loudly enough to drown out the rest of the noise.

Adellia took a deep breath. She had impressive lung capacity, and though her parents’ attempts to hire singing tutors for her had fizzled out, she would put her angry shouts up against anyone you’d care to name.

“What the hell is going on?!” she screamed.

Silence descended. As the last ringing echoes died away, a faint but unmistakable sound rushed in to fill the space: the chiming of a distance clock.


“It’s midnight,” Philippe said quietly.


“Time to unmask,” said Lady Eloise, folding her arms.


“I think has gone on rather far enough,” Toby said. He reached up to remove his mask.


Adellia, hesitantly, reached up and pulled off her mask. Colette and Toby did likewise, tossing the cat and seal faces onto the bed. The five of them stared at one another, each waiting for someone else to make the first move.
There was nothing for it. She would have to… apologize.

“My name is Adellia Hawk, milady,” she said, bowing to the woman she didn’t recognize. “I… I hit you and took your mask. I’m so sorry. I had this thought… this idea… that I had to test my boyfriend’s loyalty. It was wrong, and I’m sorry.”

“You what?” Toby asked. But before Adellia could defend herself, he looked down. “I’m sorry, too. I switched masks with Philippe. I thought you and he… well, you know.”

“I suppose I must accept your apology,” the newcomer said. “My name is Eloise Fabergé. The heart can be messy. At least you made this party a bit exciting. They can be so dull.” She rubbed her head and winced. “Perhaps, in future, you leave strangers out of your affairs.”

“I should apologize too, mes amies,” Philippe said, looking down and shifting his foot uncomfortably to and fro. “It is true, I have had my eye on you, Adellia Hawk. You are a beautiful woman and a fierce hunter. Toby is lucky to have you.”

All eyes turned to Colette. At first she stared in incomprehension, then Philippe elbowed her in the ribs.

“Oh!” she cried. “Oh, yes. Yes, I tried to seduce you, monsieur Cotton. It was wrong, I know, but… you are so brave, and handsome, and knowledgeable… and I thought, after the Tarasque, that I was… was…” her voice dropped to a whisper and she looked at the floor. “Ruined.”

All at once Adellia felt an upwelling of sympathy for the poor girl. She thought back to her experiences with the araqny, the ahol, the chimera… so many others…

She laid a hand on Colette’s shoulder. “Colette, dear, you’re not ruined. Not even close. It’s an occupational hazard of being a huntress. You were very brave, and you have a bright career ahead of you. Isn’t that right?” She looked around, and on cue, Toby and Philippe nodded enthusiastically.

“So… wait a moment,” Philippe said. “Nobody actually followed through on their seductions, did they? Nobody cheated at all. I don’t know if you can even say they tried to, since nobody was who they said they were.”

“I think,” Toby said, after a brief pause, “I think we just… write off tonight entirely. Like it never happened. It’s easier than trying to sort out who did what when. I think the party’s pretty much unsalvageable, to be honest.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Lady Eloise said with a faint smile. “You, Philippe. You were the one who comforted me earlier, yes?”

“Indeed, milady,” Philippe said. “And I meant every word. Now that I see you unmasked, though, I know I was wrong-- you are twice as beautiful as I thought.”

Now the look in Eloise’s eyes was practically devilish. “Bold words, young monsieur. Are you prepared to back them up?” She extended one arm, elbow cocked, and he slid his own through it.

“Shall we retire?” he asked, and winked at Adellia. To her surprise, she found herself blushing. Lady Eloise giggled girlishly and headed for the door, practically dragging Philippe behind her. Gradually, their footsteps faded, and somewhere a door slammed shut.

“Well,” Toby said, after an awkward pause. “I, uh, well… what should we do now?”
“I have an idea,” Adellia said, and cozied up to him just as Lady Eloise had to Philippe. Toby’s eyes widened. He smiled, then seemed to remember something. Colette was still staring at the floor with tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. Adellia pulled Toby away for a brief, whispered conversation.

“Colette,” she said, turning back, “did you mean all those things you said about Toby? Brave and handsome and so on?”

“Of course,” Colette said, and a note of bitterness crept into her voice. “You really are lucky.”

“Well… how’d you like to join us?” Adellia asked, blushing crimson. “Just… just for one night.”

Colette’s jaw dropped and she stared up at them. “Really?” she asked. Adellia nodded.

“Of course!” Colette took two steps and practically leapt into the bed. “It would be an honor!”

Smiling, Adellia went to the door and pushed it gently closed. She twisted the latch until it clicked and turned back. “Have you ever, uh, done this before?” she asked. Colette paused halfway through removing her robe and nodded.

In a voice no bigger than a mouse, Adellia asked: “Could you—could you show us how?”

Colette beckoned Toby over, then stood him next to the bed. “Disrobe, monsieur. You can look, but no touching… yet,” she said. Toby stared at her in confusion for a moment, then loosened his robe and tossed it off. His jacket was next to go; he untied his cravat and tossed it into the corner, then unbuttoned his shirt and peeled it off. He pulled his belt off in one motion, stepped out of his trousers, and finally removed hisbriefs with only the merest hint of hesitation. Naked, he sat on the bed and folded his hands nervously in his lap.

Meanwhile, Colette took Adellia by the hand and led her into the center of the carpet. Adellia stood there self-consciously, feeling like a mannequin in a dressmaker’s shop. Colette circled her once, twice, then began to undo the fasteners of her robe. The garment fell to the floor around Adellia’s feet and the French girl kicked it away. Next, she began to loosen the laces of Adellia’s dress. She took her time; her hands traced the contours of Adellia’s body, lingering on her curves and making her shiver in anticipation. When the last laces parted, Colette took the fabric of Adellia’s shoulders in both hands and began to gently roll it downward. Inch by inch, the dress descended, exposing pale flesh and the satin cups of her bra. Colette’s hands caressed Adellia’s arms, sliding the dress’s sleeves over her hands.

The girl took her time undressing Adellia, her fingers sliding across smooth skin. Her fingertips were soft and cool. When the dress reached Adellia’s belly, Colette’s thumbs brushed across her navel. Colette knelt beside Adellia and finished pulled her dress all the way down, exposing the silken triangle of her panties and her black stockings. She rolled these down and lifted Adellia’s feet one at a time, retrieving the dress and peeling off her stockings. Finally, Adellia was left standing in her underwear, her arms crossed self-consciously beneath her breasts. It did not escape her notice that Toby Cotton was rock-hard. His cock jutted out like a ship’s mast, and he was staring avariciously at her with his mouth hanging open. Colette wasn’t finished, either. She stood behind Adellia and unclasped her bra, then slid the straps along her arms and lifted the cups off her chest. Tossing it aside, she cupped Adellia’s breasts in her hands, her fingertips finding her sensitive nipples. They stiffened immediately, and Colette rolled them between thumb and forefinger, eliciting a gasp. Her hands were small, and soft, warm flesh filled her palms and overspilled their edges. She kneaded Adellia’s breasts for a moment or two more, then bent over and slid her hands palms-inward through the band of Adellia’s underwear. Thumbs hooked over the band, she pulled downward. As this last scrap of fabric vanished, Adellia closed her eyes and
shuddered. Part of her couldn’t believe this was happening. Was she really about to share Toby with this girl? But another part of her was filled with delight. Colette was beautiful, that couldn’t be denied, and Adellia had plenty of experience with far less appealing partners.

“Now you do me,” Colette said quietly. She stood patiently as Adellia fumbled with the laces of her dress. There were buckles, too, and buttons… she began to sweat, inwardly cursing her awkwardness. She certainly wasn’t going to be able to put on as elaborate a show as Colette had.

Eventually, though, she managed to unlace enough of the dress to begin to remove it. The feeling of Colette’s skin under her hands was intoxicating. This wasn’t like Toby, whose back and chest were nearly as hairy as his head. Colette was smooth and cool, like a porcelain doll. Adellia’s heart thumped in her chest. Colette hadn’t been wearing a bra, and her small, pert breasts stared at Adellia as the dress rolled over them. Adellia tried to imitate the other girl’s movements, squeezing and massaging her soft peaks, and Colette let out a little sound halfway between a whimper and a sigh. The feeling of firm nipples brushing against her palms made Adellia’s heart flutter. She did her best to stay focused as she worked her way down. Colette’s waist was so narrow, her limbs so delicate… there had been a corset built into the center panel of her dress, and Adellia wondered where she could get one. Colette’s hips flared outward and the fabric of her dress stuck for a moment before continuing down her gleaming alabaster thighs.

Beneath her dress, she’d worn the most scandalously tiny panties Adellia had ever seen— barely more than a triangle of cloth and a circle of cord around her waist and between her butt cheeks. Twin globes of unblemished pink swelled outward from her hip, creating an enticing bubble-butt that jiggled as she shimmied back and forth. Adellia dithered for a moment before realizing there was no modest way to grab the triangle of cloth; she simply plucked it free and pulled down, exposing a tiny thatch of sorrel hair and the pink delta of Colette’s sex. Moisture beaded the girl’s nether lips; either the sight of Toby’s erection or the feel of Adellia’s hands on her body had clearly gotten her excited. In the silence of the room Adellia could hear Colette’s shallow, rapid breaths.

Once they were both naked, they stepped forward hand in hand towards Toby. His gaze swiveled from one girl to the other and back again, and his expression suggested a man unsure of whether he was dreaming or not. Colette and Adellia shared a look, then simultaneously dropped to their knees on the carpet in front of the bed.

Toby offered no resistance as they reached for his member. Adellia’s hand overlapped Colette’s, and in unspoken unison, they began to stroke him back and forth. He was as hard as Adellia had ever seen him. The rigid flesh of his cock seemed to strain to contain his excitement. The second their fingers touched it, a dollop of precum oozed from the tip, and a few seconds of energetic rubbing ensured that his entire length glistened wetly from base to tip.

Toby grunted and shuffled forward until his butt was planted right on the edge of the bed, parting his knees to allow easier access. He seemed afraid to breathe. Colette turned to Adellia, smiled, then bent forward and closed her lips around the head of his cock.

Adellia could only stare. She knew, intellectually, that what she was seeing should upset her. This was another woman— and not just any woman, but the beautiful Colette Martel— pleasuring her boyfriend. This mental image, or one like it, had replayed in her head dozens of times in the past week. And yet the expected jealousy did not manifest. Instead, Adellia felt only a growing excitement in the pit of her stomach. Wasn’t this every man’s dream? And she had made it come true for Toby! What’s more, she was filled with a sense of vicarious pride. Toby was hers, and yet Colette wanted him. She wanted something of Adellia’s, and that meant that that something must be truly worthy. By extension, Adellia must be worthy. These thoughts and others, harder to pin down, all whirled through her head as she watched Colette’s head bob up and down on Toby’s
penis. She could only imagine what was going through his head right now.

Besides, there was something beautifully aesthetic about the sight that Adellia could appreciate. Colette’s eyes were closed in concentration. She had the fingers of one hand wrapped around the base of Toby’s cock, pumping slowly back and forth. Her head, meanwhile, moved in a curving arc. She would slide forward until her lips met her curled fingers, then pull back, revealing a length of spit-slick pink flesh. Her head would withdraw, farther and farther, until only the head of his prick rested between her cherry-blossom pink lips. She’d purse those lips as though about to deliver a kiss, then swoop forward again.

Adellia watched mesmerized for a few minutes, then knelt beside the other girl. She’d had enough watching. She felt like an energized loop of wire was spiraling up through her body. It crackled and surged, pushing her forward, demanding action. Colette noticed her and let Toby’s cock slip out of her mouth with a wet pop. Adellia stared at it for a moment, then up at Colette, and acting on instinct she leaned forward and kissed her.

Kissing her wasn’t like kissing Toby. His lips were big, rough, with a faint dusting of hair no matter how assiduous he was with his razor. Colette’s were smooth and cool. Her tongue was a slender thing, a darting serpent that explored the inside of Adellia’s mouth and flicked gently across her teeth. They locked lips for a few seconds, then Colette pulled back slightly and grabbed Toby’s penis. With a devilish grin she placed it between their mouths and then kissed Adellia again. This time, their tongues tangled across his shaft. Adellia could taste sweat and precum mixed in with the other girl’s saliva. The brew was heady, intoxicating. Their lips touched feather-light, forming a bridge with Toby’s cock in the middle, and following Colette’s lead Adellia dragged her head down to the base of his shaft and back again. They were kissing him as much as they were kissing each other, and their fingers interlaced around his round pink tip as they went. Toby’s balls dangled freely, and Adellia and Colette each took one in their mouths, teasing with their tongues and pursed lips. Toby groaned and twitched, and another glop of precum slid down the length of his cock.

“Enough for now, I think,” Colette said quietly. “We do not want you to pop off too soon, eh?” She stepped back to an audible whine of disappointment from Toby. “Why don’t you pay us some attention, hm?” She helped Adellia to her feet and the two of them strode arm in arm around the bed and laid down. Adellia’s left leg tangled with Colette’s right. The French girl caressed Adellia’s head, running her fingers through her hair and leaving sticky kisses on her cheek. Toby shook off his reverie and stood. “W-what should I do?” he asked, looking from one to the other.

“Use your hands!” Adellia blurted out in a flash of inspiration. She’d patiently taught him how to do this, and she was proud of his progress. He looked confused for a moment, then stepped forward and knelt between them. He cracked his knuckles and raised his hands like a maestro conductor ready to open a symphony. One hand descended towards Adellia’s mound, the other slipped between Colette’s legs, and Toby began to conduct.

His fingers were thick but surprisingly agile. It had taken painstaking work to show him the way: not to bludgeon or stab, but to slide and caress, to roll the ball of his thumb gently across her clit and trace the delicate outline of her sex. Adellia’s lip trembled as he began. He circled her opening, exploring the petals of her flower with all the delicacy of a master gardener. Her clit ached with need, and he answered it patiently: a soft touch, a mounting pressure, even a hint of vibration in his thumb that made her cry out. Next to her, Colette was panting and twitching as well, every jerk of her leg transmitted to Adellia’s body. As Toby built up speed, the other girl arched her back and began to cry out in French, cries that needed no translation. Ecstasy sounded much the same in every language. Toby did not allow himself to become distracted. He worked with marvelous ambidexterity, bringing one girl to the edge before relaxing and allowing her respite while he worked
on the other. A half-dozen times Adellia felt herself approaching the heights of climax, only to lapse into shivering incoherence as his touch ebbed away. Her thighs were soaking wet by now and her eyes stared unfocused at the ceiling. All she could think of was how badly she needed release. From the sound of her wanton moans, Colette was in the same boat.

Before they could be satisfied, Toby stepped back. He looked down, admiring his work, and crossed his arms. "Fair’s fair," he declared. "Now what?"

Perhaps Colette was about to suggest something, but Adellia wasn’t about to give her the chance. She knew what she wanted. Her desire was simple, pure and primal.

"Quit messing around, you oaf," she demanded, "and fuck me!"

Toby needed no second instruction. Colette rolled away, and Toby grabbed Adellia’s calves, lifting her exhausted legs up and pulling her to the edge of the bed. She loved it when he did this, and leaned what strength she could— her legs felt like limp noodles. He took a moment to position her perfectly, then with a single movement and a wet squelch, pistoned his cock into her, hilting himself almost at once. Their extensive foreplay had left Adellia’s cunt sopping wet and ready for him. He planted his entire length inside her in one huge thrust, then withdrew with a lewd squishing sound and drove back in again. He quickly fell into a familiar rhythm, a rhythm the two of them had settled on after much practice.

To Adellia’s surprise, she felt hands on her chest. She focused and looked up to see Colette climbing on top of her. The other girl was petite enough that her weight was not uncomfortable. She lay belly-down on top of Adellia, her small but perfectly formed breasts pressing down into Adellia’s larger ones. Her nipples were tiny, rock-hard nubs that pressed into Adellia’s flesh like pebbles. Her legs spread, she straddled Adellia and began to grind. The feel of her pubic hair scraping across Adellia’s lower belly was surprisingly ticklish, and she left a wet trail behind her as she went, smearing her love-juices all over her partner’s body. Adellia’s only response was to reach upward and wrap her arms around Colette, showering her with kisses. One hand snaked in between them and squeezed the other girl’s breast while her fingers pinched and rolled the nipple between them. Part of Adellia watched this scene with clinical detachment.

"Am I really doing this?" she asked herself. "With another girl? Is this what I want?"

Colette was beautiful, she could see that easily enough, and she had to admit to an idle curiosity. She decided that this didn’t have to mean any more than she wanted it to. She couldn’t imagine life with anyone but Toby Cotton… but that didn’t mean she couldn’t sample what life had to offer, especially when it threw itself into her bed.

Colette continued grinding against Adellia, and her mouth descended onto Adellia’s right breast. She sucked with a fierce urgency and swabbed her tongue back and forth, teasing the nipple and areola. The pleasure that emanated from Adellia’s stiff nipple flowed like a tributary into the mighty river that poured from her quim. Toby had hit his stride now, and each thrust sent an electric tremor skittering up her spine. Adellia willed her inner walls to clench and squeeze, and was rewarded by a redoubling of bliss. She closed her eyes and bit her lip as she felt her orgasm approaching.

"TOBY!" she cried. "Toby, Toby, oh, OH, OH! I’m… I’m… nyaaaahhhHHH! " Her brain filled with a roar like a crashing wave. All thought disintegrated in the face of it. Her toes curled so tightly that her foot went into spasm. She flailed her arms weakly, then felt Colette grab them and pin them to the bed. The French girl’s lips found Adellia’s and she had no choice but to submit to her kisses, hungry, greedy kisses that drowned her moans. Still Toby was thrusting, each movement of his hips wringing an aftershock of pleasure out of her. He grunted and increased his
speed, a sure sign that his own climax was near.

“Wait!” she heard Colette cry from somewhere far, far away. “Wait! Don’t I get some as well?” She clambered off Adellia and squeezed her hand. Toby gradually slowed and, with a groan of disappointment, pulled out.

“What do you say, Adellia?” he asked. “Does she?”

“Please,” Colette whispered in her ear. “There is no danger— I drink tea with my breakfast. Just… just let me experience it!”

Adellia was too blissed-out to do more than nod. But how could she deny such a transcendent experience to a friend?

Toby and Colette worked together to prop her up on pillows at the head of the bed. Gradually, by degrees, she regained control of herself and her senses, in time to see Colette lean forward on all fours and Toby kneel behind her. Colette had positioned herself head downwards with her shoulders between Adellia’s knees. She looked up and smiled shyly.

“Adellia,” she asked. “Have you and Toby done… you know… the Lord’s Kiss?” When Adellia gave her a confused and groggy look, she pantomimed with her hand and tongue, parting two fingers and licking between them.

“Oh!” Adellia said. “Oh, we tried that. I don’t think I like it.”

“Meaning no offense to your beau here, but zere is a finesse to the technique,” Colette said. “Perhaps he just lacked a good teacher? If you want, I could try… perhaps you will like it?” She looked away nervously. “If you don’t like it, just say so.”

Adellia smiled a crooked smile. Sure, why not? Today was a day of firsts. “Go ahead, Colette,” she said. “If you won’t be too distracted.”

Colette contrived to look offended. “Surely not, mademoiselle. I am— OOH!”

Toby had chosen that moment to grip his prick in one fist and Colette’s waist with the other and slam his hips forward. The entire length of his cock, already soaking wet with a mixture of spit, precum and Adellia’s juices, vanished into Colette’s tight hole with barely a sound. He began to thrust, slowly at first, but rapidly picking up speed. His balls slapped against her mound and her round bubble-butt jiggled wildly with each impact. Adellia listened to the impact of skin on skin, the rhythmic slap, slap, slap of their bodies coming together. Again came that strange feeling: she knew she should be jealous, but she could only feel happiness for Colette. She was getting to experience what up until now had been Adellia’s exclusive province.

The French girl recovered quickly, though. She leaned forward and reached out with one hand, her tentative fingers gently parting Adellia’s lips. Adellia’s pussy was flushed rosy red from the workout she’d already gotten and her lips were puffy and dripping, and the lightest touch filled her veins with lightning and her ears with thunder. Colette’s tongue slithered out and teased Adellia’s swollen nub, and she threw her head back and howled.

In the midst of her ecstasy, she vowed to make Toby sit down and take notes. His technique had been enthusiastic but amateurish. Colette, by contrast, was a connoisseur. Her tongue explored Adellia’s pussy with confidence and aplomb. She pursed her lips and sucked at Adellia’s clit with the same care and attention she had shown to Toby earlier. It responded by digging deep and finding further reserves of pleasure Adellia hadn’t known she had. She writhed helplessly, reaching
down and twining her fingers through Colette’s hair. The other girl didn’t even deign to notice. Her hands gripped Adellia’s inner thighs, squeezing and rubbing, finding erogenous zones that had lain dormant for who knew how long. And all the while her tongue slid, spun, twisted, licked, dove and tasted.

Another climax rose up inside Adellia, this one as sudden and violent as a squall. She clenched her thighs together, pinning Colette’s head between them, and thrust her hips forward in a series of short, sharp motions. Colette’s tongue darted inside her, deeper than seemed possible, and curled upward to lick at her most sensitive inner places. At the same time, Colette’s heady breathing became low moaning became a muffled shriek, and the girl’s body flailed. Her coordinated movements fell apart into spastic twitching. Just as the two of them reached the apex of their pleasure, Toby let out a final roar and buried himself as deeply as he could in the warm yielding softness of Colette. Adellia fancied she could feel his cock twitching, the motion transferred through Colette’s shivering body. In her mind’s eye she saw his balls boiling and churning and his warm broth flooding Colette’s insides.

He pulled out before he had finished and a spurt of white cream flew through the air, spattering across Colette’s back. She rolled over in time to catch the next one on her belly. Toby had the presence of mind to grab his cock and position it so that the third splashed into Adellia’s cleavage. He turned back and forth, alternately basting both of his partners until their tummies and breasts were thoroughly coated. Adellia wasn’t sure, but she thought that this was his most copious ejaculation ever.

It took at least ten minutes for the three of them to catch their breath and for the last twitches and jerks to work their way out of their systems. They lay side-by-side atop the bedsheets, coated in sweat and other fluids, their bodies so tangled up Adellia couldn’t tell where she ended and the other two began. “That… was… lovely,” panted Colette. “Thank you for inviting me, you two. You are a beautiful couple.”

“That was great for me too, Colette,” Toby said in a dazed voice. “You’re… wow.” He trailed off, unable to think of how to continue.

Adellia managed to prop herself up on one elbow. “Is he as good as you imagined, Colette?” she asked. She couldn’t resist. Colette, though, simply smiled angelically up at her.

“That was better, Adellia. I should have known better than to come between you two. I should have known you would never give him up.”

“Never,” Adellia confirmed, resting a hand on Toby’s chest. “But… from time to time… I might be persuaded to share.”

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